



Top 30
Essential Short Stories in English:
1843 to 2000

Jim Knudsen



NAN'UN-DO

To the Students

Top 30: Essential Short Stories in English: 1843 to 2000 introduces you to 30 wonderful short stories—30 of my favorites—written by some of the greatest authors in the English language. I am not a professional critic or literary scholar; I’m just a person who enjoys reading short fiction—and I thought it might be fun and useful to share that joy with you in some friendly, “chatty” mini-reviews. Of course, I do engage in a little “criticism,” but it’s all practical, positive, appreciative. My main goal is to try to pique your interest in each story by telling you a bit about its setting and plot and characters, pointing out a significant theme or two, citing a memorable passage, and presenting a comment here and there from writers and critics who love a story as much as I do and have something revealing or inspiring to say about it. This is all done with the hope that sometime, somewhere, you will want to read some of the stories on your own.

In choosing these stories, I have tried to give you a variety of styles, points of view, subject matter, settings, and author nationalities. In here you will find tales of adventure, mystery, romance, revenge, tragedy, and fantasy; stories that deal with marriage and family, social and political issues, history and traditions; stories written by authors from England, Ireland, Scotland, Canada, New Zealand, India, China, Poland, and the United States.

As for *Top 30*’s exercises, they were devised not to test, but to encourage deeper, more careful reading. Each activity asks you to go back to the text to look for key words, key details, key ideas, and then to write them down. I am confident that in the process, your vocabulary will become bigger and better, and your writing, reading, and listening skills will all greatly improve.

To say that these stories are “essential” means that they have become permanent parts of the literary “canon,” and that anyone who is majoring in (or simply interested in) English literature should know a little about them and their authors. And let me also say that knowledge of these stories’ characters and their problems—and their struggles to deal with them—has been an “essential” part of my own moral and emotional and intellectual development, and that I hope that the stories will in some way become “essential” to you, too.
















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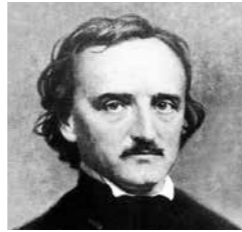
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The Tell-Tale Heart (1843)

Edgar Allan Poe (American)



1-2 ▶ **Reading** Read and listen to this short essay and then do the exercises that follow.

[1] The adjective “telltale” means revealing, obvious, betraying. In this classic psychological thriller, a man is betrayed by the sound of a beating heart—a telltale sign of his guilt. Guilty of what? Of nothing short of cold-blooded murder!

[2] A good story, Edgar Allen Poe said, should be readable in one sitting and have a **compelling** plot. “The Tell-Tale Heart” more than satisfies both conditions. 5
It is barely ten paragraphs long and breathlessly exciting to read. It is told by an unnamed narrator who tries very hard to **convince** the reader that he is not insane, that he is merely extremely nervous, troubled by an **affliction** that makes him sensitive to ... everything. To prove his sanity, he relates an event from his past. In a nutshell, he committed murder—for the flimsiest of reasons. His 10
nervousness made him do it, he says. “I am NOT crazy!” he insists.

[3] At the time, the narrator lived with an old man who had a “horrible, pale-blue eye.” The narrator hates that eye, cannot stand looking at it. So what does he do? One night, he drags the sleeping old man out of bed and suffocates him. But just before he dies, the old man wakes up and lets out a terrified scream. 15

[4] The narrator chops the body up and buries the remains under the floorboards. Almost immediately, he hears a loud ticking noise. Can it be the old man’s beating heart? Then there’s a knock on the door. It’s the police, **alerted** by a neighbor who heard a scream. The narrator acts cool, at first. The policemen believe the made-up story he tells them. But that beating heart—that terrible ticking noise—gets louder, 20
louder. Surely the police must hear it, too! And then ...

[5] I won’t **spoil** it for you. But by all means, read this famous story. The contemporary American writer Joyce Carol Oates calls it a work of genius—“utterly convincing in its pathology, and in its obvious **zest** in its pathology.”

Notes **betraying** 「(秘密などが) 漏れている」 **cold-blooded** 「冷血な」 **insane** 「正気でない」
cannot stand 「我慢できない」 **suffocates** 「窒息死させる」 **pathology** 「病理」

▶ **Words in Context** Find the words in bold in the essay that match the definitions/synonyms below. Write the words on the lines.

