

Unit 6

Title: The Tell-Tale Heart

Suggested Time: 14 days (50 minutes per day)

Common Core ELA Standards: RL.8.1-3, RL.8.6, W.8.1, W.8.4-6, W.8.9-10

Teacher Instructions

Preparing for Teaching

1. Read the Big Ideas and Key Understandings and the Synopsis. Please do **not** read this to the students. This is a description for teachers about the big ideas and key understanding that students should take away **after** completing this task.

Big Ideas and Key Understandings

In literature, the narrator is not always a reliable source of information.

Synopsis

“The Tell-Tale Heart” is told by a murderer, who explains his behavior by claiming that he suffers from an “overacuteness of the senses.” He explains his obsession with the eye of an old man and describes his nightly visits during which he looked in on the man as he slept. Ironically, it is the overacuteness of his senses that causes the narrator not only to kill but also to admit his guilt.

2. Read the entire selection, keeping in mind the Big Ideas and Key Understandings.
3. Re-read the text while noting the stopping points for the Text Dependent Questions and teaching Tier II/academic vocabulary.

During Teaching

1. Students read the entire selection independently.
2. Teacher reads the text aloud or plays the CD while students follow along or students take turns reading aloud to each other.
Depending on the text length and student need, the teacher may choose to read the full text or a passage aloud. For a particularly complex text, the teacher may choose to reverse the order of steps 1 and 2.
3. Students and teacher re-read the text while stopping to respond to and discuss the questions, continually returning to the text.
A variety of methods can be used to structure the reading and discussion (i.e., whole class discussion, think-pair-share, independent written response, group work, etc.)

Text Dependent Questions

Text Dependent Questions	Evidence-based Answers	Vocabulary
In the first paragraph, how does the narrator describe himself? Identify any contradictions in his description.	The narrator describes himself as “very dreadfully nervous,” but not mad. He acknowledges that he has a disease, but claims that it has made his senses more acute, allowing him to hear things in heaven, in earth, and in hell. He also describes himself as healthy and calm, which contradicts his earlier claim that he is nervous and diseased.	dulled – lacking keenness of perception in the senses or feelings acute – sharp; keen

<p>In the second paragraph, what contradiction does the narrator describe concerning his opinion of the old man?</p>	<p>The narrator says, "I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire." But then he continues on to say that the old man's pale blue eye "resembled that of a vulture" and made his blood run cold, so he made up his mind to kill the old man in order to get rid of the eye forever.</p>	<p>conceived – formed an idea object – goal or purpose passion – powerful or compelling emotion</p>
<p>In the third paragraph, how does the narrator behave in front of the old man? How does this contrast with his intentions and actions?</p>	<p>The narrator says that he "was never kinder to the old man" and that he would speak to him in a hearty tone and would inquire how he had passed the night. In reality, however, he was planning to end the life of the old man. He was sneaking into the old man's room every night and watching him while he slept, but he could never commit the murder because the old man's eye was always closed.</p>	<p>fancy – to believe without being sure foresight – care for the future dissimulation – hiding of one's feelings or purposes</p>
<p>After reading the first page, what has the narrator said or done that makes him appear mad?</p> <p>What evidence does the narrator give that he is not mad?</p>	<p>The narrator says that he "heard all things in the heaven and in the earth" and "many things in hell." He also expresses his desire to take the old man's life because he has a pale blue eye that makes his blood run cold. At night when the narrator sneaks into the old man's room, he takes an entire hour to move his head slowly through the door. He repeats this action seven nights in a row without actually killing the old man.</p> <p>The narrator argues that "the disease had sharpened my senses." He also says "You should have seen how wisely I proceeded—with what caution—with what foresight." He claims his actions just show that he is wise when he says, "Ha!—would a madman have been so wise as this?" He argues that he was unable to commit the murder during those seven nights because "it was not the old man who vexed me, but his evil eye."</p>	<p>vexed – tormented chamber – a private room in a house hearty – warm-hearted profound – intellectually deep</p>

