The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Stories

Edgar Allan Poe

About the author
Edgar Allan Poe was an American poet, fiction writer and critic, best known for his unforgettable tales of terror and as the father of the modern detective novel. He was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1809, the son of two poverty stricken actors. Poe’s talent for writing was evident at an early age and his first published works were collections of poems. After studying Latin and poetry at Virginia University and a period in the army, he moved to Baltimore and continued to write, working for newspapers to earn a living. He then started to submit short stories to magazines and his first book of stories, Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque, was published in 1839. Throughout his life, Poe struggled with poverty, alcohol and madness. In 1849, he was found unconscious in the street after a bout of heavy drinking. He did not recover. Poe’s reputation continued to grow after his death and his books became especially popular in Europe. His work is still popular and very widely read today.

Summary
The five stories in this collection represent different facets of Poe’s writing. Three of them, The Fall of the House of Usher, The Maelström and The Barrel of Amontillado are horror stories, rich in atmosphere and gothic detail. The other two, The Murders in the Rue Morgue and The Stolen Letter are detective stories, amongst the earliest examples of this popular genre.

The Fall of the House of Usher
A man visits a former school friend and finds that both he and his sister, Madeline, are near to death. They are suffering from a strange illness that seems in some way connected to the house, which had been passed down through this wealthy family for generations. A few days after the old school friend arrives, Madeline dies and the two men bury her in a tomb under the house. However, it transpires that she is merely in a coma and they have buried her alive. She comes back during a terrible storm and both she and her brother die, bringing an end to the Usher family and also to the house itself, which crashes to the ground.

The Maelström
In this story, a fisherman relates how he and his brothers were sucked into a terrible whirlpool and how he alone managed to escape death by tying himself to a water barrel. The experience frightened him so much that his physical appearance changed dramatically. His black hair turned white and his body weak, like that of an old man.

The Barrel of Amontillado
In this story, the madman Montresor wants to punish a man named Fortunato for the terrible things he has supposedly done. Montresor tricks Fortunato into going with him to some caves under his house on the pretext of inspecting a barrel of wine. Once there, Montresor gets Fortunato drunk and ties him to some metal rings in a small cave. Then he builds a wall across the front of the cave and leaves Fortunato there to die.

The Murders in the Rue Morgue
This is a detective story starring C. Auguste Dupin, a character similar to Sherlock Holmes, who is able to solve crimes that have baffled the French police. In this tale, two women, mother and daughter, are found brutally murdered on the fourth floor of their house in the Rue Morgue. The daughter is found, covered in blood and badly bruised, up the chimney and the mother is found in the yard, her head almost completely cut off. Witnesses, who entered on the ground floor, claim to have heard the voice of a Frenchman and another high-pitched unintelligible voice coming from the room where the daughter was found. However, when police entered the room, there was nobody there and they fail to explain how the suspected murderers could possibly have left the house without being detected. Dupin inspects the house and concludes that the second voice did not belong to a human being, rather to an orang-utan, which could easily have escaped from the fourth floor window. He puts a note in the local newspaper saying that the orang-utan has been caught, thus tricking the owner, a French sailor, into going to his house to reclaim it. The mystery is solved when we discover that the orang-utan had gone mad, escaped and murdered the two women.
The Stolen Letter
This is also a detective story in which the Chief of the Paris Police visits Dupin to ask for some help with regards to a stolen letter. The letter had been stolen by a government minister from an important lady. She had seen him take the letter but was unable to say anything as the contents of the letter might compromise her in some way. The police had searched the Minister’s room on numerous occasions but had been unable to find the letter. Dupin realizes that the case must be simple rather than complicated and sees that the police are not searching in the right way. He visits the Minister and recognizes the letter immediately in a letter rack. He leaves but conveniently forgets his hat so that he can return on another occasion. This time he arranges for a disturbance to take place in the street and he takes advantage of the occasion to take the letter, replacing it with another. The letter is returned to the lady and the Chief of Police is very happy.

Background and themes
Horror stories became extremely popular in the early nineteenth century after the publication of Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (1818), and this popularity has continued to the present day. Though many have not stood the test of time, those written by Poe have remained popular and have not lost their power to chill. Another genre for which people seem to have an insatiable appetite is the detective story. The device adopted by Poe of an extremely intelligent hero who is able to solve cases which have baffled the police through impressive powers of observation and deduction is one which continues to feature heavily in modern detective fiction.

Madness: This is a recurrent theme in many of Poe’s short stories. His work shows an astonishing grasp of psychology (especially given that Freud didn’t arrive until a good sixty years later) and he uses this to explore the darker side of human nature, and extreme states of consciousness.

Death: Death and dying are central themes in the first three stories in this book. This was new in horror fiction of the time and Poe deals with it in an elaborate, ceremonial way. He also addresses the fear of being buried alive either deliberately or due to a mistaken assumption of death when the person is really only in a catatonic condition.

