

The Dark Side of Individualism

American Gothic

Set in an ancient castle where strange and terrifying events take place, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1765) spawned the Gothic tradition in English fiction. Eighteenth-century readers fell in love with the novel's weird setting and macabre plot, and over the next century, Gothic novels of varying literary quality poured from the presses. In them, some of the greatest creatures of all time were born—including the repulsive monster created from human body parts in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and the dangerously attractive count in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). Today, Anne Rice's sexy vampire Lestat owes his immortal life to the Gothic tradition.

The spirit and imagery of the Gothic literary tradition came in part from the Gothic architecture of the Middle Ages. Cavernous Gothic cathedrals with their irregularly placed towers and their high stained-glass windows were intended to inspire awe and fear in religious worshippers. Gargoyles—those carvings of small deformed creatures squatting at the corners and crevices of Gothic cathedrals—were supposed to ward off evil spirits, but they often looked more like demonic spirits themselves. Think of a gargoyle—a grotesque creature—as the mascot of Gothic, and

you will get a good idea of the kind of imaginative distortion of reality that Gothic represents.

Another force that gave rise to Gothic literature was the romantic movement. As you have already learned, romanticism developed as a reaction against the rationalism of the Age of Reason. Once the romantics freed the imagination from the lordship of reason, they could follow the imagination wherever it might lead them. For some romantic writers, the imagination led to the threshold of the unknown—that shadowy region where the fantastic, the demonic, and the insane reside. This is Gothic territory. Because of this perspective, the Gothic tradition can be called the dark side of individualism. When romantics looked at the individual, they saw hope (think of Longfellow's "A Psalm of Life"); but when Gothic

Gargoyles on the Cathedral of Notre Dame, Paris. Copyright © Van Phillips/Leo de Wys, Inc.





Bodiam Castle in East Sussex, England. Copyright © Penny Tweedie/Tony Stone Images.

writers looked at the individual, they saw potential evil (think of anything you've ever read by Edgar Allan Poe). While romantic writers were extolling the beauties of nature, the Gothic writers were peering into the darkness at the supernatural.

The Gothic tradition was firmly established in Europe before American writers had made names for themselves. By the 19th century, however, Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne, and to a lesser extent Washington Irving and Herman Melville, were using Gothic elements in their fiction.

Edgar Allan Poe, of course, was the master of the Gothic form in the United States. In many of his stories, dark medieval castles or decaying ancient estates provide the setting for weird and terrifying events. Many of Poe's male narrators are insane; his female characters, beautiful and dead (or dying). His plots involve extreme situations—not just murder, but live burials, physical and mental torture, and retribution from beyond the grave. For Poe, it was only in such extreme situations that people revealed their true natures. The Gothic dimension of his fictional world offered him a way to explore the human mind in these extreme situations and so arrive at an essential truth.

Hawthorne also used Gothic elements in his fiction to express what he felt were important truths. However, instead of looking at the mind and its functions (or dysfunctions) as Poe did, Hawthorne examined the human heart under various conditions of fear, greed, vanity, mistrust, and betrayal.

Voices from the TIMES

The door opened, and a figure glided in. The portmanteau dropped from my arms, and my heart's-blood was chilled. If an apparition of the dead were possible, and that possibility I could not deny, this was such an apparition. A hue, yellowish and livid; bones, uncovered with flesh; eyes, ghastly, hollow, woe-begone, and fixed in an agony of wonder upon me; and locks, matted and negligent, constituted the image which I now beheld.

Charles Brockden Brown
from *Arthur Mervyn*

Imagination is the queen of darkness; night the season of her despotism.

James Kirke Paulding
from *Westward Ho!*

The death . . . of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world—and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover.

Edgar Allan Poe
from "The Philosophy
of Composition"

Moonlight, in a familiar room, falling so white upon the carpet, and showing all its figures so distinctly—making every object so minutely visible, yet so unlike a morning or noontide visibility— . . . [has created] a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairyland, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other. Ghosts might enter here, without affrighting us.

Nathaniel Hawthorne
from *The Scarlet Letter*

The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.

H. P. Lovecraft
from *Supernatural
Horror in Literature*



Traditions Across Time: Southern Gothic

After the real horrors of the Civil War, the popularity of Gothic writing waned in the United States. Realism replaced romanticism as the preferred American literary style. The Gothic spirit had to wait until the 20th century before it again found fertile ground for its particular brand of truth telling. That ground was the American South.

Modern Southern writers as diverse as William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, Truman Capote, and Flannery O'Connor are sometimes grouped together in the category of Southern Gothic because of the gloom and pessimism of their fiction. For William Faulkner, the crumbling medieval castle of 19th-century Gothic fiction became the decaying plantation, with its fallen aristocratic family isolated in time and place. Instead of ghostly figures stalking noble heroines, Faulkner gave us the ghost of the past hounding his not-so-noble characters to madness and death.

