

1

Lesson One

FOCUS: Word Choice and the Value of a Dictionary

For Lessons 1–5, begin discussion of each poem by reading it aloud in class.

Before a poem can be appreciated for its deeper meanings, it must first be read literally. We often overlook words we can already define. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in *Nature*, “Every word . . . if traced to its root, is found to be borrowed from some material appearance. *Right* means *straight*; *wrong* means *twisted*. *Spirit* primarily means *wind*; *transgression*, the crossing of a *line*; *supercilious*, the *raising of the eyebrow*.” Encourage your students to utilize the footnotes or endnotes when reading poetry. They should even look up words that are commonly understood, to understand better the careful, conscious choices poets make. To develop your students’ vocabulary, several words from each lesson’s assigned texts are defined in the margins of these lessons.

Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



The poem “Romance” is one that students may not fully understand, especially because they are likely to be familiar with only one meaning of the title word, which is a very modern one. The 1913 edition of *Webster’s Revised Unabridged Dictionary*, for instance, gives five definitions for “romance,” but doesn’t even include “a love affair or relationship between lovers.” Poe uses “romance” in the sense that was common to his time, to signify the spirit of imagination or fancy (itself a term whose appropriate meaning may have to be supplied). Explain to your students that words sometimes change meanings over time, and that the poem must be read in light of the earlier meaning of the title in order to be properly understood.

Read the poem aloud. The two stanzas contrast the freedom to indulge the imagination in the idleness of youth with the lack of such opportunities in the careworn, workaday world of maturity. Lead your students to see how these contrasting states are symbolized by the contrasting symbols of the parakeet and the condor. Read the poem again, and follow with a discussion focused on understanding the meanings of the terms in the poem. Have the students write a one-page essay to explain how those terms are relevant to the meaning of the poem. Does this new awareness change their first reading? Does it deepen their understanding of the poem?



Homework

Distribute Handout One: Poe’s Theory of Poetry. Read the poems “The Bells” and “The City in the Sea.” Pay attention to sound and tone in the poems as ways of creating mood.

VOCABULARY WORDS

From “Romance”:

Romance, n.

1. A love affair
2. Inclination toward the romantic or adventurous; romantic spirit

Condor, n.

A vulture of the Western Hemisphere

Lyre, n.

A stringed instrument of the harp family

2

Lesson Two

FOCUS: Sound, Tone, and Rhythm

More than any other form of writing, poetry communicates not only through the meanings of the words it employs, but also through elements that transcend dictionary definition, especially the *sound* values of words (the sounds that they make, both individually and in combination with one another) and its *tone* and *rhythm*. In reading a poem, we should first relax and experience the poem's music. Learning to hear how a poem communicates is often an important first step in understanding what it communicates.

?? Discussion Activities

Like many other poets and critics, Poe likened poetry to music. If possible, play a recorded recitation of "The Bells" to the class. Ask the class to characterize the tone and rhythm of each section of the poem. Point out how the third line of each section sets its "key"—"merriment," "happiness," "terror," and "solemn thought," respectively—and encourage students to find words in each section that help create that mood, such as "tinkle," "liquid," "scream," "groan," etc. Discuss the use of sound values to underscore these effects—e.g., the e sounds in the third section ("scream," shriek") and the o sounds in the fourth ("groan," "monotone," "tolls").

Give an essentially flat and uninflected reading of "The City in the Sea," and then play a professional recording of the poem. Ask your students the following questions: What is the intended effect of "The City in the Sea"? What specific sound devices are used to try to achieve that effect? How successful is the poem in achieving its intentions?

VOCABULARY WORDS

From "The Bells":

Euphony, *n.*

Agreeable sound, especially in the phonetic quality of words

Expostulation, *n.*

Earnest reasoning in an effort to dissuade or correct

From "The City in the Sea":

Pinnacles, *n., plural*

1. Small turrets
2. Pointed formations; peaks
3. Highest points; culminations

Viol, *n.*

Early stringed instrument played with a curved bow

✍ Writing Exercise

Ask students to examine the four sections of "The Bells" and then write a paragraph for each section, describing its dominant mood and pointing out key terms or poetic devices used to create that mood.

📖 Homework

Read the poems "Annabel Lee" and "Ulalume." Keep in mind the details of Poe's life as given in "Edgar Allen Poe, 1809-1849" and "The Life and Times of Edgar Allan Poe" from the Reader's Guide.



