

Before You Read

This selection also appears in *Elements of Literature*.

The Tell-Tale Heart by Edgar Allan Poe

LITERARY FOCUS: NARRATOR

A **narrator** is a person who tells a story. A story's narrator may be a character in the story. Another type of narrator is outside the story and observes and reports on the action that takes place. We rely on a story's narrator to let us know what is going on. But what if the narrator can't be trusted? As you read "The Tell-Tale Heart," decide whether or not its narrator is truthful—or even sane.

IRONY: THE UNEXPECTED

Irony is a contrast between expectation and reality. Much of the horror in "The Tell-Tale Heart" comes from Poe's use of irony. Look for these three basic kinds of irony as you read the story:

- **Verbal irony** What is said is the opposite of what is meant.
- **Situational irony** What happens is different from or even opposite of what we expected.
- **Dramatic irony** We know something a character doesn't know.

READING SKILLS: PREVIEWING

When you **preview** a selection, you look it over to see what lies ahead. You might scan the title and skim a paragraph or two to get an idea of the writer's subject and style. Preview Poe's story. What predictions can you make?

SKILLS FOCUS

Literary Skills

Understand narrator; understand irony.

Reading Skills

Preview the story.

Vocabulary Skills

Identify synonyms.

My Predictions

My Predictions

VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

PREVIEW SELECTION VOCABULARY

Become familiar with these words before you read “The Tell-Tale Heart.”

acute (ə·kyōōt') *adj.*: sharp.

His nervousness increased his acute sense of hearing.

vexed (vekst) *v.*: disturbed.

He was vexed by the old man's eye.

sagacity (sə·gas'ə·tē) *n.*: intelligence and good judgment.

He was proud of his powers and of his sagacity.

refrained (ri·frānd') *v.*: held back.

Though furious, he refrained from action.

wary (wer'ē) *adj.*: cautious.

He was too wary to make a careless mistake.

suavity (swäv'ə·tē) *n.*: smooth manner; smoothness.

The police showed perfect suavity.

audacity (ō·das'ə·tē) *n.*: boldness.

He was impressed with his own audacity.

vehemently (vē'ə·mənt·lē) *adv.*: forcefully.

He talked more vehemently, but he couldn't drown out the sound.

gesticulations (jes·tik'yōō·lā'shənz) *n.*: energetic gestures.

His violent gesticulations did not disturb the police officers.

derision (di·rizh'ən) *n.*: ridicule.

He hated the smiling derision of the police.

CLARIFYING WORD MEANINGS: SYNONYMS

A **synonym** is a word that has the same or nearly the same meaning as another word. When you learn a new word, take note of its synonyms. Knowing its synonyms will help you remember the new word's meaning.

In the sentences below, a synonym is provided in parentheses for each boldface vocabulary word.

- “Above all was the sense of hearing **acute** (sharp).”
- “It was not the old man who **vexed** (annoyed) me, but his Evil Eye.”
- “I had been too **wary** (cautious) for that.”
- “I talked more quickly—more **vehemently** (forcefully); but the noise steadily increased.”
- “Anything was more tolerable than this **derision** (ridicule)!”

THE TELL-TALE HEART

Edgar Allan Poe



Tom Leonard.

IDENTIFY

Re-read lines 1–7. Circle what the narrator says he is *not*. Underline how he intends to prove he's healthy.

VOCABULARY

acute (ə·kyōōt') *adj.*: sharp; sensitive; severe.

INTERPRET

How would you describe the narrator's reaction to the old man (lines 8–17)? Underline the idea that enters the narrator's brain.

True!—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why *will* you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing **acute**. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad? Hearken! and observe how healthily—how calmly I can tell you the whole story.

It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but once conceived, it haunted me day and night.

10 Object¹ 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! One of his eyes resembled that of a

1. **object** (äb'jikt) *n.*: purpose or goal.

vulture—a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees—very gradually—I made up my mind to take the life of the old man and thus rid myself of the eye forever.

