

The Genius of "The Tell-Tale Heart" BY STEPHEN KING

When I do public appearances, I'm often-no, always-asked what scares me. The answer is almost everything, from express elevators in very tall buildings to the idea of a zealot¹ loose with a suitcase nuke in one of the great cities of the world. But if the question is refined to "What works of fiction have scared you?" two always leap immediately to mind: *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding and "The Tell-Tale Heart" by Edgar Allan Poe.

Most people know that Poe invented the modern detective story (Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes is in many ways the same detective as Poe's C. Auguste Dupin), but few are aware that he also created the first work of criminal sociopathy² in "The Tell-Tale Heart," a story originally published in 1843. Many great crime writers of the twentieth century, from Jim Thompson and John D. MacDonald to Thomas Harris (who in Hannibal Lecter may have created the greatest sociopath of them all), are the children of Poe.

The details of the story are still gruesome enough to produce nightmares (the cutting up of the victim's body, for instance, or the old man's one dying shriek), but the terror that lingers-and the story's genius-lies in the superficially reasonable voice of the narrator. He is never named, and that is fitting, because we have no idea how he picked his victim, or what drove him to the crime. Oh, we know what he says: it was the old man's gruesomely veiled eye. But of course, Jeffrey Dahmer said he wanted to create zombies, and the Son of Sam at one point claimed his dog told him to do it. We understand, I think, that psychopaths³ offer such wacky motivations because they are as helpless as the rest of us to explain their terrible acts.

This is, above all, a persuasive story of lunacy, and Poe never offers any real explanations. Nor has to. The narrator's cheerful laughter ("A tub had caught... all [the blood]-ha! ha!") tells us all we need to know. Here is a creature who looks like a man but who really belongs to another species. That's scary. What elevates this story beyond merely scary and into the realm of genius, though, is that Poe foresaw the darkness of generations far beyond his own.

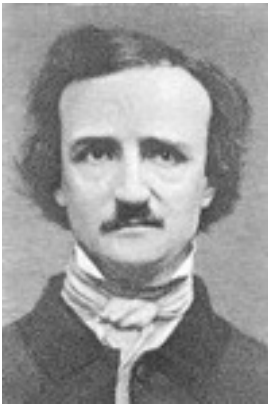
Ours, for instance.

1: zealot- fanatic, enthusiast

2: sociopathy- having antisocial behavior

3: psychopaths- persons suffering from chronic mental disorder with abnormal or violent social behavior.

Biography of Edgar Allan Poe



Edgar Allen Poe was an American author, poet, editor and literary critic, considered part of the American Romantic Movement. Best known for his tales of mystery and the macabre, Poe was one of the earliest American practitioners of the short story and is considered the inventor of the detective fiction genre. He is further credited with contributing to the emerging genre of science fiction. He was the first well-known American writer to try to earn a living through writing alone, resulting in a financially difficult life and career.

Early Life

He was born Edgar Poe in Boston, Massachusetts, on January 19, 1809, the second child of actress Elizabeth Arnold Hopkins Poe and actor David Poe, Jr. He had an elder brother, William Henry Leonard Poe, and a younger sister, Rosalie Poe. Edgar may have been named after a character in William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, a play the couple was performing in 1809. His father abandoned their family in 1810, and his mother died a year later from consumption (pulmonary tuberculosis). Poe was then taken into the home of John Allan, a successful Scottish merchant in Richmond, Virginia, who dealt in a variety of goods including tobacco, cloth, wheat, tombstones, and slaves. The Allans served as a foster family and gave him the name "Edgar Allan Poe", though they never formally adopted him.

The Allan family had Poe baptized in the Episcopal Church in 1812. John Allan alternately spoiled and aggressively disciplined his foster son. The family, including Poe and Allan's wife, Frances Valentine Allan, sailed to Britain in 1815. Poe attended the grammar school in Irvine, Scotland (where John Allan was born) for a short period in 1815, before rejoining the family in London in 1816. There he studied at a boarding school in Chelsea until summer 1817. e was subsequently entered at the Reverend John Bransby's Manor House School at Stoke Newington, then a suburb four miles (6 km) north of London.

