

The Shadow Trilogy

A Four-Level Literature
Teacher Manual

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Four-Level Literature: General Comments

The purpose of this literature program is to immerse children in great books so that they experience literature as literature and not as a drudgery of tedious school activities. I want children's minds on the books themselves and not on attendant assignments. It is by loving to read that children become literate.

The pedagogy of this program is grown-up and reflective; it is deliberately simple, focusing entirely on the reading of the book and avoiding all traditional worksheet activities in favor of rich discussion and thoughtful writing. Busywork has been eliminated. The activities that are included are flexible options, not a rigid system requiring every step every time. In the end if the child does not love reading, we have failed.

This manual is for the classroom teacher. The classroom environment presents the teacher with unique limitations and opportunities. The classroom is a good environment for discussions and Socratic explorations

of ideas. The dynamic relationships between students and teacher provide moments of intense learning that are amplified by the group interactions. On the other hand, classroom teachers see students for limited amounts of time; teachers may have students of various readiness levels in the same classroom, and they usually have to report grades to an administration according to a system that can affect the classroom dynamic adversely. The activities that generate numerical scores may not be activities that increase student enthusiasm for content. Many of the most important things to teach are also the least scorable. Furthermore, classroom teachers have course content and test content that they are expected to cover, and this may limit the amount of time available for a literature program.

Teachers also work in a social culture that can be unintellectual or even anti-intellectual, and this may afford scant support for a teacher determined to bring rigorous, superb reading experiences to the students. The public understanding of the importance of literary classics, of long works, of works with rigorous vocabulary, and of works from previous generations or centuries is not always what a literature teacher would desire. The

teacher may be confronted with not only a lack of understanding but even an intractable opposition to these elements, even though these elements are the very heart of an authentic education.

All too often, great reading that includes these characteristics is rejected as “old-fashioned.” People who know literature well do not think that; it is an impediment to a credible program of literature, and it escalates the very weaknesses that our program is designed to strengthen.

Serious literature—including great children’s literature—is not old-fashioned, regardless of when it was written. High genius does not go out of fashion. Furthermore, Western civilization did not begin thirty years ago. It is no advantage to be able to read only entry-level books of the present generation. Great readers of every age read great writers of every age, and the great readers of our present avidly devour the best books of the past.

Books are the time machine of culture. Whenever they were written, it is now that we read them. It is one of the great joys of the educated mind to read back through time, to read back through the centuries, to read great

books written in the nineteenth century, the eighteenth century, and before. It is exciting to immerse oneself in the English of Jane Austen or of Daniel Defoe. There is a romance in the history of the English language. It is not better if one cannot read the *Declaration of Independence*, or *Gulliver's Travels*, or Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, or Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. We do not want our children's minds to be trapped in contemporary English or contemporary beginner's vocabulary.

Imagine that you lived in a spectacular mountain range, surrounded by famous peaks, but did not know it; you had a high fence, and all you had ever seen was the yard around your house.

We also do not want our children to be capable only of reading short works or excerpts. We want their attention spans to be developed and strengthened. Minds grow from struggle. Life is filled with problems that require long and complex thinking. There is a growth of intellect that occurs in following a story or argument for 300 pages that is unknown to everyone who has not experienced it, and almost all famous works are long. To eliminate long works from the educational program is to eliminate the educational program. It is to eliminate

almost all famous novels. It is to eliminate almost all of the reading that makes one educated. To avoid the long books is to be unread. The current emphasis on short works and excerpts, however well-intentioned, is an educational disaster. Long works are essential.

Short works and excerpts are geared to the instructional minutes available in a one-hour class period. They are not geared to the serious needs of an educated life, and there are abundant ways to incorporate long works into the classroom—ways that have been standard educational practice for centuries.

