There in the nursery window the two of us, standing quite still, quite close, gazing down. At us. But as though at nothing, at an empty spot near the garden.

-Roderick, Lady Madeline
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I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart’s affections and the truth of imagination. What the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth – whether it existed before or not.

- John Keats, Romantic poet
Imagination

The Fall of the House of Usher

i.mag.in.a.tion
(noun)

The formation of a mental image of something that is neither perceived as real nor present to the senses.

The ability to confront and deal with reality by using the creative power of the mind; resourcefulness.

Though we all have the ability to imagine, every person's creative abilities are as unique as they are themselves. Edgar Allan Poe described his own imagination as a raging, wild waterfall. In his short story, "The Fall of the House of Usher," he compares the ill Roderick's imagination to his frightening, decaying mansion.

What is your imagination like, and how does it work? Pretend your one-of-a-kind imagination could take on a physical form, like Poe's waterfall. Would it be a winding river? A twisting tornado? An overgrown garden? How would you describe it in words? What would a picture of your imagination look like? Now think about a writer or other artist you like—do you think their imagination would look similar to or different than yours? Why?
The narrator describes his arrival at the House of Usher in dark and foreboding tones. He examines the dilapidated house and the dying plants and trees with dread. He notes the sorrowful atmosphere that permeates the scene. He recounts the arrival of Roderick's letter and its contents and his consequent visit. He also reminisces about school days with Roderick and reveals Roderick's family history. The narrator notices, with curiosity, a zigzag crack traveling up the middle of the house from the base to the top of the house.

Eventually, the narrator reaches the mansion and notes the “atmosphere of sorrow” inside. Roderick warmly greets the narrator upon his entrance. The narrator is appalled by how different Roderick looks from the way he recalls him in his memories. They discuss his arrival and Roderick's illness. They speak at length of Roderick's fears and depression and about Lady Madeline, Roderick's sister, and her disease. As they touch on the subject of the lady, she appears like a ghost and exits the room. Later that day it is revealed that this will be the last time the guest sees her since she seems to be at her death bed.

In order to distract and cheer up Roderick, the narrator suggests that he and Roderick spend many of the following days painting, reading and talking together. Roderick and the narrator discuss Roderick's belief that inanimate objects have consciousness. Roderick gives the impression that the cause of his decay is caused by the decay of the house.

A few days after the narrator's arrival, Roderick informs him that Lady Madeline is dead and that he would like to place her in a vault inside the house for two weeks before burying her because he fears that someone may snatch her body from the grave. The narrator helps place her in the vault and is awed by her appearance as she lays dead in the coffin. After looking at her one last time, they shut the metal door to the ancient vault. As the days progress, Roderick becomes increasingly paranoid and agitated. By the seventh or eighth day Roderick has created such an atmosphere of hysteria that the guest also becomes agitated and cannot sleep. The night is stormy and Roderick eventually rushes into the narrator's room and throws open the window to reveal the storm and the ghostly light that seems to emanate from everything outside.

The narrator tries to calm Roderick by reading to him from a book about a hero and a dragon. The narrator stops reading and hears an echo of a ripping and cracking sound similar to one described in the dragon story. Finally, mad with terror, Roderick confesses that they sealed up Lady Madeline while she was still alive. Suddenly, the doors burst open and Lady Madeline covered in blood is standing at the entrance to the room. She rushes to her brother and attacks him while the narrator, horrified, flees from the scene and the mansion. He stops to look at the mansion and at that moment the crack in the middle of the house grows wider and wider and the house collapses.
1. Why is Roderick depressed? What are some clues you get from the story?

2. Why is the narrator telling the story? To whom do you think he is speaking?

3. Roderick is very interested in art, music and literature. What effect does art have on him throughout the story? What is the role of art in the story?

4. What is the significance of the crack in the house?

5. Edgar Allan Poe helped create the genre of the horror story. What are some clues from this story that remind you of horror stories you know?

6. Analyze this passage told from the narrator’s perspective. What association is he making between Roderick and the house?

The conditions of the sentience* had been here, he imagined, fulfilled in the method of collocation* of these stones-in the order of their arrangement, as well as in that of the many fungi which overspread them, and of the decayed trees which stood around above all, in the long undisturbed endurance of this arrangement, and in its reduplication in the still waters of the tarn* [...] The result was discoverable, he added, in that silent, yet importunate* and terrible influence which for centuries had moulded the destinies of his family, and which made him what I now saw him—what he was.

*sentience=consciousness, awareness of the senses
*collocation=a grouping of words together in a sentence
*tarn=lake
*importunate=urgently requesting
Characters and Setting

**Roderick Usher**
If the narrator is guided by reason, then Roderick Usher serves as the narrator’s opposite. Dangerously sensitive and cut off from any sense of reality, Roderick is keenly aware of his demise and yet feels powerless to stop it. He instead lives out his days as an artist, writing songs and making paintings. Except, unlike an artist, Roderick has difficulty differentiating between life and art, and his sense of reality is closely linked to his imaginative world. Like many of Poe’s protagonists, Roderick relishes his own pain. Hinting at an inappropriate infatuation with his sister, Roderick is consumed by a desire and pain that is closely linked with his family’s incestuous history and manifests itself as a sensitivity to light and sound, as well as a chronic foreboding sense of fear. Believing it is his familial destiny to be tied to his sister, Roderick seeks to both call upon his childhood friend and also bury his sister, whom he believes to be the source of his guilt and demise, in an effort to cling to life rather than death. However, the sensitivities and visions of his imagination become reality when Madeline breaks out of her tomb, and the house, and what is left of the Usher family cracks and crashes to the ground.

