

## ***The Gold Bug and other Tales***

***by Edgar Allan Poe***

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### **Summary**

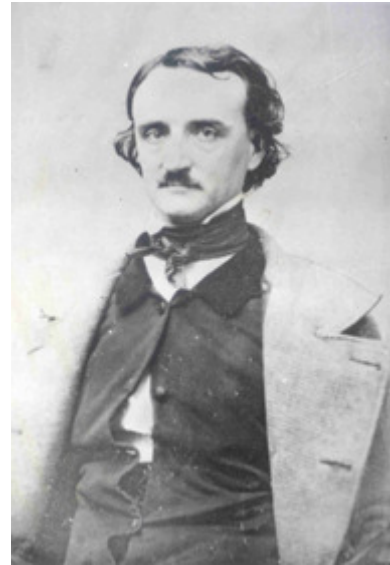
This anthology contains nine of Poe's best-known short stories. Among them are "**The Murders in the Rue Morgue**", a gripping 19<sup>th</sup> century detective story that provided the model for future mystery writers; "**The Fall of the House of Usher**" and "**The Masque of the Red Death**" pervaded with eerie thoughts and fears; "**The Tell-Tale Heart**" and "**The Cask of Amontillado**" masterpieces of wickedness and crime; "**The Pit and the Pendulum**" with its specter of horrifying death; and "**The Gold-Bug**" a fascinating detective story that combines romance and adventure in an absorbing tale of buried treasure.

## About Edgar Allan Poe (January 19, 1809 – October 7, 1849)

From The Poe Museum website

<http://www.poemuseum.org/life.php>

Edgar Allan Poe was born January 19, 1809 in Boston, where his British mother had been employed as an actress. His father David Poe abandoned the family soon after Edgar was born, and died of alcoholism several years later. Elizabeth Arnold Poe died in Richmond on December 8, 1811, and Edgar was taken into the family of John Allan, a member of the firm of Ellis and Allan, tobacco-merchants.



After attending schools in England and Richmond, young Poe registered at the University of Virginia on February 14, 1826, the second session of the University. He lived in Room 13, West Range. He became an active member of the Jefferson Literary Society, and passed his courses with good grades at the end of the session in December. Mr. Allan failed to give him enough money for necessary expenses, and Poe made debts of which his so-called father did not approve. When Mr. Allan refused to let him return to the University, a quarrel ensued, and Poe was driven from the Allan home without money. Mr. Allan probably sent him a little money later, and Poe went to Boston. There he published a little volume of poetry, *Tamerlane and Other Poems*. It is such a rare book now that a single copy has sold for \$200,000.00

Moldavia, Poe's last home in Richmond located at Fifth and Main Streets. John Allan bought the house in 1825, and Edgar lived there before entering the University of Virginia in 1826.

In Boston on May 26, 1827, Poe enlisted in The United States Army as a private using the name Edgar A. Perry. After two years of service, during which he was promoted to the rank of Sergeant-major, he secured, with Mr. Allan's aid, a discharge from the Army and went to Baltimore. He lived there with his aunt, Mrs. Maria Poe Clemm, on the small amounts of money sent by Mr. Allan until he received an appointment to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.

Meanwhile, Poe published a second book of poetry in 1829: *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane and Minor Poems*. After another quarrel with Allan (who had married a second wife in 1830), Poe no longer received aid from his foster father. Poe then took the only method of release from the Academy, and got himself dismissed on March 6, 1831.

Soon after Poe left West Point, a third volume appeared: *Poems by Edgar Allan Poe, Second Edition*.

While living in Baltimore with his aunt, Mrs. Clemm, young Poe began writing prose tales. Five of these appeared in the *Philadelphia Saturday Courier* in 1832.

With the December issue of 1835, Poe began editing the Southern Literary Messenger for Thomas W. White in Richmond; he held this position until January, 1837. During this time, Poe married his 13 year old first cousin, Virginia Clemm in Richmond on May 16, 1836.



Poe's slashing reviews and sensational tales made him widely known as an author; however, he failed to find a publisher for a volume of burlesque tales, Tales of the Folio Club. Harpers did, however, print his book-length narrative, Arthur Gordon Pym in July of 1838.

Little is known about Poe's life after he left the Messenger; however, in 1838 he went to Philadelphia where he lived for six years. He was an editor of Burton's Gentleman's Magazine from July, 1839 to June, 1840, and of Graham's Magazine from April, 1841 to May, 1842. In April, 1844, with barely car fare for his family of three, [including his aunt, Virginia's mother, who lived with them], Poe went to New York where he found work on the New York Evening Mirror.

In 1840, Poe's Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque was published in two volumes in Philadelphia. In 1845, Poe became famous with the spectacular success of his poem "The Raven," and in March of that year, he joined C. F. Briggs in an effort to publish The Broadway Journal. Also in 1845, Wiley and Putnam issued Tales by Edgar A. Poe and The Raven and Other Poems.

The year 1846 was a tragic one. Poe rented the little cottage at Fordham, where he lived the last three years of his life. The Broadway Journal failed, and Virginia became very ill and died on January 30, 1847. After his wife's death, Poe perhaps yielded more often to a weakness for drink, which had beset him at intervals since early manhood. He was unable to take even a little alcohol without a change of personality, and any excess was accompanied by physical prostration. Throughout his life those illnesses had interfered with his success as an editor, and had given him a reputation for intemperateness that he scarcely deserved.

In his latter years, Poe was interested in several women. They included the poetess, Mrs. Sarah Helen Whitman, Mrs. Charles Richmond, and the widow, Mrs. Sarah Elmira Shelton, whom he had known in his boyhood as Miss Royster.

In personal appearance, Poe was a quiet, shy-looking but handsome man; he was slightly built, and was five feet, eight inches in height. His mouth was considered beautiful. His eyes, with long dark lashes, were hazel-gray

There are conflicting accounts surrounding the last days of Edgar Allan Poe and the cause of his death. Some say he died from alcoholism, some claim he was murdered, and various diseases have also been attributed. Most say he was found unconscious in the street and admitted to the Washington College Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland. He died soon after, on 7 October 1849, and was buried unceremoniously in an unmarked grave in the Old Westminster Burying Ground of Baltimore. On this original site now stands a stone with a carving of a raven and the inscription;



Quoth the Raven, Nevermore  
Original Burial Place of Edgar Allan Poe

From October 9, 1849 Until November 17, 1875  
Mrs. Marian Clemm, His Mother-In-Law  
Lies Upon His Right And Virginia Poe His Wife, Upon His Left. Under The  
Monument Erected To Him In This Cemetery

In a dedication ceremony in 1875, Poe's remains were reinterred with his aunt Maria Clemm's in the Poe Memorial Grave which stands in the cemetery's corner at Fayette and Greene Streets. A bas-relief bust of Poe adorns the marble and granite monument which is simply inscribed with the birth and death dates of Poe (although his birthdate is wrong), Maria, and Virginia who, in 1885, was reinterred with her husband and mother. Letters from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Lord Alfred Tennyson were read, and Walt Whitman attended. The mysterious Poe Toaster visits Poe's grave on his birthdays and leaves a partially filled bottle of cognac and three roses.

***All that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream*** -- Poe

### **Selected Bibliography**

The works of American author Edgar Allan Poe include many poems, short stories, and one novel. His fiction spans multiple genres, including horror fiction, adventure, science fiction, and detective fiction, a genre he is credited with inventing. These works are generally considered part of the Dark romanticism movement. He is further credited with contributing to the emerging genre of science fiction. He was the first well-known American writer to try to earn a living through writing alone, resulting in a financially difficult life and career.

