

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Best of Poe:

The Tell-Tale Heart, The Raven, The Cask of Amontillado, and 30 Others

by Edgar Allan Poe

written by Amber Reed

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The Best of Poe

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Objectives

By the end of this Unit, students will be able to:

1. recognize and describe various elements of Gothic horror and detective fiction.
2. define the following literary elements and point out examples of each: allusion, atmosphere, imagery, irony, metaphor, narrator, personification, setting, simile, theme, and tone.
3. understand and identify the characteristics that define empiricism and transcendentalism.
4. apply logic and systematic deduction to solve a puzzle.
5. understand how satire is used to ridicule folly, vice, and stupidity.
6. distinguish between the author and the narrator of a story.
7. identify the following sound devices:
 - alliteration
 - assonance
 - internal rhyme
 - onomatopoeia
 - repetition
 - rhyme
8. recognize an allegory.
9. define the vocabulary words listed in the study guide.
10. distinguish between a reliable and an unreliable narrator.
11. understand the fundamentals of ciphered code.
12. analyze a poem's meter and rhyme scheme.
13. appreciate the potential psychological influences of superstitious beliefs.

The Best of Poe

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Discuss the various elements of Gothic literature that arise in *The Fall of the House of Usher*.
2. Explain the metaphysical relationship between Roderick and Madeline Usher.
3. Define the fundamental characteristics of detective fiction as portrayed in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*.
4. Explain how *Never Bet the Devil Your Head* is a satirical response to critics who claim that Poe's work contains no moral lessons.
5. What is significant about the design and layout of the seven rooms in *The Masque of the Red Death*?
6. Explain the double meaning of the title, *The Masque of the Red Death*.
7. In *The Pit and the Pendulum*, how is the endurance of the human spirit celebrated?
8. How does the narrator's sensory perception increase the element of terror in *The Pit and the Pendulum*?
9. In *The Tell-Tale Heart*, what is the "Evil Eye"? How does the superstitious belief in the "Evil Eye" relate to the story?
10. In what way is the narrator established as unreliable in *The Tell-Tale Heart*?
11. In *The Gold-Bug*, what coincidences play a role in discovering the treasure?
12. Cite the similarities between *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Black Cat*.
13. How does Poe employ supernatural or unusual events to create suspense in *The Black Cat*?
14. What characteristics indicate that *A Tale of the Ragged Mountains* is a psychological story instead of a supernatural thriller?
15. In what ways does *The Premature Burial* differ from other short stories by Poe?
16. How does Poe utilize sensory images to enhance *The Premature Burial*?
17. How does the significance of the letter change throughout *The Purloined Letter*?

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The Fall of the House of Usher

Introduction

Written in 1839, *The Fall of the House of Usher* is an early example of Gothic horror fiction. This genre is defined by its grotesque, mysterious, and gloomy elements; Poe, however, ascribed the term “arabesque” to describe the complex and elaborate styles found within his story. *The Fall of the House of Usher* is written in a manner typical of Poe’s short stories. The narrator is cast into a psychologically intense situation involving supernatural forces; the final result is his mental collapse. In addition, the philosophies of Empiricism and Transcendentalism are successfully combined through Roderick Usher, who symbolizes the material world, and his sister, Madeline, who represents the spiritual. The tale exhibits Poe’s notion of “art for art’s sake,” a concept that removes social, political, and moral teachings from fiction. In place of these elements, a utilization of style and language create an intense atmosphere of terror. The story contains numerous elements characteristic of the Romantic Movement, such as a fascination with death, incest, and abnormal characters. The subject matter of Poe’s work, while peculiar to many modern readers, was written to appease the literary tastes of mid-nineteenth-century readers, and was considered conventional in its time.

Aspects of Poe’s personal life are apparent in *The Fall of the House of Usher*. His drinking habits and opium use may be associated with the comparison of Roderick Usher’s voice to “the lost drunkard, or the irreclaimable eater of opium.” The severity of Poe’s substance abuse, however, is a subject of debate.

