

Course: English Literature

Level: Second Year

Lesson Three: “The Tell Tale Heart” (1843) Analysis

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“The Tell Tale Heart” 1843 (summary and analysis):

“The Tell Tale Heart” is another Gothic story with its eerie setting and possibly mad narrator. In this story, the narrator decides to kill an old man whom he claims to have loved. The narrator offers no reason for killing the old man but mentions that the old man has one eye that is quite disturbing. The narrator describes a detailed plan sneaking into the old man’s room for seven nights. On the eighth night, the narrator waits for long time and approaches to kill him. He cuts the old man into pieces and hides his body under the floorboards of the house. The Police come to the old man’s house after a report from the neighbours who have heard the scream of the old man. While he is sitting with the police, the narrator starts to hear some noise in his ears that he describes as the sound that a watch makes. The sounds get louder that he could not take it anymore and this has led him to confess his crime.

- The central theme in this story is sanity versus insanity as the narrator tries to convince the readers that he is sane throughout the story. However, he only proves that he is insane. This is seen through repeating the phrase “how, then, am I mad?” as it only makes the reader convinced about his unreliability. This means that the narrator’s exaggerating way of attempting to give evidence about his sanity makes the reader more suspicious. For example, the statement “how, then, am I mad? Hearken! And observe how healthily – how calmly I can tell you the whole story” raises more suspicion about his sanity.
- The narrator believes that a person can only be insane if they are not methodical, meaning if they cannot plan. However, his methodical efforts to kill an old man because of his disturbing “eye” is an act of insanity. Also, the idea that he needs to actually see the eye to commit the crime makes him seem more insane. Poe here increases the suggestion of madness that he suggested at the start of the story and which occurs through the narrator’s constant repetition that he is not mad.
- The old man is a silent character as we do not get much information about him except his eye that seems to bother the narrator. The eye that the narrator is describing is possibly a **cataract** which is an eye condition associated with age. The narrator is

clearly obsessed with the old man's eye as it seems to torment him. The narrator refers to this eye as a vulture eye. Vultures are scavengers that eat dead animals. This suggests that vultures symbolise a coming of death that the narrator dreads. Although he says that he had no reason to kill the old man, it can be suggested that the "eye" reminds him of something evil and threatening like a coming disaster or death.

- The narrator continues to convince us that he is not insane because of his careful way of disposing of the body. He works quickly and quietly through the night, dismembering the body and taking up the planks and hiding everything below the room's floorboards, leaving no trace of the old man. It can be seen from this scene that each time the narrator has tried to prove his sanity, he has found himself undermining it with confessions of mad behavior as such. It can be arguable that being rational and calm in his murder technique is actually more disturbing than his moments of anxiety.
- The episode of the beating heart is repeated in the story. The narrator describes it as it gets louder and quicker. The narrator thinks that the heartbeats that he hears are the old man's when it can actually be his own heart beats that are symptomatic of anxiety and instability. This shows that his repressed sense of guilt comes to surface; given that he pretended to remain calm when he committed the crime.
- In conclusion, the narrator claims that he is not mad, however his behaviour throughout the story shows otherwise.
- Two significant symbols in the story are the eye and the heart beats. The "eye" symbolises threatening death and the power that the old man can have over the narrator. The "heart beats" on the other hand, symbolise the repressed guilt of the narrator.
- The act of hiding the body under the floorboards of the house symbolise the character's attempt to conceal his feeling of guilt.