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Reader Resources

The Stories and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe



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“I would give the world to embody one half the ideas afloat in my imagination.”

Preface

Edgar Allan Poe invented the detective story, perfected the horror tale, and first articulated the theory of the modern short story as well as the idea of pure poetry. A hero of Dostoevsky, Baudelaire, and Nabokov, Poe has never been entirely respectable to American critics because of his twin “faults”: being too eccentric, and too popular among common readers.

It’s time to say the obvious. No author stays internationally popular for 150 years by accident. Poe is one of the classic authors of American literature—a master of the short story, a magician of the short poem, and a critic of brilliance and originality. And no small part of his artistic sleight of hand is that he appeals to readers from childhood to old age. Let us underestimate him nevermore!



What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you’re a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining the NEA Big Read.



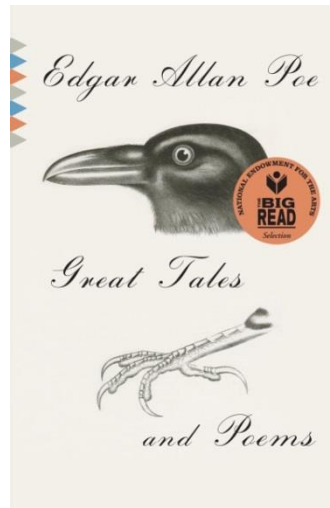
About the Book

Introduction to the Book

Few writers have pioneered so many forms of escapism as Edgar Allan Poe, and fewer still have sought escape so desperately themselves. Poe's claustrophobic life consisted of one escape attempt after another, most of them unsuccessful. Again and again he dodged poverty through overwork, but never for long. He fled loneliness into an ill-fated, loving but likely chaste marriage to a frail cousin. And drink promised an oblivion that kept luring him back, with increasingly destructive consequences.

Poe's most satisfying escape was into his writing, where generations of readers have followed him ever since. His sheer versatility continues to astonish. Without Poe, the literary arts of horror, adventure, detective, and science fiction—and, arguably, the short story itself—would have developed very differently. In addition to fiction in several genres, he wrote as famous a poem as American literature can claim. He practiced literary criticism as fine art, blood sport, and, with a series of female poets, the highest form of flirtation. If the movies had existed in the nineteenth century, he might have written screenplays as well—and bedeviled his producers as reliably as he did most of his editors.

At the same time, another side of Poe remained relentlessly logical. In his criticism as well as his detective stories, he could make a case and prove it with mathematical inevitability. Often lost in any study of Poe, too, is his sense of humor. Though their victims would hardly have agreed, his hoaxes, essays, and especially his negative reviews retain their wit even today. Even the most macabre of his stories impart a certain ghoulish tickle.



Poe's influence is almost too universal to notice. He resembles scarcely anybody before him but, at least a little, almost everyone after. If he hadn't come along to make American literature safe for ghosts and murderers, for crime-solving know-it-alls and their quarry—for the subconscious mind, in all its murk and madness—somebody else might have. But, to use one of Poe's signature italicized endings, *what if nobody had?*

Poe's Fiction

Throughout Poe's fiction, there runs an undercurrent of inwardness, an obsession with dark corners of the subconscious mind, at the time familiar perhaps only from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). He also used a fiction writer's entire bag of tricks—exclamation points, double-dashes, italics, repetition, the capitalization of first letters and sometimes of entire words—to pump up the urgency of his gothic stories. If melodramatic organ chords could talk, they would sound like the narrator of a Poe story.

Few students of Poe can resist the temptation to group his stories into subsets, like teams. Some might say there's the claustrophobia team, captained by the "The Cask of Amontillado," in which the narrator bricks up his friend in a wine cellar. Then there's the idealized-women team, anchored by "Ligeia" and "The Fall of the House of Usher," with its female characters either doomed, impossibly perfect, or both. Then there's the junior detective team, consisting mainly of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and its two sequels, in which Poe essentially invented detective fiction.