1. The opening epigraph reads, “What song the Syrens sang, or what name Achilles assumed when he hid himself among women, although puzzling questions are not beyond all conjecture.” (Pg. 27) What does the passage mean?

2. Summarize the opening of the story. What mood does the narrator create with the introduction?

3. Describe Monsieur Dupin.

4. How do the narrator and Dupin meet? Describe their relationship.

5. How does Dupin astonish the narrator during their walk in Palais Royal?

The Masque of the Red Death

Vocabulary

arabesque – complex
brazier – a holder for burning coals
castellated – built with turret and battlements, like a castle
disapprobation – disapproval
disconcert – an interruption that causes confusion
dissolution – death; decay
egress – an exit
emphatic – striking, forceful
fete – an elaborate party
grave-cerements – shrouds for the dead
hale – healthy
hearken – to listen
impetuosity – spontaneity; forcefulness, violence
ingress – an entrance
habiliment – clothes, dress
mummer – a person dressed in costume for a festival
peal – a loud, prolonged sound
perforce – necessarily
pestilence – a disease
phantasms – delusions
piquancy – charm, enthusiasm
profusion – an abundance
prostrate – lying flat
reverie – a daydream
spectral – ghost-like
vesture – clothing; a covering
visage – the face
voluptuous – luxurious
wanton – lewd
writhe – to twist and turn as if in pain

1. What is the “Red Death”?

The Cask of Amontillado

Introduction

The Cask of Amontillado is a compelling tale of revenge and murder. Montresor, the malevolent narrator, has long held a grudge against Fortunato for a supposed slight. From the story's onset, the legitimacy of this slight is questionable for several reasons. Montresor's exaggerated statements and drastic actions prove him to be an unreliable character; Fortunato's congenial personality seems unable to offend so grievously; and Montresor fails to give any specific reasons for his affront. One evening, Montresor leads a drunken Fortunato into the catacombs under the pretext of tasting a rare wine, Amontillado. Here, he completes his revenge by sealing the unfortunate Fortunato away behind a brick wall.

Poe utilizes irony, symbolism, and metaphor to enhance the tenor of *The Cask of Amontillado*. Both verbal and dramatic irony are used extensively to create dark humor and suspense. For instance, Montresor expresses concern for Fortunato's health while leading him to his death; Fortunato plays the fool, complete with motley garb. Symbolism augments the theme of revenge: Montresor's family arms depicts a foot crushing a biting snake, or the family motto says, "*Nemo me impune lacessit*" ("No one attacks me with impunity"). In addition, the story's conclusion—the encasement of Fortunato—is essentially a metaphor that parallels the title. These elements, compounded with a sinister plot, make *The Cask of Amontillado* an intense tale of shock and horror.

The Cask of Amontillado

Vocabulary

absconded – left quickly; disappeared
azure – the color blue
circumscribing – encircling; constricting
ejaculated – exclaimed
Eld – [archaic] old age
fettered – chained
flagon – a glass bottle for holding wine before serving it
flambeaux – torches
gait – a manner of walking
hearken – to listen
immolation – a sacrifice
impunity – with no regard; exemption
leer – a sideways glance; sneer
motley – a clown or jester’s costume; varied (in color or design)
nitre – potassium nitrate, a compound that causes oxidation; an ingredient in gunpowder
palazzo – a mansion
puncheons – large casks
rapier – a type of small sword
redresser – an avenger
rheum – a thick watery discharge from the eyes
roquelaire – a knee-length cloak
surmounted – rested on top
unredressed – not avenged
virtuoso – a person skilled or knowledgeable in a specific subject

1. The story begins, “The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult I vowed revenge.” (Pg. 161) What does the narrator’s comment suggest about his reliability?

2. What wrong has Fortunato done to, Montresor that warrants death? What does this answer suggest about Montresor?
