Michael Clay Thompson’s
Language-Illustrated Classics

A written word is the choicest of relics. It is something at once more intimate with us and more universal than any other work of art. It is the work of art nearest to life itself.

- Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

I have selected and edited this collection of language-illustrated classics in trilogies—in groups of three related classic novels or other distinguished works—with separate implementation manuals, making four-book sets. Each implementation manual addresses a trilogy as a whole and contains discussion questions, suggestions for cumulative essay tests, and recommendations for formal academic papers as presented in my *Advanced Academic Writing* series. The trilogies are not age-graded or specifically linked to individual strands of my English curricula; you may determine readiness and use them where you would like to and where you know is best. My hope is that each trilogy will be used as a one-semester project, providing a minimum of six major readings per year, with emphasis on the word *minimum*.
In creating this collection, I have aimed to have as few purposes as possible.

One purpose is to provide a library of superb, world-recognized books that will strengthen students with stories, characters, sublime English, and rigorous vocabulary, while giving them personal acquaintance with the classic books most loved by good readers. Reading the classics is an essential part of a proper education. There are reasons—having nothing to do with school—why classics become classics; there are things in them worth keeping that books of the moment lack.

A second purpose is to demonstrate how profoundly formal language study benefits important reading; to accomplish this, I have developed a language-illustration format that incorporates and applies the methods of formal language study found in my texts on vocabulary, grammar, writing, and poetics. We have been in rehearsal long enough; now let us read.

The language illustrations are only that: illustrations. Many books have illustrations of pirates or dogs in the snow, and the books in this collection too have illustrations—of language itself. There are vocabulary definitions augmented with parts of speech and sometimes Latin or Greek stems; there are good looks at poetic writing; there are Socratic plot questions to think
about. When sentences have telling structures, I have used four-level analysis to dig the grammar out. These illustrations are meant to flow unobtrusively with the story, available as quick, elective glances for a reader’s enjoyment.

Might the reader pause from the story and spend a moment or two looking at the illustration of a detail of language? Surely, but that is the case with any illustration. I often have paused and glanced from the text to enjoy a painting, such as one of N.C. Wyeth’s paintings of pirates in *Treasure Island*, and then moved back to the text of the story. Here, too, one may look at an illustration of the author’s language and then return to the story.

The content of these illustrations is sometimes advanced and technical. That is as it should be. These books are a locus of confluence where the elements of my curricular programs converge. It is thrilling to see it happen, and to see what full-powered language arts can do. Those who have not studied the preparatory grammar, vocabulary, or poetry texts may be perplexed by some of the more rigorous illustrations; if so, the preparatory texts are available. This collection of literature is not the place to teach grammar or poetics; it is a place to enjoy them. Those who have studied my English curricula
deserve a program of literature that lets them run with the talent they have developed.

These illustrated classics have not been diminished to the blank stare of a textbook. They are still good stories. Happiness must be pursued. The language illustrations must be symbiotic and not break or block the reading adventure. What Coleridge called “the suspension of disbelief” is paramount. The illustrations are designed to complement the book in a reader’s way, making it needless to stop reading and look something up in a reference book. Likewise, discussions and papers that enhance the series are presented in separate manuals in a read-first, analyze-later process that respects the primacy and integrity of the reading experience.

Good books have a visual magic that real readers know. I have worked on the look of the page; each book is set in readable Goudy Old Style type, with roomy, open-spaced lines and indented paragraphs. There are few hyphenated lines, keeping words intact. There are wide margins and a wider center gutter. The page itself is hand-sized, just right for good reading. In a glittering digital age, here is a reminder of why we still do, and always will, love books.

Each title also contains good biographical background about its author and other historical and cultural facts.
that benefit our thoughts.

What criteria have I used to choose the books for the collection? I know them. They are my friends. They have been loyal to me during the decades of my life. They are read everywhere, whether schools and colleges assign them or not. They have exciting vocabularies with words to learn, characters that blink and look back, and sentences that make my hair stand on end.

