

Teacher's notes

The Black Cat and Other Stories

by Edgar Allan Poe



SUMMARY

In their strange atmosphere and the fantastic events they describe, the four stories in this collection are typical of Edgar Allan Poe's tales: part horror story, part romantic poetry. In 'The Black Cat', one of Poe's most famous stories, the evil done by an originally good man comes back to him in the terrible revenge of his once-loved cat. In 'The Oval Portrait', a traveller comes across a remarkably life-like painting of a woman in a mountain castle. He also finds a book, which tells him the portrait's horrible secret. 'Berenice' is the weird story of a strange man's proposal of marriage to his cousin, and her terrible fate at his hands. In 'The Mask of the Red Death', another famous story, a prince tries to escape a horrible epidemic by locking the doors of his castle - but of course fails.

ABOUT EDGAR ALLAN POE

The American poet, fiction writer and critic, Edgar Allan Poe (1809-49), was responsible for some of the most unforgettable stories of terror ever written. They were the products of the mind of an unstable man, who lived a short and unhappy life.

Poe was born in January 1809 in Boston, USA. His life began tragically, as both of his parents had died by the time he was two. He went to live with a family, the Allans, who became his foster parents. He went to good schools and university, but had to leave university early because he fell out with his foster father, who never really understood him. Poe was deeply upset; his relationship with his foster father worsened, and Poe left home for ever.

Poe showed early literary promise, finding a publisher for his first collection of poetry, *Tamerlane and Other Poems*, before he was twenty years old. After a spell in the army he started on a career in journalism and began writing short stories. He married when he was twenty-six. Despite being a good, hard-working editor and also producing articles and short stories all the time, Poe never had much money, and much of what he did have was spent on alcohol.

When Poe's wife died young in 1847, any stability in his life disappeared and he himself was dead two years later,

found unconscious in the street after a session of heavy drinking.

BACKGROUND AND THEMES

Horror stories are as popular today as they were when the genre was at its height of popularity some two hundred years ago. Now we can find horror not only in books and plays, but also in films and comics and on the Internet. But in nineteenth-century Europe it was of course through books that people enjoyed the excitement and thrills of the horror story.

In the early part of the nineteenth century, Mary Shelley published her novel *Frankenstein* (1818). From this time until the latter part of the century when Bram Stoker's *Dracula* was published, there was no shortage of novels and short stories telling tales of terror, murder, mystery and suspense. Some of the great writers of the nineteenth century concentrated much of their efforts in this direction, among them Charles Dickens, Robert Louis Stevenson and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century on the other side of the Atlantic, the novel was struggling to make its mark on the United States. The USA was still a very young country at that time, having only become independent in 1776. Remarkably little in the way of American literature had been produced before Independence. The novel had always been regarded with suspicion by the leading thinkers of the country, most of whom were Puritans with strict moral values. They considered the novel to be a potentially dangerous thing, with the power to have a bad influence on young people. Moreover, there was a strong tendency to look down on authors writing in the English language who were not living and publishing their work in Great Britain. Irving Washington was the best-known writer writing in English and living outside Great Britain. He freely admitted to borrowing heavily from European literature and based one of his most famous stories, *Rip Van Winkle*, on a folk tale from Germany.

Early American novelists tended to be cautious. Many of them aimed to please Puritans and publishers alike by putting morals before plot. One such writer was Charles Brockden Brown (1771-1810), but the books he published

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at the turn of the century were different from his others in one respect - he included an element of horror in them. A little later, Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) wrote novels and collections of short stories concerning themselves with evil and the darker side of the human soul.

Edgar Allan Poe was influenced by both Brockden Brown and Hawthorne, who was a contemporary of his. The most successful of Poe's stories were in the tradition of Gothic fiction, and combine terror and guilt in a lyrical style that reminds us that he was a great poet, too. He also wrote some of the first science-fiction stories; and in his character C. Auguste Dupin, he virtually created the modern detective story. In addition, he was one of the most feared critics in America.

It is typical of Poe's tragic life that he died just as people were starting to read him in ever-increasing numbers and he was becoming famous. After his death, his reputation continued to grow, especially in Europe, and for well over a century he has been one of the most widely-read authors in any language.

Communicative activities

The following teacher-led activities cover the same sections of text as the exercises at the back of the reader, and supplement those exercises. For supplementary exercises covering shorter sections of the book, see the photocopiable Student's Activities pages of this Factsheet. These are primarily for use with class readers but, with the exception of discussion and pair/groupwork questions, can also be used by students working alone in a self-access centre.

ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK

- 1 Ask students if they like stories (in books or films) which frighten them. Why/Why not? Ask them what the most frightening story they know is. Can the class agree on one story?
- 2 Ask students to look up *mad* and *horror* in their dictionaries. Then tell them that Edgar Allan Poe led a difficult life and believed that he was mad. Ask students to talk about the following:
 - Is it necessary for a writer to be mad to be able to write real horror stories?
 - Do the readers of horror stories like the stories more if they too have a difficult life?
 - Can horror stories be dangerous for some people?

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING A SECTION

'The Black Cat'

- 1 Put students into small groups. Ask them to discuss these questions. Ask them to look up *superstitious* in their dictionaries.
 - (a) Are black cats 'evil' in your culture?
 - (b) Are you superstitious? If so, what about? If not, why not?

- 2 Put students into pairs. Ask them to discuss:

'The Black Cat' begins: 'You are not going to believe this story, but it is a true story ...'. Do you think this is a good way to start a story which is impossible to believe? Does it make the story seem more or less easy to believe?

'The Oval Portrait'

- 1 Put students into small groups. They tell the story. Each student says one sentence, until the story is finished. They try to do it in three minutes.
- 2 Put students into small groups. Ask them to make up a story for one of the other pictures in the room. One person in the group tells their story to the class. The class decides which story is best.

'Berenice'

Put students into groups of four people. Ask them to role-play a conversation between two policemen/women and two of Egaeus's servants. The policemen/women ask questions and the servants explain what happened.

'The Mask of the Red Death'

Put students into pairs. They role-play a conversation between a newspaper reporter and the stranger in the mask. Reporters ask questions like 'Why did you go to the Prince's party?'.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK

Put students into small groups. Ask them to look up *vampire* and *ghost* in their dictionaries, and then to discuss these questions:

- (a) What do you most like to find in horror stories - murder, vampires, ghosts, etc.?
- (b) Do you think Poe's stories are better as books or as films? What can you do with a film that you can't do with a book? Think of five things, for example *music*, and make a list.

Then compare lists as a class.

Glossary

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

'The Black Cat'

axe (n) this is like a big knife; people use it to cut down trees
bury (v) to put somebody who is dead under the ground
cellar (n) a room under the ground in a house
evil (adj) very, very bad and doing bad things
horrible (adj) very unpleasant
horror (n) great fear
mad (adj) ill in the mind
object (n) a thing that you can touch
plaster (n) this is put on walls to make them smooth
servant (n) somebody who works for a person in their house

'The Oval Portrait'

decorate (v) to put paint or paper on the walls of a house
oval (adj) with a shape like an egg
portrait (n) a painting of a person

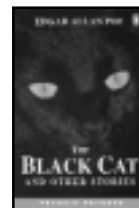
'The Mask of the Red Death'

mask (n) this is worn over someone's face to hide it



Student's activities

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Photocopiable

Students can do these exercises alone or with one or more other students. Pair/group-only activities are marked.

Activities before reading the book

Try to answer these questions, then look in the Introduction at the front of the book to find the answers.

- (a) When did Edgar Allan Poe live?
(i) 1809-1849, (ii) 1919-1959, (iii) 1950-1990
- (b) Which country did he come from?
(i) England (ii) The United States
(iii) Australia (iv) Scotland

Activities while reading the book

'THE BLACK CAT'

Before reading the story

Look at the picture on the front of the book. What words does a black cat make you think of? Write them down and then talk about them with another student.

At the middle of page 6

Which of the words below describe the people or animals in the story?

good kind clever brave happy loving sick bad

The story-teller:

His wife:

Pluto:

The second cat:

After reading the story

- 1 All of these sentences are in the story. Put them in the same order as they are in the story.
 - (a) But the more I hated the cat, the more he seemed to love me.
 - (b) ... I pulled her hand away from my wrist, lifted the tool again, brought it down hard and buried it in the top of her head.
 - (c) It was the shape of a large cat, hanging by its neck.
 - (d) It was that evil enemy of Man called Drink who was changing me.
 - (e) I put my hand up, touched it, and found that it was a black cat - a very large one, as large as Pluto.
 - (f) I knocked hard on the part of the wall where my wife was.
 - (g) I took my knife from my pocket, held the poor animal by his neck and cut out one of his eyes.
 - (h) And there was the cat, standing on her head, his red mouth wide open in a scream, and his one gold eye shining like fire.