*“If feel that the period will sooner or later arrive when I must abandon life and reason together, in some struggle with the grim phantasm, FEAR.”*

**Lady Madeline**
In Poe’s story, Madeline Usher, Roderick’s sister only appears three times. She is more of a haunting apparition than an actual human being. What we know about her is only through Roderick’s perspective—that she has been ill and is near death. At the end of the story, we see her as a character of action, tearing herself out of the tomb and falling upon her brother. Why or how she does this remains a mystery in the story. Madeline serves as Roderick’s physical reminder of the Ushers’ incestuous ancestry and the obsessive compulsion that resides within her brother.

*“While he spoke, the lady Madeline (for so she was called) passed slowly through a remote portion of the apartment, and without having noticed my presence, disappeared. I regarded her with an utter astonishment not unmixed with dread.”*
Characters and Setting

"I was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion, that while, beyond doubt, there are combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth."

The Narrator

The narrator is a childhood friend of Roderick Usher, although the two have not seen each other in a long time. Initially, the narrator seems to be the voice of reason and the reader starts to rely on him to portray the story's events, since he is the only character who is not possessed by such powerful forces as melancholy or desire, like Roderick is. However, by the end of the story he is also a participant in the story's most horrific act of entombing Madeline before she is really dead. The narrator's reliability is called into question when he puts his trust in an unstable Roderick, leaving us to wonder how different from Roderick he might actually be and demonstrating how the mind's imagination can be more powerful than its capacity for rational thought.

Setting

The Usher mansion is as important to the story as the characters themselves, since it seems to live, breathe and decay with the same intensity as those who live inside it. Arguably, this is the first American haunted house, as it reacts to and entraps Roderick, Lady Madeline and ultimately the visiting narrator as well. The mansion can be viewed as a predator, feasting upon the characters' sanity and draining them of any sense of reality. The nearby lake, with water so still it never moves or changes its reflection of the Usher house signifies the stagnation of the Ushers, even as they are on the verge of destruction.
1. What are some primary differences between the narrator and Roderick? Why might Roderick have invited the narrator to come to his house?

2. What compels the narrator to stay at the Usher house as long as he does?

3. In your opinion, does Roderick actually believe Lady Madeline is dead or is it something he convinced himself of? Considering both possibilities, does that change your view of Roderick, and if so, how?

4. “Atmosphere of Sorrow”
Write a detailed description of a room in your house. Write not only what is contained in the room, but what shadows the objects cast, what it looks like when light hits it, or when it is in darkness. What mood does this room put you in? How does it change during different times of day? How does sound travel through it, is there an echo? Is this a room lots of people in your house use, or rarely anyone? Do you like/dislike this room? Why or why not, and be specific in your description.

Look through the “The Fall of the House of Usher” and note how Poe’s narrator describes the house. He attaches emotions to physical descriptions. Use that as your model as you write your description of the room in your house.
1. CHARACTER SCULPTING

Portions of excercise conceived by Kimberly Baker.

Make three columns on a page. At the top of each column write one of the character’s names (narrator, Roderick, Lady Madeline). Go through the story and, in each column write down words that the story uses to describe each of the characters. You can also add your own words. Look at your list, did you use any of the same words to describe more than one character?

Choose one character from “The Fall of the House of Usher” and some of the words used to describe them on your list. Find a partner. Quickly decide who will be A and who will be B. A will first be the “sculptor” and B will first be the “clay.” The sculptor molds the clay into the character they are thinking of by slowly pulling on imaginary strings covering the clay’s body. The sculptor cannot talk to the clay or make any physical contact. The sculptor should be very specific—positioning facial expressions, hips, knees, feet, even fingers.

The idea is to create a character caught in a moment—what just happened? What is about to happen? How does this character hold him/herself? After a few minutes, clay hold their poses and sculptors go on a “museum tour” of all the work that has been created in the room. The pairs then switch roles.

During the “museum tour,” take a close look at each sculpture. Take a guess as to who the character might be. What about their posture, facial expression, and other details give you clues as to who they might be?

The characters in the story are all very different and yet there are many things we don’t know about them. Use your imagination and fill in the blanks where the story leaves off!

2. FROM THE PAGE TO THE STAGE

Imagine how these scenes from the story might be acted out. With a partner, choose one of the events from the story listed below and act out or write out a scene between the two characters. Think about what words might actually be spoken between the characters, especially since the actual conversation is not written into the story.

a. The moment the narrator arrives at the house and sees Roderick.
b. The narrator watching Roderick make his paintings.
c. The moment when the narrator and Roderick place Lady Madeline in the coffin.
Edgar Allan Poe is one of the most famous American poets and short story writers, known for his unique gothic style which employs a keen sense of rhythmic language and suspenseful storytelling. Poe was plagued with a difficult life and many of his stories seem to reflect the loneliness and struggles he endured. Themes of death, dying and estrangement, as well as sickness of the mind and body, appear all throughout his work.

Edgar Allan Poe was born January 19, 1809 in Boston. His parents were both actors but his father had already abandoned the family by the time he was born. Just a few years later, after a long and painful illness, Poe’s mother was the first of many women in his life to die of sickness. Young Edgar was taken in by the John Allan family, relatively wealthy tobacco merchants who split their time between England and Richmond, Virginia. Although, he was never formally adopted, he regarded this family, especially the mother, Francis, as his own.

