

Edgar Allan Poe



*Best Stories of
Edgar Allan Poe*



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INTRODUCTION

I EDGAR ALLAN POE: AN APPRECIATION

By W. H. R.

*Caught from some unhappy master whom unmerciful
Disaster
Followed fast and followed faster till his songs one burden
bore—
Till the dirges of his Hope that melancholy burden bore
Of “never—never more!”*

THIS STANZA from “The Raven” was recommended by James Russell Lowell as an inscription upon the Baltimore monument which marks the resting place of Edgar Allan Poe, the most interesting and original figure in American letters. And, to signify that peculiar musical quality of Poe’s genius which intralls every reader, Mr. Lowell suggested this additional verse, from the “Haunted Palace”:

*And all with pearl and ruby glowing
Was the fair palace door,
Through which came flowing, flowing, flowing,
And sparkling ever more,
A troop of Echoes, whose sweet duty
Was but to sing,
In voices of surpassing beauty,
The wit and wisdom of their king.*

Born in poverty at Boston, January 19 1809, dying under



painful circumstances at Baltimore, October 7, 1849, his whole literary career of scarcely fifteen years a pitiful struggle for mere subsistence, his memory malignantly misrepresented by his earliest biographer, Griswold, how completely has truth at last routed falsehood and how magnificently has Poe come into his own, For “The Raven,” first published in 1845, and, within a few months, read, recited and parodied wherever the English language was spoken, the half-starved poet received \$10! Less than a year later his brother poet, N. P. Willis, issued this touching appeal to the admirers of genius on behalf of the neglected author, his dying wife and her devoted mother, then living under very straitened circumstances in a little cottage at Fordham, N. Y.:

“Here is one of the finest scholars, one of the most original men of genius, and one of the most industrious of the literary profession of our country, whose temporary suspension of labor, from bodily illness, drops him immediately to a level with the common objects of public charity. There is no intermediate stopping-place, no respectful shelter, where, with the delicacy due to genius and culture, he might secure aid, till, with returning health, he would resume his labors, and his unmortified sense of independence.”

And this was the tribute paid by the American public to the master who had given to it such tales of conjuring charm, of witchery and mystery as “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “Ligeia”; such fascinating hoaxes as “The Unparalleled Adventure of Hans Pfaall,” “MSS. Found in a Bottle,” “A Descent Into a Maelstrom” and “The Balloon Hoax”; such



tales of conscience as “William Wilson,” “The Black Cat” and “The Tell-tale Heart,” wherein the retributions of remorse are portrayed with an awful fidelity; such tales of natural beauty as “The Island of the Fay” and “The Domain of Arnheim”; such marvellous studies in ratiocination as the “Gold-bug,” “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” “The Purloined Letter” and “The Mystery of Marie Roget,” the latter, a recital of fact, demonstrating the author’s wonderful capability of correctly analyzing the mysteries of the human mind; such tales of illusion and banter as “The Premature Burial” and “The System of Dr. Tarr and Professor Fether”; such bits of extravaganza as “The Devil in the Belfry” and “The Angel of the Odd”; such tales of adventure as “The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym”; such papers of keen criticism and review as won for Poe the enthusiastic admiration of Charles Dickens, although they made him many enemies among the over-puffed minor American writers so mercilessly exposed by him; such poems of beauty and melody as “The Bells,” “The Haunted Palace,” “Tamerlane,” “The City in the Sea” and “The Raven.” What delight for the jaded senses of the reader is this enchanted domain of wonder-pieces! What an atmosphere of beauty, music, color! What resources of imagination, construction, analysis and absolute art! One might almost sympathize with Sarah Helen Whitman, who, confessing to a half faith in the old superstition of the significance of anagrams, found, in the transposed letters of Edgar Poe’s name, the words “a God-peer.” His mind, she says, was indeed a “Haunted Palace,” echoing to the footfalls of angels and demons.

“No man,” Poe himself wrote, “has recorded, no man has dared to record, the wonders of his inner life.”



