

# THE TELL-TALE HEART

True!—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am! but why *will* you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing **acute**. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? Hearken! and observe how healthily—how calmly I can tell you the whole story.

It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but once **conceived**, it haunted me day and night. Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! He had the eye of a vulture—a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees—very gradually—I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever. Now this is the point. You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen *me*. You should have seen how wisely I proceeded—with what caution—with what foresight—with what dissimulation! I went to work!

I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him. And every night, about midnight, I turned the latch of his door and opened it—oh, so gently! And then, when I had made an opening sufficient for my head, I put in a dark lantern, all closed, closed, so that no light shone out, and then I thrust in my head. Oh, you would have laughed to see how cunningly I thrust it in! I moved it slowly—very, very slowly, so that I might not disturb the old

1. **dissimulation** (dG-sGmQyE-lAPshEn): a hiding of one's true feelings.

## ANALYZE VISUALS

What details in the picture help create **suspense**?

**acute** (E-kyLtP) *adj.*

sharp; keen

## EVALUATE NARRATOR

Reread lines 1–16. On the basis of what he plans to do, decide whether the narrator's opinion of himself makes you trust him more or less.



man's sleep. It took me an hour to place my whole head within the opening so far that I could see him as he lay upon his bed. Ha!—would a madman have been so wise as this? And then, when my head was well in the room, I undid the lantern cautiously—oh, so cautiously—cautiously (for the hinges creaked)—I undid it just so much that a single thin ray fell upon the vulture eye. And this I did for seven long nights—every night just at midnight—but I found the eye always closed; and so it was impossible to do the work; for it was not the old man who **vexed** me, but his Evil Eye. And every morning, when the day broke, I went boldly into the chamber, and spoke courageously to him, calling him by name in a hearty tone, and inquiring how he had passed the night. So you see he would have been a very profound old man, indeed, to suspect that every night, just at twelve, I looked in upon him while he slept.

Upon the eighth night I was more than usually cautious in opening the door. A watch's minute hand moves more quickly than did mine. Never before that night had I *felt* the extent of my own powers—of my sagacity.<sup>2</sup> I could scarcely contain my feelings of triumph. To think that there I was, opening the door, little by little, and he not even to dream of my secret deeds or thoughts. I fairly chuckled at the idea; and perhaps he heard me; for he moved on the bed suddenly, as if startled. Now you may think that I drew back—but no. His room was as black as pitch with the thick darkness (for the shutters were close fastened, through fear of robbers), and so I knew that he could not see the opening of the door, and I kept pushing it on steadily, steadily.

I had my head in, and was about to open the lantern, when my thumb slipped upon the tin fastening, and the old man sprang up in the bed, crying out—“Who's there?”

I kept quite still and said nothing. For a whole hour I did not move a muscle, and in the meantime I did not hear him lie down. He was still sitting up in the bed listening,—just as I have done, night after night, hearkening to the death watches<sup>3</sup> in the wall.

Presently I heard a slight groan, and I knew it was the groan of mortal terror. It was not a groan of pain or grief—oh, no!—it was the low, **stifled** sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe. I knew the sound well. Many a night, just at midnight, when all the world slept, it has welled up from my own bosom, deepening, with its dreadful echo, the terrors that distracted me. I say I knew it well. I knew what the old man felt, and pitied him, although I chuckled at heart. I knew that he had been lying awake ever since the first slight noise, when he had turned in the bed. His fears had been ever since growing upon him. He had been trying to fancy them causeless, but could not. He had been saying to himself—“It is nothing but the wind in the chimney—it is only a mouse crossing the floor,” or “it is merely a cricket which has made a single chirp.” Yes, he has been trying to comfort himself with these suppositions; but he had found all in vain. *All in vain*; because Death,

2. **sagacity** (sE-gBsPG-tC): sound judgment.

3. **death watches**: deathwatch beetles—insects that make a tapping sound with their heads.

**vex** (vDks) *v.* to disturb; to annoy

### **SUSPENSE**

Note the actions the narrator repeats. Why does this repetition create a sense of dread?

### **SUSPENSE**

In what way does the characters' inaction create tension?

**stifled** (stFPfEld) *adj.*

smothered **stifle** *v.*

in approaching him, had stalked with his black shadow before him, and enveloped the victim. And it was the mournful influence of the unperceived shadow that caused him to feel—although he neither saw nor heard—to *feel* the presence of my head within the room.

When I had waited a long time, very patiently, without hearing him lie down, I resolved to open a little—a very, very little **crevice** in the lantern. So I opened it—you cannot imagine how **stealthily**, stealthily—until, at length, a single dim ray, like the thread of the spider, shot from out the crevice and fell full upon the vulture eye.

