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## **Cast of Characters**

TEACHER

STAGE HANDS

*“The Cask of Amontillado”:*

MONTRESSOR

FORTUNATO

NARRATOR(S)

*“The Tell-Tale Heart”:*

MAN

OLDER MAN, his Uncle

TWO POLICEMEN

NARRATOR(S)

*“The Fall of the House of Usher”:*

POE

RODERICK USHER

MADELINE USHER, his twin sister

NARRATOR(S)

## **Character Notes**

Each production can cast as many or as few narrators as it desires, and lines can be assigned as appropriate.

Since the concept of the show is highly theatrical, roles may be cast gender-blind; i.e., women can play men’s roles as men.

## Production Notes

The idea behind this adaptation is that it is a real “contest” actually being conducted by the real producing organization.

Feel free to change the title as appropriate: for example: “The Great Senior Class Poe-a-Thon,” or “The Great Drama Club Poe-a-Thon,” or “The Great Spring Play Poe-a-Thon.”

In the introductory speech, use the actual names of cast members as appropriate. Feel free to rewrite that speech to fit the time, place, occasion, or personnel for your specific production.

How you want to use the Narrator speeches is flexible, depending on how many Narrators you use. You may use one or two for the whole play, or change them for each individual play. You may assign all the Narrator lines to one person, or as many as you want. You may even assign some Narrator lines to the character as appropriate. If you like, it may be appropriate to have the Narrators pretend to “read” their lines from a large “book” or two.

The scenery should be very simple and, as the introduction suggests, very imaginative and flexible. Use screens and flats instead of backdrops. Use suggested frames for doors and windows. You can cast two or three Stage Hands to move the scenery during the play, or you may have Narrators move pieces around as they deliver their lines.

If this is a real contest, there should be a real prize; choose what’s appropriate and adjust the relevant lines as appropriate. You may use a plaque, a certificate, little badges for the appropriate cast, pizza coupons from a corporate sponsor, a listing in the yearbook, or whatever has value for your audience.

Finally, if your producing situation demands a shorter time limit, feel free to use any two of these plays, and adjust the opening lines as appropriate.

# THE GREAT SENIOR CLASS POE-A-THON

## adapted by David Rush

FROM THREE SHORT STORIES BY EDGAR ALLAN POE

*(As house lights fade, some eerie music fades in. Perhaps Vaughan Williams' "Theme by Thomas Tallis," or Witches Sabbath from Berlioz' "Symphonie Fantastique.")*

*(CURTAIN opens, or a spotlight picks up TEACHER as she/he enters. [This could either be the actual teacher/director or a student playing the role. If the latter, the student should use the name MR. or MRS. PACKER.] TEACHER quiets the audience with:)*

**TEACHER.** Ladies and gentlemen, good evening. I am *(Insert name)*, *(Insert title)* here at *(Insert name of school or organization)*. Welcome to our show: "The Great (...) Poe-a-Thon!" A bit of background:

This project started a couple of months ago *(Or "back in ...")* in *(Name appropriate class or group)*: we were reading one of Edgar Allan Poe's great stories, "The Cask of Amontillado," and talking about drama when *(Name of student.)* came up with the great idea of making a play out of it. Well, everybody loved that idea, and then *(Name of student.)* suggested "The Tell-Tale Heart," and we liked that too, but before you knew it, *(Name of student.)* put in "The Fall of the House of Usher," and that worked too. So we decided we'd adapt all three of them and make a sort of contest out of it. So we're going to present them and you, ladies and gentlemen, get to choose which is best: the scariest, the most Halloween-like of the three. And that will be a real vote; the winner will receive *(Describe award as appropriate.)*

A couple of things before we start: we didn't have time for elaborate scenery or costumes, *(or, "And we didn't have as many boys as we needed")* so you're going to have to help us by using your imagination. If you see a big painted screen that looks like bricks, you have to imagine it's a long dark tunnel. If you see a cigarette lighter, you have to see it as a terrible fire. And it's not *(Name of student playing Montessor or a girl playing a man's role.)* wearing a fake moustache; you have to pretend it's a man in the story. After all, isn't pretending what makes being scared so much fun?

So that's the plan. Shall we get started?

*(TEACHER exits as the first NARRATOR enters.)*

**NARRATOR.** "The Cask of Amontillado."

*(Scene is revealed. A bare stage flanked by several screens or flats. STAGE HANDS move one screen into place, painted to look like a 19th century Venetian street or carnival town.)*

**NARRATOR.** The story takes place in Venice, many years ago and tells of the strange and terrible thing that happened between two men:

*(The actor playing MONTRESSOR appears.)*

**MONTRESSOR.** *(As "NARRATOR":)* One was named Montressor. His greatest enemy at the time...

*(The actor playing FORTUNATO appears.)*

**FORTUNATO.** *(As "NARRATOR":)* ...was a nobleman named Fortunato.

**MONTRESSOR.** *(As "NARRATOR":)* He loved to taunt and humiliate me. His thousand injuries I bore in silence.

**FORTUNATO.** Well, Montressor, have your grapes rotted again this year? You always seem to be on the side of failure: why is that?

