



The Tell-Tale Heart

Edgar Allan Poe's 1843 Masterpiece of Mystery & Madness

RUE! I am nervous, very, very dreadfully nervous; but how can you say that I am crazy? The disease has sharpened my senses, not dulled them. In fact, my sense of hearing became acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth, and elsewhere too. How then am I mad? Look! Look how calmly I can tell you the whole story.

It is impossible to say how the idea first came to me, but once there it haunted me day and night. There was no reason for it. In fact, I loved the old man. He had never mistreated me, and I had no need of his money! I think it was his eye. Yes, it was this! One of his eyes looked like that of a vulture—a pale blue eye with a film over it. Whenever it looked at me my blood ran cold, and so slowly, over time, I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye for ever.

Now this is the point. You suspect I am insane. But you should have seen me! You should have seen how carefully 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 opened it just enough, 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. You won't believe it, but it took me an hour just to place my head far enough in so that I could see the old man as he lay upon his bed. Hal! Would a madman have been so wise as this? And when my head was well in the room, I undid the lantern cautiously—*oh, so cautiously—* cautiously because the hinges creaked. I undid it just so much that a single thin ray fell upon the vulture eye. This I did for seven long nights, every night just at midnight. But every night 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**. Every morning when day broke, I went boldly into his room and spoke casually to him, calling him by name in a hearty tone, and asking him how he had passed the night. So you see it would have been most amazing indeed for the old man to suspect that every night, just at twelve, I looked in upon him... while he slept.

On the eighth night I was more cautious than ever. A watch's minute hand moves more quickly than did mine. Never before had I felt the greatness of my own powers, of my cunning. I could barely contain my feelings of triumph. To think that there I was opening the door little by little, and the not even to dream of my secret deeds or cunning plan. I chinked 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, for he kept the shutters tightly closed for 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 heartily to the death watches in the wall.

Suddenly, 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 overborne with fear. I knew the sound well. Many a night, just at midnight, when all the world slept, it has welled up from my own chest, 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 chinked 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 find reason to ignore them, 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 such thoughts; but he had found them all in vain. **ALL IN VAIN**, because Death was indeed stalking his victim. Although the old man had neither seen nor heard me, Death's unseen shadow caused him 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 very, very little slit in the

lantern. So I opened it—you cannot imagine how stealthily, stealthily—until at length a single dim ray, like the thread of a spider, shot out from the crevice and fell upon the vulture eye.

It was open! **WIDE, WIDE OPEN!** And it made me furious to look at it! I saw it with perfect clarity—all dull blue with a hideous film 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 evil spot.

Have I not told you that what you mistake for insanity is but over-acuteness of the senses? For now, I say, there came to my ears a low, dull sound, such as a watch makes when packed 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 encourages the soldier to war.

But even yet I held back 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 beating of the heart increased. It grew quicker and quicker, and louder and louder, every instant. The old man's terror must have been extreme! The beating grew louder, I say, louder every moment! Do you understand? I have told you that I am nervous; so I am, and now at the wicked hour of the night, amid the dreadful silence of that old house, so strange a noise as this beating heart excited me to uncontrollable terror. The beating grew louder, louder! I thought the heart might burst. And now a new anxiety took hold of me: that 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 to find the deed done, yet 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. It too eventually 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 dead. **THE EYE** would trouble me no more.

If still you think me crazy, you will think it no longer when I describe the brilliant steps I waned, I worked quickly, but in silence.

I took up three planks of the floor and placed *all* beneath. I then replaced the boards 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 whatsoever. I had been too clever for that.

When I had made an end of these labors, it was four o'clock—still dark as midnight. As the clock 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? It was 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 station, and they, these three officers, had been sent to search the premises.

I smiled—for what had I to fear? I welcomed the gentlemen inside. The shriek, I said, was my own in a dream. The old man, I told them, was away traveling the countryside. I took my visitors all over the house. I told them to search as they pleased, to search well. I led them to his bedroom. I showed them his belongings, secure and undisturbed. In my confidence I even brought chairs into the room and invited them to sit and rest while I myself, in the

wild audacity of my perfect triumph, placed my own seat upon the very spot where I had concealed the victim's corpse.

The officers were satisfied. My manner had convinced them. I was perfectly at ease, and as we sat they chatted of familiar things. But after awhile, I felt myself getting pale and wished them gone. My head ached, and I noticed a ringing in my ears. Still they sat, chatting. The ringing became more distinct. I talked more freely to get rid of the feeling, but it continued and became still clearer until at length, I found that the noise was *NOT* within my ears.

No doubt I now grew **VERY** pale. I talked rapidly and with a heightened voice, yet the sound increased! What could I do? It was a low, **DULL**, **QUICK** sound—much like the sound a watch makes when packed in cotton. I gasped for breath, and yet the officers seemed not to hear. I talked more quickly, more vehemently, but the noise grew steadily **LOUDER**. I arose and gestured wildly with my arms, but still the noise. Why **WOULD** they not be gone? I 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. 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, smiling as if nothing was wrong. Was it possible they couldn't hear it? 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! I could bear their smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die! And now—again—**hark!** **LOUDER!** **LOUDER!** **LOUDER!** **LOUDER!**

"Villains!" I shrieked, "trouble me no more! I admit the deed! I did it! Tear up the planks! Here, here! It is the beating of his hideous heart!" *

IV. Style – Analyze Poe's Stylistic Devices

Find examples (quotes) of each stylistic device used in the story and its effect on the reader. (See Poe's *Sinister Stylings* OR notes if you need to review these devices.)

Device	1 Example	Effect on Reader
Word Repetition	2 different words that are repeated: Quote showing one of the examples listed above:	What is the effect of the passage you selected on you, the reader?
Dashes/Italicized Words	2 examples of dashes or italicized words being used: Quote showing one of the examples listed above:	What is the effect of the passage you selected on you, the reader?
Short, Choppy Sentences	Identify a passage where Poe uses short, choppy sentences. (The excerpt must have at least two short, choppy sentences.):	What is the effect of the passage you selected on you, the reader?