

The Tell-Tale Heart

A retelling of the story

BY EDGAR ALLAN POE

I can't say how the idea first entered my brain, but once it was there, it haunted me day and night. There wasn't any reason for it. I liked the old man. He never did anything to hurt me, and I wasn't after his money.

I think it was his eyes! Yes, that was it! One of his eyes looked like the eye of a vulture—pale gray with a film over it. Whenever it looked at me, my blood ran cold. I made up my mind to kill the old man and get rid of that eye forever.

I made my move slowly. Every night at midnight, I opened his door very gently, poked my head in, and shined a lantern on his vulture eye.

I did this for seven nights—every night just at



THE TELL-TALE HEART

midnight. But his eye was always closed, so I could not bring myself to do what I had to do. It was not the old man who bothered me. It was his evil eye.

On the eighth night, I was even more careful than usual. I thought about the fact that I was opening the door and that he wasn't even dreaming of my secret thought. I had to laugh.

Perhaps he heard me. He moved suddenly. His room was dark, so I knew he couldn't see the door opening.

I had my head in and was about to turn the lantern on, but my thumb slipped on the tin switch. The old man sat up in bed, crying, "Who's there?"

I kept still, not moving an inch. Finally, I heard a slight groan, and I knew it was a groan of terror—terror in the face of death.

I knew the terror the old man felt and I felt sorry for him, although I laughed inside. I knew he had been lying awake ever since the first slight noise. His fears had grown ever since. He tried to tell himself, "It is nothing but the wind in the chimney... It is only a mouse crossing the floor... It is just a cricket.

I waited a long time, and I turned the lantern up a little bit. I was careful. Only a single ray shot out and fell on his vulture eye.

THE TELL-TALE HEART

The eye was wide open! I grew angry as I looked at it. I could see it perfectly—that dull gray eye with an ugly film over it chilled my bones.

Then I heard it, a low, dull, quick sound. It was like the sound a watch makes when it's wrapped in cotton. It was the beating of the old man's heart. It made my anger grow, but even then I kept still. I hardly breathed at all. I kept the ray of light shining on his eye. The beating of his heart grew quicker and quicker, and louder and louder.

In the dead hour of the night, in the awful silence of that old house, that noise terrified me. Yet for a few minutes longer, I stood still.

The beating grew louder, louder! Then a new fear grabbed me. The sound so loud that a neighbor might hear it!

With a loud yell, I turned the lantern up and leaped into the room. He screamed once, only once, before I dragged him to the floor and lay the heavy mattress over him.

I smiled. The deed was almost done. For many minutes his heart beat on with a muffled sound.

This didn't bother me. The sound would not be heard through the wall.

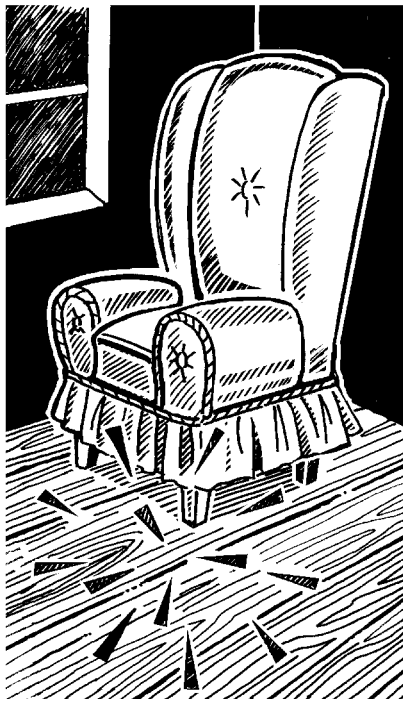
Finally it stopped, and the old man was dead. I

THE TELL-TALE HEART

removed the bed and looked at the body. I put my hand on his heart and held it there many minutes—no heartbeat. His eye would not trouble me ever again.

I worked quickly but silently as I pulled up three boards from the floor. Then I slipped the old man's body into the space below and replaced the boards so well that no human eye could have found anything wrong. Ha! Ha!

