

SHUDDERSOME: TALES OF POE

A PLAY IN ONE ACT ADAPTED BY
Lindsay Price

FROM THE WORKS OF
Edgar Allan Poe



CLASSROOM STUDY GUIDE

Introduction

A vivid and theatrical adaptation of some of Poe's best known work including *The Tell Tale Heart*, *The Masque of Red Death*, *The Bells*, and *The Raven*.

Background

Before publication, *Shuddersome: Tales of Poe* was premiered by St. Roche Catholic Secondary School (as *The Tell Tale Heart and Other Strangeness*) on October 17, 2012. The play was subsequently presented by Listowel District Secondary School (as *The Tell-Tale Heart and Other Strangeness*) on March 21, 2013.

Playwright Bio

Lindsay Price is the Vice President of Theatrefolk Inc. and the co-creator of the Drama Teacher Academy. She has been involved with theatre education for over 25 years as a playwright, adjudicator, workshop instructor, resource writer, curriculum supervisor, professional development creator and keynote speaker. Her plays have been performed in schools all over the world with over 1000 productions a year.

Scene by Scene Breakdown

There are three different versions of *Shuddersome* of various lengths consisting of the following stories:

The Tell-Tale Heart

A young man tries to convince the audience he is sane after killing his employer, chopping up the body and placing it under the floorboards. He thinks he's gotten away with it, to the point that when the police come to investigate a shriek, the young man brings them right into the room where the body is buried. The young man starts to hear the beating of the dead man's heart until he is driven to surrender and confess.

The Bells

This poem describes four types of bells: Silver – the childlike wonder of winter fun. Gold – the romantic wonder of life. Brass – the alarm bells that signal a horrific, senseless death. Iron – cemetery bells that awaken ghouls to dance on the graves.

The Oval Portrait

A painter is obsessed with painting a young, vibrant dancer. But with each session the young woman's soul is being slowly drawn out of her. The painter ignores her pleas to stop the painting; he must finish. As the painting becomes more and more lifelike, the young lady becomes more and more gaunt. The moment the painting is finished, she dies.

Lionising

A vain young man knows that having a big nose will make him the talk of the country. And for a while the rich and the royalty are totally entranced. But he takes it a step too far when in a duel he shoots off the other man's nose. A man with no nose will always be more interesting than a man with a big nose.

The Raven

A young man mourns the loss of a loved one is taunted and haunted by a large, ominous raven.

The Masque of Red Death

A prince and a thousand of his courtiers have shut themselves up in the castle while a plague devastates the country. But walls are no match for the Red Death.

Characters

Many of Poe's characters are male. Having said that, changing the gender of the characters is encouraged. The Prince in the *Masque of Red Death* can be the Princess. The Young character in *The Tell Tale Heart* can be female.

The SHUDDERS: The Shudders (the ensemble) appear in every scene. They are there to help create that creepy Poe atmosphere. Think of them as evil ghosts.

ROSALIE POE: In the 60-minute version there is an additional character: Rosalie Poe, Edgar Allan Poe's half-sister. She is prim, conservative, and disdainful of Poe and his stories. She also doesn't realize that she is dead.

The Tell-Tale Heart

THE YOUNG: Selfish and self-centered. Thinks he's intelligent and sane and acts as such. Works for The Old.

THE OLD: An old rich man. Afraid of death. Thinks The Young is a loyal employee.

POLICEMEN (x2): Both are polite and conscious of doing a good job. They're not exactly observant and get caught up in their own stories.

SHUDDERS: Evil ghosts.

The Bells

GOLD SPEAKERS: Melodic, joyful, content.

SILVER SPEAKERS: Gleeful, childlike, happy.

BRASS SPEAKERS: Despairing, terrified, helpless.

IRON SPEAKERS: Evil ghouls with claws.

SHUDDERS: Take on the qualities of each bell section.

The Oval Portrait

PAINTER: Obsessed, egotistical, arrogant, single-minded.

YOUNG LADY: A dancer. At first, bright and full of light. Her bright light is slowly sucked away.

PICTURE LADY: An image of the Young Lady. Bright and full of light.

SOUL SUCKERS: Evil ghouls who taunt the Young Lady.

SHUDDERS: They watch. They can also sing underneath this scene.

The Raven

The script divides the poem into five individual speakers along with the Shudders who speak in unison and form tableaux. Feel free to divide the poem up further. Each speaker is a master ghost storyteller.

Lionizing

ROBERT JONES: A Narcissist with a big nose. Dedicated to the study of noseology.

MOTHER: Thinks her son is a genius.

FATHER: Doesn't think his son is a genius.

DUCHESS: In love with Robert's nose. Ostentatious. Thinks she is smart.

COUNTESS: In love with Robert's nose. Ostentatious. Thinks she is smart.

MARQUIS: In love with Robert's nose. Ostentatious. Thinks he is smart.

PRINCE: In love with Robert's nose. Ostentatious. Thinks he is smart.

ARTIST: In love with Robert's nose. Will pay anything to paint it.

