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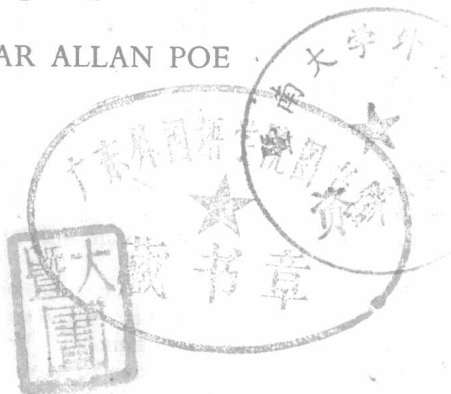
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TALES OF

MYSTERY AND IMAGINATION



EDGAR ALLAN POE



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EDGAR ALLAN POE, born in Boston,  
U.S.A., on 19th January 1809. Brought  
up as an adopted child; educated in England  
and Virginia. Abandoned a business career;  
was dismissed for neglect of duty from West  
Point Academy (1831), and thereafter sup-  
ported himself by writing. Most of his  
life was spent in poverty, and he died on  
8th October 1849 in Baltimore.

Everyman, I will go with thee, and be thy guide,  
In thy most need to go by thy side.

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**FICTION**

**TALES OF  
MYSTERY AND IMAGINATION  
BY EDGAR ALLAN POE • INTRO-  
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# INTRODUCTION

## I

WHEN we say that Poe's imagination moves amongst exceptional things, we imply that he is familiar by temperament with the matter proper to the brief narrative or tale. The tale, on account of its brevity, is precluded from expounding facts and experiences that are socially important; therefore it deals with the exceptional—with something that arrests our curiosity from the start. It was a French critic, M. Brunetière, who noticed the social insignificance of the incident upon which the tale is based; and he has pointed out that the material for the tale is to be sought in "certain peculiarities or variations of passion, which, though physiologically or pathologically interesting, are socially insignificant," and M. Brunetière goes on to say that the incident is never taken out of the mainway of life, but out of its border—"things that happen on the margin," M. Brunetière says suggestively.

That phrase "on the margin" admirably describes the whole of Poe's imaginative work, his verse as well as his prose. It is marginal, not central; it comes, not out of the mainway of life, but out of the border of existence. Poe gives us experiences that are on the margin of sanity, or on the border of unconsciousness. He reports, with extraordinary literalness and lucidity, the last swoon of the nerves, as in the passage where he describes the sensations of one who has just been sentenced by the Inquisition.

"The sentence—the dread sentence of death—was the last of distinct accentuation which reached my ears. After that the sound of the inquisitorial voices seemed merged in one dreamy, indeterminate hum. It conveyed to my soul the idea of *revolution*—perhaps from its association in fancy with the burr of a mill wheel. This only for a brief period, for presently I heard no more. Yet, for a while I saw—but with how terrible an exaggeration!—I saw the lips of the black-robed judges. They appeared to me white—whiter than the



sheet upon which I trace these words—and thin even to grotesqueness; thin with the intensity of their expression of firmness—of immovable resolution—of stern contempt of human torture. I saw that decrees of what to me was Fate were still issuing from those lips. I saw them writhe with a deadly locution. I saw them fashion the syllables of my name, and I shuddered because no sound succeeded. I saw, too, for a few moments of delirious horror, the soft and nearly imperceptible waving of the sable draperies which enwrapped the walls of the apartment. And then my vision fell upon the seven tall candles upon the table. At first they wore the aspect of charity, and seemed white slender angels who would save me; but then, all at once, there came a most deadly nausea over my spirit, and I felt every fibre in my frame thrill as if I had touched the wire of a galvanic battery, while the angel forms became meaningless spectres, with heads of flame, and I saw that from them there would be no help. And then there stole into my fancy, like a rich musical note, the thought of what sweet rest there must be in the grave."

