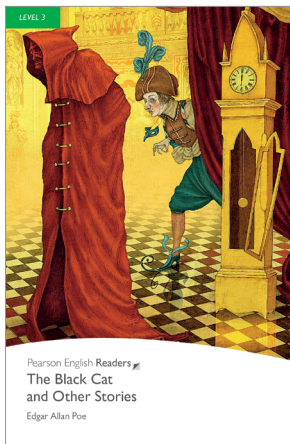


The Black Cat and Other Stories

Edgar Allan Poe



About the author

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 forever.

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.

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.

The Black Cat

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.

The Oval Portrait

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

Berenice is a weird story of a strange man's proposal of marriage to his cousin, and her terrible fate at his hands.

The Mask of the Red Death

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.

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

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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 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.

Discussion activities

The Black Cat, pages 1–11

Before reading

- Discuss:** Talk about the beginning of the story. Have students read the first sentence of the story: 'You are not going to believe this story, but it is a true story ...' Then have a whole-class discussion using the following questions.
 - *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?*

After reading

- Discuss:** Talk about Pluto and the second cat. Have students work in pairs and discuss the following question. Later, ask some pairs to share their opinions with the rest of the class.
 - *Is the second cat Pluto? What do you think?*

- Discuss:** Talk about superstition. Put students into small groups. Ask them to look up 'superstition' and 'superstitious' in their dictionaries. Then ask them to discuss these questions.
 - *Are black cats 'evil' in your culture?*
 - *Can you think of some examples of superstition in your culture?*
 - *Are you superstitious? If so, what about? If not, why not?*

The Oval Portrait, pages 13–17

Before reading

- Discuss:** Put students into small groups. Have them look at the picture on page 12. Ask them to guess which of these words they will read in the story: house, horse, paint, photographer, sad, beautiful, electricity, afraid. Later, ask each group to share their conclusions with the rest of the class.

While reading

- Pair work:** Stop reading at page 14, line 8. Put students into pairs. Have them ask and answer the following questions and see if they can agree with each other.
 - *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?*
 - *What do you think is going to happen next?*

After reading

- Check:** Have students revisit the list of words from the Activity 4. Have them see if they were right. Ask them to add some more words which are important in the story.
- Retell:** Put students into small groups. Have each group retell the story. Each student says one sentence, until the story is finished. Encourage them to try to do it in three minutes.
- Write:** Have students work in pairs or small groups. Prompt students to continue the story. Give them the sentences 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 ...' When they are ready, ask some students to read out their stories or make a classroom wall display so that everyone can read them.
- Group work:** Create a story. 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, pages 19–27

Before reading

- Guess:** Put students into small groups. Have them look at the picture on page 18 and the words below it. Have each group to come up with five words that they think they will read in the story. Ask each group

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to read out the list of words and write them on the board. According to the number of times each word appears on the board, decide on the most popular five words. Ask them to keep the words in mind while reading.

While reading

- 11 Discuss:** Talk about Egaeus and Berenice. Stop reading at page 20, line 16. Put students into small groups. Have them discuss and choose the three best words to describe Egaeus and the three best to describe Berenice. Later, ask each group to share their words with the rest of the class.

- 12 Predict:** Stop reading at the top of page 24. Put students into small groups. Have them read the beginnings of newspaper stories below. Encourage them to choose one newspaper story that says what is going to happen in the story. Pre-teach the word 'vampire' if necessary or let students look it up their dictionaries.

Berenice drinks blood

Beautiful woman is really vampire. A man died in a strange old house yesterday ...

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.'

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

- 13 Check:** Have students go back to the three stories in the activity 12. Have them check if they were right.
- 14 Check:** Have students go back to the list of five words that they predict before reading the story (Activity 10). Ask them to check to see if they were right. Then tell them to add more words to the list.
- 15 Role play:** Put students into groups of four. Ask them to role-play a conversation between two police officers and two of Egaeus's servants. The police officers ask questions and servants explain what happened.
- 16 Discuss:** Put students into small groups. Draw their attention to the beginning of the story, and have them exchange their opinions.
Look at page 19. Egaeus says, 'I know I lived another life before the one I am living now. I can remember another time, like a dream without shape or body: a world of eyes, sweet sad sounds and silent shadows. I woke up from that long night, my eyes opened, and I saw the light of day again – here in this room full of thoughts and dreams.' What does he mean? What do you think he is talking about? Can you believe what he is saying?

The Mask of the Red Death, pages 29–36

Before reading

- 17 Guess:** Have students look at the picture on page 28. Ask them to guess when this story happens. Give them the following choices: before 1600, 1700–1800, 1800–1900. Then put students in small groups. Have them make some guesses using the following question.
- *Why do you think this man is throwing the key into the lake?*

After reading

- 18 Discuss:** Talk about the tall masked man. Put students into small groups. Have them discuss the following questions.
- *Who is the tall masked man?*
 - *Why is everyone afraid of him?*
- 19 Role play:** Put students into pairs. Have them act out a conversation between a newspaper reporter and the stranger in the mask. Prompt students to start a conversation with the reporter asking questions like 'Why did you go to the Prince's party?'

Extra activities

- 20 Discuss:** Talk about horror stories. Put students into small groups. Ask them to look up 'vampire' and 'ghost' in their dictionaries, and then to discuss the following questions.
- *What do you most like to find in horror stories – murder, vampires, ghosts, etc.?*
 - *What is the most frightening story you know?*
 - *Do you like horror stories?*
- 21 Discuss:** Books or films? Put students into small groups. Have them imagine that there are films of Poe's stories. Have them discuss the following questions.
- *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?*
- Later ask each group to share their opinions with the rest of the class.
- 22 Project:** Edgar Allan Poe's life Give students an opportunity to find information on Edgar Allan Poe using outside resources, e.g. library books, the Internet, etc as well as the Introduction in the book. Divide the students into groups and they can make posters to display the information they found out. This could be simply his biography, the types of his work or his famous poems. Then each group can make a presentation using their poster.