The narrator is intensely nervous, but claims that he isn't insane. He is “diseased.” He possesses heightened senses, especially hearing. He claims to be able to hear everything in heaven and earth, and most of what happens in hell. He argues that he is not mad. An insane person, he argues, has very weak senses. If his are heightened, how can he be insane? He will further prove his sanity by telling his story.

The narrator has decided that the old man with whom he lives must die. He does not want the old man’s fortune. He “loves the old man.” But the old man has a “vulture eye - a pale blue eye, with a film over it” that terrifies the narrator. The narrator must destroy this evil eye; therefore, it is necessary to kill the old man.

Again the narrator defends his sanity. He argues that insane people lack knowledge and skill, whereas he plans everything well and is extremely careful.

Vocabulary:

Foresight: The ability to predict or the action of predicting what will happen or be needed in the future.

Dissimulation: Deception; the act of deceiving by giving a false appearance.

The narrator is super-sweet to the old man all week before the killing goes down. Each night of the week, near midnight, the narrator goes to the old man's room and cracks the door enough to put in a "a dark lantern." The narrator's lantern is lit, but it has plates around it that can be opened and closed to control the amount of light coming out. The narrator has it closed so no light shines out. After the lantern, the narrator pokes his head through the door, but because he's afraid of waking the old man, this takes him a very long time. The narrator argues that this is proof that he's not insane. How could the he be insane, he asks, and be so careful at the same time? Next, the narrator opens the lantern, just enough to let a tiny bit of light shine on the old man's eye. Because the old man is sleeping and his eyes are closed, the narrator can’t kill the old man. It's the man's "Evil Eye" the narrator has a problem with, not the man himself.

Every morning, the narrator comes into the old man's room, and asks him how he slept. The old man would have to be very "profound" (deep) to guess that the narrator had been spying on him while he slept.

On the eighth night, the narrator repeats the process, opening the door more carefully than usual. He feels at the height of his "power" and can't even believe his own "sagacity." ("Sagacity" means quick and clever thinking. It also means an excellent sense of smell. These days, the word is rarely used in that second way, but considering what the narrator said about his heightened senses, both meanings might apply.) The narrator is sure that he's going to win this game; he is really enjoying the fact that the old man is asleep and has no idea what the narrator is doing.
Suddenly, the old man moves in his bed. The narrator doesn't draw back. The old man is afraid of "robbers" and keeps his "shutters" closed. The room is so dark that there is no way the old man can see the door opening. Just as the narrator gets his head through the door and is about to shine the light, he makes a noise, and the old man jumps up and says, "Who's there?" The narrator doesn't move for an hour while the man must sits still, listening ("hearkening") to "the death watches in the wall."

("Death watches" are beetles that often live in tunnels they make inside of walls. They hit their heads on the tunnel walls to attract mates. For more information, check out the following link: http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/dept/preservation/training/pests/watch.htm.)

Then the narrator hears a "groan of mortal terror." He knows it's a groan of terror because the narrator groans like that, too. He feels sorry for the man, but yet he is laughing inside, knowing the old man is scared out of his mind and has been trying to convince himself there is nothing to fear. However, according to the narrator, the old man knows there really is something to fear, and he knows he's about to die.

The narrator waits and waits, and then decides to open his lantern just a little bit. He opens it "stealthily" (that is, "sneakily") and then trains the beam on the man's "vulture eye." It's open. The eye is open. The narrator gets mad when he sees it. Then he can hear, due to his heightened senses, the old man's heart beating dully. So the narrator doesn't move. He just keeps the light shining on the old man's scary eye.

The heartbeat gets louder and faster as the old man gets more and more scared. The narrator reminds us to "mark" (or “notice”) that he was and still is a nervous person. Finally, the noise gets so loud the narrator is afraid the neighbors are going to hear it. The narrator screams, opens the lantern all the way, then jumps into the old man's room. The old man only screams one time, and the narrator drags him off the bed and then yanks "the heavy bed over him." The narrator smiles. The heartbeat continues, but soon stops. The old man is dead. The narrator moves the bed and checks out the body, just to be sure. He's definitely dead. The narrator says that if you still think he's insane, you won't after hearing what he does with the body.

