The Tell-Tale Heart

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? Hearken! 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 put in a dark lantern, all closed, closed, 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 him 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—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 was impossible to do the work; for it was not the old man who vexed me, but his Evil Eye. And every morning, when the day broke, I went boldly into the chamber, and spoke courageously to him, calling him by name in a hearty tone, and inquiring how he has passed the night. So you see he would have been a very profound old man, indeed, to suspect that every night, just at twelve, I looked in upon him while he slept.

Upon the eighth night I was more than usually cautious in opening the door. A watch's minute hand moves more quickly than did mine. Never before that night had I felt the extent of my own powers—of my sagacity. I could scarcely contain my feelings of triumph. To think that there I was, opening the door, little by little, and he not even to dream of my secret deeds or thoughts. I fairly chuckled at the idea; and perhaps he heard me; for he moved on the bed suddenly, as if startled. Now you may think that I drew back—but no. His room was as black as pitch with the thick darkness, (for the shutters were close fastened, through fear of robbers,) and so I knew that he could not see the opening of the door, and I kept pushing it on steadily, steadily.

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 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 death watches 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. I knew the sound well. Many a night, just at midnight, when all the world slept, it has welled up from my own bosom, deepening, with its dreadful echo, the terrors that distracted me. I say I knew it well. I knew what the old man felt, and pitied him, although I chuckled at heart. I knew that he had been lying awake ever since the first slight noise, when he had turned in the bed. His fears had been ever since growing upon him. He had been trying to fancy them causeless, but could not. He had been saying to himself—“It is nothing but the wind in the chimney—it is only a mouse crossing the floor,” or “It is merely a cricket which has made a single chirp.” Yes, he had been trying to comfort himself with these suppositions: but he had found all in vain. All in vain; because Death, in approaching him had stalked with his black shadow before him, and enveloped the victim. And it was the mournful influence of the unperceived shadow that caused him to feel—although he neither saw nor heard—to feel the presence of my head within the room.

When I had waited a long time, very patiently, without hearing him lie down, I resolved to open a little—a very, very little crevice in the lantern. 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.

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

And have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but over-acuteness of the sense?—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.

But even yet I refrained and kept still. I scarcely breathed. I held the lantern motionless. I tried how steadily I could maintain the ray upon the eye. Meantime the hellish tattoo of the heart increased. It grew quicker and quicker, and louder and louder every instant. The old man's terror must have been extreme! It grew louder, I say, louder every moment!—do you mark me well I have told you that I am nervous: so I am. And now at the dead hour of the night, amid the dreadful silence of that old house, so strange a noise as this excited me to uncontrollable terror. Yet, for some minutes longer I refrained and stood still. But the beating grew louder, louder! I thought the heart must burst. And now a new anxiety seized me—the sound would be heard by a neighbour! 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.

If still you think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body. The night waned, and I worked hastily, but in silence. First of all I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs.

I then took up three planks from the flooring of the chamber, and deposited all between the scantlings. I then replaced the boards so cleverly, so cunningly, that no human eye—not even his—could have detected any thing wrong. There was nothing to wash out—no stain of any kind—no blood-spot whatever. I had been too wary for that. A tub had caught all—ha! ha!

When I had made an end of these labors, it was four o'clock—still dark as midnight. As the bell sounded the hour, there came a knocking 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 introduced themselves, with perfect suavity, as officers of the police. A shriek had been heard by a neighbour during the night; suspicion of foul play had been aroused; information had been lodged at the police office, and they (the officers) had been deputed to search the premises.

I smiled,—for what had I to fear? I bade the gentlemen welcome. The shriek, I said, was my own in a dream. The old man, I mentioned, was absent in the country. I took my visitors all over the house. I bade them search—search well. I led them, at length, to his chamber. I showed them his treasures, secure, undisturbed. In the enthusiasm of my confidence, I brought chairs into the room, and desired them here to rest from their fatigues, while I myself, in the wild audacity of my perfect triumph, placed my own seat upon the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse of the victim.

