

EDGAR ALLAN POE

Edgar Allan Poe Biography

Edgar Allan Poe was born January 19, 1809, and died October 7, 1849; he lived only forty years, but during his brief lifetime, he made a permanent place for himself in American literature and also in world literature. A few facts about Poe's life are indisputable, but, unfortunately, almost everything else about Poe's life has been falsified, romanticized, distorted, or subjected to grotesque Freudian interpretations. Poe, it has been said at various times, was a manic depressive, a dope addict, an epileptic, and an alcoholic; moreover, it has been whispered that he was syphilitic, that he was impotent, and that he fathered at least one illegitimate child.

- Hardly any of Poe's biographers have been content to write a straight account of his life. This was particularly true of his early biographers, and only recently have those early studies been refuted. Intrigued with the horror and mystery of Poe's stories and by the dark romanticism of his poetry, his early critics and biographers often embroidered on the facts of his past in order to create their own imaginative vision of what kind of man produced these "strange" tales and poems.

- Thus Poe's true genius was neglected for a long time. Indeed, probably more fiction has been written about this American literary master than he himself produced; finally, however, fair and unbiased evaluations of his writings and of his life are available to us, and we can judge for ourselves what kind of a man Poe was. Yet, because the facts are scarce, Poe's claim to being America's first authentic neurotic genius will probably remain, and it is possible that Poe would be delighted.

- Both of Poe's parents were professional actors, and this fact in itself has fueled many of the melodramatic myths that surround Poe. Poe's mother was a teenage widow when she married David Poe, and Edgar was their second son. Poe's father had a fairly good reputation as an actor, but he had an even wider reputation as an alcoholic. He deserted the family a year after Poe was born, and the following year, Poe's mother died while she was acting in Richmond, Virginia.

- The children were parceled out, and young Poe was taken in as a foster-child by John Allan, a rich southern merchant. Allan never legally adopted Poe, but he did try to give him a good home and a good education.

- When Poe was six years old, the Allans moved to England, and for five years Poe attended the Manor House School, conducted by a man who was a good deal like the schoolmaster in "William Wilson." When the Allans returned to America, Poe began using his legal name for the first time.

- Poe and his foster-father often quarreled during his adolescence and as soon as he was able to leave home, Poe enrolled at the University of Virginia. While he was there, he earned a good academic record, but Mr. Allan never allowed him the means to live in the style his social status demanded. When Poe tried to keep up with his high-living classmates, he incurred so many gambling debts that the parsimonious Mr. Allan prevented his returning for a second year of study.

- Unhappy at home, Poe got money somehow (probably from Mrs. Allan) and went to Boston, where he arranged for publication of his first volume of poetry, *Tamerlane and Other Poems* (1827). He then joined the army. Two years later, when he was a sergeant-major, he received a discharge to enter West Point, to which he was admitted with Mr. Allan's help. Again, however, he felt frustrated because of the paltry allowance which his foster-father doled out to him, so he arranged to be court-martialed and dismissed.

- Poe's next four years were spent in Baltimore, where he lived with an aunt, Maria Clemm; these were years of poverty. When Mr. Allan died in 1834, Poe hoped that he would receive some of his foster-father's fortune, but he was disappointed. Allan left him not a cent. For that reason, Poe turned from writing poetry, which he was deeply fond of — despite the fact that he knew he could never live off his earnings — and turned to writing stories, for which there was a market. He published five tales in the Philadelphia Saturday Courier in 1832, and because of his talent and certain influential friends, he became an editorial assistant at the Southern Literary Messenger in Richmond in December 1835.

- The editor of the Messenger recognized Poe's genius and published several of his stories, but he despaired at Poe's tendency to "sip the juice." Nevertheless, Poe's drinking does not seem to have interfered with his duties at the magazine; its circulation grew, Poe continued producing stories, and while he was advancing the reputation of the Messenger, he created a reputation of his own — not only as a fine writer, but also as a keen critic.

