**The Tell-Tale Heart Plot Analysis**

**Exposition**

The narrator wants to show that he is not insane, and offers a story as proof. In that story, the initial situation is the narrator's decision to kill the old man so that the man's eye will stop looking at the narrator.

**Rising action**

The narrator goes to the old man's room every night for a week, ready to do the dirty deed. But, the sleeping man won't open his eye. Since the eye, not the man, is the problem, the narrator can't kill him if the offending eye isn't open.

**Climax**

The narrator kills the old man with his own bed and then cuts up the body and hides it under the bedroom floor.

**Falling action**

The narrator is pretty calm and collected when the police first show up. He gives them the guided tour of the house, and then invites them to hang out with him in the man's bedroom.

But, the narrator starts to hear a terrible noise, which gets louder and louder, and…

**Denouement**

***Make it stop, please!***

Well, the noise gets even louder, and keeps on getting louder until the narrator can't take it anymore. Thinking it might make the noise stop, the narrator tells the cops to look under the floorboards.

**Conclusion**

***The narrator identifies the source of the sound.***

Up to this moment, the narrator doesn't identify the sound. It's described first as "a ringing," and then as "a low, dull, quick sound – much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton" . Only in the very last line does the narrator conclude that the sound was "the beating of [the man's] hideous heart!"

**Setting**

The story opens in an undisclosed locale, possibly a prison, when the narrator tells readers that he is not mad. To defend his sanity, he tells a story which he believes will prove him sound of mind. His story is set in a house occupied by the narrator and an old man. The time of the events in the story is probably the early 1840's, when Poe wrote the story. The action in the narrator's story takes place over eight days.

**Characters**

**The Narrator**: Deranged unnamed person who tries to convince the reader that he is sane. The narrator's gender is not identified, but Poe probably intended him to be a man. Here is why: Poe generally wrote from a male perspective, often infusing part of himself into his main characters. Also, in major short stories in which he identifies the narrator by gender–stories such as "The Black Cat," "The Cask of Amontillado," and "The Fall of the House of Usher"–the narrator is male. Finally, the narrator of "A Tell-Tale Heart" exhibits male characteristics, including (1) A more pronounced tendency than females to commit violent acts. Statistics demonstrate overwhelmingly that murder is a male crime. (2) Physical strength that would be unusual in a female. The narrator drags the old man onto the floor and pulls the bed on top of him, then tears up floorboards and deposits the body between joists. (3) The narrator performs a man's chore by bringing four chairs into the old man's bedroom, one for the narrator and three for the policemen. If the narrator were a woman, the policemen probably would have fetched the chairs. But they did not.     
**The Old Man**: Seemingly harmless elder who has a hideous "evil eye" that unnerves the narrator.     
**Neighbor**: Person who hears a shriek coming from the house of the narrator and the old man, then reports it to the police.     
**Three Policemen**: Officers who search the narrator's house after a neighbor reports hearing a shriek.    
**Type of Work** Short story in the horror genre that focuses on the psyche of the narrator .

**Year of Publication**

"The Tell-Tale Heart" was first published in the winter of 1843 in *The Pioneer*, a Boston magazine.

**Themes**

**Theme 1**: A human being has a perverse, wicked side–another self–that can goad him into doing evil things that have no apparent motive. This is the same theme of another Poe story, "The Black Cat." The narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" admits in the second paragraph of the story that he committed a senseless crime, saying: "Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved    
the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire." However, he does note that his evil deed, murder, was not entirely unprovoked; for the old man he killed had a hideous eye that unnerved him. Unable to look upon it any longer, he decided to kill the old man.     
**Theme 2**: Fear of discovery can bring about discovery. At the end of the story, the narrator begins to crack under the pressure of a police investigation, hearing the sound of the murdered man's beating heart, and tells the police where he hid the body. Fear of discovery is the principle under which lie detectors work.     
**Theme 3**: The evil within is worse than the evil without.. The old man has a hideous, repulsive eye; outwardly, he is ugly. But, as the narrator admits, he is otherwise a harmless, well-meaning person. The narrator, on the other hand, is inwardly ugly and repulsive, for he plans and executes murder; his soul is more repulsive than the old man's eye.