Coming after Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor saw the pressures of modern life making grotesques of us all. Like Hawthorne, O'Connor was interested in the human heart and its potential for evil. In her view, the old moral and religious order was crumbling. Criminals, con men, and fools—rather than ghosts and goblins—were unleashed upon the world.

Although this part of Unit Three focuses on the Gothic, you can see Gothic aspects in the work of writers in other units, such as Ambrose Bierce in Unit Four, Charlotte Perkins Gilman in Unit Five, and Sylvia Plath in Unit Six. Try identifying what's Gothic about the next horror movie you see or the next Stephen King or Anne Rice novel you read.

Author Study

EDGAR ALLAN POE

OVERVIEW

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*“What a strange,
though enormously
talented writer, that
Edgar Poe!”*

—Fedor Dostoyevsky

Edgar Poe
HIS LIFE
HIS TIMES

A Talented, Tormented Writer

During a life marked by pain and loss, Edgar Allan Poe wrote haunting tales in which he explored the dark side of the human mind. A well-read man with a taste for literature, Poe was cursed with a morbidly sensitive nature and made his feelings of sadness and depression the basis of a distinctive body of literary work. Through this Author Study, you will explore the life and work of a mysterious American master.



1809–1849

“AMBITIOUS TO EXCEL” Edgar Allan Poe was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1809, one of three children of a couple who toured the East as actors. Before he reached the age of three, however, his father abandoned the family and his mother died of tuberculosis.

John and Frances Allan, a well-to-do merchant and his wife who were both theater fans, took Poe into their Richmond, Virginia, home and became his foster parents. In 1815 the Allans moved to England. Poe’s stay in England lasted only

1809
Is born in
Boston on
January 19

1811
Death of
mother;
taken in by
the Allans



Elizabeth
Arnold Poe,
mother

1820
Returns from a
five-year stay in
England

1810

1815

18

1812
U.S. declares
war on Great
Britain.

1819
Washington Irving
publishes
“Rip Van Winkle.”



LITERARY Contributions

Best known as a literary critic during his lifetime, today Poe is renowned for his poems and stories in the Gothic tradition (which is discussed in detail on pages 446–448).

Poetic Pioneer Poe regarded his poems as his greatest works. He believed that poetry should be musical, be expressive of beauty, and be composed logically. The following poems reflect Poe's strong views:

"The Raven" (1845)

"For Annie" (1849)

"Annabel Lee" (1849)

Founder of the Short Story Prior to Poe's time, short fiction consisted primarily of loose, rambling tales. It was Poe who insisted that a story or poem should create a single effect, containing no details or incidents that do not contribute to the effect—an idea that would have an enormous influence on subsequent writers. Among the stories in which he put his theory into practice are

"The Pit and the Pendulum" (1842)

"The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843)

"The Cask of Amontillado" (1846)

Originator of the Detective Story With the publication of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" in 1841, Poe gave birth to a new genre: the detective story. His hero, who solves crimes solely by means of logic, has been the model for scores of later fictional detectives.

five years. Mrs. Allan's ill health and the failure of the London branch of her husband's business forced the family to return to Richmond.

Poe continued his education in the United States, showing a flair for languages, particularly Latin and French. Schoolmates noted that he was "ambitious to excel." He started writing poems and by the time he was 16 had enough to fill a book.

A RESTLESS SPIRIT In Poe's young adulthood, the pattern of his life became established: periods of personal difficulty would alternate with promises of a fresh start. In 1826 he began attending the University of Virginia, where his reckless spending habits led to heavy debts. Poe was forced to leave the school. He fled to Boston, attracted by the city's literary activity, and it was there that the anonymous *Tamerlane and Other Poems*, his first book, was published in 1827. Flat broke, the 18-year-old Poe enlisted in the army, but he continued to read widely and to experiment with poetry.

When Frances Allan died in 1829, the grief-stricken John Allan arranged for Poe's release from the army and secured him a place as a cadet in the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Poe, however, found life at the academy confining and still had his eye on a writing career. By deliberately misbehaving, he managed to get himself expelled.

