In “The Tell-Tale Heart” by Edgar Allan Poe, the narrator tells his story of how and why he kills the old man: He decides to kill him because of his dreadful eye, which resembles that of a vulture. At midnight on the eighth night of watching the old man in his sleep, the narrator finally completes his mission: He smothers him, dismembers his body, and stuffs it under the floorboards. When the police officers arrive at his house due to a neighbor’s concerns, the narrator can no longer maintain his composure. The story ends with his confession to the crime. Although I and the majority of readers and scholars would agree that the narrator is suffering from insanity, a condition that could convince judges to deem him not guilty in the court of law, I wish to offer another perspective by arguing in opposition to this argument. In doing so, I hope we can have fun seeing this classic short story through an entirely different lens: let’s imagine that the narrator is guilty, and that he is merely feigning insanity because he does not want to be charged for homicide.

To begin, the narrator is guilty of first degree murder because, first and foremost, he is guilty of committing the crime. From the narrator’s story, we find that he has performed actus reus, the guilty act. He recalls, “With a loud yell, I threw open the lantern and leaped into the room. . . . 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. . . . The old man was dead” (Poe). The narrator admits
to the deed, and this confession, along with the evidence of the maimed body, will therefore be held against him in the court of law.

In addition, the narrator also has *mens rea*, a guilty mind. This is a Latin phrase that refers to a crime that has been premeditated. It indicates malicious intent. The combination of these two components—*actus reus*, guilty act; and *mens rea*, guilty mind—are essential in demonstrating that a criminal should be found guilty for first-degree homicide. If there was no premeditation and the narrator’s murder of the old man had been an accident, he would not have been found guilty for first-degree murder, and thus the sentence would have been lighter.

However, this was no accident; the narrator plans the crime specifically because “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... I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever” (Poe). Because the narrator expresses malicious intent in his plans, it is clear that he has *mens rea*; he has thought about the murder before actually committing the crime. Each consecutive night after he has decided upon a course of action, he pokes his head into the old man’s room, intent on killing him, until he finally completes his mission on the eighth night.

Based on the narrator’s actions in not only committing homicide but also premeditating it beforehand, it is therefore possible to charge him with first-degree murder.

Another indication that the narrator has *mens rea* is from the first example, when he says he “smiled gaily” upon killing the old man. Based on his word choice, one can infer that there is malicious intent behind his planned actions. Not only does he smile, but he smiles in a gay manner, which demonstrates his joy that the deed he had planned has been a success; it also shows that this was not an accident: it was premeditated. Therefore, we can conclude that he has *actus reus* and *mens rea*, both of which are essentially needed to condemn him.
Although the narrator is guilty for the murder, he can still be found not guilty if it can be proven that he is insane. I want us to imagine that he is *not* insane; in this case, his motive for fabricating his condition would be easy to decipher: he wants to be found not guilty by reason of insanity. This exemption from punishment was made possible in January 1843 with the M’Naghten rule, which happened to be the same year that Poe published “The Tell-Tale Heart.” This rule was based on the definition of insanity, which, according to Cornell University Law School, means that someone does not “know the nature and quality of the act he was doing or, if he did know it . . . he did not know what he was doing was wrong” (“Insanity Defense”). Using the M’Naghten rule, we can nullify the narrator’s last chance of being deemed “not guilty.”

First, the narrator is not insane because he does indeed know that what he is doing is wrong. When disposing of the old man’s body, he recalls, "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 anything wrong.” The precision and care with which the narrator discards the body illustrates not only that he is aware of what he is doing, but also that he knows it is wrong. If he had not known it was wrong to commit murder, there would be no reason for him to hide the body, especially with his meticulous attention to detail, but the narrator *does* have reason to conceal the body: he does not want others to find the corpse because this would lead to his punishment for murdering the man. In trying to prevent punishment for himself, the narrator demonstrates that he knows what he has done is wrong. His ability to distinguish between right and wrong, according to the M’Naghten rule, indicates that he may have been sane when he committed the crime. Therefore, because the narrator is sane, he cannot be found “not guilty.”
Next, another example of the narrator’s sanity is when the police officers enter the narrator’s house, and the narrator calmly welcomes them inside. To the officers’ questions, the narrator responds with the following information: “The shriek . . . was my own in a dream. The old man . . . was absent in the country” (Poe). The narrator’s clever reaction to the officers’ questions indicates that he may have premeditated everything beforehand. This adds to his mens rea. In addition, his response also shows that he knows what he has done is wrong, since he is so determined to hide the fact that the old man had shrieked in fear. He also knows that murdering the man is wrong; otherwise, there would be no reason to lie and say the old man is away. The narrator obviously is aware of the moral distinction between “right” and “wrong,” so he may therefore be sane under the M’Naghten rule. His response also shows that he is capable of lying. We should not fully trust everything he says; since he has lied to the police officers in the story, there is nothing to stop him from lying to the audience.

Another indicator that the narrator may be sane occurs when he is in the old man’s room. While waiting for the right moment to kill him, he tells us he hears the beating of the old man’s heart. Worried, he says, “And now a new anxiety seized me—the sound would be heard by a neighbour!” (Poe). That the narrator is afraid someone will hear demonstrates his awareness that his attack on the old man is not an act of which society approves. There is no other reason he would not want the neighbor to hear what is going on other than the fact that he knows his actions are illegal, and he does not want to get caught. His awareness of what is acceptable in society suggests that there is a possibility of his sanity after all.