ELECTOR: Not in love with Robert's nose. Arrogant. German.

SHUDDERS: They play aristocrats.

The Masque of Red Death

PRINCE PROSPERO: Powerful, egotistical, childish. Puts himself before all others. Only wants to have fun.

NARRATORS (x3): Evil, eerie, scornful. They know a secret.

GUESTS (x3): Merry, rich, lighthearted, purposefully ignorant.

SPECTRE: Silent. Death.

SHUDDERS: They play guests.

Themes

Death, madness, guilt, revenge, regret, illness, lost love

Pre-Read Questions

- ★ Can you identify an urban legend (specifically one with horror elements)? What's the story?
- ★ What scares you the most? Are you easily scared?
- ★ Do you like scary stories/horror movies? Why or why not?
- ★ Have you ever been affected after reading a scary story/watching a horror movie? What happened?
- ★ What are the differences between a scary story and a horror movie?
- ★ What elements do you usually find in a scary story?
- ★ How can you create a creepy atmosphere when telling a scary story?
- ★ What do you know about Edgar Allan Poe?

Pre-Read Activities

Scary Stories

- ★ Divide students into groups.
- ★ Have each group pick an urban legend with horror elements. It should be a story that everyone knows, or is simple enough that everyone can learn it quickly.
- ★ Each group will tell their story to the class. Their job is to be as creepy and scary as possible. They can use light and sound to create atmosphere and they can use vocal techniques. They're not going to physically stage it, so their entire focus will be on the atmosphere they create through their storytelling.
- ★ Groups will discuss, rehearse and present.
- ★ Afterward, have the class vote on the scariest story and why it was the scariest.

- ★ Discuss the experience. What was it like to try to be scary? What was it like to listen to the stories? Were you scared? Why or why not?

What Scares Me? Reflection

- ★ Students will write a one-paragraph description answering the question, “What scares me the most?” Students are to identify what scares them, why they think they get scared, and what they do to deal with the fear or avoid being scared.

Adaptation Exercise

- ★ Divide students into groups. Give each group a short poem as their source material. The point is to have students work quickly.
- ★ Discuss the definition of adaptation, and adaptations that students may know.
 - » Adaptation: To make something suitable for a new purpose, to modify, to alter
- ★ The goal of the exercise is to have students adapt the poem into a scene. They don't have to use the words of the poem, but the scene must be connected to it. Remind students that they are making something suitable for a new purpose. That means the scene must have characters and a conflict, and take place in a specific location.
 - » What characters can be derived from the poem?
 - » What location can the scene take place in, as indicated by the poem?
 - » What conflict can be derived from the poem?
- ★ The scene should be less than one minute.
- ★ Groups will discuss, rehearse, and present.
- ★ Afterward, discuss the similarities and differences in the scenes. Hopefully there will be differences! This will show students that there is not one way to adapt material. Also, discuss the process. What were the challenges? How did they modify and alter for a new purpose?

The Tell Tale Heart Tableau Series

- ★ Give students a copy of Edgar Allan Poe’s short story *The Tell Tale Heart*. Read it aloud as a class, or divide students into groups and have each group read the story.
- ★ As a class, discuss the characters: Who are they? What do they want? What do they do?
- ★ As a class, discuss the important plot points. What are the key moments in the story?
- ★ Divide the class into groups. Based on the discussion, groups will create a tableaux of three pictures that visualize the three most important moments in the story.
 - » Emphasize to students any principles of tableau that you use in your class. Do they need to incorporate levels? Connection between individuals?
- ★ Lastly, groups will create transitions between each picture to form a series.
- ★ Groups will present their series to the class. Those watching should try to identify the moments each group chooses to visualize.
- ★ Discuss afterward. What are the similarities and differences of the moments that the groups chose?

Inference Scene

- ★ In groups, students will create a one-minute scene based on the title “The Masque of Red Death.” Groups are to discuss and decide what the title means, and create a scene based on the title. They are not to look up the actual story.
- ★ Groups will discuss, rehearse and present.
- ★ Discuss the experience afterward. What are the similarities and differences in the scenes?

The Oval Portrait Theatrical Moment

- ★ Give students the following description: An obsessed, egotistical, and single-minded painter paints a dancer. At first the dancer is bright and full of light. But her bright light is slowly sucked from her and transferred into her picture. The painter ignores the dancer's complaints, so focused is he on creating the perfect painting. The second the painting is finished, the dancer dies.
- ★ Divide students into groups. Based on the description, groups will create a theatrical moment. This can be an original scene, movement piece, poem, tableaux series, film piece, musical moment, or any other approved form.
- ★ Groups will discuss, rehearse and present.

Research Project: Author

- ★ Divide students into groups and give them a limited amount of time to research the author of the source material: Edgar Allan Poe.
 - » Who is Edgar Allan Poe?
 - » What is his background?
 - » When was he writing?
 - » In what forms did he write?
 - » Was he a "successful" writer?
- ★ Decide how students will share their knowledge. Will they create a scene based on what they've learned? An oral presentation with a visual component? Will you create a quiz? Give students a way to demonstrate what they've learned.