- Poe married his cousin, Virginia Clemm, in 1836, when she was fourteen years old. He left the Messenger the following year and took his aunt and wife to New York City. There, Poe barely eked out a living for two years as a free-lance writer. He did, however, finish a short novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, and sold it to the Messenger, where it was published in two installments. Harper's bought out the magazine in 1838, but Poe never realized any more money from the novel because his former boss had recorded that the Narrative was only "edited" by Poe.

- From New York City, the Poes moved to Baltimore, and for two years, the young family lived in even more dire poverty than they had in New York City. Poe continued writing, however, and finally in May 1839, he was hired as a co-editor of Burton's Gentleman's Magazine. He held this position for a year, during which he published some of his best fiction, including "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "William Wilson."

- Because of his drinking, Poe lost his job the following year. This was unfortunate because his *Tales of the Grotesque*, which had been published several months earlier, was not selling well. Once again, Poe and his wife found themselves on the edge of poverty, but Poe's former employer recommended Poe to the publisher of *Graham's*, and once again Poe found work as an editor while he worked on his own fiction and poetry.

- In January 1842, Poe suffered yet another setback. His wife, Virginia, burst a blood vessel in her throat. She did recover, but Poe's restlessness began to grow, as did the frequency of his drinking bouts, and he left Graham's under unpleasant circumstances. He attempted to found his own magazine and failed; he worked on cheap weeklies for awhile and, in a moment of despair, he went to Washington to seek out President Tyler. According to several accounts, he was so drunk when he called on the President that he wore his cloak inside out.

- Shortly afterward, Poe moved his family to New York City and began working for the Sunday Times. The following year was a good one: James Russell Lowell praised Poe's talent and genius in an article, and Poe's poem "The Raven" was published and received rave reviews. Seemingly, Poe had "made it"; "The Raven" was the sensation of the literary season. Poe began lecturing about this time and, shortly afterward, a new collection of his short stories appeared, as well as a collection of his poetry.

- Most biographers agree that Poe died of alcoholism — officially, "congestion of the brain." However, in 1996, cardiologist R. Michael Benitez, after conducting a blind clinical pathologic diagnosis of the symptoms of a patient described only as "E.P., a writer from Richmond," concluded that Poe died not from alcoholic poisoning, but from rabies. According to Dr. Benitez, Poe had become so hypersensitive to alcohol in his later years that he became ill for days after only one glass of wine. Benitez also refutes the myth that Poe died in a gutter, stating that he died at Washington College Hospital after four days of hallucinating and shouting at imaginary people.

About Poe's Short Stories

- The Gothic Story: Introduction to "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "Ligeia"

- These stories represent the highest achievements in the literary genre of the gothic horror story. By gothic, one means that the author emphasizes the grotesque, the mysterious, the desolate, the horrible, the ghostly, and, ultimately, the abject fear that can be aroused in either the reader or in the viewer.

- Almost everyone is familiar with such characters as Dr. Frankenstein's monster and Count Dracula, two of today's pop culture horror characters who evolve from the gothic tradition, and it is probably not an exaggeration to say that most adults in the Western world have been exposed to some type of gothic tale or ghost story.

- We all know that a gothic story or a ghost story will often have a setting that will be in an old, decaying mansion far out in a desolate countryside; the castle will be filled with cobwebs, strange noises, bats, and an abundance of secret panels and corridors, down which persecuted virgins might be running and screaming in terror.

- This is standard fare; we have either read about such places or seen them in the movies or on TV. The haunted castle is a classic setting of the gothic story. The author uses every literary trick possible to give us eerie sensations or to make us jump if we hear an unexpected noise. The shadows seem menacing in these stories, there are trap doors to swallow us up, and the underground passages are smelly, slimy, and foul — all these effects are created for one reason: to give us a sense of the ghostly and the supernatural.

- Both "Ligeia" and "The Fall of the House of Usher" utilize many of these aspects of the gothic and are considered by critics to be not just among Poe's best short stories, but also among the finest examples of the gothic genre in all of literature.

