I was never really insane, except on occasions where my heart was touched,” Edgar Allan Poe once wrote to his mother-in-law. During his life, Poe was known for writing about mysterious forces, wicked crimes, and death. Unfortunately, his life was as sad as those of most of his characters. He was poor for most of his life. His mother died when he was two, and he was disowned by his foster father. In addition, Poe’s wife died when she was only twenty-four.

Edgar Allan Poe was born in 1809 and died in 1849. “The Tell-Tale Heart” was first published in Pioneer magazine in January 1843.

**READING FOCUS**
Do we see ourselves as others see us?

**FreeWrite**
How is the way people view themselves different from the way others view them? Freewrite your answer.

**Setting a Purpose**
Read this short story to find out what the narrator thinks about himself and the acts he has committed.

**BUILDING BACKGROUND**

**Did You Know?** Poe spent most of his life writing poetry, beginning as a teenager and sacrificing material comforts for twenty years so that he could concentrate on his art. The success he finally found with his poem “The Raven” didn’t improve his financial status. The poem was reprinted and parodied everywhere, and Poe was invited to tour the country lecturing and reading his work. However, he was paid less than $15 for the poem, and lecturing paid barely enough to support him. Three years after “The Raven” came out, Poe still could not afford to keep his house warm during his wife’s final battle with tuberculosis.

**VOCABULARY PREVIEW**

- **acute** (ə kūt’) adj. sharp and strong or intense; p. 835
- **vex** (veks) v. to disturb, annoy, or anger, especially by some small, repeated action; p. 836
- **stifled** (stī’fold) adj. held back; smothered; p. 837
- **wane** (wān) v. to draw to a close; approach an end; p. 839
- **audacity** (ə das’ë tē) n. reckless boldness; daring; p. 840
- **singularly** (sing’gə lar lē) adv. unusually or remarkably; extraordinarily; p. 841
- **vehemently** (vē’ə mant lē) adv. strongly; intensely; passionately; p. 841
- **hypocritical** (hip’ə krī’tə kal) adj. pretending to be what one is not; fake; insincere; p. 841
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.

Vocabulary
acute (a kūt’) adj. sharp and strong or intense
The Tell-Tale Heart

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! One of his eyes resembled that 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 for ever.

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, so 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 had 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

1. Dissimulation means "the hiding or disguising of one's true feelings and intentions."

2. Here, profound means "very thoughtful and wise."

3. Sagacity (sag' a tè) is wisdom and good judgment.

Vocabulary

vex (veks) v. to disturb, annoy, or anger, especially by some small, repeated action
Edgar Allan Poe

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 the 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 mean time 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 watches⁴ 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 has been trying to comfort himself with these suppositions;⁵ 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 crevice⁶

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4. _Death watches_ are beetles that bore into wood, especially of old houses and furniture. Some superstitious people believe that these insects' ticking sounds foretell death.
5. _Suppositions_ are things one assumes, or supposes, to be true.
6. A _crevice_ (krev' is) is a crack in or through something.

**Vocabulary**

- _stifled_ (stɪˈlɛd) adj. held back; smothered
Hidden Room of 1,000 Horrors (The Tell-Tale Heart), 1963. Movie still.

**Viewing the photograph:** How does this photograph add to the horror of the story?

in the lantern. So I opened it—you cannot imagine how stealthily, stealthily—until, at length, a single dim ray, like the thread of the spider, shot from out the crevice and fell 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 now have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but over acuteness of the senses?—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

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7. The heart was making a drumming or rapping sound. (This *tattoo* comes from a Dutch word; the other *tattoo*, a design on the skin, comes from the language of Tahiti, a Pacific island.)
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 uncontrol-

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old

able 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 neigh-

bored. The old man's hour had come! With a loud yell, I threw open the lan
tern 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 knock-
ing 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 neighbor 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.

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Vocabulary

- **Vocabulary**
- **wane** (wān) v. to draw to a close; approach an end

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How might you vary your reading rate in this passage? Why?
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

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Vocabulary

audacity (ə dəˈsätə) n. reckless boldness; daring

singularly (sing′ gə lər ˈla) adv. unusually or remarkably; extraordinarily

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Hidden Room of 1,000 Horrors (The Tell-Tale Heart), 1983. Movie still.

