

Summary and Analysis "The Tell-Tale Heart"

Even though this is one of Poe's shortest stories, it is nevertheless a profound and, at times, ambiguous investigation of a man's paranoia. The story gains its intensity by the manner in which it portrays how the narrator stalks his victim — as though he were a beast of prey; yet, at the same time, elevated by human intelligence to a higher level of human endeavor, Poe's "murderer" is created into a type of grotesque anomaly. In a sense, the narrator is worse than a beast; only a human being could so completely terrorize his victim before finally killing it, as, for example, the narrator deliberately terrorizes the old man before killing him. And as noted in the introduction to this section, this story shows the narrator's attempt to rationalize his irrational behavior.

The story begins with the narrator admitting that he is a "very dreadfully nervous" type. This type is found throughout all of Poe's fiction, particularly in the over-wrought, hyper-sensitive Roderick Usher in "The Fall of the House of Usher." As with Usher, the narrator here believes that his nervousness has "sharpened my senses — not destroyed — not dulled them." Thus, he begins by stating that he is *not* mad, yet he will continue his story and will reveal not only that he is mad, but that he is terribly mad. His sensitivities allow him to hear and sense things in heaven, hell, and on earth that other people are not even aware of. His over-sensitivity becomes in this story the ultimate cause of his obsession with the old man's eye, which in turn causes him to murder the old man. Ironically, the narrator offers as proof of his sanity the calmness with which he can narrate the story.

The story begins boldly and unexpectedly: "I loved the old man," the narrator says, adding, "He had never wronged me." Next, he reveals that he was *obsessed* with the old man's eye — "the eye of a vulture — a pale blue eye, with a film over it." Without any real motivation, then, other than his psychotic obsession, he decides to take the old man's life.

Even though he knows that we, the readers, might consider him mad for this decision, yet he plans to prove his sanity by showing how "wisely" and with what extreme precaution, foresight, and dissimulation he executed his deeds. Every night at twelve o'clock, he would slowly open the door, "oh so gently," and would quietly and cunningly poke his head very slowly through the door. It would sometimes take him an hour to go that far — "would a madman have been so wise as this?" he asks, thus showing, he hopes, how thoroughly objective he can be while commenting on the horrible deed he committed.

For seven nights, he opened the door ever so cautiously, then when he was just inside, he opened his lantern just enough so that one small ray of light would cast its tiny ray upon "the vulture eye." The following morning, he would go into the old man's chamber and speak to him with cordiality and friendship.

On the eighth night, he decided it was now the time to commit the deed. When he says "I fairly chuckled at the idea," we know that we are indeed dealing with a highly

disturbed personality — despite the fact that he seems to present his story very coherently.

On this particular night, unlike the preceding seven nights, the narrator's hand slipped on the clasp of the lantern, and the old man immediately "sprang up in bed, crying out — 'Who's there?'" He can see nothing because the shutters are all closed. Here, as in most of Poe's stories, the action proper of the story takes place within a closed surrounding — that is, the murder of the old man is within the confines of his small bedroom with the shutters closed and in complete darkness.

Furthermore, as in works like "The Cask of Amontillado," the moans of the victim heighten the terror of the story. The old man's moans were "low stifled sounds that arose from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe." The narrator knew that the old man *felt* that he was in the room and, dramatically, when he opened his lantern to let a small ray of light out, it "fell full upon the vulture eye." When he saw that "hideous veiled eye," he became furious. But he warns the reader not to mistake his "over-acuteness of the senses" for madness because he says that suddenly there came to his ears "a low, dull, quick sound": It was the beating of the old man's heart. It is at this point in the story that we have our first ambiguity based upon the narrator's over-sensitivity and madness. The question is, obviously, *whose* heart does he hear? We all know that in moments of stress and fright our own heartbeat increases so rapidly that we feel every beat. Consequently, from the psychological point of view, the narrator thinks that he is hearing his own increased heartbeat.

As he waits, the heartbeat which he heard excited him to uncontrollable terror, for the heart seemed to be "beating . . . louder [and] louder." The narrator was suddenly aware that the old man's heartbeat was so loud that the neighbors might hear it. Thus, the time had come. He dragged the old man to the floor, pulled the mattress over him and slowly the muffled sound of the heart ceased to beat. The old man was dead — "his eye would trouble me no more."

Again the narrator attempts to show us that because of the wise precautions he took, no one could consider him to be mad, that he is, in fact, *not* mad. First, he dismembered the old man, and afterward there was not a spot of blood anywhere: "A tub had caught all — ha! ha!" The mere narration here shows how the narrator, with his wild laughter, has indeed lost his rational faculties. Likewise, the delight he takes in dismembering the old man is an act of extreme abnormality.

After the dismembering and the cleaning up were finished, the narrator carefully removed the planks from the floor in the old man's room and placed all the parts of the body under the floor. As he surveyed his work, the door bell rang at 4 A.M. The police were there to investigate some shrieks. (To the reader, this is an unexpected turn of events, but in such tales, the unexpected becomes the normal; see the section on "Edgar Allan Poe and Romanticism.")

The narrator admitted the police to the house "with a light heart" since the old man's heart was no longer beating, and he let the police thoroughly search the entire house. Afterward, he bade the police to sit down, and he brought a chair and sat

upon "the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse of the victim." The officers were so convinced that there was nothing to be discovered in the apartment that could account for the shrieks that they sat around chatting idly. Then suddenly a noise began within the narrator's ears. He grew agitated and spoke with a heightened voice. The sound increased; it was "*a low, dull quick sound.*" We should note that the words used here to describe the beating of the heart are the exact words used only moments earlier to describe the murder of the old man.

As the beating increased, the narrator "foamed [and] raved" adjectives commonly used to apply to a mad man. In contrast to the turmoil going on in the narrator's mind, the police continued to chat pleasantly. The narrator wonders how it was possible that they did not hear the loud beating which was becoming louder and louder. He can stand the horror no longer because he knows that "they were making a mockery of my horror . . . [and] anything was better than this agony!" Thus, as the beating of the heart becomes intolerable, he screams out to the police: "I admit the deed! — tear up the planks! here, here! — it is the beating of his hideous heart!"

Early commentators on the story saw this as merely another tale of terror or horror in which something supernatural was happening. To the modern reader, it is less ambiguous; the beating of the heart occurs within the narrator himself. It is established at the beginning of the story that he is over-sensitive — that he can hear and feel things that others cannot. At the end of the story, if there really were a beating heart up under the floor boards, then the police would have heard it. Clearly, the narrator, who has just finished the gruesome act of dismembering a corpse, cannot cope with the highly emotional challenge needed when the police are searching the house. These two factors cause his heart rate to accelerate to the point that his heartbeat is pounding in his ears so loudly that he cannot stand the psychological pressure any longer. Thus he confesses to his horrible deed. The narrator's "tell-tale" heart causes him to convict himself.

We have here, then, a narrator who believes that he is *not* mad because he can logically describe events which *seem* to prove him to be mad. The conciseness of the story and its intensity and economy all contribute to the total impact and the overall unity of effect. In the narrator's belief that he is not mad, but that he actually heard the heart of the old man still beating, Poe has given us one of the most powerful examples of the capacity of the human mind to deceive itself and then to speculate on the nature of its own destruction.