First the narrator cuts the arms, legs, and head off the body, then hides the body parts under some loose boards in the floor. ("The scantlings" means the limited space under the floorboards.) There isn't even any blood on the floor, because the narrator is too smart for that and cuts up the body in a bathtub. By then it's 4 am, but still dark.

There's a knock on the door. Not worried, the narrator answers the door. Three policemen come in; a neighbor heard a scream and thought something bad was going on and called them. The narrator tells them he screamed during his sleep. He claims the old man is out of town and invites the officers to search the place, which they do.

Finally, the narrator takes them to "the old man's chamber" (or bedroom) and even brings in some chairs for them all to sit down. The narrator puts his chair on top of the place where the body is hidden. The police are no longer suspicious, and the narrator chats with them happily, but soon gets tired and wants them to go away.
His head is really hurting, and there is "a ringing in [his] ears." It gets louder and louder, and the narrator talks to try to get rid of the sound. The police officers drone on. Uh-oh. The noise isn't coming from the narrator's ears at all. As the noise gets louder, the narrator talks more and more wildly. It sounds like the ticking of a watch wrapped up in cloth. The policemen don't seem to notice the noise, but the sound torments the narrator, who begins to lose control. He argues with the police officers, making wild "gesticulations" (or gestures) and pacing.

But the noise just keeps getting louder. The narrator can't take it. He is convinced the police officers know everything and are just toying with him. The noise gets so bad that the narrator will do anything to make it stop. He wishes that the lying police officers would stop smiling at him, pretending not to know what's going on. Finally, the narrator knocks the policemen to the ground and blurts out, "Villains! [D]issemble no more! I admit the deed! – tear up the planks! here, here! – It is the beating of his hideous heart!"

Vocabulary:

Dissemble: Conceal one's true motives, feelings, or beliefs.

Character Analysis

The Narrator

Our narrator is such a wreck; it's hard not to feel sorry for him. He's nervous ("very dreadfully nervous"), paranoid, and physically and mentally ill. He doesn't know the difference between the "real" and the "unreal," and seems to be completely alone and friendless in the world. We suspect that he rarely sleeps. He's also a murderer.

Maybe this explains why he doesn't share his name, or any other identifying characteristics. He wants us to know what he did, but not where to find him. We actually have precious little to go on in discussing his character. We have to do lots of investigation and reading between the lines to come up with possibilities.

Before we explore some of those possibilities, we should clear up a fine point. Poe doesn't explicitly tell us if the narrator is male or female. The only reason I feel comfortable calling the narrator "he" is these lines:

"In the enthusiasm of my confidence, I brought chairs into the room, and desired them here to rest from their fatigues, while I myself, in the wild audacity of my perfect triumph, placed my own seat upon the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse of the victim."

Nineteenth century etiquette suggests that males would not allow a woman to bring chairs for their use. To the contrary, the police would very likely bring in the chairs and help the woman into her seat.

Now let's dive deeper into the narrator's character.
Perverseness

Poe wrote a famous story called "The Imp of the Perverse." In this story the narrator claims that people are driven to murder, and other acts that are destructive to the self and others, due to perverse and uncontrollable impulses. Most of his works -- including “The Black Cat” -- explore this idea to some degree.

The Oxford English Dictionary Online provides two helpful definitions of perverse: "1. Contrary to what is morally right or good; wicked, evil, debased. 2. Contrary to an accepted standard or practice; incorrect, mistaken, wrong; (of an argument, interpretation, etc.) unjustifiable, contradictory, distorted."

