The Tell-Tale Heart by Edgar Allan Poe

Biography
Edgar Allan Poe (1809-49) was the son of itinerant actors, who died when he was a child. John Allan, a tobacco exporter from Virginia, adopted the boy. When business interests took Mr. Allan abroad the boy accompanied him and lived in England and Scotland (1815-1820). There he received a good education, which was continued after his return to America. In 1826 he went to the University of Virginia, which he had to leave after one term when his foster father refused to pay his gambling debts. For a long time Foe's literary work was denied its due appreciation in Puritan America because his work was identified with his dissolute life. He had a fateful propensity to alcohol, opium and gambling. Today his literary fame is undeniable. Poe was a man of great genius, endowed with the gift of analytical logic as well as sensitive imagination. Murder and death in all its forms are Poe's favourite themes together with the presentation of the monstrous and terrible, e.g. The Murders in the Rue Morgue (1841); The Masque of the Red Death (1842); The Oval Portrait (1844). His psychological interest is very strong; one of his merits resides in the fact that he, for the first-time in American literature, probed regions of the human mind which were hitherto unknown in literature. The Tell-Tale Heart (1843), for instance, is a madman's account of how he committed a senseless murder. Besides being a famous author and poet, Poe made a very important contribution to literary criticism. In his review of Hawthorne's Twice-Told Tales he formulated his famous definition of the short story, which has been very influential.

First Unit
The Madman's State of Mind
1. How does the narrator himself explain his own frame of mind?

Does he really think himself mad?

2. What does he himself think to be the motive for his deed?

Can we accept this as a reason?

3. What is the real motive for the murder?
4. Give examples of the murderer's insanity.
   a) The symptoms of his mental disease can best be seen when he describes the old man's mortal terror:

   b) The madman keeps telling the reader that he is not insane; this is proof of his uncertainty.

   c) The way the murder is committed (extravagant details):

   d) He revels in the victim's mortal fear:

   e) The seeming overacuteness of his sense of hearing is nothing but a deception.

   f) The wildly animated language of the lunatic:
Summary

Fill in the missing words:

commits – confession - convince – conceal - cunningly – despite -
emphasizing – overacuteness - reveal – sagacity - scruples

Poe has a madman tell this tale of terror in the first person thus ______________________ his psychological interest in the narrator's state of mind. The madman tries to ____________
the reader of his mental integrity by demonstrating how ____________________ he has
planned and executed the murder, but in reality he displays his mental derangement. He
____________________a senseless crime without being hampered by any moral
___________________. The extravagant details of the murder, his relish for the old man's
mortal terror, his wild language and his failure, even now, to realize that his _____________
was not necessary, ________________ him as the madman he really is. What he mistakes
for an __________________________ of the senses is but a sign of his insanity. He makes
the mistake of confusing cleverness and __________________ with mental normality. The
presence of the former does not prove that he possesses the latter. This becomes clear at the
end: the madman cannot but confess _____________________ his cleverness. He falls prey
to the deception of his senses which is caused by the insanity he wants to _____________.

Second Unit

Central Motif and Tension

Summary .
The beating of the old man's heart and the overacuteness of the narrator's sense of hearing
form the central motif of the story. They lie at the basis of the plot, lending it its compactness
and tautness. Although one knows from the beginning that the old man has to die, the
suspense is nevertheless kept up at a high pitch, finally culminating in the surprise ending, the
unexpected confession of the evil-doer after having committed such a perfect murder. Thus,
suspense in this story must be understood as "a combination of uncertainty about and intense
interest in the outcome of an action and the way in which the outcome is to be brought about."
Suggestions for a Further Unit Parallelisms in Structure

1. Are there characteristic traits which apply to the narrator as well as to the victim?

a) Both have on overacute sense of hearing.

b) The two are capable of apprehending things by feeling or intuition:

