“The Tell Tale Heart”

“CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS”
Question

1. Do you think the narrator is related to the old man or just a hired caretaker? What evidence leads you to this conclusion?
Answer

• 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 will be given credit.
Question

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?
Answer

• 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 may lock 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 will be given credit.
Question

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.
Answer

• 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.”
Question

4. Which part of the story is the creepiest?
Answer

• Students’ answers will vary. Any reasonable answer should be given credit.
• 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.
• A review of those passages reveals 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?
Answer

• It’s about 4 a.m.
Question

6. If the narrator hadn’t confessed, do you think he/she would’ve been caught by the police? Explain your answer.
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.
Question

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.
Answer

• 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 a 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.
Answer

• 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.
Question

9. Is the narrator male or female? How do you know?
Answer

• 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.
10. Consider the title of the story. Does the “tell-tale heart” belong to the old man or the narrator? Explain your choice.
Answer

• 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 will be given credit.