Although Poe’s fate seemed to be looking upward, he had what he considered a difficult time as a young adult. He often fought with his foster father about education and money. Edgar was popular among his peers but much of this was due to his extravagant personality. He had a love of gambling that eventually ruined his early college education. Attending the University of Virginia, an early American university known for its rough atmosphere, Poe racked up nearly $2,000 in gambling debt. This was nearly two years worth of salary at that time. He claimed gambling was his only option since his foster family would not provide for him—Mr. Allan refused to pay this debt. Poe was left poor and at odds with the only family he had ever known.

Unable to pay tuition, Poe enlisted in the army for a short time and published a few short stories and poems, including his first book *Tamarlane and Other Poems*. After two years he was discharged. Two years later he published a second book, *Al Aaraf*, shortly after his foster mother died. Following her request, Poe reconciled with his foster father and with his help received an appointment at West Point. Although, Poe was a strong student in math and French, he took little care with his other responsibilities at the military academy. Soon he was court-martialed and expelled. Upon his removal his classmates gave him $170 as a parting gift. With this money he published a new edition of his poetry and dedicated it to the “U.S. Corps of Cadets.”

In spite of his academic and financial difficulties, Poe actually found a reasonable amount of success early in his life. He was publishing his fiction and was a serious candidate in literary contests in his early twenties. Unfortunately, this early start did not propel him into literary fame quickly. With an economic depression, and dealing with his personal bouts of angst and depression, Poe struggled through his late twenties just to make ends meet, as his adversarial relationship with his foster father continued. After West Point, he lived with his aunt, Maria Clemm, and young cousin, Virginia, who would later become his wife. The trio moved several times and Poe worked as an editor for various magazines. As an editor he managed to publish several stories and poems along with his novella *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. He was also a well-respected literary
critic but several scandals involving his feisty attitude and growing drinking problem resulted in several lost jobs.

Poe's drinking habits are often misunderstood. He is often said to have been a serious alcoholic, which is not necessarily true. Although his death seems to be the result of alcohol abuse, this was partially due to his high intolerance to the substance. Imbibing just a tiny portion of an alcoholic drink, Poe would become viciously drunk. Part of the problem was that he would not stop and would continue to drink to the point where he would become sick. He would need at least a few days to recuperate. Although works like Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque and "The Raven" would give Poe a fair amount of popularity, he was never particularly successful financially. Poe also struggled with a public feud with writer Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in addition to caring for his wife Virginia as her health failed due to tuberculosis.

After his wife's death and the failure of his own publication, Broadway Journal, Poe's behavior became more erratic. He attempted to court several women, including a relationship with his childhood sweetheart. In the summer of 1849 he proposed to her but the wedding never took place.

Much of Poe's actual death is disputed but he was found in Baltimore distressed and delirious. He was taken to the Washington College Hospital where he died on October 7th. Although he was never coherent enough to explain the situation that brought him to the hospital there is speculation that his final words where "It's all over now; write Eddy is no more." Eddy is no more was engraved on his tombstone.

Regardless of the cause of his death, Poe's life and work, including penning the first detective story and his unique use of diction and syntax, continue to capture the fascination of students, writers and scholars today.

The Poe Toaster

Each January 19th, on the anniversary of Poe's birth a mysterious tradition occurs in Baltimore. For over fifty years spectators have gathered in the graveyard where Poe is buried to witness the "Poe Toaster", a mysterious visitor who never fails to bring three roses and a half-empty bottle of cognac to place on Poe's tombstone. It is believed that the roses represent Poe, his wife and his mother-in-law, all buried in the cemetery. The meaning of the cognac is unknown as well as the identity of the mystery man who appears dressed in dark clothing and a hat to conceal his identity. While the event now gathers a crowd of Poe fans willing to wait in the cold in the early morning hours, the tradition continues with mystery like in many of Poe's stories.
**Timeline for the Poe Era**

### In Poe’s Career

- **1827**: Leaving University of Virginia, Poe moves to Boston and publishes *Tamerlane and Other Poems*.
- **1829**: Moves to Baltimore and publishes *Al Aaraaf*, *Tamerlane and Minor Poems*.
- **1830**: Receives an appointment to West Point military academy where he excels in French and math but neglects other obligations.
- **1831**: After being court-martialed and dismissed from West Point Poe publishes a third volume of his poetry, *Poems*, and enters a literary contest.
- **1832**: Unsuccessful in literary the contest but publishes "Metzengerstein" and four other stories in *Saturday Courier*. He foster father writes him out of his will, leaving Poe no hope for any family wealth.
- **1833**: Publishes short story “MS. Found in a Bottle” in the *Baltimore Saturday Visiter*.
- **1835**: Publishes short fiction pieces “Berenice” and “Morella.” He works at a publisher, suffers from a suicidal crisis and may have secretly married his cousin Virginia.
- **1836**: Poe comes to fame as acknowledged editor of *Southern Literary Messenger*. He publicly marries Virginia, abandons the idea of his own magazine and starts to be known as a drinker.
- **1837**: He is fired from *Messenger* although two installments of what would be his only novella, “The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym,” are published in the periodical. Poe moves to New York and finishes a novel but publication is postponed.

