

Poe — a misunderstood pioneer

N.J. scholar says the author's character was slandered even in his own death

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 a perfect pumpkin. Still others turn their thoughts to witches, black cats, graveyards and, of course, Poe.

On Oct. 9, 1849, the die was cast and the legend of Edgar Allan Poe was born. Just two days following his mysterious death in Baltimore, a hostile



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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 the man'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 slanderous notice was penned by Rufus Griswold, a mediocre writer who had met Poe eight years earlier. Griswold published the malicious attack under a cowardly pseudonym, Ludwig. His bitterness was based on an uncomplimentary lecture that Poe delivered on Griswold's popular anthology compilation. 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.

Critics followed with preposterous allegations that Poe possessed the same qualities as his fictional characters: drug addiction, neurosis and psychosis.

The more reliable accounts of Poe's character suggest a disillusioned introvert, insecure, with a strong ego, who was possibly an alcoholic. He lived his adult life in utter poverty while perfecting his craft as a writer, editor and critic in Richmond, Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York.

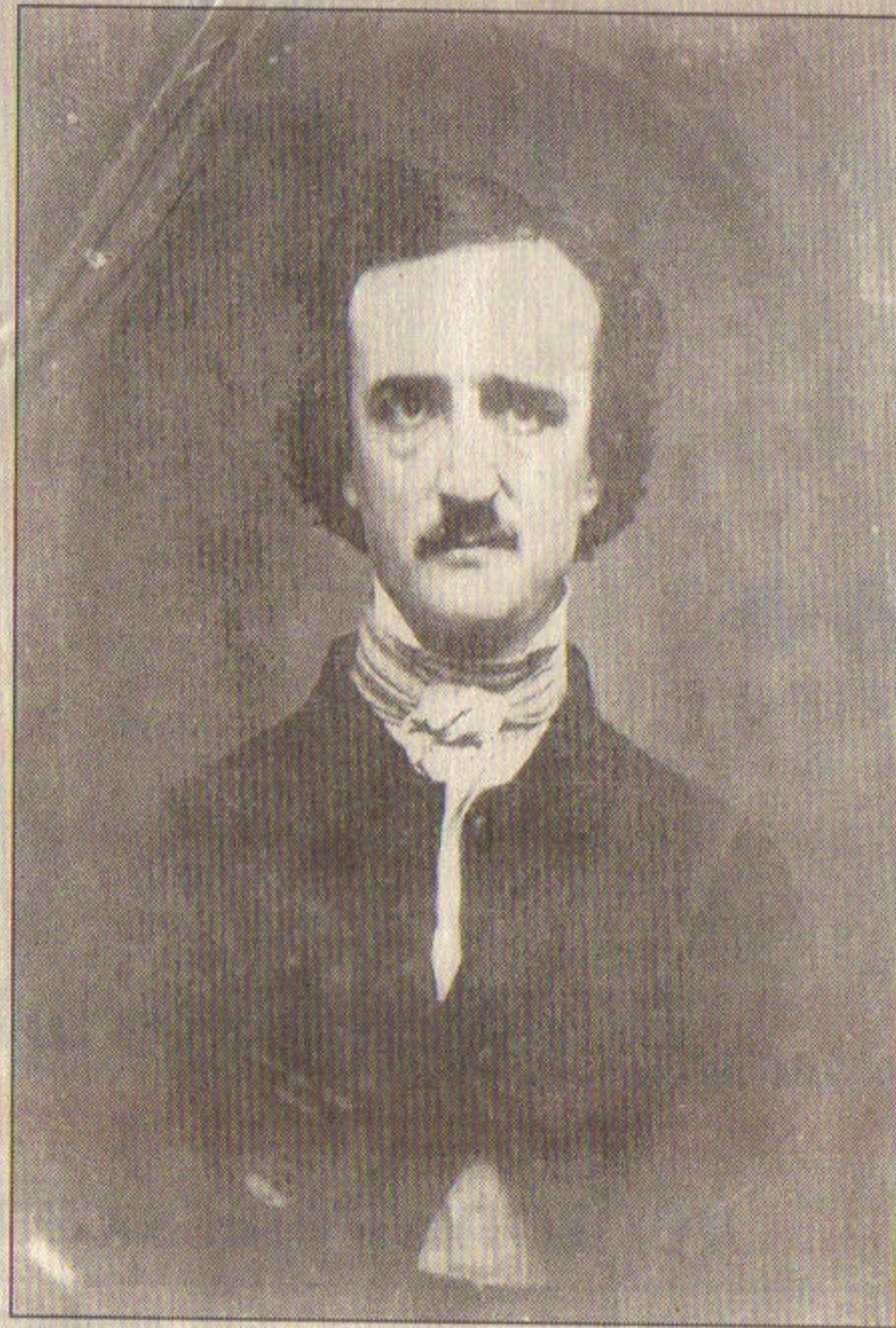
America's early writers considered his talents as ranging from mediocre to having mere flashes of brilliance. Emerson referred to him as "The Jingle Man," Lowell stated that Poe was "three-fifths genius and two-fifths sheer fudge," and Elliot later remarked that Poe's intellect was that of "a highly gifted young person before puberty."

The real tragedy for Poe was that the acclaim he so desperately sought during his lifetime would not originate in his native America but in European countries shortly following his death. What is indisputable is that Edgar Allan Poe became the first well-known and widely read American writer to significantly influence literary Europe.

The French poet Charles Baudelaire translated his writings, influencing Mallarmé and Rimbaud in the Symbolist movement. His acclaim spread to Germany, where Nietzsche, Rilke and Kafka were captivated by Poe's explorations into irrational worlds of imagination. In Russia his presence impacted Dostoyevsky's characters and themes. Poe influenced English, Irish and Scottish writers, including Stevenson, Kipling, Joyce and Doyle.

The tide turned in America during the early 20th Century as advanced scholarship elevated Poe to an American literary icon, father of the modern horror story (*The Masque of the Red Death*) and acclaimed poet (*The Raven*).

Scholars came to recognize Poe's lesser-known and equally important list of contributions: He is acknowledged as the father of the detective story (*The Purloined Letter*). Poe was an innovator



The skies they
were ashen
and sober;

The leaves
they were
crisped and

The leaves
they were
withering and
sere;

It was night in
the lonesome
October

Of my most
immemorial
year ...

— From *Ulalume*,
by Edgar Allen Poe

in modern science fiction, fantasy and satire (*The Balloon-Hoax*). His tales invoking themes of the psychotic and split personality (*The Tell-Tale Heart*) were forerunners to the modern diagnosis of schizophrenia. Poe's prose-poem (*Eureka*), a cosmological treatise on the creation of the universe, sets forth his explanation of the "night sky" conundrum, which is almost universally accepted by astrophysicists.

Poe, as a critic and editor, sought to raise the quality of American literature by promoting nationalism with an unwillingness to accept England's continued domination of the book-publishing market in America.

The image of Edgar Allan Poe as the mysterious, brooding loner, a misunderstood genius, lurking in the shadows of

our souls, will never escape him despite his many enduring contributions. 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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