

The Tell-Tale Heart – Suggested Lesson Procedure

Day 1:

1. Begin by asking your students what they already know about Edgar Allan Poe. After they've shared their prior knowledge, give a brief explanation of the troubled life that Poe led, emphasizing how the loss of his parents, foster mother, and young bride likely contributed to his alcoholism and misery.
2. Hand out copies of "The Tell-Tale Heart" short story. I like to read the story aloud with the class, as some of the language can be challenging for students. Sometimes, though, it's nice to have an actor read to the class instead. For those times, I'm especially fond of the version posted on the Chilling Tales for Dark Nights YouTube channel. It runs just about 15:30 minutes:

<https://youtu.be/nvrG4E4CtZM>

3. After the story is complete, hand out the question sheet on page 5. I give students the rest of the hour to complete the sheet either solo or in small teams of two. Some students may need to complete the questions as homework.
4. If students finish with time remaining in the class period (or at the launch of class tomorrow), I like to show them an animated version of Poe's story created in 1953. It's rather mod and makes some minor changes, which students will likely want to discuss after the viewing. The 8-minute video is posted on several YouTube channels, including these locations:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bCEdRES08Y4>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=flKOtXC4oyM>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W4s9V8aQu4c>

When I use the video, I follow up with a discussion about which version of the story, Poe's original text or the animated film, has a greater effect. Encourage the students to identify which moments/techniques are most effective in building tension and horror in the audience.

Day 2:

5. Collect and discuss the answers to the questions from yesterday. Be sure to launch a full class discussion of the answers, as this will serve as a good model for students who may have struggled with some of the questions.
6. Allow students to debate the answers to questions #7 and #8 – Should the narrator be sent to prison or a state mental hospital? Usually students have heard of cases of people who are criminally insane and want to share the details they know. Once the class has discussed stories they've heard about, tell them that an actual legal defense, "Not guilty by reason of insanity," is sometimes successfully used, including in a famous case involving a man who tried to assassinate U.S. President Ronald Reagan. Have them read the non-fiction article about John Hinckley, Jr. on page 8 and have students work in teams of two to complete the answers.
7. Review the answers. Expect a lively class discussion to follow.

The Tell-Tale Heart

by Edgar Allan Poe

True! – nervous – very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? 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? Hearken! And observe how healthily – how calmly I can tell you the whole story.

It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but once conceived, it haunted me day and night. 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! One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture – a pale blue eye, with a film over it. 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.

Now this is the point. You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen me. You should have seen how wisely I proceeded – with what caution – with what foresight – with what dissimulation I went to work! I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him. And every night, about midnight, I turned the latch of his door and opened it – oh so gently! And then, when I had made an

opening sufficient for my head, I put in a dark lantern, all closed, closed so that no light shone out, and then I thrust in my head. Oh, you would have laughed to see how cunningly I thrust it in! I moved it slowly – very, very slowly, so that I might not disturb the old man’s sleep. 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? And then when my head was well in the room, I undid the lantern cautiously – oh, so cautiously – cautiously (for the hinges creaked) – I undid it just so much that a single thin ray fell upon the vulture eye. And this I did for seven long nights – every night just at midnight – but I found the eye always closed; and so it was impossible to do the work; for it was not the old man who vexed me, but his Evil Eye. And every morning, when the day broke, I went boldly into the chamber, and spoke courageously to him, calling him by name in a hearty tone, inquiring how he has passed the night. So you see he would have been a very profound old man, indeed, to suspect that every night, just at twelve, I looked in upon him while he slept.