**MONTRESSOR.** *(As "NARRATOR":)* He would never stop. Always knowing my weakest places.

**FORTUNATO.** Montressor, I hear Gabriella Martinelli is engaged. I thought you were courting her; what's the matter, are you not rich enough?

**MONTRESSOR.** *(As "NARRATOR":)* Always loudly, always in public.

**FORTUNATO.** Montressor, I missed you at the Duke's ball last night; surely you *were* invited, weren't you?

**MONTRESSOR.** *(As "NARRATOR":)* I had no choice but to plan revenge.

**NARRATOR.** But you must not suppose that I threatened him in any way.

No. I must not only punish, but punish with impunity. A wrong is not avenged when the avenger is caught. Nor is it avenged when the victim is ignorant of the deed; the victim must know who his enemy is and what he's being punished for.

So I waited for my time.

I waited for my chance.

And, of course, gave Fortunato no clue about my intent. I continued, as always, to smile in his face,

And he never perceived that what made me smile was the thought of my terrible revenge.

Now, I was lucky in that my enemy had one weak spot.

*(FORTUNATO pours out a glass of wine into a goblet, swirling it, smelling it, tasting it, going through all the motions that a wine connoisseur would go through, as he speaks.)*

**FORTUNATO.** When it comes to wine, Montressor, I am a true connoisseur. Many will tell you they are, but few of my countrymen come close to my skill. They pretend, so they can impress foreigners. But I am unmatched.

*(MONTRESSOR comes to join him, and FORTUNATO pours out a glass for him too.)*

**FORTUNATO.** Now here, what do you think of this?

*(They hold their glasses up to the light, swirl the wine around, sniff it, taste it, etc.)*

**FORTUNATO.** The texture, the clarity, the bouquet, the sweetness: can you name the vintage?

**MONTRESSOR.** Clearly a Chablis from Chateau Rothschild, at least 5 years old.

**FORTUNATO.** Excellent, my good friend. Absolutely right. Now if only your pocketbook were as large as your nose, you could afford a bottle for yourself.

*(He chuckles as he takes glasses and bottle and exits. During the following narration, MONTRESSOR puts on his carnival costume: a colorful coat and fancy hat.)*

**NARRATOR.** So I planned and I waited for my opportunity.

My scheme grew ever more and more elaborate as time went on. Each detail, each tiny step of my beautiful revenge—I worked them out time and again in my head and smiled to think of the look on his face when he understood what was happening to him. And who was doing it. And why.

Soon my plan was ready.

It was carnival time in the spring. Everybody dressed up in masquerades, ate merrily, drank to the full, and forgot their daily cares in a bout of intoxication that grew bigger each night.

I planned it so that I met him “by accident” on the very last night, when the madness was at its height and nobody would remember anything in the morning.

(FORTUNATO *re-enters*. He is now wearing a carnival costume with a cap-and-bells on his head. He is singing loudly to himself a merry song such as "O Sole Mio!")

(MONTRESSOR *calls to him*. Now the actors play the scene.)

**MONTRESSOR.** Fortunato!

**FORTUNATO.** Montressor! My good friend! Are you enjoying yourself? Shall I treat you to a dinner if you can't afford one?

**MONTRESSOR.** I've been looking for you. I have received a cask of what the man tells me is Amontillado, but I have my doubts.

**FORTUNATO.** (*Coughing:*) Amontillado? The finest wine there is!

**MONTRESSOR.** And impossibly rare, yes!

**FORTUNATO.** A whole cask? Impossible! Especially in the middle of carnival!

**MONTRESSOR.** That's what I thought, but, like a fool, I paid full price.

**FORTUNATO.** You should have come to ask me.

**MONTRESSOR.** You were nowhere to be found, and I feared losing the bargain.

**FORTUNATO.** (*Coughing:*) Amontillado, you say?

**MONTRESSOR.** Yes. But I have my doubts. I'm on my way to see Luchesi. If anyone can advise me, I know (*he can*)—

**FORTUNATO.** Luchesi is a fool; he can't tell Amontillado from water.

**MONTRESSOR.** Yet some say his taste is a sure match for yours.

**FORTUNATO.** Nonsense! Come, let's go. Take me to your vault, and let me see.

**MONTRESSOR.** No, I can't impose on your good nature, especially in the middle of the last night of carnival.

**FORTUNATO.** (*Coughs.*) I insist! Come.

**MONTRESSOR.** And with your cough! My wine cellar is dark and damp, I fear you're not well—

**FORTUNATO.** Nonsense. It's merely a cough. And after all, if it IS Amontillado, it's well worth— (*A fit of coughing.*)

**NARRATOR.** Each cough was like music to my ear.

My revenge would be doubly pleasant now. I could barely contain my delight.

**MONTRESSOR.** Well then, if you insist. Come. My house is this way.

*(During the next few speeches, STAGE HANDS replace the cityscape with some screens painted to look like ancient brick walls.)*

**NARRATOR.** I had told my servants I would be gone all night and they were not to leave the house. And I knew they would disobey me as soon as they could, so my house was dark and silent.