What these categories all have in common is the self-dramatizing loneliness of genius. Poe almost always relies on a first-person narrator. *All* his stories are ultimately claustrophobia stories, whether they include a literally confined space, a roomier but still airless and solitary house, or the psychological prison of a damaged character's mind. Poe's treatment of women characters also reflects his essential solitude. Many of his narrators marry, but none ever achieves a lasting connection with his bride. Even his most self-satisfied character, the peerless amateur detective C. Auguste Dupin, has but one friend and no equal. We don't see the suffering this causes, but only the shallowest character would fail to feel it.

No serious writer today could get away with all this hyperventilating. Yet few writers can fully escape Poe's gravitational pull as one of the original two masters of the American short story. The other would be Nathaniel Hawthorne, who, interestingly, also wrote more than a few horror stories. Like many fledgling writers, American fiction itself started out with a fascination for ghosts and gore.

Poe's Poetry

Edgar Allan Poe began his literary career as a poet, was a merciless critic, and found his greatest success with "The Raven." Poe defined poetry as "the rhythmical creation of beauty." He had strong and serious ideas as to what qualified as "poetry," and what fell short.

Poe wrote several variable essays on poetics—the best is "The Poetic Principle"—through which his ideas evolved, but remained fairly consistent. In "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe outlines how he came to write "The Raven," detailing his artistic choices. Scholars have pointed out that Poe's account of writing the poem is vastly idealized and probably untrue, but however disingenuous Poe is about his composition, he's crystal clear on his philosophy: "Beauty is the sole legitimate province of the poem.... Melancholy is thus the most legitimate of all poetical tones.... The death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world—and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover."

The death of a beautiful woman is the theme that dominates the best of Poe's poems. There is "the lost Lenore" of "The Raven," but also Lenore of the poem "Lenore"—Poe thought that the sound *or* was the most beautiful in the English language. His other famous poem to lost love, "Annabel Lee" tragically ends when he lies down by the side of his "life" and his "bride" "in the sepulcher there by the sea, / In her tomb by the sounding sea."

Poe devoted his longest essay on poetics, "The Rationale of Verse," to an overly complicated view of rhythm and meter, but the importance of sound in Poe's poems cannot be overstated. A master of rhythm, Poe's syllable-by-syllable approach to sound yielded some of the most memorable lines in American poetry. His ear for mimicry is unparalleled. "The Bells" is an onomatopoeic marathon of tinkling tintinnabulation and clanging, banging bells, bells, bells throughout.

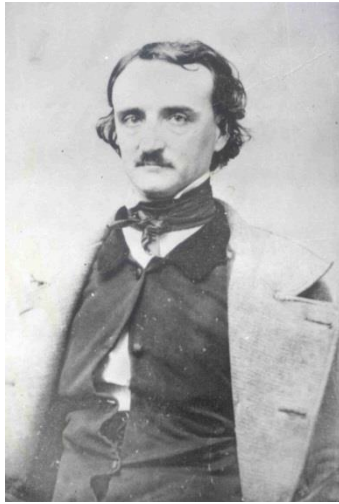
Excluding "The Raven," Poe's poems are mostly short lyric pieces—meditations on death or beautiful women or the death of beautiful women—almost always less than a page long. He believed that a poem should be readable in one sitting and objected to what he saw as the epic "mania" among such contemporaries as Longfellow, whom he felt valued Truth and moral didacticism over the exaltation of Beauty.

For all the time he spent writing about it, Poe left behind a rather slim corpus of poetry. Perhaps because his standards were so high, a remarkable share of Poe's poems are excellent in their technique and unity. His poems remain popular in and outside the classroom, and are assured a place in the minds of readers forevermore.

About the Author

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849)

Edgar Poe was born in 1809 in Boston to David and Elizabeth Poe. David was the son of a Revolutionary War hero and a drinker; Elizabeth, a popular stage actress. Soon after Edgar's birth, David Poe left the family, and in December of 1811, Poe's mother died. Two-year-old Edgar was taken in by John Allan, a wealthy Richmond tobacco merchant, who lent Poe his middle name.



Edgar Allan Poe, 1848
(Courtesy of the Poe Museum,
Richmond, Virginia)

Poe spent a single year at the University of Virginia. After John Allan refused to pay his second-year tuition, and gambling debts kept him from paying his own way, Poe joined the army. He did well there and, when his enlistment was up, attended West Point for officer training. He was soon expelled for failing to attend class and skipping mandatory chapel services. He settled in Baltimore with his paternal aunt Maria Clemm and her eight-year-old daughter, Virginia, Poe's future wife.