On the other hand, readers may believe that the narrator is insane because he claims that he hears the beating of the old man’s heart. While there is definitely exaggerated worry within the narrator, this does not necessarily mean that he is insane. He could just be experiencing high
volumes of anxiety, which is a normal reaction to stressful circumstances. According to Calm Clinic, “Anxiety is, in many ways, a fear of irrational things . . . . and all [irrational thoughts] can be caused by anxiety” (“How Anxiety Causes Irrational Thoughts”). While it is strange to say that one can hear the beating of another person’s heart, this irrational thought could be caused by anxiety. Taking into consideration the fact that he has just murdered the old man, it is easy to understand why the narrator is anxious and worried that a neighbor will discover what he has done. His thoughts may be irrational, but they may not necessarily reflect insanity. His uneasiness may reveal his awareness of right and wrong, along with his fear of being punished for what he has done. The narrator’s claim may also be a layer in a fabrication of insanity.

Adding in as many strange details as possible may be the narrator’s way of ensuring that the judges will think he is insane at trial. We can infer that the narrator is instead very intelligent for being able to concoct a plan of escaping punishment. Keeping in mind the M’Naghten test for insanity, he may not be insane because of his ability to distinguish between right and wrong. In addition, the anxiety could just be causing him to have irrational fears.

Next, we should not automatically believe the narrator is insane based on his story. Because his story is inconsistent with what actually happens, he is an unreliable narrator, and we should read with caution. For instance, when the officers are at his house, the narrator begins to grow nervous. He recalls, “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. . . . And still the men chatted pleasantly, and smiled” (Poe). It is clear from this excerpt that the story does not seem realistic; if the narrator were swinging his chair and scraping it against the floor boards, there is no way the police officers would continue to converse and smile at one another; naturally they would react to the situation and ask the narrator for the reason behind his strange behavior. However,
because the officers have no reaction, we can infer that the narrator does not really get out of his chair and drag it over the floor. This only leads to one conclusion: the narrator has lied about his activities with the chair. Because he has lied about this scene, it is cause for us to wonder what else he has lied about, especially given the circumstances: he has killed the old man, and the police officers are at his house, suspicious that something terrible has happened. There is little chance for him to hide the murder, so it therefore makes sense that, in his confession to the officers, the narrator would pretend to be insane with the hopes of being found not guilty.

Not only is the narrator unreliable but he may also be a liar. It seems contradictory that the narrator “smiled gaily” while seeing the old man dead when in the beginning of the story he says, “I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire” (Poe). The narrator claims to have loved the old man, yet upon seeing him dead, he smiles with the utmost gaiety. There is a discrepancy between the love that he claims to have for him and the love he actually shows for him. In this case, his actions speak more loudly than his words. Although the narrator claims he loves the man and just hates his “Evil Eye,” his story does not have much verisimilitude in showing the tension between the narrator’s emotions: his love for the man and his hatred of his eye. Instead, upon killing the old man, he merely displays joy due to his hatred of the eye. Because of his lack of remorse or sadness over having lost someone he loved, it therefore seems unlikely that he loved the old man. It may just be another lie.

Another example that demonstrates he did not love the old man is when he is in the darkness of the old man’s room, waiting for the opportune moment to kill him. He tells the audience, ”I knew what the old man felt, and pitied him, although I chuckled at heart” (Poe). The reader may wonder why he would pity him yet chuckle at his fear at the same time. It is unlikely
that he experiences both pity and satisfaction—two conflicting emotions—at the same time. In addition, it is strange that the narrator is happy about the old man’s fear of danger when he had earlier claimed that he loved the old man. These two statements are contradicting and are therefore cause for suspicion. Clearly he may not love the old man since he is satisfied when seeing him fear for his life. Therefore, the narrator may have lied about his love.

In addition to the possibility that the narrator may not have loved the old man, it is likely that the narrator could have also lied about his motives for murdering him. Although he claims it is the old man’s eye that causes his blood to run cold, there is enough reason to believe that he may just hate the man’s presence enough to murder him, considering he mentions the old man’s heart as much as his eye. After killing him, the narrator says, "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" (Poe). On top of the narrator chuckling “at heart,” this is another mention of a heart. I find it no coincidence that the narrator mentions so many hearts within one piece. He could have checked the old man’s jugular vein on his neck, or perhaps his wrist, or he could have checked if the old man were breathing, but instead he goes straight for the heart to see if the man is alive. He wants to get to the source of life and ensure that the man is dead. Even though the old man is dead, his vulture eye is still there, so why is the narrator so satisfied? It seems as if he is just happy that the old man is dead.

If the narrator were so obsessed with the eye, he would have done something with it after murdering him. For instance, he takes special care in removing the man’s limbs, yet he does not take the same care in also removing the eye, the apparent source of his vexations. He could have at least covered it up with an eye patch. For something that has been bothering him so much, he does not seem to have taken much effort in concealing it. In addition, besides his lack of
attention on the eye, he seems to focus on the heart instead. Clearly, concealment or removal of the eye would have solved his problems if the eye had been what bothered the narrator, but the narrator goes all the way with his decision to murder him. This could indicate that it is not necessarily the old man’s eye that motivated him; his actions could have been driven by something else. For example, he may claim that he had no desire for the old man’s gold, but this could be a lie; he could be putting all of this emphasis on the old man’s eye in order to make himself sound insane to have killed someone for such a petty reason.

In conclusion, I hope to have offered another perspective regarding the narrator’s guilt and insanity. If we allow ourselves to question the narrator’s reliability, we can see this short story through a different lens, imagining that the narrator is guilty and is pretending to be insane with the hopes that he will not be charged for murder. If this were the case, we can see that the narrator is not insane but is actually very intelligent with his decision to feign insanity. The story can be seen as the narrator’s confession to the officers: the reason for the confession may be neither guilt nor fear of the old man's heart; in reality, it could be that he is afraid of the consequences of his actions and does not want to be punished for manslaughter. Taking everything into consideration, one must ask, “What’s the verdict?”
Works Cited


