

# The Tell-Tale Heart

Short Story by Edgar Allan Poe

 Video link at [thinkcentral.com](http://thinkcentral.com)

VIDEO TRAILER  KEYWORD: HML8-80

## What makes you **SUSPICIOUS?**

### COMMON CORE

**RL 4** Analyze the impact of word choices on meaning and tone.

**RL 6** Analyze how differences in the points of view of the characters and the reader (e.g., created through the use of dramatic irony) create suspense.

Has something or someone ever seemed dangerous or untrustworthy to you? The feeling you had was suspicion. While suspicion might come from a misunderstanding, it can also be a warning that something is very wrong. In this story, you'll meet a man whose own suspicions are his downfall.

**DISCUSS** With a small group, discuss suspicious characters you've read about or seen on television shows. In what ways did these characters look or act differently from other characters? Continue your discussion by creating a list of warning signs that should make a person suspicious.



## Meet the Author

### Edgar Allan Poe

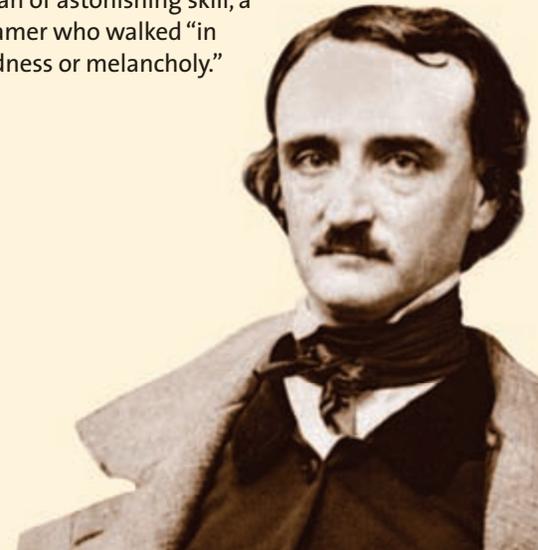
1809–1849

#### Orphan at Two

Edgar Allan Poe was born in Boston to parents who made their livings as traveling actors. When Poe was two, his father deserted the family. Less than a year later, his mother died. Edgar was raised in Virginia by family friends, the Allans. After being expelled from both the University of Virginia and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, Poe began writing for a living.

#### “Madness or Melancholy”

Poe got a job as a journalist to support himself and his young wife while he worked on the stories and poems that would earn him the title “father of the modern mystery.” A master of suspense, he wrote works that were often dark and full of horrifying images. Poems such as “The Raven” and short stories such as “The Pit and the Pendulum” brought him fame but no fortune. Poverty intensified his despair when his wife, Virginia, fell ill and died. Deeply depressed, Poe died two years later after being found on the streets of Baltimore. Poe’s obituary stated he was a man of astonishing skill, a dreamer who walked “in madness or melancholy.”



### ● TEXT ANALYSIS: SUSPENSE

Writers often “hook” readers by creating a sense of excitement, tension, dread, or fear about what will happen next. This feeling is called **suspense**. Edgar Allan Poe uses the following techniques to develop suspense:

- describing a character’s anxiety or fear
- choosing vivid words to describe dramatic sights and sounds
- repeating words, phrases, or characters’ actions

As you read “The Tell-Tale Heart,” notice what causes you to feel suspense.

### ● READING SKILL: EVALUATE NARRATOR

Have you ever suspected someone was not telling you the truth? Just as you can’t trust every person you meet, you can’t believe all **narrators**, or characters who tell a story. To evaluate a narrator’s **reliability**, or trustworthiness, pay attention to his or her actions, attitudes, and statements. Do any raise your suspicions? As you read “The Tell-Tale Heart,” record clues that reveal whether the narrator is reliable or not.

<i>Narrator’s Reliability</i>	
<i>Makes Me Suspicious:</i>	<i>Makes Me Trust Him:</i>
•	•
•	•

### ▲ VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

Poe uses the following words to reveal how the main character is acting, feeling, and thinking. For each word, choose the numbered word or phrase closest in meaning.

<b>WORD</b>	acute	crevice	stealthily	vehemently
<b>LIST</b>	audacity	derision	stifled	vex
	conceive	hypocritical		

1. annoy
2. cautiously
3. intense
4. crack
5. deceptive
6. smothered
7. ridicule
8. think of
9. strongly
10. shameless daring



Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

Authors Online



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# The Tell-Tale Heart

Edgar Allan Poe

**T** rue!—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. Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given  
10 me insult. For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! He had the eye of a 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 have seen how wisely I proceeded—with what caution—with what foresight—with what dissimulation<sup>1</sup> I went to work! **A**

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,  
20 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 I might not disturb the old

## Analyze Visuals ▶

What details in the picture help create suspense?

