

Character analysis - tell tale heart

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The short story can produce many different “ types” of characters. Usually, these characters are faced with situations that give us an insight into their true “ character”. In the Tell Tale Heart, a short story written by Edgar Allen Poe, the narrator of the story is faced with a fear. He is afraid of the Old Man’s Eye. The actions that this narrator performs in order to quell his fear can lead others to believe that he suffers from some sort of mental illness. The very fact that this narrator is so repulsed by the old man’s eye, which he refers to as “ the evil eye”, is reason enough to be suspicious of his character.

The narrator has an inner struggle with the thought that “ the evil eye” is watching him and an underlying feeling that “ the evil eye” will see the real person that he has become. This paranoia leads the narrator to believe that the only way he can put down his fears is to kill the old man. It is said that denial is usually the sign of a problem. If this holds true, then the narrator has the characteristics of a “ madman”. In the first paragraph, he asks, “ but why will you say that I am mad! (Kennedy & Gioia, 34)

This statement can be looked upon as a statement made by someone going through a paranoid episode. He talks as if he is in frenzy, especially when he talks about hearing things in heaven and in hell. “ The disease had sharpened my senses? Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven? I heard many things in hell. ” (Kennedy & Gioia, 34) The “ disease” that the narrator is talking about eats away at his conscience until “[I] made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever. (Kennedy & Gioia, 34)

The progression of the story revolves around the actions of the narrator. He describes the “ wise” ways in which he prepares himself to commit this deed. The way the narrator “ stalks” the old man the whole week before he kills him can be evidence of a problem. Every night he would watch the old man sleep. He found comfort in knowing that the eye was not watching him, that it could not see the true evil within his soul. While the eye was closed, so was the idea of killing the old man.

It is not until the old man awakens each day that the struggle within is apparent. This may be the reason why the narrator is so obsessed with watching the old man sleep. The actual act of murder, which the narrator believes was premeditated, was in fact a spur of the moment action. He toiled with the idea while the man was awake, that is, while he could see the “ evil eye”. However, while the eye was closed, the narrator was at peace. One night, during one of the narrator’s “ stalking” sessions, the old man awakens.

The narrator goes into a paranoid frenzy, mistaking the beating of his heart for the beating of the old man’s heart. During this frenzy, the narrator is afraid that neighbors will hear the beating of the man’s heart. This causes the narrator to take action. He quickly subdues the old man and kills him. He then takes extreme steps in disposing of the body, dismembering it and burying it under the planks in the floorboard. These extreme actions can be used as evidence to the paranoia that is taking shape. The fear of getting caught would be a normal reaction to someone who has committed a murder.

However, the dismemberment of the body was not necessary since the narrator had ample resources to dispose of the body properly. When the police arrive at the house, the narrator is sure that he has nothing to fear. He lets them into the house and bids them to search wherever they like. He leads them into the room where the body is buried and invites them to sit down. Although he fears nothing consciously, the narrator battles with his conscience subconsciously. He begins to feel uneasy when the officers start talking to him.

The paranoia begins to build steadily and before long, the narrator hears the beating of his heart, which he again mistakes for the beating of the corpse's heart. This implication gives further evidence to the paranoid nature of the narrator. The beating grows louder to him and, since it is his heart beating, the officers could not hear it. This made the narrator even uneasier since he could not understand why they could not hear it as well. A short while later and after a rabid inner struggle, the narrator, in a fit of rage, admits to his crime, believing that the police officer were aware of what he had done.

This is the pinnacle of his paranoid state. The idea that the officers were just toying with him, that they knew all along that he had murdered, presents a clear case of paranoid psychosis. Despite the narrator's cunning plan of how to commit the murder and how to dispose of the body, his own sub-conscience becomes his undoing. The sound of the old man's heartbeat continues to taunt the narrator and his reaction to his subconscious thoughts causes him to admit his crime to the police.