Poe moved back with the Allans to Richmond, Virginia in 1820. In 1824 Poe served as the lieutenant of the Richmond youth honor guard as Richmond celebrated the visit of the Marquis de Lafayette. In March 1825, John Allan's uncle and business benefactor William Galt, said to be one of the wealthiest men in Richmond, died and left Allan several acres of real estate. The inheritance was estimated at \$750,000. By summer 1825, Allan celebrated his expansive wealth by purchasing a two-story brick home named Moldavia. Poe may have become engaged to Sarah Elmira Royster before he registered at the one-year-old University of Virginia in February 1826 to study languages. The university, in its infancy, was established on the ideals of

its founder, Thomas Jefferson. It had strict rules against gambling, horses, guns, tobacco and alcohol, but these rules were generally ignored. Jefferson had enacted a system of student self-government, allowing students to choose their own studies, make their own arrangements for boarding, and report all wrongdoing to the faculty. The unique system was still in chaos, and there was a high dropout rate. During his time there, Poe lost touch with Royster and also became estranged from his foster father over gambling debts. Poe claimed that Allan had not given him sufficient money to register for classes, purchase texts, and procure and furnish a dormitory. Allan did send additional money and clothes, but Poe's debts increased. Poe gave up on the university after a year, and, not feeling welcome in Richmond, especially when he learned that his sweetheart Royster had married Alexander Shelton, he traveled to Boston in April 1827, sustaining himself with odd jobs as a clerk and newspaper writer. At some point he started using the pseudonym Henri Le Rennet.

Death

On October 3, 1849, Poe was found on the streets of Baltimore delirious, "in great distress, and... in need of immediate assistance", according to the man who found him, Joseph W. Walker. He was taken to the Washington College Hospital, where he died on Sunday, October 7, 1849, at 5:00 in the morning. Poe was never coherent long enough to explain how he came to be in his dire condition, and, oddly, was wearing clothes that were not his own. Poe is said to have repeatedly called out the name "Reynolds" on the night before his death, though it is unclear to whom he was referring. Some sources say Poe's final words were "Lord help my poor soul." All medical records, including his death certificate, have been lost. Newspapers at the time reported Poe's death as "congestion of the brain" or "cerebral inflammation", common euphemisms for deaths from disreputable causes such as alcoholism. The actual cause of death remains a mystery; from as early as 1872, cooping was commonly believed to have been the cause, and speculation has included delirium tremens, heart disease, epilepsy, syphilis, meningial inflammation, cholera and rabies.

Griswold's "Memoir"

The day Edgar Allan Poe was buried, a long obituary appeared in the New York Tribune signed "Ludwig". It was soon published throughout the country. The piece began, "Edgar Allan Poe is dead. He died in Baltimore the day before yesterday. This announcement will startle many, but few will be grieved by it." "Ludwig" was soon identified as Rufus Wilmot Griswold, an editor, critic and anthologist who had borne a grudge against Poe since 1842. Griswold somehow became Poe's literary executor and attempted to destroy his enemy's reputation after his death.

Rufus Griswold wrote a biographical article of Poe called "Memoir of the Author", which he included in an 1850 volume of the collected works. Griswold depicted Poe as a depraved, drunk, drug-addled madman and included Poe's letters as evidence. Many of his claims were either lies or distorted half-truths. For example, it is now known that Poe was not a drug addict. Griswold's book was denounced by those who knew Poe well, but it became a popularly accepted one. This occurred in part because it was the only full biography available and was widely reprinted and in part because readers thrilled at the thought of reading works by an "evil" man. Letters that Griswold presented as proof of this depiction of Poe were later revealed as forgeries.

Literary Style and Themes

Genres

Poe's best known fiction works are Gothic, a genre he followed to appease the public taste. His most recurring themes deal with questions of death, including its physical signs, the effects of decomposition, concerns of premature burial, the reanimation of the dead, and mourning. Many of his works are generally considered part of the dark romanticism genre, a literary reaction to transcendentalism, which Poe strongly disliked. He referred to followers of the movement as "Frogpondians" after the pond on Boston Common and ridiculed their writings as "metaphor-run mad," lapsing into "obscurity for obscurity's sake" or "mysticism for mysticism's sake." Poe once wrote in a letter to Thomas Holley Chivers that he did not dislike Transcendentalists, "only the pretenders and sophists among them."