Upon the eighth night, I was more than usually cautious in opening the door. A watch’s minute hand moves more quickly than did mine. Never before that night had I felt the extent of my own powers – of my sagacity.¹ 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. I fairly chuckled at the idea; and perhaps he heard me, for he moved on the bed suddenly, as if startled. Now you may think that I drew back – but no. His room was as black as pitch with the thick darkness, (for the shutters were close fastened, through fear of robbers), and so I knew that he could not see the opening of the door, and I kept pushing it on steadily, steadily. I had my head in, and was about to open the lantern, when my thumb slipped upon the tin fastening, and the old man sprang up in bed, crying out, “Who’s there?” I kept quite still and said nothing. For a whole hour, I did not move a muscle, and in the meantime I did not hear him lie down. 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.²

¹ sagacity = quick and clever thinking

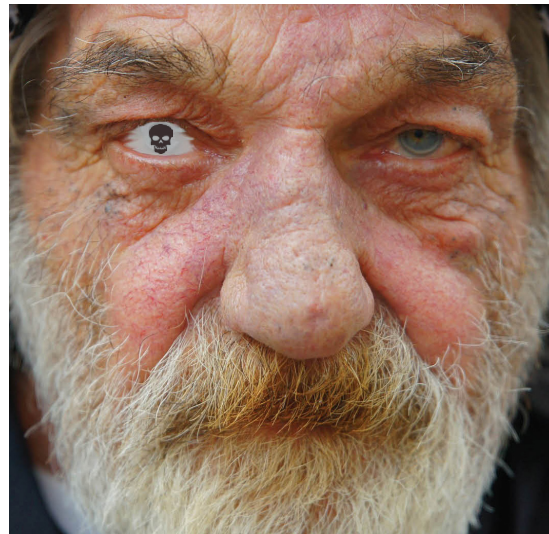
² death watches in the wall = insects that live inside wood-framed walls and hit their heads on the wood to make a noise that attracts mates

Presently, I heard a slight groan, and I knew it was the groan of mortal terror. It was not a groan of pain or of grief – oh, no! – it was the low stifled sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with awe. 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. I knew that he had been lying awake ever since the first slight noise, when he had turned in the bed. His fears had been ever since growing upon him. 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.” Yes, he had been trying to comfort himself with these suppositions: but he had found all in vain. All in vain because Death, in approaching him, had stalked with his black shadow before him and enveloped the victim. And it was the mournful influence of the unperceived shadow that caused him to feel – although he neither saw nor heard – to feel the presence of my head within the room.

When I had waited a long time, very patiently, without hearing him lie down, I resolved to open a little – a very, very little crevice in the lantern. So I opened it – you cannot imagine how stealthily, stealthily – until, at length, a simple dim ray like the thread of the spider shot out from the crevice and fell full upon the vulture eye. It was open – wide, wide open – and I grew furious as I gazed upon it. I saw it with perfect distinctness – all a dull blue, with a hideous veil over it that chilled the very marrow in my bones; but I could see nothing else of the old man’s face or person: for I had directed the ray as if by instinct, precisely upon the damned spot. And now have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but over-acuteness 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 that 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.

But even yet I refrained and kept still. I scarcely breathed. I held the lantern motionless. I tried how steadily I could maintain the ray upon the eye. Meantime, the hellish tattoo³ of the heart increased. It grew quicker and quicker, and louder and louder every instant. The old man’s terror must have been extreme! It grew louder, I say, louder every moment! – do you mark me well I have told you that I am nervous: so I am. – And now at the dead hour of the night, amid the dreadful silence of that old house, so strange a noise as this excited me to uncontrollable terror. Yet, for some minutes longer I refrained and stood still. But the beating grew louder, louder! I thought the heart must burst. And now a new anxiety seized me – the sound would be heard by a neighbor! The old man’s hour had come! With a loud yell, I threw open the lantern and leaped into the room. He shrieked once – once only. 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. But, for many minutes, the heart beat on with a muffled sound. This, however, did not vex me; it would not be heard through the wall. At length it ceased. The old man was dead. I removed the bed and examined the corpse. Yes, he was stone, stone dead. I placed my hand upon the heart and held it there many minutes. There was no pulsation. He was stone dead. His eye would trouble me no more.



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. The night waned, and I worked hastily, but in silence. First of all, I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs. I then took up three planks from the flooring of the chamber, and deposited all between the scantlings.