It was open—wide, wide open—and I grew furious as I gazed upon it. I saw it with perfect distinctness—all a dull blue, with a hideous veil over it that chilled the very marrow in my bones; but I could see nothing else of the old man’s face or person: for I had directed the ray as if by instinct, precisely upon the damned spot.

And now have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but overacuteness of the senses?—now, I say, there came to my ears a low, dull, quick sound, such as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton. I knew *that* sound well too. It was the beating of the old man’s heart. It increased my fury, as the beating of a drum stimulates the soldier into courage.

But even yet I refrained and kept still. I scarcely breathed. I held the lantern motionless. I tried how steadily I could maintain the ray upon the eye. Meantime the hellish tattoo<sup>4</sup> of the heart increased. It grew quicker and quicker, and louder and louder every instant. The old man’s terror *must* have been extreme! It grew louder, I say, louder every moment!—do you mark me well? I have told you that I am nervous: so I am. And now at the dead hour of the night, amid the dreadful silence of that old house, so strange a noise as this excited me to uncontrollable terror. Yet, for some minutes longer I refrained and stood still. But the beating grew louder, louder! I thought the heart must burst. And now a new anxiety seized me—the sound would be heard by a neighbor! The old man’s hour had come! With a loud yell, I threw open the lantern and leaped into the room. He shrieked once—once only. In an instant I dragged him to the floor, and pulled the heavy bed over him. I then smiled gaily, to find the deed so far done. But, for many minutes, the heart beat on with a muffled sound. This, however, did not vex me; it would not be heard through the wall. At length it ceased. The old man was dead. I removed the bed and examined the corpse. Yes, he was stone, stone dead. I placed my hand upon the heart and held it there many minutes. There was no pulsation. He was stone dead. His eye would trouble me no more.

If still you think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body. The night waned,<sup>5</sup> and I worked hastily, but in silence. First of all I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs.

4. **hellish tattoo:** awful drumming.

5. **waned:** approached its end.

**crevice** (krDvPGs) *n.* crack

#### EVALUATE

#### NARRATOR

What does the narrator claim to be hearing? Decide whether you think he is correct.

#### SUSPENSE

Reread lines 84–102. What is the scariest or most exciting part of this paragraph? Tell what details contribute to this feeling.

**stealthily** (stDIPthE-IC)

*adv.* cautiously; secretly



I then took up three planks from the flooring of the chamber, and deposited all between the scantlings.<sup>6</sup> I then replaced the boards so cleverly, so cunningly, that no human eye—not even *his*—could have detected anything wrong. There was nothing to wash out—no stain of any kind—no blood-spot whatever. I had been too wary for that. A tub had caught all—ha! ha! When I made an end of these labors, it was four o’clock—still dark as midnight. As the bell sounded the hour, there came a knocking at the street door. I went down to open it with a light heart,—for what had I *now* to fear?

6. **scantlings**: small wooden beams supporting the floor.

**ANALYZE VISUALS**

What can you **infer** from the character’s expression in each of the three panels?

There entered three men, who introduced themselves, with perfect suavity,<sup>7</sup> as officers of the police. A shriek had been heard by a neighbor during the night: suspicion of foul play had been aroused; information had been lodged at the police office, and they (the officers) had been deputed<sup>8</sup> to search the premises. I smiled,—for *what* had I to fear? I bade the gentlemen welcome. The shriek, I said, was my own in a dream. The old man, I mentioned, was absent in the country. I took my visitors all over the house. I bade them search—search *well*. I led them, at length, to *his* chamber. I showed them his treasures, secure, undisturbed. In the enthusiasm of my confidence, I brought chairs into the room, and desired them *here* to rest from their fatigues, while I myself, in the wild **audacity** of my perfect triumph, placed my own seat upon the very spot beneath which reposed<sup>9</sup> the corpse of the victim.

The officers were satisfied. My *manner* had convinced them. I was singularly at ease. They sat, and while I answered cheerily, they chatted of familiar things. But, ere long, I felt myself getting pale and wished them gone. My head ached, and I fancied a ringing in my ears: but still they sat and still chatted.

The ringing became more distinct:—it continued and became more distinct: I talked more freely to get rid of the feeling: but it continued and gained definitiveness—until at length, I found that the noise was *not* within my ears. No doubt I now grew *very* pale;—but I talked more fluently, and with a heightened voice. Yet the sound increased—and what could I do? It was a *low, dull, quick sound—much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton*. I gasped for breath—and yet the officers heard it not. I talked more quickly—more **vehemently**; but the noise steadily increased. I arose and argued about trifles, in a high key and with violent gesticulations,<sup>10</sup> but the noise steadily increased. Why *would* they not be gone? I paced the floor to and fro with heavy strides, as if excited to fury by the observation of the men—but the noise steadily increased. What *could* I do? I foamed—I raved—I swore. I swung the chair upon which I had been sitting, and grated it upon the boards, but the noise arose over all and continually increased. It grew louder—louder—*louder!* And still the men chatted pleasantly, and smiled. Was it possible they heard not?—no, no! They heard!—they suspected!—they *knew!*—they were making a *mockery* of my horror!—this I thought, and this I think. But anything was better than this agony! Anything was more tolerable than this **derision!** I could bear those **hypocritical** smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die!—and now—again!—hark! louder! louder! *louder!*—“Villains!” I shrieked, “dissemble!<sup>11</sup> no more! I admit the deed!—tear up the planks!—here, here!—it is the beating of his hideous heart!” \_

7. **suavity** (swäPvG-tC): graceful politeness.

