

The Tell-Tale Heart (1843)

Note: be sure to know all the underlined vocabulary words for our end of unit vocabulary test. You must provide the definitions yourself; you may be called upon in class to provide a definition.

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 heavens 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 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 has 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. 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 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 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 of 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 had been trying to comfort himself with these suppositions: but he had found all in vain. All in vain; because Death, 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
105 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
110 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,
115 precisely upon the damned spot.

And have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but over acuteness of the senses? -- now, I say, there came to my ears a low, dull, quick sound, such as a watch makes when enveloped in
120 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
125 breathed. I held the lantern motionless. I tried how steadily I could maintain the ray upon the eye. Meantime the hellish tattoo of the heart increased. It grew quicker and quicker, and louder and louder every instant. The old man's terror must have been
130 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
135 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
140 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
145 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
150 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,

155 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.

I then took up three planks from the flooring of the chamber and deposited all between the
160 scantlings¹. 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
165 caught all -- ha! ha!

When I had 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,
170 -- for what had I now to fear? There entered three men, who introduced themselves, with perfect suavity, 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
175 lodged at the police office, and they (the officers) had been deputed 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
180 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
185 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 the corpse of the victim.

The officers were satisfied. My manner had
190 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.
195 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 definiteness -- until, at length, I found that the noise was not within my ears.

200 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

¹ a piece of lumber of small cross section, part of the interior structure of the floor.

205 -- 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; but the noise
steadily increased. Why would they not be gone? I
210 paced the floor to and fro with heavy strides, as if
excited to fury by the observations of the men -- but
the noise steadily increased. Oh God! 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
215 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? Almighty God! -- no, no!
They heard! -- they suspected! -- they knew! -- they
220 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
225 -- again! -- hark! louder! louder! louder! louder! --
"Villains!" I shrieked, "dissemble no more! I
admit the deed! -- tear up the planks! -- here, here! -
- it is the beating of his hideous heart!"

Answer the following questions before class and be prepared to discuss your answers. Note that further vocabulary is included in these questions and should be part of your vocabulary list.

1. The question asked in lines 36 and 37 is an example of

- A. Allusion
- B. Characterization
- C. Foreshadowing
- D. Irony

2. The narrator thinks of himself as

- A. Austucious
- B. Expeditious
- C. Lackadaisical
- D. Precipitate

3. the narrator excuses his apparent “madness” as rather

- A. An acuteness of the senses
- B. A fear of a blind eye’s evil aura
- C. A fear of the old man’s maliciousness
- D. An intractable emotional condition

4. As used in line 127, the word “tattoo” most nearly means

- A. glyph
- B. sound
- C. rap
- D. strum

5. As used in line 193, the word “fancied” most nearly means

- A. decorated
- B. enjoyed
- C. heard
- D. imagined

6. The word “dissemble” in line 226 was a conscientious choice of words by the author. All of the following could be an identifier for this word play except.

- A. a situational double entendre
- B. a near homophonic pun
- C. situational irony
- D. verbal irony

Discussion Questions:

1. Poe uses hyphenated clauses throughout this passage. What effect is he aiming to create through the use of this compositional device?

2. Be prepared to explain to the class what Poe means by “death watches in the wall” in line 75. Use the resources of the internet to find a possible answer to this question. Hint: there is a double meaning in this phrase given the context of this story.

3. In addition to the sound of the tell-tale heart, provide five other examples of sound characterized in this story.

4. What is probably the reason the narrator is hearing the old man’s heart beating even after he is already dead? What might this tell us about the tell-tale heart’s true nature?

Vocabulary List:

acute
audacity
bosom
concealment
crevice
deputed
derision
dismembered
dissemble
dissimulation
ere
fancied
foresight
gaily
gesticulations
hastily (adv.) (hast, n)
hypocritical
precautions
sagacity
suavity
tattoo
vehemently
waned

