TALES OF MYSTERY AND IMAGINATION

by Edgar Allan Poe

SUMMARY

The ten tales are stories of the supernatural, of revenge, near-death experiences and some of the very first detective stories. In William Wilson a man is haunted in a strange way. In the Gold-Bug is a search for buried treasure. The Fall of the House of Usher has some very strange happenings. The Red Death happens in another house. In The Barrel of Amontillado a death brings revenge. The Whirlpool describes a very frightening experience. In The Pit and the Pendulum a suffering man looks forward to death. In The Stolen Letter the Paris police look for a letter which holds great power and look for a mystery voice in The Murders in the Rue Morgue. Two families in Metzengerstein suffer deaths of men and their horses.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Edgar Allan Poe was born in Boston in 1809. His parents died when he was a baby and he was raised by John and Frances Allan. Poe attended school in England from 1815 until 1820. In 1826 he went to the University of Virginia. He was a very good student but he lost a lot of money playing cards. Allan refused to pay his debts so Poe had to leave the university and take a job as a clerk. He hated his job and soon gave it up, against Allan’s wishes. Allan then got him into the US Military Academy, but Poe was dismissed after just a few months and Allan disowned him.

Poe went to live with his aunt, Marie Clemm and her young daughter, Virginia. In 1835, he started work as an editor for the Southern Literary Messenger. The following year he married his cousin. For the next ten years, during which time his wife was often ill, Poe worked for various newspapers and magazines. He also wrote the stories for which he is now famous, though he did not always make a lot of money from them. Also during this period, he began to drink heavily and for the rest of his life he had problems with alcohol. In 1847, Virginia died. Poe planned to remarry but it was not to be. He died in October, 1849.

Though Poe is now most famous for his short stories, his first published works were books of poems. Collections of stories were published in 1840, 1843 and 1845. Poe continued to write poetry all his life and his poem ‘The Raven’ has become one of the most famous poems in American literature.

BACKGROUND THEMES

Poe’s stories are remarkable for their inventiveness, their fine construction, their vivid descriptions and their psychological insight. Since their first publication, Poe’s powerful stories have captured the imagination of generations of readers. Many of the stories have been made into films or television dramas or they have been the source of inspiration for countless adaptations.

Poe’s fame nowadays rests more on his macabre tales of mystery and horror than on his poetry or literary essays. But he did not invent the horror story. In Poe’s youth, one of the most popular types of fiction was the gothic novel and his stories owe a lot to the gothic style. These novels typically dealt with mystery, horror, violence and the supernatural and the stories often took place in dramatic, romantic settings such as ruined castles. They were extremely popular at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th. Perhaps the most famous example of the genre is Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (1818).

In the gothic elements of his stories, Poe was tapping into an existing tradition. However he can be credited with creating the world’s first fictional detective in the figure of C. Auguste Dupin. A number of aspects of Dupin’s character (his methods of deduction, his slightly eccentric personality and his generally low opinion of the police force) have all served as a model for many if not most detective story writers ever since.

One idea that obviously interested Poe is the power of the imagination and how it can possess or haunt a person. We see this theme developed in a number of stories, particularly ‘William Wilson’, ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ and ‘Metzengerstein’. Poe was also interested in analysing how a person (often a lonely figure) reacts in moments of extreme terror or despair facing death or torment. We see this in ‘The Pit and the Pendulum’, ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ and ‘The Whirlpool’. Poe examines the themes of revenge and punishment in ‘The Barrel of Amontillado’, ‘The Red Death’ and ‘Metzengerstein’ while in the detective stories his underlying theme is the power of deductive reasoning to solve a seemingly insurmountable problem.
Penguin Readers Factsheets

ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK

1. Give students the following list of different types of fiction and ask them to tick the ones they enjoy most:
   - horror stories
   - stories of the supernatural
   - mystery or detective stories
   - stories of suspense

   Then put students into small groups to discuss their preferences. Encourage them to give their reasons and to cite examples of the types of stories they enjoy.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING A SECTION

- 'William Wilson' and 'The Gold-Bug'
  Put students into pairs and ask them to act out these conversations:
  a) William Wilson talking to a psychiatrist
  b) the narrator of 'The Gold-Bug' talking to a newspaper reporter

- 'The Fall of the House of Usher' and 'The Red Death'
  Put students into small groups and ask them to make lists of the descriptive details in the two stories that create a sense of impending doom.