Beyond horror, Poe also wrote satires, humor tales, and hoaxes. For comic effect, he used irony and ludicrous extravagance, often in an attempt to liberate the reader from cultural conformity. In fact, "Metzengerstein", the first story that Poe is known to have published, and his first foray into horror, was originally intended as a burlesque satirizing the popular genre. Poe also reinvented science fiction, responding in his writing to emerging technologies such as hot air balloons in "The Balloon-Hoax".

Poe wrote much of his work using themes specifically catered for mass market tastes. To that end, his fiction often included elements of popular pseudosciences such as phrenology and physiognomy.

Literary Theory

Poe's writing reflects his literary theories, which he presented in his criticism and also in essays such as "The Poetic Principle". He disliked didacticism and allegory, though he believed that meaning in literature should be an undercurrent just beneath the surface. Works with obvious meanings, he wrote, cease to be art. He believed that quality work should be brief and focus on a specific single effect. To that end, he believed that the writer should carefully calculate every sentiment and idea. In "The Philosophy of Composition", an essay in which Poe describes his method in writing "The Raven", he claims to have strictly followed this method. It has been questioned, however, if he really followed this system. T. S. Eliot said: "It is difficult for us to read that essay without reflecting that if Poe plotted out his poem with such calculation, he might have taken a little more pains over it: the result hardly does credit to the method." Biographer Joseph Wood Krutch described the essay as "a rather highly ingenious exercise in the art of rationalization".

Legacy

Literary Influence

During his lifetime, Poe was mostly recognized as a literary critic. Fellow critic James Russell Lowell called him "the most discriminating, philosophical, and fearless critic upon imaginative works who has written in America", though he questioned if he occasionally used prussic acid instead of ink. Poe was also known as a writer of fiction and became one of the first American authors of the 19th century to become more popular in Europe than in the United States. Poe is particularly respected in France, in part due to early translations by Charles Baudelaire. Baudelaire's translations became definitive renditions of Poe's work throughout Europe.

Poe's early detective fiction tales featuring C. Auguste Dupin laid the groundwork for future detectives in literature. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle said, "Each [of Poe's detective stories] is a root from which a whole literature has developed.... Where was the detective story until Poe breathed the breath of life into it?" The Mystery Writers of America have named their awards for excellence in the genre the "Edgars". Poe's work also influenced science fiction, notably Jules Verne, who wrote a sequel to Poe's novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* called *An Antarctic Mystery*, also known as *The Sphinx of the Ice Fields*. Science fiction author H. G. Wells noted, "Pym tells what a very intelligent mind could imagine about the south polar region a century ago."

Like many famous artists, Poe's works have spawned innumerable imitators. One interesting trend among imitators of Poe, however, has been claims by clairvoyants or psychics to be "channeling" poems from Poe's spirit. One of the most notable of these was Lizzie Doten, who in 1863 published *Poems from the Inner Life*, in which she claimed to have "received" new compositions by Poe's spirit. The compositions were re-workings of famous Poe poems such as "The Bells", but which reflected a new, positive outlook.

Even so, Poe has received not only praise, but criticism as well. This is partly because of the negative perception of his personal character and its influence upon his reputation. William Butler Yeats was occasionally critical of Poe and once called him "vulgar". Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson reacted to "The Raven" by saying, "I see nothing in it" and derisively referred to Poe as "the jingle man". Aldous Huxley wrote that Poe's writing "falls into vulgarity" by being "too poetical" —the equivalent of wearing a diamond ring on every finger.

It is believed that only 12 copies of Poe's first book, *Tamerlane and Other Poems*, have survived. In December 2009, one copy sold at Christie's, New York for \$662,500, a record price paid for a work of American literature.

In Popular Culture

The historical Edgar Allan Poe has appeared as a fictionalized character, often representing the "mad genius" or "tormented artist" and exploiting his personal struggles. Many such depictions also blend in with characters from his stories, suggesting Poe and his characters share identities. Often, fictional depictions of Poe use his mystery-solving skills in such novels as *The Poe Shadow* by Matthew Pearl.