Say, for example, we believe the narrator's contention that he wants to kill the old man simply to be free of the power of his eye. For the sake of argument let's assume that it would be very difficult to leave the old man, and that killing him was the only way to escape his eye. Even under those circumstances, the narrator still seems abnormal and frightening because he seems to enjoy spying on the old man for the eight nights prior to the murder, as we see in these lines:

"I could scarcely contain my feelings of triumph. To think that there I was, opening the door, little by little, and he not even to dream of my secret deeds or thoughts."

If he wants to kill the man for "practical" reasons, why does he go through such an elaborate and creepy process? And why does he take such pleasure in it? Can we chalk this up to perverse impulse? Could he simply be plagued by the Imp? Or must all "perverse" deeds stem from a logical, reasonable cause? These are the kinds of questions the narrator provokes.

Tinnitus

If you do a web search for "ringing ears" or "hyper sensitive ears," you'll get results for tinnitus, a condition which can cause auditory hallucinations, intense sensitivity to sound, and possibly amplified hearing. (You can read more about tinnitus on the American Tinnitus Association website.) This disorder sounds an awful lot like the "disease" the narrator says he has, though the narrator's case is rather extreme.

The American Tinnitus Association website states that tinnitus can be caused by many factors, including tumors, sinus infections gone bad, overly loud noises, and "misaligned jaw joints or jaw muscles." Since the narrator doesn't reveal his pre-disease past, we can't really use any of that to understand him.

But, we can entertain the claim that his intensified hearing is a result of physical illness, rather than mental illness. But who knows? Whatever the case may be, you should send him your recommendation for a good Ear, Nose, and Throat specialist.

Southern Gothic
Poe is often considered a "Southern Gothic" author, that is, an author whose work deals with issues and anxieties over slavery in the southern United States. Poe was actually born in Boston, Massachusetts, but moved to the South at a young age and spent much time there. He died in 1849, and slavery was legal in the U.S. throughout his lifetime.

Toni Morrison wrote a book called *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness in the Literary Imagination*. In it, she argues that many Poe stories, most notably "The Black Cat," are part of the Southern Gothic tradition in that they express anxiety over the institution of slavery, though in a veiled, hidden, or coded fashion.

Does "Tell-Tale" belong in this category? Do you think that it's possible that the narrator is a slave and the old man his owner?

Although Caucasians aren't the only people with blue eyes, for the sake of argument, let's use that detail about the old man to assume he is white. This is the one bit of color in the story, and the only detail we are given as to any character's physical appearance. If the narrator is a slave, this blue eye might have looked on him with an air of possession, dominance, superiority, and perhaps even disgust.

This interpretation would also explain the narrator's nervousness. As a slave, this sensitive guy could have been exposed to all kinds of horrors and would have lived in fear. It could also explain why the narrator took so much pleasure in violating the man's privacy and the sanctity of his bedroom. As a slave he would have had precious little privacy.

Unlike "The Black Cat," this story doesn't fit neatly in the Southern Gothic, but it doesn't hurt to ask this question: if the narrator is a slave and the old man his master, would this change the way you feel about the narrator and/or the old man? If so, how? If not, why not?

**A Hopeless Case?**

The narrator seems completely hopeless, a bundle of nerves and murderous impulses, and extreme sensory perception. Can we imagine a scenario in which he is well? We know that he is tortured by the murder he committed, even as he claims to have enjoyed it. It is, after all, not the old man’s heartbeat that the narrator hears, but his own!

**The Old Man**

The old man is even more of a mystery than the narrator, partly because we only see him through the narrator's skewed perspective. We know he has money (the narrator shows the old man's "treasures" to the police). We also know he has a blue eye that the narrator is afraid of, and which fits the description of a corneal ulcer. We know he's old, and that he's a fairly sound sleeper. Not much meat for a character study, though. Luckily, we are given some hints to work with.
Trust?

