

# About Poe's Short Stories

## The Gothic Story: Introduction to "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "Ligeia"

These stories represent the highest achievements in the literary genre of the gothic horror story. By *gothic*, one means that the author emphasizes the grotesque, the mysterious, the desolate, the horrible, the ghostly, and, ultimately, the abject fear that can be aroused in either the reader or in the viewer. Almost everyone is familiar with such characters as Dr. Frankenstein's monster and Count Dracula, two of today's pop culture horror characters who evolve from the gothic tradition, and it is probably not an exaggeration to say that most adults in the Western world have been exposed to some type of gothic tale or ghost story. We all know that a gothic story or a ghost story will often have a setting that will be in an old, decaying mansion far out in a desolate countryside; the castle will be filled with cobwebs, strange noises, bats, and an abundance of secret panels and corridors, down which persecuted virgins might be running and screaming in terror. This is standard fare; we have either read about such places or seen them in the movies or on TV. The haunted castle is a classic setting of the gothic story. The author uses every literary trick possible to give us eerie sensations or to make us jump if we hear an unexpected noise. The shadows seem menacing in these stories, there are trap doors to swallow us up, and the underground passages are smelly, slimy, and foul — all these effects are created for one reason: to give us a sense of the ghostly and the supernatural.

Both "Ligeia" and "The Fall of the House of Usher" utilize many of these aspects of the gothic and are considered by critics to be not just among Poe's best short stories, but also among the finest examples of the gothic genre in all of literature.

Not surprisingly, both stories have many qualities in common: (1) In addition to the gothic elements, there is also a sense of remoteness and a sense of indefiniteness — that is, we are never told where "The Fall of the House of Usher" takes place in terms of setting; it could be in Ireland, Virginia, Scotland, Germany, or even Transylvania. The story could, in fact, take place anywhere as long as the area is remote to the reader, removed from his everyday environment. Likewise, "Ligeia" is set in an old castle on the Rhine or else in an abbey in the "most remote part of England." In both stories also, the time (the century) is set somewhere in the indefinite past. Clearly, it is *not* in an old castle in the present era.

(2) One of the primary aims of both stories is to create the single effect of an eerie and ghostly atmosphere and to do so, both stories emphasize the physical aspects of the various structures — the deep caverns or vaults where the Lady Madeline is buried and the weird room where the Lady Rowena died among various types of black sarcophagi. (3) In both stories, a super-sensitive hero is presented, a man who could not function well in the "normal" world. Roderick Usher and the narrator of "Ligeia" share a super-sensitivity to the point of maladjustment — due to the narrator's opium addiction in "Ligeia," and due to an undefined illness in Roderick Usher. (4) Often in the gothic story, the characters seem to possess some sort of psychic communication; this usually occurs between a member of the living world and a "living" corpse. In both stories, we see this kind of communication between,

first, Roderick Usher and his twin sister and, again, between the narrator and his beloved, Ligeia. (5) One of the stock elements of the gothic story concerns the possibility of returning to life after one is dead and, moreover, inhabiting one's own corpse. Poe uses this effect to its very best effect in these two stories; both of them climax with just such an incident: To this purpose Poe created the return of the entombed and living corpse of the Lady Madeleine, as well as the slow re-emergence into life by the enshrouded Lady Ligeia. (6) In addition to the above features of the gothic story, Poe also stressed another similar element; he placed a strong emphasis on the life of the mind after the death of the body. This is also true of the stories associated with the Dracula legends, where the focus is upon the continuation of the life of the mind after the body has become a living corpse. The central concern of the Lady Ligeia is the continuation of the mind after physical death; Poe's emphasis here additionally stresses that one does not yield oneself to death except through a weakness of the will. Both in the Lady Madeline and in the Lady Ligeia, there is a *superhuman* strength to *live* — even after death. Both women overcome the most impossible barriers of the mortal world in order to *live*.

### **Tales of Ratiocination, or Detective Fiction: Introduction to "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Purloined Letter"**

Part of the genius of Edgar Allan Poe is that he excelled in a number of different types of endeavors. In addition to his reputation as a poet, his originality in his literary criticisms, and the perfection he achieved in creating gothic tales of terror and science fiction, he is also acknowledged as the originator of detective fiction. Poe invented the term "Tale of Ratiocination." The ratiocination, however, is not just for the detective; Poe does not allow the reader to sit back and merely observe; the process of ratiocination which he sets up is also intended for the reader, as well as for the detective. In fact, the story becomes one in which the reader must also accompany the detective toward the solution and apply his own powers of logic and deduction alongside those of the detective. This idea becomes very important in all subsequent works of detective fiction. That is, in all such fiction, all of the clues are available for the reader, as well as the detective, to solve the crime (usually murder), and at the end of the story, the reader should be able to look back on the clues and realize that he could have solved the mystery. A detective story in which the solution is suddenly revealed to the reader is considered bad form. Poe, then, introduces one of the basic elements of the detective story — the presentation of clues for his *readers*, and in addition to the above, Poe is also credited with introducing and developing many other of the standard features of modern detective fiction.

