

Presentation of “The Tell-Tale Heart”



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"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 heavens and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad?"

"...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."

It is impossible to say how the idea of murdering the old man first entered the mind of the narrator. There was no real motive as stated by the narrator:

"Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me....For his gold I had no desire. I think that it was his eye!"

The narrator states that one of the old man's eyes was a pale blue color with a film over it, which resembled the eye of a vulture. Just the sight of that eye made the narrator's blood run cold, and as a result, the eye (and with it the old man) must be destroyed. Every night at midnight, the narrator went to the old man's room. Carefully, he turned the latch to the door, and opened it without making a sound. When a sufficient opening had been made, a covered lantern was thrust inside.

"I undid the lantern 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...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."

The old man suspected nothing. During the day, the narrator continued to perform his usual duties, and even dared to ask each morning how the old man had passed the night; however, at midnight, the nightly ritual continued. Upon the eighth night, the narrator proceeded to the old man's room as usual; however, on this night, something was different.

"Never before that night had I felt the extent of my powers--of my sagacity....To think that 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...so I knew that he could not see the opening of 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 sprang up in bed, crying out--'Who's there?'"

The narrator kept quiet, and did not move for an entire hour. The old man did not lie back down; he was sitting up. Even in that darkness,

"I knew that he had been lying awake ever since the first slight noise....His fears had been ever since growing upon him. He had been trying to fancy them causeless, but could not."

"When I had waited a long time, very patiently...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 single dim ray, like the thread of a spider, shot from out the crevice and fell full upon the vulture eye."

The eye was wide open. "I saw it with perfect distinctness--all a dull blue, with a hideous veil over it that chilled the very marrow in my bones....Nothing else of the old man's face or person [could be seen]."

"And now have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but over-acuteness of the senses?"

For at that moment, the narrator heard the sound such as a watch would make when it is enveloped in cotton.

"I knew that sound well too. It was the beating of the old man's heart....It increased my fury....But even yet I refrained and kept still." The heartbeat grew "...quicker and quicker, and louder and louder every instant. The old man's terror must have been extreme." The time had come. "With a loud yell, I threw open the lantern and leaped into the room." The old man shrieked once.

The narrator "...dragged him to the floor, and pulled the heavy bed over him." He did not die at once, but in a short time, the hideous heartbeat stopped; then the narrator removed the bed, and examined the body.

"I placed my hand upon [his] heart and held it there many minutes. There was no pulsation. He was stone dead. His eye would trouble me no more."

Next came the concealment of the body. The narrator dismembered the corpse by cutting off the head, the arms and the legs. Three planks were removed from the floor of the chamber to deposit the remains of what once had been a harmless, elderly man. The boards were replaced so carefully that no one would have been able to detect any wrong doing or foul play. There was no mess or blood stains to clean up; the narrator had cut up the body in a tub. It was 4 A.M. by the time this ghastly deed had been completed. A knocking was heard at the door, and when the narrator answered it, he found three men who quickly introduced themselves "...as officers of the police." They told the narrator that a neighbor had reported hearing a shriek in the night, and that they were there conducting an investigation to make sure that no foul play had occurred.

"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."

The narrator escorted the officers as they searched the premises. Nothing was disturbed; everything was in order, even in the old man's room. The narrator brought in chairs and insisted that the officers "...rest from their fatigues...." The narrator brought in another chair, and placed it upon "...the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse of the victim." They sat and chatted at ease, while the narrator pleasantly answered their questions. However, the narrator soon wished them to be gone.

"...I felt myself getting pale....My head ached, and I fancied a ringing in my ears....The ringing became more distinct; I talked more freely to get rid of the feeling; but it continued...until, at length, I found that the noise was not within my ears....It was a low, dull, quick sound--much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton."

The narrator gasped for breath, and spoke "...more quickly--more vehemently." The sound steadily increased; yet the officers made no notice. The narrator "...arose and argued about trifles, in a high key and with violent gesticulations.

Why would they not be gone? I paced the floor...with heavy strides....Oh, 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." Was it possible that the officers did not hear the sound? "No, no! They heard!--they suspected!--they knew!--they were making a mockery of my horror!....I could bear those hypocritical smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die!" All the while the sound grew "louder! 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."