- _____ disease; illness; disorder; sickness
- _____ very interesting; fascinating; enthralling; captivating
- _____ notified; warned; called attention to
- _____ ruin; destroy; upset
- _____ assure; make sure; prove; persuade
- _____ enthusiasm; zeal; excitement; energy

▶ **Reading for Details** Write the requested information about “The Tell-Tale Heart” on the lines. Listen to check your answers. 1-3

- _____ what the narrator insists he is NOT
- _____ what the narrator hates about the old man
- _____ how the narrator murders the old man
- _____ what the old man does just before he dies
- _____ where the old man’s remains are buried
- _____ what the narrator hears, or thinks he hears
- _____ who knocks on the door
- _____ how the narrator acts—at first

▶ **Making Conversation** With a partner, complete the conversation below. Listen to check and correct your answers. Then practice the conversation together. 1-4

- A: How does the essay’s author describe “The Tell-Tale Heart”?
B: He calls it a _____.
- A: Why can the story be read in one sitting?
B: Because it is _____.
- A: What does the author of the essay say the story is like to read?
B: He describes reading it as being _____.
- A: What did Joyce Carol Oates have to say about the story?
B: She called it a _____.

Lesson 11

Roman Fever (1934)
Edith Wharton (American) 1-52 ▶ **Reading** Read and listen to this short essay and then do the exercises that follow.

[1] The popular American writer O’Henry (real name William Sydney Porter, 1862–1910) is famous for the surprise, ironic endings of his short stories. Sure, they’re fun to read, but let’s be honest: Many of his “twists” come across as gimmicks. They can be, as the literary critic Susan Lohafer puts it, “simplistic, formulaic, and **trivial**.” But, Lohafer adds, the shock ending, when handled by a master, can “jolt us into perceiving something **fundamental** about what we have been reading.” 5

[2] No story better illustrates the “masterful” surprise ending than “Roman Fever.” Up until the very last line (which I won’t **divulge** here!), you don’t know what’s coming. It’s the early 20th century, and two New York society widows of “ripe middle-age,” Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley, are sitting at a terrace cafe on Rome’s Janiculum Hill, gazing out at “the best view in the world.” They have been friends, off and on, for most of their lives. Having been out of touch recently, they are now enjoying what appears to be a **civil**, catch-up conversation: about their late husbands; about the marriage prospects of their two teenage daughters, who are in Rome with them; about “Roman fever,” the malaria that once plagued the Eternal City. 10 15

[3] But beneath the politeness and pleasantries lurk envy, jealousy, **hypocrisy**, and resentment. Most of this is reflected in the mind of the **haughty** but ultimately lonely and insecure Mrs. Slade. The talk then turns to a time 25 years earlier, here in Rome, when the two women were teenagers themselves—and rivals for the same man. Suddenly, Mrs. Slade can no longer contain herself. She must have the last say, she thinks, and tells Mrs. Ansley ... well, you’ll see. Suffice it to say that all the long-buried bitterness and tension and secrets between the two women come out. And then comes the “jolt” of Edith Wharton’s last line, which can make you smile, gasp, nod your head in wonder, all at once. This “twist” is no gimmick. 20 25

Notes formulaic 「型通りの」 prospects 「見込み」 plagued 「苦しめた」
“Can no longer contain herself” 「もはや抑えきれずに」
“Suffice it to say ...” 「あえて言うなら…」

▶ **Words in Context** Find the words in bold in the essay that match the definitions/synonyms below. Write the words on the lines.

- _____ polite; courteous; well-mannered
- _____ conceited; stuck-up; arrogant
- _____ of little value or importance; petty; insignificant
- _____ reveal; tell (a secret); disclose; make public
- _____ false behavior; pretentiousness; insincerity
- _____ basic; essential

▶ **Reading for Details** Write the requested information about “Roman Fever” on the lines. Listen to check your answers.



- _____ William Sydney Porter’s pseudonym
- _____ an informal word meaning “trick” or “ploy”
- _____ who or what Susan Lohafer is
- _____ where Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley are sitting
- _____ where their husbands are now
- _____ who is in Rome with the two women
- _____ another name for “Roman fever”
- _____ what the two women were 25 years earlier

▶ **Making Conversation** With a partner, complete the conversation below. Listen to check and correct your answers. Then practice the conversation together.



- A: What does Susan Lohafer say “good” surprise endings can do?
B: They can jolt us into _____.
- A: How are Mrs. Slade and Mrs. Ansley described?
B: They are described as _____.
- A: On the surface, what is the two women’s conversation like?
B: It _____.
- A: What happens when Mrs. Slade tries to have the last say?
B: That’s when all the _____.