The officers were satisfied. My manner had convinced them. I was singularly at ease. They sat, and while I answered cheerily, they chatted of familiar things. But, ere long, I felt myself getting pale and wished them gone. My head ached, and I fancied a ringing in my ears: but still they sat and still chatted. The ringing became more distinct:—It continued and became more distinct: I talked more freely to get rid of the feeling: but it continued and gained definiteness—until, at length, I found that the noise was not within my ears.

No doubt I now grew very pale;—but I talked more fluently, and with a heightened voice. Yet the sound increased—and what could I do? It was a low, dull, quick sound—much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton. I gasped for breath—and yet the officers heard it not. I talked more quickly—more vehemently; but the noise steadily increased. I arose and argued about trifles, in a high key and with violent gesticulations; but the noise steadily increased. Why would they not be gone? I paced the floor to and fro with heavy strides, as if excited to fury by the observations of the men—but the noise steadily increased. Oh God! what could I do? I foamed—I raved—I swore! I swung the chair upon which I had been sitting, and grated it upon the boards, but the noise arose over all and continually increased. It grew louder—louder—louder! And still the men chatted pleasantly, and smiled. Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God!—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, “dissemble no more! I admit the deed!—tear up the planks! here, here!—It is the beating of his hideous heart!”

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Notice how the broken style of this sentence contradicts its content. The narrator wants us to believe that he is not mad and that he can tell a story calmly. However, he disrupts the flow of the very sentence in which he tries to claim stability. This theme—of style contradicting content—resurfaces throughout the story.

 [4]*—Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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Notice that the narrator disassociates himself from the "idea" that caused his actions. It "entered" his brain, suggesting that it came from an external source rather than an internal desire. This could be another way in which the narrator asserts that he is not mad.

[5]*—Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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Notice that unlike the first sentence of this paragraph, the narrator is actively deciding to kill the old man. This suggests that the "idea" that haunted him was not the decision to murder but something else about the old man. Poe uses this ambiguity to create suspense as the reader will now search for the narrator's motive.

 [6]*—Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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The old man's "eye" is symbol for the idea that haunts the narrator. Though Poe does not reveal what this symbol means to the narrator, the reader can understand that this murder is not a response to something the old man did but rather a response to something inside the narrator's mind.

[7]*—Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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Notice how choppy the sentences at the beginning of this paragraph are. He talks about being calm, collected, and calculated as he plans out this murder. Yet the choppy style of his sentences and emphatic punctuation create a frenzied or hectic feeling to the text. Again, the style contradicts the content.

[8]*—Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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Notice that the address shifts here. Whereas at the beginning of the story the narrator accuses the "you" of believing that he is mad, here the narrator suggests that the "you" would be in collusion with his actions. The way in which the narrator addresses his audience, this unidentified "you," demonstrates his disconnection from reality.

[9]*—Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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Defining these actions as "wise" creates a sense of irony: the narrator insists that he is not mad using his actions as evidence, yet it is these very actions that make the reader see him as mad. In attempting to insist that he is "wise" the narrator only comes across as more insane.

[10]*—Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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Notice that the narrator keeps insisting that he bore no ill will towards the old man. He keeps hinting at his motive to murder by invoking the symbol of the eye. However, this symbol continues to create suspense as the audience still does not know what idea the eye stands for.

[11]*—Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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The "Evil Eye" was a superstition that people can use their eyes to curse others. Curses could range anywhere from bad luck, to disease, to death.

 [12]*—Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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Poe has the narrator specify that he looked in on the old man every night just at twelve. Readers can therefore assume that he finally killed him shortly after midnight on the eighth night. This gives him enough time to hide the evidence before the police arrive at four o'clock in the morning. He has to dismember the body—that is, cut off the head, the arms, and the legs—pull up some of the flooring in the old man's bedchamber, and replace the boards. He also has to put the bed back in place after pulling it over on top of his victim to smother him under the mattress. Later the narrator specifies that the police arrive just as the church bell is sounding four o'clock.