Analysis

BACKGROUND

No real background information is given on either the narrator nor the man that he murders. Poe does not give any previous experience, social status, educational background, or any other personal information about this character.

PERSONALITY

The character is emotional, but he is not rational. He is neither shy nor outgoing. He thinks that he is skillful. He tends to be depressed. He does not seem to be caring, but he does state that he loved the old man. He is dishonest because he hid the body, and he was not going to confess to the crime until he thought that the police heard the heart beating.

RELATIONSHIPS

The only relationship shown between the narrator and the old man is that they are housemates. They really do not have any personal interactions with each other, but the narrator is friendly to the old man the week before he kills him.

CONFLICT

There are two conflicts: internal and external. Internal - The narrator's guilt over killing the old man forces him to believe that he hears the dead man's heart beating. External - The eye itself; the narrator feels that the old man's eye is always watching him.

MOTIVATION

The narrator likes his boss whom he later murders, but the boss's "pale blue eye with the film over it" irritated the narrator. He murders his boss because the look of the eye disturbs him.

Reflexion of The Tell-Tale Heart and its Evil Eye

"The Tell-Tale Heart" is a short story written by E. A. Poe, narrated from the perspective of a nameless protagonist, living together with an old man whose "evil eye" scares him so much that he kills him and hides the dead body under his living room. Because of a reported shriek by a neighbor the police arrive and question him. While answering the questions pleasantly, he becomes paranoid due to the growing beating of the old man's heart. However, he is not aware of his own madness and the futility of his effort to rid himself of the "evil eye" until he tears up the planks and admits the deed. The rising beating of the heart and loss of hope make the narrator reveal the secret of the "evil eye".

Poe's story is a case of domestic violence that occurs as the result of an irrational fear. To the narrator that fear is represented by the old man's eye. Through the narrator, Poe describes this eye as being pale blue with a film over it, and resembling that of a vulture. Does the narrator have any reason to fear the old man or his eye? Is it this phobia that evokes the dark side, and eventually drives the narrator to madness? Or could Poe be referring to a belief whose origins could be traced back to Greece and Rome?

The belief in the "evil eye" dates back to ancient times, and even today, is fairly common in India and the countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea. References are made to it in Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist and Hindu faiths. The belief centers around the idea that those who possess the "evil eye" have the power to harm people or their possessions by merely looking at them. Wherever this belief exists, it is common to assign the "evil eye" as the cause of unexplainable illnesses and misfortunes of any kind.

To protect oneself from the power of the eye, certain measures can be taken. In Muslim areas, the color blue is painted on the shutters of the houses, and found on beads worn by both children and animals. There is also a specific hand gesture named the "Hand of Fatima," named after the daughter of Mohammed. This name is also given to an amulet in the shape of hand that is worn around the neck for protection. In some locations, certain phrases, such as "God's will" or "God bless it" are uttered to protect the individual from harm. In extreme cases, the eye, whether voluntarily or not, must be destroyed. One Slavic folktale relates the story of the father who blinded himself for fear of harming his own children with his "evil eye".

Human nature is a delicate balance of light and dark or good and evil. Most of the time this precarious balance is maintained; however, when there is a shift, for whatever reason, the dark or perverse side surfaces. How and why this "dark side" emerges differs from person to person. What may push one individual "over the edge" will only cause a raised eyebrow in another. In this case, it is the "vulture eye" of the old man that makes the narrator's blood run cold. It is this irrational fear which evokes the dark side, and eventually leads to murder. The narrator plans, executes and conceals the crime; however, what has been hidden within the self will not stay concealed. The narrator speaks of an illness that has heightened the senses: "Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heavens and in the earth. I heard many things in hell." The narrator repeatedly insists that he(he) is not mad; however the reader soon realizes that the fear of the vulture eye has consumed the narrator, who has now become a victim to the madness which he had hoped to elude.

Would Poe have had knowledge of this rather strange belief? It is altogether possible that he would have, which creates another interesting twist to this story. Maybe the narrator who tries to convince us that madness is not really the issue, is telling the truth. Maybe this vile act is necessary in order to destroy the power of the old man's evil eye!