The Fall of the House of Usher & the Tell-Tale Heart

1. Identity card

Title: *The Fall of the House of Usher & The Tell-Tale Heart*

Author: Edgar Allan Poe

Date of publication: 1839 / 1843

Genre: Gothic short stories / Psychological fiction

Historical and Cultural Context: Written during the American Romantic period, these stories reflect the fascination with mystery, madness and the supernatural. Poe explores the darkest aspects of the human mind and helped establish the Gothic tradition in American literature.

2. Plot summary

In a nutshell: *The Fall of the House of Usher* tells the story of a man who visits his childhood friend, Roderick Usher, in his decaying family mansion. As Roderick's mental state worsens and his sister Madeline apparently dies, terrifying events lead to the destruction of both the house and the Usher family. In *The Tell-Tale Heart*, an unnamed narrator insists on his sanity while confessing to the murder of an old man. Haunted by guilt and the imagined beating of the victim's heart, he finally admits his crime.

Key Moments:

- ➜ The narrator arrives at the House of Usher.
- ➜ Madeline returns from her tomb.
- ➜ The House of Usher collapses.
- ➜ The narrator murders the old man.
- ➜ The beating heart leads to the confession.

3. Main characters

The Fall of the House of Usher

Name	Role	Symbol
Roderick Usher	last heir of the Usher family	madness, decay
Madeline Usher	Roderick's twin sister	death, supernatural
The narrator	visitor and witness	reason, observation

The Tell-tale Heart

Name	Role	Symbol
the narrator	murderer	guilt, obsession
the old man	victim	innocence, fear
the police officers	investigators	justice, truth

4. Major themes and links to the LLCER program

Première – Imaginations (*imaginaires effrayants*)

How do the stories illustrate this theme?

- ➜ Gothic imagination creates an atmosphere of fear.
- ➜ The boundary between reality and the supernatural becomes uncertain.
- ➜ Psychological horror replaces physical monsters.

Key examples

- ➜ The haunted House of Usher.
- ➜ Madeline's return.
- ➜ The imagined beating heart.

Terminale – Expression and construction of the self

How do the stories illustrate this theme?

- ➜ The narrators struggle with their own minds and identities.
- ➜ Madness distorts reality and shapes their perception of the world.
- ➜ The stories explore guilt, obsession and the limits of self-awareness.

Key examples

- ➜ Roderick Usher's psychological decline.
- ➜ The narrator's obsession with the old man's eye.
- ➜ The confession driven by overwhelming guilt.

5. Key quotes and key words

"True! — nervous — very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am."

madness – guilt – fear – Gothic – supernatural – obsession – decay

6. Author's message

- ➜ The human mind can become its own worst enemy.
- ➜ Guilt cannot remain hidden forever.
- ➜ Fear distorts reality and reason.
- ➜ Evil often comes from within rather than from supernatural forces.