Soon after I'd finished, someone knocked at the door. It was three policemen who said that a neighbor had heard a scream. I smiled and invited them in. The scream, I said, was my own. I'd had a nightmare. I told them the old man was away in the country. I told



THE TELL-TALE HEART

them to search the house—search it well.

Finally, I took them into his room and asked them to sit down. I placed my chair on the floorboards above his body.

The policemen were satisfied since I seemed very much at ease. But then I felt myself getting pale. My head hurt and I imagined a pounding in my ears, but the policemen just sat there, talking and talking. The pounding in my ears grew louder. Finally, I decided that the terrible noise was not just in my head.

I tried talking more quickly and in a louder voice, but the sound got louder too. What could I do? It was a low, dull, quick sound. It was like the sound a watch makes when it is wrapped in cotton.

The police didn't seem to hear it, so I kept talking, even more quickly. The noise got louder.

The men kept talking. Was it possible that they did not hear it? No, they heard, and they knew! They were making fun of my terror.

Anything was better than this. I couldn't stand their smiles any longer. I had to scream—or I'd die. The noise got louder, louder, louder!

“Enough!” I screamed. “I admit it! Tear up the floor! Here, here! It is the beating of his hideous heart.”

About Foreshadowing & Flashback

Foreshadowing means suggesting beforehand what is going to happen later in the story.

A **flashback** occurs when the author tells about an event that happened before the time of the story.

Neither writing nor recognizing these particular literary elements is simple. The writer has to try to foreshadow without actually giving away the ending ahead of time, and the reader has to be able to notice these hints and begin to speculate about where they might be leading. As for flashback, the writer's challenge is to jump back and forth in time without confusing the reader; the reader's challenge is to recognize and follow the jumps.

Before students read the story, introduce them to the elements involved. Write the above definitions of foreshadowing and flashback on the board and ask a volunteer to read them aloud to the class. Copy the paragraphs on page 81 onto a blank transparency and display it on an overhead projector. Invite students to read the paragraphs aloud. Then challenge them to identify which underlined segments are flashbacks and which are foreshadowings, and explain how they know. (Answers: 1. flashback; 2. foreshadowing; 3. flashback; 4. foreshadowing)

Discuss with students how they might recognize foreshadowings and flashbacks. For example, in the first paragraph, the words *remembered* and *from long ago* hinted that Rory was about to have a flashback. The past perfect tense (i.e., *had been walking*, *had been so frightened*, and *had cried*) used in the next two sentences indicates that the events occurred before the time of the narration. In the second paragraph, a continuation of the first paragraph, readers are brought back to the present time by the word *today*. But the second sentence gives a hint of what's about to come: *He had no way of guessing what was waiting now, just a few yards ahead*. Ask students to predict what they think is going to happen, based on the tone of the whole paragraph. (They might guess that

something sinister is about to occur, maybe even the appearance of the hooded monster mentioned earlier.) Continue analyzing the third paragraph, challenging students to point out the words and phrases that indicate where Gloria is flashing back in time and those that foreshadow a future event.

Then invite students to read the story, keeping an eye out for these literary elements. When students have finished reading, have them work on the reproducible activities in this lesson. The activities will help reinforce what they've learned about foreshadowing and flashback and use these elements in their own stories.

IDENTIFY FORESHADOWING AND FLASHBACK

- 1.** All of a sudden, Rory remembered an incident from long ago. He had been walking in the woods with his older brother, who tried to scare him half to death with a story about a hooded monster. Rory had been so frightened then that he had cried uncontrollably.
- 2.** Today, as he strolled along peacefully, Rory chuckled at that long-ago horror story. He had no way of guessing what was waiting now, just a few yards ahead. Right now, he was happy and relaxed.
- 3.** Gloria lined up with the other runners. They were all flushed with determination and excitement—all except Gloria. Suddenly, it was last year again, and she was telling the coach that she had to drop out of the team because of her illness. Now she was well again. “Still,” she said to herself, “what am I doing here? I’ll never win. I haven’t practiced enough!” But miracles do happen. The question is, what kind of miracle would be best for Gloria?