3

Lesson Three

FOCUS: Biographical Criticism and the Speaker of a Poem

Examining an author’s life can inform and expand a literary text. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author’s experience. Some poems depend on a reader’s knowledge of biographical facts. However, readers should be careful not to assume that the speaker of a poem is necessarily the poet. When we read a poem, one of our first questions should be: whose “voice” is speaking to us? Sometimes a poet will create a *persona*, a fictitious speaker. This speaker may not always be human. A speaker may be an animal or object, and good poems have been written from perspectives as various as a hawk, a clock, or a cloud.

The frequency with which Poe, in both poems and short stories, presents a despairing man mourning the untimely loss of his beloved, coupled with his assertion in “The Philosophy of Composition” that “the death . . . of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world,” has obvious roots in the illness and death of his wife, Virginia, to whom he was intensely devoted and upon whom he was deeply emotionally dependent. She was ill with tuberculosis—at that time an irrevocable death sentence—for several years before her death in January 1847 at the age of twenty-four. Nonetheless, her death was a shattering event, from which Poe never fully recovered.

VOCABULARY WORDS

From “Annabel Lee”:

Lore, n.

1. Teaching; instruction; something taught
2. Knowledge or learning

Ember, n.

A glowing piece of coal, wood, etc., from a fire

Lattice, n.

1. An openwork structure of crossed strips or bars
2. A door, gate, shutter, trellis, etc., formed of such a structure

Obeisance, n.

1. A gesture of respect or reverence, such as a bow or curtsy
2. The attitude shown by this; homage; deference

Seraphim, n.

Any of the highest order of angels, above the cherubim

?? Discussion Activities

Virginia’s death was almost certainly the basis for “Ulalume,” written later in 1847. “Annabel Lee,” published after Poe’s death, is one of his most popular poems and commonly assumed also to refer to Virginia (though several of Poe’s childhood sweethearts later claimed to have inspired it). Lead a discussion of the two poems’ treatments of the theme of the death of a beloved. Have students focus on both similarities—the use of repetition for emotional effect, the speaker’s feelings being thwarted by “high-born Kinsmen” in one poem and Psyche in the other—and dissimilarities—the light and airy “kingdom by the sea” vs. the dark and haunted forest; the obsessive vigil at the beloved’s sepulcher vs. the futile effort to forget her loss and avoid her tomb.

Writing Exercise

Despite similarities of subject matter, “Annabel Lee” has always been a much more popular poem than “Ulalume.” Have the students write a one-page essay arguing which of the two poems more effectively deals with the theme of loss of a loved one. Ask them to give the reasons for their choice and to support it with passages from the text.

Homework

Read the poems “To Helen” and “Sonnet—To Science.” Ask students to research Helen of Troy.

4

Lesson Four

FOCUS: Allusions

Poems will often make reference to a person, place, or thing that might be unfamiliar or seem out of place at first. These allusions are often brief, sometimes indirect, references that imply a shared set of knowledge between the poet and the reader. They may appear in a poem as an initial quotation, a passing mention of a name, or a phrase borrowed from another writer—often carrying the meanings and implications of the original.

Brief as they are, the poems “To Helen” and “Sonnet—To Science” make fairly extensive use of allusion, especially to figures from Greek (and Roman) mythology. The references give a weight and dignity to both poems consistent with their subject matter and their themes. In “To Helen,” the subject’s very name establishes a connection with Helen of Troy, the great beauty of the ancient world. In “Sonnet—To Science,” the mythological references signify the speaker’s attachment (as in “Romance”) to the world of the imagination. These references also reinforce the thematic current in both poems, from an unsatisfying present back to a distant and idealized past.

VOCABULARY WORDS

From “To Helen”:

Barks, *n. plural*

Boats, especially small sailing boats

Yore, *n.*

Time long past

Niche, *n.*, variant of “sepulcher”

A recess or hollow in a wall, as for a statue, bust, vase

From “Sonnet—To Science”:

Deem, *v.*

To think, believe, or judge

Albeit, *conj.*

Although; even though

Tamarind, *n.*

A tropical, leguminous tree with yellow flowers and brown pods

?? Discussion Activities

Ask students how the world of classical Greece and Rome might specifically relate to the themes of the two poems. What attributes of Helen of Troy might be applicable to the Helen of the poem? What qualities of the ancient past does the speaker associate with his Helen? What relationship is there between classical mythology and science?

