

## The Tell-tale Heart

By Edgar Allan Poe  
Part 2

**Author:** Daniel Barber

**Level:** Advanced

**Age:** Young adults / Adults

**Aims:** In this lesson the students will:

1. listen to various predictions about the story's ending;
2. listen for gist to check the predictions;
3. listen for detail;
4. explore stress timing;
5. discuss aspects of the story in detail;
6. debate the storyteller's state of mind.

**Materials:** one copy of the worksheet per student; Track 1 (full audio for Part 2) and Track 2 (short extract) downloaded from onestopenglish; one copy of the full transcript per student; one set of the Role cards per group of three students

**Summary:** A cold-blooded killer explains how he prepared what he believes is the perfect murder of the old man he lived with. All went according to plan until the police paid a call after a neighbour reported hearing a noise. The story is told in two parts. In Part 2, can he stay calm long enough to avoid suspicion?

### Warmer

**Aims:** to share the various predictions the students made in the previous lesson; to listen extensively for gist

1. Remind the students that at the end of the last lesson they made predictions about the end of the story. Explain that they are going to listen to each other's predictions and then to Part 2 in order to find out whose prediction was most accurate. Let the students get into the groups they were in at the end of the last lesson.

Hand out the envelopes from the last lesson. Ask a spokesperson from each group to read their predictions to the class. Ask them to make notes on the other groups' predictions. They need to make notes because there will be a quiz afterwards. Make sure you also make notes because you will be asking the class questions afterwards.

2. When all the groups have given their predictions, ask everyone to follow these instructions:

- Draw a star next to your favourite prediction.
- Put a circle around the one you think is most likely true.

- Put an exclamation mark next to the most unexpected ideas.
- Are any ideas close to your group's? Put an 'equals' sign (=) next to these.

3. Now use your notes to create a quick quiz for the class. Tell students to clap or raise their hand if they know the answers. Ask questions like:

- Which group thinks the old man dies of fright?
- What does Gabi's group think is going to happen to the lantern?

**Note:** If you prefer, you could prepare the quiz before the lesson by opening the envelopes and reading the predictions.

4. Now let the students hear what actually happens in the story and play Track 1.

5. Ask for a show of hands to see which group's ideas were closest to the original story. Ask individuals to justify their choices – this is important because they can show what they have understood. Congratulate the winners when students have voted on all the groups and award the prize (if you promised one!).

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### Activity 1

**Aim:** to listen for detail

1. Hand out the worksheet. Show the class Activity 1. Explain that they should decide whether each statement is true or false. Give them time to read the statements and let them work with a partner to try to remember any answers they may know from the first listening.

2. Play Track 1 again. After the story has finished, let them confer in their pairs again before handing out the transcripts and giving them time to check their answers. Finally, elicit the answers in whole-class feedback.

**Key:** 1. F – He hears a sound similar to a watch.; 2. T; 3. F – He is able to stay motionless.; 4. T; 5. T; 6. F – He opens the lantern the moment he attacks.; 7. F – He shrieks once. 8. F – He pulls him to the floor and pulls the bed on top of him. 9. Unclear – According to the storyteller, the old man’s heart continues beating for some time; however, it is unlikely that the sound is the old man’s heart.; 10. T; 11. T; 12. F – He is calm and confident at first.; 13. T; 14. T – Although the sound is first described as a ‘ringing’, he goes on to describe it as being like the sound ‘a watch makes’.; 15. T; 16. F – The policemen do nothing; he confesses without being forced.

### Activity 2

**Aim:** to sensitize students to stress timing

1. Point out Activity 2 on the worksheet. Tell the students to read the extract and predict which syllables are stressed. Tell them that the first four stressed syllables have been marked and tell them to continue marking the stressed syllables in the same way. Allow students to check their predictions with a partner.

2. Play Track 2 (short extract) and tell the students to listen and check their predictions.

**Key:** 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.

Allow students to check their answers in pairs before checking with the whole class. Ask the class which types of words are usually stressed, and why they think this is so.

**Key:** Typically, words that carry the lexical meaning of the sentence, such as nouns, verbs and adjectives are stressed. It is useful to identify words that are not normally stressed too. These include prepositions, pronouns and articles.

3. Play Track 2 again, this time encouraging the students to tap their fingers in time with the stressed syllables. Ask them if they notice a rhythm created by the spacing of the stressed syllables.

4. Ask students to work in pairs and take turns at being the storyteller, reading aloud the passage, focusing on sentence stress.

### Activity 3

**Aims:** to more fully understand the story; to discuss how the students feel about the characters

1. Get the students into groups and allow them a few minutes to discuss the questions on the worksheet. Listen in on their discussions, prompting and challenging them where appropriate. When most of the groups are coming to the end of their discussions, field a whole-class summary of their ideas.

### Role-play

**Aims:** to debate the storyteller’s state of mind; to further explore the themes of madness and the criminal mind

1. The students may have already suggested during the discussion in the previous activity that the storyteller would go on trial for his crime and that he may be telling his story to a lawyer or judge in a court of law. Explain, if necessary, that before someone is tried for a crime their state of mind needs to

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be determined because if it is decided they are mentally ill, they cannot be found guilty and punished but will be treated as a psychiatric patient instead.

Tell the students that they are going to determine whether the storyteller, or 'defendant', should stand trial or not by debating the matter before a panel of judges, who will decide based on the evidence. Divide the class into three groups: the prosecution, the defence, and the panel of judges. Hand out the corresponding role cards and give the students ten minutes to plan their arguments and form their questions.

The panel of judges will probably need most help from you in thinking up questions for each side; to do so they will have to predict the arguments that each side will make. The prosecution may also find it hard to argue sanity (he certainly seems insane!) so you might suggest they think about his motives for telling the story (to appear insane). The defendants, on the other hand, should have little difficulty finding evidence for his unstable mind.

