

PLAY GUIDE

A TELL-TALE HEART



BY
EDGAR ALLAN POE

ADAPTED & PERFORMED BY
ALEC
SILBERBLATT

DIRECTED BY
MARYA SEA
KAMINSKI



For more information
about this production,
including cast photos &
bios click below:
ppt.org/a-tell-tale-heart

For more info about PPT,
including Racial Justice
Commitments & Land
Acknowledgement visit:
<https://ppt.org/about>

EXPOSITION



Set in a standard finished basement of a house in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, we meet Perry, our narrator and sole storyteller in very close quarters. He describes the atmosphere and dynamics of his neighborhood bar Folie's and introduces us to people such as friend rivals Patricia and Patti, dart master Roddy, unassuming neighbor Bridgette Tiernan, new love interest Nora, and his elderly uncle Julian, all entwined around his life on Grandview Avenue. Small talk starting with a dart playing contest and gift card prizes for donuts turns mysterious and gruesome as Perry asserts that the 'the only way he saw to do it was the way he did it, all while claiming he knows 'right from wrong.' The 'it' in this case is what beats beneath the surface of this macabre murder mystery as a terrifying cycle of violence threatens to envelop a neighborhood of innocent friends and neighbors.

A NEW LOOK



Pittsburgh & Poe: This adaptation honors Poe's creeping, dread-filled stories with gruesome descriptions and suspenseful hints to violent ends, while also injecting some humor in, by making the characters involved folks who you might expect to see at the dive bar on the corner of your block, or tailgating at a Steelers game. The text is also written and delivered in the iconic Pittsburgh accent, filled with vernacular "ahts" "dahns" and "yinz's" sprinkled throughout the story.



The Trap Room: Did you know that in the bowels of the O'Reilly, under the stage, deep in the basement there exists a dark, room made of cement brick, painted black, with the stage supports visible in the ceiling? While that room has been used in the past as an orchestra pit and as a place for the lovely voice of Audrey Two, the man-eating plant in *Little Shop of Horrors* to sing, this production of *A Tell Tale Heart* marks the very first time that we are inviting the audience into this exciting new space. This Pittsburgh-centric retelling of Poe's two explorations of hiding things deep in one's space is a perfect fit for the underbelly of the stage.

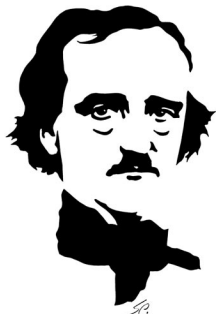
SUMMARIES



While there are many of Poe's works woven in to this new adaptation, "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Cask of Amontillado" are featured most centrally.

"The Tell-Tale Heart" is a short story by Edgar Allan Poe that delves into the mind of an unnamed narrator who insists on their sanity while recounting a gruesome murder they have committed. The narrator is obsessed with an old man's vulture-like eye and claims that this eye is the source of their madness. Driven by this obsession, the narrator carefully plans and executes the murder, believing it to be the only way to rid themselves of the eye's disturbing presence. After committing the murder and concealing the body, the narrator begins to hear a relentless, rhythmic beating, which they believe is the sound of the old man's heart still beating beneath the floorboards. As the sound grows louder and more intense, the narrator's guilt and paranoia escalate, eventually driving them to confess their crime in a fit of madness.

"The Cask of Amontillado" is another short story by Edgar Allan Poe, centered around the theme of revenge. The story is narrated by Montresor, who reveals his deep-seated hatred for Fortunato, a fellow nobleman. Montresor lures Fortunato into the catacombs of his family's estate with the promise of tasting a rare and exquisite wine called Amontillado. Using Fortunato's love for wine and his pride as a connoisseur, Montresor manipulates him into following him deeper into the underground vaults. As they descend, Montresor takes advantage of Fortunato's inebriation and chains him to a wall. Montresor then proceeds to build a brick wall, slowly sealing Fortunato alive within the catacombs. The story ends with Montresor's chilling realization that his vengeance is complete and that Fortunato's screams will never be heard again.