Edgar Allen Poe was born in Boston, U.S.A., on January 19, 1809. Certain peculiarities in his work have been put down to racial tendencies, for his father, though American born, was of Irish descent. But we notice the profession of the parents as a fact more immediate than their racial derivation. Both parents were actors, and the stage seems to have been in keeping with certain tendencies in the father. He seems to have been a Bohemian, or rather a vagabond. It is said that he had made an imprudent marriage; it is fairly certain that he deserted his wife before the child Edgar was born. The mother died when Poe was two years old, and Edgar, one of her three children, was adopted by a childless pair, the Allans, wealthy Scotch folk of Richmond in Virginia. Four years later the Allans made a tour through Ireland, Scotland and England. They settled in England for a while, and young Edgar Allan, now six years of age, was given five years' schooling at Stoke Newington. He was eleven when he returned to America with the Allans, and we hear of him afterwards as a youngster at the Richmond school, brilliant indeed, but defiant, irritable and solitary—"a descendant of a race whose imaginative and easily excitable temperament has at all times rendered them remarkable," as he says, in what seems to be an autobiographical note.

Poe, as a youth, had a rare aptitude for athletic feats, and

Baudelaire notes with satisfaction that, though made with the feet and hands of a woman, Poe was capable of great muscular exertion; as a youth he excelled his contemporaries in swimming. He had high personal distinction; he was graceful, good-looking, and endowed with noticeable eloquence. He was fond of dramatic recitation. Once he recited some speeches out of *Julius Cæsar*, impersonating Cassius, and he gave his audience the impression that he was "a born actor." This evidence of declamatory power is interesting, and the reminiscence of the theatre accounts for a great deal in Poe's work. At seventeen he was sent to the University of Virginia. Here he won high honours in Latin and French, but within a year he was withdrawn on account of some gambling transactions. We may be sure that Edgar Allan Poe was loth to let his eighteenth year pass unmarked; unlike most young literary aspirants he succeeded in making it memorable. He went up to Boston and published a book—verse, of course—*Tamerlane and Other Poems* (1827). Mr. Allan seems to have interested himself in this volume, but soon after the publication of *Tamerlane* there came a breach between the poet and his patron. Edgar Allan Poe now entered the army of the United States, and in two years he had risen to the rank of sergeant-major. He was now twenty; his foster-mother died, and then there came a reconciliation between Edgar and Mr. Allan. In 1830 he entered the College at West Point as a military cadet. Meanwhile (1829) he had published his second volume. It contained *Tamerlane* (re-written) and *Al Aaraaf*. His conduct at the Military College was considered irregular, and he was dismissed in 1831. Affairs had now taken a serious turn. Mr. Allan had married again; this time he was blessed with offspring, and his wife knew not Edgar Allan. Poe insisted upon seeing his foster-parent, but the interview led only to a definite breach. When he left Allan's house he seems to have turned his back on settled ways of living. It is curious that he did not at this point try the stage; it would have fitted his temperament and his gifts; but perhaps the career of his parents had biassed him against the theatre. He published a third book of verse, poems old and new, and we hear of him next in Baltimore. He went into the office of the *Saturday Visitor* to claim a prize he had won with the story, *A MS. found in a Bottle*, and it was noticed that his coat was fastened to hide a lack of shirt, and that his face bore traces of illness and destitution. Afterwards he got an engagement on

the *Southern Literary Messenger*, and he returned to his native Richmond. It was in *The Messenger* that he first published the studies *Berenice* and *Morella*, reveries belonging to the *Ligeia* group, and connected in theme with *The MS. found in a Bottle*, and the splendid *Fall of the House of Usher*. He did literary criticisms for this paper and eventually became assistant editor. At twenty-six he married his cousin, Virginia Clemm, a girl of fourteen. He made some reputation in Richmond, but he left the place in 1837, sanguine of a New York success. *The New York Review*, however, did little for him, and Poe and his wife had to move on to Philadelphia. There he published various tales, including *Ligeia*, *William Wilson*, and *The Fall of the House of Usher*. In 1839, *Tales of the Grotesque and the Arabesque*, Poe's first collection, were given to the public, and then for a while he occupied himself with analytical subjects, writing a great deal about cryptograms, and exercising his extraordinary analytical talent in solving those sent to the paper. His power of analysis enabled him to invent something new in the narrative form, *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, contributed to *Graham's Magazine* in April 1841. This remarkable story was followed by *A Descent into the Maelström*. By this time he had won a place for himself in Philadelphia; he was the editor of *Graham's Magazine*, and he was known as the author of some tales that had made a stir in London and Paris.