According to the narrator, the old man suspects nothing because the narrator was super duper nice to him the week before he killed him. We can't prove the old man wasn't suspicious, but because he leaves his bedroom door unlocked we can assume it. We know the man isn't naturally trusting – he's afraid of robbers. But, it seems he does trust the narrator enough to give him the run of the house while he sleeps. Unless the old man is a poor judge of character, or senile, his trust suggests that the narrator really is capable of acting sanely.

"Mad"

Nothing the narrator tells us about the old man fits our idea of "madness" or "insanity," but the old man does fit neatly into the narrator's definition of madness: 1) "destroyed" or "dulled" senses; 2) "Madmen know nothing." Sounds like the old man, right? His senses are definitely dulled – he only hears the narrator on the eighth night. He doesn't seem to have the slightest idea what's going on around him and is incapable of defending himself. Perhaps the narrator is slyly hinting that he thinks the old man is "mad." This makes us wonder if the old man was very senile, dependant on the narrator's care. At no time does the narrator feed, clothe, bathe, or otherwise care for the old man. If the narrator is negligent in his role as caregiver, this adds a new dimension to the creepiness and puts the narrator in an even more negative light.

Alienated

We know that at least one neighbor is suspicious of the goings on in the house of the old man and the narrator. Otherwise, he or she would not have been so quick to call the cops after hearing a little scream, and wouldn't have been able to convince the powers that be to send not one or two, but three policemen. We don't know if this suspicion is directed toward the old man or toward the narrator or both. But, it's possible that the narrator wasn't the only one afraid of the old man's eye. The old man could be an alienated figure both in and out of the home, and thus the narrator's murder of him could be symbolic of prejudices and abuses that stem from physical "difference."

Symbolism, Imagery, Allegory

The Old Man's Eye

The old man's eye is blue with a "film" or "veil" covering it. This could be a medical condition, like a corneal ulcer, but symbolically it means that the characters have issues with their "inner vision" – what's commonly known as one's outlook on the world. They are stuck. Everything is obscured for them. Our reading of the story is likewise filtered through this hazy eye, causing at least some confusion and frustration with the text.

The eye also does some pretty weird stuff. It seems dull and unseeing – yet, it has strange powers. It makes the narrator's blood run cold. It "chill[s] the very marrow in [his] bones." After hiding the old man's body, the narrator "replaced the boards so cleverly, so cunningly, that no human eye – not even his [the old man's] – could have detected anything wrong." Interesting.
That statement implies that at some point the eye could see hidden or secret things.

The eye also seems to have a bodyguard, the heart. When the narrator trains the beam on the open eye, it causes the heart to beat an alert. When the policemen are there, the heart beats loudly to alert the cops – so the eye can again see and be seen.

The narrator is fixated on the "vulture eye" aspect of the old man's eye. He brings it up three times. Vultures prey on the sick or dead, and they gorge themselves to the point of stupor. Whether or not the old man is a vulture-like person, we can't know. But that's what he symbolizes to the narrator. If vultures prey on the dead and almost dead, and the narrator is afraid of the "vulture eye," does this mean the narrator is dead or almost dead? Even more interesting, however, is how the narrator’s behavior is characteristic of a vulture. The old man's eye seems to be going untreated. This suggests that the old man is ill, and possibly neglected. For eight nights, it is the narrator who sits, watching the old man, preying on him and waiting for his death.

More important, in the discussion of the eye is the relationship to the “I”. The narrator fails to see that the eye is the “I” of the old man, an inherent part of his identity that cannot be isolated as the narrator perversely imagines.

The murder of the old man illustrates the extent to which the narrator separates the old man’s identity from his physical eye. The narrator sees the eye as completely separate from the man, and as a result, he is capable of murdering him while maintaining that he loves him. The narrator’s desire to eradicate the man’s eye motivates his murder, but the narrator does not acknowledge that this act will end the man’s life. By dismembering his victim, the narrator further deprives the old man of his humanity. The narrator confirms his conception of the old man’s eye as separate from the man by ending the man altogether and turning him into so many parts. That strategy turns against him when his mind imagines other parts of the old man’s body working against him.

