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Free Lesson of the Month October, 2009

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This month’s Free Lesson is a lesson on The Tell-Tale Heart taken from [The Best of Poe Teaching Unit](#).

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The Tell-Tale Heart

Introduction

The Tell-Tale Heart, though one of Poe's shortest stories, is a powerful psychological thriller. Written in 1843, *The Tell-Tale Heart* gives an account of a murder from the perspective of its perpetrator, a deranged madman. The narrator's insanity is evident by his maniacal and ranting mind; he claims to possess acute senses which enable him to hear sounds from heaven, hell, and everywhere in between. Repeatedly throughout the story, the narrator insists that he is sane; his contention is based on his ability to relate the story in a rational manner.

Driven by paranoia, the narrator plots to kill his benefactor to forever rid himself of the old man's "Evil Eye," a term that holds double meaning: a cataract-infected orb, and the superstitious belief that some people have the power to inflict harm with a look. For seven nights the narrator stalks the old man, waiting to catch his enemy—the eye—open. When the time arrives, on the eighth night, he meticulously carries out the heinous murder and disembodiment of his victim. The madman's victory is short-lived, however, as his paranoia couples with guilt. As his emotions intensify, so does his insanity, which manifests itself as the sound of a heartbeat that becomes progressively louder. At the pinnacle of madness, the narrator can no longer endure his guilty conscience, and he confesses his crime.

The Tell-Tale Heart

Vocabulary

audacity – boldness

death watch – a guard set over a person to be executed; also a wood-burrowing beetle, whose head makes a tapping sound that is superstitiously regarded as an omen for death

deputed – delegated

derision – ridicule

dissemble – to act or speak falsely, lie

dissimulation – deceit

hearken – to listen

pitch – tar

sagacity – shrewdness, cleverness

scantlings – small pieces of lumber

suavity – pleasantness

tattoo – a rhythmic rapping

vex – to irritate

1. What does the opening paragraph imply about the narrator's reliability?

The narrator is unreliable because he is insane; he admits to hearing voices and suffering from a disease.

2. What is the narrator's reason for killing the old man?

The narrator decides to kill the old man because of the gentleman's eye. The narrator explains, "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." (Pg. 81)

3. For seven days the narrator plans the old man's murder. What does the narrator do every night that he believes is proof of his sanity?

The narrator is meticulous in planning the murder; every night, at midnight, he pokes his head into the old man's room to catch a glimpse of the eye. The process takes an hour, which the narrator believes is proof of his sanity. He says, "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!" (Pg. 81)

4. The narrator's account contains numerous situations of word repetition. Why does Poe use this technique? Cite at least one example to support your response.

Answers will vary. Poe uses word repetition to increase suspense and to portray the extent of the narrator's insanity. Numerous examples are available, including the following passages:

- "I moved it slowly—very, very slowly—so that I might not disturb the old man's sleep." (Pg. 82)
- "So I opened it—you cannot imagine how stealthily, stealthily—until, at length a simple dim ray, like the thread of the spider, shot from out the crevice and fell full upon the vulture eye." (Pg. 83)
- "It was open—wide, wide open—and I grew furious as I gazed upon it." (Pg. 83)
- "But the beating grew louder, louder!" (Pg. 83)

5. What does the narrator hear on the night of the murder, and what purpose does the sound serve?

First, the narrator hears a soft groan, supposedly from the old man. Next, the narrator hears a heartbeat that he claims belongs to the old man, but likely is his own, indicated by his admission to an “overacuteness of the sense.” (Pg. 83) The noises enhance the story’s suspense and the reader’s sense that the narrator is mad.

6. The narrator, while spying on the old man, says, “He was still sitting up in the bed listening;—just as I have done, night after night, hearkening to the death watches in the wall.” (Pg. 82) “Death watch” has two definitions that are applicable to this sentence: a guard set over a person to be executed, and wood-burrowing beetles whose heads make a tapping sound that is superstitiously regarded as an omen for death. Explain how each definition relates to the story.

For seven nights, the narrator keeps watch over the old man in anticipation of killing him. Similarly, the insects represent the pending death sentence. In addition, the noise made by the insects may be, or represent, the heartbeat that the narrator claims to hear.

7. The narrator is vexed at the old man’s “Evil Eye.” (Pg. 82) In superstitious belief, one who possesses an “Evil Eye” has the power to harm another person with a mere look. In view of this belief, how might the reader’s perspective of the narrator’s insanity change, if at all?

Answers will vary. Example: The story is read with the assumption that the narrator is insane, and his deeds have no basis. However, consider that, based on a superstitious belief, he is acting in self defense against the “Evil Eye,” and his insanity becomes more understandable, if not more rational.

8. How does the narrator kill the old man?

On the eighth night, the narrator sees that the old man’s eye is open. In a mad frenzy, the narrator rushes into the room, pulls the old man down to the floor, and pulls the bed on top of him. The old man is suffocated.

9. How does the narrator dispose of the body?

The narrator cuts off the old man’s head, arms, and legs in the tub, then places the pieces under the floor boards.

10. Who arrives in the middle of the night, and why?

The police arrive because neighbors report that they had heard a shriek.

11. As the police search, the narrator becomes more and more agitated. What is the source of his agitation, and what does it represent?

The narrator begins to hear a heartbeat, which becomes louder as time progresses. The sound he hears represents his guilty conscience.

12. How is the crime exposed?

The narrator is driven further into insanity as the heartbeats grow louder. Finally, he becomes convinced that the police can also hear the noise and are mocking him. He admits to the crime by suddenly shouting, “I admit the deed!—tear up the planks! here, here!—It is the beating of his hideous heart!” (Pg. 85)

13. Why is it ironic that the narrator feels compelled to confess his crime?

Answers will vary. Example: The narrator is unreasonable because he kills a man whom he loves for no legitimate reason, yet he seeks justice to ease his conscience.

14. What is the meaning of the title?

The heartbeat, or the narrator’s guilty conscience, forces him to tell the tale of his murderous deed.

15. Explain how the story portrays love and hate as inseparable emotions.

The story portrays love and hate as two sides of the same coin; they are inseparable because they are the extremities of intense emotion. The narrator loves the old man but hates his eye. The narrator loves the old man but kills him.

16. Time is a recurring element in *The Tell-Tale Heart*. Cite at least one reference to time in the story.

Answers will vary. Numerous examples are available, including the following passages:

- “And every night, about midnight, I turned the latch of his door and opened it—oh so gently!” (Pg. 81)
- “A watch’s minute hand moves more quickly than did mine.” (Pg. 82)
- “[. . .]Now, I say, there came to my ears a low, dull, quick sound, such as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton.” (Pg. 83)

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