

## Edgar Allen Poe: Biography

Poe was born January 19, 1809, in Boston, Massachusetts. His father and mother were professional actors who at the time of his birth were members of a repertory theater company in Boston. Before he was three years old both of his parents had died, and he was raised in the home of John Allan, a prosperous exporter from Richmond, Virginia. In 1815 Allan took his wife and foster son, whom he never formally adopted, to visit Scotland and England, where they lived for the next five years. While in England, Poe spent two years at the school he later described in the story "William Wilson."

Returning with his foster parents to Richmond in 1820, Poe attended the best schools available, wrote his first poetry, and, when he was sixteen years old, became involved in a romance which ended when Allan sent him to the University of Virginia at Charlottesville. There Poe distinguished himself academically, but as a result of bad debts and inadequate financial support from Allan he was forced to leave after less than a year. An established discord with his foster father deepened on Poe's return to Richmond in 1827, and soon afterward Poe left for Boston, where he enlisted in the army for lack of other means of supporting himself and where he also published his first poetry collection, *Tamerlane and Other Poems*, which the cover stated was "By a Bostonian." The book went unnoticed by readers and reviewers, and a second collection received only slightly more attention when it appeared in 1829.

That same year Poe was honorably discharged from the army, having attained the rank of regimental sergeant-major, and, after further conflict with Allan, he entered the West Point military academy. However, because Allan would neither provide his foster son with sufficient funds to maintain himself as a cadet nor give the consent necessary to resign from the academy, Poe gained a dismissal by ignoring his duties and violating regulations. He subsequently went to New York City, where his book *Poems* was published in 1831, and then to Baltimore, where he lived at the home of his aunt, Mrs. Clemm.

Over the next few years, Poe's first stories appeared in the Philadelphia *Saturday Courier*, and his "MS. Found in a Bottle" won a cash prize for best story in the Baltimore *Saturday Visitor*. Nevertheless, Poe was still not earning enough to live independently, nor did Allan's death in 1834 provide him with a legacy. The following year, however, his financial problems were temporarily alleviated when he went back to Richmond to become editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, bringing with him his aunt and his cousin Virginia, whom he married in 1836. The *Southern Literary Messenger* was the first of several magazines Poe would direct over the next ten years and through which he rose to prominence as one of the leading men of letters in America. Poe made himself known not only as a superlative author of fiction and poetry but also as a literary critic whose level of imagination and insight had been unapproached in American literature until that time.

While Poe's writings gained attention in the late 1830s and 1840s, including the success of the poem "The Raven," the profits from his work remained meager. He was forced to move several times in order to secure employment that he hoped would improve his situation, editing *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* and *Graham's Magazine* in Philadelphia and the *Broadway Journal* in New York. In addition, the royalties for *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, and other titles were always nominal or nonexistent. After his wife's death from tuberculosis in 1847, Poe became involved in a number of romances, including the one that had been interrupted in his youth with Elmira Royster, now the widowed Mrs. Shelton. It was during the time they were preparing for their marriage that Poe, for reasons unknown, arrived in Baltimore in late September of 1849. On October 3, he was discovered in a state of

semiconsciousness. He died on October 7 without regaining the necessary lucidity to explain what had happened during the last days of his life.

## Gothicism

Originally, the term Gothic was confined to a specific genre of mostly 18th and 19th Century British literature. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's, *Frankenstein* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* are perhaps the most famous examples of this tradition, although the works of Ann Radcliffe and Emily Bronte figure prominently as well.

"The Fall of the House of Usher" is considered a preeminent example of Gothic short fiction in the American tradition with its focus on such topics as incest, terminal illness, mental breakdown, and death. Gothic fiction generally includes elements of horror, the supernatural, gloom, and violence and creates in the reader feelings of terror and dread. Gothic fiction also frequently takes place in medieval-like settings; the desolate, ancient, and decaying Usher mansion is ideally suited for this story.

## Historical Context

"The Fall of the House of Usher" was first published in 1839 in *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*. At a time when most popular literature was highly moralistic, Poe's stories were concerned only with creating emotional effects. Poe charged that most of his contemporaries were "didactic," that is, they were preoccupied with making religious or political statements in their writings to the detriment of the fiction itself. His own tales of terror, in which he often depicted the psychological disintegration of unstable or emotionally overwrought characters were in sharp contrast to the works of more highly praised writers of the time. Because of Poe's disdain for didactic writing, he was little regarded by the literary establishment in his day.

But despite being dismissed by literary critics, Poe's tales were instrumental in establishing the short story as a viable literary form. Before his time, such short works were not regarded as serious literature. Poe's examples of what the short story could accomplish, and his own nonfiction writings about the form, were instrumental in establishing the short story as a legitimate form of serious literature. Poe had a strong influence in popular fiction as well. His tales of terror are considered among the finest ever produced in the horror genre. He also pioneered, some critics say invented, the genre of detective fiction with his story "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." Walt Whitman, in his essay titled "Edgar Poe's Significance" wrote:

Poe's verses illustrate an intense faculty for technical and abstract beauty, with the rhyming art to excess, an incorrigible propensity toward nocturnal themes, a demoniac undertone behind every page. . . . There is an indescribable magnetism about the poet's life and reminiscences, as well as the poems

During the time Poe was writing, a distinct and mature body of American literature was beginning to develop with the contributions of such authors as Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, John Greenleaf Whittier, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and James Fenimore Cooper. Before this time, American readers considered British literature the only serious literature available. American writers wrote imitations derived from British models. But with the advent of a new group of American writers who were writing about specifically American subjects, settings, and characters, a distinctly American literature began to emerge. Poe was one of the American writers of the time who helped to formulate this national literature.

**Biography, Gothicism and Context: Questions**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Answer the following questions, which appear in order. You need not use complete sentences.

1. What was the profession shared by Poe's parents and what happened to them?
2. Why did Poe leave the University of Virginia?
3. Which city did Poe live in with his aunt, Mrs. Clemm?
4. Besides being a "superlative author of fiction," how else did Poe make himself known?
5. How did Poe's wife die in 1847?
6. What are the two most famous Gothic works?
7. What elements are generally found in Gothic fiction? What feelings do these things create in the reader?
8. What settings are common in Gothic literature?
9. How was Poe's writing "in sharp contrast" to other writing popular in the time?
10. What literary form did Poe help establish?