

EDGAR ALLAN POE (1809—1849)

Simply mentioning Edgar Allan Poe brings to mind images of murderers, madmen, and corpses. Although Edgar Allan Poe is widely acknowledged as the inventor of the modern detective story and an innovator in the science fiction genre, it is Poe's tales of terror that have captivated readers for over 150 years. Yet almost as haunting as his stories is the story of Poe himself.

Edgar Poe was born to traveling actors in Boston on January 19, 1809, but within three years he was orphaned. Poe was taken in by the wealthy tobacco merchant John Allan and his wife in Richmond, Virginia. Mr. Allan (the source of Poe's middle name) became Poe's guardian and raised him to be a businessman and a Virginia gentleman just like himself. But Poe had different ambitions: He wanted to write. Mr. Allan made no secret of his disappointment in Poe, and his frequent criticism only added to Poe's growing moodiness.

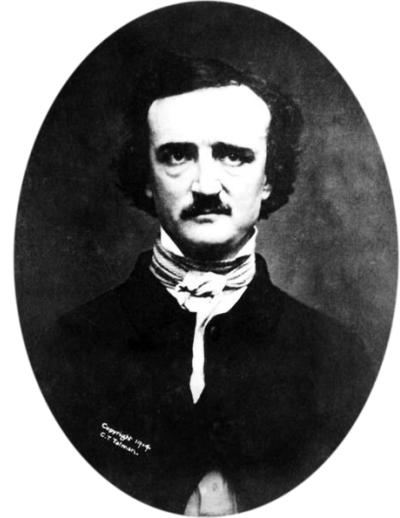
At the age of seventeen Poe left Richmond to attend the University of Virginia, where he excelled in his classes but accumulated considerable debt. His guardian had sent him to college with less than a third of the funds he needed, and Poe soon took up gambling to raise money to pay his expenses. By the end of his first term Poe was so desperately poor that he burned his furniture to keep warm. Humiliated by his poverty and furious with his guardian, Poe was forced to drop out of school and return to Richmond. To make matters worse when he visited the home of his fiancé, Elmira Royster, he discovered that she had become engaged to another man.

The heartbroken Poe's last few months in the Allan mansion were punctuated with increasing hostility toward Mr. Allan until Poe finally stormed out of the home in a quest to become a great poet. He published his first book of poetry when he was only eighteen, but when no more opportunities presented themselves, he enlisted in the United States Army. The army life did not suit him, so he appealed to his guardian for help, and Allan grudgingly arranged for Poe to attend the United States Military Academy at West Point. At West Point Poe continued to publish and write poetry, but after only eight months, he was expelled.

Broke and alone, Poe turned to Baltimore—his birth family's home city—and called upon his relatives that resided there. One of Poe's cousins robbed him in the night but another relative, Poe's aunt Maria Poe Clemm, became a new mother to him and welcomed him into her home. Furthermore, Clemm's daughter, Virginia, soon became the object of Poe's desire.

While Poe was in Baltimore, his guardian died, leaving Poe out of his will. By then Poe was living in poverty but had started publishing his short stories. He earned his income through his writing and literary criticism.

At the age of twenty-seven, Poe married his thirteen-year-old cousin Virginia. The odd marriage proved a happy one, but Virginia was frequently in poor health, and money was always tight. In spite of his growing fame as a writer, Poe was still barely able to make a living.



The January 1845 publication of the poem “The Raven” made Poe a household name. He was now famous enough to draw large crowds to his lectures and began demanding better pay for his work. With stories such as “The Purloined Letter” and “Murders in the Rue Morgue,” built around the investigations of the detective C. Auguste Dupin, Poe laid the foundations for the modern detective story. In fact, he inspired Sir Arthur Conan Doyle to create his own sleuth: Sherlock Holmes.

Poe was a master of the psychological thriller. His tales of the ghastly and the grotesque are peopled with distraught narrators, deranged heroes, and doomed heroines. Yet his purpose in creating such characters is not to present readers with convincing likenesses of human beings— not merely to shock and frighten. Instead, Poe wanted to take us in the dark, irrational depths of the human mind.

Poe produced a considerable body of work in spite of humiliating poverty and a serious drinking problem. The slightest amount of alcohol made him senseless, yet he drank to escape a reality he found agonizing.

In the winter of 1847 Virginia died of tuberculosis at the age of twenty-four. Her death devastated Poe and left him unable to write for months. Poe returned to Richmond in the summer of 1849 and reconnected with his first fiancé, Elmira Royster Shelton, who was now a widow. They became engaged and planned to marry after Poe returned from a business trip to Philadelphia. However, on the way to Philadelphia, Poe stopped in Baltimore and disappeared for five days. He was found in the bar room of a public house that was being used as a polling place for an election. He was delirious—his clothes torn and wet from a raging storm. Poe spent the last days of his life in a hospital far from home and surrounded by strangers. He regained enough consciousness to pray, “Lord, help my poor soul,” before he died on October 7, 1849. He was forty years old. Neither Poe’s mother-in-law nor his fiancée knew what had become of him until they read about it in the newspapers. The exact cause of Poe’s death remains a mystery. Perhaps that is the way he would have wanted it.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

1. What do you find surprising or interesting about Poe’s life?
2. How do the events of Poe’s life seem to connect with the mood of much of his writing?