In his book *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe*, Daniel Hoffman offers an explanation of *Nicéan* in the second line: “Nicéan must be Poe’s spelling of Nikean, pertaining to Nike, goddess of Victory—his wanderer may be Ulysses, returning from his victorious campaign against Troy, weary, wayworn, approaching Ithaca at last.” Ask the students what effect, if any, this information has on their understanding of the poem or, more specifically, the speaker’s feelings about Helen.

Writing Exercise

Write a short essay on how Poe’s allusions broaden the meaning of either poem. Ask students to be specific by explaining how the meaning has changed with your new understanding of the references.

Homework

Read “The Raven.” Ask students to list the poem’s various shifting moods.

5

Lesson Five

FOCUS: Evaluating a Poem

Great poems stir us profoundly by engaging us emotionally, intellectually, and often spiritually. Poets blend rhythmical and tonal values with a heightened use of language to create vivid images and memorable descriptions.

Even in Poe's lifetime "The Raven" was the best known of his poems, which is why he selected it for discussion and analysis in his essay "The Philosophy of Composition." Recalling Poe's theories about poetry, it is not surprising that by Poe's own standards "The Raven" is a great poem. In a larger context, however, critical opinion has always been sharply divided about the merits of "The Raven" in particular and of Poe's poetry in general.

Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Ask the class what elements of previously discussed Poe poems can be found in "The Raven" (examples: rhythmic and emotional intensity, heavy repetition, an overwrought narrator, classical allusions, and, of course, the death of a beautiful young woman). Discuss the speaker's shifting moods from the nameless anxiety occasioned by the gloom and the knocking, through amusement at the appearance of the raven, to increasing hysteria and ultimate despair. Ask the class to identify some ways the raven functions as a symbol within the poem.

One of the most frequent objections to Poe's poetry is that his forms, rhymes, rhythms, and sound effects are inappropriate to his subject matter and themes, so that he winds up sounding absurd and unintentionally funny when he is trying to be somber and moving. Read the poem aloud, taking turns so that everyone in the class has the opportunity to read. Ask students how the repetitions of the classic refrain "Nevermore" affect the mood of the poem.

Have the students write an essay in which they consider whether "The Raven" is a great poem or not, giving the reasons for their conclusions.



Homework

Read "The Tell-Tale Heart." Consider the personality of the narrator as he reveals himself to us. Is he reliable? Why or why not?

VOCABULARY WORDS

From "The Raven":

Coveted, *v.*, past tense of "covet"
To want ardently; long for with envy

Dissever, *v.*
To separate; cause to part; sever

From "Ulalume":

Tarn, *n.*
A small lake

Senescent, *adj.*
Growing old; aging

Liquescent, *adj.*
Becoming liquid; melting

Nebulous, *adj.*
1. Cloudy; misty
2. Unclear; vague

6

Lesson Six

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The way a narrator tells a story is informed by his or her experiences, including his or her ignorance and bias. Narrators can be major or minor characters, or exist outside the story altogether. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the story using “I.” A distanced narrator (often not a character) is removed from the action of the story and uses the third person (he, she, or they). The distanced narrator can be omniscient, able to read the minds of all the characters, or limited, accessing only certain characters, thoughts and feelings. Ultimately, the type of the narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

“The Tell-Tale Heart” has a first-person narrator who dominates the story and initiates all of its significant events. From the very beginning, it is obvious that this unnamed narrator is a hysteric who has a very tenuous grasp on external reality. We see immediately that his perceptions—including his perception of himself—and his account of the narrative’s events are not to be taken uncritically as fact, but must be measured against our own sense of his personality and situation, as well as against our own sense of how reality works.

VOCABULARY WORDS

From “*The Tell-Tale Heart*”:

Sagacity, n.

Penetrating intelligence and sound judgment

Tattoo, n.

Any continuous drumming or rapping

Suavity, n.

Graceful politeness

Dissemble, v.

To conceal the truth or one’s true feelings, motives, etc., by pretense; behave hypocritically

Discussion Activities

Ask the students for specific instances of statements in the story that show the narrator’s derangement and his lack of contact with reality. Have the students use these details as a basis for forming a sense of his personality. Write these traits on the board.

Read aloud the paragraph beginning “Presently I heard a slight groan.” Ask students to interpret this paragraph. Based on the discussion about the narrator, what do students think is the true source of the noise that the narrator hears in the story’s last two paragraphs?

