

Dreams of E. A. Poe

Long before Sigmund Freud mapped the “swamps” of the human psyche, Edgar Allan Poe roamed there, his tales and fables as odd and troubling as dreams.

It is curious that while most of us can remember vividly our first reading of “The Tell-Tale Heart,” or “The Masque of the Red Death”—can remember the tale's plot and the fascination, and the frightening effect, we rarely reread these stories, perhaps from a fear that the satisfying terror of first reading would now be stale and flat, or from reluctance to submit to it again. The image of Red Death removing his mask to mock the arrogant revelers is too potent a metaphor to need repeating; we got it the first time and have never forgotten it. Nor can we ever recapture the effect of a first reading of “The Cask of Amontillado,” the horrid understanding dawning on us as we read; once known, the ending to which the whole thing is so cryptically pointed cannot surprise us again. Yet today we return to Poe to admire the brilliance with which he marshals his effects. The stories are shorter than we remembered, and decorated like plumcakes with symbols whose significance has been made familiar since Poe's time, and whose directness could make the stories seem obvious in retrospect but does not. He continues to trouble us.

Edgar A. Poe
1809–1849

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

Alfred Hitchcock, interview, 1960

Dreams of E. A. Poe



"The Masque of the Red Death" (1842).

You cannot read the collected tales of Poe without being aware that you are in the hands of a most peculiar writer, perhaps a disturbed and clearly obsessed one, who gave us access to his own tormented unconscious with an openness possible only in pre-Freudian writers. But Poe wormed his way deeper than anyone had into the buried meaning of the sorts of tales and poems people were already familiar with. He touched on an underside of madness and rage that his readers were squeamish to acknowledge, and even his contemporaries sometimes confused his mad narrators with the man himself. His fellow American writers could not make sense of him, and they believed wild stories about him—it is said that William Cullen Bryant refused to contribute to his burial (his reburial) on account of what he had heard about Poe's bad character.

It is perhaps his language that has made English speakers wonder at the immense reverence the French have for Poe; Poe was admired in France even in his day, and he is still regarded by them as one of our greatest writers. He was translated by Charles Baudelaire and influenced Verlaine, Mallarmé, Huysmans, Jules Verne, and countless others. Poe also influenced Dostoevsky, who printed "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat," two tales of murder and confession, in his magazine five years before he wrote *Crime and Punishment*. Altogether his influence on both the French and even the Russians is without equal among American writers.

Life Filled With Tragedy

In "The Philosophy of Composition" Poe wrote that the most poignant and melancholy subject for poetry was the death of a beautiful young woman, an idea that must have arisen from his pre-memory, for this subject was given him at the age of two, as he and his infant sister watched beside their deserted, terrified, dying young mother, in rented lodgings in Richmond, Virginia.

Betty Poe was dying of tuberculosis. The immediacy of the child's horror of sickness, decay, and death would never leave him. The father, David Poe, would also die of tuberculosis, whether two days later, as one tradition has it, or earlier, in October 1810, or as late as 1813.

The orphans were adopted, Edgar by a Scots tobacco merchant, John Allen, his infant sister Rosalie by another family. The childless Mrs. Allen was delighted with the attractive, bright little boy, and his upbringing seems at first to have been a happy and relatively privileged one, with good schools and all the manners and expectations of an upper-middle-class southern family. From 1815 to 1820, the Allens lived in England, where Poe went to a boarding school on Sloane Street, and it was there, one supposes, that he became acquainted with English literature.

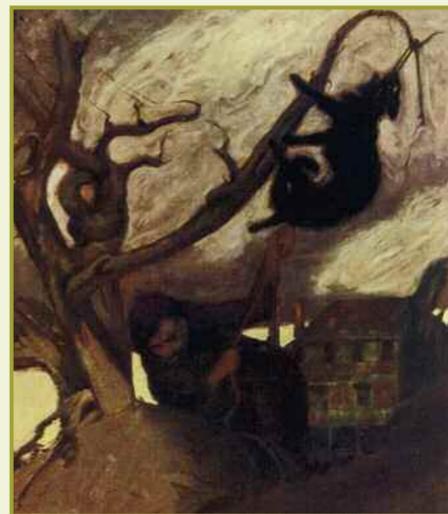
The family returned to America. Edgar continued to do well in school and to show some promise at writing, which was by no means John Allen's hope for him. Like the English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, Poe was a rebellious adolescent, wild in the fashion of Romantic poets and young southern gentlemen. He had to leave the University of Virginia after his first semester because of gambling debts and drinking. From here his relationship with his foster father would deteriorate in a repetitious cycle of accusations, pleas for money, hard-hearted refusals from John Allen, and increasingly desperate measures by Poe. At the age of eighteen he joined the army, and had to be bought out. It was now that he paid to have his

