

# Edgar Allan Poe

(1809–1849)

“The want of parental affection,” wrote Poe, “has been the heaviest of my trials.” Edgar Allan Poe was, indeed, most unfortunate in his parents. His father, David Poe, was a mediocre traveling actor who drank heavily. His mother, Elizabeth Arnold, was a talented actress who was deserted by her husband when Edgar was still a baby. She died on tour in Richmond, Virginia, leaving Edgar virtually an orphan before his third birthday.

The boy was taken in by John and Frances Allan, a charitable and childless couple in Richmond. John Allan, an ambitious and self-righteous merchant, became Edgar’s guardian (and the source of the writer’s middle name). He provided generously for Edgar’s early education, but he never formally adopted the boy.

Although Frances Allan was kind to Edgar, the boy grew up feeling both the lack of a natural father and the disapproval of his foster father. John Allan made no secret of his disappointment in Edgar—in his idleness, in his indifference to business life, and in his literary ambitions. Surely Allan’s criticism added to Edgar’s growing moodiness.

## Breaking Away

At seventeen, Edgar entered the University of Virginia. He did well in his studies but was resentful of the meager allowance Allan gave him. When he tried to earn extra money by gambling, he went deep into debt. On discovering this, Allan refused to help his foster son and instead withdrew him from college.

After an especially bitter quarrel with Allan, Poe ran off to Boston to make his own way in the world. There, in 1827, he published a small volume of poems, *Tamerlane*. The book did not attract much attention, and Poe could find no other work. In despair he joined the army. He was promoted to the rank of sergeant major, but he disliked the enlisted man’s life and appealed to Allan for help. At the request

of his wife, who was dying, Allan interceded for Poe (for the last time) and agreed to help him enter the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Poe’s motive in going to the academy was probably to please his foster father.

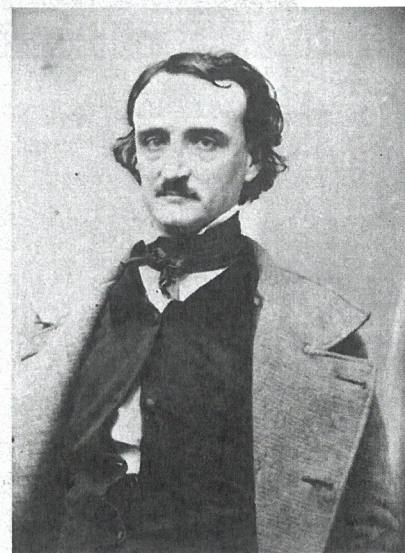
While waiting to get into the academy, Poe published a second book of poems, *Al Aaraaf*, in 1829 and received his first real recognition as a writer. The next year, while at West Point, Poe learned that Allan (now a widower) had remarried and that the woman was young enough to have children. Since this appeared to end all hope of becoming Allan’s heir, Poe had himself dismissed from West Point.

## Exploring the Darkness and the Depths

Poe moved in with an aunt, Maria Poe Clemm, in Baltimore, Maryland. In 1835, he married her thirteen-year-old daughter, Virginia. The difference in their ages and Virginia’s poor health resulted in a very odd marriage, but need and a strong sense of family drew the three housemates together.

Poe supported his family by working as an editor at various magazines. He wrote when he could find the time, completing his only full-length novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, several years after his marriage. It was his short stories, however, that had the greatest effect on other writers.

In “The Gold Bug” and in the tales built around the intuitive sleuth C. Auguste Dupin, “The Purloined Letter” and “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” Poe laid the foundations for the modern detective story. In fact, he inspired Sir Arthur Conan Doyle to create Sherlock Holmes. In tales such as “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Cask of Amontillado,” Poe inspired the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky





(1821–1881) to explore the criminal mind.

Poe was a master of the psychological thriller. His tales of the ghastly and the grotesque are peopled with distraught narrators, deranged heroes, and doomed heroines, yet his purpose in creating such characters was not to present readers with convincing likenesses of human beings—nor merely to shock and frighten. Instead, Poe wanted to take us behind the curtain that separates the everyday from the incredible. He wanted to leave behind the sunlit, tangible, rational world and discover the unsettling truth that lies in the dark, irrational depths of the human mind.

### Small Triumphs and Great Tragedy

Poe produced a considerable body of work in spite of humiliating poverty and a serious drinking problem. The slightest amount of alcohol made him senseless, yet he drank to escape a reality he found agonizing. Publication of his poem “The Raven” in 1845 brought Poe some fame at last, but financial security still eluded him.

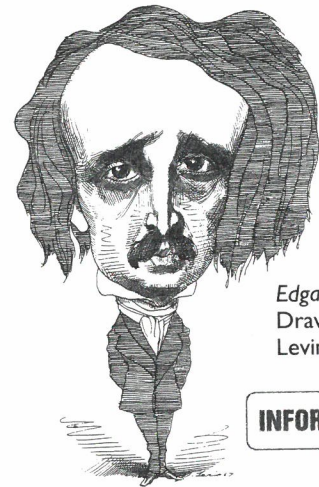
When Virginia died of tuberculosis in 1847, Poe and “Muddy” (Virginia’s mother) were left alone. Poe grew more unstable. He pursued romance relentlessly, always looking for someone to “adopt” him. In 1849, on his way home after a visit to Virginia to see a woman he hoped to marry, Poe disappeared. A week later, he was found in a Baltimore tavern—delirious and in cheap clothing that was not his, wet through from a raging storm. Four days later, having passed in and out of delirium, Poe died, leaving critics to argue endlessly about this final mystery. What happened during those last days in Baltimore?

### For Independent Reading

For more of Poe’s horror stories, read these titles:

- “William Wilson”
- “The Oval Portrait”

## A CLOSER LOOK: SOCIAL INFLUENCES



Edgar Allan Poe.  
Drawing by David  
Levine.

### INFORMATIONAL TEXT

### Poe the Pop Icon

Can you guess what Edgar Allan Poe has in common with Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, the Beatles, and Michael Jordan? Like all of the above, Poe is a legend of popular culture. Consider these facts:

- Poe’s works have been translated into virtually every language.
- Such popular writers as Stephen King and Ray Bradbury point to Poe as their literary forefather.
- The Mystery Writers of America annually honors great achievements in mystery writing with the Edgar—the equivalent of an Oscar or an Emmy.
- Poe has been immortalized in the popular arts, on everything from posters, buttons, and coffee mugs to bumper stickers and T-shirts.
- Poe has been “ushered” into pop culture through dozens of film adaptations, including *The Masque of the Red Death*, *The Black Cat*, *The Tomb of Ligeia*, and *The Pit and the Pendulum*.

Keep your eye out for Poe. He may be closer than you think.