<p>On the eighth night, the narrator chuckles to himself twice. What does this tell you about the narrator's feelings toward the old man? Cite evidence to support your answer.</p>	<p>The first time the narrator chuckles, he is trying to "contain my feelings of triumph" that he was able to sneak in on the old man, and "he not even to dream of my secret deeds or thoughts." This shows his opinion that he is superior to the old man in intellect and sagacity. The second time the narrator "chuckled at heart" was when he heard the old man groan with terror. He says that he pitied the old man, but the fact that he laughs shows his enjoyment of the old man's suffering.</p>	<p>sagacity – high intelligence drew – moved slowly pitch – tar-like substance hearkening – listening stifled – suppressed awe – overwhelming fear welled up – to rise from</p>
<p>At the bottom of p. 525, the narrator claims that what we think is madness is really an "overacuteness of the senses." What does the narrator say he can hear, and how does he react to this sound?</p>	<p>The narrator hears a "low, dull, quick sound, such as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton." It increases his fury, but at first he is able to keep still. As the sound becomes louder, he begins to become nervous and excited to "uncontrollable terror." He is able to remain still for a few minutes longer, but then he is seized by anxiety and worries the sound would be "heard by a neighbor!" This puts him into motion and he finally murders the old man by pulling the heavy bed over him.</p>	<p>enveloped – wrapped up in stimulates – rouses to action or effort refrained – to abstain from an impulse to say or do something tattoo – a knocking or strong pulsation mark – give attention to seized – took hold of</p>
<p>How likely is it that neighbors would be able to hear the old man's heartbeat? What does this reveal about the narrator?</p>	<p>It is very unlikely that neighbors would be able to hear the old man's heartbeat. This reveals the narrator's paranoia and it is this paranoia that propels him to kill the old man because he does not want the neighbors to hear the heartbeat.</p>	

<p>The narrator defends his sanity again when he describes the way he concealed the body. What words does he use in this defense? Why does the narrator believe this proves his sanity? What about his actions makes him appear insane?</p>	<p>The narrator believes an insane person would not be intelligent enough to take such “wise precautions.” He uses the words “cleverly,” “cunningly,” and “wary” to describe himself. He was able to successfully dismember and hide the body without leaving a trace of blood or stain of any kind. His actions still appear insane, however, because he describes a very gruesome act with pride and satisfaction.</p>	<p>precautions – cautions employed beforehand concealment – the act of hiding something waned – drew to a close hastily – with speed dismembered – cut into pieces scantlings – small beams cunningly – in a sly manner, as in deceiving</p>
<p>How does the narrator’s emotional and physical state change from the third to the fourth paragraph on p. 527? What can you infer is the cause of this change?</p>	<p>In the third paragraph, the narrator is confident and relaxed as he shows the police officers through the house, encouraging them to search the old man’s chamber. He invites them to sit and rest and even “placed my own seat upon the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse of the victim.” In the fourth paragraph, however, he feels himself “getting pale and wished them gone.” His “head ached” and there was a “ringing in my ears.” We can infer that even though the narrator is completely confident at first, his guilt eventually gets to him and he is concerned that the police will discover his crime.</p>	<p>bade – expressed or directed fatigues – causes of weariness audacity – boldness, especially with arrogant disregard for personal safety reposed – rested ere – before definitiveness - clarity</p>
<p>Compare the sound the narrator hears in the last paragraph on p. 527 to the sound he heard at the bottom of p. 525. Describe his response to the sound this time using evidence from the text.</p>	<p>Both times, the narrator describes the sound as a “low, dull, quick sound – much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton.” In response, he “gasped for breath” and “talked more quickly – more vehemently.” He “arose and argued about trifles” and used “violent gesticulations.” He “paced the floor to and fro with heavy strides.” “I foamed—I raved—I swore! I swung the chair upon which I had been sitting, and grated it upon the boards.”</p>	<p>vehemently – with great energy or exertion gesticulations – energetic hand or arm movements strides – long steps raved – talked wildly grated – to scrape with noisy friction</p>

Describe the police officers' behavior in the last paragraph on p. 527 (ending on p. 528). Is this response we would expect given the narrator's behavior at this time? What does that tell you about the reliability of the narrator?