first volume of verses printed: *Tamerlane and Other Poems*, by a "Bostonian."

Poe was twenty when he got out of the army. He lived for a while in Baltimore with his grandmother Poe, her widowed daughter Mrs. Clemm, and Mrs. Clemm's little daughter Virginia, and tried to launch himself into a literary career, attracting attention for his poems and inventing travel tales based on his military service. At twenty-two he obliged Mr. Allen by entering West Point, but he failed at this too, and was court-martialed for neglecting his duties. He left West Point with money collected from his fellow cadets to publish a new volume of poems.

Meantime his beloved foster mother died, Mr. Allen remarried, and the new wife produced a son, so that Allen had no need to repose his hopes in the unruly Edgar, whom he steadfastly refused to help. In Baltimore with Mrs. Clemm, Poe's brother Henry died, of tuberculosis like their parents, and at the same age as their mother, twenty-four. Poe would marry Virginia Clemm, and she too would die of tuberculosis at twenty-four.

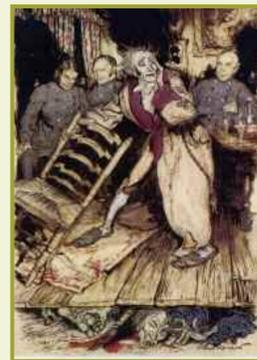
Poe was devastated by Virginia's death, but even before her death he struck people as a man in trouble, talented but impossible, given to binge drinking and erratic behavior that caused him to lose every job his undoubted talent could procure for him (as editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*, and *Graham's Magazine*). Yet he was also respected and admired. After Poe's death, many people testified to his genius, intelligence, and good manners, at least when he was sober. He lived two years after Virginia, rampaging, grieving, wildly courting widows, and one day was found unconscious and beaten, lying over some barrels in an alley in a stranger's shabby clothes. Taken to a charity hospital and kindly tended by a young doctor who had no idea who he was, he lingered, regained consciousness briefly, died, and was sewn into a pauper's shroud by the doctor's wife on October 7, 1849, aged forty.



"The Black Cat" (1843).

Exploring the Unconscious

Freudian critics have always fallen with particular relish on the tales of Poe to infer things about Poe himself, his life and character. The most famous study of Poe the man was by Marie Bonaparte, the pupil of Freud, who found in him a perfect illustration of Freud's theories. Knives, eyes, teeth, black cats, terrifying coffins, caskets, holes—indeed the post-Freudian reader of Poe cannot escape the designated significance of these familiar symbols any more than the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" can escape the staring eye of his victim. Everywhere are wistful expressions of impotency and uncontrolled expressions of primal fears. One cannot escape the sense that Poe's manipulation of these symbols was an important part of his intention, however much they may also encode his own anxieties. He seems to have had a remarkable access to his own unconscious, and to have assumed that the patterns of his imagination would find a response in his reader.



"The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843).

The record shows that he was an excellent editor, with an eye for talent, very good taste, and a rather mean hatchet as a reviewer. His regard for his own talent was enormous, and he was ambitious. He made a name in America but also abroad, most popularly with his poem "The Raven," and with other stories and poems soon after. His critical interests, his sense of cultural milieu, were European, and he participated in the English literary world as well as he could from his remote American exile, corresponding with

Dickens and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, reviewing for and contributing to *Blackwood's Magazine*, and taking part in the critical debates of his day.

He was himself a voice against bombast and inanity, and he was such a rational, often witty, and discerning critic that we cannot suppose him entirely without art and strategy when it came to writing his own tales, however bombastic they may sometimes seem.