Or, maybe the eye is a symbol of the narrator’s inner vision, his view of himself, his view of the world. Maybe, the narrator is frightened of the “vulture eye” because in its outward ugliness, he “sees” his own reflection; the narrator is inwardly ugly and repulsive, for he plans and executes murder; his soul is more repulsive than the old man's eye.

The narrator has no rational reason for wanting to kill the old man. Indeed, he claims the old man has never done him wrong and that he loves him and does not want his money. Why, then, is there a need for murder? “Object there was none. Passion there was none,” says the narrator. Neither does the narrator explain how or why exactly the old man’s “pale blue eye, with a film over it” bothers him so greatly. In fact he only thinks it was the eye that first prompted him with murderous thoughts: “I think it was his eye! yes, it was this!” Critic Charles E. May, however, interprets the “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 succumbs to this urge when he could no longer contain his overwhelming sense of guilt.
The Watch

The narrator mentions a "watch" four times in the story. A watch is a visual and auditory representation of time. The watch watches time, and tells tales of time. Time can also be said to be watching death, up ahead in the distance. Each tick of the watch symbolizes a movement closer to the inevitable death that all humans face. Poe presents this subtly in the story's first mention of the watch: "A watch's minute hand moves more quickly than did mine."

This of course is on the eighth night. Here the narrator compares himself to a watch, a watch watching the old man's death. The narrator steals time's power as an agent of death. The narrator literally controls the time of the old man's death. He's a walking "death watch."

This metaphor/word play becomes more explicit in the second mention of time in the story: "He was still sitting up in the bed listening; – just as I have done, night after night, hearkening to the death watches in the wall."

This is a mystifying line, until we know that "death watches" are kind of beetle. Death watch beetles live inside walls, and bang their heads on said walls to attract mates. Poe might not have known this was a mating call, and was likely referring only to the popular belief that the banging is a countdown to someone's death.

Now for the second and third mentions of "watch" in the story:

[N]ow, I say, there came to my ears a low, dull, quick sound, such as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton.

It was a low, dull, quick sound – much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton.

The old man's heart is also a watch, as we see in these almost identical passages. It both watches and counts down the time leading up to the man's death (first passage). Then the heart/clock becomes a zombie of sorts (second passage). It resurrects itself so it can tell about the time (of death) it watched, in a sense taking time back from the narrator. Pretty clever.

Setting

We don't know where the narrator is while he's telling the story of the old man's murder. The story he tells us takes place inside a random old house about which few details are directly given. We are told that the old man keeps his shutters tightly locked. A neighbor hears at least one of the story's two screams. The cops arrive promptly, just after the narrator has hidden the body. As such, the house might be in an urban area, possibly a high-crime one.

As to the interior of the house, we only hear about the old man's bedroom, which is the place where horror plays in the dark while the old man sleeps, completely unaware. The room is all the
more scary because it isn't described, because we can't see it. This story taps our fears of the dark, and what the dark might hold.

The "ideal" bedroom is supposed to be a fairly private place where we can rest and recuperate without fear. The narrator completely violates the sanctity of the bedroom in this story. The night spying is possibly more terrifying for our imaginations than the murder itself.

As with many Poe stories, the landscape of the narrator's mind is also a setting of the story, and it echoes the external or surface setting, the man's bedroom. Just as we are unable to see the bedroom, the narrator is unable to see his own mind.

**Point of View**

When an author creates a situation where the protagonist tells a personal account, the overall impact of the story is heightened. The narrator, in this particular story, adds to the overall effect of horror by continually stressing to the reader that he or she is not mad, and tries to convince us of that fact by how carefully this brutal crime was planned and executed. It is obvious when reading that the narrator is mad, however, which marks the protagonist as an unreliable narrator.