Link to text of Poe's most famous stories and poems  
<http://www.poemuseum.org/works.php>

### **Tales/Short Stories**

"The Black Cat"  
"The Cask of Amontillado"  
"A Descent into the Maelström"  
"The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar"  
"The Fall of the House of Usher"  
"The Gold-Bug"  
"Hop-Frog"  
"Ligeia"  
"The Masque of the Red Death"  
"The Murders in the Rue Morgue"  
"The Mystery of Marie Rogêt"  
"The Oval Portrait"  
"The Pit and the Pendulum"  
"The Premature Burial"  
"The Purloined Letter"  
"The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether"  
"The Tell-Tale Heart"

## **Poetry**

"Al Aaraaf"  
"Annabel Lee"  
"The Bells"  
"The City in the Sea"  
"The Conqueror Worm"  
"A Dream Within a Dream"  
"Eldorado"  
"Eulalie"  
"The Haunted Palace"  
"To Helen"  
"Lenore"  
"Tamerlane"  
"The Raven"  
"Ulalume"

## **Other works**

Politian (1835) – Poe's only play  
The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket (1838) – Poe's only novel  
"The Balloon-Hoax" (1844) – A journalistic hoax printed as a true story  
"The Philosophy of Composition" (1846) – Essay  
Eureka: A Prose Poem (1848) – Essay  
"The Poetic Principle" (1848) – Essay  
"The Light-House" (1849) – Poe's last incomplete work

## **More Online Information about Edgar Allan Poe**

Poe National Historic Site in Philadelphia

<http://www.nps.gov/ner/edal/>

The Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore

<http://www.eapoe.org/>

Edgar Allan Poe Museum of Richmond

<http://www.poemuseum.org/index.php>

Edgar Allan Poe Cummings study guides

<http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/index.html#PoeStudy>

Poe stories celebrated

<http://www.poestories.com/>

Knowing Poe -Great interactive site

[http://knowingpoe.thinkport.org/default\\_flash.asp](http://knowingpoe.thinkport.org/default_flash.asp)

## ***Ligeia (1838)***

"Ligeia" is an early short story by American writer Edgar Allan Poe, first published in 1838. The story follows an unnamed narrator and his wife Ligeia, a beautiful and intelligent raven-haired woman. She falls ill, composes "The Conqueror Worm", and quotes lines attributed to Joseph Glanvill (which suggest that life is sustainable only through willpower) shortly before dying. After her death, the narrator marries the Lady Rowena. Rowena becomes ill and she dies as well. The distraught narrator stays with her body overnight and watches as Rowena slowly comes back from the dead – though she has transformed into Ligeia.

### **Plot summary**

The unnamed narrator describes the qualities of Ligeia, a beautiful, passionate and intellectual woman, raven-haired and dark-eyed, that he thinks he remembers meeting "in some large, old decaying city near the Rhine." He is unable to recall anything about the history of Ligeia, including her family's name, but remembers her beautiful appearance. Her beauty, however, is not conventional. He describes her as emaciated, with some "strangeness." He describes her face in detail, from her "faultless" forehead to the "divine orbs" of her eyes. They marry, and Ligeia impresses her husband with her immense knowledge of physical and mathematical science, and her proficiency in classical languages. She begins to show her husband her knowledge of metaphysical and "forbidden" wisdom.

After an unspecified length of time Ligeia becomes ill, struggles internally with human mortality, and ultimately dies. The narrator, grief-stricken, buys and refurbishes an abbey in England. He soon enters into a loveless marriage with "the fair-haired and blue-eyed Lady Rowena Trevanion, of Tremaine."

In the second month of the marriage, Rowena begins to suffer from worsening fever and anxiety. One night, when she is about to faint, the narrator pours her a goblet of wine. Drugged with opium, he sees (or thinks he sees) drops of "a brilliant and ruby colored fluid" fall into the goblet. Her condition rapidly worsens, and a few days later she dies and her body is wrapped for burial.

As the narrator keeps vigil overnight, he notices a brief return of color to Rowena's cheeks. She repeatedly shows signs of reviving, before relapsing into apparent death. As he attempts resuscitation, the revivals become progressively stronger, but the relapses more final. As dawn breaks, and the narrator is sitting emotionally exhausted from the night's struggle, the shrouded body revives once more, stands and walks into the middle of the room. When he touches the figure, its head bandages fall away to reveal masses of raven hair and dark eyes: Rowena has transformed into Ligeia.

### **Analysis**

The narrator relies on Ligeia as if he were a child, looking on her with "child-like confidence." On her death, he is "a child groping benighted" with "childlike perversity." It has been suggested that, despite this dependency on her, the narrator has a simultaneous desire to forget her (perhaps causing him to be unable to love Rowena).

This desire to forget is exemplified in his inability to recall Ligeia's last name. The story tells us however that the narrator never knew her last name at all.

Ligeia, the narrator tells us, is extremely intelligent, "such as I have never known in a woman." Most importantly, she served as the narrator's teacher in "metaphysical investigation", passing on "wisdom too divinely precious not to be forbidden!" So, her knowledge in mysticism, combined with an intense desire for life may have led to her revival. The opening epigraph, which is repeated in the body of the story, is attributed to Joseph Glanvill, Poe may have fabricated the quote and attached Glanvill's name in order to associate with Glanvill's belief in witchcraft.

Ligeia and Rowena serve as aesthetic opposites: Ligeia is raven-haired from a city by the Rhine while Rowena (presumably named after the character in Ivanhoe) is a blonde Anglo-Saxon. This symbolic opposition implies the contrast between German and English romanticism.

Exactly what Poe was trying to say in the metamorphosis scene has been debated, fueled in part by one of Poe's personal letters in which he denies that Ligeia was reborn in Rowena's body (a statement he later retracts). If Rowena had actually transformed into the dead Ligeia, it is only evidenced in the words of the narrator, leaving room to question its validity. The narrator has already been established as an opium addict, making him an unreliable narrator. In fact, perhaps tellingly, the narrator early in the story describes Ligeia's beauty as "the radiance of an opium-dream." He also tells us that "in the excitement of my opium dreams, I would call aloud upon her name, during the silence of the night... as if... I could restore her to the pathway she had abandoned... upon the earth." This may be interpreted as evidence that Ligeia's return was nothing more than a drug-induced hallucination.

If Ligeia's return from death is literal, however, it seems to stem from her assertion that a person dies only by a weak will. This implies, then, that a strong will can keep someone alive. It is unclear, however, if it is Ligeia's will or her husband's will that brings Ligeia back from the dead

## Themes

**An All-Consuming Love That Does Not Die .....**Whether Ligeia's reincarnation was an opium-induced hallucination or an actual event does not matter. What matters is that undying love caused her actual or imagined reappearance. Either the narrator willed his beloved back to life (as a phantasm or in the flesh) or Ligeia willed herself back to life. Poe stressed the power of the human will in the quotation that precedes the story

## **The Destructive Power of Obsessive Longing**

.....The narrator becomes addicted to opium to escape (or perhaps intensify) his abnormal preoccupation with the memory of Ligeia, manifested by his continued mourning of her death. He isolates himself in a gloomy abbey, then takes another wife, a woman he does not love. Still, he can do nothing but think of Ligeia. In time, he plunges ever deeper into his addiction. Ultimately, if one interprets his perception of Ligeia's "reincarnation" as a hallucination, he appears to go insane.

## Discussion questions

Two good starting places for the discussion of "Ligeia" are the personality of the narrator and the explanation of what happened.

Do readers feel that Ligeia came back to life?

If so, by what agency, her own will or her husband's will?

Or is the story a record of an opium dream?