- 'The Barrel of Amontillado' and 'The Whirlpool'
  Put students into pairs and ask them to draw either a plan of Montresor's cave or a map of the coast and the islands near the whirlpool.

- 'The Pit and the Pendulum' and 'The Stolen Letter'
  Put students into small groups and ask them to summarize each story in no more than 50 words.

- 'Metzengerstein' and 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue'
  Ask students to write six statements (three true, three false) about each story. Students read each other's sentences and sort the true statements from the false ones.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK

- Put students into small groups, ask them to choose their three favourite stories and, for each one, to decide which famous actors they would choose to star in a new film version of the story.

It will be useful for your students to know the following words. They are practiced in the 'Before You Read' sections at the back of the book. (Definitions are based on those in the Longman Active Study Dictionary.)

- bug (n) any small insect, a keen but perhaps short-lived interest in something
- companion (n) a person who goes somewhere with or spends time with another out of friendship or by chance
- determined (adj) having a strong will
- kid (n) a child, a young goat
- mask (n) a covering for the face, in this case worn to avoid being recognised
- mercy (n) willingness to forgive, not to punish
- misery (n) great unhappiness or great pain of body or mind
- namesake (n) one of two or more people with the same name
- nuts (n) dry fruits with a seed covered by a hard shell
- skull (n) the bone of the head, enclosing the brain
- tales (n) stories of imaginary events, especially of an exciting kind
- telescope (n) a tubular scientific instrument that makes distant objects look nearer and larger
- treasure (n) riches in the form of gold, jewels, etc.
- tremble (v) to shake uncontrollably from fear, excitement or weakness
- disturb (v) to interrupt (esp. a person who is working)
- immense (adj) extremely large
- shield (n) a broad piece of metal or wood carried as protection against being hit (esp. with "-ed")
- barrel (n) a round wooden container with curved sides and a flat top and bottom
- horizon (n) the line where the sky meets the earth
- log (n) a large unshaped piece of a tree that has been cut down
- slope (n) a surface or piece of land going up or down
- whirlpool (n) a place in the sea with circular currents that can pull objects down into it
- pendulum (n) a weight that hangs from a fixed point and swings freely
- pit (n) a deep hole in the ground
- suspicion (n) a belief that a person is or may be guilty

- orangutan (n) a large monkey with reddish hair
- shutter (n) metal or wooden covers that unfold in front of a window to shut out the light
- stable (n) a building for keeping or feeding horses in

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Factsheet written by Ivor Williams
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Many people enjoy and are willing to pay to be frightened, for example, when they go to see a horror film. Why is this? In what other ways do people enjoy being frightened?

Look up in a dictionary the word 'mystery'. Then study the picture on the cover of the book. Write down some ideas that come to you about the title and the picture.

Which of these sentences are true, which are false? Correct those that are false.

(a) As a boy, William Wilson went to a school in a large city in England.
(b) The two William Wilsons started school on the same day.
(c) William Wilson went to Cambridge University.
(d) Lord Glendinning cheated at cards.
(e) William Wilson was killed with a sword.

Match each person or thing with the correct description.

(a) Sullivan's Island (i) Legrand's friend
(b) Jupiter (ii) a high rock
(c) G___________ (iii) the person who buried the gold
(d) Bessop's Castle (iv) the place where Legrand lives
(e) Captain Kidd (v) Legrand's servant

Discuss these questions with another student. Do you know people who seem to have two very different sides to their character? How do they behave? How do you get along with them?

Discuss these questions with another student. Did you enjoy 'The Gold-Bug'? Did you find the story believable? What impressed you most about Legrand's method of solving the mystery?

Number these events in the correct order.

