

The Poe connection: Major literary contributions

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The life and career of Edgar Allan Poe has been more documented, analyzed and dissected than perhaps any other figure in literary history. One can choose to critique the Poe of his choice: short story writer, novelist, poet, literary theorist, editor, critic, journalist, philosopher, astronomer and of course, Poe, the man. In terms of assessing Poe's merits, as with all great artists, one must look no farther than the body of their work. In the case of Poe, his contributions are enormous:

Father of the Gothic Horror Story

First and foremost Poe is remembered for his horror stories. He emphasized mystery, the macabre, the grotesque, and death, bringing a new art form to the short story. It is perhaps mankind's fascination, and at the same time, dread of the unknown that has kept Poe's fiction timeless.

Father of the Detective Story

While Poe was not the inventor of this type of fiction, he was the first to introduce actual detection, that is the presentation of clues to solve puzzles by reason. In this respect, he is credited as an originator. Poe's master detective, M. Auguste Dupin, became the model for a long line of super sleuths that were to come. Without question, Dupin became the inspiration behind Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes some 50 years later.

Father of Modern Science Fiction, Fantasy and Satire

Poe's tales of science fiction and adventure inspired the likes of Jules Verne ("Journey to the Center of the Earth"), H.G. Wells ("War of the Worlds"), and Robert Louis Stevenson ("Treasure Island"). During their careers, all three individuals publicly paid homage to Poe.

Poe's Psychoanalytic Interpretations

Many of Poe's short stories deal with themes of the psychotic personality and double self, that is, the split personality. These themes are forerunners of modern forms of parapsychology and the yet to be invented term, schizophrenia. His works have been subject to both Freudian and Jungian interpretations. In 1933, a biography was published by Marie Bonaparte, a literary psychoanalyst. She had studied under Freud, who wrote the forward to her book. Although excessive at times, it offers many interesting psychoanalytic perspectives on Poe's life and works.

Poe and the Sciences

Throughout his life, Poe maintained a strong interest in astronomy. One year before his death, Poe completed Eureka, his cosmological treatise on the creation of the universe, based on mathematical and astronomical observations. It is Poe's attempt to deal with the philosophy of death and the unification of the soul after death. Poe may have looked upon this as one of his crowning achievements. He had hoped, upon his own death that this work would be judged as a poem. In combining the physical laws of nature, along with intuition, he utilized the work of Newton, Kepler and Laplace to present the universe as a work of art.

Poe's interpretation of cosmic origin is incredibly modern in espousing today's black hole theory. He wrote that the universe began at some definite time in the past, and that since it is not infinite, it could not be bright at night. This explanation for the dark "night sky" conundrum is now almost universally accepted by astrophysicists. (Source: New York Times — Science Section, March 19, 1991)

Poe and his Poetry

By the age of 21, Poe had already completed the majority of his fifty or so poems. He was influenced by the works of Byron, Moore and Shelley. Poe believed that a poem should represent beauty, provide pleasure and appeal to the emotions. While perhaps only a handful of his poems are remembered, those few are among the most well-known and best loved poems in history.

Poe's Critical Theories

Poe believed in art for art sake. He is recognized by many to be the first American to write seriously about criticism and produced original theories on poetry. His three lectures, "The Philosophy of Composition," "The Rationale of Verse and The Poetic Principle" provide his views on exactly what poetry should be. They include (1) the unity of effect, (2) the rejection of allegory (3) that a poem should be brief in order to reach the single effect, (4) the use of emotions. He classified the human faculties into three divisions: intellect, taste and moral sense. Common to all of these is intuition.

Poe as Critic and Editor

Poe's strong desire to raise the quality of American literature is evident in his reputation as a literary critic. He was known as "The Man with the Tomahawk," rightfully so because of the many scathing reviews he rendered. He went so far as to publicly accuse Longfellow of plagiarism. He was subjected to a great deal of criticism, and in some respects it was completely warranted. However, Poe believed in holding the writers of his generation to the same high standard that he imposed upon himself as a critic and as an editor. A convincing argument can be made that he was the Father of modern American literary criticism.

Poe In Contemporary Culture

The popularity of Edgar Allan Poe in our contemporary culture has reached new heights. Each year we are inundated with books, songs, operas, television adaptations and films which serve to provide new theories on Poe's life and works.

Some examples include early films such as "The Raven" (1935), which starred Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi. The onset of the 1960's marked producer/director Roger Corman's movie, "Tales of Terror," starring Vincent Price and Peter Lorre. These adaptations were very loosely based on Poe's works. By the second half of the decade, filmmaker, Francois Truffaut paid his personal tribute to Poe in a concluding scene of the film version of Ray Bradbury's book, "Fahrenheit 451". The irony of Poe's "The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether" is not lost in the book (1962) and movie version (1975) of "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest."

Tom Wolfe, in his best-selling novel, "The Bonfire of the Vanities" (1987), entitled one chapter, The Masque of the Red Death, drawing upon the AIDS epidemic in relation to our own inevitable date with destiny.

