

Biography of Edgar Allan Poe

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Edgar Poe was born January 19, 1809, in Boston, Massachusetts, to parents who were professional actors. Poe always believed that he inherited his talents as a reciter of verse especially from his mother, Elizabeth Arnold Poe, and it is not far-fetched to see his lifelong concern for the effect of the poem on the reader as an outgrowth of this early exposure to the stage. One of the most important events of his early life was the death of his mother when he was not yet three years old, and his poetry bears the imprint of his various attempts to find an ideal woman adequate to her memory. His father, David Poe, Jr., abandoned the family about this time and probably died shortly thereafter, and young Edgar was taken into the family of John Allan, a merchant from Richmond, Virginia. It was from Allan that Poe took his middle name.

From 1815 to 1820 the family lived in England, where Poe acquired much of his early education as well as his first exposure to the gothic style that figures so prominently in the atmosphere and settings of his works. Back in Richmond, Poe studied the classics in several schools, and in 1826 he entered the University of Virginia, where he seems to have impressed his teachers and fellow students with his knowledge of languages. He ran up large gambling debts, however, which Allan refused to pay, forcing Poe to drop out of school. Thus began an estrangement from Allan that lasted until Allan's death six years later.

At eighteen Poe enlisted in the U.S. Army, where he would rise within two years to the rank of sergeant major. Already at eighteen he had managed to have a slim volume of verse published, *Tamerlane, and Other Poems* (1827), followed by another, *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane, and Minor Poems* (1829), when he was twenty. At about that time he requested (with Allan's approval) a discharge from the Army so that he could apply to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. He entered the academy in 1830 and did well, but when Allan again refused him

necessary financial support, it is likely he felt that he had no choice but to get himself expelled in order to find a job. He left West Point for New York, where, with financial support from West Point friends, he published a third volume of poetry, *Poems by Edgar Allan Poe* (1831), when he was twenty-two years old.

Poe now set himself to making a career in the world of professional letters, which he pursued with mixed success until his death eighteen years later. His financial circumstances were often desperate as he moved from one eastern city to another looking for work as a writer or editor of literary magazines. In 1835 he received his first job as an editor at the *Southern Literary Messenger*, and in 1836 he married his cousin, Virginia Clemm. In 1839 he became an editor at *Burton's Gentlemen's Magazine*, but he left that position after a year to try to establish his own magazine. When his attempt proved unsuccessful, he became an editor at *Graham's Magazine* in 1841, a position he left a year later, again to attempt to found his own magazine. He returned to editing again in 1842 with the *New York Mirror* and stayed there until 1845.

The circulation of both *Burton's* and *Graham's* increased dramatically under Poe's editorship, and he published some of his most famous stories in these magazines' pages. Sometimes, however, his erratic behavior and frequent problems with alcohol cost him jobs even when his actual performance was adequate. The journalistic world of the 1830's and 1840's was characterized by fiercely polemical writing, full of vituperation and personal attacks—a style that Poe practiced with great zest and ability. Despite his attacks in print on his fellow writers, some of them aided him in his times of unemployment and stress.

In 1842 Poe's young wife burst a blood vessel, and her deteriorating health over the next five years added greatly to Poe's financial worries. His mother-in-law was an important source of strength to the couple during these years. Amazingly, he was able to turn out dozens of first-rate poems, reviews, and stories for the magazines even while

fighting off financial and health problems. The publication of “The Raven” in 1845 made him famous, enabling him to begin earning good money as a public reciter of poetry. The same year, he moved to the *Broadway Journal* and quickly became its proprietor until it folded in 1846.

When Virginia finally died in 1847, Poe himself became desperately ill. Even after recovering, he never regained his old resilience, though in 1848 he managed to publish his famous *Eureka: A Prose Poem*. That same year he became engaged to one of the several women he was seeing, Mrs. Sarah Whitman, another poet who attempted with some success to help him overcome his problems with drinking. Whitman’s family disapproved of Poe, however, and the engagement was broken off not long after it began. Poe then became engaged to a widowed childhood sweetheart, Sarah Elmira Royster. In what was to be the last year of his life he achieved a measure of security with Royster, a regular income from lecturing and writing, and some popularity in Richmond society.

On September 24, 1849, Poe delivered his final lecture, “The Poetic Principle,” in Richmond. On September 27, he took a steamer to Baltimore en route to New York. On October 3, he was found senseless and apparently drunk in a polling place and taken to a hospital, where he died a few days later, on October 7, at the age of forty.

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