Writing Exercise

Ask the students to imagine that the story is narrated by one of the three policemen describing the interrogation and breakdown of the murderer. Have them write a brief essay on whether that approach would have been more or less effective than Poe’s story, giving the reasons for their conclusion.

Homework

Read “The Fall of the House of Usher.” Have students list as many words as they can think of to describe the mood of the story.

7

Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Genre and Tradition

To fully understand and enjoy a work, it is sometimes helpful to know its historical background and cultural context, including the category or genre to which it belongs, and the rules or conventions that apply to that category.

“The Fall of the House of Usher” derives from the tradition of the Gothic novel, which is associated with the revival of Gothic (or medieval) architecture in eighteenth-century England, and which is generally said to have begun with Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). Characteristics of the Gothic tradition include a heightened and extravagant style of writing: an atmosphere of brooding, unknown menace or terror; the setting of a decaying medieval castle with long underground passages and mysterious rooms; and the appearance of ghosts and other supernatural phenomena.

?? Discussion Activities

Have your students find Gothic instances in “The Fall of the House of Usher.” List these instances on the board. At a time when “horror movie” usually means sadistic violence and revolting gore, do students find Poe’s use of atmosphere and suggestion effective? Why or why not?

Use the following questions to generate further discussion: Do students find the story successful in creating uneasiness and dread? Does the narrator suggest any reasons for the fall of the House of Usher? If so, what are they? Is the story more effective as the working out of a cause-and-effect process, or as an instance of unknown horror?

VOCABULARY WORDS

From “*The Fall of the House of Usher*”:

Collateral, *adj.*

1. Side by side; parallel
2. Descended from the same ancestors, but in a different line

Anomalous, *adj.*

1. Deviating from regular arrangement, usual rule, or general method; abnormal
2. Being or seeming to be inconsistent, contradictory, or improper

Incubus, *n.*

1. An evil spirit or demon thought in medieval times to descend upon and have sexual intercourse with women
2. A nightmare

Casements, *n.*

Window frames that open on hinges along the side

Prolixity, *n.*

Wordiness; long-windedness; use of more words than necessary

Writing Exercise

Works of fantasy—*Harry Potter*, *Star Wars*, and *The Lord of the Rings*—are extremely popular. Ask your students to write a two-page essay on why such books and films are so appealing and what we can gain that isn’t available from more “realistic” works of fiction.

Homework

Ask students to read Handout Two: Poe and Detective Fiction and “The Purloined Letter.” Write a brief personal description of each of the story’s characters.

8

Lesson Eight

FOCUS: Genre and Originality

In *ABC of Reading* (1934), Ezra Pound identifies and ranks six categories of writers, of which the highest two are: “1. Inventors. Men who found a new process, or whose extant work gives us the first known example of a process” and “2. The masters. Men who combined a number of such processes, and who used them as well as or better than the inventors.”

With “The Fall of the House of Usher,” we could place Poe within the second category, as a master who built upon the work of others to bring an existing tradition to an even higher level. But with the three Dupin stories—“The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt,” and “The Purloined Letter”—he unquestionably climbs into the first category. In these three tales, Poe single-handedly created the detective story, fashioned a template whose basic elements have defined the genre for over a century and a half, and produced three highly ingenious works of fiction that continue to delight readers.

?? Discussion Activities

According to Kenneth Silverman, author of *Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance*, “Poe had few if any precedents for such ‘tales of ratiocination,’ as he called what he attempted. . . . But crime was much in the air, as its prevention became a pressing urban need. . . . Poe understatedly called ‘Murders in the Rue Morgue’ ‘something in a new key.’ In fact, few other works can claim its authority in giving rise to a new popular genre and settings its conventions. At the time Poe wrote, the word *detective* did not exist in English, and for many readers his story had the delight of profound novelty: ‘it proves Mr Poe to be a man of genius,’ said the Pennsylvania *Inquirer*.”

In creating the now popular genre of detective fiction, Poe very cleverly balanced the elements of the tale. The solution of the mystery is of crucial interest and importance, but some of the story’s appeal lies in characterization and in the interplay of the personalities. Ask the students which element of the story they found more entertaining: the mystery and its solution, or Dupin and his interactions with the narrator and Monsieur G?