1825
A large inheritance restores John Allan's wealth.

1826
Briefly attends the University of Virginia

1827
Publishes *Tamerlane and Other Poems*

1829
Frances Allan dies.

1830
Enters West Point

1831
Expelled from West Point; publishes *Poems*

1821
Charles Baudelaire born in France.



Charles Baudelaire

1825
Erie Canal opens.

1826
Thomas Jefferson and John Adams die on July 4.

1828
Andrew Jackson is elected president.

1830
Emily Dickinson is born.

1825

1830

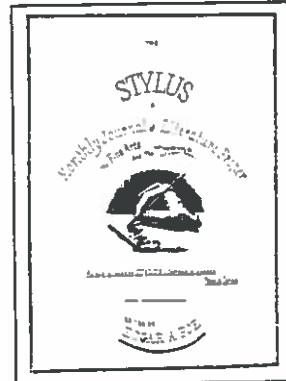
Author Study: EDGAR ALLAN POE

A MAN OF LETTERS Poe now began to embark on a literary career in earnest. In 1831, shortly after leaving West Point, he published *Poems*, then moved to Baltimore to live with his aunt Maria Clemm and her young daughter Virginia. There, he began writing short stories, and in 1833 one of these, “MS. Found in a Bottle,” won him a sorely needed \$50 prize in a literary contest.

In 1834 John Allan died, leaving nothing to his foster son. The next year, Poe moved to Richmond to work for a periodical, the *Southern Literary Messenger*. The popularity of his book reviews in the *Messenger* led to a great increase in the magazine’s circulation. In May 1836, now editor of the *Messenger*, Poe married his cousin Virginia; but before eight months had passed, a dispute with the magazine’s publisher led him to resign his editorship and move his household to New York City. There, he published the short novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* before deciding to move again in search of work, this time to Philadelphia.

Poe’s years in Philadelphia, though not without conflict, would be his most productive. In 1839, he became an editor of *Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine*, to which he contributed

both stories and reviews. The end of that year also saw the publication of the first collection of his short stories, called *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*. Once again, Poe found himself at odds with his publisher, and he was fired from *Burton’s* in mid-1840. In 1841, having failed in an attempt to start his own literary magazine, he accepted a job as editor of *Graham’s Magazine*, for which he wrote the groundbreaking detective story “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.”



This is Poe’s suggested design for the cover of *The Stylus*, his short-lived magazine.

TROUBLES DILUTE SUCCESS

Poe’s fame increased when a Philadelphia newspaper awarded him a \$100 prize for “The Gold Bug” in 1843; and “The Raven,” published in 1845, was an enormous success, bringing him the recognition as a poet he had long desired. But personal difficulties continued to dog Poe. Then, in early 1847, he was hit with a major blow: Virginia, who had been in poor health since 1842, died.

1834
Death of John Allan

1835
Becomes editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*

1836
Marries Virginia Clemm



Virginia Clemm

1839
Becomes an editor of *Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine*; publishes *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*

1835

1840

1833
Charles Dickens’s first works are published in Britain.

1836
Alamo falls; Texas becomes a republic.

1837
Nathaniel Hawthorne publishes first series of *Twice-Told Tales*.

1838
Cherokee driven west along the “Trail of Tears.”

1839
Daguerreotype (an early type of photograph) is invented.



In the years following Virginia's death, Poe struggled with despair as well as with his own deteriorating health. In 1849 he became engaged to Elmira Royster Shelton, a widow who had been his boyhood sweetheart. Late that year, he left Richmond for Baltimore, where his health declined quickly. He collapsed on a Baltimore street and was taken to a hospital, where he died a few days later.

work established the view of Poe as a gifted but socially unacceptable writer that would taint his reputation in America for many years. The French poet Charles Baudelaire, however, recognized and championed Poe's achievements, and eventually Baudelaire's favorable view began to influence thinking in the United States. Today, Poe is recognized as a master of poetry, a superb writer of short stories, and a profound explorer of the torments of the human soul.

POE'S REPUTATION Poe's work generated strong responses: critics either loved him or hated him. Shortly after his death, a one-time friend published a biography that included harsh attacks on Poe's personal life. This

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Poe's Death: The Mystery Continues

The exact reason for Poe's death in 1849 has never been established, although the most common theory is that he died from heart failure after consuming too much alcohol. In 1996, however, a Baltimore physician came up with a new solution of the mystery. A noted cardiologist and assistant professor of medicine, he was given a description of Poe's last four days but not told the patient's name. After careful study, the physician came up with his diagnosis—the victim, he said, was suffering from a classic case of rabies, caused by the bite of an infected animal. Poe's last days may never be unraveled to everyone's satisfaction, but if this theory is true, his reputation is cleared of at least one dark spot.



Poe's grave in Baltimore, Maryland

1841
Poe's "The Raven" is published in the *Argue*

1845
Becomes famous overnight after publication of "The Raven"



Poe lived in this house in New York City.

1847
Death of Virginia

1849
Dies in Baltimore on October 7

1841
Topian nity is lished Brook Farm.

1844
Alexandre Dumas publishes *The Three Musketeers*.

1846
U.S. goes to war with Mexico.

1847
Frederick Douglass founds antislavery paper *The North Star*.

1848
Women's rights convention is held in Seneca Falls, New York.

1849
California gold rush begins.

1845

1850