

Great Books: Tales of Edgar Allan Poe

Teacher's Guide

Grade Level: 9-12

Curriculum Focus: Literature

Lesson Duration: 1–2 class periods

Program Description

Explore the psychology of terror in some of Poe's most-haunting tales. Interwoven through these stories is the most tragic tale of all – that of author Edgar Allan Poe. Many of his tales resonate with themes from his own life: abandonment, sickness, and fear. Leading us through Poe's tales of terror are well-known horror writers and directors.

Lesson Plan

Student Objectives

- Read one work by Edgar Allan Poe (*The Pit and the Pendulum*, *The Raven*, or *The Tell-Tale Heart*).
- Summarize basic elements (plot, characters, setting, and perspective).
- Identify the emotions revealed in the work.
- Create an original piece portraying these emotions.

Materials

- *Great Books: Tales of Edgar Allan Poe* video
- Computer with Internet access
- Materials for students to write their own work

Procedures

1. Review biographical information about Edgar Allan Poe and the nature of his work:
 - Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) was an American author best known for his dark and ominous short stories and poems.
 - Poe experienced tragedy in his life. He was born into poverty; his father was an alcoholic who left when Edgar was young; his mother died of tuberculosis; his foster mother and his wife died; he lived and died in poverty.
 - Ideas that come to mind regarding *The Pit and the Pendulum*, *The Raven*, and *The Tell-Tale Heart* may include horror stories, terror, fear, death, darkness, murder, obsession, insanity, sadness, loss, guilt, torture, and the unknown.

2. Ask students to choose a partner. Each pair should select one of the works listed below. The works are available on the Internet at the following sites:
 - *The Raven*
http://www.poemuseum.org/selected_works/the_raven.html
 - *The Tell-Tale Heart*
http://www.poemuseum.org/selected_works/tell_tale_heart.html
 - *The Pit and the Pendulum*
<http://www.eapoe.org/works/tales/pitpdmc.htm>
3. With their partners, students should read the work and briefly summarize the following elements:
 - Plot – Give a brief summary of the piece.
 - Setting – Describe the setting. What words or phrases help paint the picture?
 - Characters – How does Poe portray the characters?
 - Perspective – Who is the narrator? Describe this person's feelings. Is it written in third or first person? How does this affect the piece?
4. Have the pairs explore the work as a psychological thriller. What human emotions are revealed? (Examples may include fear, sadness, regret, loneliness, obsession, anticipation, and helplessness.) Have students identify and write words and phrases that portray these emotions.
5. Ask each pair to think about events or images from their experiences that conjure up the same emotions. For example, what have they experienced that may have sparked deep fear or loneliness?
6. Finally, have students work individually to create an original piece that portrays these emotions. They may make posters, write poems or short stories, or record songs. Encourage them to use some of Poe's words and phrases.

Assessment

Use the following three-point rubric to evaluate students' work during this lesson.

- **3 points:** Students were highly engaged in class discussions; created clear and detailed summaries that included plot, setting, characters, and perspective; developed creative, thoughtful personal works reflecting emotions from Poe's writing.
- **2 points:** Students participated in class discussions; created adequate summaries that included some of the following elements: plot, setting, characters, and perspective; developed personal works reflecting emotions from Poe's writing.
- **1 point:** Students participated minimally in class discussions; wrote incomplete summaries that included few or none of the following elements: plot, setting, characters, and perspective; personal works were unclear or did not reflect emotions from Poe's writing.

Vocabulary

first-person narrative

Definition: A form of writing in which the story is told from one of the character's perspective

Context: In a first-person narrative, a story's character refers to himself or herself as "I."

Gothic

Definition: A style of literature emphasizing the grotesque, mysterious, and desolate

Context: Edgar Allan Poe is considered an author of Gothic literature.

narrator

Definition: A person telling a story

Context: The voice of the narrator can determine how a reader interprets a story.

plot

Definition: The sequence of events that make up a literary work; the structure of the story

Context: The plot of *The Tell-Tale Heart* ends with the narrator confessing his crime.

setting

Definition: The time and place in which a story or play takes place.

Context: Many of Poe's short stories and poems have a dark and foreboding setting.

third-person narrative

Definition: A form of writing in which the story is told from an omniscient point of view; all characters are referred to as "he" or "she"

Context: In a story written in the third-person narrative, a reader may see into the thoughts of different characters.