### In American History

- **1827**: Railroads are built in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania while great migrations from Ireland and Germany occur.
- **1828**: The American Dictionary of the English Language is first published by Noah Webster.
- **1830**: The beginning of the Underground Railroad. Native Americans are removed from their homelands.
- **1831**: The abolitionist movement starts. Nat Turner is tried and executed after the Virginia slave revolt. National hymn "America" first performed.
- **1832**: The Oregon Trail becomes a main route for settlers moving west.
- **1836**: Texas becomes a state after The Alamo. Congress adopts "gag resolution" to suppress issues of abolition. Van Buren becomes president.
- **1837**: John Deere invents the steel plow and Michigan becomes a state.
### Timeline for the Poe Era

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<tr>
<th>In Poe’s Career</th>
<th>In American History</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1840:</strong> Six installments of the travel hoax “The Journal of Julius Rodman.” Accuses Longfellow of plagiarism and is dismissed as editor for Gentleman’s Magazine. He prepares to start his own publication, <em>Penn Magazine</em>, but postpones due to his poor health. Writes the tale “The Man of the Crowd” for the first issue of <em>Graham’s Magazine</em>.</td>
<td><strong>1841:</strong> In the biggest group thus far, forty-eight wagons make their way across the Oregon Trail.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1841:</strong> Joins <em>Graham’s Magazine</em> and publishes “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.”</td>
<td><strong>1842:</strong> Anaesthesia is introduced and the first adhesive postage stamps became available by a private company.</td>
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<td><strong>1842:</strong> Leaves <em>Graham’s Magazine</em> but publishes “The Masque of the Red Death” and “The Pit and the Pendulum”.</td>
<td><strong>1843:</strong> The typewriter is invented; minstrel shows are popularized; the country reaches the lowest point of economic depression.</td>
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<td><strong>1843:</strong> Publishes three horror stories; “The Tell-Tale Heart”, “The Black Cat” and “The Gold Bug.”</td>
<td><strong>1844:</strong> Morse invents the telegraph.</td>
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<td><strong>1845:</strong> Becomes owner of <em>The Broadway Journal</em>. After several years of mild success publishing his writing and several attempts to obtain a government position, he writes “The Raven” which puts him at the height of his popularity during his life.</td>
<td><strong>1845:</strong> The term &quot;Manifest Destiny&quot; is coined expressing the idea that natural superiority was a right given by a divine power. The term is mainly used in discussion of American expansionism. Mexico resists as Texas is annexed and made a U.S. state. The Irish potato famine brings a great number of Irish immigrants to New York.</td>
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<td><strong>1846:</strong> <em>The Broadway Journal</em> fails. “The Philosophy of Composition” and “The Cask of Amontillado” are published.</td>
<td><strong>1846:</strong> After disputes over Texas escalate, the Mexican-American war starts and last for two years.</td>
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<td><strong>1848:</strong> Poe publishes a prose poem “Eureka: An Essay on the Material and Spiritual Universe.”</td>
<td><strong>1848:</strong> Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton organize the Seneca Falls Convention that launches a crusade for women’s rights. Gold is discovered at Sutter’s Mill starting the California Gold Rush.</td>
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<td><strong>1849:</strong> After a long period of heavy drinking Poe falls into a coma and dies on October 7th. Posthumously “Annabel Lee” and “The Bells” are published.</td>
<td><strong>1849:</strong> Nathaniel Hawthorne writes <em>The Scarlet Letter</em>.</td>
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The cause of terror is generally connected to an immediate threat, specifically an object or a person.

Terror affects a character by exciting the imagination and physical body of that character. It incites action rather than paralysis.

Terror has a possibility of escape while horror does not.

<table>
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<th>Horror</th>
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<td>The cause of terror is generally connected to an immediate threat, specifically an object or a person.</td>
<td>The cause of horror is harder to pinpoint. It tends to be more abstract and is often related to things that are taboo, supernatural or psychological rather than specific objects or people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terror affects a character by exciting the imagination and physical body of that character. It incites action rather than paralysis.</td>
<td>Horror induces states of shuddering or paralysis. It can cause a loss of consciousness, speech, or general physical powerlessness. Horror often causes mental confusion and has the ability to dissolve a person's sense of defined identity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terror has a possibility of escape while horror does not.</td>
<td>Horror seems to inevitably lead to a downfall or to death.</td>
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Poe is arguably one of the most influential American writers. He was the creator of the detective story, which he referred to as a "tale of ratiocination." He was one of the forerunners of the short story and helped to develop it as a form.

Poe was also an editor and a fierce literary critic. In addition, he often satirized and experimented with the gothic genre and consequently further developed the concept of horror through his use of themes and literary devices. His works frequently deal with live burials; memory; doppelgangers; victimization; power struggles; the death of women; mourning; descriptive landscapes; confrontations with mysterious presences; extreme mental, emotional and physical states; and the relationships between the physical body and mental and emotional states. In addition, he uses diction, grammar and syntax in order to set very specific tones and atmospheres in his stories and poetry.

Despite all of Poe's literary accomplishments many of his contemporaries and even some present-day critics believe him to be a bad writer because his writing style is so unconventional. Poe's works draw an emphasis on diction, grammar, and syntax in order to emphasize and exploit themes, tones and moods rather than on plot or character development. It was for these reasons that Poe has been criticized. However, it is the very fact that Poe's style is so different that makes his works compelling. Poe believed in the importance of words, grammar, and syntax within a literary piece and often brutally criticized other writers for their poor or careless use of these devices.