- Not surprisingly, both stories have many qualities in common: (1) In addition to the gothic elements, there is also a sense of remoteness and a sense of indefiniteness — that is, we are never told where "The Fall of the House of Usher" takes place in terms of setting; it could be in Ireland, Virginia, Scotland, Germany, or even Transylvania. The story could, in fact, take place anywhere as long as the area is remote to the reader, removed from his everyday environment.

- Likewise, "Ligeia" is set in an old castle on the Rhine or else in an abbey in the "most remote part of England." In both stories also, the time (the century) is set somewhere in the indefinite past. Clearly, it is not in an old castle in the present era.

- One of the primary aims of both stories is to create the single effect of an eerie and ghostly atmosphere and to do so, both stories emphasize the physical aspects of the various structures — the deep caverns or vaults where Lady Madeline is buried and the weird room where Lady Rowena died among various types of black sarcophagi.

- In both stories, a super-sensitive hero is presented, a man who could not function well in the "normal" world. Roderick Usher and the narrator of "Ligeia" share a super-sensitivity to the point of maladjustment — due to the narrator's opium addiction in "Ligeia," and due to an undefined illness in Roderick Usher. (4)
Often in the gothic story, the characters seem to possess some sort of psychic communication; this usually occurs between a member of the living world and a "living" corpse.

- In both stories, we see this kind of communication between, first, Roderick Usher and his twin sister and, again, between the narrator and his beloved, Ligeia. (5) One of the stock elements of the gothic story concerns the possibility of returning to life after one is dead and, moreover, inhabiting one's own corpse. Poe uses this effect to its very best effect in these two stories; both of them climax with just such an incident:

- To this purpose Poe created the return of the entombed and living corpse of the Lady Madeleine, as well as the slow re-emergence into life by the enshrouded Lady Ligeia. (6) In addition to the above features of the gothic story, Poe also stressed another similar element; he placed a strong emphasis on the life of the mind after the death of the body. This is also true of the stories associated with the Dracula legends, where the focus is upon the continuation of the life of the mind after the body has become a living corpse.

- The central concern of the Lady Ligeia is the continuation of the mind after physical death; Poe's emphasis here additionally stresses that one does not yield oneself to death except through a weakness of the will. Both in the Lady Madeline and in the Lady Ligeia, there is a superhuman strength to live — even after death. Both women overcome the most impossible barriers of the mortal world in order to live.

- Tales of Ratiocination, or Detective Fiction:
Introduction to "The Murders in the Rue
Morgue" and "The Purloined Letter"

- Part of the genius of Edgar Allan Poe is that he excelled in a number of different types of endeavors. In addition to his reputation as a poet, his originality in his literary criticisms, and the perfection he achieved in creating gothic tales of terror and science fiction, he is also acknowledged as the originator of detective fiction. Poe invented the term "Tale of Ratiocination."

- The ratiocination, however, is not just for the detective; Poe does not allow the reader to sit back and merely observe; the process of ratiocination which he sets up is also intended for the reader, as well as for the detective. In fact, the story becomes one in which the reader must also accompany the detective toward the solution and apply his own powers of logic and deduction alongside those of the detective.

- This idea becomes very important in all subsequent works of detective fiction. That is, in all such fiction, all of the clues are available for the reader, as well as the detective, to solve the crime (usually murder), and at the end of the story, the reader should be able to look back on the clues and realize that he could have solved the mystery.

- A detective story in which the solution is suddenly revealed to the reader is considered bad form. Poe, then, introduces one of the basic elements of the detective story — the presentation of clues for his readers, and in addition to the above, Poe is also credited with introducing and developing many other of the standard features of modern detective fiction.

- For example, M. Auguste Dupin is the forerunner of a long line of fictional detectives who are eccentric and brilliant. His unnamed friend, who is a devoted admirer of the detective's methods, is less brilliant but, at times, he is perhaps more rational and analytical than Dupin is. He never, however, has the flashes of genius that the detective exhibits; instead, he begins the tradition of the chronicler of the famous detective's exploits — that is, he mediates between reader and detective, presenting what information he has to the reader, while allowing the detective to keep certain information and interpretations to himself.

