

PREVIEW

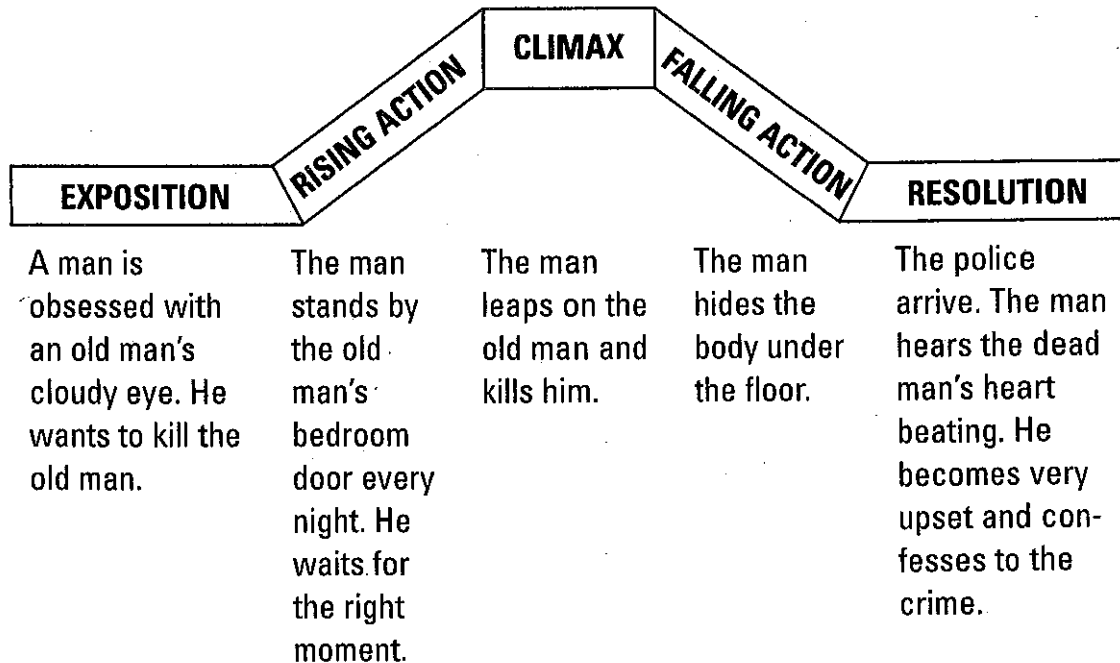
The Tell-Tale Heart

Edgar Allan Poe

Summary

The murderer himself tells this chilling story of how he kills an old man because he is disgusted by the man's filmy blue eye. First the murderer practices carefully opening the door to the old man's room every night for a week. On the eighth night, he enters the room and hears the beating of the old man's heart. The killer leaps upon his victim and kills him. The murderer then dismembers the corpse and hides the pieces under the floor boards of the room. When police arrive because of a neighbor's complaint of a shriek in the night, the murderer confidently lets them in to search the premises. The officers remain on the scene when the murderer begins to hear the dead man's heart-beat. The sound increases and upsets the murder so much that he confesses to his crime.

Visual Summary



PREPARE TO READ

LITERARY ANALYSIS

Plot

The **plot** is the order of events or main story in fiction, or writing that is not true. Edgar Allan Poe, the author of this selection, is known for his scary plots about the darkest kinds of human behavior. In this selection, the plot follows a madman's steps to the murder of an old man.

Although every plot tells a different story, most plots develop along similar lines. As you read, be aware of these steps in the plot's development:

1. *Exposition*: introduction of setting, characters, and conflict.
2. *Conflict*: struggle between two opposing forces.
3. *Rising action*: events build toward the high point or climax.
4. *Climax*: high point of interest or suspense.
5. *Falling action*: end of the conflict.
6. *Resolution*: events that follow the climax.

READING STRATEGY

Making Predictions

Have you ever sat in a movie theater and whispered to your friend, "I bet that he's going to turn out to be a spy," or "I think she's the one who did it"? **Making predictions**, or using clues to guess what will happen next, is a fun way to stay more involved in the action.

Make predictions while you read "The Tell-Tale Heart," keeping in mind the following guidelines:

- Identify the key details of what has already happened.
- Understand the characters' reasons for what they do and think.

Use the following chart as you read the story. It will help you check your predictions.

Author's Clue	My Prediction	True or False

The Tell-Tale Heart

Edgar Allan Poe

In "The Tell-Tale Heart," a man tells how he was taken over by the urge to kill the old man who employed him. The narrator begins by denying that he is crazy.



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 the things in heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. . . .

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 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 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.



The narrator rehearses the crime every night. At around midnight, he opens the door to the old man's room and slowly moves in a lantern. He shines a narrow ray of light from the lantern and aims it at the old man's "vulture eye."

Vocabulary Development

acute (uh KYOOT) *adj.* reacting easily to impressions

Vocabulary and Pronunciation



In English, the word *mad* can have two meanings:
(a) angry (b) crazy

Circle the letter of the meaning used in this paragraph. What clues did you use to answer?