2. When the groups have prepared their arguments, regroup the students so that there is one or two of each group together (e.g. two defence lawyers, two prosecution lawyers and one or two judges). Explain that the judges in each group are now in charge and must chair the debate. Monitor to check the groups are working well together to reach a decision. You may want to make a note of errors you hear and other interesting use of language to feed back to them after.

3. When all the groups have finished, check with the judges that they have reached a decision. Ask each one in turn: *Have you reached a decision, your honour? What say you?* Count up the number of 'not guilty by reason of insanity' and 'of sound mind' decisions and announce the class's overall decision.

4. You may want to provide feedback on their performance during the debate and correction on their use of English.

### Follow-up tasks

- Ask the students to imagine that they are forensic psychologists. One of their roles is to testify in court regarding the state of mind of a suspected criminal. Treat the transcript as forensic evidence. Reread it, looking for signs that the storyteller is either mentally unstable, and therefore unable to stand trial, or sane and therefore responsible for his actions. Write your report for the judge.
- Suggest that the students investigate one of the following:
  - the 'insanity defence' in criminal law;
  - the Gothic tradition in fiction ('The Tell-tale Heart' is considered a classic Gothic short story);
  - Poe's theories about fiction.
- There have been numerous adaptations of 'The Tell-tale Heart', especially in film and animated film versions. Several of these are easily available to watch on the internet on sites such as YouTube. Ask the students to find at least two of these online, watch them and choose a favourite. They can either tell the class about their favourite, why they chose it over the other(s) and where their classmates can find it or, if you have the necessary equipment in class, show it to the rest of the class.

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#### Activity 1

Listen again and decide whether the statements are true (T) or false (F).

1. The storyteller hears a watch ticking.
2. The noise makes him angry.
3. He tries to keep still but can't because he is so emotional.
4. The noise gradually becomes stronger.
5. He becomes worried that a neighbour might be able to hear the noise.
6. He attacks the old man in darkness.
7. The old man makes no sound.
8. He kills the old man in his bed.
9. Death is almost instant.
10. He hides the body under the floorboards of the old man's bedroom.
11. The police arrive in the early hours of the morning.
12. He is nervous that the policemen are in his house.
13. He sits and talks to the policemen in the old man's bedroom.
14. He starts to hear the same sound as before.
15. He starts to panic.
16. The policemen find it easy to force him to confess to the murder.

#### Activity 2

Underline the stressed words.

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.

#### Activity 3

Discuss the following questions in groups.

- Why did the police visit the house? Do you think they suspected the murderer? What would have happened if the storyteller had stayed calm?
- Do you feel sorry for the old man at all? Why? Why not? What about the storyteller? How do you feel about him?
- Whose is The Tell-tale Heart in the title of the story?
- What do you think happens after the end of the story? Where do you imagine the storyteller is when he tells the story? Who is he telling it to?

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Role cards

#### The prosecution

Your objective is to convince the judge that the storyteller, or defendant, should be tried because he was not mentally ill at the time of the killing. Study the story, or 'evidence', for signs that he knew exactly what he was doing and prepare to present them to the judge.

You may want to think about:

- a possible motive that he is trying to hide;
- his preparation for the crime;
- the clear way that he tells the story;
- what is best for society;
- any other information or ideas that might help your case.

Good luck! Your job won't be easy, and the defence has a very strong team!

#### The defence

Your objective is to convince the judge that your client, the storyteller or 'defendant', should not be tried because he is insane and was so at the time of the murder. Study the 'evidence' for signs that he was not in control of his actions and prepare to present them to the judge.

You may want to think about:

- the motive for the killing;
- his preparation for the crime;
- the way that he tells the story;
- what is best for him and for society;
- any other information or ideas that might help your case.

Good luck! The judge is hard on criminals and the prosecution team has some excellent lawyers!

#### The panel of judges

Your objective is to listen to the two sides of the argument: the prosecution, who will want the trial to go ahead and so will be trying to persuade you that the storyteller, or 'defendant', knew what he was doing; and the defence, who will argue that he was not in control of his actions. Listen carefully, ask both sides questions and make your decision based on the strength of their presentations.

Prepare some questions to challenge each side and test the strength of their arguments. You may read the 'evidence' beforehand to help you do this.

At the end of the hearing, you will need to decide whether the defendant is 'not guilty by reason of insanity' or 'of sound mind'.

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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.

Track 2

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 anything 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

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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: 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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### Glossary

**refrain** (formal) to stop yourself from doing something

**tattoo** (military) a signal that tells soldiers to return to their buildings at night, played on a drum or a bugle

**mark well** (old-fashioned) used for emphasizing that what you are saying is important

**shriek** to shout in a loud high voice because you are frightened, excited, or surprised

**wane** (literary) to come to an end, to become weaker

**scantlings** beams of wood found under floorboards in old houses

**suavity** (unusual noun from adjective: **suave**) confidence and politeness

**bade** (formal, past simple of **bid**) to say 'hello', 'goodbye', etc. to someone

**fatigues** (old-fashioned) hard work

**ere** (old-fashioned) before

**vehemently** with extremely strong feelings or beliefs

**trifles** (old-fashioned) unimportant things

**gesticulations** movements with your hands and arms when you are talking, usually because you want to emphasize what you are saying or because you are excited

**foam** to show your anger

**rave** to talk in an angry and uncontrolled way

**make a mockery** to make someone or something seem stupid or useless

**derision** the opinion that someone or something is stupid, unimportant or useless

**hark** (old-fashioned) to listen

**dissemble** (literary) to hide your real thoughts, feelings or intentions