We moved through the empty rooms until we came to the stairway to my catacomb.

**MONTRESSOR.** Are you certain, my friend, you want to continue? I warn you of the damp; it gets worse below.

**FORTUNATO.** Nonsense. Lead the way. Where are we going?

**MONTRESSOR.** Deep into the earth. We will pass through the family tombs and down to where only I know the way. Are you certain you want to continue?

**FORTUNATO.** It's Amontillado, good man.

**MONTRESSOR.** But your cough!

**FORTUNATO.** It's a cough, that's all. Don't be absurd. It will not kill me.

**NARRATOR.** I had to hold myself in from laughing aloud. Certainly...  
...It was not the *cough* that would kill him. Not at all.

**MONTRESSOR.** Come.

*(They move on. As they pretend to walk, STAGE HANDS move the wall of scenery behind them in the opposite direction, giving the impression they are going deeper into the earth.)*

**MONTRESSOR.** It grows worse as we proceed. Here, some of this will warm you.

*(He hands FORTUNATO a flask, and FORTUNATO drinks heavily from it.)*

**FORTUNATO.** Vile stuff.

**MONTRESSOR.** Perhaps, but it will warm you for a while. Have another.

*(FORTUNATO drinks again and offers the flask back to MONTRESSOR.)*

**MONTRESSOR.** No. I have no need. You finish it off.

*(FORTUNATO drinks again.)*

**MONTRESSOR.** How do you feel now? Are you sure you want to continue?

**FORTUNATO.** Of course. Never felt better.

*(He flings the bottle away and sings/chants:)*

*Hail, Spirit of the wine*

*Thou who art good and divine*

*Let this offering of mine*

*Give all praise to thee and thine.*

You do not join me? You are not of the fellowship?

**MONTRESSOR.** Fellowship?

**FORTUNATO.** The masons, man: I thought you once told me you were a mason? Or were you just trying to impress me?

**MONTRESSOR.** Oh, yes, of course. A mason. *(He takes out a trowel from his coat pocket.)* I am indeed a mason. I can lay bricks like a master.

**FORTUNATO.** No, you fool. Not that kind of mason. I mean the secret society; we call ourselves Masons because we construct the Lord's Heavenly City here on earth.

**MONTRESSOR.** Ah, I understand.

**FORTUNATO.** I didn't think you were a member. Only the most select men can ever be chosen. Who would think to choose you?

**MONTRESSOR.** Indeed, but there are many sorts of masons in this world, my friend, and we all build many different kinds of things. You'll see.

**FORTUNATO.** See what? What are you talking about?

**MONTRESSOR.** Come, we're wasting time.

**FORTUNATO.** Yes. *(Coughs again, a bad fit this time.)*

**MONTRESSOR.** Come, my friend, I insist we turn back.

**FORTUNATO.** Nonsense.

*(Now, as they move, STAGE HANDS set up the wall niche: it may be a door frame set against a back wall. Fastened to each support of the frame are the chains that Montressor describes. There is also nearby a screen that will fit inside this niche when it's time. STAGE HANDS also lay a small pile of "large bricks" nearby.)*

**NARRATOR.** We continued further and deeper. The tunnel twisted and turned, the glow from our torches cast terrible shadows on the damp walls, and I began to sing a little song in my heart.

**FORTUNATO.** Are we close?

**MONTRESSOR.** Just one more twist, my good man.

**NARRATOR.** We soon drew near my goal.

Now I had prepared this carefully. We were in a large burial room, where bodies of my ancestors lay, covered by years of mold and damp and decay.

At one end of the room, I had carved out a little niche in the wall. Very small, but large enough to hold a man.

Nearby were bricks and mortar. And inside, two chains, each fastened at one end to the wall,

And at the other, a strong iron wrist band.

My friend was confused.

**FORTUNATO.** I don't understand, Montressor; this isn't a wine cellar, it's a tomb.

**MONTRESSOR.** A tomb, yes, indeed. It's where I bury my most precious wines against my servants. Nobody would think to come here, and even if they did, they're too frightened. No, Fortunato, this is the perfect place.

**FORTUNATO.** But I don't see anything. I don't see any cask at all.

**MONTRESSOR.** Inside here, good man. A step inside and all will be clear.

**NARRATOR.** Then, with a grin on his face, thinking of the pleasure ahead, Fortunato stepped into the niche.

I called to him.

He turned to face me.

**FORTUNATO.** Where's the Amontillado?

**MONTRESSOR.** Up against one of the side wall, can you not feel the shelves there?

**NARRATOR.** He raised his hands, and

Quick as a cat, I fastened the bands to his wrist, locking them securely.

**FORTUNATO.** What...? I don't understand...? Where is the wine?

**MONTRESSOR.** Can't you feel anything, dear friend? Feel how damp the walls are.

**FORTUNATO.** The Amontillado...?

**MONTRESSOR.** Feel how strong the chains are.

**NARRATOR.** And with that, I threw aside the cloth that was hiding them, and exposed the pile of bricks I had laid in advance...

and the tub of mortar made ready only this morning...

