

Introduction

Slowly, this strange fear grew into horror. Yes, horror. If I tell you why, you will not believe me. You will think I am mad.

The Black Cat is one of Edgar Allan Poe's most famous horror stories. Why is the man in the story afraid of his own black cat? Why does he kill it? And how does the cat punish him for his evil ways?

In *The Oval Portrait* a man finds a portrait of a beautiful young woman in a lonely house. Who is this woman? Who painted her? And why is the man so frightened of her picture? What terrible secret does it hold?

In *Berenice*, a madman offers to marry his sick cousin. He does not love her but she loves him. One day after she smiles at him, he cannot stop thinking about her beautiful teeth. What really happens to Berenice in the end?

In *The Mask of the Red Death*, a terrible illness is killing people in the city. Prince Prospero takes a thousand friends away from the city and tries to shut his door against the face of Death. How does the 'Red Death' get into his large house? What will happen to him and all his friends when they meet the stranger with the red mask of death?

Here, you will read four horror stories from the strange and terrible mind of Edgar Allan Poe. They are stories about beauty, evil and death. Will they stop you sleeping at night?

No writer knew more about pain and horror than Edgar Allan Poe. He lived most of his life afraid of the things in his own mind. And he wrote some of the most frightening horror stories ever written.

He was born Edgar Poe on 19 January 1809 in Boston,

Massachusetts in the United States. When he was two years old, his mother died. His father died or left the family (Nobody knows exactly what happened to him). So young Edgar Poe went to live with a family called Allan in Richmond, Virginia. At this time, he added their surname to his. The Allans were a rich family, and Mrs Allan loved him like a real son. But her husband, Mr Allan, never understood Poe and he was unkind to the boy. The family moved to England for five years from 1815, and Poe went to one of the best schools in the country. In 1820 he returned to Virginia and went to university there in 1826. When he was a student there his life started to go badly wrong. John Allan refused to pay for his university because the boy was spending too much money. This hurt Poe very deeply. The dislike between him and John Allan grew, and in 1827 he left the Allans' home for ever.

Poe became a successful soldier for a few years. Then he went to Baltimore, Maryland, and earned money by writing for newspapers and magazines. He also worked on a magazine in Richmond, Virginia, but he didn't go back to his old home.

When Poe was twenty-six, in 1835, he married his young cousin, Virginia Clemm. She was much younger than him, and their married life together was difficult. Poe worked hard but he didn't earn much money. He never stayed long in one job. He was a nervous man, and he drank too much all his life. He also believed that he was mad.

In 1847, Virginia died after a long illness. Poe's home life ended and he began to drink more than before. Then, his luck changed. In 1849 Poe met a friend from his school days – she was now called Mrs Shelton. When they were children, he liked her very much. Her husband was dead, so Poe asked her to marry him. She accepted and they happily planned their wedding. He was forty years old, and he thought that his troubles were finished at last. But in September of that year, he suddenly

disappeared. Nobody knows why. He was later found lying in a street in Baltimore. He was taken to hospital, where he died on 7 October 1849. He was buried in Baltimore, next to his wife.

Poe was very unhappy for much of his life, and when he died he was still a poor man. He earned only about fifteen dollars for each of his stories. But by the end of his life he was beginning to be a very popular and successful writer. Many people, first in France and later in America, were reading and enjoying his stories and poems.

His poem *The Raven* (1845) is a cry for lost love and is one of the best-known poems in American literature. Since his death, Poe has become one of the most famous of all American writers. His stories and poems are now read by people all over the world.

Poe's horror stories, like the four in this book, are very cleverly written, full of imagination. People read them in American magazines from 1831, and in books called *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (1840) and *Tales* (1845). Some of his most famous stories are in this Penguin Reader. Other famous stories are 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839), 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' (1841), and 'The Pit and the Pendulum' (1843).

Poe had a strange imagination and one of the saddest lives in all of literature. His terrible stories touch our deepest fears and are difficult to forget.

The Oval Portrait

We saw the dark shape of the roof above the forest. It was not far away, but travelling was difficult in that wild part of the mountains. We did not arrive until night was falling.

It was a sad and strangely beautiful house, many hundreds of years old. Pedro, my servant, broke in through a small door at the back and carried me carefully inside. I was so badly hurt that I would die if we stayed out all night.

‘People were living here until a very short time ago,’ Pedro said. ‘They left in a hurry.’