This strong belief in the importance and good use of literary devices can be seen in both his fictional and non-fictional works. Poe uses puns, rhyming words, repetition of words and/or phrases, archaic diction, inversion of word order, bizarre and foreign words, words used to create sounds, parenthesis for emphasis, dashes, and loose sentence structure in his works to create a certain mood or tone in a piece. His language has a musical quality and often relies on the sound of words to emphasize a thought. In addition, the combinations of these devices vary according to the particular style he chooses to write in. Critics argue that Poe does not have one style but rather through the various and specific combinations of literary devices he uses in his writing he has developed at least five separate writing styles: the plausible or verisimilar style, the critical or analytical style, the hyperbolic style, the parabolic style and the arabesque style. He is best known for his arabesque style—the style he uses in many of his short stories.

The arabesque style is employed in "The Fall of the House of Usher." It involves the use of strange or foreign words, words used for sounds, inversion of word order, loose sentence construction, and use of parenthesis in order to create the atmosphere and setting of a strange situation or the effect of abnormal mental states. This effect can clearly be seen in "The Fall of the House of Usher," where very little happens in the story but a great deal of fear and gloom can be perceived from descriptions.

In essence, Poe and his critics differed on what they believed was important in a piece of literature. Poe seemed to think that the use of diction, grammar and syntax, in order to create a certain tone or mood that would invoke a specific (often horrifying) reaction, was more important than plot or character development. This belief went against the classical belief that story and character development were more important.
Herman Melville is most famous for his novel *Moby Dick*, which only received critical acclaim after Melville’s death. The book is ultimately a discussion of good and evil, and the relevance of man’s quest to achieve his dreams. Both Captain Ahab (the protagonist) and the whale he seeks to kill symbolize many things, including the aspects of one’s life that are out of human control.

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley was an English novelist most famous for her Gothic novel, *Frankenstein*, written in 1817. Shelley’s horror novel, considered by some to be the first work of science-fiction, examines human identity through the characters of Dr. Victor Frankenstein and the creature he creates. The monster and Dr. Frankenstein are linked by name, reflecting a large theme in the book that humans are tied to what they create, and that what they create serves as a reflection of themselves. Victor is horrified by his creation and cannot escape the havoc he wreaks—a supernatural theme common in Gothic literature.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was an American poet whose poems are some of the most famous in American history, including “Paul Revere’s Ride” and “The Song of Hiawatha.” His poems contributed to an American ideal and mythology that we are still familiar with to this day. Poe and Longfellow engaged in a very public feud throughout their careers, each trying to discredit the other’s credibility as writers.

Nathaniel Hawthorne was a 19th-century American novelist and short story writer. Like Poe and Melville, he is considered an American Gothic writer. A majority of Hawthorne’s work was a response to his Puritan upbringing. In one of his most famous novels, *The Scarlet Letter*, the heroine Hester Prynne is condemned to wear a scarlet “A” for bearing a child out of wedlock. The novel deals with issues of guilt, and moral and religious faith.

Bram Stoker was only two years old when Poe died, yet his works follow in the Gothic tradition, particularly since his novels mostly dealt with death and resurrection, most notably in *Dracula*. *Dracula* tells the story of a count who lived in Transylvania and maintained immortality by feasting on blood. The story is graphic and horrific and displays the conflict between the past and the emerging modern world.

In American Gothic literature British castles, Gothic architecture and monasteries have been replaced by isolated houses and cities. Wilderness continues to be a theme in American Gothic literature but now includes the prairies and the uncivilized landscapes of the Americas. Similar to British Gothic, American Gothic also explores the social, political, and economic fears of people. However, because of the different social, political and economic situations of each country many themes are different in each country. While the British themes tended to focus more on the historical past, tradition, and superstitions, American Gothic themes focused on racism, slavery, oppression of women, isolation, and psychology. These themes not only added to the Gothic genre but also made the genre an American tradition.
The word "Gothic" originates from the word "Goth," a term used to describe a group of Germanic people that existed from about the 2nd century through the 6th century. Originally from Scandinavia, the Goths moved south settling near the Roman Empire around the 3rd century causing a great deal of tension between themselves and the Romans. Originally one group, the Goths later split and formed the Visigoths and Ostrogoths. The Romans viewed both groups as ruthless and crass barbarians because they were violent invaders, who were not as cultured nor as polished as the Romans.

Similarly, when "Gothic" literature first emerged in 1750, critics condemned it as a primitive, dark and low form of literature. Critics viewed Gothic literature this way because they frequently compared the works to earlier and more traditional styles of literature. Gothic literature was radical when it first appeared primarily because of its themes. Ironically, the term "Gothic" was rarely used to describe "Gothic" literature during this time. Initially, the term "romance" was the word actually used by critics and writers to describe these works. The term “Gothic” was first coined by Horace Walpole, the first official author of the genre, in reference to his first Gothic novel, The Castle of Otranto. Arguably, Walpole used the term in response to the negative criticism his work received from literary critics at the time. Other authors would also occasionally refer to their work as Gothic. However, it was not until the early twentieth century that the term "Gothic" was consistently used to refer to the genre.
The term "Gothic" was originally used by critics during the Renaissance to refer to a style of architecture that was popularly used in cathedrals from the 1100's through the 1500's. The term was first used to denounce the style which seemed primitive and rough in contrast to the simple and elegant style of both the ancient Greeks and the Renaissance. This view had more to do with cultural, political and religious associations rather than with the actual styles of architecture. The style first emerged in France in 1140 A.D. with the creation of the new Saint Denis church. Gothic architecture continued to develop in Ile-de-France and spread across Europe. The style consists of pointed arch windows, ribbed vaults, and flying buttresses. Later on during the late 18th century and early 19th century there was a Gothic Revival during which Gothic architecture gained popularity.

