

Edgar Allan Poe

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) suffered from bouts of insobriety, hypersensitiveness, emotional instability, and intellectual arrogance. His artistic temperament often got the best of him, and a voice inside his head held his writing to such high standards that it adversely affected his health. Otherwise – no problem. Born in Boston to itinerant actors, Poe was orphaned at the age of two. He was adopted by John Allan, a Richmond, Virginia tobacco merchant and shipowner. Raised in urban comfort, Poe entered the University of Virginia for a year, then chose the Bohemia of literary journalism. He enlisted in the army, did a brief stint at West Point, then settled into the Baltimore home of Allan's sister, Maria Clemm.

In 1836 Poe married Virginia Clemm, Maria's thirteen-year-old daughter. The couple moved to Philadelphia where he wrote his greatest stories, many of them contained in his *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*. In 1844 the Poes moved to New York City where he published *The Raven and Other Poems*. His final years are those of a prominent author who writes literary criticisms, and waxes philosophically about money and his wife's illness. (He was profoundly shocked by her death in January of 1847.) Ignoring the blandishments of those around him, he undertook a series of sentimental fixations with emotionally susceptible literary belles. In early October of 1849 he was found in a state of delirium on a Baltimore street and rushed to the Washington College Hospital, where he died a short time later.

Poe's stories show originality, economy of words, and a structural logic that is often set in a bizarre domain lying beyond any sane person's sense of reality. He also has a little-known sense of humor that appears when things are getting rather gruesome. The bulk of his work contains over four hundred separate entries – mostly book reviews and notices. His editorials are at their best when he discusses his theories of poetry and the short story. His poems have a rational structure, and usually contain some sort of weird imagery. His short stories employ a unique plot framework with a satirical burlesque that sets the stage for his macabre creations. In authoring *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, *The Mystery of Marie Roget*, and *The Purloined Letter*, Poe established the detective story as a legitimate genre, and anticipated the patterns and devices later employed by such gifted writers as Dashiell Hammett and Earle Stanley Gardner.

– essay by Bill Lounsbery

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