STORY SUMMARY

The Tell-Tale Heart

A RETELLING OF THE STORY BY EDGAR ALLAN POE

In the first two paragraphs of this famous tale, readers can immediately tell that the narrator is deranged. He is obsessed by the ugliness of an old man's eye, and so has decided to kill the poor fellow. Will the narrator really kill him? If so, will he be caught and punished? The answer is foreshadowed in the story title: Somehow the heart is going to tell on him.



After students finish reading the story, ask them to go back and identify other sentences that foreshadow the climax and the ending. Three examples:

- ☉ *The beating of his heart grew quicker and quicker, and louder and louder.*
 - ☉ *I smiled. The deed was almost done. For many minutes his heart beat on with a muffled sound . . . Finally it stopped, and the old man was dead.*
 - ☉ *I put my hand on his heart and held it there many minutes—no heartbeat.*
-

Name _____

Date _____

Foreshadowing
& Flashback

Time Spotters

In each paragraph below, you'll find examples of foreshadowing and one of flashback. Draw one line under each foreshadowing and two lines under each flashback. Then discuss your choices with classmates.

- 1.** Something good was in store for her soon. She just knew it in her bones! Out on this same hillside last year, she had felt angry and helpless. Today she felt happy and self-assured.
- 2.** Sinking lower and lower, pulled into darkness by the furious undertow, he could no longer hold his breath. He knew the end was near. Then the jangling alarm clock burst in, saving him from reliving once more that awful experience of many summers ago. He would never go near the sea again, he promised himself. But who says we can control our future?
- 3.** The big, emaciated dog started across the street, heading right for Alonso. Alonso froze in his tracks. His dog Chance had disappeared in the fall, leaving Alonso's whole family distressed—Mom crying, Dad peering out the window every five minutes, hoping that by some miracle Chance would be at the door. Now this old thing was lumbering toward Alonso . . . was it Chance, or just another look-alike?
- 4.** Luisa stood next to her mother, ready to begin kneading the dough. Suddenly, the yeasty smell of dough took her back to six months ago, when her grandmother had come for a visit. She, her mother, and her grandmother had been kneading bread when the phone call came. Luisa froze as she thought of this.
- 5.** The heavy coins made his pockets sag, so Alex quickly emptied the change onto the table. He didn't need them for the bus since his mother was driving him to school. Later, he'd be sorry he'd done that.

Name _____

Date _____

Foreshadowing
& Flashback

Change the Story

“The Tell-Tale Heart” is primarily a story of foreshadowing, where even the title gives a clue as to how the story will end. But you can easily change this story into a flashback. How? Tack on a new beginning and end to the story.

Write a new beginning to “The Tell-Tale Heart” that happens at the present time. What happens to trigger the flashback?