In these twentieth century days—of lavish recognition—artistic, popular and material—of genius, what rewards might not a Poe claim!

Edgar's father, a son of General David Poe, the American revolutionary patriot and friend of Lafayette, had married Mrs. Hopkins, an English actress, and, the match meeting with parental disapproval, had himself taken to the stage as a profession. Notwithstanding Mrs. Poe's beauty and talent the young couple had a sorry struggle for existence. When Edgar, at the age of two years, was orphaned, the family was in the utmost destitution. Apparently the future poet was to be cast upon the world homeless and friendless. But fate decreed that a few glimmers of sunshine were to illumine his life, for the little fellow was adopted by John Allan, a wealthy merchant of Richmond, Va. A brother and sister, the remaining children, were cared for by others.

In his new home Edgar found all the luxury and advantages money could provide. He was petted, spoiled and shown off to strangers. In Mrs. Allan he found all the affection a childless wife could bestow. Mr. Allan took much pride in the captivating, precocious lad. At the age of five the boy recited, with fine effect, passages of English poetry to the visitors at the Allan house.

From his eighth to his thirteenth year he attended the Manor House school, at Stoke-Newington, a suburb of London. It was the Rev. Dr. Bransby, head of the school, whom Poe so quaintly portrayed in "William Wilson." Returning to Richmond in 1820 Edgar was sent to the school of Professor Joseph H. Clarke. He proved an apt pupil. Years afterward Professor Clarke thus wrote:



“While the other boys wrote mere mechanical verses, Poe wrote genuine poetry; the boy was a born poet. As a scholar he was ambitious to excel. He was remarkable for self-respect, without haughtiness. He had a sensitive and tender heart and would do anything for a friend. His nature was entirely free from selfishness.”

At the age of seventeen Poe entered the University of Virginia at Charlottesville. He left that institution after one session. Official records prove that he was not expelled. On the contrary, he gained a creditable record as a student, although it is admitted that he contracted debts and had “an ungovernable passion for card-playing.” These debts may have led to his quarrel with Mr. Allan which eventually compelled him to make his own way in the world.

Early in 1827 Poe made his first literary venture. He induced Calvin Thomas, a poor and youthful printer, to publish a small volume of his verses under the title “Tamerlane and Other Poems.” In 1829 we find Poe in Baltimore with another manuscript volume of verses, which was soon published. Its title was “Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane and Other Poems.” Neither of these ventures seems to have attracted much attention.

Soon after Mrs. Allan’s death, which occurred in 1829, Poe, through the aid of Mr. Allan, secured admission to the United States Military Academy at West Point. Any glamour which may have attached to cadet life in Poe’s eyes was speedily lost, for discipline at West Point was never so severe nor were the accommodations ever so poor. Poe’s bent was more and more toward literature. Life at the academy daily became increasingly distasteful. Soon he began to purposely



neglect his studies and to disregard his duties, his aim being to secure his dismissal from the United States service. In this he succeeded. On March 7, 1831, Poe found himself free. Mr. Allan's second marriage had thrown the lad on his own resources. His literary career was to begin.

Poe's first genuine victory was won in 1833, when he was the successful competitor for a prize of \$100 offered by a Baltimore periodical for the best prose story. "A MSS. Found in a Bottle" was the winning tale. Poe had submitted six stories in a volume. "Our only difficulty," says Mr. Latrobe, one of the judges, "was in selecting from the rich contents of the volume."

During the fifteen years of his literary life Poe was connected with various newspapers and magazines in Richmond, Philadelphia and New York. He was faithful, punctual, industrious, thorough. N. P. Willis, who for some time employed Poe as critic and sub-editor on the "Evening Mirror," wrote thus:

"With the highest admiration for Poe's genius, and a willingness to let it alone for more than ordinary irregularity, we were led by common report to expect a very capricious attention to his duties, and occasionally a scene of violence and difficulty. Time went on, however, and he was invariably punctual and industrious. We saw but one presentiment of the man—a quiet, patient, industrious and most gentlemanly person.