Readers could fruitfully debate the evidences for both interpretations and maybe see how Poe writes the tale in a way that resists closure.

Is the story about a supernatural event or a psychological disturbance?

How would you describe the narrator? What are his specific traits? Too often readers may be satisfied at stamping the narrator as "crazy" and delve no further

What similarity do you find between the subjects of "The Raven" and the short story "Ligeia"?

What are the narrator's feelings toward Ligeia? How does he describe her and what do these descriptions suggest about his character?

How does the quotation attributed to Joseph Glanville comment on the action of the story? Besides in the epigraph, where else does this quote appear, and what is its significance each time?

.Why does the narrator marry Rowena? How does he feel about her, and why?

How do the decorations in the bridal chamber reflect the narrator's psychological state?

How do we explain the bizarre and horrific ending of the story?

Poe featured the death and return to life of beautiful women in numerous stories. Discuss how true events in Poe's real life influenced this obsession in his writing.

## ***The Fall of the House of Usher (1839)***

### **Plot Summary**

The tale opens with the unnamed narrator arriving at the house of his boyhood friend, Roderick Usher, having received a letter from him in a distant part of the country complaining of an illness and asking for his comfort., Roderick's symptoms can be described according to its terminology. They include hyperesthesia (hypersensitivity to light, sounds, smells, and tastes), hypochondria (an excessive preoccupation or worry about having a serious illness), and acute anxiety. It is revealed that Roderick's twin sister, Madeline, is also ill and falls into cataleptic, death-like trances. The narrator is impressed with Roderick's paintings, and attempts to cheer him by reading with him and listening to his improvised musical compositions on the guitar. Roderick sings "The Haunted Palace", then tells the narrator that he believes the house he lives in to be sentient, and that this sentience arises from the arrangement of the masonry and vegetation surrounding it.

Roderick later informs the narrator that his sister has died and insists that she be entombed for two weeks in a vault in the house before being permanently buried. The narrator helps Roderick put the body in the tomb, and he notes that Madeline has rosy cheeks, as some do after death. They inter her, but over the next week both Roderick and the narrator find themselves becoming increasingly agitated for no apparent reason. A storm begins. Roderick comes to the narrator's bedroom, which is situated directly above the vault, and throws open his window to the storm.

The narrator attempts to calm Roderick by reading aloud *The Mad Trist*, a novel involving a knight named Ethelred. As the narrator reads of the knight's forcible entry into the dwelling, cracking and ripping sounds are heard somewhere in the house.. Roderick becomes increasingly hysterical, and eventually exclaims that these sounds are being made by his sister, who was in fact alive when she was entombed and that Roderick knew that she was alive. The bedroom door is then blown open to reveal Madeline standing there. She falls on her brother, and both land on the floor as corpses. The narrator then flees the house, and, as he does so, notices a flash of light causing him to look back upon the House of Usher, in time to watch it break in two, the fragments sinking into the tarn.

### **Analysis**

"The Fall of the House of Usher" shows Poe's ability to create an emotional tone in his work, specifically feelings of fear, doom, and guilt. These emotions center on Roderick Usher who, like many Poe characters, suffers from an unnamed disease. Like the narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart", his disease causes his hyperactive senses. The illness manifests physically but is based in Roderick's mental or even moral state. He is sick, it is suggested, because he expects to be sick based on his family's history of illness and is, therefore, essentially a hypochondriac. Similarly, he buries his sister alive because he expects to bury her alive, creating his own self-fulfilling prophecy.

The House of Usher, itself doubly referring both to the actual structure and the family, plays a significant role in the story. It is the first "character" that the narrator introduces to the reader, presented with a humanized description: its windows are described as "eye-

like" twice in the first paragraph. The fissure that develops in its side is symbolic of the decay of the Usher family and the house "dies" along with the two Usher siblings. This connection was emphasized in Roderick's poem "The Haunted Palace" which seems to be a direct reference to the house that foreshadows doom.

The explicit psychological dimension of this tale has prompted many critics to analyze it as a description of the human psyche, comparing, for instance, the House to the unconscious, and its central crack to the personality split which is called dissociative identity disorder. Mental disorder is also evoked through the themes of melancholy, possible incest, and vampirism. An incestuous relationship between Roderick and Madeline is not explicitly stated, but seems implied by the strange attachment between the two.

### **Major themes**

The doppelganger theme, prominent in such works of Poe as "William Wilson", appears as well in "The Fall of the House of Usher". The reflection of the house in the tarn is described in the opening paragraph, and "a striking similitude between the brother and sister" is mentioned when Madeline "dies". Poe uses the theme of the death and resurrection of a woman here as well as in "Ligeia". The theme of mental illness is explored in this work, as in numerous other tales.

### **Discussion questions**

What feelings does the narrator have when he looks at the House of Usher? Can he explain what causes these feelings

Why has the narrator come to visit this house? What is his relationship to its proprietor, Roderick Usher?

What is unusual about the history of the Usher family?

What does the narrator notice about the air surrounding the house? Does he trust his observation? What does he notice about the stones in the walls?

What kind of illness does Roderick suffer from? What are his symptoms? What kind of illness does his sister Madeline Usher have?

What are the qualities of Roderick's paintings? What example does the narrator describe? What do you think it means?

In Roderick's song "The Haunted Palace" the narrator says he first perceived Roderick's awareness of "the tottering of his lofty reason upon her throne." What does the narrator mean? What story does the song tell?

What is the meaning of this story and what does it suggest about Roderick's mental state?

What opinion does Roderick express about the "sentience" of his family mansion? What is the evidence of this sentience and what is its possible cause?

After Madeline's death, why does Roderick decide to keep her body temporarily in one of the walls of the house?

What fact is revealed about the relationship between Madeline and Roderick, when the narrator and Roderick place Madeline in this temporary tomb?

On the stormy night about a week later, what does Roderick see out the window that terrifies him? How does the narrator explain this phenomenon rationally?

Why does the narrator read a book to Roderick? What book does he choose and why? What kind of story does it tell?

If Roderick knew that his sister was alive in the tomb, why didn't he release her?

In what ways does the conclusion of Poe's story relate to the title "The Fall of the House of Usher"? What is the light that the narrator sees ?

### ***The Murders in the Rue Morgue (1841)***

"The Murders in the Rue Morgue" is a short story by Edgar Allan Poe published in Graham's Magazine in 1841. It has been claimed as the first detective story; Poe referred to it as one of his "tales of ratiocination". C. Auguste Dupin is a man in Paris who solves the mysterious brutal murder of two women. As the first true detective in fiction, the Dupin character established many literary devices which would be used in future fictional detectives including Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot. Many later characters, for example, follow Poe's model of the brilliant detective, his personal friend who serves as narrator, and the final revelation being presented before the reasoning that leads up to it

#### **Plot summary**

The story surrounds the baffling double murder of Madame L'Españaye and her daughter in the Rue Morgue, a fictional street in Paris. Newspaper accounts of the murder reveal that the mother's throat is so badly cut that her head is barely attached and the daughter, after being strangled, has been stuffed into the chimney. The murder occurs in an inaccessible room on the fourth floor locked from the inside. Neighbors who hear the murder give contradictory accounts, claiming they hear the murderer speaking a different language. The speech is unclear, and they admit to not knowing the language they claim to have heard.

Paris natives Dupin and his friend, the unnamed narrator of the story, read these newspaper accounts with interest. The two live in seclusion and allow no visitors. They have cut off contact with "former associates" and venture outside only at night. When a man named Adolphe Le Bon has been imprisoned though no evidence exists pointing to his guilt, Dupin is so intrigued that he offers his services to "G-", the prefect of police.