Stop to Reflect



Underline the passage in this section that shows that the narrator might really be crazy.

English Language Development

The order of the words in the underlined sentences is unexpected. Rewrite these two sentences in their natural order. Why would a writer choose to write sentences in which the words are not in the order you expect?

Reading Check



Circle the name of the animal that the narrator is reminded of when he looks at the old man's eye.

He does this for seven straight nights, but he always finds that the horrible eye is closed. So he does not harm the man. And each morning he greets the old man cheerfully, as if nothing is going on at all.

On the eighth night, the murderer opens the old man's door very slowly. He notices that the old man moves suddenly, as though he is startled.

◆ Literary Analysis

What remark by the old man increases the suspense of the **rising action** in this paragraph? Circle your answer.



◆ Vocabulary and Pronunciation

In some English words, the *t* is silent when it follows an *s*.

- (a) *listen* (LIS en) v. to hear carefully
- (b) *hasten* (HAY sen) v. to move quickly
- (c) *fastening* (FA sen ing) n. something used to shut or lock

Say these words aloud. Check your pronunciation with your teacher.

◆ Reading Check

What sound does the narrator hear that tells him that the old man is filled with terror? Circle your answer.

◆ ◆ ◆
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 deathwatches¹ in the wall.

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. . . .

◆ ◆ ◆
The narrator knows that the old man is lying awake, filled with a silent terror of death. He knows that this fear is like a shadow quietly creeping up on the old man. After waiting a long time, the narrator decides to let a little light escape from the lantern. He aims the light at the old man's eye.

◆ ◆ ◆
It was open—wide, wide open—and I grew furious as I gazed upon it. I saw it with perfect

Vocabulary Development

hearkening (HAR ken ing) v. listening carefully

1. **deathwatches** (DETH wach ez) n. beetles who make a tapping sound with their heads. A superstition says the sound is an omen of death.

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 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.



The narrator senses that the old man's heart begins to beat faster and faster, louder and louder. The beating seems so loud to the narrator that he thinks the old man's heart will burst. He also thinks that the beating heart will 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 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.



Vocabulary Development

enveloped (en VEL opt) *v.* covered up completely
pulsation (pul SAY shun) *n.* a beating in rhythm

◆ Reading Check

Underline the words that tell how the narrator reacts to seeing the old man's eye.



The murderer cuts the corpse into pieces. He then lifts several wooden planks from the floor and hides the body pieces there. After he replaces the planks, he is sure that no one will ever be able to tell that anything is hidden there.

By four o'clock in the morning the narrator has finished hiding the body. Just then there is a knock at the door. Three policemen enter. They were called by a neighbor who had heard the scream from the house earlier that night. The narrator is confident that he has nothing to fear. He shows the police all over the house. But as he speaks to them, he thinks that he hears "a low, dull quick sound, much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton." As he begins nervously pacing, the sound grows louder and louder, driving the murderer crazy.

◆ ◆ ◆

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! *louder!*—

"Villains!" I shrieked, "dissemble² no more! I admit to the deed!—tear up the planks!—here, here!—it is the beating of his hideous heart!"

◆ Literary Analysis

Where does the **climax**, or the most suspenseful point, of the story occur?

◆ English Language Development

In the last two paragraphs of this story, the narrator is getting more and more excited and upset. Circle all the punctuation marks that show you how upset the narrator is.



Vocabulary Development

derision (di RIZH en) *n.* mocking laughter

hypocritical (HIP e KRIT I kal) *adj.* saying one thing and doing something different

2. **dissemble** (di SEM bluh) *v.* to hide your true feelings or motives

REVIEW AND ASSESS

1. **Reading Strategy:** Look at your prediction chart. Did you predict that the narrator would really kill the old man? Why or why not?

Author's Clue	My Prediction	True or False

2. Which of his senses does the narrator say is especially sharp while he plans the murder?

3. How does the narrator react when he sees the old man's eye?

4. **Literary Analysis:** What event in the rising action of the plot makes the narrator yell and leap into the old man's room?

5. Why do the police come to the house?

6. Write three words that describe the narrator's reactions when the police arrive.

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

(Continued)

Writing

Response to Literature

Now that you have read “The Tell-Tale Heart,” you are probably saying to yourself something like, “Wow, that was a terrific story,” or “That story left me cold.”

Did you like this story or not?

Why?

Did you like some parts but not others? Which parts? Think about how your reactions are connected to certain specific parts of the story.

Fold a piece of paper into three long sections, or columns.

- In the first column, list parts of the story that you reacted strongly to (liked or disliked).
- In the second column, describe the reaction you had to that part of the story.
- In the third column, give a reason you liked or didn't like that part of the story.

Your chart should look something like this:

Story Part	My Reaction	Reason for My Reaction
The narrator sees the eye in the dark.	That scene gave me the creeps, but in a good way—it was exciting.	Poe's language was so vivid—especially his description of the eye—that I really got involved in the scene.

Now, on separate paper, write a paragraph or two about why you did or did not like this story. Use your chart to give specific reasons for your reaction. Share your writing with your classmates.