**acute** (ə-kyōōt') *adj.*  
sharp; keen

**conceive** (kən-sēv) *v.* to think of

## **A** EVALUATE NARRATOR

Reread lines 1–16. On the basis of what he plans to do, decide whether the narrator's opinion of himself makes you trust him more or less.

1. **dissimulation** (dī-sīm'yə-lā'shən): a hiding of one's true feelings.



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  
30 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 profound old man, indeed, to suspect that every night, just at twelve, I looked in upon him while he slept. **B**

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.<sup>2</sup> 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  
40 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.

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  
50 up in the bed listening,—just as I have done, night after night, hearkening to the death watches<sup>3</sup> in the wall. **C**

Presently I heard a slight groan, and I knew it was the groan of mortal terror. It was not a groan of pain or 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 been lying awake ever since the first slight noise, when he had turned in the bed. His fears had  
60 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 has been trying to comfort himself with these suppositions; but he had found all in vain. *All in vain*; because Death,

**vex** (vēks) v. to disturb; to annoy

**B SUSPENSE**

Note the actions the narrator repeats. Why does this repetition create a sense of dread?

**C SUSPENSE**

In what way does the characters' inaction create tension?

**stifled** (stī'fəld) *adj.*  
smothered **stifle** v.

2. **sagacity** (sə-gās'ī-tē): sound judgment.

3. **death watches**: deathwatch beetles—insects that make a tapping sound with their heads.

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.

When I had waited a long time, very patiently, without hearing him lie  
70 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 dim ray, like the thread of the spider, shot from out the crevice and fell 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 over-  
80 acuteness 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. **D**

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 tattoo<sup>4</sup> 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  
90 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 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  
100 bed and examined the corpse. Yes, he was stone, stone dead. 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. **E**

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,<sup>5</sup> 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.

**crevice** (krěv'ıs) *n.* crack

**stealthily** (stěł'thē-lē)  
*adv.* cautiously; secretly

**D EVALUATE NARRATOR**

What does the narrator claim to be hearing? Decide whether you think he is correct.

**E SUSPENSE**

Reread lines 84–102. What is the scariest or most exciting part of this paragraph? Tell what details contribute to this feeling.

4. **hellish tattoo:** awful drumming.

5. **waned:** approached its end.



### ◀ Analyze Visuals

What can you infer from the character's expression in each of the three panels?

I then took up three planks from the flooring of the chamber, and deposited all between the scantlings.<sup>6</sup> I then replaced the boards so cleverly, so cunningly, that no human eye—not even *his*—could have detected anything  
110 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!

When I 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?

### Language Coach

**Syntax** The way words are put together in a sentence is called syntax. Poe often uses unusual syntax. Reread line 112. What is another way to say “When I made an end of these labors”?

6. **scantlings:** small wooden beams supporting the floor.

There entered three men, who introduced themselves, with perfect suavity,<sup>7</sup> 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 deputed<sup>8</sup> to search the premises.

I smiled,—for *what* had I to fear? I bade the gentlemen welcome. The shriek, I said, was my own in a dream. The old man, I mentioned, was absent in the country. I took my visitors all over the house. I bade them search—search *well*. I led them, at length, to *his* chamber. I showed them his treasures, secure, undisturbed. In the enthusiasm of my confidence, I brought chairs into the room, and desired them *here* to rest from their fatigues, while I myself, in the wild **audacity** of my perfect triumph, placed my own seat upon the very spot beneath which reposed<sup>9</sup> the corpse of the victim.

The officers were satisfied. My *manner* had convinced them. I was singularly at ease. They sat, and while I answered cheerily, they chatted of familiar things. But, ere long, I felt myself getting pale and wished them gone. My head ached, and I fancied a ringing in my ears: but still they sat and still chatted. The ringing became more distinct:—it continued and became more distinct: I talked more freely to get rid of 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,<sup>10</sup> 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. 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 the men chatted pleasantly, and smiled. Was it possible they heard not?—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!*—**F**

“Villains!” I shrieked, “dissemble<sup>11</sup> no more! I admit the deed!—tear up the planks!—here, here!—it is the beating of his hideous heart!” ☹

**audacity** (ô-dās'ī-tē) *n.*  
shameless daring or  
boldness

**vehemently**  
(vē'ə-mənt-lē) *adv.* with  
intense emotion

**derision** (dĭ-rĭzh'ən) *n.*  
ridicule

**hypocritical**  
(hĭp'ə-krĭt'ī-kəl) *adj.* false  
or deceptive

**F SUSPENSE**

Think about the emotions that the narrator is feeling. How does Poe help the reader feel the same way?

7. **suavity** (swā'vĭ-tē): graceful politeness.

8. **deputed**: appointed as a representative.

9. **reposed**: rested.

