

Midnight Dreary, The Mysterious Death of Edgar Allan Poe
Author: John Evangelist Walsh

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Book Review by John Esposito

Poe's Death Revisited

The complex personality of Edgar Allan Poe has arguably been more documented, analyzed and dissected than that of any figure in literary history. It has often been portrayed, accurately or not, that the poet's forty short years were as enigmatic and tragic as his most compelling tales of gothic horror and ratiocination.

It is not surprising, therefore, that on the eve of the sesquicentennial of his death we have been presented with a new tome attempting to explain Poe's mysterious death in Baltimore on October 7, 1849.

John Evangelist Walsh, ever the consummate literary detective, presents his case in the true fashion of Poe's *M. Dupin*. He meticulously reconstructs the author's "five lost days" beginning with his journey on September 27, aboard a Richmond steamer, until the time he was found unconscious on October 3 outside a polling station on a Baltimore street. Mr. Walsh asserts that the events which occurred during this period led to his untimely demise four days later at Washington College Hospital.

For the past 150 years, the widely accepted hypothesis has been that Poe, a problem drinker, and quite possibly an alcoholic, died as a result of a drinking binge during his Baltimore stopover. It has been advanced that since he was found outside a polling booth during election time, he may have been drugged by hoods, dressed in clothes that were not his own and used as a repeat voter. This illegal political practice, known as "cooping," was not uncommon at the time. Additional theories include his succumbing to such calamities as a brain aneurysm, an epileptic seizure, a heart disorder, and diabetes.

Most recently, in 1996, a cardiologist and assistant professor of medicine at the University of Maryland Medical Center conjectured the cause of death was rabies. This latter charge was soundly refuted by noted Poe scholar, Burton R. Pollin (*New York Times Editorial, September 23, 1996*).

Mr. Walsh postulates that Poe was victimized by the three brothers of Elmira Royster Shelton, a wealthy Richmond widow. He makes a convincing argument that Shelton's brothers, including her own children, were deeply troubled at the prospect of a pending marriage.

It is suggested that without the knowledge of their sister, the brothers confronted Poe during the infamous five days where no scholarly account of Poe's life exists. Mr. Walsh alleges they demanded Poe call off the engagement. His refusal to do so resulted in more drastic measures, including holding him captive, plying him with whiskey and keeping him in an inebriated state, and then abandoning him in the streets.

Just short of being left for dead, their intention was to publicly disgrace Poe. Due to his notoriety from the publication of *The Raven*, four years earlier, they could be certain that word of this incident would get back to Elmira and the wedding plans would come to a crashing halt!

The events are coupled with romantic irony. Firstly, biographers have generally held that Elmira was Poe's first true love as a teenager. However, while a student at the University of Virginia, all his love letters were intercepted by her father who wanted no part of Poe for his daughter. Believing her devotion had waned, Poe curtailed his communication with her. The relationship ceased for 23 years. Secondly, and even more distressing, was that upon rekindling his relationship with Elmira during the final months of his life, Poe openly joined a Richmond temperance society, *The Sons of Temperance*, publicly swearing never again to touch liquor!

Despite utilizing all available sources, Mr. Walsh unfortunately does not present any new findings that scholars have not already uncovered during this past century. His supposition, while thought provoking, remains highly speculative and provides no more credence than earlier theories.

Mr. Walsh is no stranger to probing into Poe's life. He previously penned *Poe the Detective: The Curious Circumstances Behind the Mystery of Marie Roget* (1968), and *Plumes in the Dust: The Love Affair of E.A. Poe and Fanny Osgood* (1980). The former is a superior work demonstrating Mr. Walsh's masterful skills as an historical sleuth, earning him an *Edgar* by the *Mystery Writers of America*. But *Midnight Dreary*, while affording an entertaining read, regrettably does not solve, perhaps, Poe's greatest mystery.

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