Because none of the witnesses can agree on the language the murderer spoke, Dupin concludes they were not hearing a human voice at all. He finds a hair at the scene of the murder that is quite unusual; "this is no human hair", he concludes. Dupin puts an advertisement in the newspaper asking if anyone has lost an "Ourang-Outang". The ad is answered by a sailor who comes to Dupin at his home. The sailor offers a reward for the orangutan's return; Dupin asks for all the information the sailor has about the murders in the Rue Morgue. The sailor reveals that he had been keeping a captive orangutan obtained while ashore in Borneo. The animal escaped with the sailor's shaving straight razor. When he pursued the orangutan, it escaped by scaling a wall and climbing up a lightning rod, entering the apartment in the Rue Morgue through a window.

Once in the room, the surprised Madame L'Espanaye could not defend herself as the orangutan attempted to shave her in imitation of the sailor's daily routine. The bloody deed incited it to fury and it squeezed the daughter's throat until she died. The orangutan then became aware of its master's whip, which it feared, and it attempted to hide the body by stuffing it into the chimney. The sailor, aware of the "murder", panicked and fled, allowing the orangutan to escape. The prefect of police, upon hearing this story, mentions that people should mind their own business. Dupin responds that G— is "too cunning to be profound

## **Analysis**

Poe said of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue", "its theme was the exercise of ingenuity in detecting a murderer." Dupin is not a professional detective; he decides to investigate the murders in the Rue Morgue for his personal amusement. He also has a desire for truth and to prove a falsely accused man innocent. His interests are not financial and he even declines a monetary reward from the owner of the orangutan. The revelation of the actual murderer removes the crime, as neither the orangutan nor its owner can be held responsible. Later detective stories would have set up M. Le Bon, the suspect who is arrested, as appearing guilty as a red herring, though Poe chose not to.

Dupin's method emphasizes the importance of reading and the written word. The newspaper accounts pique his curiosity; he learns about orangutans from a written account by "Cuvier" – possibly Georges Cuvier, the French zoologist. This method also engages the reader, who follows along by reading the clues himself. Poe wrote "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" at a time when crime was at the forefront in people's minds due to urban development. London had recently established its first professional police force and American cities were beginning to focus on scientific police work as newspapers reported murders and criminal trials.

"The Murders in the Rue Morgue" establishes an urban theme which will be reused several times in Poe's fiction, in particular "The Man of the Crowd", likely inspired by Poe's time living in Philadelphia. The tale has an underlying metaphor

for the battle of brains vs. brawn. Physical strength, depicted as the orangutan as well as its owner, stand for violence: the orangutan is a murderer, while its owner admits he has abused the animal with a whip. The analyst's brainpower overcomes their violence. The story also contains Poe's often-used theme of the death of a beautiful woman.

### Discussion Questions

The title of this story is "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," but the narrator spends nearly the first third of the story on chess players, whist players, and Chantilly the comic/tragic actor. What is the purpose of this long introduction to Dupin's method? What would be the effect of jumping right into the murder plot?

In explaining his logic for his "tales of ratiocination" (see our "In a Nutshell" section), Poe talks about presenting clues for the reader to reason along with his protagonist. Do we have the clues we need to solve this mystery before the sailor appears to explain all? What is the purpose of presenting so much detail to the reader (e.g., the three spoons of *metal d'Alger*) that never reappear in the story?

What are some reasons why Poe might not spend a lot of time giving insights into Dupin's feelings. What effect does this have on the reader's engagement with the story? Does it make for a satisfying reading experience? How can we compare and contrast Dupin's characterization with later classic detectives like Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes or Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot?

The narrator describes Dupin as a perfect model of the "old philosophy of the Bi-Part soul". The two parts of the soul that the narrator identifies are 1) imaginative or "creative," and 2) rational or "resolvent." Dupin may contain these two parts *within* his character, but creativity and reason also seem to be split *between* characters, such as the narrator and Dupin or the Prefect of Police and Dupin. What role do these character foils play in proving the story's point about analytical versus analytical/ingenious minds? How effective is "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" at making the case for ingenuity that it sets out to make?

What different kinds of minds does this illustrate? What kind of man is Dupin?

What makes Dupin characteristic of "the detective"? How is the narrator different?

How do they live? Why? What is the purpose of Dupin's explanation of his powers of deduction or observation on the topic of Chantilly?

Do the newspaper "clues" give the reader a chance to practice detection? Why does Dupin get involved in the murder case?

What do the police do wrong? What is the only situation Dupin rules out?

What detective fiction conventions are used?

Is there a first and second story?

## ***The Masque of the Red Death (1842)***

### **Plot summary**

The story takes place at the castellated abbey of the "happy and dauntless and sagacious" Prince Prospero. Prospero and one thousand other nobles have taken refuge in this walled abbey to escape the Red Death, a terrible plague that has swept over the land. The symptoms of the Red Death are gruesome: the victim is overcome by convulsive agony and sweats blood instead of water. The plague is said to kill within half an hour. Prospero and his court are presented as indifferent to the sufferings of the population at large, intending to await the end of the plague in luxury and safety behind the walls of their secure refuge, having welded the doors shut.

One night, Prospero holds a masquerade ball to entertain his guests in seven colored rooms of the abbey. Six of the rooms are each decorated and illuminated in a specific color: blue, purple, green, orange, white, and violet. The last room is decorated in black and is illuminated by a blood-red light; because of this chilling pair of colors, few guests are brave enough to venture into the seventh room. The room is also the location of a large ebony clock that ominously clangs at each hour, upon which everyone stops talking and the orchestra stops playing. At the chiming of midnight, Prospero notices one figure in a dark, blood-spattered robe resembling a funeral shroud, with an extremely lifelike mask resembling a stiffened corpse, and with the traits of the Red Death, which all at the ball have been desperate to escape. Gravely insulted, Prospero demands to know the identity of the mysterious guest so that they can hang him. When none dares to approach the figure, instead letting him pass through the seven chambers, the prince pursues him with a drawn dagger until he is cornered in the seventh room, the black room with the scarlet-tinted windows. When the figure turns to face him, the Prince falls dead. The enraged and terrified revelers surge into the black room and remove the mask, only to find that there is no face underneath it. Only then do they realize that the figure is the Red Death itself, and all of the guests contract and succumb to the disease. The final line of the story sums up: "And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all."

### **Analysis**

Poe adopts many conventions of traditional Gothic fiction, including the setting of a castle. The multiple single-toned rooms may be representative of the human mind, showing different personality types. The imagery of blood and time throughout also indicate corporeality. The plague may, in fact, represent typical attributes of human life and mortality. This would imply the entire story is an allegory about man's futile attempts to stave off death; this interpretation is commonly accepted. However, there is much dispute over how to interpret "The Masque of the Red Death"; some suggest it is not allegorical, especially due to Poe's admission of a distaste for didacticism in literature. If the story really does have a moral, Poe does not explicitly state that moral in the text.

Blood, emphasized throughout the tale along with the color red, serves as a dual symbol, representing both death and life. This is emphasized by the masked figure – never explicitly stated to be the Red Death but only a reveler in a costume of the Red Death – making his initial appearance in the easternmost room, which is colored blue, a color most often associated with birth

Though Prospero's castle is supposed to serve as a protective location, meant to keep the sickness out, it is ultimately an oppressive structure. Its maze-like design and tall and narrow windows become almost burlesque in the final black room, so oppressive that "there were few of the company bold enough to set foot within its precincts at all." Additionally, the castle is meant to be a closed space, but the stranger is still able to get in, suggesting that control is an illusion.

Like many of Poe's tales, "The Masque of the Red Death" has also been interpreted autobiographically. In this point of view, Prince Prospero is Poe as a wealthy young man, part of a distinguished family much like Poe's foster parents the Allans. Under this interpretation, Poe is seeking refuge from the dangers of the outside world, and his portrayal of himself as the only person willing to confront the stranger is emblematic of Poe's rush towards inescapable dangers in his own life.

### **The "Red Death"**

The disease the Red Death is fictitious. Poe describes it as causing "sharp pains, and sudden dizziness, and profuse bleeding at the pores" leading to death in half an hour. It is likely that the disease was inspired by tuberculosis (or consumption, as it was known then), since Poe's wife Virginia was suffering from the disease at the time the story was written. Like the character of Prince Prospero, Poe tried to ignore the fatality of the disease. Poe's mother Eliza, brother William Henry Leonard Poe, and foster mother Frances Allan had also died of tuberculosis. Alternatively, the Red Death may refer to cholera; Poe would have witnessed an epidemic of cholera in Baltimore, Maryland in 1831. Others have suggested that the plague is actually Bubonic plague or the Black death, by the climax of the story featuring the "Red" Death in the "black" room

### **Discussion Questions**

.Is Prince Prospero a tragic hero, or a fool? What is his primary flaw?

Is Prince Prospero Poe? If "The Masque of the Red Death" is a dream, whose dream?

Is "The Masque of the Red Death" apocalyptic? Does it present a challenge to traditional ideas of the end of the world, or is it a fairly traditional vision itself?

Why might "The Masque of the Red Death" be called a twisted version of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*? What similarities are there? What differences? Do they share a message?

.Is fear Poe's intended effect in "The Masque of the Red Death"? How does social-economic status affect if one survives or falls victim to the Red Death?

There is no allusion to how "Red Death" originally began, only to how it spreads. Why

What do you make of the colors of the chambers? Why an emphasis on the most eastern chamber being blue and most western being black velvet and red.

What is time's importance to the story? What about the clock striking the hours? How do the prince and his guests act like a disease in a body? How do you think the Red Death entered the Prince's abbey that was sealed in "deep seclusion" from the rest of the world?

## ***The Pit and the Pendulum (1842)***

### **Plot summary**

The story takes place during the Spanish Inquisition. At the beginning of the story an unnamed narrator is brought to trial before various sinister judges. Poe provides no explanation of why he is there or for what he has been arrested. Before him are seven tall white candles on a table, and, as they melt, his hopes of survival also diminish. He is condemned to death and finds himself in a pitch black compartment. At first the prisoner thinks that he is locked in a tomb, but he discovers that he is in a cell. He decides to explore the cell by placing a hem from his robe against a wall so he can count the paces around the room; however, he faints before being able to measure the whole perimeter.

When the prisoner awakens he discovers food and water near by. He gets back up and tries to measure the prison again, finding that the perimeter measures one hundred steps. While crossing the room he slips on the hem of his robe. He discovers that if he had not tripped he would have walked into a deep pit with water residing on the bottom in the center of the cell.

After losing consciousness again the narrator discovers that the prison is slightly illuminated and that he is bound to a wooden board by ropes. He looks up in horror to see a painted picture of Father Time on the ceiling; hanging from the figure is a gigantic scythe-like pendulum swinging slowly back and forth. The pendulum is inexorably sliding downwards and will eventually kill him. However the condemned man is able to attract rats to his bonds with meat left for him to eat and they start chewing through the ropes. As the pendulum reaches a point inches above his heart, the prisoner breaks free of the ropes and watches as the pendulum is drawn back to the ceiling.

He sees that the walls have become red-hot and begun moving inwards, driving him into the center of the room and towards the brink of the pit. As he gazes into the pit, he decides that no fate could be worse than falling into it. It is implied by the text that the narrator fears what he sees at the bottom of the pit, or perhaps is frightened by its depth. The cause of his fear is not clearly stated. As the narrator moves back from the pit, he sees that the red-hot walls are leaving him with no foothold. As the prisoner begins to fall into the pit, he hears human voices. The walls rush back and an arm catches him. The French Army has taken Toledo and the Inquisition is in the hands of its enemies.

### **Historical context**

Poe takes dramatic license with history in this story. The rescuers are led by Napoleon's General Lasalle (who was not in command of the French occupation of Toledo) and this places the action during the Peninsular War, centuries after the height of the Spanish Inquisition and at a time when it had lost much of its power. The elaborate tortures of this story have no historic parallels in the activity of the Spanish Inquisition in any century. The Inquisition was abolished during the period of French intervention (1808–13).

### **Analysis**

"The Pit and the Pendulum" is a study of the effect terror has on the narrator starting with the opening line that suggests he is already suffering from death anxiety. What makes the story particularly effective at evoking terror is in its lack of supernatural

elements; the action taking place is real and not imagined. The "reality" of the story is enhanced through Poe's focus on sensation: the dungeon is airless and unlit, the narrator is subject to thirst and starvation, he is swarmed by rats, the closing walls are red-hot metal and, of course, the razor-sharp pendulum threatens to slice into the narrator. The narrator experiences the blade mostly through sound as it "hissed" while swinging. Poe further emphasizes this with words like "surcingle", "cessation", "crescent", "scimitar", and various forms of sibilance.

"The Pit and the Pendulum" is distinct among Poe's first-person narrations. Unlike the hypersensitive characters from other stories, such as Roderick in "The Fall of the House of Usher" or the narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart," this narrator claims to lose the capacity of sensation during the swoon that opens the story. He thus highlights his own unreliability in ways that other narrators resist or deny. Upon describing his possible loss of sensation, though, the narrator of "The Pit and the Pendulum" proceeds to convey the sensory details that he previously claims are beyond him. The narrative pattern resembles that of other stories, such as "The Tell-Tale Heart," to the extent that the narrator says and does the opposite of what he originally announces. This story diverges from the pattern, however, in that this narrator's descriptions are more objectively valid—**The story is also unusual among Poe's tales because it is hopeful.** Hope is manifest not only in the rescue that resolves the tale, but also in the tale's narrative strategy. The narrator maintains the capacity to recount faithfully and rationally his surroundings while also describing his own emotional turmoil. "The Pit and the Pendulum" also stands out as one of Poe's most historically specific tales

### Discussion Questions

The story never explains why the central character has been thrown into the pit. Why does Poe not inform the reader of his crime?

In "The Pit and the Pendulum," how does the narrator's clever idea of smearing food on the straps holding him down, so as to induce the hungry rats to chew him loose, anticipate the climactic maneuvers of heroes in suspense and adventure stories today?

There are many details in the story which suggest the state of sleep, such as references to dreams and occasions when the character himself falls asleep. How is it possible to think of this story as a fictional account of a nightmare?

The primary dilemma of the narrator is that he is caught between the bottomless pit and the slowly descending pendulum. What do these two horrors represent?

How does Poe use setting as a Gothic element in "The Pit and the Pendulum," "The Cask of Amontillado," and "The Masque of the Red Death"?

What is the role of history in "The Pit and the Pendulum"? How does the specificity of the tale's historical placement contribute to its aura of terror?

## ***The Tell-Tale Heart (1843)***

### **Plot summary**

"The Tell-Tale Heart" is a first-person narrative of an unnamed narrator who insists he is sane but suffering from a disease which causes "over-acuteness of the senses." The old man with whom he lives has a clouded, pale, blue "vulture-like" eye which so distresses the narrator that he plots to murder the old man, though the narrator states that he loves the old man, and hates only the eye. The narrator insists that his careful precision in committing the murder shows he cannot possibly be insane. For seven nights, the narrator opens the door of the old man's room, a process which takes him a full hour. The old man's vulture eye is always closed, making it impossible to "do the work".