Viewing the photograph: What seems to be tormenting the man in this picture? Compare this realistic image with the illustration of the eye on page 835. Which image best helps you to visualize the story? Why?
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 definitiveness—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,11 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;12 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!13 I could bear those hypocritical smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die!—and now—again!—hark! louder! louder! louder! louder! louder!14—and now I shrieked, “dissemble14 no more! I admit the deed!—tear up the planks!—here, here!—it is the beating of his hideous heart!”

11. To speak fluently is to do so smoothly and effortlessly.
12. Trifles are unimportant things. Bold, expressive gestures are gesticulations.
13. Derision is scornful mockery or ridicule.
14. Here, dissemble means “to disguise one’s true thoughts or feelings; act in an insincere way.”

Vocabulary

vehemently (vē'ə mant lē) adv. strongly; intensely; passionately
hypocritical (hip'ə krī'ə tī kal) adj. pretending to be what one is not; fake; insincere
PERSONAL RESPONSE
- Can you hear the beating of the dead man’s heart as you finish the story? What incidents from the story stay in your mind?

Active Reading Response
- Which prediction did you make that was supported by evidence later in the story?

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Analyzing Literature

RECALL
1. What reason does the narrator give for committing the murder?
2. What does the old man do when he hears the narrator at his bedroom door?
3. Why do the police come to the door?
4. What does the narrator hear while talking to the police officers in the victim’s bedroom?

INTERPRET
5. What does the narrator want his audience to understand about him as he talks about his murder plans? Explain.
6. How does the narrator feel about frightening the old man? Support your answer with examples from the story.
7. How does the narrator react when the police first arrive? Why does he behave this way?
8. Why does the narrator confess to his crime?

EVALUATE AND CONNECT
10. Who has the “tell-tale” heart in this story—the narrator or the old man? Defend your choice.

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LITERARY ELEMENTS

Mood
The mood of a story is the emotional effect it has on a reader. The overall mood of “The Tell-Tale Heart” is one of anxiety and fear. One way Poe achieves this mood is through the rhythm of his language, which mimics a fast, irregular heartbeat. Poe’s use of exclamation marks and dashes conveys agitation, as does the narrator’s repetition of the word “nervous.”

1. Find three other passages in the story in which punctuation and repetition help project a mood.
2. Find a description of the victim that supports the story’s overall mood of anxiety and fear.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups
Unanswered Questions What questions do you still have about this story? With your group, discuss questions such as these: Is the narrator of the story insane, or is he just evil? How do you explain the power that the old man’s eye and heartbeat had over the narrator? Why did the narrator continue to hear the old man’s heartbeat after he was dead? Share your answers with the rest of the class.

Writing About Literature
Suspenseful Scene Which scene from this story did you find most gripping or scary? Why did it affect you this way? Write a paragraph or two explaining your answer. Include details and examples from the story to support your answer.

Creative Writing
Police Report Imagine that you are one of the police officers called to the house after a neighbor heard a scream. What facts do you uncover? Write a police report about this case.

Reading Further
If you enjoyed this story, try Look for Me by Moonlight by Mary Downing Hahn

Save your work for your portfolio.

Skill Minilesson

VOCABULARY • ANALOGIES

An analogy is a type of comparison that is based on the relationships between things or ideas. Analogies are often used on tests to measure how well you can figure things out and how good your vocabulary is. A test will not tell you what kind of relationship is shown by the first pair of words. You’ll have to figure that out. Then you’ll need to find another pair of words that could be used to illustrate the same relationship.

For more about analogies, see Communications Skills Handbook, pp. R72–R73.

PRACTICE Complete each analogy.

1. cramp : sharp :: ache :
   - a. brief
   - b. dull

2. loud : quiet :: stifled :
   - a. soft
   - b. ignored

3. knock : pound :: vex :
   - a. soothe
   - b. torture

4. taunt : scorn :: praise :
   - a. approval
   - b. complaint

   c. sudden
   - d. slight

   d. touched

   c. released

   d. comfort

   c. disgust

   d. care