

# Poe's usage of diction and word choice for portraying narrator's insanity

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In the short story "Tell-Tale Heart", Edgar Allan Poe uses specific diction to subtly portray the narrator's insanity, but also to characterize the narrator as a guilt-ridden person somewhat capable of differentiating right vs. wrong.

At the exposition of the story, the narrator describes the intent behind the murder by stating, "Object there was none. Passion there was none. ...He had never wronged me... I think it was his eye!" Here, he uses "no", "never", and "none" to identify all of the usual motives for murder, and write them off, one by one. Although this story is written in past tense, the narrator is unable to identify the reason he decided to kill the old man, he is only able to recognize that it was something that relentlessly "haunted" him. His desperate attempt to find a reason (in this case, he finally decided on the eye) is his way of justifying the murder and attempting to lessen his guilt. This shows that he had no true motive to kill this man, but it was simply an uncontrollable desire, therefore hinting towards his insanity.

Towards the middle of the story, when the narrator is witnessing the old man's cries of terror, he states, "I knew the sound well. Many a night, just at midnight, when all the world slept, it had welled up from my own bosom, deepening, with its terrible echo, the terrors that distracted me...I knew what the old man felt, and pitied him". The imagery in this sentence shows not only that the narrator is capable of remorse, but also that he feels sympathy and guilt before he has even committed the crime. However, it seems as though the urge is too strong to resist, which also provides the reader insight into the narrator's mental state. The fact that he openly acknowledges that he would regularly break out into cries of fear in the dead of night also supports the idea that he is suffering from insanity. In addition, earlier in the <https://assignbuster.com/poes-usage-of-diction-and-word-choice-for-portraying-narrators-insanity/>

passage, he states, " Never before that night had I felt the extent of my own power". It seems as though the narrator is committing this murder because this is one of the only ways he can overpower the object of his terror, something he has never before been able to gain control of. This shows that the narrator's mental state and well-being were compromised long before he decided to kill the man. In this case, the murder was simply an attempt to regain control of his mind, thus proving his insanity.

At the end of the story, the narrator is conversing with the police officers when he begins to hear the beating of the old man's dead heart, and eventually becomes so paranoid that he confesses his crime by stating, "' I admit the deed! — tear up the planks! Here, here! — It is the beating of his hideous heart!'" . We, as readers, know that it is difficult to hear the beat of a heart when a person is alive, but it is impossible to hear a heart beat once it has stopped entirely. However, the narrator is adamant that the sound is there and growing louder each second. This not only displays his insanity, but also exposes his immense guilt. This sound is haunting him relentlessly, serving as a constant reminder of the crime he has committed. Despite his attempts to justify his actions, eventually, his conscious overpowers his mind and he admits his wrongdoings.

Throughout this intricately written short story, Edgar Allen Poe uses careful word choice to convey the insanity and guilt that the narrator exhibits. Through his usage of language, he is able to portray the mental instability of his character as well as humanize him by showing his ability to feel remorse.