...and began my task.

*(During the following, MONTRESSOR puts the bricks into place in a layer at the bottom of the frame.)*

**FORTUNATO.** What are you doing, my friend?

**MONTRESSOR.** I told you I was a mason, Fortunato. You didn't believe me. But then you never did, did you? You never took me seriously. You never gave it a second thought when you mocked me, when you humiliated me to my friends, when you insulted me in public places. You never gave me a second thought at all.

**FORTUNATO.** But the wine...?

**MONTRESSOR.** There is no Amontillado, my friend. There is nothing here but the dead.

**FORTUNATO.** ...No...You can't be serious...

**MONTRESSOR.** Never more so.

**FORTUNATO.** My dear friend, this is madness. What are you thinking of?

**MONTRESSOR.** I'm thinking of many things, *my* dear friend. When you laughed at the failure of my grapes; when you mocked me about Gabriella Martinelli; when you offered to buy me dinner tonight. And what I want you to think of them too, in the few hours you have left. That and every other *(cut and insult)*—

**FORTUNATO.** *(Interrupting:)* But I was only joking with you all those times. As a sign, Montressor, as a sign.

**MONTRESSOR.** Of what? Your contempt?

**FORTUNATO.** My affection. Surely you knew that I was joking.

**MONTRESSOR.** Joking, is that it?

**FORTUNATO.** The way you're joking now. Of course. Foolish jokes.

**MONTRESSOR.** Some jokes are not so foolish after all, are they?

**FORTUNATO.** And now you can stop. I understand. I will never speak ill of you again.

**MONTRESSOR.** Yes, that is true. Very true indeed.

**FORTUNATO.** *(Pleading now:)* Stop. Please.

**MONTRESSOR.** *(Imitating FORTUNATO'S tone:)* Soon. Soon.

**THIS PLAY IS  
NOT OVER!**

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(MONTRESSOR *steps back and looks at the wall.*

(LIGHTS FADE.

(*During the scene shift, music plays until ready.*

(*The second set needs to be split into two areas: one area as a kitchen, with table, two chairs and a door to outside—although “outside” can be offstage. The other area, separated from the first by a working door and frame, is a bedroom containing a bed, two chairs, and whatever else is desired.*

(NARRATOR(s) *appear.*)

**NARRATOR.** “The Tell-Tale Heart.”

I am surrounded by madmen in this place. You must understand; I do not belong here. I am not mad. If anything, I am more clever by far, more intelligent, more crafty, more cunning, more brilliant than all of them, all of these insane feeble excuses for human beings, than all of them put together.

Then why am I here, you ask? I blame it all on my hearing. Many months ago I was afflicted by a strange disease that affected my ears. I recovered quickly enough, but now my sense of hearing is more acute—so fine, in fact, that even the ticking of a clock is enough to drive me to distraction.

I hear all things in Heaven,

All things on the earth,

And now, all things in the land of the damned.

So blame it on my hearing if you must...

Or on the old man. The old man and his eye. His horrible, rheumatic, dreadful eye.

He was a distant uncle that, due to many unfortunate circumstances, I was forced to live with.

(OLD MAN *comes into the kitchen, tottering on a cane, and helped by MAN.*

(MAN *helps him sit down and then sits in the other chair.*)

**MAN.** Easy now, Uncle. Take it slow.

**OLD MAN.** Did you bring my book? I want you to read me another chapter before bed.

**MAN.** Yes, Uncle. Of course. Here, sit down now.,

**OLD MAN.** Do you remember where we were?

**MAN.** (*Moves to another chair, sits, picks up book.*) Yes, Uncle.

**OLD MAN.** David had brought Steerforth to meet Little Emily. He doesn't know what disaster lies ahead.

**NARRATOR.** Every night I would read to him from Dickens. And he would watch me. Looking at me.

There's where the trouble lay.

It was in his eye.

(*MAN mimes/mouths reading from David Copperfield as OLD MAN stares at him and NARRATOR(s) continue.*)

**NARRATOR.** One of his eyes had a pale blue film over it, making it stand out from the other and appear in a most grotesque intensity. It resembled that of a vulture and I was its prey.

Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold.

(*MAN reads and looks up frequently to see the "eye" looking at him. He tries shifting in his chair, moving his body to different angles, but always keeps coming back to see the OLD MAN staring at him.*)

**NARRATOR.** And so, by degrees—very gradually—I made up my mind to take the life of the old man,

And thus rid myself of the eye forever.

And you should have seen me.

I was never kinder to the Old Man than I was in the week before I killed him.

I would fix his favorite tea at bedtime,

And read endlessly from that boring dreadful novel.

(*MAN puts down the book and helps OLD MAN get up, go to bedroom, and get into bed.*)

I tried to think kindly of him. I tried to reason with myself.

It's not his fault his eye was so dreadful.

It's not as though he were doing anything on purpose.

It's not as though he would live forever; time would do for me what I wouldn't have to do for myself.

Tell me, would a madman have been so thoughtful?

And still, every day I had to suffer it looking at me.