Poe became a regular contributor to the *Southern Literary Messenger*, publishing not just stories but scathing book reviews that earned him the nickname "tomahawk man." Poe, Virginia, and Maria Clemm moved to Richmond, where Poe then took the reins as editor of the *Messenger*. The next year, Poe, 27, and Virginia, 13, married.

Poe resigned from the *Messenger* in 1837 over a salary disagreement and moved the family to New York where financial troubles continued to haunt him. He met with some success in 1840, when he released *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, including all his stories up to that point.

In 1842 Virginia ruptured a blood vessel, the first sign of the ill health that plagued her short life. To cope with her illness and the stress of his failing finances, Poe occasionally turned to alcohol. He repented after each binge, but his employers and friends took note. In 1845, Poe published "The Raven," which brought him temporary popular and critical acclaim. Always prone to self-destructive behavior, Poe attacked Henry Wadsworth Longfellow on grounds of plagiarism, greatly damaging his own reputation.

Two years later, Virginia died of tuberculosis. Poe's own death followed just two years after that. The cause of his death remains uncertain.

The Death of Edgar Allan Poe

On October 3, 1849, Poe was found at Ryan's 4th Ward Polls, a tavern also known as Gunner's Hall, in Baltimore, disoriented and wearing tattered clothing. He was admitted to Washington College Hospital, where he never regained full consciousness and died four days later.

His death was attributed to "congestion of the brain," though no autopsy was performed. Due to conflicting testimonies from his doctor and a libelous obituary written by his literary nemesis Rufus Griswold, the nature of Poe's death has remained in question. Doctors and scholars have theorized that Poe died of epilepsy, hypoglycemia, beating, rabies, alcohol, heart failure, murder, or carbon monoxide poisoning. One of the most compelling scenarios is that Poe, found on election day, was a victim of "cooping," a form of voter fraud in which a person is dressed up, beaten, drugged, and forced to vote multiple times—the term is related to a "chicken coop," as victims were often held captive in a small space while abused. Not one of these theories has been proven, and Poe's death remains a mystery.

Poe's Houses

The Poe Museum

Richmond, Virginia

Poe was raised in Richmond by the Allan family. He moved back in 1835 to work for the *Southern Literary Messenger*. Most of the landmarks and houses from Poe's time in Richmond have been lost to history, but Richmond's Poe Museum offers a collection of his manuscripts and artifacts.

www.poemuseum.org

The Baltimore Poe House and Museum

Baltimore, Maryland

Poe moved to Baltimore to live with his future wife, Virginia, and her mother. There Poe published poems and short stories and won his first literary contest, with "Ms. Found in a Bottle." He lived at what is now the Baltimore Poe House and Museum from about 1831 to 1835.

www.eapoe.org

Edgar Allan Poe National Historic Site

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Poe lived in Philadelphia for six years, where he wrote and published some of his most influential work, including "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Gold-Bug." For the last year or so of his time in the city (c. 1842–1844), he lived with his wife and mother-in-law at what is now the Edgar Allan Poe National Historic Site, maintained by the National Park Service.

<http://www.nps.gov/edal/>

The Edgar Allan Poe Cottage

Fordham, Bronx, New York

From 1846 to 1849, Edgar Allan Poe lived in the hills of the Bronx, New York. Here, his young wife died and Poe wrote some of his most lyrical work, such as "Annabel Lee" and "The Bells." The Edgar Allan Poe Cottage is now preserved by The Bronx County Historical Society.

www.bronxhistoricalsociety.org/poecottage.html

Poe the Critic

In his day, Poe was known for his poison pen, but a few contemporaries did earn his admiration.

- **Nathaniel Hawthorne**, American novelist (1804-1864)
- **Elizabeth Barrett Browning**, English poet (1806-1861)
- **Alfred, Lord Tennyson**, English poet (1809-1892)
- **Charles Dickens**, English novelist (1812-1870)
- **James Russell Lowell**, American poet (1819-1891)

Poe's Admirers

"Your 'Raven' has produced a sensation, a 'fit horror,' here in England. Some of my friends are taken by the fear of it and some by the music. I hear of persons haunted by the 'Nevermore,' and one acquaintance of mine who has the misfortune of possessing a 'Bust of Pallas' never can bear to look at it in the twilight."

