

Stanford House Classics - Elementary

BLACK TALES

Edgar Allan Poe

literature analysis and response



BLACK TALES

Edgar Allan Poe

EDGAR ALLAN POE was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1809. His parents, who were actors, died when he was only two, and he was brought up by a rich merchant, John Allan. His relationship with his foster father was not good and when Poe left University because of bad debts, Allan refused to help him. Poe published his first volume of writing in 1827 and continued an extraordinary range of writing - poems, essays, tales and reviews in conditions of poverty and poor health aggravated by heavy drinking and melancholia. In 1835 he married his 13-year-old cousin, Virginia Clemm, who died in 1847. In 1845 Poe reached literary fame with his poem *The Raven*. He died in 1849. He is best known as the author of some of the best horror stories ever written.



Stanford House

BLACK TALES

From childhood's hour I have not been
As others were - I have not seen
As others saw - I could not bring
My passions from a common spring -

Edgar Allan Poe, 'Alone'

THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER

For the whole of a dull, dark and soundless¹ day in the autumn I had been riding under low clouds across a dreary² countryside. By evening, I came to the House of Usher.

A sense of gloom³ descended on me as I stopped my horse beside a black lake edged⁴ by dying trees.

Reflected in the surface of the lake were the windows and the old stones of the house. I looked up and saw that the stones were crumbling⁵ and covered with a web⁶ of tiny fungi. A faint crack zig-zagged⁷ down the face of the building from the roof to the surface of the lake. A feeling of dreariness and oppression surrounded the house.

I had arranged to stay here for a week or two in answer to a call for help from my friend, Roderick Usher. I rode over the short bridge to the house. A servant took my horse, and led me in silence along many dark passages, and, finally, to the room of his master.

1. Choose the correct word/s in the following sentences:

- 1) The narrator was travelling by a) horse b) car c) boat.
- 2) The weather was a) sunny b) cloudy c) wet.
- 3) The House of Usher was a) new b) friendly c) old.
- 4) The narrator intended staying there a) for a couple of weeks b) for a month c) for ever.
- 5) The house was near a) the sea b) a lake c) the mountains.
- 6) The owner of the house was the narrator's a) uncle b) master c) friend.

2. Find the words that mean the following:

- | | |
|--------------------------|--------|
| 1) misery, depression | G..... |
| 2) they float in the sky | C..... |
| 3) no sound | S..... |
| 4) mould | F..... |
| 5) falling to pieces | C..... |
| 6) dismal, depressing | D..... |

Now list them under the correct heading:

NOUN	ADJECTIVE	PRES. PARTICIPLE
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.....		
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.....		
.....		

1. soundless: without sounds.
2. dreary: grey, dull.
3. gloom: depression.
4. edged: bordered.
5. crumbling: falling into pieces.
6. web: net (like that of a spider).
7. zig-zagged: in the shape of the letter z.

The room was very large and high. The windows were tall, narrow and pointed, and set¹ far above the black oak² floor. They allowed only a weak crimson³ light onto the comfortless⁴ furniture, and the old books and musical instruments. The walls and the ceiling were lost in gloom. There was a feeling of sorrow everywhere.

Roderick Usher got up from a sofa on which he had been lying, and welcomed me. He was terribly changed from the friend I had known. He still looked like an educated and very nervous man, but his pale skin and the strange look in his eye made him seem almost inhuman. One moment he would be lively, the next moment he would be silent. His voice would go from high and uneven, to dull and heavy.

He said, "I am suffering from an `illness` which the Ushers carry in their blood. It causes a terrible oversensitivity in my senses of hearing, sight, smell, and touch. I hope that it will go, but, until it does, I must have the most tasteless food, the softest clothes, and the weakest light. The smell of flowers is oppressive to me. All sounds, except for my guitar, are painful to my ears."

He paused, and finally continued in a whisper, "I shall die in this terrible house! I shall go mad! I am afraid that even the smallest thing may break my sanity, and I will lose the struggle⁵ with this... terrible..... nameless..... FEAR!"

I found it hard to understand. Slowly I realised that he thought it was the house itself which created his terrible moods⁶!

3. Fill in the blanks in this short paragraph describing Roderick Usher:

Roderick Usher was a man.
His skin was and he
had a look. His
moods were always He
laughed and then immediately became
..... When he spoke, his voice was
never same. He
..... an illness. He could smell too
....., hear much and
..... too well. The light
..... him. Loud
disturbed him. He was afraid of
mad.

4. Complete the following sentences with appropriate adjectives:

- 1) Roderick Usher's room was
- 2) The windows were
- 3) The books were
- 4) The atmosphere was
- 5) Roderick Usher was
- 6) The narrator was

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1. set: placed.
 2. oak: wood from the oak tree.
 3. crimson: bright red.
 4. comfortless: uncomfortable.
 5. struggle: battle, fight.
 6. moods: humour, feelings.

Many people at that time believed that all vegetable life had some feeling.

He went much further, “ The stones in this house, standing over the reflection in the black lake, the dying trees, the long time that these have stood unchanged, all joined together by the many fungi which have woven¹ their web over the whole house It is ALIVE, this house!..... It can FEEL!..... It controls the lives and fate² of my Family! From parents to children. From children to grandchildren..... ”

I said nothing.

A more likely³ reason for the way my friend was feeling was the long illness of his much loved sister, his only relative.

“She will soon die and leave me the last of the Ushers.”

At that moment, the lady Madeline moved slowly through a far part of the room. She did not seem to see me. I felt suddenly afraid as I watched her cross the room and go out through a door. I turned to her brother - but he had put his face in his hands. Tears ran through his thin fingers.

The doctors of the lady Madeline had been unable to help her. She was getting weaker and weaker, and was often unconscious⁴.

That night, her brother said, “She has finally collapsed and been taken to her bed. You will never see her again while she is alive.”

5. Describe a house that you know well (an old one, if possible).

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6. Make questions for the following answers:

- 1)
That the house controlled the destiny of the Usher family.
- 2)
His sister.
- 3)
Madeline.
- 4)
A long time.
- 5)
No, they could not help her.
- 6)
That night.

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1. woven: *made* (to weave; wove; woven).
2. fate: *destiny*.
3. likely: *probable*.
4. unconscious: *as if asleep, after shock or from illness*.