10. **gesticulations** (jĕ-stĭk'yə-lā'shəns): energetic gestures of the hands or arms.

11. **dissemble**: pretend.

## Comprehension

- 1. Recall** Why does the narrator want to kill the old man?
- 2. Clarify** Why does the narrator believe he will not be caught after murdering the old man?
- 3. Summarize** How does the narrator prepare for the crime and cover up?

## Text Analysis

- 4. Make Inferences** Reread lines 7–13. From this passage, what do you think was the relationship between the narrator and the old man?
- 5. Analyze Suspense** Which of Poe’s techniques for creating suspense is most effective for you? To find out, review the following story sections. List the techniques used in each section, and then rank the sections from 1–4, with 1 being the most suspenseful.

Rank				
Lines	1–78	79–111	112–133	134–152
Techniques	1. 2.	1. 2.	1. 2.	1. 2.

- 6. Evaluate Narrator** How reliable is the narrator of the story? Should you believe what he tells you about himself? Support your answer with details from the chart you created as you read.
- 7. Compare and Contrast** When readers know something a character does not, **dramatic irony** results. Contrast what you know about the narrator to what he believes about himself. What effect does this difference in perspective create? Explain.

## Extension and Challenge

- 8. Readers’ Circle** With a group, brainstorm a list of horror stories and movies that most of you are familiar with. Choose at least two of these titles and discuss the techniques the authors or directors used to create suspense. Which of the techniques are similar to the ones Poe uses?
- 9. Inquiry and Research** Do research on lie detection to find out what are the most reliable ways of finding out if someone is telling the truth. Present your findings to the class. Does what you learn change your opinion about whether the narrator is reliable?

### What makes you **SUSPICIOUS**?

Review the list of suspicious actions you recorded on page 80. Which of these actions, if any, did the narrator exhibit while talking to the police?

### COMMON CORE

**RL 4** Analyze the impact of word choices on meaning and tone. **RL 6** Analyze how differences in the points of view of the characters and the reader (e.g., created through the use of dramatic irony) create suspense.

## Vocabulary in Context

### ▲ VOCABULARY PRACTICE

Choose *true* or *false* for each statement.

1. It is difficult to hide a **stifled** yawn.
2. If you have the **audacity** to do something, you are bold and daring.
3. **Derision** is something you feel toward someone you respect.
4. A lion would approach its prey **stealthily**.
5. You could not hear much if you had an **acute** sense of hearing.
6. If someone **conceived** of a plan, he or she heard it from someone else.
7. A person could trip over a **crevice** in the sidewalk.
8. When a person is **hypocritical**, he is honest and true.
9. To **vex** is to delight in something.
10. If you react **vehemently** to something, you don't care much about it.

### ACADEMIC VOCABULARY IN WRITING

• affect • conclude • evident • imply • initial

At what point in “The Tell-Tale Heart” did it become **evident** to you that the narrator was mad, or insane? Write a short paragraph explaining your answer. Try to use at least one Academic Vocabulary word in your response.

### VOCABULARY STRATEGY: USING REFERENCE AIDS

Choosing the perfect word can make a difference between good and great writing. One reason Poe’s writing is still so popular is because of his masterful use of language. When you want to find the most accurate words to express yourself, the following reference aids can help you.

- A **thesaurus** is a reference book of **synonyms**, words with similar meanings. Most word processing software provides an electronic thesaurus tool.

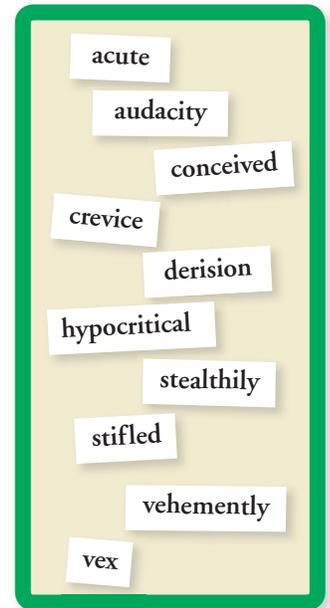
**vex** *verb* aggravate, annoy, bother, bug, disturb, provoke

- A **dictionary** lists synonyms after the definitions of some words.

**vex** (vēks) *v.* 1. To annoy. 2. To cause perplexity in. 3. To bring distress or suffering to.  
**syn** BOTHER, PUZZLE, PLAGUE, AFFLICT

**PRACTICE** Use a dictionary or thesaurus to find a synonym for each word. Use each synonym in a sentence that matches its distinct meaning.

1. commend
2. dupe
3. impish
4. menace



### COMMON CORE

**L.4c** Consult reference materials (e.g., dictionaries, thesauruses) to determine a word’s precise meaning.

Interactive Vocabulary **THINK** central  
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KEYWORD: HML8-89