

“The Tell-Tale Heart” by Edgar Allan Poe

I. Contrast and compare the strategies Poe presents in the two versions.

- Discuss the requirements of the Gothic genre. How does Poe’s story meet these?
- The text promotes the fact the setting is in a building in an extreme state of decay (death watches) — is that conveyed in the stage setting of the film?
- What is significant about the vase of flowers on the table in the film version? What could they represent?
- How effective is the setting in presenting a Gothic theme of dilapidation and decay with the film version?
- Do the text and the film rely solely on the decaying mental state of the narrator to convey the Gothic theme of dilapidation?
- Why does the Narrator promote the scenes of nighttime and hours of midnight so frequently in both versions?
- Why does Poe in the text never convey the exact location of the scene of events? —or the precise year?
- Poe uses many literary devices to enhance suspense and mood in the story. Find an example of each of the following: 1. Alliteration 2. Simile 3. Personification 4. Assonance
Are they as successfully conveyed and identifiable in the film version?
- Often Poe will use repeated words and phrases in order to convey a mood or enhance feelings of suspense. Find one example where he uses this technique. Explain how it enhances the particular scene you have chosen.
- Overall the element of “irony” is explained as a contrast between expectation and reality. Poe often successfully manipulates this concept in his work. Identify the following three types of irony and cite examples:
 1. Verbal irony: Characters will say something which is in opposition to what they mean.
 2. Situational irony: Events occur differently from or opposite to what the audience expects.
 3. Dramatic irony: The audience knows details which are not revealed to individual characters.

II. Compare/ Contrast the principal character within the film and the text:

- The text version provides a narrator as the protagonist of the story, traditionally acknowledged as not having a name. Likewise the narrator is not shown with a precise defined gender; “it” is shown as an ambiguous character. However, the film chooses to provide an obvious gender and names the narrator as Poe himself. What does this element promote regarding the plot? What are the producers suggesting about Poe? What would critic Gita Rajan comment about this choice?
- Does the actor’s portrayal promote an equivalent madman committing domestic violence meet your expectations? Notice throughout the opening dialogue the narrator-as-Poe is shown sitting until the line discussing his first attempts to see the old man’s eye at night: “I undid [the lantern] just so much that a single thin ray fell upon the vulture eye” (619). Why use such a strategy, showing him standing up at this particular point in the retelling?
- The text displays four other characters of note: the victim (an old man) and three policemen. While reading the text it is easy to use their presence as plot motivators— yet the film chooses to only show an actor retelling the morbid tale. Does this lessen the use of suspense and intrigue embedded in the original Poe version?
- Why do both versions leave the old man without any recorded speech? Would dialogue enhance the drama?

(Item II. Principal Characters, continued)

- Consider the unnamed narrator's and the Poe-figure's reaction to the crime. Do they show remorse afterwards? Remember that the character states plainly: "Object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man" (619). What happens to him emotionally after he disposes of the body?
- Consider the critics Hollie Pritchard and Robert Kachur. How do their opinions factor into the development of the relationship of the two men? How would they react to the filmed version utilizing Poe as the central figure and not some fictionalized figure? Does the Poe-character help or contract their opinions on power or incest?

III. Compare and contrast the Gothic themes of both text and film. Which is more effective?

- Is the movie successful in conveying Poe's Gothic agenda, overall?
- Does the pacing and time restriction take away from a strong development of the maniac character?
- There have been suggestions that the overall story is a commentary about American society in the 1840's and the circumstances leading up to the Civil War. Is there any evidence in the story and film to point this out?
- Consider how the Unnamed Narrator suggests the Old Man has money: "his gold" and "treasures" are both mentioned in various points in the story. Yet, in the house where they live is infested with death watch beetles, insects which usually only attack buildings in a state of dilapidation. What does Poe gain with this contradiction? What can it show about the Narrator? What can it show about the Old Man? What can it show about their relationship?