"We heard, from one who knew him well (what should be stated in all mention of his lamentable irregularities), that with a single glass of wine his whole nature was reversed, the demon became uppermost, and, though none of the usual signs of intoxication were visible, his will was palpably insane. In this



reversed character, we repeat, it was never our chance to meet him.”

On September 22, 1835, Poe married his cousin, Virginia Clemm, in Baltimore. She had barely turned thirteen years, Poe himself was but twenty-six. He then was a resident of Richmond and a regular contributor to the “Southern Literary Messenger.” It was not until a year later that the bride and her widowed mother followed him thither.

Poe’s devotion to his child-wife was one of the most beautiful features of his life. Many of his famous poetic productions were inspired by her beauty and charm. Consumption had marked her for its victim, and the constant efforts of husband and mother were to secure for her all the comfort and happiness their slender means permitted. Virginia died January 30, 1847, when but twenty-five years of age. A friend of the family pictures the death-bed scene—mother and husband trying to impart warmth to her by chafing her hands and her feet, while her pet cat was suffered to nestle upon her bosom for the sake of added warmth.

These verses from “Annabel Lee,” written by Poe in 1849, the last year of his life, tell of his sorrow at the loss of his child-wife:

*I was a child and she was a child,
In a kingdom by the sea;
But we loved with a love that was more than love—
I and my Annabel Lee;
With a love that the winged seraphs of heaven
Coveted her and me.
And this was the reason that, long ago;*



*In this kingdom by the sea.
A wind blew out of a cloud, chilling
My beautiful Annabel Lee;
So that her high-born kinsmen came
And bore her away from me,
To shut her up in a sepulchre
In this kingdom by the sea.*

Poe was connected at various times and in various capacities with the “Southern Literary Messenger” in Richmond, Va.; “Graham’s Magazine” and the “Gentleman’s Magazine” in Philadelphia.; the “Evening Mirror,” the “Broadway Journal,” and “Godey’s Lady’s Book” in New York. Everywhere Poe’s life was one of unremitting toil. No tales and poems were ever produced at a greater cost of brain and spirit.

Poe’s initial salary with the “Southern Literary Messenger,” to which he contributed the first drafts of a number of his best-known tales, was \$10 a week! Two years later his salary was but \$600 a year. Even in 1844, when his literary reputation was established securely, he wrote to a friend expressing his pleasure because a magazine to which he was to contribute had agreed to pay him \$20 monthly for two pages of criticism.

Those were discouraging times in American literature, but Poe never lost faith. He was finally to triumph wherever preeminent talents win admirers. His genius has had no better description than in this stanza from William Winter’s poem, read at the dedication exercises of the Actors’ Monument to Poe, May 4, 1885, in New York:

He was the voice of beauty and of woe,



*Passion and mystery and the dread unknown;
Pure as the mountains of perpetual snow,
Cold as the icy winds that round them moan,
Dark as the eaves wherein earth's thunders groan,
Wild as the tempests of the upper sky,
Sweet as the faint, far-off celestial tone of angel
whispers, fluttering from on high,
And tender as love's tear when youth and beauty die.*

In the two and a half score years that have elapsed since Poe's death he has come fully into his own. For a while Griswold's malignant misrepresentations colored the public estimate of Poe as man and as writer. But, thanks to J. H. Ingram, W. F. Gill, Eugene Didier, Sarah Helen Whitman and others these scandals have been dispelled and Poe is seen as he actually was—not as a man without failings, it is true, but as the finest and most original genius in American letters. As the years go on his fame increases. His works have been translated into many foreign languages. His is a household name in France and England—in fact, the latter nation has often uttered the reproach that Poe's own country has been slow to appreciate him. But that reproach, if it ever was warranted, certainly is untrue.