He carried me through several tall, richly decorated rooms to a smaller room in a corner of the great house. He helped me to lie down on the bed. There were a lot of very fine modern pictures in this room. I looked at them for a while in the dying light. They were everywhere on the walls, all round me.

After dark, I could not sleep because of the pain. Also, I was so weak now that I was afraid that I was dying. So I asked Pedro to light the lamp beside the bed.

I began to look at the pictures on the walls, and as I did so I read a small book. I found this book on the bed next to me. It described all the pictures in the room, one by one, and told their stories.

I looked and read for a long time, and the hours passed quickly. Midnight came and went. My eyes became more and more tired, and soon I found it hard to read the words on the page. So I reached out – this was painful and difficult – and moved the lamp closer. Now, the lamp’s light fell in a different part of the room, a part that was in deep shadow until then. I saw more pictures, and among them there was a portrait of a young woman. As soon as I saw it, I closed my eyes.

Keeping my eyes closed, I tried to understand why. Why did I suddenly close my eyes like that? Then I realized. I did it to give myself time. I needed time to think. Was I sure that I *really* saw what I thought I saw? Was I dreaming? No, I was suddenly very awake.

I waited until I was calm again; then I opened my eyes and looked a second time. No, there was no mistake. My eyes were seeing what they saw the first time, only seconds before.

The picture, as I said, was a portrait. It was oval in shape, and showed the head and shoulders of a young woman. It was the finest and the most beautiful painting that I have ever seen. And I know I never ever saw a woman as beautiful as her! But it was not her beauty that shook me so suddenly from my half-sleep. And it was not the beauty of the painter's work that excited me in such a strange way.

I stayed for perhaps an hour, half-sitting, half-lying, never taking my eyes off the portrait. Then at last, I understood. At last, I realized what the *true* secret of the picture was, and I fell back in the bed again.

It was the way she was looking at me.

Her eyes, that beautiful smile, that way she looked at me – she was so *real*! It was almost impossible to believe that she was just paint – that she was not *alive*!

The first time I looked at the portrait I simply *could not believe* what my eyes were seeing. But now I felt a very different feeling growing inside me. The more I looked into those eyes, the more I looked at that beautiful smile, the more I was *afraid*! It was a strange, terrible fear that I could not understand. It was a fear mixed with horror.

I moved the lamp back to where it was before. The portrait was now hidden in darkness again. Quickly, I looked through the book until I found the story of the oval portrait. I read these words:



The picture was a portrait. It was oval in shape, and showed the head and shoulders of a young woman.

‘She was a beautiful young flower, and always so happy. Yes, she was happy until that evil day when she saw and loved the painter of her portrait. They were married. But, sadly, he already had a wife: his work. His painting was more important to him than anything in the world.

‘Before, she was all light and smiles. She loved everything in the world. Now she loved all things but one: her husband’s work. His painting was her only enemy; and she began to hate the paintings that kept her husband away from her. And so it was a terrible thing when he told her that he wanted to paint his young wife’s portrait.

‘For weeks, she sat in the tall, dark room while he worked. He was a silent man, always working, always lost in his wild, secret dreams. She sat still – always smiling, never moving – while he painted her hour after hour, day after day. He did not

see that she was growing weaker with every day. He never noticed that she was not healthy any more, and not happy any more. The change was happening in front of his eyes, but he did not see it.

‘But she went on smiling. She never stopped smiling because she saw that her husband (who was now very famous) enjoyed his work so much. He worked day and night, painting the portrait of the woman he loved. And as he painted, the woman who loved him grew slowly weaker and sadder.

‘Several people saw the half-finished picture. They told the painter how wonderful it was, speaking softly as he worked. They said the portrait showed how much he loved his beautiful wife. Silently, she sat in front of her husband and his visitors, hearing and seeing nothing now.

‘The work was coming near an end. He did not welcome visitors in the room any more. A terrible fire was burning inside him now. He was wild, almost mad with his work. His eyes almost never left the painting now, even to look at his wife’s face. Her face was as white as snow. The painter did not see that the colours he was painting were no longer there in her *real* face.

‘Many more weeks passed until, one day, in the middle of winter, he finished the portrait. He touched the last paint on to her lips; he put the last, thin line of colour on an eye; then he stood back and looked at the finished work.

‘As he looked, he began to shake. All colour left his face. With his eyes on the portrait, he cried out to the world: ‘This woman is not made of paint! She is *alive!*’ Then he turned suddenly to look at the woman he loved so much . . .

‘She was dead.’



*Then he turned suddenly to look at the woman he loved
so much . . . She was dead.*