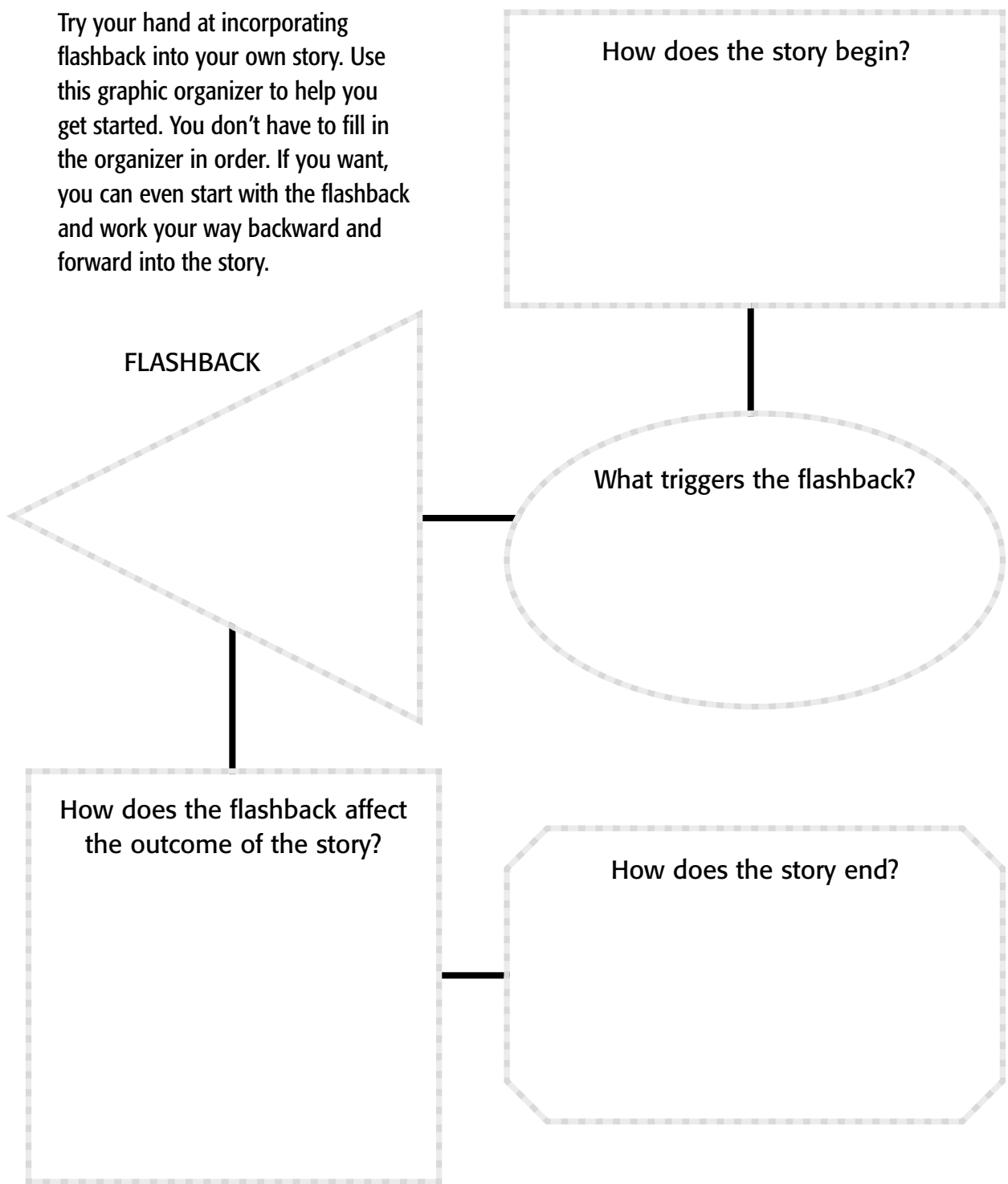
Now bring the story back to the present. What happens when the killer finishes his narration? Write a new ending.

Name _____

Date _____

Flashback in Your Own Story

Try your hand at incorporating flashback into your own story. Use this graphic organizer to help you get started. You don't have to fill in the organizer in order. If you want, you can even start with the flashback and work your way backward and forward into the story.



How does the story begin?

FLASHBACK

What triggers the flashback?

How does the flashback affect the outcome of the story?

How does the story end?

Foreshadowings Everywhere

- A.** In real, everyday life we often experience foreshadowings of things that may be about to happen. Examples:

A sudden, blustery wind starts making its way through the woods.

This could possibly foreshadow that:

- (1) the biggest storm of the year will ravage the town.
- (2) a tree will topple over, smashing into a nearby house.

A police car with sirens blaring zooms down the highway.

This could possibly foreshadow that:

- (1) a speeder will cause a major traffic accident before being pulled over.
- (2) the police will finally capture an escaped convict.

- B.** Now YOU think of two possibilities about what may happen.

A dad greets his kids at the door, saying "Have I got a surprise for you! You'll never guess where we're going!"

This could possibly foreshadow that:

- C.** Use your ideas in B to begin a story of your own.