- This technique has since been employed by numerous writers of detective fiction, the most famous being the Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson combination. Almost as popular are the well-known novels of Rex Stout, dealing with the eccentric Nero Wolfe and his sidekick, Archie Goodwin, further examples of Poe's methodology. In all the cases that these detectives attempt to solve, the eccentric detective has a certain disdain, or contempt, for the police and their methods, and this has also become a standard feature of many detective stories, along with the fact that the head of the police force feels, as he does in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," that this amateur detective, while solving the murder, is a meddler.

- Poe is clearly responsible for and should be given credit for giving literature these basics of the detective story as a foundation for an entirely new genre of fiction: (1) the eccentric but brilliant amateur sleuth; (2) the sidekick, or listener, or worker for the clever detective; (3) the simple clues; (4) the stupidity or ineptitude of the police; (5) the resentment of the police for the amateur's interference; and (6) the simple but careful solution of the problem through logic and intuition.

- Stories of the Psychotic Personality:
Introduction to "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat"

- Many of Poe's short stories treat the same type of phenomena, yet in fact, part of Poe's greatness lies in the diversity of his creativity, and everything he wrote carries with it the distinctive trademark that would identify it as being a work by Edgar Allan Poe. The stories in this section, likewise, are Poe's best examples of another type of story; these are tales of the psychotic personality, one who tries to give a rational explanation for his irrational and compulsive acts. In both stories treated here, the criminal is so completely occupied with his own mental state and in justifying his horrifying actions that the reader is not nearly as horrified at the horrors that the criminal perpetrates, as he is at the bizarre mental state of the criminal.

- The cruel acts performed by the criminal in both stories are de-emphasized in order to examine the mind of the criminal. In other stories, Poe creates a feeling of horror in the reader's mind by certain acts of cruelty: Here, the reverse is true; for example, the narrator's murder of his wife in "The Black Cat" occurs so suddenly that we hardly notice the horrible cruelty of the act. Instead, we note the mental state of the psychotic killer.

- Poe made one assumption throughout his writings that is very important in understanding both of these stories. Poe assumed that any man, at any given moment, is capable of performing the most irrational and horrible act imaginable; every mind, he believed, is capable of falling into madness at any given moment. Thus, these stories deal with those subconscious mental activities which cause a person who leads a so-called normal existence to suddenly change and perform drastic, horrible deeds.

- Unlike some commentators who thought that Poe was trying to determine exactly what constitutes madness, Poe was more accurately concerned with the conditions and the various stages which lead a person to commit acts of madness, particularly when that madness manifests itself in an otherwise normal person. Both narrators in these stories are — just prior to their atrocities — considered to be normal, average, commonplace men. Yet without warning, each of them loses his sanity momentarily. Poe's emphasis in these stories, particularly in "The Black Cat," is on the fact that the narrator is sometimes aware that he is going mad. Yet even with this self-knowledge, he can do nothing about his terrifying, changing mental state.

- Aside from the general patterns and concerns that are present in both stories, there are even more basic similarities: Both stories, for example, begin with (1) a first-person narrator who (2) begins his story by asserting that he is not mad ("Why will you say I am mad" and "Yet, mad am I not"); (3) in addition, both narrators are seemingly average people at the beginning of their chronological narratives; and (4) both perform crimes that are both irrational and intensely personal; (5) both love their victims deeply (the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" loves the old man he murders, and the narrator of "The Black Cat" loves and adores his wife, and, therefore, ironically (6) the murderers' love for their victims makes their crimes even more irrational;

- both narrators consider dismembering the corpses of the victims; this is actually done in "The Tell-Tale Heart," and in "The Black Cat" it is considered before the narrator finally decides to entomb the corpse in the chimney; (8) in both cases, the narrator's over-confidence in the superiority of his concealment of the body leads directly to the discovery of the body. There are other similarities in the two stories, but these basic correlatives suffice to show how Poe uses similar techniques to achieve the desired effects in each story.