*(By now, OLD MAN is in bed. MAN goes out the door and shuts it behind him. He is now "in the hallway.")*

*(MAN now goes back to the kitchen and, from a drawer, takes out a flashlight, or lantern apparatus if that works. MAN then goes back to bedroom door and mimes what NARRATOR(s) speak:)*

**MAN.** (As NARRATOR:) Every night about midnight, I procured a lantern and stood outside the room. I very carefully opened his bedroom door, slowly, slowly,

It would take me near an hour to place my head within the small narrow opening.

I thrust in a small lantern so that I could see him as he lay upon his bed.

Tell me, would a madman have been so careful?

I would open the lantern just enough so a small ray of light fell upon his vulture's eye,

But the eye was always closed in sleep, so it was impossible to do the deed I had planned.

For it was not the Old Man that vexed me, but his evil eye.

*(OLD MAN stirs.)*

I did this for eight days, until one night—

**OLD MAN.** *(Startled; he sits up in bed.)* Hello? Is somebody there?

*(MAN shuts off flashlight.)*

**OLD MAN.** Is somebody there? Is that you? Edgar, is that you? I heard a noise. I thought I saw a light. Please...you're frightening me... Speak...

**NARRATOR.** I stood silent as a stone.

The Old Man sat there; I could feel how frightened he was.

And then I first began to hear it.

Have I not told you before that what you mistake for madness is only the over-acuteness of my senses,

So that now I could hear—

*(One of the NARRATORS—or another actor—now appears sitting on the side of the stage on a small stool, with a small drum, large enough to make a dull, low, heavy heart-like throbbing sound.)*

—the beating of the Old Man's heart.

*(A bit of silence as we get used to the sound.)*

As clear as though it were the bell of a church. Or the call to Judgment Day.

**OLD MAN.** Who's there? Who's there? What do you want?

**NARRATOR.** I could contain myself no longer.

*(MAN rushes into the room.)*

**OLD MAN.** What is it? What do you want?

**MAN.** Silence! Silence!

**OLD MAN.** *(Cries out:)* No. No! Leave me be! Edgar!!!

*(The MAN takes up a pillow and suffocates the OLD MAN. No speeches or sounds, except the sound of the drum, low and steady and just a little bit faster. Then it stops for a while as OLD MAN struggles a bit, but quickly dies.)*

*(MAN stands over the body. Closes the OLD MAN's eyes, and drapes blanket over his face.)*

**NARRATOR.** He was dead. The eye would bother me no further.

But still, in the silence, I could swear I could still hear it.

*(Drumbeat sounds.)*

But I had no time to think about it. Morning was coming and I had to work in haste.

*(LIGHTS go dark on bedroom scene, as NARRATOR(s) continue. The drumming noise now starts up again, and continues underneath.)*

If you still think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe for you the wise precaution I took for the concealment of the body.

First of all, I dismembered the body. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs. I then took up three planks from the flooring and deposited all between the slats. I then replaced the boards so cleverly, so cunningly, that no human eye...

Not even his...

Could detect anything wrong.

*(MAN moves into kitchen.)*

And then I sat down for my morning tea.

All was silent, save for that strange, incessant noise...

*(A bit of silence so we can hear the drumming heart-beat.)*

When there came a knock at the door.

*(Drumming continues under scene, gradually growing louder as the scene progresses.)*

*(FIRST and SECOND POLICEMEN appear and knock. MAN answers door.)*

**FIRST POLICEMAN.** Beg pardon, sir; hate to disturb you.

**SECOND POLICEMAN.** We got a call this morning; somebody thought they heard screams coming from this house last night.

**FIRST POLICEMAN.** Is everything alright here?

**MAN.** Yes. Of course. Come in and see for yourself.

*(He invites them in.)*

**MAN.** I think perhaps it was my Uncle calling out in his sleep. He has nightmares now and then. It's his old age.

**FIRST POLICEMAN.** And he's alright?

**MAN.** Of course. I'd invite him to show you, but he's gone for the day to visit his sister. She lives a few miles away, they have so little time for each other nowadays, you can understand, it's his old age.

**FIRST POLICEMAN.** You're sure.

**MAN.** Yes. Thank you for checking. May I offer you some tea?

*(They nod, ad lib thanks. MAN invites them to sit at the table. They sit, MAN sets out teacups, pours tea, etc., during:)*

**NARRATOR.** You would have been impressed, I'm sure, by the calm I showed.

The cleverness.

The cunning.

Surely such poise and confidence is not the measure of a madman; surely you can see that.

So calm.

So clever.

**MAN.** If you'd like to satisfy yourself all is proper, please let me show you the rest of the house.

*(As MAN leads POLICEMEN towards the bedroom:)*

**NARRATOR.** I took them all over, urging them, begging them, to be thorough. I made them search every room and closet, every possible corner, until at length we arrived at his bedroom.

I sat my chair directly over where I knew his wretched dead heart lay rotting...

And we made small conversation.

**FIRST POLICEMAN.** How old is your Uncle?

**MAN.** It's not his years that are giving out, sir; it's his heart. His heart is growing weary these days.

**SECOND POLICEMAN.** Ah, yes. It happens that way to some people.

*(They mime talking etc., as:)*

**NARRATOR.** And then I could hear it again, the dull, low, quick sound.

And I suddenly realized what it was,

It was the Old Man's heart, still beating.