The police officers seem not to notice the narrator's raving behavior. The narrator says "And still the men chatted pleasantly, and smiled." This is an unusually calm response to a man who is swearing and swinging chairs. We can infer that the narrator's description of the events is unreliable. He is most likely either incorrectly exaggerating his own behavior, or misinterpreting the behavior of the police officers.

mockery – a subject or occasion of derision
derision – contempt; ridicule
hypocritical – having the quality of pretending to have virtues that one does not possess
dissemble – conceal under a false appearance

Tier II Academic Vocabulary

	These words require less time to learn (They are concrete or describe an object/event/ process/characteristic that is familiar to students)	These words require more time to learn (They are abstract, have multiple meanings, are a part of a word family, or are likely to appear again in future texts)
Meaning can be learned from context	<p>Pg. 523 – conceived, foresight, dissimulation, vexed, chamber, hearty</p> <p>Pg. 524 – sagacity</p> <p>Pg. 525 – stifled, welled up, enveloped, stimulates, refrained</p> <p>Pg. 526 – precautions, concealment, dismembered</p> <p>Pg. 527 – cunningly, bade, fatigues, reposed, vehemently, strides, raved</p> <p>Pg. 528 – derision</p>	<p>Pg. 523 – dulled, acute, profound</p> <p>Pg. 524 – drew, pitch</p> <p>Pg. 525 – tattoo</p> <p>Pg. 527 – audacity</p> <p>Pg. 528 – grated</p>
Meaning needs to be provided	<p>Pg. 525 – hearkening</p> <p>Pg. 526 – seized, hastily</p> <p>Pg. 527 – scantlings, ere, gesticulations</p> <p>Pg. 528 – mockery</p>	<p>Pg. 523 – object, passion, fancy</p> <p>Pg. 525 – awe, mark</p> <p>Pg. 526 –waned</p> <p>Pg. 527 – definitiveness</p> <p>Pg. 528 – hypocritical, dissemble</p>

Culminating Task

- Prompt

In Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart,” the narrator describes how he suffocated an old man to death because of the old man’s ghastly eye. He claims he is not insane, but was just very “nervous” and “wise.” Yet, are there clues in his narration to reveal otherwise? Closely examine the narrator’s testimony to determine the reliability of his account of events. Then write an argumentative essay about whether the narrator is guilty of murder and should be put in prison or is not guilty by reason of insanity and should be put in a mental hospital. Consider the narrator’s manner of speaking, state of mind, and actions to frame your case and support your argument with evidence from the text.

- Teacher Instructions

1. Students identify their writing task from the prompt provided.
2. Students complete an evidence chart as a pre-writing activity. Teachers should guide students in gathering and using any relevant notes they compiled while reading and answering the text-dependent questions earlier. Some students will need a good deal of help gathering this evidence, especially when this process is new and/or the text is challenging!

<i>Evidence Quote or paraphrase</i>	<i>Page number</i>	<i>Elaboration / explanation of how this evidence supports ideas or argument</i>
“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?”	523	The narrator argues here that he is not mad, but that his disease has made his hearing more sensitive, allowing him to hear things in heaven and hell. Sane people don’t usually hear things in heaven and hell.
“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.”	523	The fact that the narrator plans to kill the old man purely because the old man’s eye bothers him is a sign of insanity.