³ tattoo = a rhythmic tapping or drumming
Image credit: Pixabay (altered), Public domain

I then replaced the boards so cleverly, so cunningly, that no human eye – not even his – could have detected anything wrong. There was nothing to wash out – no stain of any kind – no blood-spot whatever. I had been too wary for that. A tub had caught all – ha! ha!

When I had made an end of these labors, it was four o'clock, still dark as midnight. As the bell sounded the hour, there came a knocking at the street door. I went down to open it with a light heart, for what had I now to fear? There entered three men, who introduced themselves, with perfect suavity, as officers of the police. A shriek had been heard by a neighbor during the night; suspicion of foul play had been aroused; information had been lodged at the police office, and they (the officers) had been deputed to search the premises. I smiled – for what had I to fear? I bade the gentlemen welcome. The shriek, I said, was my own in a dream. The old man, I mentioned, was absent in the country. I took my visitors all over the house. I bade them search – search well. I led them, at length, to his chamber. I showed them his treasures, secure, undisturbed. 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.

The officers were satisfied. My manner had convinced them. I was singularly at ease. They sat, and while I answered cheerily, they chatted of familiar things. But, ere long, I felt myself getting pale and wished them gone. My head ached, and I fancied a ringing in my ears: but still they sat and still chatted. The ringing became more distinct: it continued and became more distinct. I talked more freely to get rid of the feeling: but it continued and gained definiteness – until, at length, I found that the noise was not within my ears. No doubt I now grew very pale, but I talked more fluently and with a heightened voice. Yet the sound increased – and what could I do? It was a low, dull, quick sound – such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton. I gasped for breath – and yet the officers heard it not. I talked more quickly – more vehemently; but the noise steadily

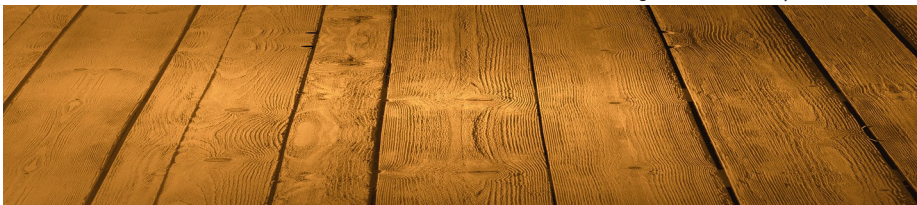
increased. I arose and argued about trifles, in a high key and with violent gesticulations; but the noise steadily increased. Why would they not be gone? I paced the floor to and fro with heavy strides, as if excited to fury by the observations of the men – but the noise steadily increased. Oh God! What could I do? I foamed – I raved – I swore! I swung the chair upon which I had been sitting, and grated it upon the boards, but the noise arose over all and continually increased. It grew louder – louder – louder! And still the men chatted pleasantly, and smiled. 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!”

The Tell-Tale Heart - Questions

**On a separate sheet of paper, answer the following questions.
To receive credit, write complete, thoughtful sentences.**

1. Do you think the narrator is related to the old man or just a hired caretaker? What evidence leads you to this conclusion?
2. The old man's "vulture eye" is described as "pale blue...with a film over it." Thinking more deeply, what might the eye's blindness symbolize?
3. A simile is a figure of speech where a writer compares two things using connective wording, such as "like" or "as." Find and write two similes from the text.
4. Which part of the story is the creepiest?
5. What time of day is it when the police arrive?
6. If the narrator hadn't confessed, do you think he/she would've been caught by the police? Explain your answer.
7. Pretend you are a police detective and you need to prove the narrator committed the murder and is sane, meaning he/she knew it was wrong to kill the old man. Give three pieces of evidence from the text to support your stance that the narrator is guilty and deserves to go to prison.
8. Pretend you are the narrator's defense attorney. You need to prove your client is insane and should receive treatment at a mental hospital instead of being sent to prison. Give three pieces of evidence from the text to support your stance that your client is mentally deranged.
9. Is the narrator male or female? How do you know?
10. Consider the title of the story. Does the "tell-tale heart" belong to the old man or the narrator? Explain your choice.