POE HIMSELF

Edgar Allan Poe, an iconic figure in American literature, lived a life characterized by both brilliance and tragedy. Born in Boston in 1809, he faced early adversity with the untimely death of his parents, leading to his upbringing by foster parents. Despite these challenges, Poe exhibited remarkable talent from a young age, publishing his first collection of poetry, "Tamerlane and Other Poems," in 1827. However, it was his enigmatic and chilling works that would come to define his legacy.

Poe's writing often delved into the shadowy realms of the human mind, exploring themes of death, madness, and the uncanny. His 1843 short story, "The Tell-Tale Heart," showcased his mastery of psychological suspense as the narrator's guilty conscience unraveled in a tale of murder and paranoia. In 1846, Poe published "The Cask of Amontillado," a tale of revenge set in the eerie catacombs of Italy, which demonstrated his ability to craft intricate narratives of tension and malevolence. While his literary accomplishments garnered acclaim, Poe's personal life was fraught with challenges, including struggles with alcoholism and financial instability.

Tragically, Poe's life was cut short at the age of 40 in 1849, under circumstances that remain shrouded in mystery and speculation. Despite his tumultuous existence, his literary contributions left a massive impact on the realm of short stories and poetry. Edgar Allan Poe's gift for weaving intricate tales of terror and intrigue, coupled with his exploration of the darkest corners of the human psyche, solidified his status as a trailblazer of the gothic and macabre genres, securing him a lasting place in the chronicles of literary history.

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! He had the eye 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, 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, and 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. 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.

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 from out 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 have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but over-acuteness of the sense?—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 tattoo 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 neighbour! 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. I then replaced the boards so cleverly, so cunningly, that no human eye—not even his—could have detected any thing 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 neighbour 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—much 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!”

REFERENCES TO POE'S WORK



In this reimagining of Poe's original work, playwright Silberblatt makes reference to the following:

A TELL-TALE HEART: *One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture — a pale blue eye, with a film over it. / loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire. / cutting the old man up, putting him beneath the floor boards.*

THE RAVEN: Perry's love interest, Nora, has a bird tattoo on her arm that serves as the conversation starter when they meet at Folie's

ANNABEL LEE: This poem is referenced when Perry describes his walk back from Folie's and passing the plaque with his mother's name on it.

THE BLACK CAT: This piece is alluded to when Perry describes a news story where a woman is killed and put in a wall, dead cat beside her.

THE CASK OF AMONTILLADO: Perry's description of his Uncle Julian behind the wall references 'bones of a man being left to die in catacombs.

To learn more about Edgar Allan Poe and his work, visit: <https://poemuseum.org/>

A LEGACY OF ADAPTATIONS



Edgar Allan Poe's writings have inspired numerous adaptations across various forms of media over the years. His dark and mysterious themes, as well as his exploration of the human psyche, have made his works particularly enticing for adaptation. Here are a few notable examples of adaptations of Poe's writings in film and music:

These adaptations highlight the enduring appeal of Poe's writing, as creators continue to find inspiration in his tales of mystery, horror, and the human psyche. Each adaptation brings its own interpretation and perspective to his stories, showcasing the timeless and universal themes that make Poe's work so enduring.

Film and Television:

- "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1928): This silent film adaptation directed by Jean Epstein is one of the earliest film adaptations of Poe's story. It captures the eerie atmosphere of the original tale.
- "The Pit and the Pendulum" (1961): This film, directed by Roger Corman and starring Vincent Price, is a loose adaptation of Poe's story. It adds elements of torture and suspense while maintaining the overall macabre tone.
- "The Masque of the Red Death" (1964): Also directed by Roger Corman and starring Vincent Price, this film is based on Poe's story and explores themes of mortality and decadence in a plague-ridden world.
- "The Raven" (2012): This film starring John Cusack presents a fictionalized account of Poe's life, where he becomes involved in a murder investigation inspired by his own works.

Music:

- "The Tell-Tale Heart" by The Alan Parsons Project (1976): A song that captures the psychological intensity of Poe's story through its lyrics and music.
- "Annabel Lee" by Stevie Nicks (2011): Stevie Nicks released a song based on Poe's poem "Annabel Lee," interpreting its themes of love and loss.

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OPEN STAGE: RESOURCE GUIDE

BRAINSTORM



This play centers around one character's recounting and descriptions of people they know, places they frequent, and things they notice with specific detail.

- Make a list of a few people, places, and things that come to mind immediately and choose at least two adjectives to describe each one.
- Compare your descriptions and words with others. What are some similarities? Main differences?
- Pick one person, place, or thing you'd like to know more about.

PA Core Standard: CC.1.2.11-12.G

National Core Arts Standards: TH:Re8.1.8

DISCUSSION POINTS



- What is the point-of-view of this story? How does the point-of-view effect your understanding of the events in the story?
- Choose three adjectives the narrator might use to describe himself. Then, choose three adjectives on how you would describe the narrator. How do these two sets of adjectives compare to one another
- List all the characters that come to mind from Perry's story.
- How would you describe the relationship between Perry (the narrator) and Uncle Julian? Perry and Nora?
- Do you believe every aspect of Perry's story? Why or why not?
 - Choose one scene to describe from the other character's perspective (i.e., Nora, Mrs. Tiernan, Uncle Julian, etc.)

PA Core Standard: CC.1.2.11-12.G

National Core Arts Standards: TH:Re8.1.8

THEMES IN THE PLAY



- | | |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
| - Sanity vs. Insanity | - Appearance vs. Reality |
| - Relationship dynamics | - Competition |
| - Following the Rules | - Persuasion |
| - Paranoia | - Right vs. Wrong |
| - Heightened Senses | - Point of View/Perspective |
| - Awareness | - The Truth vs. Lie |

Critical Thinking: Choose a theme listed above and use examples of how it applies in the play. Give an example of how one of these themes connects to your own life.

PA Core Standard: CC.1.3.11-12.A

National Core Arts Standards: TH:Re8.1.8

MAKING SENSE OF THE WORLD IN A TELL-TALE HEART



SIGHT

- one blue glass eye
- one real brown eye
- Mrs. Tiernan's flower bed

LIST YOUR OWN BELOW!:



SOUND

- heartbeat
- music for dancing
- splash of water

LIST YOUR OWN BELOW!:



TASTE/SMELL

- musty basement
- hot dog breath
- cereal

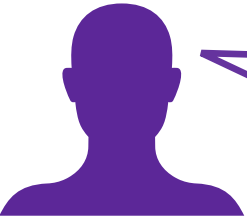
LIST YOUR OWN BELOW!:



TOUCH

- leaning in for a kiss
- the lipstick staining

LIST YOUR OWN BELOW!:



Awaken your senses! The lists above contain examples of what characters in the play might see, hear, taste, and feel. Add more as you watch the show. **Choose at least one from any column to consider further:** try to imagine it, look up an image, find a recipe, add a song to your playlist, invest in the action of it, and get inspired!

PA Core Standard: CC.1.4.8-12.M

National Core Arts Standards: TH:Re7.1.HSI

BEHIND THE SCENES



The photo to the right shows a snapshot of The Trap Room in its beginning phase of transformation for this production.

All roads lead to Pittsburgh Public Theater for Alec Silberblatt. Hear about this Shakespeare Monologue & Scene Contest winner's journey back to The O'Reilly in [this interview](#)!

Check out this trailer of the Public's production of A TELL TALE HEART by clicking [here](#).



DID YOU KNOW?

- The playwright of this adaptation wrote over 80-90 internal re-writes of scenes and approx. 13 full drafts
- The HBO Documentary "Crazy, Not Insane" was a source of inspiration for playwright Alec in this process.
- The entire set, including the paneled walls and staircase, was custom built for the Trap Room underneath the O'Reilly stage.
- The room in which the show happens seats 45 people max, opposed to the traditional seating of over 600 above the stage.



What is at least ONE new thing you learned from this play?
What impacted you the most from this show?
What is ONE question you have for anyone on the ATTH creative team?

OPEN STAGE MATINEES ARE SUPPORTED BY: