“Mood in ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’”

Edgar Allan Poe masterfully designs a frightening mood in his short story “The Tell-Tale Heart.” Within this story, the narrator proudly shares his carefully plotted murder through specific details and descriptive words. Through the narrator’s denial of madness; the description of the old man’s eye; and the use of repetition; Poe creates a chilling mood as one reads this horror story.

In the beginning of the story, the narrator questions people who think he is mad. He begins questioning by stating, “True! – nervous – very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am! But why will you say that I am mad?”(625). The narrator admits that he is extremely nervous, yet as the story unfolds, the narrator’s behavior causes the reader to question the narrator’s sanity. A few lines further the narrator continues, “I heard all things in heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell” (625). These opening remarks by the narrator make the reader realize that the narrator is insane even though he denies it. The denial of madness creates a frightening setting for the rest of the story.

The skillful description and focus on the old man’s eye sets a creepy mood. Poe uses descriptions of the eye to generate suspense and horror. The narrator shares his obsession with the old man’s eye and compares it with the eye of a vulture. He describes it as “a pale blue eye, with a film over it” (625). This eye troubles him and appears to warrant the narrator’s excuse for taking the life of the old man, for the narrator shares, “. . . for it was not the old man who vexed me, but his Evil Eye” (626). As the narrator continues to explain his carefully crafted death plot, the focus is on killing the eye –robbing the old man of his life is never considered. As the narrator sneaks into the old man’s room, the narrator is focused upon it saying, “. . . I grew
furious as I gazed upon it. I saw it with perfect distinctness – all dull blue, with a hideous veil over it that chilled the very marrow in my bones” (627). As the narrator describes the old man’s eye and reveals his feelings towards the old man’s eye throughout the story, the reader experiences an eerie mood.

The repetition of words in the story also adds to the suspense and creates a terrifying mood. As the narrator views the old man and his eye, he repeats words to increase the tension and to create fear within the reader. The narrator remarks, “And then, when my head was well in the room, I undid the lantern cautiously – oh, so cautiously – cautiously (for the hinges creaked)” (626). Again later in the story, the narrator uses repetition as he enters the old man’s room once again and says, “So I opened it – you cannot imagine how stealthily, stealthily” (627). The repetition of certain words creates a mood of fear and terror in the minds of the reader.

“The Tell-Tale Heart” is a short story classic for all times. In the story, Poe creates a creepy, scary mood through the narrator’s denial of madness, the description of the old man’s eye, and the repetition of certain words throughout the story.