 [13]*—William Delaney*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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The "watch" is a motif that comes up four times throughout this story. Since a watch is both a physical and auditory reminder of time, this motif could symbolize the narrator's conscious understanding that his time is running out. Each time the watch is mentioned, or the watch ticks, the narrator remembers his own mortality.

 [14]*—Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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Readers can relate to how the old man is feeling. Most readers have experienced lying in bed in a dark room and suddenly hearing a strange noise. They sit up and strain their ears to listen for a repetition of that sinister sound. Who knows what all those creaks and squeaks really are? Some of them might be mice. Or rats! Some might be the house itself settling just a fraction of an inch, or lumber stretching or contracting as the temperature changes. Or nails being pulled at by the lumber. Or bits of plaster falling from the musty lathing inside the walls. During such times, readers are acutely aware of their helplessness, unpreparedness, and vulnerability.

[15]*—William Delaney*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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Notice how attentive the narrator is to documenting time. He gives precise amounts of time spent doing each activity, suggesting the narrator has a fixation with time.

 [16]*—Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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"Just as I have done" could refer to the narrator listening to the death watches in the old man's room over the past eight nights. However, it could also signify that the narrator has been sitting up in his own bed similarly contemplating his own death night after night before he hatched his plan to kill the old man.

[17]*—Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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"Death watches" are a type of beetle that lives inside walls. Part of their mating ritual is to bang their head into the wall to attract mates. In Poe's time it was a widely held belief that these banging noises were a countdown to someone's inevitable death.

[18]*—Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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In this sentence, the narrator gives us a glimpse into his psyche. He claims to feel moral terror, or fear of death, every night that he has watched the old man. He equates his feelings with the old man's and therefore draws an implicit comparison between himself and the old man. This could suggest one motivation for the murder he is about to commit: he must kill the old man to kill something that he is afraid of within himself.

[19]*—Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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Here the narrator imagines that he knows what the old man is thinking. Because he presents this idea as a fact instead of a hypothesis, we can see that the narrator sees himself in the old man: this is what the old man is thinking because this is what the narrator would be thinking.

[20]*—Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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The narrator personifies Death as a character that maliciously stalks and then kills. This description of Death mirrors the very actions that the narrator takes. The narrator in this sense attempts to embody his conception of Death.

[21]*—Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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This depiction of Death demonstrates the narrator's fear of dying. That Death's victim is presented as powerless in the face of Death suggests the narrator feels the same helplessness. Remember that the narrator is suffering from an unknown disease which may be the source of his fear of death.

[22]*—Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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Notice how Poe uses repetition to create intensity and build tension within the story. The narrator continuously insists that he is not mad; however, with this constant repetition, Poe creates a frenzied tone that suggests the narrator is less stable than he claims.

 [23]*—Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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Vultures are birds that feed on dead carcasses and gather around sick or injured animals in anticipation of their death. Vultures are a symbol of coming death or immanent death. In characterizing the eye as a "vulture," the eye becomes a symbolic omen of death. This suggests that the original thought that drove the narrator to kill the old man is his fear of death.

[24]*—Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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The narrator reinvokes the motif of the watch in order to compare it to the old man's heartbeat. Using this comparison, the narrator links the watch, a symbol of time, to the heartbeat, a symbol of life. In this way, time and lifespan becomes inextricably intertwined.

[25]*—Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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"Tattoo" in this context means a signal made by soldiers using a drum beat. In using this noun to describe the old man's heartbeat, the narrator continues to compare himself to a soldier going into battle.

[26]*—Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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Whereas earlier in the story the narrator presumed to have omniscient knowledge of what the old man was thinking, here he can only assume what the old man thinks. In the moments leading up to the old man's death, the narrator stops identifying with the old man.

[27]*—Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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The house has been silent. It is midnight, and the whole neighborhood must be equally silent. The narrator states that he let out a loud yell and that his victim shrieked once. When the three police officers arrive at four o'clock in the morning, readers will understand that it was the "shriek" that eventually brought them.