On the eighth night, the old man awakens and sits up in his own bed while the narrator performs his nightly ritual. The narrator does not draw back and, after some time, decides to open his lantern. A single ray of light shines out and lands precisely on the old man's eye, revealing that it is wide open. Hearing the old man's heartbeat beating unusually and dangerously quick from terror, the narrator decides to strike, jumping out with a loud yell and smothering the old man with his own bed. The narrator chops up the body and conceals the pieces under the floorboards. The narrator makes certain to hide all signs of the crime. Even so, the old man's scream during the night causes a neighbor to report to the police. The narrator invites the three officers to look around. He claims that the screams heard were his own in a nightmare and that the man is absent in the country. Confident that they will not find any evidence of the murder, the narrator brings chairs for them and they sit in the old man's room, right where the body was concealed, yet they suspect nothing, as the narrator has a pleasant and easy manner about him.

The narrator begins to hear a faint noise. As the noise grows louder, the narrator comes to the conclusion that it is the heartbeat of the old man coming from under the floorboards. The sound increases steadily, though the officers seem to pay no attention to it. Shocked by the constant beating of the heart and a feeling that not only are the officers aware of the sound, but that they also suspect him, the narrator confesses to killing the old man and tells them to tear up the floorboards to reveal the body.

### **Analysis**

"The Tell-Tale Heart" uses an unreliable narrator. The exactness with which the narrator recounts murdering the old man, as if his stealthy way of executing the crime is evidence of his sanity, reveals his monomania and paranoia.

The story starts in the middle of the event. The opening is an in-progress conversation between the narrator and another person who is not identified in any way. It is speculated that the narrator is confessing to a prison warden, judge, newspaper reporter, doctor or psychiatrist. This sparks the narrator's need to explain himself in great detail. What follows is a study of the memory of terror as the narrator is relating events from the past. The first word of the story, "True!", is an admission of his guilt. This introduction also serves to grab the reader's attention and pull him/her into the story. From there, every word contributes to the purpose of moving the story forward, possibly making "The Tell-Tale Heart" the best example of Poe's theories on a perfect short story.

The story is driven not by the narrator's insistence on his innocence but by insistence on his sanity. This is self-destructive because in attempting to prove his sanity he fully admits he is guilty of murder. His denial of insanity is based on his systemic actions and precision. This rationality is undermined by his lack of motivation. Despite this, he says the idea of murder, "haunted me day and night." The story's final scene is a result of the narrator's feelings of guilt. Like many characters in the Gothic tradition, his nerves dictate his true nature. Despite his best efforts at defending himself, the narrator's "over acuteness of the senses," which help him hear the heart beating in the floorboards, is actually evidence that he is truly mad. Readers during Poe's time would have been especially interested amidst the controversy over the insanity defense in the 1840s.

The relationship between the old man and the narrator is ambiguous, as are their names, their occupations, and where they live. In fact, that ambiguity adds to the tale as an ironic counter to the strict attention to detail in the plot. The narrator may be a servant of the old man's or, as is more often assumed, his son. In that case, the "vulture" eye of the old man is symbolizing parental surveillance and possibly the paternal principles of right and wrong. The murder of the eye, then, is a removal of conscience. The eye may also represent secrecy, again playing on the ambiguous lack of detail about the old man or the narrator. Regardless, their relationship is incidental; the focus of the story is the perverse scheme to commit the perfect crime

### **Discussion Questions**

In "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat," what is the relationship between the confessions of Poe's guilty narrators and their claims to sanity and reliability?

Is the narrator of "William Wilson" insane? Compare and contrast him with the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart."

Many suggest that the narrator is of ambiguous gender. If the narrator was a woman, would this impact your interpretation? If so, how?

If this was a satire (a work critiquing certain aspects of society which the author thinks could use improvement), what might it be saying about American society in the 1840s?

The narrator claims he is not mad. What evidence do we have that he is?

Give examples of how Poe creates suspense in the story with language, sentence structure and even punctuation

The two controlling symbols in the story are the eye and the heart. What might these two symbols represent

How do the characters' choices influence the outcome in "The Tell-Tale Heart"?

What are the two things that the mad man believes will help him in accomplishing his goal of trying to convince the reader that he's sane, not mad?

Is the conflict in the story internal, external or both, and is it settled when the narrator kills the old man. Which is the climax?

## ***The Gold Bug (1843)***

### **Plot summary**

Legrand becomes obsessed with searching for treasure after being bitten by a scarab-like bug thought to be made of pure gold. He notifies his closest friend, the narrator, telling him to immediately come visit him at his home on Sullivan's Island in South Carolina. Upon the narrator's arrival, Legrand informs him that they are embarking upon a search for lost treasure along with his servant Jupiter. The narrator has intense doubt and questions if Legrand, who has recently lost his fortune, has gone insane.

Legrand captured the bug but let someone else borrow it; he draws a picture of the bug instead. The narrator says that the image looks like a skull. Legrand is insulted and inspects his own drawing before stuffing it into a drawer which he locks, to the narrator's confusion. Uncomfortable, the narrator leaves Legrand and returns home to Charleston.

A month later, Jupiter visits the narrator and asks him to return to Sullivan's Island on behalf of his master. Legrand, he says, has been acting strangely. When he arrives, Legrand tells the narrator they must go on an expedition along with the gold-bug tied to a string. Deep in the wilderness of the island, they find a tree, which Legrand orders Jupiter to climb with the gold-bug in tow. There, he finds a skull and Legrand tells him to drop the bug through one of the eye sockets. From where it falls, he determines the spot where they dig. They find treasure buried by the infamous pirate "Captain Kidd", estimated by the narrator to be worth a million and a half dollars. Once the treasure is secured, the man goes into an explanation of how he knew about the treasure's location, based on a set of occurrences that happened after the discovery of the gold bug.

The story involves cryptography with a detailed description of a method for solving a simple substitution cipher using letter frequencies. The cryptogram is:

53‡‡‡305))6\*;4826)4‡.)4‡);806\*;48‡8  
¶60))85;1‡(:;‡\*8‡83(88)5\*‡;46(;88\*96  
\*?:8)\*‡(;485);5\*‡2:\*‡(;4956\*2(5\*—4)8  
¶8\*;4069285);6‡8)4‡‡;1(‡9;48081;8:8‡  
1;48‡85;4)485‡528806\*81(‡9;48;(88;4  
(‡?34;48)4‡;161;:188;‡?;

The decoded message is:

A good glass in the bishop's hostel in the devil's seat  
forty-one degrees and thirteen minutes northeast and by north  
main branch seventh limb east side shoot from the left eye of the death's-head  
a bee line from the tree through the shot fifty feet out.

### **Analysis**

"The Gold-Bug" includes a cipher that uses polyphonic substitution. Though he did not invent "secret writing" or cryptography Poe certainly popularized it during his time. To most people in the 19th century, cryptography was mysterious and those able to break the codes were considered gifted with nearly supernatural ability. Poe had drawn attention to it as a novelty over four months in the Philadelphia publication Alexander's Weekly Messenger in 1840. He had asked readers to submit their own substitution ciphers, boasting he could solve all of them with little effort. Poe wrote "The Gold-Bug"

as one of the few pieces of literature to incorporate ciphers as part of the story. Poe's character Legrand's explanation of his ability to solve the cipher is very like Poe's explanation in "A Few Words on Secret Writing."

Poe's depiction of the African servant Jupiter is often considered stereotypical and racist from a modern perspective. Jupiter is depicted as superstitious and so lacking in intelligence that he cannot tell his left from his right. Black characters in fiction during this time period were not unusual, but Poe's choice to give him a speaking role was. Critics and scholars, however, question if Jupiter's accent was authentic or merely comic relief, suggesting it was not similar to accents used by blacks in Charleston but possibly inspired by Gullah.

