

# Studying Literature With Music

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## APPENDIX: Lesson Plan: Studying Literature With Music

### A Music-Based ESL Lesson

EDGAR ALLAN POE

The Raven (poem)

The Tell-Tale Heart (short story)

Music Performed by the Alan Parsons Project (1976)

### Part 1. Background on Author, Poem, Story, Music Group, and Songs

Most U.S. students get introduced to the idea of literature in middle school and high school. Common world literature readings include Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. When it comes to U.S. literature, generally one of the first authors studied is Edgar Allan Poe, and the first works discussed are "The Raven" (1845) and "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843). These two works are popular because the themes of darkness are still relevant in modern times, the storylines are simple despite the challenging vocabulary and old-style prose, and they are great examples of storytelling in a literary form.

Edgar Allan Poe had a difficult childhood. Born in Boston, Massachusetts, both of his parents died before he was 3 years old. Poe was influenced by a common issue at that time: medical science was not able to definitively confirm that someone was clinically dead, and people could be buried while still alive. Newspaper accounts told of people screaming for help or scratching at the caskets in which they had been sealed. In fact, an inventor in the 1800s created a coffin from which people could free themselves.

Poe struggled with alcoholism and drug addiction during his adult years and was found wandering the streets of Baltimore in a daze in 1849, where he died in a hospital a week later.

### Comprehension Questions

1. What is one example of a world literature classic that is studied by U.S. students?

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2. Why was Poe's life difficult?

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3. What was a common issue in the 1880s that influenced Edgar Allan Poe to write stories about dark topics?

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4. What was invented in the 1800s as a potential solution to the issue mentioned in Question # 3?

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5. Where did Edgar Alan Poe spend the last week of his life?
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**“The Raven”** (1845) is a poem done in trochaic octameter, a style that uses a rhythm of eight pairs of stressed and unstressed syllables. Poe tells a simple story of a man who answers a knock at the door of his home, only to have a large black raven swoop in and perch above the door. The man finds himself talking to this bird, which only says one word in response: “nevermore.” The man’s conversation escalates into self-questioning and madness. Ravens held a mythical significance among Europeans as a symbol of death, and Poe’s poem only adds to that mythology. Even today, ravens are popular as Halloween decorations and are seen in many horror films, even though they are peaceful, intelligent, and very social creatures.

**“The Tell-Tale Heart”** (1843) is the most popular American short story ever written, and most U.S. students are required to read it numerous times in middle school, high school, and even university level classes. It tells the story of a man who lives with an old man who has a strange “vulture” eye (again a bird as a symbol of death.) The younger man grows to hate the eye, and decides he will murder the old man to get rid of the thing that bothers him so much. He commits the murder and buries the old man under the floorboards of his house. However, his action was heard and the police come to question him the next day. Their questioning leads to the murderer imagining he can hear the heartbeat of his victim under the floorboards, and the insanity of the killer leads to a confession of his crime.

### Alan Parsons Project

Alan Parsons was originally a sound engineer for the band Pink Floyd and was involved in their legendary album “Dark Side of the Moon,” produced in 1973 at Abbey Road studios in London. He had his own ideas for a music group, and together with composer and musician Eric Woolfson, he formed a progressive rock band called the Alan Parsons Project. Their first album, “Tales of Mystery and Imagination,” was released in 1976 and included songs dedicated to retelling classic Edgar Allan Poe songs, notably “The Raven” and “The Tell-Tale Heart.”

### Comprehension Questions

1. What is the literary name for the rhythmical pattern of “The Raven”?
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2. Who believed that ravens were a symbol of death?
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3. When do U.S. students have to read “The Tell-Tale Heart”?
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4. What did Alan Parsons do before he started his own rock group?
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5. What was the theme of some songs on the album “Tales of Mystery and Imagination”?
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### Part 2. Music Lesson: “The Raven”

Listen to the song “The Raven,” performed by the Alan Parsons Project. Read the lyrics projected on the screen as you listen.

**Discussion:** With a partner, discuss the following questions about the reading and the song.

1. How does the mood and pace of the music reflect the nature of the story?
2. Are the lyrics of the song paraphrased or quoted from the original story?
3. Does the song (through music and words) effectively summarize the original story? Why or why not? Offer examples from the material to support your opinion.

**Writing:** Using information from the original story and the song, write a summary of the story “The Raven.” Be sure to *paraphrase* the material so that you are describing the story in modern language.

### Part 3. Music Lesson: “The Tell-Tale Heart”

Listen to the song “The Tell-Tale Heart,” performed by the Alan Parsons Project. Read the lyrics projected on the screen as you listen.

**Discussion:** With a partner, discuss the following questions about the reading and the song.

1. How does the mood and pace of the music reflect the nature of the story?
2. Are the lyrics of the song paraphrased or quoted from the original story?
3. Does the song (through music and words) effectively summarize the original story? Why or why not? Offer examples from the material to support your opinion.

**Writing:** After reading the story of “The Tell-Tale Heart” and listening to the song, what do you think the message of the story is? Is Edgar Allan Poe trying to teach readers something in this story, or is it just entertainment? Use examples from the material to answer.