The power of the superior mind: In the two detective stories, Poe shows how a thinker with good powers of observation can solve an apparently unsolvable puzzle.

Discussion activities

Introduction

After reading
1. Discuss: Put students in small groups to answer the following questions: Where was Poe from? What happened to him when he was a child? Why was Mr. Allan angry with Poe? What did Poe do after he left university? Where did Poe work? What kind of things did he write? Did Poe have a happy life? Why or why not? Do you think you will enjoy reading these stories?

The Fall of the House of Usher

Before reading
2. Describe and predict: Put students in groups of three and tell one student from each group to look at the illustration on page 2, another student to look at the one on page 5, and the last student to look at the one on page 8. Each student then describes what they can see in the picture to the other two students. When they have finished, ask the students to make predictions about the story. They can make notes that can be checked later.

3. Discuss: Write the following on the board: airplanes, animals, criminals, dead bodies, death, the dark, illness, being alone. Now put students in groups to discuss if they are scared of these things or not. They can also add some ideas of their own and talk about a time in the past when they have felt really scared. Get feedback from the class.

While reading
4. Read carefully: Get students to collect information about Roderick. They can record the information on this web diagram:

5. Role play: (p. 4, after “I will be the last of the Ushers.”) Put students in pairs. One is the narrator and the other is Roderick Usher. Have them act out the scene where the two old school friends meet each other again. Encourage them to ask each other questions about the things that have happened in their lives.

After reading
6. Check: Students go back to their predictions and see if they were right.
The Maelström
Before reading
7 Pair work: Get students to look at the pictures on pages 13 and 15 and to describe them and say how they think the people in them are feeling. Then tell them the man on the right on page 13 is the same man as the one on the left on page 15. Ask students: How is he different? What do you think changed him?

While reading (p. 16, after “I wanted to see inside the whirlpool.”)
8 Discuss: Put students in small groups to discuss these questions: Why did the fishermen get into this dangerous situation? What happened to one of the brothers? What do you think is going to happen to the other two brothers? What do you think they will see inside the whirlpool?

After reading
9 Discuss: Put students in small groups and tell them they must imagine making a film out of this story. Get them to choose suitable actors, adding extra characters and scenes to make it more interesting.

The Barrel of Amontillado
Before reading
10 Predict: Have students look at the picture on page 23 and ask students these questions: Who are these two men? What is happening? Is the man in green going to die? Why does the other man want to kill him? What has he done? Is this a prison? How is the story going to end? Why is the story called The Barrel of Amontillado?

While reading (p. 18, after “He must know who is punishing him.”)
11 Discuss: Put students in small groups to discuss these questions: Is it always right to punish somebody who does terrible things to you? What do you think Fortunato did? What kind of punishment do you think he might get?

After reading
12 Write, ask and answer: Write “Why did Fortunato think that Montresor liked him?” on the board and elicit the answer (Because his words and actions showed he was a friend). Now tell students to write similar questions about the story. Students then mingle with each other, asking and answering each other’s questions.

The Murders in the Rue Morgue
Before reading
13 Discuss: Ask students to discuss how the police or a detective normally solves a crime. Get feedback from the whole class.

While reading (p. 31, after “The police have little information and few ideas.”)
14 Pair work: Ask students to make a list of all the things they know about the crime. Get feedback and then ask them to discuss what they think might have happened.

After reading
15 Write and guess: Write “The screams came from the third story of a house in the Rue Morgue.” on the board. Elicit which word is wrong from the students (fourth story not third). Now students choose a sentence from the story and rewrite it changing one word. Students mingle, reading out their sentences and the other students have to identify and correct the mistake.

16 Role play: Put the students in pairs. One is the Chief of Police and the other is the sailor. Students act out the scene in which the Chief interrogates the sailor. First, brainstorm with the class the kind of questions the police normally ask in this situation.

The Stolen Letter
Before reading
17 Predict: Write these words on the board: thief, government, woman, search, money, hide, hat. Tell the students that these words all appear in the story and get them to predict what happens in pairs.

While reading (end of page 45)
18 Pair work: Get the students to discuss good hiding places in a house. Tell them to think of at least five and then get feedback from the class. Have a vote to see which hiding place the class thinks is best.

After reading
19 Write and guess: Put students in pairs and tell them to look at the illustrations on pages 44, 47 and 50. Get them to write sentences to represent what they think each person in the illustrations is thinking. Now put each pair together with another pair and they read out their sentences and the other pair have to guess which person it is.

20 Game: Put students in groups. They should make 5 questions about each of the stories. Once all the groups are ready, each of the groups should ask one of their questions to the others. The group to answer first and correctly scores a point.