For example, M. Auguste Dupin is the forerunner of a long line of fictional detectives who are eccentric and brilliant. His unnamed friend, who is a devoted admirer of the detective's methods, is less brilliant but, at times, he is perhaps more rational and analytical than Dupin is. He never, however, has the flashes of genius that the detective exhibits; instead, he begins the tradition of the chronicler of the famous detective's exploits — that is, he mediates between reader and detective, presenting what information he has to the reader, while allowing the detective to keep certain information and interpretations to himself. This technique has since been employed by numerous writers of detective fiction, the most famous being the Sherlock Holmes

and Dr. Watson combination. Almost as popular are the well-known novels of Rex Stout, dealing with the eccentric Nero Wolfe and his sidekick, Archie Goodwin, further examples of Poe's methodology. In all the cases that these detectives attempt to solve, the eccentric detective has a certain disdain, or contempt, for the police and their methods, and this has also become a standard feature of many detective stories, along with the fact that the head of the police force feels, as he does in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," that this amateur detective, while solving the murder, is a meddler.

Poe is clearly responsible for and should be given credit for giving literature these basics of the detective story as a foundation for an entirely new genre of fiction: (1) the eccentric but brilliant amateur sleuth; (2) the sidekick, or listener, or worker for the clever detective; (3) the simple clues; (4) the stupidity or ineptitude of the police; (5) the resentment of the police for the amateur's interference; and (6) the simple but careful solution of the problem through logic and intuition.

### **Stories of the Psychotic Personality: Introduction to "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat"**

Many of Poe's short stories treat the same type of phenomena, yet in fact, part of Poe's greatness lies in the diversity of his creativity, and everything he wrote carries with it the distinctive trademark that would identify it as being a work by Edgar Allan Poe. The stories in this section, likewise, are Poe's best examples of another type of story; these are tales of the psychotic personality, one who tries to give a rational explanation for his irrational and compulsive acts. In both stories treated here, the criminal is so completely occupied with his own mental state and in justifying his horrifying actions that the reader is not nearly as aghast at the horrors that the criminal perpetrates, as he is at the bizarre mental state of the criminal. The cruel acts performed by the criminal in both stories are de-emphasized in order to examine the mind of the criminal. In other stories, Poe creates a feeling of horror in the reader's mind by certain acts of cruelty: Here, the reverse is true; for example, the narrator's murder of his wife in "The Black Cat" occurs so suddenly that we hardly notice the horrible cruelty of the act. Instead, we note the mental state of the psychotic killer.

Poe made one assumption throughout his writings that is very important in understanding both of these stories. Poe assumed that any man, at any given moment, is capable of performing the most irrational and horrible act imaginable; every mind, he believed, is capable of falling into madness at any given moment. Thus, these stories deal with those subconscious mental activities which cause a person who leads a so-called normal existence to suddenly change and perform drastic, horrible deeds. Unlike some commentators who thought that Poe was trying to determine exactly what constitutes *madness*, Poe was more accurately concerned with the conditions and the various stages which lead a person to commit acts of madness, particularly when that madness manifests itself in an otherwise normal person. Both narrators in these stories are — just prior to their atrocities — considered to be normal, average, commonplace men. Yet without warning, each of them loses his sanity momentarily. Poe's emphasis in these stories, particularly in

"The Black Cat," is on the fact that the narrator is sometimes aware that he *is* going mad. Yet even with this self-knowledge, he can do nothing about his terrifying, changing mental state.

Aside from the general patterns and concerns that are present in both stories, there are even more basic similarities: Both stories, for example, begin with (1) a first-person narrator who (2) begins his story by asserting that he is *not* mad ("Why will you say I am mad" and "Yet, mad am I not"); (3) in addition, both narrators are seemingly average people at the beginning of their chronological narratives; and (4) both perform crimes that are both irrational and intensely personal; (5) both love their victims deeply (the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" loves the old man he murders, and the narrator of "The Black Cat" loves and adores his wife, and, therefore, ironically (6) the murderers' love for their victims makes their crimes even more irrational; (7) both narrators consider dismembering the corpses of the victims; this is actually done in "The Tell-Tale Heart," and in "The Black Cat" it is considered before the narrator finally decides to entomb the corpse in the chimney; (8) in both cases, the narrator's *over-confidence* in the superiority of his concealment of the body leads directly to the discovery of the body. There are other similarities in the two stories, but these basic correlatives suffice to show how Poe uses similar techniques to achieve the desired effects in each story.

In conclusion, in both of these stories, the narrator attempts a rational examination and explanation for his impulsive and irrational actions. He attempts to bring reason into the picture to explain a completely irrational act. Both stories attempt to present an exterior view of the interior disintegration of the narrator. Both narrators begin their stories at a moment when they are sane and rational, and throughout the story, we observe their changing mental states. These tales are perhaps Poe's most thorough investigations of the capacity of the human mind to deceive itself and then to speculate on the nature of its own destruction.

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