People have always noticed that Poe had several voices, and several types of tale, notably the horror stories and ratiocinative detective stories, of which we have the quintessential "Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Purloined Letter," said to have fathered the detective story.



"The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841).

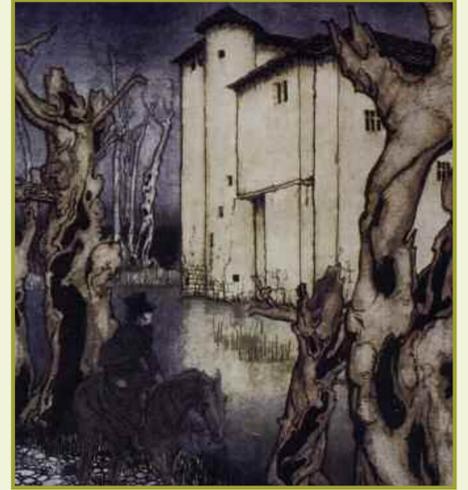
Poe almost always uses the first person, though his first-person writings have a variety of voices, funny or fearful, and the most successful is that of the dreamy, aghast narrator of the horror tales, speaking as the "I" or "eye" of a dream and reaching into the unconscious to illumine the true sources of human anxiety, and frame them in the irrational truncated dream sequences we think of as his most typical writing:

I saw, too, for a few moments of delirious horror, the soft and nearly imperceptible waving of the sable draperies which enwrapped the walls of the apartment. And then my vision fell upon the seven tall candles upon the table. At first they wore the aspect of charity and seemed white slender angels who would save me; but then, all at once, there came a most deadly nausea over my spirit, and I felt every fire in my frame thrill as if I had touched the wire of a galvanic battery, while the angel forms became meaningless spectres, with heads of flame, and I saw that from them there would be no help. ("The Pit and the Pendulum")

There is also the brisk, straightforward, scientific tone of a reliable observer in which to recount the fantastic voyages, as in "A Descent into the Maelstrom" or "MS. Found in a Bottle": "Our vessel was a beautiful ship of about four hundred tons, copper-fastened, and built at Bombay of Malabar teak." He has the witty, sarcastic critical voice we have noted, and a jocular tone that readers have generally found less successful—the tone he uses in such tales as "The Man that was Used Up," or "The Gold-Bug"—the same *faux-naïf* tone affected by many American humorists then and later, and not unlike that used by Twain, in which the writer tells the reader with a straight face something the reader understands differently. The contrast of these tales with the more famous Gothic tales is such that their charm and sense of fun is often overlooked.

Poe's subjects were in a sense very mainstream in his day—and thinking of Poe as mainstream does not diminish his genius. He was a hard-working editor and professional writer whose works amount to seventeen volumes, and he was bound to bear in mind the literary interests of his audience, which craved frightening dungeons, crypts, and heroes in the throes of the passions of hate and guilt. We can think of the sea stories "Arthur Gordon Pym" and "A Descent into the Maelstrom" as orthodox examples of the travel tale popular at this period, with its conviction that wonderful things could happen in the southern oceans, or polar or arctic regions—Pym roams over icy reaches much as Frankenstein's monster does. Poe has the passion for science that Dr. Frankenstein had, and the same sense that Nature can be explained.

Poe's preoccupation with death was itself perfectly orthodox in a period when death was an everyday family event, in a way that is difficult for us, for whom death is a resented intrusion, to remember. The nineteenth century would increasingly celebrate death with embalming, elaborate funerals, mourning jewelry, hearses, and ornate gravestones—elevating and sentimentalizing it in a way the more matter-of-fact eighteenth-century had not done, if only because certain diseases, such as tuberculosis, had worsened after the beginning of the industrial revolution and with urbanization. Even the fear of being buried alive, which recurs obsessively in Poe, was widespread, so that patented tomb alarms and escape devices were sold, by which someone unfortunately immolated might escape or make himself known—Poe has a certain amount of fun with this in "A Premature Burial," and captures its horror in the struggles of Madeleine Usher or the fate of Fortunato in "The Cask of Amontillado."



