

# Sanity and paranoia in the tell-tale heart essay samples

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The Tell-Tale Heart was written by Edgar Allan Poe in 1843, and is a short story about a man entering a battle for his sanity as he commits a murder. The story is a monologue told by an accused murderer who remains nameless. He murders an old man in the middle of the night because he sees an eye on the man's forehead that he believes needs to be removed through killing. The main theme in this story is mental illness. The narrator is mad, but he is convinced that he is not. Among this theme, sanity and paranoia are the two main ideas that present themselves within the text. The main character, the narrator, exhibits behavior representing both of these themes that allows for the analysis and connection between sanity and action.

Edgar Allan Poe was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on January 19, 1809 (Meyers 4). After his birth, his parents, Eliza and David Poe, experienced economic hardships and decided to leave him as a five week old infant with his grandparents in Baltimore, Maryland (Meyers 5). When his parents returned to retrieve him and his sister, they were transferred to the care of a maid (Meyers 5). David abandoned the family and died months later in December of 1811, leaving his wife behind in a life of poverty until she died of tuberculosis three days after him (Meyers 6). Poe was three years old when this happened, and was placed in the foster care of John and Frances Allen and sent to school in Britain where they had moved (Meyers 13-14). When they returned to the United States, at age eleven, Poe began to write poetry (Meyers 14). There were some offers to publish his works, but his father John Allan decided against it, sending him to grammar school instead (Meyers 15). In 1826, he attended the University of Virginia (Meyers 21). It is said that while he was at university he developed habits of self-

destruction, including alcohol and gambling addictions (Meyers 26). He left home in 1827 and joined the army (Meyers 29). When he returned to Baltimore after the army, he began his writing career. Edgar Allan Poe is often credited as the creator of the horror fiction genre. He experienced much grief and death through his lifetime, including the deaths of his parents and his lovers as well as from being in the army. He is known for his melancholy, gothic tales about dark subjects and haunting atmospheres. The Tell-Tale Heart is one of these stories.

The Tell-Tale Heart offers an analysis of mental illness that includes insanity and paranoia. The unnamed narrator believes that he is not insane, as one would assume from his actions. The narrator of the tale is more concerned about defending his sanity than his innocence (Robinson 369). He makes a point of continuously mentioning throughout the story that he is not insane, repeating this over and over. He consistently looks for excuses to defend his sanity. In the very first paragraph, he asks how he is mad twice, stating outright “ how, then, am I mad?” (Poe 2). Furthering his denial, he leads in to his recollection of the story in an attempt to defend himself. He tries to claim that he is not a madman because he was smart about how he watched the old man sleeping, claiming “ would a madman have been so wise as this?” (Poe 3). In the middle of the monologue, he brushes it off as “ over acuteness of the senses” (Poe 5). The narrator is so convinced that his actions were rational that he does not realize they are in actuality the opposite, and the irrationality is lost on him (Robinson 369). Through this contradiction it is shown that the narrator is insane and has become delusional about his own self. He has lost his mental grasp on what is

actually happening as he does not realize the reality of the situation (Robinson 373).

The narrator is completely paranoid from the start, and the entire murder happens because of the paranoia that causes him to see the “ eye of a vulture” on the old man’s forehead, leading him to make the decision that the old man needs to be killed so the eye will go away (Poe 2). This eye is the sole reason that the murder ends up taking place (Robinson 372).

Therefore, the murder happened entirely because of the narrator’s paranoia. Just before he murders the old man, he hears his heartbeat growing louder every beat (Poe 5). This represents the paranoia the narrator is suffering from, getting louder the closer he gets to committing the murder. When the police show up, he begins to feel sick as he becomes paranoid that he will be caught, and he begins to become overwhelmed by a ringing in his ears (Poe 7). The paranoia of the narrator begins to elevate when he is convinced that he hears the old man’s heart beating through the floorboards. In actuality, it is his own heartbeat he is hearing that has become louder as he becomes more nervous (Robinson 374). His lost grasp on reality is showcased here as well, as he claims he is foaming and showing visible signs of panic but the police officers are actually just chatting and do not notice anything (Robinson 374). This is all in his head and his paranoia gets the best of him when he finally bursts out “ I admit the deed!” (Poe 8).

Poe’s The Tell-Tale Heart is a short story driven by the theme of sanity and paranoia. Insanity is what drives the narrator to kill the old man, denying his insanity through a string of excuses and delusions. Paranoia is what drives the narrator to confess, his nerves unable to hold any longer as he believes

the police officers can hear the old man's heart beat that has taken over inside his head. Through showcasing this paranoid, delusional man's situation Poe idealizes the concept that insanity can prevent someone from feeling guilty, and delusion can prevent one's feeling of innocence.

## **Works Cited**

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