Finally, we do not want children's reading to focus on works of mere entertainment. Fun is desirable, but there is more to educated reading than fun, and fun is not the most important goal. Greater than fun is meaning. We want children to learn the excitement of thinking, of books that use fiction or nonfiction to disclose important ideas. We do not want children's reading experience to be limited to works of distraction. The educated mind is not a state of oblivion; it is a state of illumination. We want children to know the attraction of serious books with serious ideas that have the chance of being right or wrong. There are novels with memorable characters that

The Shadow Trilogy
Vocabulary Prestudy

Here are five words common to all three novels. Let us examine them before beginning the trilogy.

acute: adj. sharp

gesticulate: v. to gesture

latter: n. or adj. the second, the later one

perplexed: adj. confused

singular: adj. unique

acute: adj. sharp
acuteness: n. sharpness

“...in nine cases out of ten it is the more concentrative rather than the more acute player who conquers.”

The Murders in the Rue Morgue

“At the time, I set it down to some idiosyncratic, personal distaste, and merely wondered at the acuteness of the symptoms.”

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde

“Their evidence, corroborated by that of several friends, tends to show that Sir Charles’s health has for some time been impaired, and points especially to some affection of the heart, manifesting itself in changes of colour, breathlessness, and acute attacks of nervous depression.”

The Hound of the Baskervilles

The Murders in the Rue Morgue

A Comment

Let's go crazy. Let's imagine that a talented but little-known writer, whose name wouldn't ring a bell in his own neighborhood, wrote an unconventional—even anticonventional—murder story in which the main event was a smart guy's thoughts. Seriously—let me finish—his thought process. A thought-plot. If we read the story, we will have to read about a smart guy's thoughts for a hundred pages—a hundred pages of *reasoning*. Ratiocination. As though the whole story were a giant cartoon thought-bubble. To make it worse, there is no standard plot, no actions by characters. Nobody runs around, or hollers, or shoots anyone. No one gets lost. Other than a victim's shrieks—which we only hear about second-hand—no voices are raised. No doors creak. There are no pirates or indians or sneering villains. There is a wild beast, but we never see it. The protagonist never sees it, even; he just deduces its existence. No chapters end at

points of peril, and there are no chapters anyway. There is no romance. There are few emotions. There is no Joseph Campbell quest into the unknown where a young hero is transformed by confronting himself. The main character—if we can even call him a character—is never in danger. There is no happy ending. There is no ending at all, so far as the characters are concerned; instead, there is what the author calls a *re-solution*, like the final statement in a geometry problem. No opponents are reconciled. There is not even a respectable supply of dialogue, as we think of dialogue in fiction. The so-called story is about objective ratiocination—seriously—about *thinking about* a murder that we do not understand and that is not explained until the final pages. The story is just a long gauntlet of clues. The details of the crime scene are repulsive and obnoxious—we wish we didn’t know them. The narrator—the smart guy’s friend who describes and recounts his smart friend’s thinking, although he understands it but dimly—is anonymous; we have no idea what he looks like. His character is undeveloped. The main character, the center-thinker, is a cerebral, superciliously self-confident cosmopolitan gentleman, a pinnacle of dudely panache and equanimity, who preens

and parades his intellectual superiority for his friend's admiration. He knows—and in essence brags—that he is smart. He is a show-off. There is no drama because the thinky protagonist has no worthy opponent; from first to last he is the smartest guy in the room. No one else is in his crime-analysis league, least of all the police, whom he ridicules gratuitously as the story expires. The story is filled with fancy French words and quotes and Parisian addresses. A street is a *rue*. The victims' names are unpronounceable for anyone not French. You never see the murderer, who is only described indirectly. When the story ends, you know very little about anyone in it, but you know the facts of the crime.

The hero's deed is a performance of logic.

The end.

Not too promising, eh?

If you wanted to write a story that would make you famous, would you do it that way?

Let me make this even more far-fetched. Imagine that this was the first paragraph of the story:

The mental features discoursed of as
the analytical, are, in themselves, but little

The Murders in the Rue Morgue

Language Illustration Questions

The following questions concern the language illustrations that appear in this edition of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*. These questions will promote a thoughtful involvement with what the illustrations reveal about Poe's writing. Depending upon how you think about these questions, some of them might be almost the same.

