

The Tell-tale Heart

By Edgar Allan Poe
Part 1

Author: Daniel Barber

Level: Advanced

Age: Young adults / Adults

Aims: In this lesson the students will:

1. briefly discuss the topic of murder;
2. listen to a short extract in order to find out why the storyteller decides to commit murder;
3. study the meaning of some key vocabulary;
4. listen extensively for gist;
5. examine the author's use of assonance (with /əʊ/) and onomatopoeia;
6. predict the ending.

Materials: one copy of the worksheet per student; Track 1 (extract from the beginning of the story), Track 2 (full audio for Part 1) and Track 3 (short extract) downloaded from onestopenglish; one copy of the full transcript per student; enough envelopes for one per group of three or four 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 1, the storyteller describes how he patiently waited for the right moment to kill over a period of eight long nights.

Warmer

Aims: to engage the students' attention in motives for murder; to listen to a short extract with an easy listening task to familiarize students with the storyteller's voice.

1. Tell the class that the story they are going to hear is about the murder of an old man by a person who lives with him. Put the students in pairs and ask them to brainstorm possible reasons why someone might murder a person they live with. Give them just a couple of minutes for this.
2. Ask pairs for their ideas and then explain that they should listen to the short extract from the story in order to find out why the storyteller decides to commit murder. Play Track 1.
3. Write the following on the board.
 - What motive does he claim for killing the old man?
 - What does this tell you about him?

Have students discuss the questions in pairs before fielding ideas from the whole class.

Key: *He claims that one of the old man's eyes made his 'blood run cold'. This is his motive for murder. This indicates that he is either lying about it or, more likely, mentally ill.*

Activity 1

Aims: to check understanding of some key vocabulary; to examine the storyteller's attitude to his crime

1. Hand out the worksheet and direct the class to Activity 1a. Tell them to match the words in bold in extracts 1 to 5 with their definitions. Explain that all the extracts talk about the storyteller's careful preparation for the crime. When most students have finished, let them compare answers in pairs but don't check the answers yet.

Key: *a. cautiously; b. dissimulation; c. foresight; d. proceeded; e. sagacity; f. stealthily; g. thrust; h. cunningly*

2. Ask students to discuss question 1b in pairs. Then field answers to 1a and 1b with the whole class.

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Key: *These extracts indicate that the murderer has a conceited attitude to his crime; he believes himself extremely clever in planning and executing it so well and he is very proud of his achievement.*

Activity 2

Aims: to listen for gist

1. Ask students to read through Activity 2a before you play the entire recording of Part 1.
2. Play Track 2.
3. Give them plenty of time to consult with a partner after listening to the audio. Monitor and encourage discussion about what they heard, then get the whole class's attention and field their answers. Hand out the transcript for students to review their answers.

Key:

the storyteller's actions in the week leading up to the killing – *Each night at midnight he opens the door of the old man's bedroom very (very!) slowly and cautiously, puts his head through the door and shines a small light from a lantern onto the man's face. During the daytime he is friendly to the old man.*

the events of the eighth night – *On this occasion, he opens the door especially slowly and carefully, but when he goes to open the lantern, he slips and makes a noise, waking the old man. However, he remains silent and still for a whole hour, imagining the old man to be awake in bed listening for another noise. Eventually, he opens the lantern very slowly. A ray of light lands on the old man's eye, which is open!*

Activity 3

Aim: to examine the author's use of the /əʊ/ ('oh') sound and the effect it creates; to practise producing the sound and differentiating it from two similar sounds: /aʊ/ ('ow') and /ɔ:/ ('or')

1. Ask the students to read the extract. Ask them first where the sound comes from (the old man makes the noise as he is sitting up in bed) and then ask for volunteers to try

and reproduce the groan that is described. Explain that people groan for different reasons and that you'd like them to groan according to the reason you give them. Read the following out loud, giving students time to respond with a groan!

1. You have a stomach ache.
2. Your teacher gives you lots of homework.
3. Somebody tells you a really bad joke.
4. Your dentist is drilling a hole in one of your teeth.
5. You'd like to go for a walk but you see it's raining.
6. Your football team has just missed an easy goal.

If you have internet access in class, you might also show that some dictionaries (such as the Macmillan Dictionary online) provide sound effects to illustrate the meaning of words that describe noises. Ask students to predict the sound effect, then go to the definition of *groan* at <http://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/groan> and click on the sound effect button. (You might even ask the students why they think the dictionary is groaning!)

2. Elicit the vowel sound in the word *groan* and ask whether any of the noises they have made are similar; that is, whether the word is onomatopoeic, in their opinion. Now have them identify and underline any other words in the extract on the worksheet that contain the /əʊ/ sound.

Ask them to also identify any /aʊ/ and /ɔ:/ sounds in the extracts.