—*Elizabeth Barrett Browning*

"You might call him 'the leader of the Cult of the Unusual.'"

—*Jules Verne*

"Where was the detective story until Poe breathed the breath of life into it?"

—*Sir Arthur Conan Doyle*

"It would also be just to say that Poe sacrificed his life to his work, his human destiny to immortality."

—*Jorge Luis Borges*

"It's because I liked Edgar Allan Poe's stories so much that I began to make suspense films."

—*Alfred Hitchcock*

Historical and Literary Context

The Life and Times of Edgar Allan Poe

1800s

- 1801: Alexander Hamilton founds the *New York Evening Post*, heralding a decade in which the number of U.S. newspapers roughly doubles.
- 1803: With the Louisiana Purchase, Thomas Jefferson's administration buys from France all or part of what will become fifteen states.
- 1809: Edgar Poe born in Boston, January 19.
- 1809: Abraham Lincoln born less than a month later, on February 12.

1810s

- 1811: Abandoned by her husband, Poe's mother dies.
- 1815: Napoleon's France is defeated at Waterloo.
- 1815–1820: Poe lives with the family of his guardian, John Allan, in Great Britain.
- 1819: Jefferson founds the University of Virginia

1820s

- 1825: The Erie Canal is completed, opening the Great Lakes to seagoing Atlantic commerce for the first time.
- 1826: American Temperance Society founded.
- 1827: Poe publishes his first volume of poetry and joins the Army.

1830s

- 1836: Poe marries his cousin, Virginia Clemm.
- 1837: A tightening of foreign credit, which had helped finance American projects including the Erie Canal, creates a financial panic and leads to a five-year depression.
- 1838: Poe's only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, is published.

1840s

- 1845: Poe finds success but not solvency with "The Raven."
- 1847: Virginia dies from complications of tuberculosis, leaving Poe even more desolate.
- 1849: Poe dies under mysterious circumstances in Baltimore on October 7.

Other Works/Adaptations

Poe's Long Shadow

Poe has influenced generations of successful detective, horror, and psychological novelists, and sometimes less successful adaptors of his own work. Such horror novelists as H.P. Lovecraft and Stephen King owe a freely confessed debt to him, and Fyodor Dostoevsky and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle have likewise noted the enormous effect of his work on their own. French writers in particular have acknowledged Poe's example, and the poet Charles Baudelaire remains one of his earliest champions and finest translators.

As with even the best translations of Poe into other languages, his translations into other media may always fall short of the original. But even the weakest of Poe adaptations have the virtue of driving us back to the originals, and artists who in good faith continue to plunder him for material—unlike most of his characters—need feel no guilt. Poe's short but always visual stories pose particular opportunities and challenges for the unwary adaptor. Yet an admirer can easily put together a midnight, or even an all-night, film festival that does Poe credit, if never quite justice.

Two film versions of "The Fall of the House of Usher" may stand in for as many as 200 attempts so far to translate the author's work. Remarkably, both "Ushers" have made the Library of Congress's annual National Film Registry of movies worthy of preservation. A product of the promising yet sadly stillborn Rochester, New York, film industry, the 1928 version holds up well for its striking avant-garde approach and inventive look.

More famously, Roger Corman and Richard Matheson's *House of Usher* (1960), starring Vincent Price, started a vogue for Poe that indirectly led to the second golden age of Hollywood. Corman was a journeyman B-movie director-producer when he discovered in Poe the perfect opportunity to combine cheesecake with pure cheese. He hired mellifluous classical ham Vincent Price and great pulp writer Richard Matheson (*The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957), *Duel* (1971), "The Twilight Zone") and their several resulting Poe adaptations brought out the best in all three. The money made in the process later allowed Corman to bankroll low-budget first films by Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, and many of the other filmmakers who ushered in the American film renaissance of the 1970s.