Two major television biographies on Poe have premiered on the A&E (1994) and PBS (1995) networks. Television animation saluted the genius of Poe with an inspired parody of The Raven, in "The Simpsons" Halloween Special (1990). The narration was performed by actor, James Earl Jones.

The critically acclaimed author, Joyce Carol Oates, chose the title of her novel, "My Heart Laid Bare," (1998) directly from one of Poe's Marginalia essays. She later paid homage to Poe in her collection of horror fiction, "The Collection of Hearts: New Tales of the Grotesque."

For years, Poe's influence has transcended literature into other forms. Specifically, his works serve as an inspiration in musical compositions, as well as dance. Composer Philip Glass considers Poe the perfect collaborator. He successfully transformed "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "A Descent into the Maelstrom" into opera. Entire rock albums have been devoted to Poe, and a current female rock singer identifies herself simply as Poe.

Recitals of Poe's works have always been a perennial favorite, particularly at Halloween. They are issued regularly in a variety of audio formats. The readers have run the spectrum, from Basil Rathbone, to Gregory Hines, to Iggy Pop. Oscar and Emmy nominated actor, John Astin, best known from "The Addams Family" television

series, has portrayed Poe in well received one man theatrical performances of Edgar Allan Poe—Once Upon a Midnight, on tours in major cities throughout the country.

The United States Naval Academy has offered a seminar on Poe as part of the English curriculum. Discussion centered on a wide range of topics including his social life, works, criticism and genealogy.

Edgar Allan Poe has become the first literary man to enter the arena of professional sports. In 1995, a local survey by the Baltimore Sun newspaper was conducted among Baltimoreans to name their new football team. They were given choices which included the names, Marauders and Americans. Over 33,000 people voted. Approximately 5,500 people chose the Marauders. A similar number (5,597) picked the Americans and 21,108 selected the Ravens. The city of Baltimore chose the overall winner, Baltimore Ravens, saluting Poe's most famous poem.

The Mystery Writers of America, Inc. established an award in 1945 to recognize outstanding contributions for various categories of mystery, crime and suspense writing. These awards are known as The Edgar Allan Poe Awards. The winners receive a statuette that is appropriately called an Edgar.

This coming year should enhance the Poe legend. A major motion picture, "The Raven," is currently scheduled for release in March 2012. Actor, John Cusack will portray the master of the macabre.

Poe's Memorable Poetry Quotations

"The Raven"

Quoth the Raven, Nevermore.

"Annabel Lee"

*For the moon never beams, without bringing me dreams
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee.*

"The Conqueror Worm"

*And the angels all pallid and wan,
Uprising, unveiling, affirm
That the play is the tragedy "Man,
And its hero the Conqueror Worm.*

"A Dream Within a Dream"

*Is all that we see or seem
But a dream within a dream?*

"Dream-Land"

Out of Space - out of Time

"Eldorado"

*Over the Mountains
Of the Moon,
Down the Valley of the Shadow,
Ride, boldly ride,
The shade replied, -
If you seek for Eldorado!*

"To Helen"

To the glory that was Greece

And the grandeur that was Rome.

Poe Museums/Historic Homes/Academia/Gravesite

Edgar Allan Poe Cottage
East Kingsbridge Road & Grand Concourse
Bronx, New York 10458

The Edgar Allan Poe House
North Seventh & Spring Garden Sts.
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19123

The Edgar Allan Poe House and Museum
North Amity Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21202

Westminster Presbyterian Hall (Cemetery)
Fayette & Greene Sts.
Baltimore, Maryland 21202
(Poe's gravesite)

Poe Museum
1914-16 East Main Street
Richmond, Virginia 23223

The Poe Room - # 13 West Range
University of Virginia
Charlottesville, Virginia 22906
(Poe's room at the University is glass enclosed and under the direction of the Raven Society.)

Poe Sources And Recommended Readings

- "The Poe Log," by Thomas and Jackson - G.K. Hall & Co. (1987)
- "Edgar Allan Poe," by Vincent Buranelli - Twayne Publishers, Inc. (1961)
- "The Tell Tale Heart," by Julian Symons - Harper & Rowe (1978)
- "Edgar Allan Poe, His Life and Legacy," by Jeffrey Meyers - Scribners (1992)
- "The Portable Poe." Edited by Philip Van Doren Stern - Viking Portable Library (1945,1973) Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe, by Daniel Hoffman - Double Day (1972)
- "Edgar A. Poe, Mournful And Never-Ending Remembrance" by Kenneth Silverman - Harper Collins (1991)
- "Poe, A Biography" by William Bittner - Atlantic-Little, Brown (1962)
- "Edgar Allan Poe" by Bettina L. Knapp - Continuum (1984)
- "The Poe Encyclopedia" by Frank N. Magistrale - Greenwood (1997)
- "An Edgar Allan Poe Companion" by JR Hammond - Barnes & Noble (1981)
- "The Annotated Tales Of E. A. Poe" Edited by Stephen Peithman - Doubleday (1981)
- "Edgar Allan Poe, A Critical Biography, by Arthur Hobson Quinn" - Appleton - Century (1941)
- "The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe" by Marie Bonaparte - Imago (First English Edition (1949)