

A Tell Tale Heart Notes

Title

It means "giving information (often which a person would not wish to be known)" Example: the telltale signs of guilt.

Plot

Classic example of Freitag's Pyramid

Point of view

- Gothic horror story, told in **1st person** point of view, dramatic monologue: from the perspective of a man who has committed a crime.
- This story would be completely different if told from 3rd person point of view or from the point of view of one of the police officers.

Narrator

-The biggest effect of Poe's decision to let his readers into the mind of the killer in his story is that it creates a nervous, creepy mood.

Tone/Mood

- Mysterious and suspenseful, desperate, sinister.
- Words such as *dreadfully, disease, sharpened, acute, mad, hearken, hell*, etc. in the first paragraph establish the mood and foreshadow its horrific events.
- The mood seemed suspenseful, probably because the story was about a murder, but also because Poe wanted the reader to feel like the murderer, nervous and anxious; hoping that something would happen that would not affect them.
- There is a mood of paranoia throughout the story as the narrator is obsessed with the idea of the old man's eyes, "a pale-blue, film-covered eye like that of a vulture that he could not stand" and the "evil eye" causes his blood to run cold. The mood actually wavers between that of sheer insanity as the narrator expresses maniacal glee at the prospect of doing away with his tormentor and paranoia after the heart beat begins to drive him mad. The mood is also, as is true in many of Poe's story, one of suspense. The night time observance of the old man; the murder; and the interview with the police, all create suspense. Will the narrator actually kill him? Will he confess? These are questions that are lingered upon in detail before the answers are revealed.

Theme (moral)

- The theme can be a number of things but the most people use and or believe is guilt from the killer, and insanity. Poe is well known for illustrating both of these themes in other stories as well.
- Guilt will always get you.*
- The Truth cannot be contained. Guilt will always dominate the decision to lie.*

Suspense

-Poe creates suspense through the deft use of *pacing*, *dangerous action*, and *foreshadowing*.

How does the writer create tension in "The Tell-Tale Heart"?

Poe creates *tension* in several ways.

First, his use of the *first person narrator* helps build *suspense*. Poe brilliantly uses first person point of view to his advantage in this story. It brings out many feelings in the readers mind. Without the use of this point of view, this story would not contain the clarity and suspense it does.

For example, right away our narrator addresses the reader,

"True! -- nervous -- very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad?"

Here the reader is drawn right in to the story and its tension. The reader must decide is the man really mad? Is he reliable? What can be believed and what might be lies? All of these put the reader on edge.

This narrator is obviously deranged from a nervous breakdown and, as such, his behavior cannot be anticipated by the reader. Thus, there is an anxiety of sorts that develops in the reader who wonders what the narrator will do.

More tension is created as Poe's narrator wavers in his actions and thoughts, stating his love for the old man, while at the same time expressing horror for the "vulture eye." The narrator continues the unexpected as he explains his bizarre actions as wise: *"Ha! Would a madman have been so wise as this?"*

His calm disposals of the body, in contrast to the frenetic exclamations of the narrator seem to reignite the tension felt in the rising action of the plot. Finally, instead of an expected resolving of the plot, Poe's narrator reveals his deadly crime.

Next, Poe's *syntax*, or word choice, is another way he creates tension. It is written as if the narrator is confessing to us. His use of *repetition* and asides again draws the reader in and helps build *suspense*.

Perhaps the greatest tension is created by the *words* of the narrator. At the outset he frantically declares,

True! Nervous-very nervous, dreadfully nervous I had been and am. But why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses...

The reader wonders why the narrator tries to explain himself. What has he done?

Poe also uses *plot structure* to create *tension*. Look at the scene where our narrator spies on the old man at night. Our narrator slowly opens the door a crack and each night after a little farther

until the light falls on the man's face. Then when he finally is about to enter, after the eighth night, the man wakes up and startles our narrator.

Also, look at the methodical nature with which the narrator goes about covering up his crime. That builds tension.

Finally, look at the narrator's arrogance. How he seats himself right over the old man's body buried in his floor boards. The reader cannot help but wonder *will he get away with it? Will he crack? Is he insane? What will happen?*

Symbols and Metaphors in the Tell Tale Heart

Metaphor: An *analogy* identifying one object with another and ascribing to the first object one or more of the qualities of the second.

-Basically it is a comparison to make a point or create an *image*.

Symbol: Something that is itself and also stands for something else. In the literary sense, a *symbol* combines a literal and sensuous quality with an abstract or suggestive aspect.

Question: Can an object be both a symbol and a metaphor at the same time? If not, then how does one determine which of the two it is?

They're related, but generally a *metaphor* is used to draw a comparison between two distinct objects, whereas a *symbol* is used a stand-in for a much more complex, and generally more abstract, idea. In literature, a *metaphor* would typically be used in a specific instance to compare two objects, but a *symbol* would be used throughout the work as a major part of the theme.

What are some metaphors from The Tell Tale Heart?

