

Edgar Allan Poe: America's misunderstood genius

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*The skies they were ashen and sober;
The leaves they were crisped and sere-
The leaves they were withering and sere;
It was night In the lonesome October
Of my most immemorial year...*

— "Ulalume"

It is early evening in late October. The gray sky serves as a haunting backdrop for the falling leaves. It is the quintessential setting for the spirit of the season. Halloween is only days away. Festive conversation centers on the harvest celebration, hay rides, apple cider and the quest for the perfect pumpkin. Still others turn their thoughts to witches, black cats, graveyards and of course, Poe.

Obituary Shapes a Reputation

On October 9, 1849, the die was cast and the legend of Edgar Allan Poe was born. Just two days following the poet's death in Baltimore, a hostile obituary appeared in the New York Daily Tribune. The first paragraph set the tone for what would shape the Poe reputation and become the accepted opinion of Poe's character well into the next century:

"Edgar Allan Poe is dead. He died in Baltimore the day before yesterday. The announcement will startle many, but few will be grieved by it. The poet was well known

personally or by reputation,...but he had few or no friends..." The article declared him as a man without morals who "walked the streets in madness or melancholy, with lips moving in indistinct purses..."

The notice was penned by Rufus Griswold, a mediocre writer and influential anthologist who had first met Poe eight years earlier. Griswold published the piece under the cowardly pseudonym, Ludwig. He issued a more malicious and slanderous Memoir in his subsequent edition of Poe's works. The reason for his bitter attack dated back to 1843 when Poe had delivered an uncomplimentary lecture on Griswold's most popular compilation, "The Poets and Poetry of America." Griswold was unforgiving and harbored a strong dislike of Poe throughout the remainder of his life. Ironically, Poe had personally appointed Griswold as the executor of his literary estate! By this odd twist of fate, Poe had become the victim of revenge, much like characters from some of his own stories.

Other critics soon leaped on the Griswold bandwagon. The more preposterous allegations asserted that Poe possessed the same qualities as his fictional characters: drug addiction, neurosis, impotence and psychosis. A more truthful assessment of Poe's character would be that he was neither saint nor sinner. The most reliable accounts of his forty short years of life suggest that of a romantic figure. This unfortunately only serves to embellish his earlier tarnished image. Poe was in fact, a disillusioned introvert, insecure, with a strong ego, someone who could not hold his liquor and was quite possibly an alcoholic. He lived his adult life in utter poverty while perfecting his craft as a writer, editor and critic in the cities of Richmond, Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York. The real tragedy of his career was his inability to receive serious recognition from either a monetary standpoint or an ego perspective from his peers in the elite New York and Boston literary societies of the day.

*From childhood's hour I have not been
As others were - I have not seen
As others saw - I could not bring
My passions from a common spring
— "Alone"*

A Tortured Life

Edgar Poe was born in Boston on January 19, 1809 to traveling actors. He was orphaned before age 3, when his father apparently deserted the family and his mother died from tuberculosis. Shortly thereafter, he was taken in by John Allan, a stern, aggressive tobacco merchant from Richmond. Poe was never legally adopted. It has been suggested that Allan was unwilling to truly accept Edgar as a son because of the lower social class of his thespian parents. It appears he agreed to take in the very

young boy at the request of his childless wife, Frances. Poe was quite cognizant of this slight throughout his lifetime.

Edgar was educated at various schools in England for five years when the family lived in Europe because of Allan's business. In 1826 he entered the University of Virginia where he remained for less than one year. During this short span he enrolled in the schools of ancient languages and excelled in French and Latin translations. He was a member of the debating club. In terms of athletic prowess, classmates remembered him as a superior gymnast. Despite good grades he could not continue because of lack of funds, which resulted in part from gambling debts. The student body was of wealthy stock who reveled in this type of rebellious behavior. Poe reached out to Allan, requesting that he assume these debts and allow him to continue with his education. Allan refused and an estrangement between the two ensued.

Poe ran away to Boston in 1827 and enlisted in the Army under an assumed name because he was unable to pay his creditors. He subsequently published his first poems. Two years later on New Year's Day, he was promoted to sergeant major for artillery, the highest possible rank for noncommissioned officers. The following month, Poe learned of the death of Frances Allan and was deeply affected by it. He received an honorable discharge and had a temporary reconciliation with Allan.

Poe entered West Point in 1830. John Allan remarried the same year. Relations reached a new low point and Allan severed ties permanently. Knowing full well he would never be able to please him with his status at West Point, Poe made the conscious decision in 1831 to be expelled by purposely refusing to follow orders. This served as the real turning point in his life. He could now focus all his creative energy on his true love of poetry and literature. It was Poe's goal to successfully earn a living solely as a writer, and he was prepared to devote the remainder of his life to this quest. That same year he moved to Baltimore in search of fortune.

In 1834 John Allan died, but not before amassing great wealth through an inheritance. To add final insult to injury, Edgar was not mentioned in his guardian's will.

Poe became the editor of the Southern Literary Messenger in 1835. That same year he secretly married his 13-year-old first cousin, Virginia Clemm, a not very uncommon occurrence at the time. He referred to her often as Sissy. They lived together with Virginia's mother, Maria Clemm. There has been scholarly debate whether the marriage was ever consummated. It has been suggested the union was a ménage à trois of sorts. Poe would serve as the family provider, while his wife and aunt would supply the struggling writer the emotional dependence he desperately needed.