- (i) There, on his front, was the shape of an object I am almost too afraid to name ... It was that terrible machine of pain and death - yes, the GALLOWS!
- (j) I caught the cat and hung him by his neck from a tree until he was dead.

- 2 Talk about this question with another student. Can you agree?

Was the second cat Pluto?

'THE OVAL PORTRAIT'

Before reading the story

Look at the picture at the beginning of the story. Guess which of these words you will read in the story:

paint, photographer, beautiful, electricity, afraid

Talk about your answers with another student. Try to agree. When you've read the story, check back to see if you were right.

At page 14, line 8

- 1 What's happening in the story? Why do you think the story-teller closes his eyes? Who do you think the woman in the portrait is? Talk about your ideas with another student. Can you agree?
- 2 What do you think is going to happen next? Discuss your ideas with another student.

Page 14, line 8 to the end of the story

- 1 Answer these questions.
 - (a) What is strange about the portrait?
 - (b) Why does the story-teller again pick up the book by his bed?
 - (c) Why did the beautiful woman hate her husband's paintings?
 - (d) What happens to the woman when her husband is painting her?
 - (e) Why does she die?
- 2 Continue to write the story, beginning like this: 'I put the book down, and looked at the portrait again. Now something was happening to the portrait. I was even more afraid than before, because now...'

'BERENICE'

Before reading the story

Look at the picture on page 18, and the words below it. Write down five words that you think you will read in the story. Talk about them with another student. When you have read the story, check back to see if you were right.

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At page 20, line 16

Write down the three best words to describe Egaeus and the three best to describe Berenice. Then write sentences to describe Egaeus and Berenice. In what ways are they different?

At the top of page 24

1 Answer these questions.

- (a) Why does Berenice change so much?
- (b) What is wrong with Egaeus?
- (c) Why does Egaeus ask Berenice to marry him?

2 Work with another student.

Look at the beginnings of newspaper stories below. Which newspaper story, if any, do you think says what is going to happen in the story? Look up *vampire* in your dictionary.

A Berenice drinks blood

Beautiful woman is really vampire.

A man died in a strange old house yesterday...

B Man kills girl because of her teeth

Police took a man away from his home yesterday after he killed his cousin because of her teeth. 'I am a murderer,' he said. 'But I did it because her teeth were so bad. I saw them for the first time last night...'

C Man takes out girl's teeth

A very strange thing happened at the big house on the hill last night. A man took out all his cousin's teeth. 'I wanted them,' he said...

After reading the story

1 Answer these questions.

- (a) Why does Egaeus want Berenice's teeth?
- (b) When does the servant girl tell Egaeus that Berenice is dead?
- (c) When does Egaeus next wake up?
- (d) How many hours can't he remember?
- (e) What is in the box on the table? Whose are they?

2 Were you right about question 2, the newspaper stories, above? Talk to other students. Were they right?

'THE MASK OF THE RED DEATH'**Before reading the story**

1 Look at the picture on page 28. Guess when this story happens.

- (a) before 1600, (b) 1700-1800, (c) 1800-1900

2 Think about the title of the story. Why do you think the Prince is throwing the key into the lake? Make some guesses.

At the bottom of page 31

1 Answer these questions.

- (a) What is the Red Death?
- (b) Why did the prince take 1000 friends to his house in the forest?
- (c) Why did he throw the key into the lake?
- (d) What did the Prince do five months later?

2 Mark 'true' (✓) or 'false' (x).

The Prince's house has:

- (a) servants ____
- (b) a high wall outside ____
- (c) only seven rooms ____

Each of the seven rooms has:

- (d) different furniture ____
- (e) lamps ____
- (f) a clock ____
- (g) windows the same colour as everything inside it ____
- (h) When the clock makes a sound each hour, the dancers stop dancing and have strange thoughts. ____

3 Talk to another student.

How are the seven rooms going to be important in the story? Try to guess.

Page 32 to the end of the story

1 Answer these questions.

- (a) Why was everybody dressed so strangely at the party?
- (b) Why did people look at the tall masked man with anger and horror?
- (c) Who killed the Prince?
- (d) Why did everybody die?

2 Talk with another student.

What do you think is the importance of the clock in this story?

Activities after reading the book

Which story frightened you most? Put them in order, from most frightening to least frightening.

'The Black Cat', 'The Oval Portrait', 'Berenice', 'The Mask of the Red Death'

