EDGAR ALLAN POE - BIOGRAPHY

**Edgar Allan Poe** was one of the seminal American poets and short story writers of the nineteenth century. Edgar Allan Poe also worked as a literary critic and editor. In his lifetime, he had the distinction of being one of the first American writers with more cultural cache in Europe than in the United States. Edgar Allan Poe studied languages at the University of Virginia and United States Military Academy at West Point; however, he withdrew or was dismissed from these institutions before taking a degree (although at West Point he achieved the rank of cadet.)

The writing of Edgar Allan Poe has influenced diverse writers and thinkers including [Charles Baudelaire](http://www.egs.edu/library/charles-baudelaire/biography/), Jules Verne and H. P. Lovecraft. Edgar Allan Poe is also seen as being instrumental in the development of the literary genres of Science Fiction and Mystery. The catalog of his writing is diverse and includes such classics as “The Fall of the House of Usher", “The Purloined Letter", and *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*.

In 1809 Edgar Poe was born in Boston, Massachusetts to a family of actors. Some suppose his parents chose named him after the son of Gloucester in[Shakespeare](http://www.egs.edu/library/william-shakespeare/biography/)’s *King Lear*(which his parents were acting in at the time of his birth.) The events of his early life would inspire Angela Carter to pen “The Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe." Within a year of his father’s desertion of the family, his mother died of tuberculosis. The Allan family from Richmond, Virginia took in the young Edgar Poe. Edgar Poe was renamed Edgar Allan Poe to represent this new family relation, but he was never officially adopted.

During his first year of attendance at the University of Virginia, Edgar Allan Poe accumulated large gambling debts. Tension over finances led to an estrangement from his foster family. Poe forced to support himself found intermittent work before eventually joining the United States Army. His first year of service was also the year of publication for his first book of poetry, *Tamerlane and Other Poems*. After two years of military service, he sought discharge to pursue an education at the United States Military Academy at West Point. The discharge was granted with the caveat that Edgar Allan Poe must reconcile with his foster father. The reconciliation was short lived. Within two years, Edgar Allan Poe renewed the quarrel over finances with his foster father. Poe sabotaged his military career through neglect of his duties and disobedience. After his court-martial in 1831, he traveled to New York before returning to Baltimore.

His life was characterized by professional and personal turmoil. His ability to make a living was undermined by a general unwillingness of American publishers to publish new American writers since the lack of strong international copyright laws made it more profitable for to reprint British books. At the age of 26, Edgar Allan Poe married his thirteen year-old cousin, Virginia Clemm. Her tuberculosis (which led to her death in 1847) exacerbated his drinking. Some see this loss (coupled with the loss of his mother) as contributing to the frequent theme in his work of a beautiful woman’s death. This theme is perhaps most famously explored in “The Raven" as the speaker addresses his despondency “for the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels named Lenore." Poe’s story “The Masque of the Red Death" is often also thought to be a reference not only to the Black Death, but also of the contemporary pandemic of tuberculosis.

Even when not acting as a meditation on the death of a beautiful, much of Edgar Allan Poe’s writings are dark and measured. These works often illustrate people on the cusp of a dramatic event; they explore the darkness of human interactions, while offering visions of the sublime. In addition to these dark works, Edgar Allan Poe also wrote satirical pieces. Some of his works also showed a high level of understanding both his audience and the perceptions of reality. *The Balloon Hoax*was originally published as a newspaper article. Its plot was plausible, and it created excitement and expectation on the emergent hot air balloon technology, which fueled sales of the newspaper it first appear in. However in retrospect it is categorized as early Science-Fiction.

Although Edgar Allan Poe was truly original and singular in American literature, his place in American letters is frequently over shadowed by the expansive works of [Walt Whitman](http://www.egs.edu/library/walt-whitman/biography/) and the enigmatic verse of [Emily Dickinson](http://www.egs.edu/library/emily-dickinson/biography/). Edgar Allan Poe’s poetry retained the metric structure assumed to be more typical of nineteenth century European verse. Despite the reputation of these other figures, Edgar Allan Poe remains a dominant influence in the world of letters.