(a) Usher dies of shock. ___
(b) The door opens and Lady Madeline is standing there. ___
(c) Usher and the narrator paint and read together. ___
(d) The house splits in two and disappears. ___
(e) Usher and the narrator place Lady Madeline under the house. ___
(f) The narrator reads the story of Ethelred to Usher. ___
(g) Usher invites the narrator to stay. ___

Answer these questions.

(a) Whom did Prince Prospero invite to join him in his castle?
(b) How did the people inside the castle make sure that nobody could get in?
(c) What provided the light in the seven rooms for the dance?
(d) Why did the dancing stop briefly every hour?
(e) How did Prince Prospero try to kill the mysterious figure?

Write a list of adjectives to describe the characters of Roderick Usher, Lady Madeline and the narrator. Then compare your list with that of another student.

Imagine you have received a letter from Prince Prospero asking you to join him inside his castle. Decide if you want to go with him or stay outside and write him a letter explaining your decision.

Use one word to complete each sentence.

(a) Fortunato is very ________ of his knowledge of wine.
(b) Montresor thinks he has bought Amontillado but he has his ________.
(c) Fortunato says that his cough will not ________ him.
(d) Montresor ties Fortunato to the wall with a ________.
(e) Montresor places ________ rows of stones across the entrance.

Write the names of these places or people.

(a) The rock from which they watch the whirlpool.
(b) The larger of the two islands near the whirlpool.
(c) The person who wrote an explanation of the whirlpool.
(d) The place where the fishermen come from.
(e) The name the Norwegians give to the whirlpool.

In pairs act out a conversation in which Montresor, now an old man, feels sorry for what he did and tells his story to a friend.
Discuss this question with other students. Why are stories and films about people surviving natural disasters (floods, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, etc.) so popular?

‘The Pit and the Pendulum’ and ‘The Stolen Letter’
1 Answer these questions.
(a) How does the prisoner measure the dimensions of his cell?
(b) What food and drink is the prisoner given?
(c) What is painted on the ceiling of the cell?
(d) How does the prisoner free himself when he is tied to the bed?
(e) Who rescues the prisoner at the end of the story?

2 Who is talking and whom are they talking to?
(a) ‘That is another of your strange ideas.’
(b) ‘Give us more details.’
(c) ‘The Paris police are very clever in the ordinary way.’
(d) ‘How much was the reward, did you say?’
(e) ‘But is D___________ really a poet?’
(f) ‘You know my political views.’

3 Act out a conversation in which the prisoner tells his story to his rescuers.

4 Work in pairs. Write lists of adjectives to describe the characters of the narrator, Monsieur G___________ and C. Auguste Dupin. Then read your adjectives to another student and have them guess which character they describe.

‘Metzengerstein’ and ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’
1 Which of these sentences are true, which are false? Correct those that are false.
(a) The Berlitzings and the Metzengersteins had been fighting for ten years.
(b) The Metzengerstein family was the richest in Hungary.
(c) The mysterious horse had the initials FVM on its head.
(d) William von Berlitzing died trying to save one of his horses.
(e) At the end of the story, there was a fire in the Berlitzing castle.

2 Match the witnesses with their evidence.
(a) Pauline Dubourg (i) Madame L’Espanaye opened a bank account eight years ago.
(b) Isidore Musèt (ii) The cries lasted about ten minutes.
(c) Henri Duval (iii) I carried the money to the house in two bags.
(d) Odenheimer (iv) I’m sure they don’t have a servant.
(e) Jules Mignaud (v) I forced open the door with an iron bar.
(f) Adolphe Le Bon (vi) The high voice was not that of either of the dead women.

3 Imagine you are a Metzengerstein and that you are secretly in love with a Berlitzing. Write a letter to your loved one.

4 Discuss these questions with other students. Did you enjoy ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’? Did you find the story believable? Did the ending surprise you?

Activities after reading the book
1 Discuss these questions with other students. Which stories did you like the best and which ones the least? Which characters in the stories did you find the most interesting and which ones the least interesting?

2 Think about the key elements in Poe’s style and then write your own tale of mystery and imagination.

3 Look at the title and picture on the cover of the Reader. Why was the picture chosen, do you think? What kind of picture would you choose now that you have read the book?