8. **deputed**: appointed as a representative.

9. **reposed**: rested.

10. **gesticulations** (jD-stGkQyE-lAPshEns): energetic gestures of the hands or arms.

11. **dissemble**: pretend.

**audacity** (ô-dBsPG-tC)

*n.* shameless daring or boldness

**vehemently**

(vCPE-mEnt-IC) *adv.* with intense emotion

**derision** (dG-rGzhPEn) *n.* ridicule

**hypocritical**

(hGpQE-krGtPG-kEl) *adj.* false or deceptive

### **SUSPENSE**

Think about the emotions that the narrator is feeling. How does Poe help the reader feel the same way?

## *After Reading*

### **Comprehension**

- 1. Recall** Why does the narrator want to kill the old man?
- 2. Clarify** Why does the narrator believe he will not be caught after murdering the old man?
- 3. Summarize** What actions does the narrator take to prepare for the crime and cover up?

### **Literary Analysis**

- 4. Make Inferences** Reread lines 7–13. From this passage, what do you think was the relationship between the narrator and the old man?
- 5. Analyze Suspense** Which of Poe’s techniques for creating suspense is most effective for you? To find out, review the following story sections. List the techniques used in each section, and then rank the sections from 1–4, with 1 being the most suspenseful.
- 6. Evaluate Narrator** How reliable is the narrator of the story? Should you believe what he tells you about himself? Support your answer with details from the chart you created as you read.
- 7. Draw Conclusions** Do you think the police knew the narrator was guilty at any point before he confessed? If so, when do you think the police became **suspicious**? Give reasons for your answer.

### **Extension and Challenge**

- 8. Readers’ Circle** With a group, brainstorm a list of horror stories and movies that most of you are familiar with. Choose at least two of these titles and discuss the techniques the authors or directors used to create suspense. Which of the techniques are similar to the ones Poe uses?
- 9. Inquiry and Research** Do research on lie detection to find out what are the most reliable ways of finding out if someone is telling the truth. Present your findings to the class. Does what you learn change your opinion about whether the narrator is reliable?

### **research links**

For more on lie detection, visit the **Research Center** at **ClassZone.com**.

## Vocabulary in Context

acute –audacity-conceived-crevice-derision-hypocritical-stealthily-stifled-vehemently-vex

### vocabulary practice

Choose *true* or *false* for each statement.

1. It is difficult to hide a **stifled** yawn.
2. If you have the **audacity** to do something, you are bold and daring.
3. **Derision** is something you feel toward someone you respect.
4. A lion would approach its prey **stealthily**.
5. You could not hear much if you had an **acute** sense of hearing.
6. If someone **conceived** of a plan, he or she heard it from someone else.
7. A person could trip over a **crevice** in the sidewalk.
8. When a person is **hypocritical**, he is honest and true.
9. To **vex** is to delight in something.
10. If you react **vehemently** to something, you don't care much about it.

### vocabulary in writing

Using three or more vocabulary words, write a paragraph about how the narrator felt before the murder. Here is a sample beginning.

#### example sentence

The man **conceived** an idea that haunted him.

### vocabulary strategy: using reference aids

Choosing the perfect word can make a difference between good and great writing. One reason Poe's writing is still so popular is because of his masterful use of language. When you want to find the most accurate words to express yourself, the following reference aids can help you.

- A **thesaurus** is a reference book of **synonyms**, words with similar meanings.

Most word processing software provides an electronic thesaurus tool.

**vex** *verb* aggravate, annoy, bother, bug, disturb, provoke

- A **dictionary** lists synonyms after the definitions of some words.

**vex** (vDks) *v.* 1. To annoy. 2. To cause perplexity in. 3. To bring distress or suffering to.

**syn** BOTHER, PUZZLE, PLAGUE, AFFLICT

**PRACTICE** Use a dictionary or thesaurus to find a synonym for each word.

Use each synonym in a sentence that matches its distinct meaning.

1. commend
2. dupe
3. impish
4. menace

### Vocabulary practice

For more practice, go to the **Vocabulary Center** at **ClassZone.com**.