Though the story is often included amongst the short list of detective stories by Poe, "The Gold-Bug" is not technically detective fiction because Legrand withholds the evidence until after the solution is given. Nevertheless, the Legrand character is often compared to Poe's fictional detective C. Auguste Dupin due to his use of "ratiocination."

"The Gold-Bug" inspired Robert Louis Stevenson in his novel about treasure-hunting, *Treasure Island* (1883). Stevenson acknowledged this influence: "I broke into the gallery of Mr. Poe... No doubt the skeleton [in my novel] is conveyed from Poe."

### **Discussion Questions**

Compare William Legrand to August Dupin as detectives.

Comment: As in "The Premature Burial," the first half of "The Gold Bug" creates what is in hindsight an extremely misleading atmosphere.

What is Jupiter's role in the story?

Were you surprised that Legrand found treasure? What was your opinion of Legrand and the narrator at the early part of the story?

How does Poe establish an atmosphere of fear and suspense in this short story?

Poe often uses unreliable narrators in his stories. Discuss the narrator and protagonist in *The Gold Bug*.

Is this a detective story? Why or why not? If not, how could you make it one?

Those Poe stories which highlight the abilities of one exceptional central character often make use of foils to emphasize his superiority. Discuss who are the foils in this story and *Murders in the Rue Morgue* and *The Purloined Letter*.

This is one of Poe's stories with some humor. Why and how does he use humor here? Contrast with the humor in *The Cask of Amontillado* and *The Purloined Letter*.

## ***The Black Cat (1843)***

### **Plot Summary**

The story is presented as a first-person narrative using an unreliable narrator. The narrator tells us that from an early age he has loved animals. He and his wife have many pets, including a large black cat named Pluto. This cat is especially fond of the narrator and vice versa. Their mutual friendship lasts for several years, until the narrator becomes an alcoholic. One night, after coming home intoxicated, he believes the cat is avoiding him. When he tries to seize it, the panicked cat bites the narrator, and in a fit of rage, he seizes the animal, pulls a pen-knife from his pocket, and deliberately gouges out the cat's eye.

From that moment onward, the cat flees in terror at his master's approach. At first, the narrator is remorseful and regrets his cruelty. "But this feeling soon gave place to irritation. And then came, as if to my final and irrevocable overthrow, the spirit of PERVERSENESS." He takes the cat out in the garden one morning and hangs it from a tree, where it dies. That very night, his house mysteriously catches fire, forcing the narrator, his wife and their servant to flee. The next day, the narrator returns to the ruins of his home to find, imprinted on the single wall that survived the fire, the figure of a gigantic cat, hanging by its neck from a rope.

At first, this image terrifies the narrator, but gradually he determines a logical explanation for it, that someone outside had thrown the dead cat into the bedroom to wake him up during the fire, and begins to miss Pluto. Some time later, he finds a similar cat in a tavern. It is the same size and color as the original and is even missing an eye. The only difference is a large white patch on the animal's chest. The narrator takes it home, but soon begins to loathe, even fear the creature. After a time, the white patch of fur begins to take shape and, to the narrator, forms the shape of the gallows.

Then, one day when the narrator and his wife are visiting the cellar in their new home, the cat gets under its master's feet and nearly trips him down the stairs. In a fury, the man grabs an axe and tries to kill the cat but is stopped by his wife. Enraged, he kills her with the axe instead. To conceal her body he removes bricks from a protrusion in the wall, places her body there, and repairs the hole. When the police came to investigate, they find nothing and the narrator goes free. The cat, which he intended to kill as well, has gone missing.

On the last day of the investigation, the narrator accompanies the police into the cellar. There, completely confident in his own safety, the narrator comments on the sturdiness of the building and raps upon the wall he had built around his wife's body. A wailing sound fills the room. The alarmed police tear down the wall and find the wife's corpse, and on her head, to the horror of the narrator, is the screeching black cat. As he words it: "I had walled the monster up within the tomb!"

### **Analysis**

Like the narrator in Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart", the narrator of "The Black Cat" has questionable sanity. Near the beginning of the tale, the narrator says he would be "mad

indeed" if he should expect a reader to believe the story, implying that he has already been accused of madness.

One of Poe's darkest tales, "The Black Cat" includes his strongest denouncement of alcohol. The narrator's perverse actions are brought on by his alcoholism, a "disease" and "fiend" which also destroys his personality. The use of the black cat evokes various superstitions, including the idea voiced by the narrator's wife that they are all witches in disguise. The titular cat is named Pluto after the Roman god of the Underworld.

"The Black Cat" is Poe's second psychological study of domestic violence and guilt (the first being "The Tell-Tale Heart"); however, this story does not deal with premeditated murder. The reader is told that the narrator appears to be a happily married man, who has always been exceedingly kind and gentle. He attributes his downfall to the "Fiend Intemperance" and "the spirit of perverseness." Perverseness, he believes, is "...one of the primitive impulses of the human heart." "Who has not, a hundred times, found himself committing a vile or a stupid action for no other reason than because he knows he should not?" Perverseness provides the rationale for otherwise unjustifiable acts, such as killing the first cat or rapping with his cane upon the plastered-up wall behind which stood his wife's corpse "...already greatly decayed and clotted with gore."

We might argue that what the narrator calls "perverseness" is actually conscience. Guilt about his alcoholism seems to the narrator the "perverseness" which causes him to maim and kill the first cat. Guilt about those actions indirectly leads to the murder of his wife who had shown him the gallows on the second cat's breast. The disclosure of the crime, as in "The Tell-Tale Heart," is caused by a warped sense of triumph and the conscience of the murderer.

What makes this story different from "The Tell-Tale Heart" is that Poe has added a new element to aid in evoking the dark side of the narrator, and that is the supernatural. Now the story has an added twist as the narrator hopes that the reader, like himself, will be convinced that these events were not "...an ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects."

### **Discussion Questions**

Compare and contrast the narrators of "The Black Cat" with the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart."

Discuss how the narrator and cat change in their relationship and in their being over the course of the story.

The themes of the interconnectedness of love and hate, life and death reappear. This story introduces supernatural elements. Why? Would this story have worked without them?

Do the narrators from "The Black Cat" and "The Cask of Amontillado" deserve what they get? Do the characters around them? What does this say about Poe's world view?

## ***The Cask of Amontillado (1846)***

### **Plot summary**

Montresor tells the story of the night that he took his revenge on Fortunato, a fellow nobleman. Angry over some unspecified insult, he plots to murder his friend during Carnival when the man is drunk, dizzy, and wearing a jester's motley.

He baits Fortunato by telling him he has obtained what he believes to be a pipe (about 130 gallons. 492 litres) of Amontillado, a rare and valuable sherry wine. He claims he wants his friend's expert opinion on the subject. Fortunato goes with Montresor to the wine cellars of the latter's palazzo, where they wander in the catacombs. Montresor offers De Grave, a wine, to Fortunato; at one point, Fortunato makes an elaborate, grotesque gesture with an upraised wine bottle. When Montresor appears not to recognize the gesture, Fortunato asks, "You are not of the masons?" Montresor says he is, and when Fortunato, disbelieving, requests a sign, Montresor displays a trowel he had been hiding.