II EDGAR ALLAN POE

By James Russell Lowell

THE SITUATION of American literature is anomalous. It has no centre, or, if it have, it is like that of the sphere of Hermes. It is, divided into many systems, each revolving round its several suns, and often presenting to the rest only the faint



glimmer of a milk-and-water way. Our capital city, unlike London or Paris, is not a great central heart from which life and vigor radiate to the extremities, but resembles more an isolated umbilicus stuck down as near as may be to the centre of the land, and seeming rather to tell a legend of former usefulness than to serve any present need. Boston, New York, Philadelphia, each has its literature almost more distinct than those of the different dialects of Germany; and the Young Queen of the West has also one of her own, of which some articulate rumor barely has reached us dwellers by the Atlantic.

Perhaps there is no task more difficult than the just criticism of contemporary literature. It is even more grateful to give praise where it is needed than where it is deserved, and friendship so often seduces the iron stylus of justice into a vague flourish, that she writes what seems rather like an epitaph than a criticism. Yet if praise be given as alms, we could not drop so poisonous a one into any man's hat. The critic's ink may suffer equally from too large an infusion of nutgalls or of sugar. But it is easier to be generous than to be just, and we might readily put faith in that fabulous direction to the hiding place of truth, did we judge from the amount of water which we usually find mixed with it.

Remarkable experiences are usually confined to the inner life of imaginative men, but Mr. Poe's biography displays a vicissitude and peculiarity of interest such as is rarely met with. The offspring of a romantic marriage, and left an orphan at an early age, he was adopted by Mr. Allan, a wealthy Virginian, whose barren marriage-bed seemed the warranty of a large estate to the young poet.

Having received a classical education in England, he



returned home and entered the University of Virginia, where, after an extravagant course, followed by reformation at the last extremity, he was graduated with the highest honors of his class. Then came a boyish attempt to join the fortunes of the insurgent Greeks, which ended at St. Petersburg, where he got into difficulties through want of a passport, from which he was rescued by the American consul and sent home. He now entered the military academy at West Point, from which he obtained a dismissal on hearing of the birth of a son to his adopted father, by a second marriage, an event which cut off his expectations as an heir. The death of Mr. Allan, in whose will his name was not mentioned, soon after relieved him of all doubt in this regard, and he committed himself at once to authorship for a support. Previously to this, however, he had published (in 1827) a small volume of poems, which soon ran through three editions, and excited high expectations of its author's future distinction in the minds of many competent judges.

That no certain augury can be drawn from a poet's earliest lisps there are instances enough to prove. Shakespeare's first poems, though brimful of vigor and youth and picturesqueness, give but a very faint promise of the directness, condensation and overflowing moral of his maturer works. Perhaps, however, Shakespeare is hardly a case in point, his "Venus and Adonis" having been published, we believe, in his twenty-sixth year. Milton's Latin verses show tenderness, a fine eye for nature, and a delicate appreciation of classic models, but give no hint of the author of a new style in poetry. Pope's youthful pieces have all the sing-song, wholly unrelieved by the glittering malignity and eloquent irreligion of his later productions.



Collins' callow namby-pamby died and gave no sign of the vigorous and original genius which he afterward displayed. We have never thought that the world lost more in the "marvellous boy," Chatterton, than a very ingenious imitator of obscure and antiquated dulness. Where he becomes original (as it is called), the interest of ingenuity ceases and he becomes stupid. Kirke White's promises were indorsed by the respectable name of Mr. Southey, but surely with no authority from Apollo. They have the merit of a traditional piety, which to our mind, if uttered at all, had been less objectionable in the retired closet of a diary, and in the sober raiment of prose. They do not clutch hold of the memory with the drowning pertinacity of Watts; neither have they the interest of his occasional simple, lucky beauty. Burns having fortunately been rescued by his humble station from the contaminating society of the "Best models," wrote well and naturally from the first. Had he been unfortunate enough to have had an educated taste, we should have had a series of poems from which, as from his letters, we could sift here and there a kernel from the mass of chaff. Coleridge's youthful efforts give no promise whatever of that poetical genius which produced at once the wildest, tenderest, most original and most purely imaginative poems of modern times. Byron's "Hours of Idleness" would never find a reader except from an intrepid and indefatigable curiosity. In Wordsworth's first preludings there is but a dim foreboding of the creator of an era. From Southey's early poems, a safer augury might have been drawn. They show the patient investigator, the close student of history, and the unwearied explorer of the beauties of predecessors, but they give no assurances of a man who should add aught to



