"**The Tell-Tale Heart**" is a [short story](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Short_story) by American writer [Edgar Allan Poe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edgar_Allan_Poe), first published in 1843. It is related by an unnamed narrator who endeavors to convince the reader of the narrator's sanity while simultaneously describing a murder the narrator committed. The victim was an old man with a filmy pale blue "vulture-eye", as the narrator calls it. The narrator emphasizes the careful calculation of the murder, attempting the perfect crime, complete with dismembering the body in the bathtub and hiding it under the floorboards. Ultimately, the narrator's actions result in hearing a thumping sound, which the narrator interprets as the dead man's beating heart.

The story was first published in [James Russell Lowell](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Russell_Lowell)'s *The Pioneer* in January 1843. "The Tell-Tale Heart" is often considered a classic of the [Gothic fiction](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gothic_fiction) genre and is one of Poe's best known short stories.

The specific motivation for murder (aside from the narrator's hatred of the old man's eye), the relationship between narrator and old man, the gender of the narrator, and other details are left unclear. The narrator denies having any feelings of hatred or resentment for the man who had, as stated, "never wronged" the narrator. The narrator also denies having killed for greed.

Critics have speculated that the old man could be a father figure, the narrator's landlord, or that the narrator works for the old man as a servant, and that perhaps his "vulture-eye" represents a veiled secret or power. The ambiguity and lack of details about the two main characters stand in contrast to the specific plot details leading up to the murder.

"The Tell-Tale Heart" is a [first-person narrative](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First-person_narrative) told by an unnamed narrator. Despite insisting that they are sane, the narrator suffers from a disease (nervousness) which causes "[over-acuteness of the senses](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hyperesthesia)".

The old man, with whom the narrator lives, has a clouded, pale, blue "[vulture](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vulture)-like" eye, which distresses and manipulates the narrator so much that the narrator plots to murder the old man, despite also insisting that the narrator loves the old man and has never felt wronged by him. The narrator is insistent that this careful precision in committing the murder proves that they cannot possibly be insane. For seven nights, the narrator opens the door of the old man's room to shine a sliver of light onto the "evil eye." However, the old man's vulture-eye is always closed, making it impossible to "do the work," thus making the narrator go further into distress.

On the eighth night, the old man awakens after the narrator's hand slips and makes a noise, interrupting the narrator's nightly ritual. The narrator does not draw back and after some time, decides to open the lantern. A single thin ray of light shines out and lands precisely on the "evil eye," revealing that it is wide open. The narrator hears the old man's heart beating, which only gets louder and louder. This increases the narrator's anxiety to the point where the narrator decides to strike. He jumps into the room and the old man shrieks once before he is killed. The narrator then dismembers the body and conceals the pieces under the floorboards, ensuring the concealment of all signs of the crime. Even so, the old man's scream during the night causes a neighbor to report to the police, who the narrator invites in to look around. The narrator claims that the scream heard was the narrator's own in a nightmare and that the old man is absent in the country. Confident that they will not find any evidence of the murder, the narrator brings chairs for them and they sit in the old man's room. The chairs are placed on the very spot where the body is concealed; the police suspect nothing, and the narrator has a pleasant and easy manner.

The narrator begins to feel uncomfortable and notices a ringing in the narrator's ears. As the ringing grows louder, the narrator concludes that it is the heartbeat of the old man coming from under the floorboards. The sound increases steadily to the narrator, though the officers do not seem to hear it. Terrified by the violent beating of the heart and convinced that the officers are aware of not only the heartbeat but also the narrator's guilt, the narrator breaks down and confesses. The narrator tells them to tear up the floorboards to reveal the remains of the old man's body.

"The Tell-Tale Heart" uses an [unreliable narrator](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unreliable_narrator). The exactness with which the narrator recounts murdering the old man, as if the stealthy way in which they executed the crime were evidence of their sanity, reveals their [monomania](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monomania) and [paranoia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paranoia). The focus of the story is the perverse scheme to commit the [perfect crime](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perfect_crime).[]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Tell-Tale_Heart#cite_note-4) One author, Paige Bynum, asserts that Poe wrote the narrator in a way that "allows the reader to identify with the narrator".

The narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" is generally assumed to be a male. However, some critics have suggested a woman may be narrating; no pronouns are used to clarify one way or the other. The story starts [*in medias res*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/In_medias_res), opening with a conversation already in progress between the narrator and another person who is not identified in any way. It has been speculated that the narrator is confessing to a prison warden, a judge, a reporter, a doctor, or ([anachronistically](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anachronism)) a psychiatrist. In any case, the narrator tells the story in great detail. What follows is a study of terror but, more specifically, the memory of terror as the narrator is retelling events from the past. The first word of the story, "True!", is an admission of their guilt, as well as an assurance of reliability. This introduction also serves to gain the reader's attention. Every word contributes to the purpose of moving the story forward, exemplifying Poe's theories about the writing of short stories.