Montresor warns Fortunato, who has a bad cough, of the damp, and suggests they go back; Fortunato insists on continuing, claiming that "[he] shall not die of a cough." During their walk, Montresor mentions his family coat of arms: a foot in a blue background crushing a snake whose fangs are embedded in the foot's heel, with the motto *Nemo me impune lacessit* ("No one attacks me with impunity"). When they come to a niche, Montresor tells his victim that the Amontillado is within. Fortunato enters and, drunk and unsuspecting, does not resist as Montresor quickly chains him to the wall. Montresor then declares that, since Fortunato won't go back, he must "positively leave [him]".

Montresor walls up the niche, entombing his friend alive. At first, Fortunato, who sobers up faster than Montresor anticipated he would, shakes the chains, trying to escape. The narrator stops working for a while so he can enjoy the sound. Fortunato then screams for help, but Montresor mocks his cries, knowing nobody can hear them. Fortunato laughs weakly and tries to pretend that he is the subject of a joke and that people will be waiting for him (including the Lady Fortunato). As the murderer finishes the topmost row of stones, Fortunato wails "For the love of God, Montresor!" Montresor replies, "Yes, for the love of God!" He listens for a reply but hears only the jester's bells ringing. Before placing the last stone, he drops a burning torch through the gap. He claims that he feels sick at heart, but dismisses this reaction as an effect of the dampness of the catacombs.

In the last few sentences, Montresor reveals that it has been 50 years since the murder, he has never been caught, and Fortunato's body still hangs from its chains in the niche where he left it. The murderer, seemingly unrepentant, ends the story by remarking: *In pace requiescat!* ("May he rest in peace!").

### **Analysis**

Although the subject matter of Poe's story is a murder, "The Cask of Amontillado" is not a tale of detection like "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" or "The Purloined Letter"; there is no investigation of Montresor's crime and the criminal himself explains how he committed the murder. The mystery in "The Cask of Amontillado" is in Montresor's

motive for murder. Without a detective in the story, it is up to the reader to solve the mystery.

Montresor never specifies his motive beyond than the vague "thousand injuries" to which he refers. Many commentators conclude that, lacking significant reason, Montresor must be insane, though even this is questionable because of the intricate details of the plot.

Though Fortunato is presented as a connoisseur of fine wine, his actions in the story make it questionable. For example, he comments on another nobleman being unable to distinguish Amontillado from Sherry when Amontillado is in fact a type of Sherry to begin with and treats De Grave, an expensive French wine, with very little regard by drinking it in a single gulp.

**A Dark Abyss** It is clear to the audience that Montresor is in a state of immense unhappiness. With the murder of Fortunato and walling up the body in the catacombs, the audience could imagine that the act is symbolic of Montresor walling up some aspect of himself.

Similar to the physical downward movement of Montresor, there is also a downward movement to his convictions both morally, psychologically and ethically. Though the audience is never directly informed of his convictions, his actions define his character and desperation.

**The Detachment of Montresor** Montresor doesn't exhibit any real emotion to indicate that he is remorseful or ashamed of what he has done. If anything, Montresor feels justified and, in a sense, relieved when the act is done.

His comments following the act are a bit ambiguous. There is one moment of hesitation, although it is difficult to distinguish if this moment is representative of a morbid sense of humor or genuine emotion. Montresor describes a low, guttural laugh that escapes him

### **Use of Irony**

Throughout the story, Poe uses verbal and dramatic irony to build suspense, foreshadow the ending, and add a touch of macabre humor. Here are some examples of irony:

**The Title:** The word cask, meaning wine barrel, is derived from the same root word used to form casket, meaning coffin. Thus, the cask figuratively represents Fortunato's casket.

**Fortunato's Name:** The Italian name Fortunato suggests good fortune, luck. However, Fortunato is anything but fortunate; he is going to his death.

**Fortunato's Costume:** Fortunato dresses as a court jester. His festive outfit contrasts with the ghastly fate that awaits him. From time to time, the bell on his cone-shaped hat jingles—a nice comic touch from Poe.

**Reference to Masons:** Fortunato asks Montresor whether his is a mason, meaning a member of the fraternal order of Freemasonry. Montresor says he is indeed a mason. However, he is using the word to mean a craftsman who builds with stone and mortar (because he will be building Fortunato's "tomb," a stone wall.)

Poe also uses irony frequently in the dialogue. For example, when Montresor runs into Fortunato, he says, "My dear Fortunato, you are luckily met." Later, when Montresor pretends to be concerned about Fortunato's hacking cough as they descend into the vaults, Montresor says, "We will go back. Your health is precious. You are rich, respected, admired, beloved; you are happy, as I once was. You are a man to be missed."

Fortunato then tells Montresor not to worry: "The cough is a mere nothing; it will not kill me. I will not die of a cough." To this reply, Montresor says, "True—true." The reader at this point can almost see a devilish gleam in Montresor's eyes, for he knows exactly how Fortunato will die." Later, Montresor opens a bottle of wine and toasts Fortunato: "To your long life," he says.

### **Discussion Questions**

Is Montresor insane, evil or both? Why is he confessing to this crime of 50 years ago? Is it remorse, bragging or some other motive?

Compare Montresor as narrator to the narrator in *The Tell Tale Heart*, *The Black Cat* and *William Wilson*? Whose motives can you understand most and least?

How does Poe portray family in "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Cask of Amontillado"?

Discuss the use of irony throughout this story, in characters' names, dialogue, turns of events. Can you give examples of other Poe stories that use irony?

Can you identify elements in the story that might be regarded as humorous? What does the humor add to the story? Can you think of any other stories, books, or movies that blend horror and humor in a similar way?

The narrator never specifies why he hates Fortunato. What is your general impression of Fortunato?

Do any of Fortunato's words and actions support the narrator's belief that Fortunato is worthy of hatred? Do any refute this?

Why do you think Poe chose to bring together in this story the dreariness of the catacombs and the festival atmosphere of the carnival?

How does the setting change during the course of the story and why?

What elements of the setting in this story would you consider typical of a horror story? What elements seem unusual?

## **Further Reading**

### **Biography, Critical Analysis and Non-Fiction**

Ackroyd, Peter, *Poe : a life cut short*

Barnes, Nigel *A dream within a dream : the life of Edgar Allan Poe*

Bloom's Literary Criticism *Edgar Allan Poe*

Burlingame, Jeff. *Edgar Allan Poe : "deep into that darkness peering"*

Lange, Karen E *Nevermore : a photobiography of Edgar Allan Poe .*

Meltzer, Milton, *Edgar Allan Poe : a biography*

Poe, Edgar Allan, *In the shadow of the master : classic tales (annotated)*

*Poe illustrated : art by Doré, Dulac, Rackham and others*

Silverman, Kenneth. *Edgar A. Poe: mournful and never-ending remembrance*

Sova, Dawn B. *Critical companion to Edgar Allan Poe : a literary reference to his life and work*

Stashower, Daniel. *Beautiful cigar girl : Mary Rogers, Edgar Allan Poe, and the invention of murder*

Strathern, Paul, *Poe in 90 minutes*

### **Fiction inspired and referencing Poe**

*On a raven's wing : new tales in honor of Edgar Allan Poe* by Mary Higgins Clark, Thomas H. Cook, James W. Hall, Rupert Holmes, S. J. Rozan, Don Winslow, and fourteen others

Bayard, Louis. *The pale blue eye*

Dobson, Joanne. *The raven and the nightingale : a modern mystery of Edgar Allan Poe*

Fairstein, Linda A. *Entombed*

Gray, John *Not quite dead*

Lippman, Laura, *In a strange city*

May, John *Poe & Fanny*

Pearl, Matthew. *The Poe shadow : a novel*

Rusch, Sheldon *For Edgar*

Schechter, Harold. *Edgar Allan Poe mystery series*

Silvis, Randall *On night's shore*

Taylor, Andrew, *The American boy* and *An unpardonable crime*