VOCABULARY WORDS

From “The Purloined Letter”:

Purloined, *adj.*

Stolen; filched

Cant, *n.*

1. The special words and phrases used by those in a certain sect, occupation, etc.; *jargon*
2. Insincere or almost meaningless talk used merely from convention or habit

Prodigious, *adj.*

1. Wonderful; amazing
2. Of great size, power, extent, etc.; enormous; huge

Acumen, *n.*

Keeness and quickness in understanding and dealing with a situation; shrewdness

Writing Exercise

More than the desire to see justice done or even the personal satisfaction of his intellectual triumph, Dupin is motivated by personal revenge. Have the students write a brief essay considering whether this motivation makes the story more satisfying, or less, than it would otherwise be.

Homework

Read “Ligeia.” Ask students to list any connections between the story and others of Poe’s works.

9

Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Content and Context

In her encyclopedic *Edgar Allan Poe A to Z*, Dawn B. Sova describes “Ligeia” as “one of Poe’s most critically acclaimed stories, as well as the tale that he identified as his personal favorite,” and quotes George Bernard Shaw’s comment that “[t]he story of the Lady Ligeia is not merely one of the wonders of literature: it is unparalleled and unapproached. There is really nothing to be said about it: we others simply take off our hats and let Mr. Poe go first.”

Even if we share Shaw’s estimate of the story’s merits, there are some things to be said about it. As does “The Raven” with Poe’s poetry, “Ligeia” in some ways synthesizes a number of the characteristic elements of Poe’s fiction (and in the process perhaps takes them to another level): the Gothic atmosphere and settings, an unstable and perhaps unreliable narrator, and of course “the death of a beautiful woman.” On this last point, however, in light of the biographical information supplied above in connection with “Annabel Lee” and “Ulalume,” teachers should point out that “Ligeia” was published in 1838, several years before the onset of Virginia Poe’s illness.

VOCABULARY WORDS

From “Ligeia”:

Abstruse, *adj.*

Hard to understand; deep; recondite

Metaphysical, *adj.*

1. Very abstract, abstruse, or subtle
2. Beyond the physical or material; incorporeal, supernatural, or transcendental

Ethereal, *adj.*

1. Of or like the ether, or the upper regions
2. Very light; airy; delicate
3. Not earthly; heavenly; celestial

Transcendentalism, *n.*

Any of various philosophies that propose to discover the nature of reality by investigating the process of thought rather than the objects of sense experience

Censer, *n.*

An ornamented container in which incense is burned

?? Discussion Activities

By way of establishing this story’s unusual place in the Poe canon, emphasize the fact that the relationship between the narrator and the beloved is described more fully than is usually the case in Poe’s writings. Ask the class why the narrator loves Ligeia: not merely for her beauty and the emotional sustenance she provides, but even more for her learning and intellectual inquiries; you might also connect this celebration of intelligence with the characterization of Dupin in “The Purloined Letter.”

Ask your students what they believe is really happening in the story. Responses might range from “It’s all in his head, a drug fantasy” to “It’s all true, to be taken at face value.” Pick two or three popular interpretations; form the adherents of each view into a group; and have each present and defend its view with detailed grounding in the text.

Writing Exercise

Ask students to write a three-paragraph essay on the following question: Can a story (or poem) be enjoyed and appreciated without the reader having a precise sense of what it is really saying, or must it communicate a definite meaning in order to be satisfying?

Homework

Have students read Handout Three: Poe’s Literary Influence. Ask students to begin their essays, using the Essay Topics. Outlines are due the next class period.

10

Lesson Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Writer Great?

Works of literature illustrate the connection between individuals. Great poems and stories articulate and explore the world around us and the mysteries of our daily lives in the larger context of the human struggle. The writer's voice, style, and sense of rhythm inform imagery, plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities to learn, imagine, and reflect, great works of literature affect many generations of readers, changing lives, challenging assumptions, and breaking new ground.

Discussion Activities

Divide students into groups and have each group determine the most important themes of Poe's work. Have a spokesperson from each group explain the group's decision, using references from Poe's writings. Write these themes on the board. Ask them to discuss, within groups, other writers they know whose work deals with similar themes. Do any of these writers remind them of Edgar Allan Poe? If these writers are of a more modern time, ask students if they believe the writer might have been influenced by Poe.

Ask students to describe the characteristics of a great writer. List these on the board. A great writer can be the voice of a generation. On the other hand, a great writer may also give voice to a unique sensibility and a personal vision of life and its possibilities. What kind of voice does Poe create in his poems and tales? Does his work speak for more than one man and his personal concerns?