- “*he was stone dead*”
- “*his eye resembled that of a vultures eye*”
- The *heart* pounding in the man's head is a *metaphor* for guilt.

There are multiple *metaphors* in *A Tell Tale Heart*.

The Heart

The heart keeps beating after the old man is suffocated, dismembered and then shoved under some floor boards.

The beating heart could symbolize the narrator's guilt or his own fear. Also the symbol of the beating heart could represent the narrator's own insanity, and then the beating heart itself might only exist within the imagination of the narrator and might not be "real."

The Evil Eye

The narrator didn't think the old man was evil, just the eye. That's because the eye is a *metaphor*. There can be debate over what exactly the metaphor is for, and there really is not right or wrong answer if the theory can be supported. The eye, as Poe himself includes in the story, is evil. So it's pretty safe to conclude that the eye is a *metaphor* for evil! If you want to dig deeper you could even go as far as to say it is the evilness which the narrator sees in himself. Eyes are the windows to the soul after all. That, too, is a *metaphor*.

The narrator describes the **eye** as being like the *eye of a vulture*. Vultures are scavengers that swoop in upon dead animals to feast on the carcass. Thus, they are ever-present and diligent. They see everything. The eye in this story symbolizes that sort of penetration. The narrator is obviously disturbed and terrified that someone will see into his deepest fears and violent plans. The eye represents the window into the mind and soul of the narrator. It is always watching him - no matter what, he will be observed. This comes true in the end when the police come and the narrator reveals his own guilt. Someone is always watching - someone always knows.

You could also say that the eye is the conscience of the narrator. It watches him because it knows that he is planning to do wrong, and the narrator is thus haunted by it. Instead of trying to reconcile his desire with what his conscience knows is right, he chooses to destroy it.

The Watch

The watch, or time, is mentioned many times in the story. Whether it's a watch itself, a death watch in a wall, the seven days, or a more abstract mention in one of the many times the narrator describes how very, very slowly he moved, time is important. It represents the journey to death..

The Lantern

It is mentioned less than the watch, however it's important to note that light is generally a counter to darkness. Darkness is usually associated with evil. SO if light fights dark, and dark is evil then light is good? But then why does the narrator finally kill the old man once the light is fully shed upon the eye? Maybe it is because he has seen the full force of the eye. If the eye stands for the narrator himself; when the narrator sees his true evil/insanity in the old man's eye he must destroy the eye. The lamp could also represent the truth, the truth that the old man was never evil.

Midnight

The use of midnight is not simply to enforce the tone of the story. Midnight can be thought of as the darkest hour, and dark= evil. So of course the narrator is doing evil things at the evil hour. BUT once the old man was dead, and it was 4 o'clock but *still* dark as midnight, that was a pretty good indication that midnight wasn't just reflecting the evil of the actions but the evil of the narrator himself.

The Bell

The bell means the end. End of the old man, end of the narrator's sanity, end of the narrator's quest. Poe also wrote a poem about bells and it was all about life and being young and growing old and dying.

Literary Elements – Figurative Language

Figurative language is when you describe something by using pictures or images. A **literary device** is any technique an author uses, such as **diction**, **syntax**, **metaphors**... even **figurative language**.

Similes

"black as pitch"

"it increased my fury as the beating of a drum stimulates the soldier into courage"

Personification

"All in vain because death, in approaching him had stalked with his black shadow before him and enveloped the victim"

The "evil eye" - This is personification because eyes can't be evil.

Flashback

The entire story is a **flashback**. He is confessing to someone (the reader).

Foreshadowing

Because of the fact that the narrator murdered the old man out of paranoia, here are some foreshadowing clues that hint that the narrator "will get what's coming to him":

"I have told you that I am nervous: so I am."

"I smiled - for what had I to fear?"

"It was a low, dull, quick sound - much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton."

Irony

-After the narrator kills the old man and hides his heart underneath the floorboards the police arrive. He then begins to hear the heart beating, and he eventually breaks and confesses to the police. The guilt of killing the man he hated eventually caused his own undoing.

-Irony is when the author admits that he killed the old man. Also he tries to convince us that he isn't mad.

Verbal irony:

-calls himself calm and logical, but truly insane and agitated

"I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him."

Situational irony:

-madmen are not reasonable, but narrator seems to be bothered by justice

-He successfully completes the murder but he confesses to the police because he "hears" the beating of his heart.

Dramatic irony:

-reader understands narrator killed old man, yet police are unaware

Conflict (internal/external)

Central Conflict: Man vs. Self

-The conflict is *man vs psychological* matters.

The narrators attempt to cling to sanity.

The narrator struggles through admitting to the murder of the old man in a very chaotic-psychological manner. His mind brings the dead character back to life (through the beating of the heart), to a point of psychological break down.

-the conflict is *internal* because the eye is troubling the narrator in his mind. Then at the end of the story the narrator thinks he is hearing the heart beat in his mind which then turns into an *external* conflict because he confesses to the police.

Lesser Conflict: Man vs. Man

-when the narrator kills the old man

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