Many musical works interpret Poe's poetry and fiction. These adaptations include a choral symphony of *The Bells* by Sergei Rachmaninoff (1913, rev. 1936), and two operas based on "The Fall of the House of Usher": one finished, by Philip Glass (1987), one not, by Claude Debussy. Perhaps

the oddest stab at setting Poe to music has been *POetry* (2000), a theater piece and song cycle of selected Poe work by Lou Reed and Robert Wilson, which later became a Reed album called *The Raven* (2003).

The stage, too, has taken frequent advantage of Poe's inherent theatricality. Some of these versions have even flourished for a season or more. In the end, though, whether on stage or screen, it's difficult to make Poe any more dramatic than he already is.

Works by Edgar Allan Poe

- *Tamerlane, and Other Poems*, 1827
- *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane and Minor Poems*, 1829
- *Poems*, 1831
- *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, 1838
- *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, 1840
- *The Prose Romances of Edgar A. Poe*, 1843
- *Tales*, 1845
- *The Raven and Other Poems*, 1845

Discussion Questions

1. Do the narrators from "The Black Cat" and "The Cask of Amontillado" deserve what they get? Do the characters around them? What might this say about Poe's view of the world?
2. In "The Fall of the House of Usher," why does Poe spend nearly two full pages on the lyrics to "The Haunted Palace," one of Roderick's "performances?" Do Poe's language and content change from one form to the other, or just the medium?
3. In "The Pit and the Pendulum," how does the narrator's clever idea of smearing food on the straps holding him down, so as to induce the hungry rats to chew him loose, anticipate the climactic maneuvers of heroes in suspense and action-adventure stories today?
4. "The Masque of the Red Death" was originally published as "The Mask of the Red Death." What is a "masque," and do you think the pun was intentional?
5. Are the narrators of "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "William Wilson" sane? Do you like the stories better if they're hallucinating, or if they aren't? Why?
6. Read Poe's essay "Philosophy of Composition," in which he details how he came to write "The Raven." Do you believe him? Why or why not?
7. Listen closely to the sounds of Poe's poems "Annabel Lee" and "The Raven." How does his use of sound influence your reading of the poems?
8. Poe's works are haunted by death. Sometimes even his speakers are dead. How does this affect the tone of his work? Does it add suspense or take away from it?
9. Poe often writes about the death of a beautiful woman. His own wife was ill for most of their marriage and died at a young age. How might this affect the emotional intensity of his writing?

Additional Resources

Works about Poe

- Hutchisson, James M. *Poe*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2005.
- Ostrom, John Ward, ed. *The Collected Letters of Edgar Allan Poe*, 2 vols., 3rd ed. Revised and expanded by Burton R. Pollin and Jeffrey A. Savoye. New York: Gordian Press, 2008.
- Quinn, Arthur Hobson. *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography*. 1941. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.
- Symons, Julian. *The Tell-Tale Heart: The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe*. New York: Harper & Row, 1978.

If you'd like to read more haunting fiction, you might enjoy:

- Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, 1886
- Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, 1952
- Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, 1959
- Stephen King's *The Shining*, 1977

If you'd like to read more detective fiction, you might enjoy:

- Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*, 1860
- Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, 1930
- Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*, 1930
- Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*, 1934

Websites

- [The Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore](http://www.eapoe.org/)
Founded in 1923, the Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore grew out of several smaller organizations endeavoring to erect a memorial to Poe at his gravesite. They have been responsible for the preservation of Poe's Baltimore home and continue to honor Poe's legacy with an annual lecture series and several publications. The society's comprehensive website features information and essays about Poe's life and work.
<http://www.eapoe.org/>
- [The Poe Museum](https://www.poemuseum.org/)
Richmond's Poe Museum hosts a collection of Poe's manuscripts and artifacts from his life. The museum's website features a brief biography of Poe with special attention paid to his time in Richmond, educational resources, and a selection of Poe's stories and poems.
<https://www.poemuseum.org/>

Credits

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Wilbur, Richard. "Edgar Allan Poe" and "The Poe Mystery Case." *Responses: Prose Pieces, 1953-1976*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976.

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Cover image: "Side view of a Carrion Crow, *Corvus corone*, isolated on white" by Eric Isselee. Shutterstock.



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