Writing Exercise

Ask students to write a short essay exploring their personal reactions to the work of Edgar Allan Poe. Students should go beyond expressing like or dislike. Ask them to make a list of the emotions they felt while reading Poe's work, and to examine why. Which poems or stories did they most relate to, and which remained strange or difficult to comprehend? Why?

Homework

Students will finish their essays and present their essay topics and arguments to the class.

Poe's Theory of Poetry

Poets frequently write about poetry—reviews of other poets' books; detailed analysis of poems by classic or contemporary writers; discussions of their own techniques or working habits; essays explaining their own theories about poetry in general; and so on. Edgar Allan Poe, who made his (always precarious) living with his pen, wrote a large number of essays, reviews, and commentaries on other writers.

Two of Poe's essays present the essence of his theory of poetry. The first of these, "The Philosophy of Composition," was published in 1846. In it, stating that it would be interesting to read a poet's step-by-step description of the writing of a particular poem, he gives a detailed outline of what he claims is the process by which he wrote "The Raven." The essay provides a valuable correction to the popular assumption that poems are created in an almost unconscious frenzy of inspiration, but Poe may go too far in the other direction: many critics doubt that he could actually have written the poem in the methodical and coldly logical way that he describes.

"The Philosophy of Composition" offers several insights into Poe's general view of poetry. He suggests that the principal intent of a poem is to create an effect, and claims that "a long poem is merely a succession of brief ones—that is to say, of brief poetical effects." He maintains "that Beauty is the sole legitimate province of the poem," and that Truth and Passion (the capitals are Poe's), "although attainable, to a certain extent in poetry," are "far more readily attainable in prose." It is in this essay that he also makes his famous statement

that "the death . . . of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world."

Poe's other major statement on this subject is "The Poetic Principle." It was originally delivered as a lecture in Providence, Rhode Island, in December 1848, where he is reputed to have drawn an audience of two thousand people. The lecture was published in October 1850, a year after his death. In it, he reads and briefly discusses a number of poems by other poets, and at several points restates the essence of his poetic credo. He says again "that a long poem does not exist," and that to preserve a poem's "Unity—its totality of effect or impression," it must be read at a single sitting. He allows that "the incitements of Passion, or the precepts of Duty, or even the lessons of Truth" all may have their place within a poem, but Poe defines poetry as "The Rhythmical Creation of Beauty." In Poe's view, Passion addresses the heart, Duty the conscience, and Truth the mind, but in "the contemplation of Beauty we alone find it possible to attain that pleasurable elevation, or excitement, *of the soul*, which we recognise as the Poetic Sentiment."

Without a doubt, Poe's views are very subjective, and if every poet followed them, it would restrict the range of what poetry can achieve. But equally without a doubt, by following them himself Poe wrote some of the most remarkable poems in our literature.



Poe and Detective Fiction

Who is the most famous fictional detective of all time? Most would answer—Sherlock Holmes. But what many people don't know is that Holmes was largely inspired—as his creator, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, acknowledged—by another detective, C. Auguste Dupin, who appeared in three stories by Edgar Allan Poe some forty years before Holmes cracked his first case.

From Poe, Conan Doyle borrowed a number of significant details. The Dupin stories come to us through an unnamed and less astute narrator; Holmes's cases are narrated by his associate Dr. Watson. Like Dupin, Holmes examines the clues the criminal has left and uses cold logic and superior insight to arrive at solutions that are beyond the grasp of the methodical and unimaginative police. Like Dupin, Holmes is an isolative, eccentric, and somewhat egotistical figure. And, like Dupin, he even smokes a pipe. (Holmes's admiration for his predecessor was not, however, boundless; as he tells Watson in the very first Holmes adventure, *A Study in Scarlet* (1881): “Now, in my opinion, Dupin was a very inferior fellow ... He had some analytical genius, no doubt; but he was by no means such a phenomenon as Poe appeared to imagine.”)

From Dupin and Holmes came generations of fictional detectives. Perhaps the golden age was the 1920s and 1930s, when a number of fictional American and British detectives made their most notable appearances. Among them were Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade, Dorothy Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey, and Ellery Queen's Ellery Queen (the novels' two authors used their detective's name as their pseudonym). Detective fiction took on a life of its own, beyond what Poe and even Conan

Doyle had imagined. It was in this era that the unwritten rules of the genre were established: the crime is almost always a murder; all the clues necessary for its solution are presented fairly to the reader; the guilty party is usually the “least likely suspect.”