<p>“Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen <i>me</i>. You should have seen how wisely I proceeded—with what caution—with what foresight—with what dissimulation I went to work!”</p>	523	<p>Here, the narrator argues his sanity by pointing out the wisdom and caution he used to commit the crime.</p>
<p>“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?”</p>	523	<p>Even though the narrator argues that he is wise, taking an entire hour to put his head through the doorway certainly makes him look insane.</p>
<p>“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.”</p>	525	<p>The narrator reveals that he groans with terror many a night, which could be a sign of insanity. He also sympathizes with the old man’s feelings of fear, but still laughs about it, which adds to the argument for insanity.</p>
<p>“And now—have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but overacuteness of the senses?—now, I say, there came to my ears a low, dull, quick sound, such as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton. I knew <i>that</i> sound well, too. It was the beating of the old man’s heart. It increased my fury, as the beating of a drum stimulates the soldier into courage.”</p>	525	<p>The narrator argues for overacuteness of the senses, but it is still a sign of insanity that he believes he can hear the heartbeat of a man on the other side of the room. The argument is strengthened by the fact that the sound of the heartbeat actually makes him furious.</p>
<p>“I thought the heart must burst. And now a new anxiety seized me—the sound would be heard by a neighbor!”</p>	526	<p>He must be insane if he thinks a neighbor could hear the old man’s heartbeat through the wall, especially when he admits that he himself can only hear it because of his overacuteness of the senses.</p>
<p>“In an instant I dragged him to the floor, and pulled the heavy bed over him. I then smiled gaily, to find the deed so far done.”</p>	526	<p>The fact that he smiles happily after murdering the old man—a man he said had never wronged him—shows insanity.</p>

<p>“If still you think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body...First of all I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs.”</p>	526	The calm manner in which the narrator describes the gruesome method he uses to hide the body shows his insanity.
<p>“I then replaced the boards so cleverly, so cunningly, that no human eye—not even <i>his</i>—could have detected anything wrong.”</p>	527	The fact that the narrator goes to such lengths to hide the body and the crime shows that he is completely aware that what he did was wrong, which is an argument for sanity.
<p>“Yet the sound increased—and what could I do? It was a <i>low, dull, quick sound—much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton</i>...I foamed—I raved—I swore! I swung the chair upon which I had been sitting, and grated it upon the boards.”</p>	527-528	He believes he hears the heartbeat again, but this time it is even more insane because the old man is dead and doesn’t even have a heartbeat. The sound also makes him start to act crazy, foaming, raving, swearing, swinging the chair and grating it on the boards.
<p>“Was it possible they heard not?—no, no! They heard!—they suspected!—they <i>knew!</i>—they were making a mockery of my horror!”</p>	528	The narrator becomes paranoid, another sign of insanity.
<p>“‘Villains!’ I shrieked. ‘dissemble no more! I admit the deed!—tear up the planks!—here, here!—it is the beating of his hideous heart!’”</p>	528	If his confession is a result of the guilt he feels, it could be an argument for sanity. On the other hand, the fact that he confesses even though the police didn’t suspect anything could be a sign of insanity.

- Once students have completed the evidence chart, they should look back at the writing prompt in order to remind themselves what kind of response they are writing (i.e. expository, analytical, argumentative) and think about the evidence they found. (Depending on the grade level, teachers may want to review students’ evidence charts in some way to ensure accuracy.) From here, students should develop a specific thesis statement. This could be done independently, with a partner, small group, or the entire class. Consider directing students to the following sites to learn more about

thesis statements: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/545/01/> OR http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/thesis_statement.shtml.

4. Students compose a rough draft. With regard to grade level and student ability, teachers should decide how much scaffolding they will provide during this process (i.e. modeling, showing example pieces, sharing work as students go).
5. Students complete final draft.

- Sample Answer

In the story “The Tell-Tale Heart” by Edgar Allen Poe, the narrator murders an innocent old man because he believes the man has an “evil” eye. The narrator tries to defend his sanity numerous times throughout the story, but there is even more evidence to suggest that he really is mad. By the end of his testimony, it is clear that the narrator is criminally insane and should be placed in a mental hospital to help him deal with his paranoia and other mental issues.