Image credit: Pixabay, Public domain

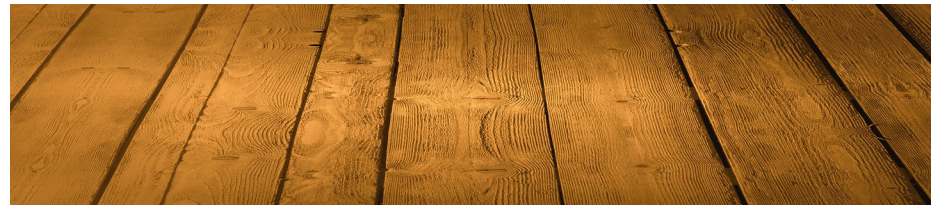


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Image credit: Pixabay, Public domain



The Tell-Tale Heart – Answer Key

1. Do you think the narrator is related to the old man or just a hired caretaker? What evidence leads you to this conclusion? *Students' answers will vary and there is no correct answer, as the text doesn't precisely clarify this for us. Many students will conclude that the narrator was a relative because he talks about loving the old man, and the second paragraph makes it seem like they knew each other a long time when he tells us that the old man "had never wronged me...had never given me insult." Any reasonable answer should be given credit.*
2. The old man's "vulture eye" is described as "pale blue...with a film over it." Thinking more deeply, what might the eye's blindness symbolize? *Students' answers will vary, but some will mention that the old man's blindness is not just physical; he's also blind to the danger within his own home. He locks the shutters in his room to protect against robbers, yet the real threat is inside his own bedroom. Other students may discuss the narrator's blindness as to his own mental state. The narrator is convinced that he is sane, yet the reader sees that this narrator is twisted, not realizing the reality of the situation. Finally, some students will do interesting things with the pale blue color, discussing it as a symbol for misery, sorrow, or a bit of foreshadowing that the man will soon die. Any reasonable answer should be given credit.*
3. A simile is a figure of speech where a writer compares two things using connective wording, such as "like" or "as." Find and write two similes from the text. There are several students may choose, including:
 1. "So I opened it – you cannot imagine how stealthily, stealthily – until, at length, a simple dim ray **like the thread of the spider** shot out from the crevice and fell full upon the vulture eye."
 2. "It was a low, dull, quick sound – **such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton.**"
 3. "It increased my fury, **as the beating of a drum stimulates the soldier into courage.**"
4. Which part of the story is the creepiest? *Students' answers will vary. Some are especially bothered by the idea of being watched while they sleep, while others are freaked out about the section where the narrator dismembers the old man's body. Any reasonable answer should be given credit. As we review the answers, I like to have students look back over those passages to determine how Poe's language adds to the creepiness. For instance, the midnight stalking is especially creepy because the narrator seems to take perverse pride in his stealthiness, while the dismemberment section is bothersome not only for the content, but also for the matter-of-fact tone the narrator uses as he describes his actions.*
5. What time of day is it when the police arrive? *It's about 4 a.m.*
6. If the narrator hadn't confessed, do you think he/she would've been caught by the police? Explain your answer. *Students' answers will vary, but it's likely he would've been caught anyway. He is a classic unreliable narrator, so we can't take what he tells us as truth and even he begins to think that the police suspect him toward the end of their search. Stepping back from the narrator's voice, we can imagine that the police likely saw a deranged man, enthusiastically leading them all around the house. Remember, it's 4 a.m. and most people would've been sound asleep, yet this man is wide awake, showing "wild audacity" as he over-explains himself. Also, no one shrieks so loudly in his sleep that it awakens the neighbors. Those are either the dumbest police officers ever (doubtful), or the narrator doesn't fully realize how he's actually coming across. The police are lingering there not to enjoy his company but because they must suspect something's amiss.*
7. Pretend you are a police detective and you need to prove the narrator committed the murder and is sane, meaning he/she knew it was wrong to kill the old man. Give three pieces of evidence from the text to support your stance that the narrator is guilty and deserves to go to prison. *Students' answers will*

vary, but they could mention any of the following:

1. The man stalked his victim over the course of eight nights, striking at the victim's most vulnerable moment.
2. He dismembered the old man's body in the tub so that the evidence would be easier to wash away.
3. He hid the old man's body parts under the floorboards so they wouldn't be discovered by police.
4. He lied to the police when he told them that the old man had travelled out of town.
5. The narrator himself repeatedly protests that he's too "wise" to be a madman. For instance, he says, "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." He admits here that he knowingly took "wise" steps to hide the evidence of his crime.