Gothic Drama was popular in the late 1700's and early 1800's. Gothic plays written at this time influenced and were influenced by gothic novels. Also, many of these plays were adaptations of popular Gothic novels of the time. In fact, many Gothic playwrights were also novelists. Thus similar themes and devices are present in both Gothic stories and Gothic plays. Devices in Gothic plays include: dark settings like a gloomy castle or a creepy forest. Characters frequently found in these plays include a melancholy aristocrat, princes in disguise, comic servants, and a pair of young lovers. In addition to these typical elements, Gothic plays were frequently used to protest social conventions or political institutions. The main difference between Gothic plays and other plays is pure sensationalism and an increase in theatricality.

Gothic art refers to two different styles of art. The first style is rooted in religion and first arose in the Middle Ages and lasted up until the Renaissance. This style is characterized by the traditional Gothic arch, stained glass windows and ornately decorated manuscripts. Later, during the Gothic Revival in the 18th and 19th centuries, Gothic art was influenced more by romanticism than religion. Famous late 18th century and early 19th century Gothic artists include Johann Heinrich Fuseli (1741-1825), Francisco Jose Goya-Lucientes (1746-1828), and Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840).
Look at this. Remarkable vision. A dream, a nightmare, far beyond Fuseli. You’ve painted an idea, you’ve painted meaning.

-The Guest, Lady Madeline
Vision

Unusual competence in discernment or perception; intelligent foresight.

The manner in which one sees or conceives of something.

A mental image produced by the imagination.

The mystical experience of seeing as if with the eyes the supernatural or supernatural being.

The play Lady Madeline is a re-visioning of Poe's original story, "The Fall of the House of Usher." The playwright and the composers combined their imagination with Poe's writing to bring his words to life onstage and explore some of the many mysteries that the story presents for the reader. Their vision provides a new way of looking at "The Fall of the House of Usher."
The play *Lady Madeline* is based on the Poe story “The Fall of the House of Usher.” Playwright Mickle Maher has kept the basic story but examines elements of the plot using a new point of view—that of Lady Madeline’s. In the original story, Lady Madeline appears only as a spirit or phantom and never speaks. In the story, her death and subsequent burial, as well as her relationship to Roderick are all very mysterious and not clearly explained. *Lady Madeline* seeks to uncover some of the mysteries of the story through Lady Madeline’s point of view. This is what is called an adaptation, where a writer will take an already existing story and develop more of its parts, or develop it for a different medium. Often books are made into films, films are turned into musicals. Sometimes an adaptation will tell the same story but from a different character’s point of view. Below are some examples of adaptation in which the point of view has changed.

**Wicked** retells the story of *The Wizard of Oz* from the villain’s point of view, the Wicked Witch. The book, which was then adapted into a musical (the story has gone through 3 adaptations!), challenges our notions of evil when we experience a similar story with the villain as the heroine.

Many authors have taken Shakespeare’s work and reimagined it. One of the most famous adaptations from a Shakespeare play is Tom Stoppard’s play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, which focuses on two fairly minor characters in one of Shakespeare’s most famous plays *Hamlet*. Like *Lady Madeline*, it examines their mysterious and briefly noted deaths and fleshes them out as real characters.

**Writing Activity**

Write your own adaptation. Think of a famous story you know (a fairy tale, a book you have read in school, even a story about your family). Now rewrite it from a different point of view. Imagine a more minor character in that story and write the story from their perspective. You can even create a character that wasn’t in the original and still tell that same story from their point of view. How do the events change when they are recounted from a different point of view?
Discussing Adaptation

An Interview with Playwright Mickle Maher

What are some striking differences between your play and the story?

The primary difference is that in the play Madeline is a speaking character, whereas in the story she's not only silent, but we get just a glimpse of her. It's that silence, I think, and the mystery it holds that gives the Poe work so much of its spooky creepiness; having Madeline talk, I had to find other places to put the mystery and silence. The Guest is made more mysterious in the play - or, rather, the mysteries around him in Poe's piece are pointed up: how exactly did he and Roderick meet, where does he come from, etc.

Why did you choose to tell the story from Lady Madeline's point of view?

Of the story's three characters (Madeline, Roderick, and the Guest) I felt she - though we don't see her much - was the most dramatically active. She spends the first part of the story in decline, making her way straight to death; once there she expends an enormous amount of energy coming straight out, just so she can drag her brother back with her. It's fairly elegant dramatic line: fall, rise, fall; the trick was to find a way to show both parts of the story, before she's in the coffin and after she's broken out.

What are some of the themes in the play? How are they different or enhanced from the story?

I think a major theme - even obsession - with Poe, is that the line between life and death is a blur; that the two realms are always finding ways to invade each other, or to get mixed up in each other. In fact, all sorts of opposites get blurred into each other in Poe: sanity and insanity, the beautiful and the hideous, the private thought and what's spoken aloud, the animate and inanimate worlds, etc. This feeling that no space, no time, no body, no mind is secure in its boundaries is what I intended the play to evoke.

How are you adapting your own language with Poe?

I've allowed myself some elbow room here, some flexibility. Poe liked the theater, but he never successfully wrote for the theater. Probably because the language he favored is so rich and thick, it would have had a hard time maintaining buoyancy over the length of an evening. At any rate, what I've done is quoted his words directly in places, paraphrased them at others, imitated his style elsewhere, thrown a lot of typical 19th-century grammatical structures around, and shot the whole thing through with my own personal (modern) idiom. The hope is to refit Poe's style to suit the stage, and at the same time make a work original in itself.