1. There are twenty language illustrations in this story. Which two of the language illustrations are your favorites? Why?
 2. Explain, in your own words, the point of the language illustration on page 80.
 3. Which of the twenty language illustrations most reveals Poe's writing genius? Why?
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The Murders in the Rue Morgue

Quotations for Discussion

The following ten quotations from Poe's *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* are for reflection and discussion, which could take the form of essay writing if that is one's preference. Students are not asked to comment on every quotation but are given a choice of several, allowing them to choose their favorite quotation or the one that they think is most interesting or meaningful.

These quotations are selected for their richness and potential for interpretation. There is not an answer key because there is not a right answer. These are open-ended Socratic reflections, not convergent questions that require students to copy right answers onto a worksheet.

We want to foster extended, uninterrupted reading before pausing for reflection. This affords a more authentic reading experience than if we required paperwork after each chapter. We do not want these quotations to become major assignments that interrupt

the flow of the book.

In other words, this assignment should not be heavy or overly time-consuming. The idea is good reflection without anxiety. This is an open-book assignment, and students may wish to go to the book to read the context of the quotation or to use additional quotations in their essays. Choice is good, so it is also acceptable for the students to select and discuss an interesting quotation not given here, instead of the ones that I provide. Each quotation is accompanied by the page number where it can be found.

11. The mental features discoursed of as the analytical, are, in themselves, but little susceptible of analysis. We appreciate them only in their effects.

20. Then we sallied forth into the streets, arm in arm, continuing the topics of the day, or roaming far and wide until a late hour, seeking, amid the wild lights and shadows of the populous city, that infinity of mental excitement which quiet observation can afford.

The Murders in the Rue Morgue

Creative Questions and Activities

These options are designed to expand the students' creative and imaginative interaction with the literature. I do not expect every option to be undertaken, and I would like for the students to play a part in choosing the creative activities that they will do. If you assign these as written essays, first person is acceptable.

1. If you had to spend an evening of conversation with either the narrator or Dupin, which person would you choose, and why?
2. *Murders* has few characters. Imagine that you were rewriting the story and adding a missing character. Who would that character be, and how would the character make the story better?

The Murders in the Rue Morgue

Academic Writing Practice

The Murders in the Rue Morgue is a book that defined a new genre in American literature. It presented story elements that were taken up and developed by many subsequent authors of detective fiction. The story contains interesting details and ideas that provide opportunities for academic essays. These essays can combine quotations from *Murders* itself and also from additional sources that the students might like to include; *Murders* need not be the only source.

In my own courses I use open-book essay questions exclusively as the assessment for literature. I insist that essays be written in standard academic English. They must be true essays, with introductions, bodies, and conclusions centered on single ideas. Students must use the standard conventions of formal style: no contractions, no first person. *Essay Voyage* and my *Advanced Academic Writing* books provide the guidelines for the essays. I like

to provide four or five study questions in advance, and I give students several days to prepare for the essays. The actual essay test presents students with three of the study questions, with one being mandatory. Each student chooses one of the remaining two to answer. Making one question mandatory causes students to prepare for all of the study questions, requiring substantial thought and rereading. I do not spring surprise questions on the students. I do believe that some student choice is important.

I provide six questions here, and you can select those that you wish to give to the students. You also may replace any of these questions with questions of your own.

These are Socratic questions that do not favor one answer over another; the evaluation of the essays is based on the English, the essay structure, and the force of the case that the students make with quotations. This means that students may use their books during the essay session in order to quote from them.

1. Review Dupin's comments about the mistakes in thinking that the police make. How would you summarize Dupin's view of the poor thinking of the police?
 2. What is your favorite part of *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*? Why?
 3. The narrator and Dupin clearly have much in common, including gloomy temperaments, a love of reading, and a love of the night. On the other hand, they also are different in some ways. How would you explain how Dupin and the narrator are different?
 4. Poe's description of the orangutan as ferocious and brutal seems to be at odds with what we now know about real orangutans. Do a bit of reading, and write an explanation contrasting real orangutans with the brutal killer described in *Murders*.
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