The Tell-Tale Heart,
Edgar Allan Poe, 1843
The “perfect” gothic short story

- The arresting beginning “TRUE!”
- The unfolding of horrific events.
- An unreliable narrator.
- The use of exaggeration, superlatives, capital letters, repetition, interjections, exclamations.
- The creation of suspense.
- The structure of a short but complex narrative.
- Form and content in perfect harmony.
The narrator has been arrested on a charge of murder. He is sent for psychiatric tests to see whether he is fit to stand trial. Write the psychiatrist’s report.
Help with the task: the language of report writing

• Reports are generally written in a formal style.
• **What makes something formal?**

**Formal**
– Use of passive voice
– No contracted verb forms
– Few personal pronouns
– Neutral language is used, ie non-emotive language

**Informal**
– Use of active voice
– Contracted verb forms
– Use of personal pronouns, eg. I, you, we
– Words that show feelings, eg I think, we feel, I am pleased; horrible, amazing...
Giving a framework: write under these headings

• Medical history
• Motive for the crime
• State of mind at the time of the crime
• Behaviour under police questioning
• Diagnosis and Conclusions
Medical history

Psychiatrist’s Report on Prisoner n° 453, on trial for the crime of murder.

Medical history:
• The prisoner is of a highly nervous disposition.

• Indeed, this has led to “sharpened senses” or hypersensitivity, and particularly an acute sense of hearing. The patient states that he could hear “many things in hell”.

• He has also suffered from frequent insomnia and severe night terrors.
Motive for the crime

• There is no obvious material motive for the crime. The prisoner did not rob the old man.

• The victim had always treated the prisoner well and the prisoner loved him. (It should be noted that the precise nature of the relationship between the victim and the prisoner is unknown).

• The prisoner had an obsessive aversion to one of the victim’s eyes, which he refers to as the ‘Evil Eye’.

• This was not a crime of passion in the typical sense of the term; the plan to murder the victim evolved slowly, over time, and was carried out methodically, with meticulous care and planning.
State of mind at time of crime

• The defendant is seen to be proud of acting “wisely” and proceeding with great “foresight”.

• Indeed his actions appear to have been calculated and meticulous; every caution, and precaution, was taken by the prisoner to ensure the successful execution of his plan.
State of mind (cont)

• The prisoner showed multiple signs of obsessive behaviour:
  • the repetitious nature of his nightly visits;
  • the extreme slowness and caution;
  • the length of time spent waiting without moving;
  • the meticulous attention to detail.
State of mind (cont)

At times he displayed signs of euphoria:

he “chuckled” with delight when considering the act of murder.

The prisoner is subject to violent mood swings – from intense fear to excessive confidence.
Excessive confidence:

- He can be said to experience the thrill of the double bluff: “I led them...to his chamber”; I brought chairs into the room”; “placed my own seat upon the very spot beneath which reposed the corpse.”
- he relished the feeling of total control;
- he behaved initially as an innocent man;
- his manner was thought to be convincing;
- he was seen to be very relaxed and good-humoured
Erratic behaviour:

• Gradually, the prisoner was seen to lose control of the situation;
• This was accompanied by a number of physical symptoms. (He grew pale, and, according to his statement, his “head ached” and he had “a ringing” in his ears.)
• He started to talk more and more, becoming garrulous and incoherent.
• Signs of derangement

His behaviour became more erratic and deranged.

He became breathless, and vehemently argumentative about trivial matters.

He began to gesticulate wildly and to pace up and down.
Diagnosis and Conclusions

The prisoner can be seen to be suffering from intense paranoia:

• he believed the ‘Evil eye’ (or Evil ‘I’) was always looking at him.

• he had to free himself by killing the old man: this can be seen as an internal struggle in the narrator’s mind (the old man = his alter ego).

• In this sense he cannot be held fully responsible for the gravity of his actions.
Diagnosis and Conclusions (cont)

• He is also suffering from delusion: he is aware of a variety of noises but he is unable to distinguish between real and imaginary sounds.

• In conclusion, the prisoner’s motive for undertaking this crime, his behaviour under questioning and the nature of his confession, all point to an irrational, unbalanced mind.

• I am of the opinion that the defendant is not of sound mind and should be committed to psychiatric care.
Authorial intentions

• **The ironic twist**: the defendant freely admits that he murdered the victim and is only arguing about his sanity. This is perhaps the clearest indication of his madness.

• **Poe reminds his readers of Macbeth’s murder of King Duncan** and of the ensuing madness that engulfs him and Lady Macbeth. In fact he makes direct reference to the ‘damned spot’.
A Freudian interpretation

• Poe devance les idées de Freud en nous décrivant le cas “typique” d’un psychopath freudien.

• Further reading:

  The Interpretation of Murder, published in 2006 by Jed Rubenfeld.