

# The Tell-Tale Heart

by Edgar Allen Poe, 1843

A classic in the genre of gothic fiction

First published in January 1843 in Boston

## Synopsis

The narrator is a killer unaware of his own madness who tries desperately to convince the audience that he is not insane.

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

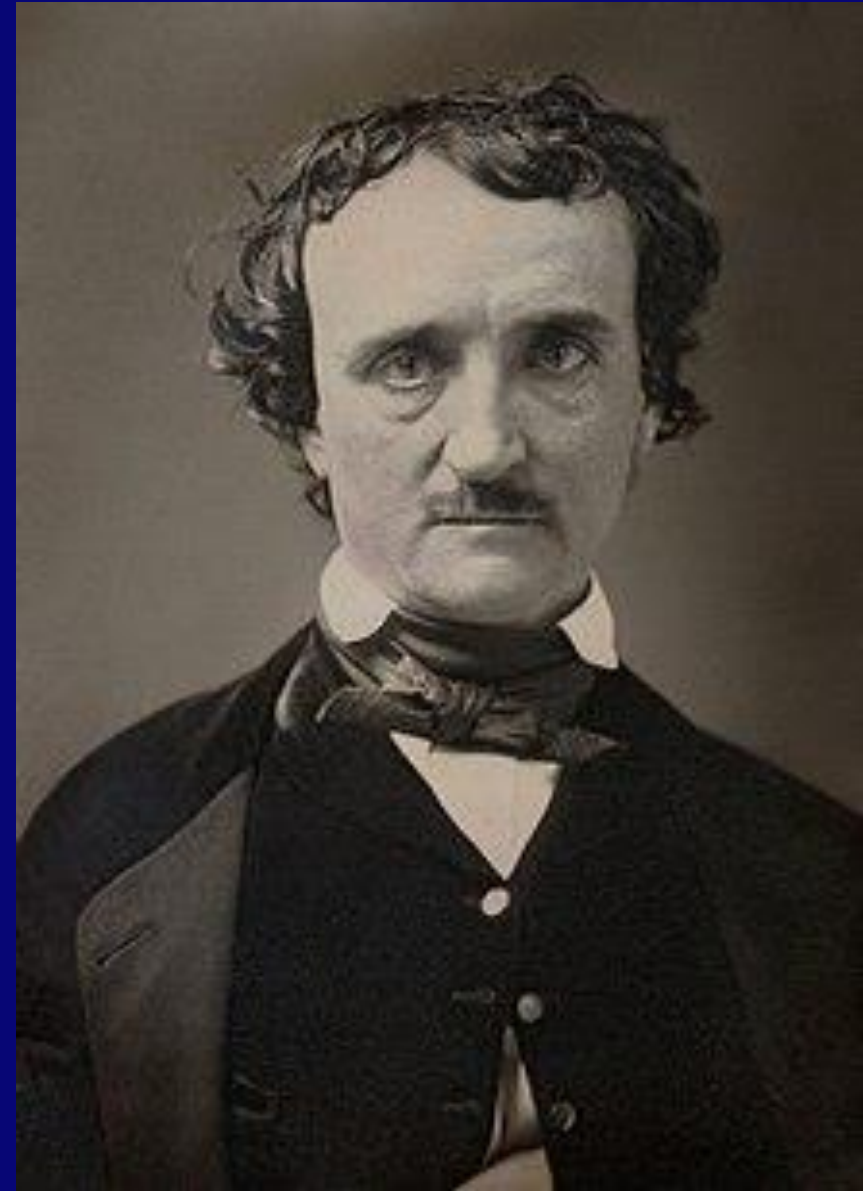


# Edgar Allen Poe

Born January 1809 in Boston

Passed October 1849 in Baltimore (age 40)

- Parents are both actors. Older brother and younger sister
  - Grandfather was an Irish immigrant, and selfless Revolutionary War hero, quartermaster buying things for troops from his own money.
  - Mom was born in London
- Father (alcoholic) abandoned family when he was one year old, mom died at age two of tuberculosis. Three children split up.
- EAP was taken in by a Virginia family, who never officially adopted him. Virginia family were merchants, who also dealt in selling slaves.
- Educated for two years in Scotland and England c.age 6-8
- 1825, he becomes secretly engaged to his neighbor Sarah (she 15, he 16), but her father disapproved and intercepts and destroys all his letters to her)
  - Thinking he has forgotten her, Sarah will marry two years later, 2 of 4 kids live, husband died in 1844, and will said she will lose estate if she remarries)
- EAP attended the University of Virginia for one year, left due to money. (relationship with Sarah is called off)
  - EAP has falling out with adoptive dad for two years, over money for college and EAP's gambling debt



- 1827 (age 18) unable to support himself, he joined US Army under fake name/age.
- Releases first book in 1827
- 1829, fails at West Point and leaves military (after securing a replacement).
  
- Starts writing.
- One of the earliest to make a living off of writing alone, which lead to a financially difficult life / career
- 1829, reconciles with adoptive dad when adoptive mom dies.
- 1830 returns to military, but then purposely gets court-martialed to be released 1831 (neglect of duty)
- 1836 (age 25) he married his 13-year-old cousin Virginia; a witness falsely claimed her age was 21.
- 1841 supposed to be in a meeting for position in Tyler Administration, but missed it (likely drunk, claims to be ill)
- 1847 Wife dies of tuberculous (age 24). He drinks even more...
  
- EAP dies under mysterious circumstances
  - EAP found semiconscious in a tavern. He was not coherent long enough to explain what happened.
  - He was wearing clothes/shoes which were not his own.
  - He was repeating the name “Reynolds” (unclear to whom he was referring)
  - Made reference to a wife in Richmond VA (could be delusion than his wife/cousin was still alive, or he was referring to Sarah, his childhood sweetheart to whom he had recently – again – proposed)
  - His final words “Lord help my poor soul”
    - Disease? alcoholism? Substance abuse? Suicide? Syphilis? Cholera (dysentery, intestine infection)? low blood sugar?

# DEBRIEF QUESTIONS

- What do we know about the murderer?
- What do we know about the motive for the murder?  
Was the motive rooted in affection for the old man or anger toward him, or something else?
- To what extent is the murderer able to control his emotions?
- What is the psychology applicable to this story? Please list as many psychological themes/traits/behaviors which are relevant to this story.

Guilt	OCD (regular waking up at same time, ritualized thoughts about the murder)
Insanity	Obsession with specific themes: the old man's eye, the heartbeat, his own claim of sanity
Paranoia	Sociopath (Absence of remorse when confessing)
Impulsive behavior	False sense of reality/narrative (schizophrenia)
Mental deterioration	Id – Ego – Superego (Id is stronger)
Auditory hallucination	Delusions
Significant disturbances to normal routines / impairment of daily life	
Diminished emotional response	

- What evidence of psychosis is there in the murderer?

➤ *“In the first sentence, the narrator admits to being nervous, but is unable to comprehend why he should be thought of as mad. He articulates his self-defense [defense mechanism] against madness in terms of heightened sensory capacity. He views his hypersensitivity as proof of his sanity, not a symptom of madness.”*  
To what extent do you agree or disagree with this assessment?

➤ The narrator clearly murdered the old man, but – when given the psychology – is he guilty of murder?

It is clear he is mentally ill from the start of the story and it is constant throughout the text. The narrator is not guilty for reasons of insanity because **he converses and argues with voices in his head, hears nonexistent sounds, and killed an innocent man because he believed his eye was haunting him.**

➤ Who might the old man have been?

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

➤ Is the narrator male or female?

➤ The story opens with the narrator in the midst of a conversation. Who might this be with?

A prison warden, a judge, a reporter, a doctor, a psychiatrist, a delusion?