**Point of View**

The story is told in first-person point of view by an unreliable narrator. The narrator is obviously deranged, readers learn during his telling of his tale, even though he declares at the outset that he is sane. As in many of his other short stories, Poe does not name the narrator. A possible explanation for this is that the unnamed narrator becomes every human being, thereby enhancing the universality of the short story. In other words, the narrator represents anyone who has ever acted perversely or impulsively–and then had to pay for his deed.

**Prose Beats Like a Heart**

From time to time, Poe uses a succession of short sentences or word groups, creating a rhythm not unlike that of a heartbeat. Note the following examples from the story:

Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eye! Yes, it was this!

I scarcely breathed. I held the lantern motionless. I tried how steadily I could to maintain the ray upon the eye. Meantime the hellish tattoo of the heart increased.

Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God! – no, 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 derision! I could bear those hypocritical smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die! – and now – again – hark! louder! louder! louder! LOUDER! – "Villains!" I shrieked, "dissemble no more! I admit the deed! – tear up the planks! – here, here! – it is the beating of his hideous heart!"

**Figures of Speech**

As in other works of his, Poe uses many figures of speech. Examples are the following:

Anaphora

Anaphora is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is repeated at the beginning of a clause or another group of words. Anaphora imparts emphasis and balance. Here are boldfaced examples from "The Tell-Tale Heart":

**I heard** all things in the heaven and in the earth. **I heard** many things in hell.    
**With** what caution–**with** what foresight, **with** what dissimulation, I went to work!     
**He had been** trying to fancy them causeless, 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."     
There was nothing to wash out–**no** stain of any kind–**no** blood-spot whatever.    
**They** heard!–**they** suspected!–**they** KNEW!–**they** were making a mockery of my horror!

Personificaton

Death in approaching him had stalked with his black shadow before him and enveloped the victim. [Here, Death is a person.]

Simile

So I opened it–you cannot imagine how stealthily, stealthily–until at length a single dim ray like the thread of the spider shot out from the crevice and fell upon the vulture eye. [The simile is the comparsion of the ray to the thread of the spider with the use of the word *like*.    
It increased my fury as the beating of a drum stimulates the soldier into courage. [The simile is the comparison of the heartbeat to a drumbeat.]     
His room was as black as pitch with the thick darkness. . . . [The simile is the comparison of the darkness to pitch.]

Alliteration

**H**ear**k**en! and observe **h**ow **h**ealthily, **h**ow **c**almly, I **c**an tell you the **wh**ole story.

Meanwhile, the **h**ellish **t**a**tt**oo of the **h**eart increased.

It is the beating of **h**is **h**ideous **h**eart!

Irony

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

**Author Information**

Edgar Allan Poe was born on January 19, 1809, in Boston. After being orphaned at age two, he was taken into the home of a childless couple–John Allan, a successful businessman in Richmond, Va., and his wife. Allan was believed to be Poe’s godfather. At age [[](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0394716787/thecompleteshake?creative=327641&camp=14573&link_code=as1)](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0394716787/thecompleteshake?creative=327641&camp=14573&link_code=as1)six, Poe went to England with the Allans and was enrolled in schools there. After he returned with the Allans to the U.S. in 1820, he studied at private schools, then attended the University of Virginia and the U.S. Military Academy, but did not complete studies at either school. After beginning his literary career as a poet and prose writer, he married his young cousin, Virginia Clemm. He worked for several magazines and joined the staff of the *New York Mirror*newspaper in 1844. All the while, he was battling a drinking problem. After the *Mirror* published his poem “The Raven” in January 1845, Poe achieved national and international fame. Besides pioneering the development of the short story, Poe invented the format for the detective story as we know it today. He also was an outstanding literary critic. Despite the acclaim he received, he was never really happy because of his drinking and because of the deaths of several people close to him, including his wife in 1847. He frequently had trouble paying his debts. It is believed that heavy drinking was a contributing cause of his death in Baltimore on October 7, 1849.     
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