Academic Standards

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)

McREL's Content Knowledge: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K-12 Education addresses 14 content areas. To view the standards and benchmarks, visit <http://www.mcrel.org/>

This lesson plan addresses the following national standards:

- Language Arts – Viewing: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media; Reading: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of literary texts; Writing: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process

Support Materials

Develop custom worksheets, educational puzzles, online quizzes, and more with the free teaching tools offered on the [Discoveryschool.com](http://www.discoveryschool.com) Web site. Create and print support materials, or save them to a Custom Classroom account for future use. To learn more, visit

- <http://school.discovery.com/teachingtools/teachingtools.html>

DVD Content

This program is available in an interactive DVD format. The following information and activities are specific to the DVD version.

How To Use the DVD

The DVD starting screen has the following options:

Play Video— This plays the video from start to finish. There are no programmed stops, except by using a remote control. With a computer, depending on the particular software player, a pause button is included with the other video controls.

Video Index— Here the video is divided into sections indicated by video thumbnail icons; brief descriptions are noted for each one. Watching all parts in sequence is similar to watching the video from start to finish. To play a particular segment, press Enter on the remote for TV playback; on a computer, click once to highlight a thumbnail and read the accompanying text description and click again to start the video.

Curriculum Units— These are specially edited video segments pulled from different sections of the video (see below). These nonlinear segments align with key ideas in the unit of instruction. They include onscreen pre- and post-viewing questions, reproduced below in this Teacher's Guide. To play a particular segment, press Enter on the TV remote or click once on the Curriculum Unit title on a computer.

Standards Link— Selecting this option displays a single screen that lists the national academic standards the video addresses.

Teacher Resources— This screen gives the technical support number and Web site address.

Video Index

I. Overview (9 min.)

Author Edgar Allan Poe is known as a master of the horror genre. Explore one of his most psychologically disturbing masterpieces, *The Pit and the Pendulum*.

II. Exploring Forbidden Horrors (11 min.)

Learn about the terrible tragedies that occurred in Poe's early years before taking a tour of the nightmarish House of Usher.

III. The Undead (12 min.)

Poe uses his grief over his wife's death to create *Ligeia*, a macabre story about a man whose beloved first wife returns in the deceased body of his second wife.



IV. Poe's Ultimate Horror (16 min.)

While descending into alcoholism and madness, Poe experiences a terrifying hallucination that he uses in *The Tell-Tale Heart*, a story about a caretaker obsessed with an old man's eye.

Curriculum Units

Segment 1: Poe's Tragic Early Years

Pre-viewing question

Q: What is your definition of fear?

A: Answers may vary

Post-viewing question

Q: Why did Poe think of himself as cursed?

A: Edgar Allan Poe's mother died of tuberculosis when he was three years old. His foster mother died of the same illness when he was still a young man. Because of these tragedies, Poe began to see himself as a cursed figure bringing pain and death upon the women he loved.

Segment 2: Poe's Descent into Madness

Pre-viewing question

Q: Do you think Poe would have been as great a writer if he had led a happy life?

A: Answers may vary

Post-viewing question

Q: How did Poe deal with Virginia's death?

A: Poe began drinking heavily after Virginia died. He was said to have drunk large amounts of liquor at a time, and was often seen behaving like a falling down drunk.

Segment 3: *The Pit and the Pendulum*

Pre-viewing question

Q: What is your deepest fear?

A: Answers may vary

Post-viewing question

Q: How do we know the difference between madness and reality?

A: Answers may vary

Segment 4: *The House of Usher*

Pre-viewing question

Q: Where is the scariest place you have ever been?

A: Answers may vary



Post-viewing question

Q: What was Roderick so afraid of?

A: At first Roderick was afraid that his sister would die, leaving him as the last living Usher. After Madeleine is buried he becomes fearful that she had not really died and was accidentally buried alive.

Segment 5: *Ligeia*

Pre-viewing question

Q: What are the similarities between love and hate?

A: Answers may vary

Post-viewing question

Q: In what ways did *Ligeia* mirror Poe's own life?

A: Poe himself was grief-stricken and heartbroken when his own wife, Virginia, died. Like the narrator of *Ligeia*, Poe developed a substance addiction to cope with his grief.

Segment 6: *The Tell-Tale Heart*

Pre-viewing question

Q: Why are Poe's tales so horrifying?

A: Answers may vary

Post-viewing question

Q: What set *The Tell-Tale Heart* apart from Poe's other works?

A: Unlike Poe's other stories and poems, *The Tell-Tale Heart* was told from the perspective of the killer.