Now this is the point. You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen me. You should
 20 have seen how wisely I proceeded—with what caution—with what foresight—with what dissimulation² I went to work! I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him. And every night, about midnight, I turned the latch of his door and opened it—oh, so gently! And then, when I had made an opening sufficient for my head, I put in a dark lantern, all closed, closed, so that no light shone out, and then I thrust in my head. Oh, you would have laughed to see how cunningly I thrust it in! I moved it slowly—very, very slowly, so that
 30 I might not disturb the old man’s sleep. It took me an hour to place my whole head within the opening so far that I could see him as he lay upon his bed. Ha! Would a madman have been so wise as this? And then, when my head was well in the room, I undid the lantern cautiously—oh, so cautiously—cautiously (for the hinges creaked)—I undid it just so much that a single thin ray fell upon the vulture eye. And this I did for seven long nights—every night just at midnight—but I found the eye always closed; and so it was impossible to do the work; for it was not the old man
 40 who **vexed** me, but his Evil Eye. And every morning, when the day broke, I went boldly into the chamber and spoke courageously to him, calling him by name in a hearty tone and inquiring how he had passed the night. So you see he would have been a very profound³ old man, indeed, to

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2. **dissimulation** (di·sim'yōō·lā'shən) *n.*: disguising of intentions or feelings. (Look for a similar word at the end of the story.)
 3. **profound** (prō·found') *adj.*: deeply intellectual.

EVALUATE

In lines 18–33 the narrator claims to have several qualities that insane people *don't* have. Circle the qualities that he mentions. In your opinion, does having those qualities prove his sanity—or not?

PREDICT

Pause at line 40. Do you think the narrator will kill the old man? Tell what you think will happen. Base your prediction on the details you already know.

VOCABULARY

vexed (vekst) *v.*: disturbed; annoyed.

VOCABULARY

sagacity (sə-gas'ə-tē) *n.*: intelligence and good judgment.

IDENTIFY

Re-read lines 47–59. Why is it **ironic** that the old man feared robbers? (What should he have feared?)

FLUENCY

Read the boxed passage at least twice to appreciate the author's unique **style**—the way he expresses himself. Notice the kinds of words and sentences he uses—long, short, simple, poetic, and so on. As you read aloud, change the pace of your reading to reflect the narrator's words. Decide which sentences you will read softly, perhaps even in a whisper. Pay special attention to Poe's use of *italic* type to show emphasis, and dashes to show abrupt changes in thought.

suspect that every night, just at twelve, I looked in upon him while he slept.

50 Upon the eighth night I was more than usually cautious in opening the door. A watch's minute hand moves more quickly than did mine. Never before that night had I *felt* the extent of my own powers—of my **sagacity**. I could scarcely contain my feelings of triumph. To think that there I was, opening the door, little by little, and he not even to dream of my secret deeds or thoughts. I fairly chuckled at the idea; and perhaps he heard me; for he moved on the bed suddenly, as if startled. Now you may think that I drew back—but no. His room was as black as pitch with the thick darkness (for the shutters were close fastened, through fear of robbers), and so I knew that he could not see the opening of the door, and I kept pushing it on steadily, steadily.

60 I had my head in, and was about to open the lantern, when my thumb slipped upon the tin fastening, and the old man sprang up in the bed, crying out—"Who's there?"

I kept quite still and said nothing. For a whole hour I did not move a muscle, and in the meantime I did not hear him lie down. He was still sitting up in the bed listening—just as I have done, night after night, hearkening to the deathwatches⁴ in the wall.

70 Presently I heard a slight groan, and I knew it was the groan of mortal terror. It was not a groan of pain or of grief—oh, no!—it was the low, stifled sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe. I knew the sound well. Many a night, just at midnight, when all the world slept, it has welled up from my own bosom, deepening, with its dreadful echo, the terrors that distracted me. I say I knew it well. I knew what the old man felt, and pitied him, although I chuckled at heart. I knew that he had

