

# Gloom and mental instability

[Countries](#), [United States](#)



His writing shows that he is familiar with the thought process of a madman, leaving some to believe that he himself was in fact insane, but if he were, could he have the ability to describe such dark thoughts and deeds in a detailed graphic account? Most of Poe's short stories revolve around death, gloom and the mental state of his main character/characters. More often than not, the main character of his stories is thought to have a certain degree of insanity. The "Tell-Tale Heart" does not disappoint. The story follows the formula that Edgar Allan Poe perfected: death, gloom, and mental instability.

Some believe it is the narrator's insanity that causes him to dismember the old man into several pieces and place him under the floorboards while others question whether or not the main character was really insane. In order for one to be able to come to a plausible conclusion concerning the mental health of the unnamed narrator one must know what insanity is, the medical definition of insanity, and compare both definitions to the mental state of the narrator in the story. So what exactly is insanity? The word insanity was actually termed by lawyers within the legal repression. Insanity is a relatively new defense in the United States, as it was not practiced until around 1849, the time that Edgar Allan wrote the story "The Tell Tale Heart". Around the time the story was written there were many cases in America being tried where the defendants had pleaded not guilty by reason of insanity. Some think that Poe was paying close attention to the trial, as his story seemed to be a confession in which the narrator confessed the murder, but has all intentions of getting off by alluding to be "insane" (Benumb).

While most would argue it was all an act, there are certain aspects in the story that allude that the narrator may have not been pretending to be insane. The legal definition of insanity is, “ a mental illness of such a severe nature that a person cannot distinguish fantasy from reality, cannot conduct his/her affairs due to psychosis, or is subject to uncontrollable impulsive behavior” (Hoses). Within the medical profession, there is no definition for the word insanity. It is not a diagnosis that is listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, also known as DSM. What is diagnosed in the DSM are various mental problems that can cause an individual’s behavior to change, sometimes leading them to commit a crime depending on their diagnosed mental illness. Based upon the clues provided in the Story “ The Tell- Tale Heart,” one can conclude that the narrator is suffering from the mental disorder of paranoid schizophrenia.

Psychiatrists believe that when a person suffers from paranoia they most likely have paranoid schizophrenia. People with paranoia tend to believe that they have super sensitive hearing. They hear inanimate objects talking to them or voices that don’t exist. Symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia include: anger, anxiety, delusions, auditory hallucinations, violence, aloofness, etc. Paranoid schizophrenia is “ one of several types of schizophrenia, a chronic mental illness in which reality is interpreted abnormally (psychosis). The classic features of paranoid schizophrenia are having beliefs that have no basis in reality (delusions) and hearing things that aren’t real (auditory hallucinations)” (“ Paranoid Schizophrenia”).

The story begins with the narrator stating "... But why will you say that I am mad? The disease has sharpened my senses-not destroyed- not dulled them I heard things in the heaven and in the earth" (Poe 40). Within reading the first few lines of the story, the narrator has revealed to the audience two symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia, anxiety and auditory hallucinations. " These symptoms, especially his disposition to dispute, are manifested not only when he " arose and argued about trifles" but also throughout the narration.

.. Obviously, the prisoners captors have named his crime for what it is, the act of an anxiety-ridden madman; this is the argument that the narrator- illustrating another symptom of schizophrenia, lack of insight- rejects as erroneous, impertinent, absurdly false; this is the thesis to which he attempts to provide the antithesis " (Zimmerman). In regards to the medical aspect, the anxiety reveals itself in the way that the narrator is attempting to give his side of the story.

He has admitted to his extremely nervous behavior, yet later in the paragraph states, " Harken! ND observe how healthily- how calmly, I can tell you the whole story' (Poe 40). The audience should also notice within the first paragraph where the legal function of insanity could also be applied. It is here where his words begin to contradict themselves. It is here where he starts to demonstrate a mad man, by accusing the audience of coming to the conclusion that he is mad. He then goes on to imply that if he were mad, he ' Goofed be out of control, . -profoundly illogical, and not even recognize the implications of his actions" (Benumb).

As the narrator divulges information about murder, the symptoms of violence, anger, and delusion also appear, further evidence to back up the claim that the narrator is a paranoid schizophrenic. “ It was open-wide, wide open- and I grew furious as I gazed upon it...

Let was the beating of the old man’s heart. It increased my fury, as the beating of a drum stimulates the soldier into courage” (Poe 42). Here the narrator has shown the symptom of anger. The old man has done nothing to the narrator to upset him.

The narrator claims it is the beating of the old man’s heart and his dull blue eye that causes him to grow furious and it is what ultimately causes him to become violent towards the Old man and end his life. The symptom Of delusion appears throughout the whole story from the beginning. We have the narrator being delusional in thinking that he knows what the audience is thinking about him. He is delusional when he states, “...

For it was not the old man who vexed me, but his Evil Eye” (Poe 41). When you combine the delusion, anger, anxiety, and violence, it is very easy to see how one can come to the conclusion that the narrator is in fact not of sound mind. Although paranoid schizophrenia was not a diagnosis until after the writing of Poe’s “The Tell- Tale Heart”, with what is known now in the year 2009 concerning medicine and mental disorders, the narrator of the story would most definitely be diagnosed as a schizophrenic, and the murder of the old man could quite possibly be written off as a figment of his imagination.