3. Play Track 3 for them to check their answers. They may want to hear it twice.

Key:

*(/əʊ/ sounds in bold, /aʊ/ sounds underlined, /ɔ:/ sounds double underlined) 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.*

Note: According to the standard phonemic chart, which is based on RP, or 'Received

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Pronunciation', *groan* and *soul* contain exactly the same vowel sound. However, in most modern-day accents, they are pronounced differently. Listen to how they are pronounced on the Macmillan Dictionary site, for example: [groan](#); [soul](#).

If you feel that spelling patterns are interesting or useful for your students to know about, you could elicit the different spellings of /əʊ/ in the extract (these are the spellings in bold in the key above). Put students in pairs and ask them to think of more /əʊ/ words for each spelling. E.g. *groan*: **boat**, **soaking**, **cloak**; *no*: **ago**, **potato**

3. Let the students practise reading the extract aloud. They can do this quietly in pairs, or just read it to themselves if they prefer. When they have finished, you may want to ask them if they think the author includes so many /əʊ/ sounds deliberately here to 'echo' the sound of the groan, or whether it is a coincidence.

Activity 4

Aim: to generate interest in the second (and final) instalment of the story

1. Put the students into groups of three or four. Announce a competition between the groups. The idea is simple: the team that guesses most closely the ending of *The Tell-tale Heart* wins. What they win is up to you! Explain that they have to write their predictions on a piece of paper, put them in an envelope and seal it. Show them the envelopes. Tell them that the envelopes will be opened and the predictions made public before listening to the end of the story next lesson. Point out the prompt questions on the worksheet.

2. As they are talking and writing, insist on secrecy between the groups. Monitor and encourage detail in their predictions. When the groups have finished, ask them to write their names on the envelopes and then take them in. Keep them safe for the next lesson.

Follow-up tasks

1. Suggest the students discover some more onomatopoeic words in English by

looking up examples online (using a search engine, look up *onomatopoeia examples*). They choose three of their favourites to teach each other in the following lesson.

2. Artists among the students might like to represent the scene at the end of Part 1 by drawing a sketch. In the next lesson, they could show the class their drawings and compare them. You could also show them similar images from the internet (look up *The Tell-tale Heart* on an image search engine).

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Activity 1

a. Look at extracts 1 to 5 below. Match the words in bold with definitions a to h.

1. You should have seen how wisely I **proceeded** – with what caution – with what **foresight** – with what **dissimulation** I went to work!
 2. ... I put in a dark lantern, all closed, closed, 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!
 3. ... I undid the lantern **cautiously**-oh, so cautiously ...
 4. Never before that night had I felt the extent of my own powers – of my **sagacity**.
 5. So I opened it – you cannot imagine how **stealthily** ...
- a. in a careful way so as to avoid problems and danger
 - b. hiding your real thoughts, feelings or intentions
 - c. the good judgment to think and plan before an event, so that you are prepared for whatever may happen
 - d. began or continued a course of action
 - e. good judgement based on practical knowledge and experience
 - f. in a quiet and secret way so that no one sees or hears you
 - g. put something somewhere with a quick hard push
 - h. using your intelligence to get what you want, especially by tricking or cheating people

b. What overall impression do you get from these extracts of the murderer's attitude to his crime?

Activity 2

a. As you listen to the whole of Part 1, make notes on the following:

- the storyteller's actions in the week leading up to the killing

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- the events of the eighth night

Worksheet

Activity 3

Read the extract. Where does the groan come from? What do you think it sounds like?

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.

Activity 4

Discuss your answers to the questions and make your predictions.

1. What happens next?
2. How does he kill the old man?
3. Does he get away with it?
 If so, how does he escape suspicion and arrest?
 If not, why not?
4. Any more details?

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Track 1

Transcript and glossary

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.

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! He had the eye 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 forever.

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, 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 **heartly** 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 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 bed, crying out – “Who’s there?”

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I kept quite still and said nothing. For a whole hour I did not move a muscle, and in the meantime 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 watches** 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 had been trying to comfort himself with these suppositions: 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 **crevice** in the lantern. So I opened it – you cannot imagine how stealthily, stealthily – until, at length a simple dim ray, like the thread of the spider, shot from out the crevice and fell full 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.

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Glossary

hearken (old-fashioned, literary) listen

vulture a large bird that eats the bodies of dead animals

film a very thin layer of something that forms on a surface

rid yourself of to remove something or someone that you find annoying, or unpleasant

fancy (literary) to believe or imagine something is true

hinge the part of a door or window that fastens to a wall and allows it to open and close

vex to make someone annoyed, confused or worried

chamber (old-fashioned) bedroom or private room

hearty friendly and enthusiastic

profound showing serious thought and wise ideas

chuckle to laugh quietly, especially in a private or secret way

startled suddenly frightened or surprised by something

draw back to move away from something

death watch a beetle that lives in wood, such as the frames of old buildings, and makes a tapping sound

awe a feeling of great respect and admiration, often combined with fear

well up if feelings well or well up inside you, they become very strong

bosom (literary) the imaginary place where you feel deep emotions

cricket a small brown insect that moves by jumping and makes a loud noise by rubbing its front wings together

in vain without success

crevice a narrow crack in rock or in a wall

veil a thing that hides or obscures something