But in 1842 he left Philadelphia under the influence of a tragedy more pitiful and terrible than any tragedy in literary history. His wife had burst a blood vessel while singing. Poe took leave of her for ever. He underwent all the agonies of her death, but she recovered and he was delivered to the torture of hope. The vessel broke again, and again, and even once again! He drank to escape from the terrible suspense. He was a man sensitive and nervous to an abnormal degree, and he loved his wife with a passion that went beyond the grave. "I became insane," he said, "with long intervals of horrible sanity. . . . I drank—God only knows how often or how much. As a matter of course my enemies referred the insanity to the drink rather than the drink to the insanity." He could do no work under those agonising conditions, and he lost the editorship of *Graham's Magazine*. His wife died in 1847. Poe was only thirty-eight, but his life was over. He occupied himself with a work which was to explain the universe, *Eureka*. We can say of *Eureka* that it gave its author

solace, and that it is a medley which Baudelaire has taken seriously. He died on October 8, 1849, and his end must have seemed the height of tragic mockery to the divine spectator of the pessimists. He came into New York city and fell in with a gang of ruffians who were rushing some election business. They seized the unfortunate man, plied him with drink, put papers into his hand and dragged him round the booths. His friends found him dying in some sordid place. It remains to be said that his literary executor disapproved of Poe's temperament and Poe's methods. And he treated the poet with a rigour that reads like malignity.

## II

There is a distinction seldom made in criticism between the short story and the tale. This distinction can best be seen in examples; thus Maupassant's *Vain Beauty* is a short story, and *A Piece of String* by the same author is a tale. There is a difference in the extent of the narratives, and there is a difference in the value of the respective incidents upon which the narratives are based. *A Piece of String* could not be expanded by "complications and diversities of many episodes and details" without attributing to the incident "an importance which, socially and historically, it does not possess." But the incident in *Vain Beauty* might be expanded without investing it with an undue importance. It is curious that M. Brunetière (whose notes on the NOUVELLE I have been quoting), does not make a distinction between the short story and the tale. His notes apply to the tale rather than to the short story. Yet though the substance of the tale is amongst "peculiarities or variations of passion," it is not the less effective on this account. It is the most ancient of compositions, the most wide-spread, the most immediately interesting; through its brevity it can be made the most perfect of prose forms. Edgar Allen Poe was well aware of the high place that the tale must always hold in literature, and his intimate knowledge of exceptional things, together with his sense of form and language, have enabled him to produce some of the world's best tales—*The Cask of Amontillado*, *The Pit and the Pendulum*, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, *The Gold Bug*, *William Wilson*, *Ligeia*. In *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*

and in *The Gold Bug*, (Poe brought a new and fascinating method into the narrative—a method which has been re-discovered in our own day and used with much public success.) *The Cask of Amontillado*, *The Pit and the Pendulum*, and *Ligeia* are so rounded and so perfect that they offer no crevice for the critical knife. *William Wilson* is perhaps the least impeccable of these tales; one notices a certain staginess here—a theatricality that flaunts out in the speech of the last encounter. “Scoundrel,” I said, in a voice husky with rage . . . “Scoundrel, impostor, accursed villain! You shall not—you shall not dog me unto death! Follow me, or I will stab you where you stand.” The theatricality in this speech is but the excess of a quality shown abundantly in *William Wilson*—the quality of dramatisation. All the speeches carry across the footlights and all the situations are visualised as if for the stage. But the situations and speeches in *William Wilson* are not the most noticeable instance of Poe’s faculty for dramatisation. There is that memorable scene which prepares the reader for the tragic return of the Lady Madeline in *The Fall of the House of Usher*. This scene is conceived as a dramatist would conceive it. The reading of the romance, the stressing of the passages which correspond with the unseen drama is a device well known to the dramatist. Poe has the dramatist’s faculty for projecting situations and he has also the faculty of anticipating difficulties that are peculiar to the dramatic action. Several instances of this could be given from the tales that follow—instances of that suspended or retrospective action which is more necessary in a play than in a narrative. The theatre would, I am convinced, have given full scope for Poe’s genius. He could not have reached it through his poetic talent, but he could have reached it through the invention which he has shown in *The Cask of Amontillado*. Poe could have done perfectly a form of work which perhaps he had no models for at the time—the “thrill” of the French vaudeville. It is a matter for regret that he did not come into contact with the theatre; for, with his delight in novelty, with his wonderful ingenuity, he could have added many devices to the dramatist’s stock. But his spirit has not been quite shut out from the theatre. Surely the dramatist of the *Plays for Marionettes* owes a good deal to *The House of Usher*, with its elaborate atmosphere, and its remote and agonising situations.