Poe moved to Philadelphia in 1838 and subsequently became the editor of Burton's Gentleman's Magazine. Over the next four years he wrote some of his most famous short stories, such as The Fall of the House of Usher, The Murders In the Rue Morgue, "The Masque of the Red Death," "The Tell Tale Heart," and "The Black Cat." It was also during this time that he would become the editor of Graham's Magazine.

In 1844, Poe moved to New York where he lived for the remainder of his life. The following year, he published "The Raven" which became an overnight sensation. Unfortunately, he would earn very little compensation for his masterpiece. Thereafter,

Poe became an editor at The Broadway Journal and subsequently assumed its ownership the next year. As his continual stream of misfortunes would have it, The Broadway Journal would soon fail.



Following a long illness, his young wife died in 1847 at the age of 24. Virginia, like his own mother 36 years earlier, became yet another victim to the ravaging tuberculosis. He had now lost three of the most important female figures in his life. Grief stricken over his wife Virginia, he plunged head first into the writing of "Eureka," a long work, which he described as a "prose-poem." It set out to espouse his theories on the creation of the universe, some of which remain extremely relevant today. It failed, however, to generate a large audience, probably due to the fact that it could not be understood by most people.

During the two remaining years of his life, Poe's own health visibly deteriorated. It is at this time that he began a courtship with three women simultaneously, possibly out of a need for the feminine understanding that always eluded him. One or more of these relationships may have in fact been simply platonic. Although he never married again, two of these women consented to become engaged to him.

In his last year of life, he attempted to achieve his greatest ambition, to be the sole proprietor of his own magazine. He would call it The Stylus. Once again, however, his dream would end in failure. During the summer of 1849, he visited Richmond, Norfolk and Philadelphia, lecturing and attempting to raise funds for his project. On October 3, while he was en route from Richmond to New York, he was found unconscious on a Baltimore street.

It was election time and he was found near a polling booth, dressed in clothes that were not his own. There have been various theories as to what had happened. It has been suggested that Poe was drugged by hoods and used as a repeat voter. This illegal political practice, known as "cooping", was not uncommon at the time. It is possible that he had sustained a brain aneurysm, or an epileptic seizure induced by alcohol or even

rabies. The latter theory, which made national headlines in 1996, was widely dismissed by one of the world's most prominent Poe scholars, Professor Burton Pollin, who died on June 30, 2009.

After undergoing several days of delirious episodes Edgar Allan Poe died in the hospital on October 7. It is said that his final words were "God help my poor soul!"

*Thank Heaven! The crisis -
The danger is past,
And the lingering illness
Is over at last -
And the fever called "Living"
Is conquered at last.
— "For Annie"*

Confusion in America — Fame throughout Europe

The major paradox of Edgar Allan Poe is that the acclaim which he so desperately sought, would not originate in his native America, but rather in Europe, which catapulted him to greatness. The French poet, Charles Baudelaire, felt such a strong kinship with Poe that he viewed him as his literary model and devoted much of his later life to translating his writings. As a result, Poe's impact upon French literature became immediate. He became a major influence upon Mallarmé, Verlaine, Rimbaud, and others of the Symbolist School. In the latter part of the 19th Century, Poe's influence had spread throughout Europe. Three of Germany's greatest writers, Nietzsche, Rilke and Kafka were captivated by Poe's tumultuous life and his explorations into irrational worlds of imagination. In Russia, Poe's presence impacted greatly on Dostoyevsky. Many of Poe's characters and themes are found in his great works of fiction. Poe's influence is evident in the works of many English, Irish and Scottish writers, including Rossetti, Oscar Wilde, Robert Louis Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling, James Joyce and Conan Doyle. In Italy, Poe's ideas can be found in the plays and novels of D'Annunzio.

The artistic and musical world could not escape the clutches of Edgar Allan Poe. The illustrators who placed Poe's poems and tales on canvas included Manet, Dore, Redon, Beardsley, Dulac, and Matisse. Poe's works were set to music by Rachmaninoff and Debussy.



During much of this same period, the appreciation for Poe's literary talents were astonishingly lacking in America. Many of its early prolific writers have widely disagreed about his talents. He was viewed as being everything from mediocre, to having mere flashes of brilliance, to being a competent hack. Ralph Waldo Emerson referred to him as "The Jingle Man", James Russell Lowell stated that Poe was "three fifths genius and two fifths sheer fudge," and T.S. Elliot remarked that Poe's intellect was that of "a highly gifted young person before puberty."

The tide began to turn in Poe's favor in America during the early part of the 20th Century, as an incredible amount of scholarship was devoted to re-examining his status as a writer, poet and critic. The breakthrough year occurred in 1941 with the publication of Arthur Hobson Quinn's richly detailed biography, which in many respects remains today as the definitive work on Poe. Although his ranking in America is still subject to a certain amount of debate, it cannot be disputed that Edgar Allan Poe became the most well-known and first widely read American writer to have significantly influenced literary Europe.

No matter what is written about Poe in years to come, it is doubtful that his image as the mysterious, brooding loner, a misunderstood genius, lurking in the shadows of our souls, will ever escape him. The testimony of the poet, Walt Whitman captures the image of Poe that will remain with us forever: "In a dream I once had, I saw a vessel on the sea, at midnight in a storm... On the deck was a slender, slight, beautiful figure, a dim man, apparently enjoying the terror, the murk and the dislocation of which he was the center and the victim. That figure of my lurid dream might stand for Edgar Poe, his spirit, his fortunes and his poems-themselves all lurid dreams."

Happy Halloween!

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