

# Creating Atmosphere

**EDGAR ALLAN POE'S** FAMOUS STORY "THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER," SHOWCASES THE WRITER'S GIFT FOR CREATING VIVID SENSORY SCENES AND PALPABLE CHARACTER EMOTION. LET THIS MORBID MASTER SHOW YOU HOW TO CREATE A SCENE THAT WILL HAUNT YOUR READERS.

## Who Was Edgar Allan Poe?



Edgar Allan Poe was born in 1809 in Boston, Massachusetts. His parents, traveling actors, both died before he reached the age of 2. Poe was separated from his brother and sister and placed in the foster care of a Virginia tobacco farmer named John Allan. After a quarrel with his foster father, Poe left home and briefly attempted a military career before publishing his first volume of poetry, *Tamerlane and Other Poems*, in 1827. He then moved in with his aunt in Baltimore and became the tutor of her 8-year-old daughter, Virginia, whom he married in 1836 when she was just 13.

In 1840, he published *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, which contained "The Fall of the House of Usher." Despite poverty, illness, and heavy drinking, Poe was extremely prolific. Well-known for his gloomy descriptions and his eerie plotlines, Poe is also credited with inventing the modern detective mystery with "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841).

Poe was found unconscious in a Baltimore tavern on October 7, 1849, and died later that day. One of his most famous poems, "Annabel Lee," was published after his death.

## How to write from models

>>READ THE EXCERPT ONCE THROUGH WITHOUT READING THE NOTES.

>>READ IT A SECOND TIME, WITH THE NOTES.

>>THINK ABOUT HOW YOU WOULD WRITE A SIMILAR PASSAGE.

>>USE THE NOTES AND WRITING PROMPTS AT THE END TO GET STARTED.

1. The narrator's voice is crucial to creating atmosphere. Poe's narrator is startled and frightened by his experience, which comes through in the way he interrupts himself.

2. Poe piles on descriptive details that relate to smell and sight, bringing the stench of the foul air and the blur of the fog to life.

... when I again uplifted my eyes to the house itself, from its image in the pool, there grew in my mind a strange fancy—a fancy so ridiculous, indeed, that I but mention it to show the vivid force of the sensations which oppressed me. I had so worked upon my imagination as really to believe that about the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their immediate vicinity—an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up from the decayed trees, and the gray wall, and the silent tarn—a pestilent and mystic vapor, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued.

Shaking off from my spirit what *must* have been a dream, I scanned more narrowly the real aspect of the building. Its principal feature seemed to be that of an excessive antiquity. The discoloration of ages had been great. Minute fungi overspread the whole exterior, hanging in a fine, tangled web-work from the eaves. Yet all this was apart from any extraordinary dilapidation. No portion of the masonry had fallen; and there appeared to be a wild inconsistency between its still perfect adaptation of parts, and the crumbling condition of the individual stones. In this there was much that reminded me of the specious totality of old woodwork which has rotted for long years in some neglected vault, with no disturbance from the breath of the external air.

3. The narrator compares his vision of the house with a dream to emphasize its unreal, eerie nature.

4. Poe emphasizes the age of the house in two sentences and suggests decay through his careful description of mold and cobwebs.

5. Using the metaphor of wood that has rotted but has not yet been exposed to air and turned to dust, Poe suggests that although it appears to be intact, the house is poised to crumble at any moment.

## The story so far

The narrator arrives at the House of Usher on horseback, and is frightened by its dreary exterior. He stops to examine its reflection in the tarn, the small lake, hoping this will make the house seem less forbidding.

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Beyond this indication of extensive decay, however, the fabric gave little token of instability. Perhaps the eye of a scrutinizing observer might have discovered a barely perceptible fissure, which, extending from the roof of the building in front, made its way down the wall in a zigzag direction, until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn.

*6. Poe uses the device of the fissure to foreshadow the collapse of the house and leaves the reader with an uneasy feeling of anticipation.*

## Write your own scene with vivid atmosphere

### BUT IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE SPOOKY

**1** Reread note #1. Create a first-person narrator and imagine a vivid scene for him or her.

**2** Review note #2. Imagine all of the senses involved in your scene. Most writers focus on sight, but what about hearing, smell, taste, and touch?

**3** Note #3 focuses on the narrator and on the suggestive power of his comments. Use your narrator's reaction to the atmosphere to help your reader experience it directly.

**4** Note #4 highlights the importance of strong descriptions. Don't rely on

adjectives to do all the work. Strong nouns and verbs paint vivid pictures.

**5** Note #5 points out how a well-chosen metaphor can capture the feeling of a place.

**6** Note #6. Sometimes, describing what isn't visible is the best way to create atmosphere. Is there a hidden aspect to the place you've invented that your reader should know about?

**7** Now that you've created the perfect backdrop, let your narrator take over and the events unfold . . .