In “The Philosophy of Composition"—true to his Romantic leanings, he discusses the nature of writing and the Truth. In this essay, Edgar Allan Poe argues the superiority of poetry over other genres of writing. Poe considers the goal of truth is to satisfy the intellect. He argues that truth and passion are better served by the mechanics of prose than poetry since the truth must be precise and passion must have a homeliness. These forces, Poe warns, are contrary to the mechanics of Beauty, which is the purview of poetry. Poetry is not entirely devoid of truth or passion. However, they are secondary to the primary function of poetry to present a beautiful atmosphere. The poetry and prose of Edgar Allan Poe have cast a long shadow over world literature and philosophy. His particular brand of Gothic literature stands as a reaction to the intellectual trends seen in transcedentalism. He disparaged this line of thought as being pointlessly obscure and ridiculously mystical. He reserved his criticism of the transcendental movement for those he considered to be merely sophists. In contrast, Edgar Allan Poe also viewed didacticism and allegory as problematic. He promoted literary work that had a singular focus and a brevity that allowed a work to be read in one sitting.

The writings of Edgar Allan Poe have helped fuel the works of such Continental Philosophers and thinkers as [Jean-Paul Sartre](http://www.egs.edu/library/jean-paul-sartre/biography/), [Maurice Blanchot](http://www.egs.edu/library/maurice-blanchot/biography/), [Jean-Francois Lyotard](http://www.egs.edu/faculty/jean-francois-lyotard/biography/), [Gilles Deleuze](http://www.egs.edu/library/gilles-deleuze/biography/) and [Felix Guattari](http://www.egs.edu/library/felix-guattari/biography/), and perhaps most notably [Jacques Lacan](http://www.egs.edu/library/jacques-lacan/biography/). Specifically, [Lacan](http://www.egs.edu/library/jacques-lacan/biography/%22%20%5Co%20%22Jacques%20Lacan%20Biography) lectured and wrote extensively on Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Purloined Letter." [Jacques Lacan](http://www.egs.edu/library/jacques-lacan/biography/) uses Edgar Allan Poe’s story to explicate the [Freud](http://www.egs.edu/library/sigmund-freud/biography/)ian conception of how the symbolic order constitutes subject through an orientation to a signifier. [Lacan](http://www.egs.edu/library/jacques-lacan/biography/%22%20%5Co%20%22Jacques%20Lacan%20Biography) further says of the work:

The narration, in fact, doubles the drama with a commentary without which no mise en scene would be possible. Let us say that the action would remain, properly speaking, invisible from the pit-aside from the fact that the dialogue would be expressly and by dramatic necessity devoid of whatever meaning it might have for an audience…

The legacy of Edgar Allen Poe continues through his ongoing popularity as a writer. His work has strong visual and narrative elements that inspire artists and thinkers. Film, radio and television adaptations of his stories and poems have been popular throughout the twentieth century. The influence Edgar Allan Poe has exerted over culture is truly incalculable, Even watching a rerun of *The Simpsons*may expose a viewer to an animated retelling of “The Raven." Perhaps, the most loving and mysterious tribute to Edgar Allan Poe was the Poe Toaster. From 1949 until 2009 on January 19, the Toaster would leave a trio of roses on Poe’s grave and toast him with cognac. The repeated act of the Toaster is a sign that Edger Allan Poe’s memory was still vivid in the minds of his readers.

Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories include “Hop-Frog", “The Gold-Bug", “Ligeia", “The Cask of Amontillado", “The Pit and the Pendulum", “The Fall of the House of Usher", “The Masque of the Red Death", “The Oval Portrait", “The Murders in the Rue Morgue", “The Purloined Letter", “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" and “The Black Cat."