

The Shadow Trilogy

A Four-Level Literature
Parent Manual

by Michael Clay Thompson

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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 homeschool parent. The homeschool environment is different in many dimensions from the traditional school environment, and the recommendations take full advantage of the

unique flexibility and purity of concentration that occur in the homeschool setting. In writing a manual for homeschool use, however, I am mindful that the homeschool environment itself exists in many variations. Some children are homeschooled individually, others in small groups or classes. There will be homeschool children using this literature trilogy who are eight or nine years old and others who are of middle school age. There will be homeschool parents who want a grade-free, creative environment and others who want to establish a classical academic rigor that they may feel is lacking in the school system.

My strategy in this manual, therefore, is to provide paths for all of the above. I present options for a fifth grader, and I present options for a seventh grader, who is by no means too old to read the books in this trilogy. Every activity in this manual can be conducted as an ungraded, creative activity, or it can be graded by a parent who wants the child to learn how to navigate a grading system. I do not provide any system for grading.

It is important that the approach to literature be literary, focused on the texts, and simple. I do not want a noisy panorama of activities, worksheets, and other

busywork to be the program. The program is the books. I want our approach to be deft and quiet, rather than loud. I want us to behave with literary grace. I want our activities to cuddle up to the books. We will do some creative and academic work in conjunction with the books, with our hearts turned at all times toward the books.

Accordingly, we can think about the program strategy in terms of four simple levels. The four levels are preparing, reading, creative thinking, and writing.

1. Preparing

Prior to reading the book, we might look up the author and learn about the author's life and the place of the book in cultural history. This content, however, is secondary to the content of the book itself; it would not be important if the book were not important. An alternative is to do this research after reading the book, when the child may be even more curious about the details.

We might also prestudy the vocabulary by studying the words common to all books in the trilogy and then by taking a sneak peak at the words of the novel we are

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 *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 Quote Quizzes

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. 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 the child 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 the child may wish to go to the book to read the context of the quotation or to use additional quotations in the essays. Choice is good, so it is also acceptable for the child 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.
 37. *William Bird*, tailor, deposes that he was one of the party who entered the house. Is an Englishman. Has lived in Paris two years. Was one of the first to ascend the stairs. Heard the voices in contention.
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The Murders in the Rue Morgue

Creative Questions and Activities

These options are designed to expand the child's creative and imaginative interaction with the literature. I do not expect every option to be undertaken, and I would like the child to play a part in choosing which creative activities to 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 child 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 child. 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 child makes with quotations. This means that the child may use the book during the essay session in order to quote from it.

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*.