- In conclusion, in both of these stories, the narrator attempts a rational examination and explanation for his impulsive and irrational actions. He attempts to bring reason into the picture to explain a completely irrational act. Both stories attempt to present an exterior view of the interior disintegration of the narrator. Both narrators begin their stories at a moment when they are sane and rational, and throughout the story, we observe their changing mental states. These tales are perhaps Poe's most accurate investigations of the capacity of the human mind to deceive itself and then to speculate on the nature of its own destruction.

- Tales of the Evil (Or Double) Personality:
Introduction to "The Cask of Amontillado" and
"William Wilson"

- These are two of Poe's greatest short stories; in fact, for some critics, "The Cask of Amontillado" is often used as an example of the perfect short story (see, for example, the critics Alternbrand and Lewis: Introduction to Literature: The Short Story). In these two stories of Poe's, which are in fact so great that they almost escape classification, there is a strong kinship to the psychotic criminal as seen in "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat." Yet there are significant differences: (1) These stories are among the very few stories that Poe wrote where the narrator of the story is given a name.

- In "The Cask of Amontillado," however, the other character (Fortunato) addresses the narrator as Montresor, thus allowing the reader to know the narrator's name. In "William Wilson," the narrator announces that he is assuming this name since his real name would shock us — why we don't know. But in the latter story, which in fact deals with a double, the name is not the important issue; consequently, an assumed name is as good as any. (2) In both stories, the main character's motive in telling about his horrible and evil crime is never revealed.

- In each case, the reader must wonder why the narrator chose to reveal such a horrible deed about himself. In the stories of the psychotic criminal, each narrator of those stories is trying to convince his readers through his logical method of narration that he is not mad, and yet each succeeds only in convincing the reader that he is indeed mad. In contrast, Montresor and William Wilson seem to have other reasons for telling about their heinous deeds.

- And in each case, we must note that the story is narrated some time after the horrible deed was performed. For example, in "The Cask of Amontillado," the entombed body of Fortunato has gone for fifty years without being detected; thus we know that the entombment occurred at least fifty years ago. Also in both cases, the narrator comes from a highly respected family, in contrast to the highly disreputable deed he commits.

- In both stories, the setting is some time in the past, in some foreign country (or countries), in order to make the evil seem both more alien and more horrible. In both stories, also, there is an emphasis upon the labyrinthine cellars of the school and the long underground vaults of the Montresor mansion.

- Finally, in both stories, there is a perverse, well-shaped plan conceived in order to inflict vengeance upon an unsuspecting victim. In "William Wilson," the plan against the gambling opponent, Glendinning, is not the main aspect of the story, but it conforms in principle to Montresor's vengeance against Fortunato.

- Thus, these two masterpieces, while quite different in their ultimate aim, do share many qualities in common and do, like so many of Poe's stories, show the perverse mind of the narrator operating in a seemingly rational manner.

- The Horror Story: Introduction to "The Pit and the Pendulum" and "The Masque of the Red Death"

- Some critics have described such tales as "The Pit and the Pendulum" and "The Masque of the Red Death" as uninterupted "horror" stories. The success of this type of story (and it is one of Poe's most successful approaches to the short story) relies upon the completeness with which he is able to communicate a terrible sense of horror and torture and fear. That is, the success of the story depends not only on the fact that the narrator undergoes suspense, horror, and mental torture, but that we, the readers, are also forced to undergo the same feelings. Poe designated such effects and responses as the "ideal," or as being in the "realm of ideality."

- By this, he intended the reader to understand that when an author used certain calculated effects, he could make the reader's reading experience (and emotions) identical to those of the protagonist (or narrator), thus achieving a perfect empathy between reader and main character.

- In "The Pit and the Pendulum," we are exposed to a series of suspenses, terrors, and horrors and, ultimately, we feel in the actual presence of those horrors. Likewise, in "The Masque of the Red Death," Poe carefully chooses every word and every description to make us feel the utter fear and horror of the presence of the dreaded "Red Death."