

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 Poe'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 an overacute sense of hearing.

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

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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** ['weəri] 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.