I am sometimes asked, would it not be better to use modernized versions of the classics, versions with current English? It is a chilling question. The assumption is that we should present students with language they already know—in other words, removing the words they do not already know—thus avoiding the very thing most worth seeking out: learning. The answer is no; it is this margin of growth that we value; it is the very thing that we want not to miss.

Finally, many classics include words, events, or values that might seem regrettable. Often, hard details are necessary to the hard truth of the art. When an offensive value—such as prejudice—appears, the novel is in part a kind of historical document, and I have made no attempt to censor any book. Education means knowing the truth.

Now, as it always has been, being educated is about what you have read.

Michael Clay Thompson
The Murders in the Rue Morgue

Originally published in Graham’s Magazine in 1841, The Murders in the Rue Morgue is regarded as the first detective story—the story that created the genre. Some of the elements of the genre include the detective as genius, the pal who narrates, and the shocking solution followed by the explanation of what Poe called the “ratiocination”—the reasoning.

These story elements influenced Arthur Conan Doyle in his Sherlock Holmes stories, Agatha Christie in her Hercule Poirot stories, and other writers, from Franz Kafka to Charles Baudelaire to Jules Verne. Dostoevsky’s Crime and Punishment shows the influence of Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart.”

Robert Louis Stevenson, born the year after Poe died, described Poe’s style as “pure imposture, a piece of audacious, impudent thimble-rigging,” but then even he admitted that Poe’s stories were frightening.

To read The Murders in the Rue Morgue is to be present at the inception, to witness the very point in intellectual history at which one of our great literary traditions began. What fun.
The child of two actors, Edgar Allan Poe was born in Boston. His father abandoned the family the year after he was born, and his mother died of tuberculosis the following year. The orphaned Poe was raised by John and Frances Allan.

Poe went to the University of Virginia but could not afford to stay, and he enlisted in the Army. After failing at West Point, he became one of America’s first writers to earn a living exclusively through his writing, and he penned a series of poems and short stories that have remained popular and influential. He invented the genre of detective fiction.

He died at the age of forty in Baltimore, Maryland.
Had the routine of our life at this place been known to the world, we should have been regarded as madmen—although, perhaps, as madmen of a harmless nature. Our seclusion was perfect. We admitted no visitors. Indeed the locality of our retirement had been carefully kept a secret from my own former associates; and it had been many years since Dupin had ceased to know or be known in Paris. We existed within ourselves alone.

It was a freak of fancy in my friend (for what else shall I call it?) to be enamored of the Night for her own sake; and into this bizarrerie, as into all his others,

...a freak of fancy in my friend...

Here Poe uses alliteration to emphasize the fact that Dupin was the narrator’s friend. Remember that rhyme and alliteration are not evident when the first term occurs; it is only when the second term rings the same note that the effect takes place.
that Chantilly—he would do better at the Théâtre des Variétés.”

Not long after this, we were looking over an evening edition of the “Gazette des Tribunaux,” when the following paragraphs arrested our attention.

“EXTRAORDINARY MURDERS.— This morning, about three o’clock, the inhabitants of the Quartier St. Roch were aroused from sleep by a succession of terrific shrieks, issuing, apparently, from the fourth story of a house in the Rue Morgue, known to be in the sole occupancy of one Madame L’Espanaye, and

...aroused from sleep by a succession of terrific shrieks, issuing...

The horror is audible in the screams. Hear the assonance in sleep/shrieks, the hissing s of aroused, sleep, succession, shrieks, issuing, and the k sounds in succession, terrific, and shrieks. Notice that these are the sounds of the word scream: s, k, ee.
her daughter, Mademoiselle Camille L’Espanaye. After some delay, occasioned by a fruitless attempt to procure admission in the usual manner, the gateway was broken in with a crowbar, and eight or ten of the neighbors entered, accompanied by two gendarmes.