8. Pretend you are the narrator's defense attorney. You need to prove your client is insane and should receive treatment at a mental hospital instead of being sent to prison. Give three pieces of evidence from the text to support your stance that your client is mentally deranged. *Students' answers will vary, but they could mention any of the following:*

1. He hears noises that aren't actually there.
2. He believes he was being "vexed" by the old man's "Evil Eye."
3. He can't control his own emotional outbursts or impulsive actions, such as when he confesses to police at the end of the story.

9. Is the narrator male or female? How do you know? *Students' answers will vary. It's never explicitly stated and the pronoun usage doesn't help us solve this mystery. A clue might reside early in the story when the narrator tells us, "You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing," but referring to one's self as not being a madman isn't really overwhelming evidence that the narrator is male. Basically, based solely on textual evidence, we can't be certain of the*

narrator's gender. Any reasonable answer should be given credit. (In this answer key, I've used the universal "he" pronoun just to keep things flowing smoothly.)

10. Consider the title of the story. Does the "tell-tale heart" belong to the old man or the narrator? Explain your choice. *Students' answers will vary and either choice can be justified. Some will argue that the heart belongs to the old man, since that's the noise the narrator tells us he hears. Others, though, will argue that the "tell-tale heart" actually belongs to the narrator; he is undone by his own guilty heart, which compels him to reveal his crime to the police. Some students will talk about the weight of having a burden on your heart or a heavy heart, which can only be lightened by confession. In this case, the narrator's heart becomes a tattle-tell heart, of sorts. Any reasonable answer should be given credit.*

John Hinckley, Jr. – Not Guilty by Reason of Insanity

By Laura Randazzo

In movies such as Ed Norton's *Primal Fear* and popular TV shows like *Law & Order*, accused criminals sometimes use an insanity defense, admitting to their crimes but arguing that they aren't responsible because of a severe mental illness, such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder.

In real life, the use of an insanity defense is actually quite rare and usually unsuccessful, according to the American Journal of Psychiatry. Far less than one percent of all defendants use the insanity defense and, of those, only a fraction are successful, the Journal reports.

Juries are unlikely to be swayed by such an argument and attorneys often advise against using such a defense because if a court determines that a defendant is not guilty by reason of insanity, that person will be sent to a mental hospital and can be kept there indefinitely. For a minor crime, a defendant could be forced to spend more time in the state's mental hospital than he or she would spend in a prison cell.

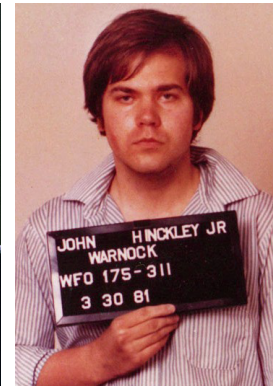
One of the most famous examples of this rare plea being successfully used is the case of John Hinckley, Jr., a 25-year-old who tried to assassinate U.S. President Ronald Reagan in 1981. Hinckley attacked Reagan in Washington D.C., firing a .22 caliber revolver at the president six times. Reagan was not directly shot, but one of the bullets ricocheted off the side of a car, hitting him in the chest. Reagan survived his injuries. In the attack, Hinckley also

shot a police officer and a Secret Service agent, both of whom recovered from their injuries. White House Press Secretary James Brady received the worst injuries after one of Hinckley's bullets hit him above his left eye, leaving him with slurred speech and paralysis of half of his body. Brady died in 2014 from complications connected to the shooting and his death was ruled a homicide.

Hinckley told police he tried to assassinate the president to get the attention of Jodie Foster, a famous actress who had been the subject of his obsessive thoughts for months. At his trial, a jury decided that Hinckley was not guilty by



Reagan



Hinckley

reason of insanity and he was sent to receive mental health treatment at a state hospital in Washington D.C. In 2016, a judge ruled that Hinckley had successfully completed his treatment and no longer posed a threat to society. Hinckley was released to live with his elderly mother. He must follow many conditions to remain eligible for parole, including staying within a 30-mile radius of his mother's home, avoiding consumption of any alcohol or illegal drugs, and attending routine psychiatric check-ins. He also is required to carry a GPS-enabled phone, which allows authorities to monitor his whereabouts.

Image credits: Reagan – Executive Office of the President of the United States, Wikimedia Commons, Public domain
Hinckley – United States Federal Bureau of Investigation, Wikimedia Commons, Public domain

Assignment

On a separate sheet of paper, answer the following questions. To receive credit, write complete, thoughtful sentences.

1. In cases of minor crimes, why are defense attorneys unlikely to recommend a "not guilty by reason of insanity" plea?
2. John Hinckley, Jr. was 25 when he committed his crime. How old was he when he was released? Do you think this is an appropriate amount of time to serve for this crime? Explain your answer.
3. If you were Hinckley's mother, how would you feel about your son's release? If you were Jodie Foster, how would you feel about Hinckley's release?
4. What other conditions would you add to Hinckley's parole agreement?
5. Do you believe mental illness can be cured? Explain your answer.

John Hinckley, Jr. Non-Fiction Article – Answer Key

1. In cases of minor crimes, why are defense attorneys unlikely to recommend a “not guilty by reason of insanity” plea? The attorneys would likely be worried that their client’s stay in a state mental hospital could be even longer than the term of the prison sentence. If someone is determined to be insane, that person will not be released back into society until he/she has been successfully treated, something that might never happen.

2. John Hinckley, Jr. was 25 when he committed his crime. How old was he when he was released? Do you think this is an appropriate amount of time to serve for this crime? Explain your answer. When we do the math (the assassination attempt was in 1981 and he was released in 2016), we discover that Hinckley was about 60 years old when he was released. He actually was 61, but 60 is a fine answer for this exercise. Students’ answers to the second question will vary and any reasonable responses should be given credit.

3. If you were Hinckley’s mother, how would you feel about your son’s release? Students’ answers will vary. She is an elderly woman now and likely feels a mixture of relief at having him home and concern that he will be able to stay out of trouble. It’s a heavy burden she now has to carry. As part of his conditions of release, Hinckley’s siblings had to promise the judge that one of them would be his caretaker when their mother dies or is no longer able to keep watch over Hinckley. If one of the siblings doesn’t take him, he’ll be returned to the state mental hospital.

If you were Jodie Foster, how would you feel about Hinckley’s release? Again, students’ answers will vary. Foster was an 18-year-old freshman at Yale when she was stalked by Hinckley. Although their contact was minimal, the case has been unsettling to the actress, who generally refuses to speak about it publicly. Students will likely conclude that Foster would feel nervous about Hinckley’s release and now have even more reason to protect her privacy. Interestingly, Foster starred in a 2002 film called *Panic Room*, in which a woman and her daughter take refuge in a high-security safe room within their home when it’s broken into by robbers. Having a strong sense of security is probably very important to Foster.

4. What other conditions would you add to Hinckley’s parole agreement? Students’ answers will vary and any reasonable response should be given credit. Suggestions might include having permanent restraining orders that block Hinckley from contacting any of his victims or their family members. The judge in this case also prohibited Hinckley from talking to the media or posting anything on the internet without the approval of his team of therapists.

5. Do you believe mental illness can be cured? Explain your answer. Students’ answers will vary and any reasonable response should be given credit. This question will likely raise an interesting debate, especially as we tie these issues back to Poe’s narrator from “The Tell-Tale Heart.”