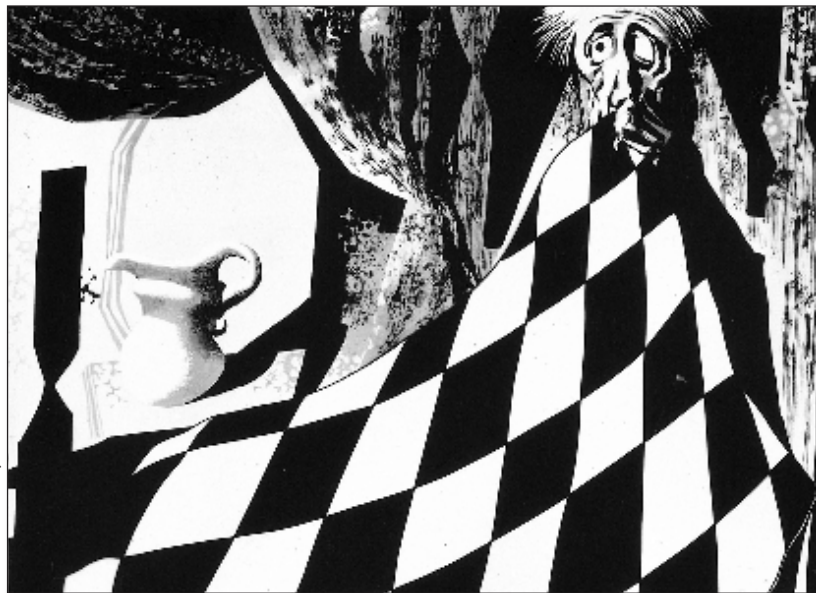
4. **deathwatches** *n.*: beetles that burrow into wood and make tapping sounds, which some people believe are a sign of approaching death.

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been lying awake ever since the first slight noise, when he had turned in the bed. His fears had been ever since growing upon him. 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." Yes, he had been trying to comfort himself with these suppositions; but he had found all in vain. *All in vain;* because Death, in approaching him, had stalked with his black shadow before him and enveloped the victim. And it was the mournful influence of the unperceived shadow that caused him to feel—although he neither saw nor heard—to *feel* the presence of my head within the room.

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When I had waited a long time, very patiently, without hearing him lie down, I resolved to open a little—a very, very little crevice in the lantern. So I opened it—you cannot imagine how stealthily, stealthily—until, at length, a single



Culver Pictures, Inc.

This illustration and the illustration on page 180 are from a short movie based on "The Tell-Tale Heart."

WORD STUDY

Unperceived, in line 87, means "not seen or detected." Circle the context clues that hint at the word's meaning.

EVALUATE

Study the art on this page. How well do you think it brings to life the scene described in lines 76–83? Explain.

VISUALIZE

Re-read lines 90–108. Underline three **visual images**, details that help you *picture* what is happening. Then, circle three **sound images**, details that help you *hear* what is happening.

INTERPRET

Pause at line 108. What do you think the narrator might be hearing when he thinks he hears the beating of the old man's heart?

VOCABULARY

refrained (ri·frānd') v.: held back.

dim ray, like the thread of the spider, shot from out the crevice and full upon the vulture eye.

It was open—wide, wide open—and I grew furious as I gazed upon it. I saw it with perfect distinctness—all a dull blue, with a hideous veil over it that chilled the very marrow in my bones; but I could see nothing else of the old man's face or person, for I had directed the ray, as if by instinct, precisely upon the damned spot.

And now have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but overacuteness of the senses?—now, I say, there came to my ears a low, dull, quick sound, such as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton. I knew *that* sound well too. It was the beating of the old man's heart. It increased my fury, as the beating of a drum stimulates the soldier into courage.

But even yet I **refrained** and kept still. I scarcely breathed. I held the lantern motionless. I tried how steadily I could maintain the ray upon the eye. Meantime the hellish tattoo⁵ of the heart increased. It grew quicker and quicker and louder and louder every instant. The old man's *terror* must have been extreme! It grew louder, I say, louder every moment!—do you mark me well? I have told you that I am nervous: So I am. And now at the dead hour of the night, amid the dreadful silence of that old house, so strange a noise as this excited me to uncontrollable terror. Yet for some minutes longer I refrained and stood still. But the beating grew louder, louder! I thought the heart must burst. And now a new anxiety seized me—the sound would be heard by a neighbor! The old man's hour had come! With a loud yell, I threw open the lantern and leaped into the room. He shrieked once—once only. In an instant I dragged him to the floor and pulled the heavy bed over him. I then smiled

5. **tattoo** *n.*: steady beat.

gaily to find the deed so far done. But, for many minutes, the heart beat on with a muffled sound. This, however, did not vex me; it would not be heard through the wall. At length it ceased. The old man was dead. I removed the bed and examined the corpse. Yes, he was stone, stone dead.