"The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839).

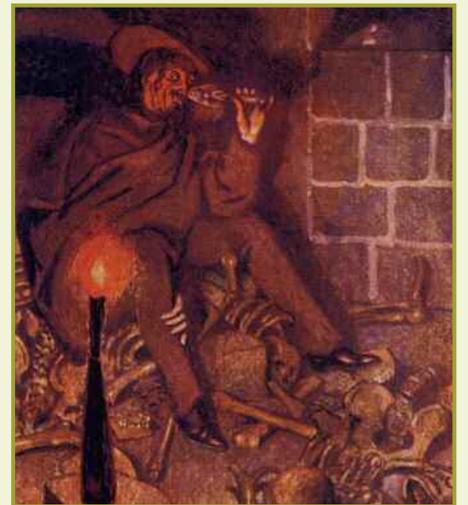
Reading Poe's tales again has some surprises, one concerning his language, which in memory is florid and horrid, seeping with Gothic excess, but which in fact is spare, rather clinical, and primly Latinate: "Hereditary wealth afforded me an education of no common order, and a contemplative turn of mind enabled me to methodise the stores which early study very diligently garnered up." He has little turn for figurative language—an odd defect for a poet, but by its restraint curiously suited to his lurid stories, its almost clinical detachment enhancing their reality. His interest is not really in language, and his vocabulary is abstract, full of words like "putrefy," or "horror," or "dread," which are in themselves notably unevocative for the stifling rooms, the sensation of being burned alive or smothered, or to describe the intricate mechanism of the pendulum and the moving walls of the pit. A word like "decay," as unpleasant as it is, cannot compare to the grisly filmic effects that would be available to him today.

Critics have almost inevitably proceeded by using Poe's tales to reveal Poe the man, but have seldom tried to explain why his stories have endured and in what their greatness lies. The manifest content of Poe's stories is the deep content, or vice versa: his tales are about fear and anxiety, the very emotions described by the narrator or embodied in superb metaphorical constructions like the pit and the pendulum. His subjects were death, the disappearance or decay of the body, and in the detective or quasi-scientific stories, the life of the mind that can defeat mortality.

To a neglected extent his stories are also about a special aspect of anxiety: hope. They often detail the moment during an unfolding tragedy or danger when the human mind gives in to hope, only to be the more bitterly disappointed. Over and over, a despairing hero is tempted, by a blush on the bosom of the supposedly dead loved one, or by a momentary respite in some torture, to hope—especially that the dead will come back to life, but also that the narrator is not after all guilty of causing death, or will obtain mercy and reprieve. It is a vein to be worked later and more successfully by Franz Kafka, and it explains the quasi-mystical quality of Poe's stories, and their similarity to, and use as, myths. Like the bard, or the spinner of myths, he employs universal images, and his interest is in his effect on the reader. His imagination is visual and three-dimensional, it invents and inhabits the space of a dungeon or casket, it dreams of curtains and chambers. If Poe had lived today he would probably have been a film maker.

— © Diane Johnson

The novelist, critic, and essayist Diane Johnson is the author of, among other works, *Le Divorce* (1997), a National Book Award finalist and the psychological thriller *The Shadow Knows* (1974).



"The Cask of Amontillado" (1846).

Images by column from top left: "The Masque of the Red Death," first published in 1842. Illustration by E. L. Blumenschein, 1908. Dover Publications; Elizabeth Arnold Hopkins Poe. Library of Congress, Prints and Photos Division; "The Black Cat," first published in 1843. Illustration by E. L. Blumenschein, 1908. Dover Publications; "The Tell-Tale Heart," first published in 1843. Illustration by Arthur Rackham, 1935. Dover Publications; "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," first published in 1841. Illustration by E. L. Blumenschein, 1908. Dover Publications; "The Fall of the House of Usher," first published in 1839. Illustration by Arthur Rackham, 1935. Dover Publications; "The Cask of Amontillado," first published in 1846. Illustration by Byam Shaw, 1909. Dover Publications. Image on poster front: Edgar Allan Poe, mezzotint, 1896. Library of Congress, Prints and Photos Division.