**MAN.** *(Calls out:)* Impossible!

**FIRST POLICEMAN.** Beg pardon, sir?

**MAN.** What?

**SECOND POLICEMAN.** You just called out something...?

**FIRST POLICEMAN.** Sounded like "impossible."

**MAN.** No. It must have been my cough. I am plagued sometimes with a wretched sounding cough.

**SECOND POLICEMAN.** Ah, of course. My wife suffers from the same.

**FIRST POLICEMAN.** Have you tried dandelion tea?

**SECOND POLICEMAN.** Dandelion tea? No.

**FIRST POLICEMAN.** Mixed with honey, three times a day, works like a miracle.

**SECOND POLICEMAN.** You don't say.

*(They continue to mime talking as:)*

**NARRATOR.** I gasped for breath.

The noise continued.

But the officers heard it not. I talked more quickly, more vehemently,

And the noise steadily increased.

I arose and argued about trifles.

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**MAN.** Alright, Yes. Villains! Dissemble no more. I admit the deed!  
I admit the deed! Here, under the boards, is his vile beating heart!

*(MAN freezes and looks at the POLICEMEN. They stand and look at the floor, then at MAN.)*

*They hold this position as*

**LIGHTS FADE**

*During the shift interlude, eerie music plays again.*

**STAGE HANDS** shift the scenic pieces to suggest a large and richly furnished room in an ancient mansion. Gothic windows, heavy tapestries, a fireplace, large chairs, etc.

*In one corner of the room rests a pile of medium-sized canvases, their backs to the audience.)*

**NARRATOR.** "The Fall of the House of Usher."

The House of Usher is no more.

That once noble, long-lived, ancient family has died out.

Even the proud mansion that was its home has crumbled into dust.

Where once there was hope and promise and a long avenue of to-morrows,

There now only remains decay and death and long-forgotten yesterdays.

And I was there the night it happened,

When the once glorious House of Usher fell into ruin.

I had gone there on the summons of Roderick Usher, who had once been a childhood friend of mine.

I still remember how I shuddered as I approached the castle, on a dull, dark and soundless day in the autumn, when clouds hung low in the heavens,

Giving the walls a bleak desolate look, making the windows look like blank unseeing eyes, and casting a pallid light on the white decaying trees surrounding the place like dead guards.

It had fallen into some inexplicable decay.

*(POE and RODERICK appear and approach each other. They embrace and then sit.)*

And when I met my friend, I saw that, somehow, he had too.

**POE.** Roderick, my friend!

**RODERICK.** Good of you to come, my friend. Thank you.

**POE.** Your letter said you were ill.

**RODERICK.** Yes, and only your comforting presence could operate a cure. I feel better already.

**POE.** But tell me, what's happened? What are you feeling?

**RODERICK.** It's hard to put into words, my friend. I am plagued by an affliction of nerves. I am depressed. I am restless, unable to sleep because I have terrible dreams.

**POE.** Do you read? It was always your passion.

**RODERICK.** My eyes fail me. Perhaps you will read aloud.

**POE.** And your music? You loved your guitar.

**RODERICK.** No. The slightest sounds are painful. The softest chords are like banshees in my ear. I am obsessed by—. Shall I tell you, my friend? Will you promise not to mock me?

**POE.** Of course.

**RODERICK.** I am afraid.

**POE.** Of what?

**RODERICK.** I don't know. The future, perhaps.

**POE.** But why? Surely you have money, your house is secure, you are safe.

**RODERICK.** And yet I wake up every morning with a shudder. What awful thing is coming to destroy me? What terrible event is waiting just beyond the dawn that I will be unable to face?

**POE.** Your mind, Roderick, needs activity. You must renew your interest in art and reading. You must take up your painting again.

*(MADLINE opens the door and comes into the room.)*

**POE.** Who is—?

**RODERICK.** *(Interrupting:)* Shh. Not a sound. She walks in her sleep sometimes.

*(MADLINE stands there for a moment, then walks across the room to pick up a book. She stares at the title, smiles, and then returns to exit through the door. The two men watch her.)*

*(When she is gone:)*

**POE.** Who was that?

**RODERICK.** Madeline. My twin.

**POE.** Your twin? Roderick, I never knew you had a sister!

**RODERICK.** She was always ill when you came to visit.

**POE.** Ill? With what?

**RODERICK.** They don't know. A weakness of sorts, a gradual, slowly evolving wasting away. It's as though she were born to die.

**POE.** All of us, good friend, are in that state. But we make the most of our lives while we can.

We have music, friends, occupations—

**RODERICK.** She has none of that, she never had the strength for life. And I fear that soon—

**POE.** Say it, Roderick. The way through your fear is to acknowledge it. You fear that her death is soon.

**RODERICK.** Yes.

**POE.** And that will leave you as the very last of the house, won't it? You see nothing but waste and darkness ahead.

**RODERICK.** More than that. As twins do, we have a bond between us, some sympathetic nerves in each of us that respond as one. We are connected in life—

**POE.** You share all its sweetnesses, of course...

**RODERICK.** Yes, and more.

**POE.** All its sorrows too. You fear her fate will be yours. But it does not have to be. Surely you know that.

**RODERICK.** You understand, my friend. I knew you would. I knew you would save me. Come, let's have dinner and talk of old times.

