Edgar Allan Poe Lesson Plan for Engaging Resistant Learners: A Lesson in Haunted Houses

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Abstract: A veteran 11th grade English teacher reflects on how to engage and challenge learners through close reading in 19th century American literature.

I have never been one for haunted houses. The creepy music and jump scares activate my fight or flight instinct to the degree that the actors behind those horrific masks and makeup should probably take some self-defense classes. My high school students in Columbus, Ohio, however, love them. Throughout the month of October, I constantly hear about some Ohio's most iconic haunted houses— "Columbus Haunted House," "Blood Prison," or even, "The Haunted Hoochie" (Yes, that is its actual name). Which is why my students' laments over our Edgar Allan Poe unit have always surprised me.

"The bird guy, seriously?" "Why do we have to read that?" "I don't even understand what he's trying to say."

They do not seem to grasp how Poe can take them through an experience even more terrifying than a cheaply redecorated warehouse. Instead, the long sentences with vivid descriptions invoke feelings of boredom and frustration.

With students' resistance in mind, a few years ago I was challenged to help them connect with "The Fall of the House of Usher" in a different way. "The Fall of the House of Usher" follows an unnamed narrator as he visits his childhood friend, Roderick Usher, who is stricken by a mysterious illness. Over the course of the story, the narrator observes the deterioration of Roderick's physical and mental state. By focusing on the impact of the atmosphere created by Poe, my goal was to help students better understand the rising terror and ultimate destruction that resulted from Roderick Usher's mental state. I was determined to help them step into the story, just like one of their haunted houses.

Using artwork, close literary analysis, and a little acting, "The Fall of the House of Usher" is now one of the highlights of our 11th grade American literature classroom experience. Students understand how vivid sensory details and descriptions develop the atmosphere over the story, which coincides with Roderick Usher's mental state. Through students' newfound understanding, they not only enjoy the story more but are better equipped to engage in broader thematic discussions at the end of the unit.

A Little Art Never Hurt Anyone

The start of "The Fall of the House of Usher" has always been a bit of a comprehension and engagement hurdle for students. Poe utilizes long, descriptive sentences to describe the house and the narrator's sudden despair as he approaches the home of a childhood friend. In the past, my students would read the first paragraph with little understanding or interest. However, these descriptions are crucial in understanding the symbolism and connections between the house and Roderick Usher later in the story. The descriptions create an atmosphere that impacts both the narrator and the reader.

As such, this first paragraph is a key connection point for students. Over a 40-minute class period, students work in groups of 3-4 to understand what Poe describes in the initial paragraph. Utilizing a graphic organizer, they list details of what Poe has described, identify words from these descriptions that help create the atmosphere, and then, finally, describe the atmosphere in their own words.

While identifying these aspects of the paragraph helps their understanding, it is by ***drawing these details*** that students discover how much they now truly grasp from the paragraph. The paragraph describes the house itself, the atmosphere surrounding the home, and the small details that the narrator notices as he approaches with a sense of unease. Using poster boards in their groups, students recreate what they have read in as much detail as possible. Students sketch and color all aspects of the first paragraph until their posters display the first scene in "The Fall of the House of Usher." After all groups have completed their posters, as a class we reread the paragraph and hold an informal competition to identify the poster that matches Poe's description the best. The poster chosen by the class is then used throughout the rest of the lesson to follow the changes that occur to the house of Usher. Through their long-term engagement with the paragraph, students become heavily invested in the house itself and the gloomy and horrific atmosphere that Poe has created.

The Artwork Comes Alive

As we continue studying "The Fall of the House of Usher," the winning poster becomes a ***living object***—perfect for a story about a sentient house. Whenever new details of the house emerge, someone is invited to the front of the classroom to draw them onto the poster depicting the house. Descriptions of Roderick Usher are compared to the house poster, and ultimately, the students begin to see the connection between both Roderick and the house. The symbolism of the house representing the Usher family becomes a natural observation, and students utilize the poster to identify foreshadowing of the coming destruction of the house and family.

Nothing Gold Can Stay

As we reach the end of the story, students become heavily invested in the poster and the events happening in the Usher mansion. However, in the past I noticed that students did not quite

understand the significance and horror of the ending. I now call on three students to join me at the front of the room while we read the final scene. As the tempest rises in the story and Madeleine Usher begins her escape from a live burial, students read the story aloud while three students (Madeleine, Roderick and the narrator) act out what is being described at the front of the classroom. Roderick sits in a chair and rocks back and forth while the narrator looks on. The student acting as Madeleine appears in the doorway and evokes giggles when she is told to sway and moan. When Madeleine falls on Roderick Usher, the students understand that both siblings have died; however, the poster is where their true allegiance lies. As the house cracks down the middle, *the poster is ripped down the middle* and falls onto the Madeleine and Roderick actors. The gasps of horror (never had a class without at least one) speak to their investment in the story and artwork. However, the real learning is in understanding the symbol's power and horror atmosphere Poe created.

Reflection in Devastation

After the story concludes, I guide students in some reflection:

- How did the evolution of the atmosphere coincide with Roderick's mental state?
- Why did the house have to fall when Roderick died?
- What is Poe trying to convey about mental illness and the human condition?

Through their investment and observations throughout the story, the conversation sets students up to write on the following essay prompt:

How does the symbol of the house in "The Fall of the House of Usher" impact the reader's understanding of the character of Roderick Usher and his complex mental state?

I'm not sure that I will ever convince any of my students that an Edgar Allan Poe story is preferable to the "Haunted Hospital." ("They look like actual sawed off arms, Mrs. Hoverman!") However, those gasps and terrified expressions that come from true understanding of Poe's complex portrayal of the human mind are enough for me.

This lesson utilizes the following Ohio state standards:

RL.11-12.3 Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

RL.11-12.4 Determine the connotative, denotative, and figurative meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text; analyze the impact of author's diction, including multiple-meaning words or language that is particularly evocative to the tone and mood of the text.

RL.11-12.9 Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more diverse texts from the same period treat similar themes and/or topics.

RL.11-12.10 By the end of grade 11, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 11–CCR text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range, building background knowledge and activating prior knowledge in order to make personal, societal, and ethical connections that deepen understanding of complex text.

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SL.11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

References

Poe, E. A. (2000). The fall of the house of Usher. In T.F. Hirsh & P. McCambridge (Eds.), *Elements of Literature, Literature of the United States with Literature of the Americas* (pp. 262-279). Holt, Rinehart, and Winston. (Original work published 1839).

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Graphic organizer available on the next page.

The Fall of the House of Usher

by Edgar Allan Poe

Complete the graphic organizer using ONLY the first paragraph from "The Fall of the House of Usher." Read the paragraph closely and look up any words you do not understand.

Details from the text:
(What is being described)

Words from the text that create atmosphere:

Describe the atmosphere in your own words: