**Who Was Edgar Allan Poe?**

He was America's first internationally influential author, he invented a new literary genre, and he overturned the traditional Gothic tale by creating the modern psychological horror story. Poe was a Virginia gentleman, an amateur scientist, a journalist, and America's first great literary critic and greatest poet. He was also a famously gifted performer who recited his works to large audiences up and down the East Coast.

**Who Is Edgar Allan Poe?**

An instantly recognizable American author and historical figure, his name calls to mind spine-chilling stories and melancholy poetry. He evokes the image of the tragic romantic poet, misunderstood and rejected by society. We are so familiar with his life and works that we already know him. Or do we?

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**A SOCIAL OUTCAST**

Born in Boston on 19 January 1809, Poe was the son of actors Elizabeth ("Eliza") Arnold Poe and David Poe. At that time the acting profession was considered immoral. For part of Poe's childhood, acting was banned in his hometown of Richmond, where as a child he bore the stigma of having been the son of "players." John M. Carter noted that despite Poe's being the ward of a prominent Richmonder, one of Poe's classmates "held himself too high to associate with the son of an actress and a pauper, and let the high-strung [Poe] understand it."

Making her American stage debut in Boston in 1796, Elizabeth Arnold performed more than two hundred roles in theaters from Boston to Charleston, Norfolk, Richmond, and Alexandria were regular stops for companies. Abandoned by her husband, David Poe, she was left with three young children. When Eliza Poe died in Richmond on 8 December 1811, at age 24, she was buried beside the east wall of the cemetery at St. John's Church because her profession prevented her from being buried near the respectable citizens.

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**Clergymen and civic leaders reacted to the**

**BURNING OF THE RICHMOND THEATRE FIRE AND THE LOSS OF LIFE BY CONDEMNING THEATRICAL PERFORMANCES, BALLS, AND OTHER ENTERTAINMENTS.**

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**ORPHANED AT A YOUNG AGE,**

**Talented Writer Struggles to Find Fortune, Fame**

On 26 December 1811, a DISASTROUS FIRE destroyed the Richmond Theatre and claimed the lives of more than seventy of the city's most prominent citizens, including the governor. News of the fire shocked Americans and Europeans alike. Richmond plunged into a period of public mourning and banned acting for eight years. Other cities postponed dancing assemblies and cancelled balls. The tragedy led to the publication of sermons and tracts condemning theatrical performances, but in some other cities theater managers adopted new building regulations.
I gave wildly popular dramatic readings of my poems and stories.

In Poe's day, poetry was written to be recited as well as read. Authors like Poe and Charles Dickens drew large audiences for readings of their work. Poe could earn one hundred dollars in one night for reading his poetry. In the last years of his life, he performed in the major eastern cities. Eighteen hundred people attended one of his readings in Massachusetts, and newspapers frequently praised his dramatic recitations. One witness, Susan Archer Talley, later wrote that at one of his performances the servants fled the room in terror.

Not everyone enjoyed Poe's writings or dramatic performances. Ralph Waldo Emerson dismissed him as the "jingle man" whose works lacked any moral lessons. Poe, on the other hand, believed that a poem or story succeeded only if it was able to create an emotional impact on its reader.

POE USED REALISTIC DETAILS TO CHANGE FANTASY INTO SCIENCE FICTION.

During his lifetime, Poe's best-selling work was The Conchologist's First Book, a textbook on shells. His last book, which he considered his most important work, is Eureka, a long philosophical essay in which he tries to explain the mysteries of the universe. Here he proposes an early version of the "Big Bang" theory of the origin of the universe—eighty years before the scientific community embraced it. Poe's other scientific interests included astronomy, biology, and modern technology. He was fascinated by the recent invention of photography and by the possibility of the creation of the electric light bulb, which was invented almost forty years after his death. Poe proposed replacing the expensive typeset printing of his day with a form of anastatic printing similar to the modern photocopier. He hoped this technology would allow books to be published inexpensively so that a wider audience could afford them.

Still Carrying Flame for Edgar
ON AGAIN, OFF AGAIN ROMANCE HEATS UP ONCE MORE

"And this maiden she lived with no other thought . . . Than to love and be loved by me." —ANNABEL LEE

Poe became engaged to Elmira Royster Shelton before he left Richmond to attend the University of Virginia, but her disapproving father broke off their relationship by intercepting Poe's letters. The incident that Poe scholars believe inspired this poem occurred ten years later, when Poe and his new wife, Virginia Clemm Poe, encountered Shelton and her husband at a party. Shelton's description of the encounter survives in one of her letters: "I remember seeing Edgar & his lovely wife, very soon after they were married . . . I shall never forget my feelings at the time—They were indescribable, almost agonizing—However in an instant, I remembered I was a married woman, and banished them from me."

"I am a Virginian."

Poe identified himself with the state in which he had been reared, educated, and begun his career in journalism. When the actress Eliza Poe died in Richmond in 1811, she left three young children. William Henry Leopold Poe grew up with his grandparents in Baltimore. Rosalie Poe grew up in the Richmond family of William MacKenzie and his wife. John Allan and his wife Frances Keeling Valentine Allan took Edgar, age two, into their household and gave him the name Allan when he was baptized. A successful merchant, Allan ensured that Poe received a good education but never adopted him. According to Poe, Allan showed him little affection, and tensions between the two increased as Poe grew older. In the Allan household, Poe learned the characteristics of a southern gentleman—proper etiquette, chivalry towards women, and a sense of class distinction. Poe grew up accustomed to the fine furnishings with which the Allans decorated their homes. As an adult, he lived in poverty in a succession of sparsely furnished rented rooms and houses, but the characters in his fictional works, such as "The Raven" and "The Fall of the House of Usher," live in the kind of opulent manors Poe knew in his childhood.

Poe published his early science fiction story “Hans Pfaal, A Tale” while he was editor of the Southern Literary Messenger in Richmond. He incorporated scientific details to make the account of a trip to the moon sound plausible. In fact, he claimed that some readers thought this was a true story. Poe's science fiction inspired the French writer and “Father of Science Fiction” Jules Verne, who also wrote stories of space travel and futuristic technology.
Many American authors of Poe's day were able to devote themselves to writing because they had access to family fortunes or because they had comfortable positions at universities. Left entirely out of John Allan's will (which made provisions for illegitimate children Allan had never seen), Poe became the first American writer to make a living from his writing.

After publishing three volumes of poetry, Poe turned to magazines as a ready market for his work. He began his career in journalism as an editor at Richmond's Southern Literary Messenger in 1835, when he was twenty-six. In addition to the first appearances of Poe's early horror tales “Berenice” and “Morella,” the pages of this magazine also featured the scathing literary reviews that first brought Poe national attention. With biting humor, he attacked the northern literary establishment and made personal attacks on some of his colleagues. Within seventeen months, Poe had increased circulation seven times, but his salary remained so low that he moved to New York and then to Philadelphia to work at a series of magazines in those cities.

The experience Poe gained working at the Southern Literary Messenger allowed him to pursue a writing career and to edit journals in New York and Philadelphia before he returned to Richmond in 1848 to contribute to the Messenger again. He continued to supply articles for the magazine until his death in 1849.

During Poe's life, books were expensive, but, thanks to new developments in printing, magazines and newspapers were cheaper and more readily available. Poe knew how to write stories and articles that sold magazines and he became editor of some of the most popular magazines in the country.

**HIS STORIES WERE NOT MERELY ACTS OF SELF-IENTATION BUT ALSO DEVICES CALCULATED TO ENTERTAIN AN AUDIENCE.**

If his narrators sound insane, it is not necessarily because Poe was exorcising his own demons. It's more likely that he was writing the kinds of stories that he knew would attract and hold readers.

As proud as Poe was to call himself a Virginian, he felt slighted by the northern literary establishment, which tended to look down on southern writers. As a literary critic, Poe attacked the northern establishment and exposed its practice of “puddery” in which authors hired their friends to write positive reviews of their work in order to boost advance book sales.

Boston and New York were the center of the American publishing industry and home to many of the nation's most popular authors. In his reviews, Poe termed the Boston literary group surrounding the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow a “legion of literary quackery” and criticized Longfellow for his lack of originality. Poe's antagonism toward northern writers made him unwelcome in literary circles and hindered his own career. Thirty years after Poe's death, another southern writer, William Hand Browne, wrote, “Some of the old vindictiveness against Poe still crops up occasionally in the Northern papers—partly because they hate the South and everything Southern, and partly because some of the old ‘mutual-admiration’ set still survives, and have never yet forgiven the man who told them the truth about themselves.”

**RIPPED FROM THE HEADLINES**

Cigar Girl's Death Becomes Fiction Fodder for Poe

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**REVENGE:**

“The Cask of Amontillado”

During his lifetime, Poe's critics often attacked the lack of moral content in his stories. His tales did not attempt to teach a lesson or edify his readers. In “The Cask of Amontillado,” Poe presented two unsympathetic characters, Montresor and Fortunato. In this tale of revenge, Montresor lures Fortunato into a wine cellar by feigning friendship and then buries him alive.

At the time that Poe wrote this short story, he was engaged in a literary feud with the writer Thomas Dunn English, who had written a novel in which a caricature of Poe appeared as the drunken author of a poem entitled “The Crow.” Some critics believe “The Cask of Amontillado” is Poe's answer to English's attack and that the victim in this story is a caricature of English.

Today's most popular television shows, like Law and Order, frequently draw inspiration from the sensational murder cases that capture newspaper headlines, but Poe perfected the practice in the 1840s. When he read that a popular New York City “cigar girl,” Mary Rogers, had been murdered and that the police were unable to find the murderer, Poe announced that he would solve the crime in his tale “The Mystery of Marie Roget.” The story was published in three installments in Godey's Ladies' Book, a journal that had covered the real murder case.
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3  Poe knew that the public’s interest in the actual murder would guarantee an audience for his fictional version.

From the newspapers’ vivid descriptions of the corpse and crime scene, Poe deduced that a single murderer had committed the crime. Details in the case continued to reach the newspapers even after Poe published the first installment of his story. Afraid of having his solution proved wrong, Poe changed the ending at least twice.

Although the story is not one of Poe’s best, it helped Poe develop the detective genre he had begun with “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” In his story, Poe foreshadowed today’s blurring of the line between news and entertainment. He demonstrated that the public craved stories “ripped from the headlines.” By claiming to have solved the crime, Poe became a part of the case.

**Poe Was The Father of American Literature.**

At the time that Poe published his first book, writers in the United States were trying to start an American literary tradition independent of British literature. Poe’s taste for writing about distant lands and exotic cultures was different from his slightly older contemporaries, such as Washington Irving (author of “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow”) and James Fenimore Cooper (author of *The Last of the Mohicans*), who were trying to define American literature by writing traditional works about American subjects and settings. In contrast, Poe valued innovation and originality in literature. Poe would complain that Cooper relied too heavily on American subject matter at the expense of plot development and originality.

**Detective Fiction: “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.”**

The first modern detective story, Poe’s immensely influential novella, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” laid the foundations for the mystery genre and initiated the “locked door” mystery. This now-familiar subgenre centers on a murder that has taken place within a room that is locked from the inside. “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” was first published in the April 1841 issue of *Graham’s Magazine*. Its success encouraged Poe to write two sequels, both featuring the same detective, C. Auguste Dupin. Poe’s detective was the prototype for Sherlock Holmes, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s character created four decades later.

**You can thank me for science fiction and the detective story!**

**“The First and the Greatest, The Cornerstone of Cornerstones . . . The Highspot of Highspots.”**

—Ellery Queen, detective fiction writer


**Here’s a peak into some of Poe’s stories:**

- *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*:
- *The Gold Bug*:
- *The Mystery of Marie Roget*:
- *The Tell-Tale Heart*:
- *The Fall of the House of Usher*:
- *The Cask of Amontillado*:
- *The Pit and the Pendulum*:
- *The Domain of Arnheim*:
- *The Masque of the Red Death*:
- *The Black Cat*:
- *The Mystery of Marie Roget*:
- *The Tell-Tale Heart*:

*Sources and Collections:*

- *Library of Virginia.*
POE AND POETRY
Poe used the sounds of words, and sometimes made up words, to create his poetry.

Poe thought that the sounds and rhythms of his poetry reflected emotional states. For example, he thought the letter "O" sounded melancholy, so he repeated the word “nevermore” throughout his poem “The Raven” in order to enhance the mood.

THE RAVEN
“The Raven” catapulted Poe to international fame and ensured his place among the greatest poets in the English language. He received only fifteen dollars when he sold his most famous poem to the American Review. Parodied, put to music, and frequently performed, the poem remains one of the most popular in the English language.

“The Raven” first appeared in the February 1845 issue of American Review, a political journal. Poe published the poem anonymously, and he may also have written the glowing introduction stating that he did not know the English language was capable of such beauty until he read that poem.

Two magazines reprinted “The Raven” in February, but Poe received no compensation. Without the protection of effective copyright laws, Poe saw his most popular works printed in magazines throughout the United States and Europe without his consent. Magazine publishers, knowing that they could print authors’ works without paying for them, were unwilling to pay high prices to recompense the authors. That is one reason why Poe remained poor even at the height of his fame, but he used his position as a popular magazine editor to champion the cause of an international copyright law. Poe’s works were immensely popular in Europe, especially in France, where translations sometimes appeared within months of their first printings in America. In 1875 the renowned French poet Stephan Mallarmé issued a new French translation of “The Raven” with illustrations by his friend Edouard Manet.

Better known as a painter who inspired the Impressionists, Manet rarely experimented with book illustration. This work is a particularly innovative example. Here, Manet has deviated from traditional book illustration and covered only parts of the page, sketching with a loose technique that borders on abstraction. Manet’s illustrations dispense with the demons and angels found in illustrations of the poem by his contemporaries in favor of restrained representations of a scholar in his study.

The French artist Gustave Doré (1832–1883) was the most famous illustrator of the late nineteenth century. His illustrations for the Bible, Dante’s Divine Comedy, and Milton’s Paradise Lost are still in print today. “The Raven” was the only work by an American author that he illustrated and the last work he produced.

The Anglo-American artist James Carling created forty-three illustrations for a proposed volume of “The Raven.” Believing that other artists’ illustrations failed to capture the spirit of Poe’s work, Carling described his drawings as “stormier, wilder, and weirder.” Perhaps too “weird” for the 1880s, these drawings were not published until nearly a century later.

In contrast to the more-detailed illustrations of Carling’s famous contemporary Gustave Doré, these drawings feature expressive distortion and bizarre imagery that bear a resemblance to the work of Odilon Redon, Edvard Munch, and the most advanced Symbolist artists of his day. Carling died at twenty-nine, and his reputation today rests primarily on his illustrations for “The Raven.”

DECIPHER A SECRET CODE
Edgar Allan Poe had a fascination with secret writing called cryptography. In fact, one story, “The Gold Bug,” used a coded secret message, or a cipher, to tell an intriguing tale about a search for a pirate’s hidden treasure. Poe even challenged his readers to send cryptographs to him, telling them he could solve them all.

Below is a cryptograph, or secret coded message, using Poe’s scrambled alphabet from “The Tell Tale Heart.”


Use the key to decipher the message.

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CDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
ABCD EFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ
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“Your ‘Raven’ has produced a sensation, a ‘fit horror,’ here in England. Some of my friends are taken by the fear of it and some by the music. I hear of persons haunted by the ‘Nevermore,’ and one acquaintance of mine who has the misfortune of possessing a ‘bust of Pallas’ never can bear to look at it in the twilight.” —Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Letter to E. A. Poe, April 1846
First published shortly after Poe's death, "The Bells" is one of his most popular poems and is considered one of the finest uses of onomatopoeia (defined on page 7) in American poetry. Less well known is the fact that this poem is the first use in the English language of the word "tintinnabulation," one of about a thousand words that Poe invented.

Poe achieved rock-star status as a poet and lecturer in a time when there were no radios or televisions or films or video games. People attended live theater. Just as today's celebrities seek to control their public image, Poe also manipulated his image. Asked by Rufus W. Griswold to provide an autobiography for an article in the anthology *The Poets and Poetry of America*, Poe supplied an embellished life history. He deliberately distorted the facts to make his life sound more interesting than he thought it really was. He began by lying about his age and claiming that he had graduated with "highest honors" from the University of Virginia. His account of traveling to Europe to fight the Greek Wars of Independence and his subsequent imprisonment in Saint Petersburg was purely fictitious.

Poe's first posthumous biography was a libelous account written by his literary executor, Rufus W. Griswold. Unaware that Griswold and Poe had personally disliked each other, Poe's mother-in-law, Maria Clemm, engaged Griswold to act as Poe's literary executor and to compile Poe's works into a single volume. The brief biography, which appeared in volume three of Griswold's anthology of Poe's works, portrayed Poe as a drunken madman devoid of morals. Perhaps Griswold expected conservative America to dismiss Poe and his works, but, after the appearance of the memoir, Poe's complete works sold out in three editions in one year—better than any of his books had sold during the author's lifetime.

Poe left Richmond for the last time early on the morning of 26 September 1849 en route to Philadelphia, but he disappeared for five days. He was discovered in a Baltimore tavern dressed in ill-fitting clothes so unlike his usual dress that some people assumed that his clothes had been stolen. Poe spent his final four days delirious in Washington College Hospital under the care of Dr. John Moran, who later attributed Poe's death to the vague term "nervous prostration." The newspapers offered varying accounts of Poe's death, and, eight years later, a published account theorized that Poe had been murdered. There was no evidence of a crime, but it became one of several conspiracy theories associated with Poe's mysterious death.

### Death Theories

Beating (1857)
Epilepsy (1875)
Dipsomania (1921)
Heart Disease (1926)
Toxic Disorder (1970)
Hypoglycemia (1979)
Diabetes (1977)
Alcohol Dehydrogenase (1984)
Porphyria (1989)
Delerium Tremens (1992)
Rabies (1996)
Heart Disease (1997)
Murder (1998)
Epilepsy (1999)
Carbon Monoxide Poisoning (1999)
Brain Tumor (2007)

Illustrations by Les Harper, Lightbox Studios, unless otherwise noted
Poe has become an icon of American popular culture. Just as his literary works continue to be read and adapted into films and music, Poe’s life also inspires today’s writers, artists, and advertisers. Although the melancholy, tormented Poe of popular culture is as much a creation of the media as a representation of Poe’s own life, it is fitting that he should appear as a fictional character in other authors’ works, like the recent novels *The Poe Shadow* and *The Pale Blue Eye* or in the graphic novel *Batman: Nevermore*, in which Poe joins forces with the superhero to battle evil.

Poe created a new form of psychological tale in which the character’s descent into madness becomes the central theme.

In spite of his numerous contributions to lyric poetry, science fiction, and mystery, Poe’s reputation as the Master of the Macabre remains secure. More than merely continuing in the tradition of Gothic literature with its roots in the British Horace Walpole and the German E. T. A. Hoffman, Poe replaced the supernatural element in Gothic literature with the demons of the character’s tormented imagination. Poe discarded the moral lesson, the happy ending, and the theme of virtue rewarded in favor of creating an emotional impact on the audience. He brings the reader into the mind of the insane and, decades before Sigmund Freud, explores the darkest recesses of the subconscious.

Poe’s universal appeal has seen his work translated into every media, including film.

**ACROSTIC POEM ACTIVITY**

**On Valentine’s Day in 1846, Edgar Allan Poe’s wife, Virginia, wrote an acrostic poem to her husband. An acrostic poem can be written about any subject and is most often formed by using the letters that spell the subject down the side of the page. Below is Virginia’s acrostic poem.**

*Now it is your turn to write an acrostic poem! Write your name vertically below. It can be your first name, your last name, or both (or you can choose another subject, such as your favorite sport, pet, etc.). Next, using those letters, write a word or phrase that describes you or your subject—and have fun!*
Poe Exhibition Events

All events are free unless otherwise noted. Check our Web site, www.lva.virginia.gov/events, for the latest information.

EXHIBITION TOURS
every Tuesday and Thursday | 2:00–2:45 pm  
(except Sept. 8 and Nov. 27)

CURATOR’S GALLERY TALKS
Space limited. RSVP 804.692.3592
Thursday, July 23 | Noon–12:45 pm
Thursday, August 6 | Noon–12:45 pm
Wednesday, September 23 | Noon–12:45 pm
Wednesday, October 7 | Noon–12:45 pm
Thursday, November 19 | Noon–12:45 pm
Tuesday, December 1 | Noon–12:45 pm

POE BOOK TALK SERIES
The Riesling Retribution: A Wine Country Mystery
Tuesday, August 11 | 6:00–7:00 pm
Virginia in Verse: The Poetry of Michelle Boisseau and John Casteen
Tuesday, September 29 | 6:00–7:00 pm
The Long Division by Derek Nikitas
Tuesday, October 27, 6:00–7:00 pm

EDUCATORS’ OPEN HOUSE
Friday, August 14 | 4:00–6:00 pm
RSVP by August 7 to 804.371.2126 or tameka.hobbs@lva.virginia.gov

“I KNOW POE” FAMILY DAY
Saturday, August 15 | 10:00 AM–2:00 PM

SPECIAL EVENT: POE MANIA!
Presented by Haunts of Richmond
Thursday, September 10 | 7:00–8:30 PM, Lecture Hall
Free $7. Call 804.371.2126 for details.

THE POE NINE

The Black Cat
The Mysteries of Marie Roget
The Raven
The Cask of Amontillado
The Unparalleled Adventures of One Hans Piaall

THE POE NINE: MEMOIRS HISTORICAL FICTION

MS Found in a Bottle
The Mystery of Marie Roget
Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque
Mystery Tales
The Fall of the House of Usher
The Pit and the Pendulum

AcrID
ARABESQUE
AUSTERE
AVARICE
bugAbOO
DreArY
DunDerheADism
fetiD
flumflummerY
ghAstlY
gothic
grOtesQue
HYSterIA
melAnchOlY
nevErMORE
OutRe
pALLiD
terror
TINTINnABULATION

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The Library of Virginia and the Poe Museum thank the Richmond Times-Dispatch for their media sponsorship.

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Genre Game

The term GENRE (pronounced zhahn-ruh) means a class, category, or style of an art form. It also applies to styles of writing. The work of Edgar Allan Poe covers several genres, including mystery, science fiction, and horror. As you walk through the Poe: Man, Myth, or Monster exhibition, try to determine the GENRES for each of Poe’s works. Place the correct GENRE sticker next to the titles of Poe’s literature in the space provided. See how many you can get correct. Sticker sheets are available at the information desk on the first floor.

MYSTERY OR DETECTIVE STORY – deals with solving a crime, often featuring a detective

SCIENCE FICTION – involves the use of science and technology and can also include references to the future or space.

HORROR – involves elements of death and suspense.

GOTHIC – uses elements in the story to build suspense and to make the reader uneasy, often involving curses and madness.