130 I placed my hand upon the heart and held it there many minutes. There was no pulsation. He was stone dead. His eye would trouble me no more.

If still you think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body. The night waned,⁶ and I worked hastily but in silence. First of all I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs.

I then took up three planks from the flooring of the chamber and deposited all between the scantlings.⁷ I then replaced the boards so cleverly, so cunningly, that no human eye—not even *his*—could have detected anything wrong. There was nothing to wash out—no stain of any kind—no blood spot whatever. I had been too **wary** for that. A tub had caught all—ha! ha!

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When I had made an end of these labors, it was four o'clock—still dark as midnight. As the bell sounded the hour, there came a knocking at the street door. I went down to open it with a light heart—for what had I *now* to fear?

150 There entered three men, who introduced themselves, with perfect **suavity**, as officers of the police. A shriek had been heard by a neighbor during the night; suspicion of foul play had been aroused; information had been lodged at the police office, and they (the officers) had been deputed⁸ to search the premises.

6. **waned** (wānd) *v.*: gradually drew to a close.

7. **scantlings** *n.*: small beams of wood.

8. **deputed** (dē-pyōōt'id) *v.*: appointed.

RETELL

Tell what happens on the eighth night (lines 47–133). Be sure to include the reason the narrator's behavior changes. Describe how he commits the murder.

INTERPRET

Pause at line 145. What's one example of something that the **narrator** has said—or done—or felt—that is evidence that he *is* mad?

VOCABULARY

wary (wer'ē) *adj.*: cautious.

suavity (swāv'ə-tē) *n.*: smoothness; politeness.

the feeling; but it continued and gained definitiveness—until, at length, I found that the noise was *not* within my ears.

No doubt I now grew *very* pale—but I talked more fluently and with a heightened voice. Yet the sound increased—and what could I do? It was *a low, dull, quick sound—much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton*. I gasped for breath—and yet the officers heard it not. I talked more quickly—more **vehemently**; but the noise steadily increased. I arose and argued about trifles, in a high key and with violent **gesticulations**, but the noise steadily increased. Why *would* they not be gone? I paced the floor to and fro with heavy strides, as if excited to fury by the observation of the men—but the noise steadily increased. Oh God! what *could* I do? I foamed—I raved—I swore! I swung the chair upon which I had been sitting and grated it upon the boards, but the noise arose over all and continually increased. It grew louder—louder—*louder!* And still
190 the men chatted pleasantly, and smiled. 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
200 of his hideous heart!”

INFER

What is happening to the narrator (lines 175–189)? What does he think he hears? What’s your explanation for the sound he hears?

INTERPRET

Poe once wrote that every word in a story should create a “single, overwhelming impression.” In your opinion, what impression was he trying to create in this story?

VOCABULARY

vehemently (vē'ə-mənt-lē)
adv.: forcefully; passionately.

gesticulations
(jes-tik'yōō-lā'shənz) *n.*:
energetic gestures.

