



IMP OF THE PERVERSE
EDGAR ALLAN POE

BORN IN BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS, 1809
DIED IN BALTIMORE, MARYLAND, 1849



*American poet and short story writer,
often considered the creator of both the
detective story and horror fiction*

“I HAVE MANY OCCASIONAL dealings with Adversity,” the man born Edgar Poe once said, “but the want of parental affection has been the heaviest of my trials.”

Any happiness he ever had seems to have ended when his mother, a popular actress, died at age twenty-four. (Poe’s father, a failed actor, had deserted the family.) His mother had little to leave her son but memories and a miniature portrait of herself.

Tobacco merchant John Allan and his wife took two-year-old Edgar into their Virginia home and gave him their name. But they never formally adopted him, which meant he had no official family. In fact, as a consequence of their many quarrels, the Allans refused to have anything to do with Poe once he grew up. (Poe never used the name Allan and always signed his name Edgar A. Poe.)

Poe joined the army for a time, attended West Point for a year, and then went to live with his aunt Maria (“Muddy”). Four years later, at age twenty-seven, Poe married her daughter and his cousin, Virginia (“Sissy”), age thirteen. He called her his darling little wifey. She called him Eddie and adored him.

Muddy and Sissy mothered Poe. The three of them moved often, renting cottages or rooms in boardinghouses. They usually lived on the outskirts of cities. Poe liked to walk in the woods and would go there to escape if they had visitors he didn't like. Lack of money was their constant plague. Sometimes they were so poor they lived on bread and molasses for weeks at a time or went without food altogether. Poe was always in debt; when he once wanted to file for bankruptcy, he couldn't afford the fee to do so. He owned few possessions — just a few books, two pine tables he had built, a cat named Catterina, and tropical birds that he kept in cages. Despite his poverty, Poe made a point of dressing very neatly (if shabbily) and acting the part of the refined southern gentleman.

He worked for various magazines, writing criticism and editing others' work, as much as fifteen hours a day but seldom for more than a year at any one place. Poe was an alcoholic by this time, which often interfered with his work. When he wasn't drinking, he was quiet and disciplined. When he was, he could be abrasive, insulting friends or leaving shops without paying. He would often disappear and be found days later wandering in the woods. People could guess Poe's state of mind by looking at the state of his clothes. If his coat was inside out, that was a bad sign.

Poe worked on his own stories and poems at night. When he was between jobs (sometimes for years at a time), he spent the mornings in his study and the afternoons in his flower garden (he loved flowers). He often recited poetry to Sissy and Muddy, and when he read a moving poem of his own, such as "Annabel Lee," he would cry. He was never paid well for his writing.

Poe was always slim and stayed in good shape by taking long walks. When young he was an outstanding athlete, famous for jumping and swimming. He always tried to be first in whatever he did and boasted for years about the time he swam six miles against a strong tide. A boxer, he would encourage boys to hit him in the chest to show he could take it.

As an adult Poe fought the world. His behavior was sometimes so bizarre that many thought he was insane or committing a slow suicide. He was notorious for

writing cruel reviews, using words like *sickening* and *worthless* to describe almost every writer of the day. Or the reviews might be just the opposite — it was as if he were writing as two entirely different people, one full of hate and the other full of love. Sometimes he perversely acted against his own professional interests and feuded with people who could have helped him. He attacked other writers for plagiarism and grammatical errors — the same sins he was occasionally guilty of himself.



He also got into real fights; the scar near his left eye was caused by the ring of a man who punched him (and who had called him Marmaduke Hammerhead in print). He criticized whole literary communities — of writers in Boston he said, “Their pumpkin pies are delicious. Their poetry is not so good.” He suspected people of plotting against him (and because he made so many enemies, they sometimes were). Sooner or later, Poe antagonized almost everyone in his life except

Sissy and Muddy, with whom he was always gentle. The only well-known writer he never attacked was Charles Dickens.

Poe usually looked pained, as if nightmares and visions haunted him. He always dressed in black, even in summer heat. Few people ever saw Poe smile; he didn't have much of a sense of humor. Sometimes, to earn a little money, he wrote jokes for magazines — “Why is a bleeding cat like a question? Because it's a catty gory [category]” — but they usually weren't very funny.

Poe often begged friends and neighbors for money. When he had it, he spent it on Sissy's education or on gifts (including a piano and harp) for her. Once he spent hundreds of dollars on tables and chairs before he saw the new house they had rented, which turned out to be too tiny for the furniture. On a tour to raise money for a magazine he badly wanted to start up, he managed to lose his trunk of clothes, the notes for the lectures he was to give, and one of his shoes. Once he had attained his lifelong goal of running his own magazine, it lasted only five weeks before being overwhelmed by debt.

Poe was a habitual liar, always embroidering his past or trying to put a good face on bad circumstances. He never admitted, for example, that Sissy was ill with tuberculosis but always said that her poor health began with a “singing accident” when she had “broken a blood vessel” and started coughing blood.

Sissy spent six years as an invalid (sleeping on a straw bed, kept warm by Poe's old military coat and Catterina, the cat). Poe shuddered every time she coughed — his moods were dependent on her health each day — but refused to admit she was dying.

After she died at age twenty-four, he visited her grave at night, stealing from the house in his stocking feet so Muddy couldn't hear him and try to stop him.

But he also began courting four different women at the same time. Within two years he was engaged to a woman who lived directly across the street from the place where his mother was buried. Soon after that he was found unconscious on the street, his clothes in complete disarray.

He died four days later, at age forty, possibly from alcohol poisoning or inflammation of the brain. His last words were, "Lord, help my poor soul."

With him, it is said, was the miniature portrait of his mother.

BOOKMARKS

❖ As a boy, Poe liked to shock people by putting a sheet over his head and coming into the room as a ghost. His stories were full of shocking, creepy things as well. In "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Pit and the Pendulum," "The Black Cat," "The Premature Burial," "The Imp of the Perverse," and other stories, Poe created ideas and techniques still used in modern horror stories and movies.

❖ "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and Poe's other mysteries starring C. Auguste Dupin have provided the model for such amateur detectives as Sherlock Holmes (created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle). At the time Poe was writing, the word *detective* did not yet exist in the English language. Today, the Edgar Awards, given each year by the Mystery Writers of America for the best mystery books, are named after him.

❖ "The Raven," Poe's best-known poem, had the effect a hit song might have today. It made Poe famous overnight and generated enormous praise and many imitations, especially of its refrain: "Quoth the raven 'Nevermore.'" "To hear Poe perform 'The Raven,'" wrote a fan, "which he does very quietly, is an event in one's life." Unfortunately, the poem earned Poe little money.