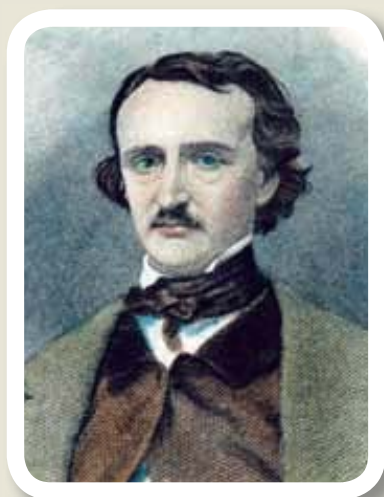


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Edgar Allan Poe was born on January 19th 1809 in Boston, Massachusetts, USA. His parents died when he was just two years old, and he was brought up¹ by John Allan, a Scottish businessman.

Poe was educated in Britain and the US. He was a good student and he attended the University of Virginia, and the famous West Point Military Academy. Poe spent two years in the army and in this period he completed his first two collections of poetry, published in 1827 and 1829.

Poe worked as a journalist and critic with several magazines and newspapers. He wrote many short stories including *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841), *The Pit and the Pendulum* (1843) and *The Black Cat* (1843). These




ABOUT THE BOOK

The three stories in this collection, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, *The Oval Portrait*, and *The Masque of the Red Death* are examples of short stories in the 'Gothic' tradition. Gothic literature became popular in Britain in the late 18th century and it explores the dark side of human nature and experience: death, ghosts, alienation¹, depression, madness² and desolate³ settings. Poe brought Gothic literature to America. The atmosphere created by Poe in each of these stories is one of both physical and psychological fear and horror. Recurrent⁴ themes in the stories are madness and death.


- 1 **alienation:** when you feel isolated or that you are not part of society
- 2 **madness:** state of being mad or crazy
- 3 **desolate:** without life
- 4 **recurrent:** that are repeated
- 5 **features:** things that make something particular or special
- 6 **troubled:** agitated; not at peace
- 7 **demented:** mad
- 8 **buried:** when a dead body is placed in a grave


BEFORE READING

-  **1** Look at these scenes from *The Fall of the House of Usher*. Discuss with a partner.



- ☐ **a** Write at least 5 words or phrases to describe each scene.
- ☐ **b** What is the atmosphere like in each one?
- ☐ **c** What is happening in each scene?

-  **2** Working in groups of three or four, look at the pictures and your descriptions once more. Together write two or three sentences to describe what you think will happen in the story. Compare your summary with those of the other groups in the class.

-  **3** You may find this story and the others in this book very frightening. Or perhaps nothing frightens you! Work with a partner. Describe your scariest experience, or something you heard or saw that made you feel afraid.





For a whole dull¹, dark, and soundless autumn day, when the clouds were low in the sky, I had been riding alone through the dreary² countryside. Eventually, as evening fell, I found myself within view of the melancholy House of Usher. When I saw the building, I felt a sense of gloom³.

I looked at the scene before me – at the house and the simple landscape, at the bleak⁴ walls, at the vacant eye-like windows, at the rough grass, and at a few white trunks of decayed⁵ trees – with a sense of depression, like an opium addict awakening from his dream. I felt a sense of iciness and my heart felt cold and heavy. What was it that made me so nervous when I thought about the House of Usher? It was a mystery, and I could not fight against the dark thoughts that filled me.

PLACES

- Have you ever visited a place and suddenly felt happy or sad? Describe how you felt. Why did this place make you feel this way?
- Was it something to do with the weather, the appearance of the place, or the people who were there?

¹ **dull**: not bright

² **dreary**: boring and dark; without life

³ **gloom**: darkness and depression

⁴ **bleak**: empty, cold and depressing

⁵ **decayed**: rotten; destroyed through age



I was forced to come to the unsatisfactory conclusion that some things are beyond our understanding. If the scene in front of me had been arranged in any different way it possibly would not have left me with such a sad impression. With this in mind, I rode my horse to the edge of a black lake that was close to the house and, trembling more than before, I looked down on the reflection of the grey grass, the ghastly¹ tree trunks, and the empty eye-like windows in the water.

Nevertheless, I was proposing to stay a few weeks in this gloomy house. Its owner, Roderick Usher, had been one of my childhood companions, but it had been many years since our last meeting. A letter from him had reached me, and it gave evidence that he was very disturbed. The writer spoke of physical illness, and of a disorder of the mind. He said I was his best and only friend, and he felt that the cheerfulness of my company would lessen² his malady³. I did not hesitate when I read this. I obeyed his request immediately.

RODERICK USHER

- How does the narrator know Roderick Usher?
- Why does Usher write to the narrator?
- What does Usher ask the narrator to do?

1 **ghastly**: horrible and frightening

2 **lessen**: make less

3 **malady**: illness

4 **reserved**: quiet; shy; private

5 **I was aware**: I knew

6 **produced**: (here) had children

7 **branch**: descendants; sons, daughters, grandchildren. etc.

8 **direct line of descent**: there was always just one child who had children of their own