The Tell-Tale Heart
by Edgar Allan Poe

**Things To Know/Things To Think About**

“The Tell-Tale Heart,” like Poe’s other works, is concerned with understanding the emotion of fear, the psychology of mental illness, and the interaction between mental and bodily processes. The “Tell-Tale Heart” begins with an unnamed narrator confessing to the murder of an elderly neighbor. Despite openly acknowledging the role he played in carrying out the crime, the narrator seems far more concerned with proving his sanity, rather than his innocence. To this end, the narrator vividly recalls the events leading up to the eventual murder. The narrator, who suffers from an “acuteness of the senses,” justifies his sanity by illustrating the methodical and systematic efforts he took to execute the murder. The narrator’s pretense to sanity, however, is undermined by the passionless and objectless nature of the crime. Even his ostensible motivation for the murder, in this case, fury over the old man’s pale blue, vulture-esque eye, seems hollow and contrived. In response to questions about his motivation, the narrator comments “I think it was his eye!” The narrator’s discernible sense of doubt over his own motivation undermines his credibility, and places his account of the murder under closer scrutiny.

On the night of the murder, the narrator hears the old man’s “groan of mortal terror” which he describes as the “low stifled sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe.” The narrator further remarks that he recognizes the sound as one that regularly comes from his own bosom on the nights when he is tormented by unspeakable and unknowable terrors. This admission further calls into question the narrator’s mental state prior to the murder. The instability of the narrator’s mental state is revealed in full shortly after the murder is completed. At this point, the narrator’s paranoia and monomania rapidly degenerates into full-fledged auditory hallucinations. As the narrator flirts recklessly with the possibility of discovery, and entertains police officers directly over the floorboards where the victim is concealed, he begins to hear a “low, dull, quick sound” that waxes in intensity. Although the narrator is convinced the source of the sound originates in the external environment, the officers remain unperturbed and appear unable to hear it. This leads the reader to question whether the
sound truly originates from the body of the dead man, or rather, from the narrator’s own guilt-stained breast. This piece is perfect as part of an introductory lesson on Edgar Allan Poe, American Romanticism, and portrayals of mental illness in literature.

**Standards Addressed:**

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.9**
Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.1**
Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.3**
Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in a story or drama propel the action, reveal aspects of a character, or provoke a decision.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.4**
Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts.

**Before Reading**

1. Based upon your knowledge of books, films, plays, and real life, how do feelings of guilt usually manifest themselves? In your opinion, how are these feelings of guilt usually relieved?

**During Reading**

1. From the very beginning, what does the narrator seem concerned with defending or justifying in his account? Use the text to support your answer. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.1)
2. According to the narrator, what is his motivation for committing the crime? Do you believe him? Why or why not? (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.3)

After Reading

1. Towards the end of the story, the narrator remarks, in relation to any evidence, that there was “no stain of any kind...no blood spot whatever.” Given the ending of the story, what is significant about the narrator’s claim that there was no evidence to convict him? (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.4)

2. The stories of Edgar Allan Poe often contain supernatural elements, but they are also realistic psychological portraits of twisted psyches. Do you think the narrator actually hears the dead man’s heart through the floorboard? Or do you think he mistakes his own heartbeat for that of the old man’s? Support your answer with details from the text. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.1)

Connections In Text

1. Compare “The Tell-Tale Heart” with Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of The House of Usher,” also found in the Books That Grow library. Compare the portrayals of mental illness in both stories. Place particular emphasis on what Poe describes as “acuteness of the senses” and other nervous disorders. What kind of relationship do you see between these nervous disturbances, and bodily ailments? (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.9)

Further Readings

For Teachers:
http://www.nms.org/Portals/0/Docs/English/Tell-Tale%20Heart.pdf

This link provides teachers with a valuable resource in the form of a lesson plan on the “Tell-Tale Heart” that places special emphasis on understanding the significance of tone in the story. It also provides a number of detailed in class workshop ideas.
Vocabulary

Domain-specific vocabulary:
vulture; cricket

G8 Challenging vocabulary list:
acute (8), crevice (8), stealthily (8), wane (8), chamber (7), hypocritical (7), marrow (7), pitch (7), acute (6), chamber (6), deed (6), fatigue (6), fluently (6), grate (6), indeed (6), premises (6), steadily (6), stimulate (6), suavity (6), vain (6)

G6 Challenging vocabulary list:

G4 Challenging vocabulary list:
agony (4), awake (4), boldly (4), calmly (4), deposit (4), dreadful (4), maintain (4), manner (4), mark (4), mockery (4), passion (4), point/pointless (4), thick (4), thin (4), victim (4), foul (3), gasp (3), groan (3), hideous (3), occur (3), power (3), precise/precisely (3), startle (3), suspect (3), barely (2), dull (2), fear (2), goal (2), horror (2), insult (2), lantern (2), nervous (2), observe (2), plank (2), possible (2), satisfy (2), sense (2), slight (2)

G2 Challenging vocabulary list:
barely (2), dull (2), fear (2), goal (2), horror (2), insult (2), lantern (2), nervous (2), observe (2), plank (2), possible (2), satisfy (2), sense (2), slight (2), act (1), chimney (1), drag (1), earth (1), enough (1), gold (1), open (1), pain (1), sudden/suddenly (1), watch (1), blood (0), close (0), floor (0), house (0), light (0), listen (0), minute (0), old (0), step (0), think