“The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Black Cat” are two short stories written by Edgar Allan Poe. Both stories share elements of murder and insanity; both have eerie and frightening nighttime scenes. At first glance, though, the protagonists of both stories seem to have very little in common. Their marital status, living conditions, and personal responsibilities are very different. If the reader looks more closely, however, the two men appear increasingly alike: both share their criminal history in flashback, thus disclosing their motives and confessing to their crimes. More importantly, as both characters recount their tales, they vehemently defend their sanity. Because of these striking similarities, it soon becomes apparent that the two men are much more alike than once believed.

In “The Tell-Tale Heart,” the nameless protagonist narrates his story from a prison cell after murdering the old man with whom he lived. The narrator tells us that he had no rational reason for wanting to kill the old man. Indeed, he claims the old man had never done him wrong and that he loved him and did not want his money. However, the old man had a “vulture eye - a pale blue eye, with a film over it” that terrified the narrator. The narrator was frightened of the “vulture eye” because in its outward ugliness, he “saw” his own reflection; the narrator is inwardly ugly and repulsive, for he planned and executed murder; his soul is more repulsive than the old man’s eye. The reader can then interpret the “vulture eye” not as an organ of vision but as the homonym of “I.” Thus, what the narrator ultimately wants to destroy is the self, and he succumbed to this urge when he could no longer contain his overwhelming sense of guilt and surrendered himself to the law, revealing the remains of the old man buried beneath the floor boards. Now, determined to defend his sanity, he shares the haunting details of his crime. However, his irrational fear of the “vulture eye,” the murderous content of his confession, and the self-destructive behavior with which he surrendered himself undermine his reliability as a sane narrator.

Similarly, in “The Black Cat,” the nameless protagonist defends the reliability of his narrative. He, too, tells his story from a prison cell after committing murder. His victim, however, was his wife. The narrator tells us that he and his wife were very happy, and together they loved and owned a variety of pets. The narrator cannot fully explain his transition to cruelty, however. On the one hand, he blames his alcoholism as a rational explanation for his mood swings. On the other hand, he faults an innate spirit of perverseness that he says forced his hand. Both, he says, led him to abuse his favorite pet, “a remarkably large and beautiful [cat], entirely black, and sagacious to an astonishing degree.” He cut the cat’s eye from its socket with his pen-knife after a night of debauchery. After the incident, the narrator was forever reminded of his cruelty by the scarred ugliness of the damaged eye. To free himself from the ghoulish eye of his pet, he eventually kills the cat, hanging it from a tree in his garden. Not long after destroying the animal, the narrator brings home a second cat which “closely resembl[ed]” his former pet “in every respect but one; …this cat had a large, although indefinite splotch of white, covering nearly the whole region of the breast.” Eventually, this white splotch of fur terrifies the narrator, because in it he sees the image of a gallows. The narrator unwittingly portrays his own insanity by demonstrating his inability to escape the hauntings of the second cat. The reader can interpret the second cat and its changing fur as the projection of the narrator’s guilty conscience; thus, the story ultimately undermines any faith in the narrator’s descriptions of the reincarnated cat. When the narrator finally decides to kill this second cat, his wife intervenes. Angered by her interference, he “buries [an] axe in her brain.” After concealing the corpse of his wife, the narrator takes unnecessary risks to appease the investigating police. His hubris reveals the resting place of his wife, and the narrator unexpectedly surrenders himself to the law. Now,
determined to defend his sanity, the narrator employs the form of his confession to explain his actions. However, his uncritical acceptance of the second cat with its changing fur, the lack of remorse for the crimes he has committed, and the self-destructive behavior with which he surrendered himself illustrate his deranged mentality and his unreliable narration.

The narrators of “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Black Cat” seem different. The narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart” is unmarried; not so in “The Black Cat.” The narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart” smothers an old man with whom he lives and conceals the body below the floorboards of his bedroom chamber. The narrator in “The Black Cat” murders his wife with an axe and walls up the corpse in the cellar of the apartment in which they live. The narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart” carefully planned the murder of the old man; in “The Black Cat,” the murder is unplanned, a crime of passion. These are minor differences, however. In truth, the narrators of both stories are strikingly similar. As evidenced in the summaries above, both narrators are guilty of murder and experience an irresistible urge to confess to their crimes. While each explains the circumstances of his hideous actions, he also attempts to defend his sanity. Each provides a rational explanation of his mental fixations and portrays his criminal activity as excusable within the logic of his confessions. These two narrators use the form of the confession to explain away the content of their actions, but Poe uses this intimate connection between form and content to undermine their reliability as narrators.

“The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Black Cat” are frightening studies of domestic violence. Both stories are told by unreliable narrators who act perversely, then pay for their wicked deeds. No doubt, these deeds - and the men who perform them - will continue to haunt readers for years to come.