Unreliable narrators are compelling because they represent a basic aspect of being human. We all experience moments of unreliability, where we can't perceive or remember events accurately. We all get confused and do and say things we don't mean or don't mean to do or say. In a story like "The Tell-Tale Heart," this unreliability is taken to extremes.

The scare power in this technique is the nagging knowledge that we could become a person like the narrator, or a victim of a person like the narrator, a person whose inner unreliable narrator has totally taken over.

**Prose Beats Like a Heart**

From time to time, Poe uses a succession of short sentences or word groups, creating a rhythm not unlike that of a heartbeat. Note the following examples from the story:

Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. I think it was his eye! Yes, it was this!

I scarcely breathed. I held the lantern motionless. I tried how steadily I could to maintain the ray upon the eye. Meantime the hellish tattoo of the heart increased.

Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God! – no, no? They heard! – they suspected! – they KNEW! – they were making a mockery of my horror! – this I thought, and this I think. But anything was better than this agony! Anything was more tolerable than this derision! I could bear those hypocritical smiles no longer! I felt that I must scream or die! – and now – again – hark! louder! louder! louder! LOUDER! – "Villains!" I shrieked, "dissemble no more! I admit the deed! – tear up the planks! – here, here! – it is the beating of his hideous heart!"
Figures of Speech

As in other works of his, Poe uses many figures of speech. Examples are the following:

Anaphora

Anaphora is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is repeated at the beginning of a clause or another group of words. Anaphora imparts emphasis and balance. Here are boldfaced examples from "The Tell-Tale Heart":

I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell.

With what caution—with what foresight, with what dissimulation, I went to work!

He had been trying to fancy them causeless, but could not. He had been saying to himself, "It is nothing but the wind in the chimney, it is only a mouse crossing the floor," or, "It is merely a cricket which has made a single chirp."

There was nothing to wash out—no stain of any kind—no blood-spot whatever.

They heard!—they suspected!—they KNEW!—they were making a mockery of my horror!

Personification

Death in approaching him had stalked with his black shadow before him and enveloped the victim. [Here, Death is a person.]

Simile

So I opened it—you cannot imagine how stealthily, stealthily—until at length a single dim ray like the thread of the spider shot out from the crevice and fell upon the vulture eye. [The simile is the comparison of the ray to the thread of the spider with the use of the word like.]

It increased my fury as the beating of a drum stimulates the soldier into courage. [The simile is the comparison of the heartbeat to a drumbeat.]

His room was as black as pitch with the thick darkness. . . . [The simile is the comparison of the darkness to pitch.]

Alliteration

Hearken! and observe how healthily, how calmly, I can tell you the whole story.

It is the beating of his hideous heart!
Tone

“Dreadfully Nervous,” Sad

While some Poe stories have a kind of fun and playful feel to them in spite of their themes of death, murder, and betrayal, "Tell-Tale" makes us want to cry. The narrator is so pathetic and, as has been suggested in his "Character Analysis," is probably physically ill. The narrator seems to have had a pretty bad life, which probably only gets worse after the murder and subsequent confession.

Poe wrote that "Melancholy is […] the most legitimate of all the poetical tones." The extent to which this tone of sadness manifests in Poe's work varies widely from piece to piece. The tone of Poe's poem “The Raven” is overtly sad. The narrator's speech is rolling and mournful, echoing the feeling of sadness.

"Tell-Tale" is much different. The sadness is woven in the nervousness we find in every line. This story might not seem sad at all on the first read. We are somewhat amused by the narrator's ridiculous arguments and think the whole thing might be a sick joke. Perhaps we feel slightly superior as we unravel all the discrepancies. But, upon reflection, we realize we've read the story of a man who, plagued by diseases of the body of the mind, is in a near constant state of stress, nerves, and meltdown.

Even if he is a murderer, the narrator is a sad figure, and it comes through in the nervous, frantic tone of the story.