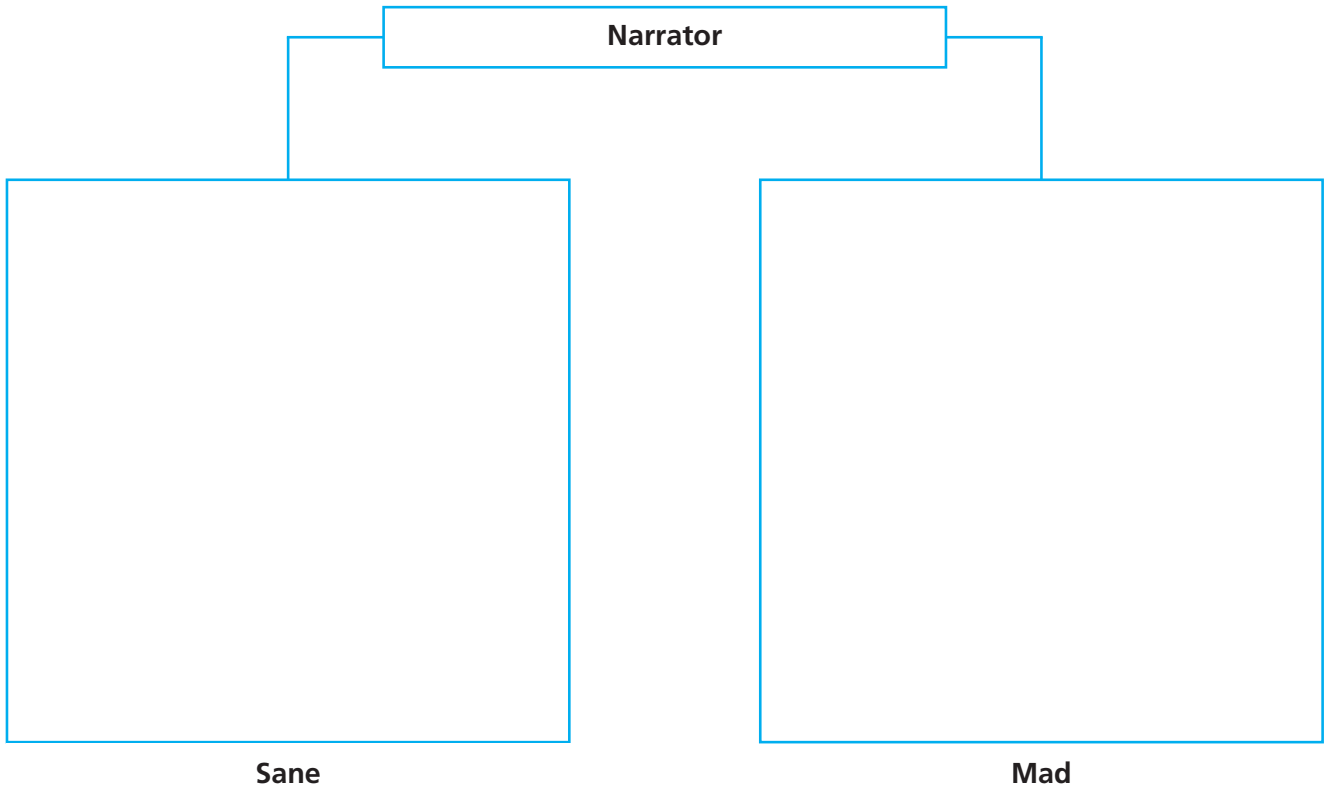
derision (di-riz'hən) *n.*:
contempt; ridicule.

The Tell-Tale Heart



Literary Skills
Analyze the narrator.

Narrator Evaluation Chart The narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” claims that he is not mad. Do you agree? Fill out the graphic below by collecting evidence from the story. Focus on the narrator’s thoughts, words, and actions. Then, write whether or not you think the narrator is a reliable source of information.



I believe the narrator is _____

Skills Review

The Tell-Tale Heart

VOCABULARY AND COMPREHENSION

A. Synonyms Write the word from the Word Bank that best fits each group of synonyms.

- _____ 1. disturbed, annoyed, troubled
- _____ 2. careful, cautious, leery
- _____ 3. boldness, daring, brazenness
- _____ 4. withheld, repressed, held back
- _____ 5. forcefully, passionately, furiously
- _____ 6. smoothness, politeness, fine manners
- _____ 7. gestures, wild movements, spasms
- _____ 8. scorn, ridicule, contempt
- _____ 9. sharp, sensitive, severe
- _____ 10. intelligence, smarts, good sense

Word Bank

acute
vexed
sagacity
refrained
wary
suavity
audacity
vehemently
gesticulations
derision

B. Reading Comprehension Answer each question below.

1. Why does the narrator decide to kill the old man? _____

2. Why does the narrator think he is not mad? _____

3. Who arrives at the narrator's door at night? Why have they come?

4. Why does the narrator finally confess to his crime? _____



Vocabulary Skills
Identify synonyms.