19

tell-tale revealing a secret —
3 to dull the opposite of to make sharp (sharpen) —
4 acute [a'kju:t] sharp, keen (of the senses) —
5 hearken (liter.) listen —
8 to conceive to form (an idea, plan etc.) in the mind —
to haunt to return to the mind repeatedly, to visit a person frequently (ghosts) — object
there was none There was no reason to justify this idea. The reader does not yet know what incident the narrator is referring to. This is done on purpose to arouse the reader's interest and to heighten the tension —
9 to wrong s.o. to do s.o. wrong —
11 vulture large bird that lives on the flesh of dead animals —
13 by degrees step by step, gradually —
14 to rid oneself of to get rid of, to free o.s. of —
15 you fancy me mad you imagine me to be mad —
18 dissimulation the act of concealing s.th. under a false appearance —
20 latch a door-lock made of a small bar which is lifted to open the door —
23 to thrust in to push in —
cunning clever at deceiving, tricky, sly —
28 to undo to open —
29 hinge a door or window swings on hinges when they are opened or shut —
to creak [i:] to make a sound like that of an unoiled door-hinge —
30 ray a beam of light (cf. the rays of the sun).

20
1 to vex to annoy, trouble —
4 profound here: very clever, showing great knowledge —
9 extent degree —
10 sagacity wisdom of a practical kind; unlike cleverness it may increase with age —
to contain to keep under control —
12 fairly clearly, distinctly –
to chuckle to laugh with one's mouth closed (indicating satisfaction or amusement) –
13 to startle to give a shock of surprise to, to frighten –
15 pitch black substance made from coal-tar –
shutter a cover for a window to keep out light or robbers –
22 muscle
24 death-watch an insect (beetle) that produces a ticking noise by knocking its head against wood; those beetles are said to announce death –
25 groan deep sound forced out by pain or expressing despair or terror –
27 to overcharge to fill too full –
29 to well up to flow up as from a fountain –
37 cricket small, brown jumping insect that makes a shrill noise by rubbing its wings together - chirp sound made by cricket (and by other insects and birds) –
38 supposition from suppose –
39 to stalk to walk with slow, stiff steps in an imposing manner.

21
5 crevice narrow opening –
10 veil [veil] covering of fine net to protect or hide a woman's face –
11 to chill to make cold –
marrow fatty substance that fills the hollow parts of bones —
13 damned spot here: his eye —
16 enveloped in wrapped up in —
20 to refrain to hold o.s. back from —
21 to maintain to keep —
22 tattoo beating of drums; here: extremely loud beating —
25 to mark to pay attention to —
26 dead hour of the night when everything is quiet –
32 yell a loud sharp cry –
33 to drag to pull along (esp. with effort and difficulty) –
35 to muffle to make the sound of something dull by wrapping it up in cloth etc., to deaden a sound –
38 corpse [ko:ps] dead body —
stone dead absolutely dead.

22
precaution care taken in advance to avoid a risk –
3 to wane to become less; here: daybreak (dawn) was near —
to dismember to cut to pieces, to separate into parts —
5 flooring floor —
6 scantlings small beams or pieces of timber the floor is fastened to –
9 wary ['weari] cautious —
15 suavity politeness —
16 foul play wicked, evil occurrence —
17 information had been lodged a piece of information had been given to an official; here: policeman –
18 premises ['premisiz] house with its outbuildings and surrounding land –
23 enthusiasm
- fatigues tiring duties –
audacity boldness –
26 the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse the very place under which the dead body lay –
29 singularly strangely, remarkably –
to be at ease to be comfortable, to be free from trouble –
30 ere long (arch.) before long –
31 to fancy to picture in the mind –
34 it gained definiteness it became more and more distinct –
38 much such a sound a sound very similar to

23
1 trifle thing of little importance —
3 to pace to walk with slow or regular steps, to move across —
to and fro backwards and forwards —
4 stride long step —
5 to rave to talk wildly, angrily —
6 to grate to rub with harsh noise on s.th. else (usually: to rub into small pieces) —
12 agony great pain or suffering —
13 derision being mocked and laughed at —
hypocritical simulating goodness or virtue —
16 to dissemble to speak or behave so as to hide one's real feelings, thoughts etc.