How do you feel that the Gothic genre influences your play?

Not sure. It's an incredibly broad genre, yes? And no one's really sure how to define it. What I've tried to do, I suppose, is in deciding what "Gothic" elements to add to the play, I've taken my cues only from Poe, not any of the other writers one might lump in with him (in regards to horror, spooky old castles, decayed twins, etc.) So, for example, when Madeline talks about the walls of the house being porous and sweating, the house being a living growing thing, that all is taken direct from Poe's "MS. Found in a Bottle," which takes place aboard a giant oaken ship that is likewise alive and growing.

What is the most fun about adapting?

Knowing for sure that you're working with strong material.

What is the hardest thing about adapting?

The fear of betraying that strong material.
In Mickle Maher's adaptation of "The Fall of the House of Usher," the events of the story are narrated by Madeline, who was buried alive by her brother. The play occurs non-linearly in a mixture of re-enacted events, memories, dreams and the occasional interjections of Madeline who is trying to piece together her last days. At the end of "The Fall of the House of Usher" the reader is left with many questions: Why does Roderick kill his sister? Does he do it on purpose? Is it an accident? If it is an accident, why doesn't he set her free once he realizes his mistake? The play Lady Madeline also explores what might have driven Roderick to kill Madeline, what role the Guest actually played in her death and how Madeline may have contributed to her own death. Ultimately, many questions remain unanswered but many of the mysteries are illuminated.
## Plot Summary - The Play

### Character Comparison

<table>
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<th>Character</th>
<th>“The Fall of the House of Usher”</th>
<th>Lady Madeline</th>
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<td><strong>The Guest</strong></td>
<td>Although, the Guest is the narrator of the story, the reader is given very little information about him. All we know is that he is Roderick's friend from school. He hasn't seen Roderick in many years but he is sufficiently concerned to respond to Roderick's letter.</td>
<td>The Guest is not the narrator in the play but we are still given more information about him. He used to write poetry and he wishes he could be like Roderick and have the time and wealth to create works. He was depressed before arriving at the House of Usher, but his depression was lifted because he was inspired by Roderick's work. He opens Roderick's eyes to the possibilities of life outside the house of Usher.</td>
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<td><strong>Roderick</strong></td>
<td>Roderick is sickly looking and very emotionally unstable. One moment he is very energetic and the next he is melancholy. He is always very nervous and fearful of everything. He partially blames his illness on his sister but also on the house. He feels his life is totally doomed and senses his own impending death. Despite all of this he is constantly creating art.</td>
<td>Roderick is still sickly and somewhat unstable but makes a greater effort to improve his mental and physical health. However, he is still as nervous as he is in the story. He goes to great lengths to blame his sister and the house for his illness. Yet, he is not resigned to his fate the way he is in the story and is more optimistic about his future. He feels his art is inspired by his hatred for the house and for his life. Roderick’s conflict is more clearly defined as he struggles to choose death alongside his sister or life in a world he fears.</td>
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<td><strong>Madeline</strong></td>
<td>Lady Madeline appears three times in the story, but never speaks. She is like a ghost in all of the encounters. All we know about her is that she has a rare disease and is near death. All the information about Madeline is told to the narrator by Roderick. We are told nothing of her feelings or desires.</td>
<td>The audience is given much more information about Madeline. Because she narrates the story, we have a greater sense of how she feels, even as she possesses similar ghostlike qualities as she does in Poe’s story. She clearly states that she doesn’t want the Guest in her house and that she wants to be alone with her brother and no one else. She refuses to go outside her home for any reason. She loves Roderick and obsesses over him, believing that she and Roderick are doomed. She feels that she and Roderick belong together because of their similarities and because they can never really change who and what they are. She expresses an awareness of her existence, even as she nears death and wishes Roderick to follow her towards death.</td>
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How did reading the story help you in what will be your set design?

Reading the story was important to me because it was the root of the story and the mood of the performance we are showing on stage. When I design a set, I look very carefully for clues in the script as to what the design should be. These clues can come from the symbols, mood, rhythms of speech, specific moments or imagery in the text; there are all kinds of hints as to which direction to go in. In this case I had two great sources to search through—Mickle and Poe’s stories.

How important is the "house" to your design?

Very. In a way, Edgar Allan Poe is great for theater because he has a real love of symbolism, and theater (especially set) can work with symbolism as a better part of its form. An excellent example of Poe’s symbols is the house in “The Fall of the House of Usher.” In the set, I was interested in the house as one of the bigger ‘clues’ I was telling you about in the previous question; the fall of the actual house is, of course, the fall of the Usher family through this, the last of its lineage. An initial idea was to use the frame of a house and small windows as the opening at the front of the stage, but we weren’t able to do this because of technical reasons. This forced me into rethinking the set, and watching the workshops, I starting thinking about being inside of a house and not knowing what the parameters of it are. It became clear to me that it was even creepier to feel like we were in only a small section at the heart of the house, its occupants rarely leaving a specific area while the rooms full of ancient, dust-covered furniture went on and on endlessly. It was exciting to me because the set becomes less an illustration and more of a sort of mood through the space it suggests.

How much did you collaborate with the director, writer, and other designers while designing the set?