stock of household words, or to the rarer and more sacred delights of the fireside or the arbor. The earliest specimens of Shelley's poetic mind already, also, give tokens of that ethereal sublimation in which the spirit seems to soar above the regions of words, but leaves its body, the verse, to be entombed, without hope of resurrection, in a mass of them. Cowley is generally instanced as a wonder of precocity. But his early insipidities show only a capacity for rhyming and for the metrical arrangement of certain conventional combinations of words, a capacity wholly dependent on a delicate physical organization, and an unhappy memory. An early poem is only remarkable when it displays an effort of reason, and the rudest verses in which we can trace some conception of the ends of poetry, are worth all the miracles of smooth juvenile versification. A school-boy, one would say, might acquire the regular see-saw of Pope merely by an association with the motion of the play-ground tilt.

Mr. Poe's early productions show that he could see through the verse to the spirit beneath, and that he already had a feeling that all the life and grace of the one must depend on and be modulated by the will of the other. We call them the most remarkable boyish poems that we have ever read. We know of none that can compare with them for maturity of purpose, and a nice understanding of the effects of language and metre. Such pieces are only valuable when they display what we can only express by the contradictory phrase of innate experience. We copy one of the shorter poems, written when the author was only fourteen. There is a little dimness in the filling up, but the grace and symmetry of the outline are such as few poets ever attain. There is a smack of ambrosia about it.



TO HELEN

*Helen, thy beauty is to me
Like those Nicean barks of yore,
That gently, o'er a perfumed sea,
The weary, way-worn wanderer bore
To his own native shore.*

*On desperate seas long wont to roam,
Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face,
Thy Naiad airs have brought me home
To the glory that was Greece
And the grandeur that was Rome.*

*Lo! In yon brilliant window-niche
How statue-like I see thee stand!
The agate lamp within thy hand,
Ah! Psyche, from the regions which
Are Holy Land!*

It is the tendency of the young poet that impresses us. Here is no “withering scorn,” no heart “blighted” ere it has safely got into its teens, none of the drawing-room sansculottism which Byron had brought into vogue. All is limpid and serene, with a pleasant dash of the Greek Helicon in it. The melody of the whole, too, is remarkable. It is not of that kind which can be demonstrated arithmetically upon the tips of the fingers. It is of that finer sort which the inner ear alone can estimate. It seems simple, like a Greek column, because of its perfection. In a poem named “Ligeia,” under which title he intended to personify the music of nature, our boy-poet gives us the following exquisite picture:



*Ligeia! Ligeia!
My beautiful one,
Whose harshest idea
Will to melody run,
Say, is it thy will,
On the breezes to toss,
Or, capriciously still,
Like the lone albatross,
Incumbent on night,
As she on the air,
To keep watch with delight
On the harmony there?*

John Neal, himself a man of genius, and whose lyre has been too long capriciously silent, appreciated the high merit of these and similar passages, and drew a proud horoscope for their author.

Mr. Poe had that indescribable something which men have agreed to call genius. No man could ever tell us precisely what it is, and yet there is none who is not inevitably aware of its presence and its power. Let talent writhe and contort itself as it may, it has no such magnetism. Larger of bone and sinew it may be, but the wings are wanting. Talent sticks fast to earth, and its most perfect works have still one foot of clay. Genius claims kindred with the very workings of Nature herself, so that a sunset shall seem like a quotation from Dante, and if Shakespeare be read in the very presence of the sea itself, his verses shall but seem nobler for the sublime criticism of ocean. Talent may make friends for itself, but only genius can give to its creations the divine