

Edgar Allan Poe was a famous 19th-century writer who is still popular. He created the detective-story genre and wrote poems with interesting rhythms (like "The Raven").

The tale of his own disappearance, followed soon thereafter by his death, remains a "cold case" in literary history.

Poe's short story about a murderer, who kills an old man because he doesn't like his "vulture" eye, is a classic of conscience-haunting. Is it the still-beating heart of the dead man—or—the pounding of the murderer's own heart which forces his confession?

If we look at the original publication of this story, which Poe released in 1843, we see that he introduced it with a poem not his own:

*Art is long, and Time is fleeting,
And our hearts, though stout and brave,
Still, like muffled drums, are beating
Funeral marches to the grave.*

LONGING:

BY W. W. STORY.

With weary heart, and dreary eye,
He gazed into the lonely night,
Hour after hour dragged slowly by,
The shadows changed from left to right.

The solemn earth, the stars' sharp gleam,
The yearning wind's low ebb and swell,
All things were but a mystic dream,
A riddle that he could not spell.

What is the worth of human art,
If the weak tongue can never speak
That which lies heavy on the heart,
Even though the heavy heart should break.

THE TELL-TALE HEART.

BY EDGAR A. POE.

Art is long and Time is fleeting,
And our hearts, though stout and brave,
Still, like muffled drums, are beating
Funeral marches to the grave.

Longfellow.

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! Harken! 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 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 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 first 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 man's sleep. It took me an hour to place my whole head within the opening so far that I could see the old man 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 (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

Psalm of Life" reflects the imagery Poe wanted to convey of a heart still beating after death?

The narrator of this story—who is unnamed—does his best to convince readers that he is sane. Would a sane person take these actions? Would a sane person kill the old man just because he doesn't like the old man's eye? Whose fear is more palpable in the story—the old man's or the murderer's?

You decide as you read this abridged version of Poe's classic tale (which he originally published in the January 1843 issue of *The Pioneer: A Literary and Critical Magazine*, Volume I, Number I).

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. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in the underworld. How, then, am I mad? 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. 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! He had the eye of a bird, a vulture—a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell on me, my blood ran cold; and so—very gradually—I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and free myself of the eye forever.

Now this is the point. You think me mad. Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen me. You should have seen how wisely and carefully 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 lock of his door and opened it—oh, so gently! And then, when I had made an opening big-enough for my head, I put in a dark lantern—all closed, closed, so that no light shone out, and then I stuck in my head.



I moved it slowly—very, very slowly, so that I might not disturb the old man's sleep. 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 of light fell upon the vulture eye.

And this I did for seven long nights—but I found the eye always closed; and so it was impossible to do the work; for it was not the old man who vexed me, but his Evil Eye.

On the eighth night, I was more than usually cautious in opening the door. I had my head in and was about to open the lantern, when my thumb slipped upon the tin fastening. The old man sat up in bed, crying out "Who's there?"

I kept still and said nothing. For a whole hour I did not move a muscle. During that time, I did not hear him lie down. He was still sitting up in the bed listening—just as I have done, night after night.

Then I heard a slight groan, and I knew it was the groan of human terror. It was the low sound that arises from the bottom of the soul. I knew the sound well. Many a night, late at night, when all the world slept, it has welled up from deep within my own chest. I say I knew it well.

I knew what the old man felt, and felt sorry for him, although I laughed to myself. I knew that he had been lying awake ever since the first noise, when he had turned in the bed. His fears had been ever since growing upon him.

When I had waited a long time, without hearing him lie down, I decided to open a little—a very, very little—crack in the lantern. So I opened it. You cannot imagine how carefully, carefully. Finally, a single ray of light shot from out and fell full upon the vulture eye.

It was open—wide, wide open—and I grew furious as I gazed at it. I saw it clearly—all a dull blue, with a horrible veil over it that chilled my bones; but I could see nothing else of the old man's face or person. For I had directed the light exactly upon the ... spot.

And have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but a kind of over-sensitivity? Now, there came to my ears a low, dull, quick sound, such as a watch makes when inside a piece of cotton. I knew that sound well, too. It was the beating of the old man's heart. It increased my anger.

But even yet I kept still. I hardly breathed. I held the lantern motionless. I attempted to keep the ray of light upon the eye. But the beating of the heart increased. It grew quicker and quicker, and louder and louder every second. The old man's terror must have been extreme! The beating grew louder, I say, louder every moment!

And now at the dead hour of the night, in the horrible silence of that old house, so strange a noise as this excited me to uncontrollable terror. Yet, for some minutes longer I stood still. But the beating grew louder, louder! I thought the heart must burst.

And now a new fear seized me—the sound would be heard by a neighbor! The old man's hour had come! With a loud shout, I threw open the lantern and burst into the room.

He cried once—once only. Without delay, I forced him to the floor, and pulled the heavy bed over him. I then smiled, to find the action so far done.

But, for many minutes, the heart beat on with a quiet sound. This, however, did not concern me; it would not be heard through the wall. At length, it stopped. The old man was dead. I removed the bed and examined the body. I placed my hand over his heart and held it there many minutes. There was no movement. 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 steps I took for hiding the body. I worked quickly, but in silence. First of all, I took apart the body. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs.