The story is driven not by the narrator's insistence upon their "innocence," but by their insistence on their sanity. This, however, is self-destructive, because in attempting to prove their sanity, they fully admit that they are guilty of murder. Their denial of insanity is based on their systematic actions and their precision, as they provide a rational explanation for irrational behavior. This rationality, however, is undermined by their lack of motive ("Object there was none. Passion there was none."). Despite this, they say, the idea of murder "haunted me day and night. It is difficult to fully understand the narrator's true emotions about the blue-eyed man because of this contradiction. It is said that "At the same time he disclosed a deep psychological confusion", referring to the narrator and the comment that "Object there was none. Passion there was none" and that the idea of murder "haunted me day and night."

The story's final scene shows the result of the narrator's feelings of [guilt](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guilt_(emotion)). Like many characters in [Gothic fiction](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gothic_fiction), they allow their nerves to dictate their nature. Despite their best efforts at defending their actions, their "over-acuteness of the senses"; which helps them hear the heart beating beneath the floorboards, is evidence that they are truly mad.[[14]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Tell-Tale_Heart#cite_note-Fisher-p87-14) The guilt in the narrator can be seen when the narrator confessed to the police that the body of the old man was under the floorboards. Even though the old man was dead, the body and heart of the dead man still seemed to haunt the narrator and convict them of the act. "Since such processes of reasoning tend to convict the speaker of madness, it does not seem out of keeping that he is driven to confession", according to scholar Arthur Robinson. Poe's contemporaries may well have been reminded of the controversy over the [insanity defense](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Insanity_defense) in the 1840s. The confession can be due to a concept called "[Illusion of transparency](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illusion_of_transparency)". According to the "Encyclopedia of Social Psychology", "Poe’s character falsely believes that some police officers can sense his guilt and anxiety over a crime he has committed, a fear that ultimately gets the best of him and causes him to give himself up unnecessarily".

The narrator claims to have a disease that causes [hypersensitivity](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sensitivity_(human)). A similar [motif](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Motif_(narrative)) is used for Roderick Usher in "[The Fall of the House of Usher](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Fall_of_the_House_of_Usher)" (1839) and in "The Colloquy of Monos and Una" (1841).[[17]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Tell-Tale_Heart#cite_note-Reilly-17) It is unclear, however, if the narrator actually has very [acute](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/acute) senses, or if it is merely imagined. If this condition is believed to be true, what is heard at the end of the story may not be the old man's heart, but [deathwatch beetles](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deathwatch_beetle). The narrator first admits to hearing deathwatch beetles in the wall after startling the old man from his sleep. According to superstition, deathwatch beetles are a sign of impending death. One variety of deathwatch beetle raps its head against surfaces, presumably as part of a mating ritual, while others emit ticking sounds. [Henry David Thoreau](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_David_Thoreau) observed in an 1838 article that deathwatch beetles make sounds similar to a heartbeat. The discrepancy with this theory is that the deathwatch beetles make a “uniformly faint” ticking sound that would have kept at a consistent pace but as the narrator drew closer to the old man the sound got more rapid and louder which would not have been a result of the beetles. The beating could even be the sound of the narrator's own heart. Alternatively, if the beating is a product of the narrator's imagination, it is that uncontrolled imagination that leads to their own destruction.

It is also possible that the narrator has [paranoid schizophrenia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paranoid_schizophrenia). Paranoid schizophrenics very often experience auditory hallucinations. These auditory hallucinations are more often voices, but can also be sounds. The hallucinations do not need to derive from a specific source other than one's head, which is another indication that the narrator is suffering from such a psychological disorder.

The relationship between the old man and the narrator is ambiguous. Their names, occupations, and places of residence are not given, contrasting with the strict attention to detail in the plot. The narrator may be a servant of the old man's or, as is more often assumed, his child. In that case, the "vulture-eye" of the old man as a father figure may symbolize parental surveillance or the paternal principles of right and wrong. The murder of the eye, then, is removal of conscience. The eye may also represent secrecy: only when the eye is found open on the final night, penetrating the veil of secrecy, is the murder carried out.

[Richard Wilbur](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Wilbur) suggested that the tale is an allegorical representation of Poe's poem "[To Science](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/To_Science)", which depicts a struggle between imagination and science. In "The Tell-Tale Heart", the old man may thus represent the scientific and rational mind, while the narrator may stand for the imaginative.