[28]*—William Delaney*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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Notice that the narrator is worried that someone will hear the old man's faint heartbeat through the wall instead of worrying about someone responding to the shriek that he mentioned earlier. This suggests that the heartbeat is the most worrisome sound to the narrator.

[29]*—Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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Poe wants to make it clear that the tell-tale heartbeat which makes the narrator finally confess to his crime could not be that of the victim. In addition to ascertaining that the old man is "stone, stone dead," the narrator tells how he "cut off his victim's head and the arms and the legs." So the narrator must either be imagining a sound that doesn't exist at all, or else he must be hearing his own heart beating because of his suppressed anxiety.

 [30]*—William Delaney*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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Poe has the narrator dismember the corpse in order to assure the reader that the victim is undoubtedly dead and that the beating sound the narrator keeps hearing cannot be the sound of the dead man's heart beating.

 [31]*—William Delaney*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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Notice the detail that the narrator uses to tell us that he removed all humanity from the old man. He is now a "corpse"; he is fragmented into parts. In highlighting the physical dissolution of the old man's body, Poe is able to signal to the reader that the beating heart is in the narrator's head.

[32]*—Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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Notice that the narrator does not tell us exactly what he did to leave no trace of the old man's murder, but instead he focuses on absences. His repetition of "no" focuses on his ability to erase the old man instead of showing his audience his actual actions.

 [33]*—Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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Poe again invokes his theme of form contradicting content using choppy, unrefined sentences. The narrator claims that no human eye could see his deeds, that he was clever and careful, yet the way in which he relates this information is not careful. The sentences run together and are interrupted by other ideas demonstrating a lack of control.

[34]*—Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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Now that the old man has died, precise time seems to matter less to the narrator. He conflates two hours—midnight and four am—and presents them as if they were the same time. This conflation of time suggests that with the old man's murder time has symbolically stopped.

[35]*—Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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Though Poe has not revealed what idea originally haunted the narrator, here the narrator suggests that he has vanquished his fear. This further suggests that the "eye" was symbolic for the narrator's fear and that the old man was killed to solve something in the narrator's conscious.

 [36]*—Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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Notice that the narrator repeats this idea that he is unafraid. This fearlessness could mean both that he is not afraid that the police will discover the murder or that he has no fears now that he has "rid himself of the eye."

[37]*—Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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Though this is a lie, notice that the narrator once again conflates himself with the old man. He takes the old man's last words, or the sound of his death shirk, and makes it into a dream, a figment of his own imagination.

[38]*—Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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The narrator beings to feel physical symptoms of disease, weakness, or infirmity. The confidence he gained in killing the old man gives way in the face of human frailty, and he is reminded that he is human, possibly a human with a terrible disease.

[39]*—Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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Here the motif of the watch appears to symbolize time moving forward. While the narrator was able to conflate hours of the day and symbolically stop time after he killed the old man, he is now unable to block out the sound of the heartbeat which he compares to a ticking clock. Time has symbolically started and he once again realizes that he is moving towards death.

 [40]*—Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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Notice how Poe uses repetition at the end of the story to show the narrator's descent into insanity. Whereas at the beginning of the story, the style and the content are in tension, now the style and the content mirror each other. The narrator is no longer claiming his sanity.

[41]*—Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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Many people interpret the narrator's sudden change of heart at the end of this story as a guilty conscience that brings about a confession. However, the narrator does not seem to regret his actions up until this point. With the motif of time, the narrator's unrevealed fear, and implicit references to his disease, this reaction at the end could be interpreted as a fear of his own mortality resurfacing instead of a guilty conscious. He kills the old man to vanquish is fear of death, but his realization that he is still human and that he cannot escape death causes him to go mad.

 [42]*—Caitlin, Owl Eyes Staff*[Cite this](https://www.owleyes.org/text/tell-tale-heart/read/the-tell-tale-heart)

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