I then took up three pieces of wood from the flooring, and placed his body parts under the room. I then replaced the wooden boards so well that no human eye—not even his—could have seen anything wrong.

There was nothing to wash out—no mark of any kind—no blood whatever. I had been too smart for that. A tub had caught all—ha! ha!

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

There entered three men, who said they were officers of the police. A cry had been heard by a neighbor during the night; suspicion of a crime had been aroused; information had been given at the police office, and the officers had been sent to search the building.

I smiled—for what had I to fear? The cry, I said, was my own in a dream. The old man, I said, was not in the country. I took my visitors all over the house. I told them to search—search well. I led them, at length, to his room. I brought chairs there, and told them to rest. I placed my own seat upon the very place under which lay the body of the victim.

The officers were satisfied. I was completely at ease. They sat, and while I answered happily, they talked of common things. But, after a while, I felt myself getting weak and wished them gone. My head hurt, and I had a ringing in my ears; but still they sat and talked.

The ringing became more severe. I talked more freely to do away with the feeling. But it continued until, at length, I found that the noise was not within my ears.

I talked more and with a heightened voice. Yet the sound increased—and what could I do? It was a low, dull, quick sound like a watch makes when inside a piece of cotton. I had trouble breathing -- and yet the officers heard it not. I talked more quickly—more loudly; but the noise increased. I stood up and argued about silly things, in a high voice and with violent hand movements. But the noise kept increasing.

Why would they not be gone? I walked across the floor with heavy steps, as if excited to anger by the observations of the men—but the noise increased. What could I do? I swung my chair and moved it upon the floor, but the noise continually increased. It grew louder—louder—louder! And still the men talked pleasantly, and smiled.

Was it possible they heard not? No, no! They heard! They suspected! They knew! They were making a joke of my horror! This I thought, and this I think. But anything was better than this pain! I could bear those smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die! And now—again! Louder! Louder! Louder!

"Villains!" I cried, "Pretend no more! I admit the deed! Tear up the floor boards! Here, here! It is the beating of his hideous heart!"

To experience the adapted story via animation, have a look at this Columbia Pictures video. It features the actor James Mason, as the narrator, and a very strong (and kind of scary) beating heart. How does the impact of seeing the story (the link takes you to a more-recent animation) differ from reading (or hearing) it?

The image, at the top of this page, is by Arthur Rackham, a famous British illustrator from the late-19th/early-20th century. Click on it for a better view.

Credits:

[The Tell-Tale Heart - Audio Narration](#)

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](#)

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Questions 2 Ponder

What Makes Edgar Allan Poe Still Relevant?

Edgar Allan Poe wrote poetry which is like music with word rhythms. He died, from very mysterious causes, and wrote about topics which still fascinate us.

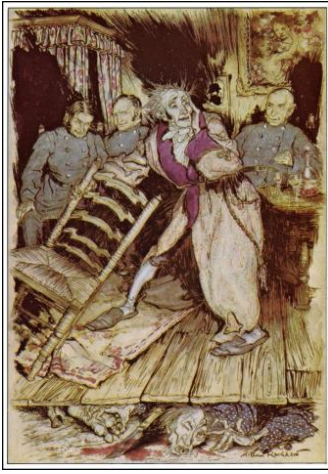
How could it be that Poe went missing for so many days, and no one even knew where to search for him?

Given the description of his appearance, when he finally resurfaced, what do you think may have happened to him?

What makes Edgar Allan Poe so popular today? Is it his works—and how he constructed his poetry—or his topics which fascinate people?

Do you think Poe's poetry, which is like music with word rhythms, could be considered a forerunner of today's rap? Why, or why not.

Media Stream



Murder Scene of the Tell Tale Heart

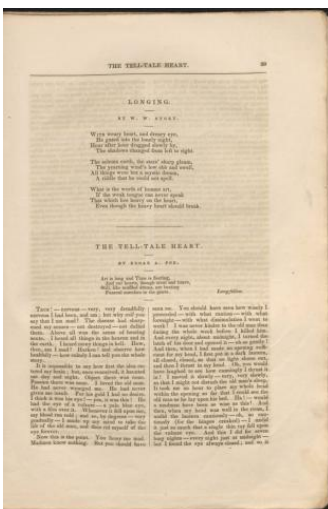
Arthur Rackham created this illustration for the first edition of "Poe's Tales of Mystery and Imagination," published in 1935 by George G. Harrap. Online via Wikimedia Commons. Public Domain.
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Edgar Allan Poe at Work

Image online, courtesy Poe Museum.

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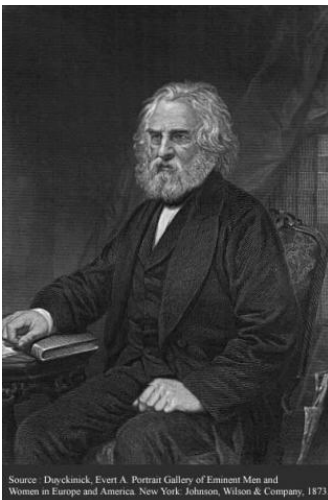


The Tell-Tale Heart - Original Publication

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Henry Wadsworth Longfellow - Portrait and Background

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The Tell Tale Heart and the Old Man with the Vulture Eye

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The Murderer Strikes - The Tell-Tale Heart

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