In considering the drama of *The Fall of the House of Usher*, we are brought into contact with Poe’s dominant idea. Part

of this idea is expressed explicitly in his favourite tale, *Ligeia*. *Ligeia* belongs to that group of studies of which *Eleonora* is the most charming, *Berenice* the most repulsive, and *Morella* the least noteworthy. *Ligeia* is less a tale than a prose poem; it is a reverie, a meditation upon that mystical sentence of Joseph Glanville's—"And the will therein lieth, which dieth not. Who knoweth the mysteries of the will, with its vigour? For God is but a great will pervading all things by nature of its intentness. Man doth not yield himself to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will." It was Poe's conviction that consciousness persisted even in the grave, and that the will, because of some great passion, could resist dissolution, and that the persistence of the human will gave sentience to inanimate things. Thus the walls of the house of Usher and the tarn beyond have been given a sort of organisation and in *A MS. found in a Bottle* the ship that holds the ancient voyagers has grown in bulk.

Poe's mentality was a rare synthesis; he had elements in him that corresponded with the indefiniteness of music and the exactitude of mathematics. He was a penetrating critic of literature, and he could have written well on æsthetics and psychology; I have already dwelt upon his sense of the theatre. He desired to be striking and original as the great creators desire to be sincere, and because of that rare synthesis of his mind (helped out, it must be said, by a wonderful ingenuity), he succeeded in making forms and formulas that have influenced a definite side of literature. His often-quoted dictum that poetry cannot be sustained in the epic form has forced many poets (Whitman amongst them) to reconsider the poetic form. His achievements in verse and his theories of versification influenced an important literary movement in France, and that movement has reacted on contemporary English literature. He made the idea of "atmosphere" self-conscious in literary art. *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* and *William Wilson* have been models for such diverse writers as Conan Doyle and Oscar Wilde. He is popularly regarded as the type of the imaginative man, but those who have come into contact with his mind have reason to believe that his critical faculties were in excess of his imaginative and creative faculties. In *The Domain of Arnheim* he says some subtle thing on our ideas of the beautiful. His æsthetics, however, are a little strained by the undue importance he gives to *strangeness* as an element of beauty. He was a psychologist in the critical rather than

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# POE'S TALES

## WILLIAM WILSON

What say of it? what say of CONSCIENCE grim,  
That spectre in my path?

CHAMBERLAYNE'S *Pharronida*.

LET me call myself, for the present, William Wilson. The fair page now lying before me need not be sullied with my real appellation. This has been already too much an object for the scorn—for the horror—for the detestation of my race. To the uttermost regions of the globe have not the indignant winds bruited its unparalleled infamy? Oh, outcast of all outcasts most abandoned!—to the earth art thou not forever dead? to its honours, to its flowers, to its golden aspirations?—and a cloud, dense, dismal, and limitless, does it not hang eternally between thy hopes and heaven?

I would not, if I could, here or to-day, embody a record of my later years of unspeakable misery, and unpardonable crime. This epoch—these later years—took unto themselves a sudden elevation in turpitude, whose origin alone it is my present purpose to assign. Men usually grow base by degrees. From me, in an instant, all virtue dropped bodily as a mantle. From comparatively trivial wickedness I passed, with the stride of a giant, into more than the enormities of an Elah-Gabalus. What chance—what one event brought this evil thing to pass, bear with me while I relate. Death approaches; and the shadow which foreruns him has thrown a softening influence over my spirit. I long, in passing through the dim valley, for the sympathy—I had nearly said for the pity—of my fellow-men. I would fain have them believe that I have been, in some measure, the slave of circumstances beyond human control. I would wish them to seek out for me, in the details I am about to give, some little oasis of *fatality* amid a wilderness of error. I would have them allow—what they cannot refrain from allowing—that, although temptation may have erewhile existed as great, man was never *thus*, at least, tempted before—certainly, never