A lot. Although this was a very quick process for me in the end, I felt like there was a great deal of collaboration among us all. It is not common to have the opportunity to work with the writer on a production (many of them are either off doing other things, or are, like in the case of Shakespeare, not around anymore), so I got to be in on many meetings where we talked about the development of the text, and the direction it was taking. So while Mickle was writing, I was working on a model, moving a little coffin around, trying to figure out where it would go and how it would be used, and Jessica was turning it all over in her mind, thinking about how she would approach working with the actors. And sometimes these delineated jobs overlapped quite a bit. Sets don’t work for me until the director fully understands, embraces, and ultimately expands on its possibilities, and in this case, as simple as the set is, many of the ideas of how it is used came from the group rather than from the head set designer.
Jessica Thebus: Let’s talk about the role of music in *Lady Madeline*. Andre, initially you and I were excited just about the idea of adding music to a Gothic theatrical world.

Andre Pluess: Yes. In Poe’s writing in general, but specifically in *Usher*, there’s immediate interest because of the sonic imagery and the oral atmospheric landscape that’s linked to the text; it’s so meditative and haunting. “The Fall of the House of Usher” really allows us to explore the intersection between what is more traditionally musical and what is more abstract sound. Does literal sound kind of turn into a musicality in the landscape of this Gothic world? And then, Poe is really exciting because the subject matter is incredibly hyper-real, dealing with death and the afterlife, and the border between the two. It’s a sound designer/composer’s dream.

Mickle Maher: Distinct from some of the other stories that Poe wrote, this one has sound at its very core. There are so many great images in this story: the house reflected in the lake, all the rooms inside it, the image of Madeline Usher coming up the stairs through the huge doors, the house falling into the tide.

Think about the first time we meet Roderick as a character. If you look at the description of his face given by the narrator, it’s one of the best physical descriptions of a character not only in Poe, but in almost anything I’ve read.

AP: I love the music that Roderick plays. It’s obvious that he’s not just sitting down playing standard pieces of classical music. He’s hearing things and creating in a completely different key.

JT: Music is intrinsic to the character development, too. Roderick has this exquisite sensitivity to sound, he can only bear to hear certain tones. We don’t know why that particular arrangement of things is palatable to him, but it’s like the interior of his mind is reflected not only in the house but in the sound and the music he makes. It’s such a great invitation to specific music and sound.

I have always had this feeling about Poe’s language, that he would be so appealing to young audiences. It’s the fantasy, the intensity of the imagination, the drenched atmosphere and emotion of the stories. This is a really great opportunity to take that quality from “The Fall of the House of Usher”, and make manifest the impassioned fever of creating and the terrifying fever of living that this artist was experiencing through words, images and music.
The Gothic tradition has pervaded culture even today. “Goth” culture came out of the punk and post-punk era in the 1980’s. Primarily youth-oriented, Goth culture maintains a fascination with music, fashion, cinema and slang that incorporates elements of the Gothic style, including but not limited to: horror, Victorian and Romantic dress and interest in the supernatural and immortality. Included on these pages are facets of Goth culture. Some of them might seem familiar to you, and some things you thought were Goth are decidedly NOT!

Misconceptions

Because “Goth” and Gothic style incorporates so many elements, the issue of what is "goth" is hotly debated. There is a common misconception that Goths have anti-religious sentiments, leaning towards Satanism, or cult-like practices. Certain types of music, like death rock, heavy metal and shock rock, are often associated with contemporary Goth culture but are far more violent in their lyrical content than actual Goth bands.

Music

Goth music came out of punk and post-punk music. Famous punk and post-punk and glam rock musicians like the Clash, the Ramones and David Bowie heavily influenced Goth music and fashion. An anti-conformist message as well as a distinct style of fashion influenced the emergence of Goth music. Bands such as The Cure, Siouxsie and the Banshees, Joy Division, Nick Cave, and Bauhaus were in the small group of Goth bands. More recently, bands such as Nine Inch Nails merged with industrial music and their lyrics deal more with gothic elements of death, depression, fetishism and black magic.

Fashion

The style of contemporary Goth dress is varied and follows with Gothic themes. It ranges from punk to Victorian. Goth dress often includes: corsets, leather, black, ruffled shirts, long coats and skirts and light face makeup with dark eye makeup. There is no particular dress code, but rather the styles vary according to tastes and localities.
Since Gothic literature has influenced a number of other genres of literature, it is difficult to pin down exactly what constitutes Goth literature. Certainly there are modern authors who write about Gothic themes and styles. Anne Rice, author of such books as *Interview with a Vampire* has gained popularity in Goth culture, but even such writers as Stephen King, the premier contemporary horror writer, fits into the Gothic style because of his suspenseful storytelling and themes of the supernatural. Comic books such as Superman, Batman and X-Men are also modern examples of Gothic in how they deal with supernatural strength, feelings of isolation, torment and discussions of good vs. evil.

Poe was one of the first writers to originate the horror story. So it should follow that horror films follow in the Gothic tradition. However, there are other films that have elements of the Gothic including the films of Tim Burton (*Nightmare Before Christmas*, *Sleepy Hollow*, *Edward Scissorhands*). What movies have you seen that remind you of the Gothic genre?
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<td><a href="http://www.uncannyxmen.net/db/covers/showgallery2.asp?HdAuto=301&amp;ID=onehots&amp;title=X-Men%20Firsts">http://www.uncannyxmen.net/db/covers/showgallery2.asp?HdAuto=301&amp;ID=onehots&amp;title=X-Men%20Firsts</a></td>
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