Close Reading Analysis Questions

Close reading is an analysis tool. Students read a text multiple times for in-depth comprehension, striving to understand not only **what** is being said but **how** it's being said and **why**. Close reading takes a student from story and character to drawing conclusions on author intention. Close reading prompts students to flex their thinking skills by:

- ★ Teaching students to engage with a text.
- ★ Teaching students to be selective. We can't highlight everything in the text, only the most important elements.
- ★ Teaching students to make educated decisions. All conclusions and opinions must be backed up with a text example.

Have students analyze *Shuddersome* individually or in groups, using the following text-dependent questions:

Read One: What is happening?

1. What is your first impression of the play?
2. *The Tell-Tale Heart*
 - a. Based on their first few lines, do you think the character Young is sane? Why or why not?
 - b. What reason does Young give for wanting to kill the old man?
 - c. What did Young practice?
 - d. What did Young do to the corpse?
 - e. Why did the policeman knock on the door?
 - f. Did the policeman suspect anything?
 - g. Why did Young confess?

3. *The Bells*

- a. Are the silver bells positive or negative?
- b. What do the golden bells represent?
- c. What is the suggested tableau for the brass bells?
- d. Who are the characters in the iron bells section?

4. *The Oval Portrait*

- a. What happens to the Young Lady?

5. *The Raven*

- a. Who is Lenore?
- b. What does the Raven say?
- c. In your opinion, is the Raven evil?

6. *The Masque of Red Death*

- a. What is the red death?
- b. What does Prince Prospero do to avoid the red death?
- c. At the end of five or six months what announcement does Prince Prospero make?
- d. What was the impact of the seventh room?
- e. How does the Prince react to the Spectre?
- f. What happens to the Prince?
- g. What happens to everyone?

7. Do you have any questions about the play?

8. What is the key idea of the play?

Read Two: How does it happen?

1. What is the difference between atmosphere and mood? Why would these be important in this type of play?
2. There are three versions of the play with different lengths. Which length do you think will have the most impact with an audience?
3. The playwright has created an ensemble called The Shudders and calls them evil ghosts. How do you think this ensemble will add to the atmosphere of the play?
4. Given that The Shudders are called evil ghosts, how would you costume them? What makeup would you give The Shudders?
5. The playwright says it is important that there are as few true blackouts as possible to maintain the eerie tone of the piece. Do you agree with this approach to lighting? Why or why not?
6. The playwright says music and sound are your best friend when it comes to creating an eerie atmosphere. Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
7. The playwright says the best costume approach is all black with red accents. If you were directing this play, how would you costume it?
8. What do you think the impact of the opening stage directions would be? How do the opening stage directions set the world of the play? How do they create atmosphere?
9. How does the storytelling for *The Tell-Tale Heart* differ from *The Bells*?
10. *The Oval Portrait* is a silent scene. In your opinion, why did the playwright choose to present the scene this way?
11. In *The Masque of Red Death* how would you show the moment when the characters contract the disease? How would you show the characters “bleeding out their eyes” on stage?
12. Are there any words you don’t understand? Identify and define them.

Read Three: Why does it happen?

1. In your opinion, why is the play called *Shuddersome*? Is this a real word?
2. Compare and contrast your own experience with scary stories with what happens in the play.
3. How does the playwright want you to respond to this play?

Post-Read Questions

- ★ What is one question that you still have about the play?
- ★ Which character resonated with you the most and why?
- ★ Do you recognize yourself in any of the characters?
- ★ What scene or moment stands out to you and why?
- ★ Did any moment scare you?

Post-Read Activities

Character Costume Design

- ★ Choose a character and design their costume.
- ★ Based on their personality, what would they wear? What pieces of clothing define them? What colours and textures would they choose?
- ★ Draw a colour costume rendering.

Set Design

- ★ Students, individually or in groups, will discuss and decide how they would design the set for this play. Based on the themes in the play, what colours and textures would they choose?
- ★ Draw a colour set rendering or write a two-paragraph description of the set.

Staged Scenes

- ★ Divide students into small groups and assign each group a scene from the play, or a short moment within a scene.
- ★ Give students time to rehearse.
- ★ Each group will present their moment.
- ★ Discuss the scenes afterward:
 - » How did seeing the scenes acted out differ from reading them?
 - » Why is it important to act a scene as well as read it?
 - » Did any of the presentations offer a different interpretation of the characters than yours?

Choral Speaking

- ★ The play often uses choral speaking to help tell the story.
 - » Choral speaking: text is spoken in unison, highly stylized and imagistic, sometimes lines of text rhyme
- ★ Using one of the play's choral speaking moments as a template, have groups write their own.
- ★ Divide students into groups.
- ★ Each group will write a paragraph version of a story. It can be an original story (if time allows), a news story, or a fairy tale.
- ★ Groups will turn their paragraph into a choral speaking moment that is highly stylized and imagistic with rhyming lines.
- ★ Groups will rehearse their choral speaking moment and present.