Two other popular sleuths are Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe and Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot. Poirot, a Belgian former policeman, appeared in 33 novels and 51 short stories between 1920 and 1975. Like Dupin and Holmes, Poirot solved his cases deductively (with sometimes maddeningly frequent references to “the little grey cells” of his brain). Millions of readers have enjoyed his cases, and millions more know him through several television series and especially the feature films starring Peter Ustinov. Nero Wolfe, who appeared in 33 novels and 39 short stories from 1934 to 1975, was as fat as Holmes was thin. Wolfe was a gourmand who cultivated orchids and preferred never to set foot outside his New York City home. Much of the pleasure of the tales comes from the interplay between the cerebral, fastidious Wolfe and his cynical, wise-cracking assistant, Archie Goodwin, who narrates. The continuing appeal of Nero Wolfe was demonstrated several years ago by a series of television adaptations on the A&E network.

The genre continues to flourish, as shown by the popularity of writers such as Sue Grafton, Sara Paretsky, Tony Hillerman, and many others. And credit continues to be given where it is due: the Mystery Writers of America guild's annual awards for the best achievements in detective writing are called the Edgar Allan Poe Awards, popularly known as the Edgars.



Poe's Literary Influence

Ralph Waldo Emerson called him “the jingle man,” Mark Twain said that his prose was unreadable, and Henry James felt that a taste for his work was the mark of a second-rate sensibility. According to T. S. Eliot, “The forms which his lively curiosity takes are those in which a preadolescent mentality delights.” After reactions like those cited above, most literary reputations would be sunk without a trace, and yet Edgar Allan Poe shows no sign whatsoever of loosening his extraordinary hold on our imaginations.

In 1959 Richard Wilbur, an elegant poet and a critic of refined taste, inaugurated the Dell Laurel Poetry Series (mass-market paperback selections from classic British and American poets) with an edition of Poe's complete poems, for which he provided a long and thoughtful introduction. In 1973 Daniel Hoffman, also a distinguished poet and critic, published a highly regarded study of Poe's writings. In 1984, two massive volumes of Poe's collected works, together comprising some three thousand pages, were published in the Library of America. Clearly, Edgar Allan Poe is here to stay. However controversial or criticized he may have been, and continues to be, as both a man and an author, no other figure in our literary history has made so strong an impact as Poe in so many different areas. By both his achievements and his example, he exerted an enormous influence on poetry, on fiction, and on literary criticism.

As a poet, Poe strongly influenced the great French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), whose *Fleurs du Mal* (“Flowers of Evil,” 1857) is considered by many to be a cornerstone of modern poetry. Baudelaire's essay on Poe and translations from his work influenced a generation of French poets, especially the Symbolist master Stéphane Mallarmé (1844–1898). These poets in turn greatly influenced

T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and other important Modernist poets in English. According to the distinguished twentieth-century American poet and critic Allen Tate: “More than any romantic poet, here or in England, either of the preceding generation of Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Bryant, or of his own, he became the type . . . of the alienated poet, the outcast. . .” and “There are . . . poems by Poe that I believe everybody can join in admiring.”

We need only look around to see the influence of Poe's fiction, in the horror tales of Ambrose Bierce and H. P. Lovecraft and in the best-selling novels of Stephen King. He has also been esteemed as a serious craftsman and artist by his peers among writers of fiction. In 1895, Willa Cather gave a public lecture on Poe, in which the future author of “Paul's Case” and *My Antonia* said: “With the exception of Henry James and Hawthorne, Poe is our only master of pure prose. . . . Poe found short story writing a bungling makeshift. He left it a perfect art. He wrote the first perfect short stories in the English language. He first gave the short story purpose, method, and artistic form.”

Edmund Wilson, one of the most highly regarded American literary critics of the twentieth century, wrote of Poe that “[p]erhaps more than any other writer, French or English, of the first half of the twentieth century, he had thought seriously and written clearly about the methods and aims of literature. He had formulated a critical theory, and he had supplied brilliant specimens of its practice.” In all of these areas—poetry, fiction, and literary criticism—Poe made enormous and invaluable contributions to American literature, so much so that it is all but impossible to imagine American literature without him.