The narrator begins his testimony by explaining that it is true that he is nervous, but that he is not mad. He claims, “The disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them.” So even the narrator admits that he has some kind of disease, and he believes this is the reason he can hear things in heaven and hell. However, hearing voices is a sign of a mental illness, such as schizophrenia, and the fact that the narrator does not see any problem with hearing voices adds to the argument that he is insane. He hears another sound later in the story that he describes as “a low, dull, quick sound, such as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton.” He is certain he knows the source of this noise, “It was the beating of the old man’s heart.” Normal, sane people know that it is difficult to hear such a faint sound without a stethoscope, let alone from across a room. It is this imagined sound—a result of his mental illness—that finally drives him to murder the old man. Then, his insanity reaches a whole new level at the end of the story when he hears the exact same sound once again and comes to the sure conclusion that it is the dead man’s heart beating below the floorboards. Most likely the pounding in his ears was coming from his own heart beating, but his mind is filled with paranoia caused by his disease. This paranoia results in his sudden confession to the police officers that he has been working so hard to deceive.

Throughout the story, the narrator argues that his cautious actions demonstrate his wisdom and sagacity. He explains, “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?” His question is ironic because only a madman would actually take an hour to put his head through a doorway. Later in the story, he brags about his cleverness again saying, “If still you think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body. . . First of all I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs.” He is so proud and calm as he describes the gruesome method he used to hide the body that he appears, once again, completely insane.

The final proof that the narrator is mad is the joyful way he responds to the suffering of others. When the narrator sneaks into the old man’s room on the eighth night, and the man sits up in his bed, the narrator says, “I heard a slight groan, and I knew it was the groan of mortal terror. . . I knew what the old man felt, and pitied him, although I chuckled at heart.” The old man is terrified, and the narrator just laughs at his fear, even though he himself can sympathize with the horrible feeling. He enjoys listening to the old man suffer, but only a madman would find this entertaining. Once he finally murders the old man he says, “I then smiled gaily, to find the deed so far done.” Again, he finds joy in the death of another person, a man that he said he loved and that had never wronged him. His complete lack of remorse for his crime shows that his illness has caused him to be mentally detached from the severity of his actions.

Some might argue that the narrator does feel remorse at the end, and that his guilt that causes him to confess his crime to the police. However, at no point in time does the narrator feel sadness or express regret for murdering the old man. His confession was a result of paranoia. He believed that the police officers knew his secret and were just “making a mockery of my horror!” It was the derision of the officers that he couldn’t stand, the “hypocritical smiles” that he couldn’t bear any longer. In reality, the officers probably thought they were having a simple conversation with a man who was, for some reason, getting all excited about whatever the topic was. It was paranoia, caused by a mental illness, that pushed the narrator over the edge and caused him to confess.

Clearly, the narrator should be placed in a mental hospital where he can be treated for his sickness, not a prison with mentally sane criminals.

Name _____

Date _____

“The Tell-Tale Heart”

1. In the first paragraph, how does the narrator describe himself? Identify any contradictions in his description.
2. In the second paragraph, what contradiction does the narrator describe concerning his opinion of the old man?
3. In the third paragraph, how does the narrator behave in front of the old man? How does this contrast with his intentions and actions?
4. After reading the first page, what has the narrator said or done that makes him appear mad?

5. What evidence does the narrator give that he is not mad?
6. On the eighth night, the narrator chuckles to himself twice. What does this tell you about the narrator's feelings toward the old man? Cite evidence to support your answer.
7. At the bottom of p. 525, the narrator claims that what we think is madness is really an "overacuteness of the senses." What does the narrator say he can hear, and how does he react to this sound?
8. How likely is it that neighbors would be able to hear the old man's heartbeat? What does this reveal about the narrator?
9. The narrator defends his sanity again when he describes the way he concealed the body. What words does he use in this defense? Why does the narrator believe this proves his sanity? What about his actions makes him appear insane?

10. How does the narrator's emotional and physical state change from the third to the fourth paragraph on p. 527? What can you infer is the cause of this change?
11. Compare the sound the narrator hears in the last paragraph on p. 527 to the sound he heard at the bottom of p. 525. Describe his response to the sound this time using evidence from the text.
12. Describe the police officers' behavior in the last paragraph on p. 527 (ending on p. 528). Is this response we would expect given the narrator's behavior at this time? What does that tell you about the reliability of the narrator?