...the gateway was broken in...

The passive voice verb enhances the mystery, leaving the actors vague.

By this time the cries had ceased; but, as the party rushed up the first flight of stairs, two or more rough voices, in angry contention, were distinguished, and seemed to proceed from the upper part of the house. As the second landing was reached, these sounds, also, had ceased, and everything remained perfectly quiet. The party spread themselves, and hurried from room to room. Upon arriving at a large back chamber in the fourth story, (the door of which, being found locked, with the key inside, was forced open,) a spectacle

procure: v. acquire, gain

gendarmes: n. armed French police officers
presented itself which struck every one present not less with horror than with astonishment.

...these sounds, also, had ceased, and everything remained perfectly quiet.

Poe punctuates the pauses with a comma after *ceased* and a period after *quiet*. Page 28.

“The apartment was in the wildest disorder—the furniture broken and thrown about in all directions. There was only one bedstead; and from this the bed had been removed, and thrown into the middle of the floor. On a chair lay a razor, besmeared with blood. On the hearth were two or three long and thick tresses of grey human hair, also dabbled in blood, and seeming to have been pulled out by the roots. Upon the floor were found four Napoleons, an ear-ring of topaz, three large silver spoons, three smaller of *métal d’Alger*, and two bags, containing nearly four thousand francs in gold. The drawers of a *bureau*, which stood in one corner, were open, and had been, apparently, rifled,

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*Napoleons*: n. twenty-franc French gold coins  
*métal d’Alger*: imitation silver  
*rifled*: v. searched in a disorderly manner

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raise her, the head fell off. The body, as well as the head, was fearfully mutilated—the former so much so as scarcely to retain any semblance of humanity.

“To this horrible mystery there is not as yet, we believe, the slightest clew.”

...upon the throat, dark bruises, and deep indentations of finger nails, as if the deceased had been throttled to death.

The brutality of the murder, as shown by the condition of the corpse, is captured in a cluster of cruel stopped consonants. (The stopped consonants are P, B, T, D, K, and G.) In literature, these consonants are often associated with death. Page 30.

Notice also the disturbing triple-stress followed by the silence of the period in “the head fell off.” Page 31.

The next day’s paper had these additional particulars.

semblance: n. appearance
clue: n. an archaic spelling of clue
resided there. The deceased and her daughter had occupied the house in which the corpses were found, for more than six years. It was formerly occupied by a jeweller, who under-let the upper rooms to various persons. The house was the property of Madame L.

Was reputed to have money put by.

We see a series of sentences in which the subject of the verb is implied. “[She] was reputed....” The effect is of scribbled notes to give this horrific story a documentary, epistolary tone so as to increase the horror. Page 32.

She became dissatisfied with the abuse of the premises by her tenant, and moved into them herself, refusing to let any portion. The old lady was childish. Witness had seen the daughter some five or six times during the six years. The two lived an exceedingly retired life—were reputed to have money. Had heard it said among the neighbors that Madame L. told fortunes—did not

under-let: v. rented, sub-let
let: v. rent
the first landing, heard two voices in loud and angry contention—the one a gruff voice, the other much shriller—a very strange voice. Could distinguish some words of the former, which was that of a Frenchman. Was positive that it was not a woman’s voice. Could distinguish the words ‘sacré’ and ‘diable.’ The shrill voice was that of a foreigner. Could not be sure whether it was the voice of a man or of a woman. Could not make out what was said, but believed the language to be Spanish. The state of the room and of the bodies was described by this witness as we described them yesterday.

The shrieks were continued until the gate was forced—and then suddenly ceased.

Poe again uses dramatic punctuation to amplify the drama of the plot. The strong verb forced is followed by a dash, and the verb ceased is followed by a period. Notice the subtle alliteration in suddenly ceased.

Page 34.

sacré: interj. holy
diable: n. devil