**POE.** Will Madeline be joining us?

**RODERICK.** I fear not.

**POE.** But I should like to get to know her. Perhaps she has secrets about your boyhood she could tell me. We could laugh about them.

*(As the two exit.)*

**RODERICK.** There hasn't been any laughter in this house for years, my friend. I think the walls would shatter.

**POE.** We'll have to change that then, won't we?

**RODERICK.** If only we could.

**NARRATOR.** Our dinner was meager. Roderick confessed he had no appetite these days, and his sister rarely ate more than soups. So we dined mostly on conversation.

He told me of the paintings he left half-unfinished.

The novels he hadn't read yet,

The poems he was still going to write,

And the music he had forgotten.

After dinner, I insisted he take out his guitar and play me at least a few scales.

*(The two men return. RODERICK carries a guitar, and POE carries two glasses of wine. As they sit, POE gives one glass to RODERICK. They sip during the scene.)*

**RODERICK.** Forgive me if I play softly, my friend. My weakness has made my hearing as sensitive as smoke. I hear distant sounds that others don't.

**POE.** It seems a blessing. You must enjoy the world all the better.

**RODERICK.** It's a curse. I hear too much of the world.

*(He strums a few chords. IF POSSIBLE, the actor could actually play and sing some short plaintive ballad such as a verse or two of "Barbara Allen" or your own choice.)*

**POE.** Your sister, Roderick, is lovely. But too pale. She is shut up too much in these walls, she should have exercise.

**RODERICK.** It's not possible, her fits prevent her from any normal activity.

**POE.** Fits?

**RODERICK.** Yes. She has a strange sort of catalepsy. She has unpredictable attacks wherein she falls into a deep swoon, her breathing will slow down to nearly nothing, and—try as we may—nothing will wake her until the fit has run its course. And this terrifies her.

**POE.** Why? Surely she is safe within this house...?

**RODERICK.** When she's in its control, one would almost think she were dead.

**POE.** How awful.

**RODERICK.** Yes, but perhaps we can talk of other things now that you're here. Tell me, do you still paint?

**POE.** Rarely. You?

**RODERICK.** I try.

**POE.** Show me something.

**RODERICK.** No.

**POE.** I insist. Your favorite pieces. Please.

*(RODERICK shows POE canvases as NARRATOR continues with:)*

**NARRATOR.** How can I describe them? They weren't representations of real places or things, but rather a series of fantastical abstractions.

Dark swirling waves of shapeless colors that swooped around the edges of the canvas, growing smaller and smaller into the distance.

One felt as though one were in some subterranean tunnel, buried far beneath the earth, desperately seeking a way out, but there was none.

As though the painter were trapped in—

*(The line is interrupted by A CRY from offstage.)*

**MADELINE.** Ahhh! Roderick! Roderick! Help me... !

**POE.** Good Lord, what was that?

**RODERICK.** Madeline.

**MADELINE.** Roderick! Save me...!

**POE.** What's the matter?

**RODERICK.** Her nightmares. She dreams of being buried alive. Excuse me.

*(He goes offstage through the door.)*

*(POE looks at paintings and puts them away as NARRATOR(s) speak:)*

**NARRATOR.** She soon fell asleep, or so I assumed. Her cries stopped, but my friend did not return to me that night.

I sat there for a while watching the fire die out.

I was slowly beginning to understand the cause of his terrible condition; why he seemed to be wasting away before my eyes.

I was determined to help him. But I knew not how.

I understood his dread of tomorrow, but was powerless to change his life. All I could do was try to distract him.

So thus we spent our days and nights. Reading, painting, making strange and sad music when the mood struck him.

And watching Madeline walk through the house.

*(POE is now sitting by the fire.)*

*He watches as MADELINE comes onto the stage. She wanders about for a bit, then sees POE. He stands to speak to her.)*

**POE.** Madeline, good morning. Your brother and I are about to have our breakfast. I trust you will join us?

*(She approaches POE, slowly raises one hand and touches his cheek, then his eye, then his cheek again.)*

**POE.** Are you well today? Perhaps you'll join us when we—

*(She gently places a finger on his lips, and puts the other to her own, gesturing him not to speak. Then she walks away, stops and turns before she exits, looks at him again, then leaves.)*

**NARRATOR.** She seemed to be growing more and more pale each day, as though she were a light slowly fading away.

And then, about a week later,

*(RODERICK enters, in grief.)*

**RODERICK.** My friend. My friend. What shall I do? What shall I do?

*(He sits, weeps into his hands.)*

**POE.** What's happened?

**RODERICK.** What I have been fearing all this time. She has passed on. My sister is dead.

**POE.** *(A moment, gently):*...Are you certain, Roderick? It's not one of her fits?

**RODERICK.** Yes, you're right. We must be certain.

**POE.** Shall we leave her where she is?

**RODERICK.** No. I couldn't bear seeing her, knowing that perhaps—

*(He breaks down again, crying.)*

**POE.** Have you a tomb then, somewhere in the house?

**RODERICK.** Yes. Yes. Of course. Come, I'll show you.

**POE.** What are you going to do?

*(They exit.)*

**NARRATOR.** His plan was simple. We would entomb the body of his sister in a large dungeon room for a period of time. At the end of a few days, we would then place her to rest in the grounds where the rest of their ancestors were sleeping forever.

And so we encased her in a heavy casket of richest wood, lined with linens of deep white silk,

With hinges of silver and the family crest emblazoned on the lid in solid gold.

Roderick kissed her gently on her forehead, lowered the lid,

Twisted and locked the two large brass screws with a noisome awful sound,

And returned, sobbing, to his room.

*(The two men come back into the room. They are now wearing large black arm-bands to signify mourning. They have wine glasses of cups of tea. They sit, and RODERICK picks up his guitar again.)*

The next day we resumed our talks. But I sensed something new in my friend...

A nervous tension that wasn't there before.

He was silent as a grave at our meals.

He would walk endlessly through all the cold, empty rooms.

Ate only enough nourishment to keep his body scarcely alive at all.

This went on for several days. Until I was determined to bring him out of it somehow.

*(STAGE HANDS or other NARRATORS come on to stage with drums and cymbals. When appropriate, where NARRATORS describe the thunder and lightning, STAGE HANDS beat the drums and crash the symbols. If you'd rather, substitute appropriate sound effects either made live or recorded.)*

The night was particularly stormy. A great wind moaned loudly against the windows;

Loud crashes of thunder,

Raging bolts of lightning,

Nature was distressed, as though echoing my friend's own morbid mood.

**POE.** Come, my friend, let us distract ourselves. Play something for me.

**RODERICK.** I know not what.

**POE.** Then recite one of your poems to me.

**RODERICK.** Very well.

*(He takes up guitar and strums a few chords now and then as he recites;)*

**RODERICK.**

*In the greenest of our valleys  
 By good angels tenanted,  
 Once a fair and stately palace—  
 Radiant palace—reared its head.  
 In the monarch Thought's dominion  
 It stood there!  
 Never angels spread a pinion  
 Over fabric half so fair.*

*(He stops.)*

What was that? Did you hear that?

**POE.** Hear what?

**RODERICK.** That sound. Far away. Somebody crying.

**POE.** No.

**RODERICK.** And a sound of, I don't know what, scraping. Scratching.

**POE.** It may be the wind, blowing branches against the house. The storm is getting worse.

**RODERICK.** No. I've heard it before. For several days now.

**POE.** Please, continue.

**RODERICK.** I'm not imagining it.

**POE.** I insist: you must keep your mind occupied, Roderick, or you'll drive yourself mad.

**RODERICK.** *(Playing and reciting as before:)*

*Wanderers in that happy valley  
 Through two luminous windows saw  
 Spirits moving musically  
 To a lute's well-tuned law*

There. There it is again.

**POE.** I tell you it's the wind, Roderick. Please. Continue.

**RODERICK.** I cannot.

**NARRATOR.** A loud crash of thunder,

A searing blaze of lightning,

The storm was growing more intense, more horrifying.

**RODERICK.**

*...But evil things, in robes of sorrow,  
 Assailed the monarch's high estate;*

*Ah let us mourn, for never morrow  
Shall dawn upon him, desolate!*

There. There it is again. Somebody is crying out...

**POE.** I tell you, Roderick, it's the storm. You're letting your fancies (*get the best*)—

**RODERICK.** No. Now there's the sound of metal. Listen—

**NARRATOR.** And then, yes, I did hear it.

A distinct,

Hollow,

Metallic

Clangorous reverberation.

My blood chilled as I watched my friend.

**RODERICK.** (*He stands and paces as he speaks:*) Now you hear it too. What I have heard, long, long—many minutes, many hours over the days have I heard it...and the cries,...scrapings...it was my fancy, I told myself, my fancy; I dared not think otherwise... Oh, pity me, miserable wretch that I am, what have I done...

**POE.** Roderick, no, you (*have done nothing*)—

**RODERICK.** I have put her living in that tomb. Did I not say that my senses were increased?

**NARRATOR.** A loud drum of thunder drowned out his words, but His eyes grew wide with fear.

He stood still and pointed to the door.

**RODERICK.** Can't you hear it? Moans...cries...from the tomb... I have heard it for nights now... The cries of a maiden... And what now? What new horror assails my ears...the rending of her coffin... the scraping and tearing of the lid...the grating, screaming sound of hinges opening...the thud of wood against the floor...footsteps... footsteps...

**POE.** Roderick...

**RODERICK.** Her footsteps...she's coming to upbraid me...she's upon the stair...

**POE.** Roderick—!

**RODERICK.** I can't move. I can't move...!

**NARRATOR.** The thunder grew louder...

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