

Poe's Biography

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The name Poe brings to mind scary stories, strange happenings, and eerie characters. He has been writing since 1827 and has created famous works like "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Raven," and "The Fall of the House of Usher." Edgar Allan Poe is a versatile writer who has written short stories, poetry, a novel, a textbook, a book about science, and many essays and book reviews. He is known for inventing the modern detective story and being innovative in science fiction. However, he mainly made a living as a literary critic¹ and theorist. Today, Poe is famous for his scary stories and haunting poetry.

Just like the strange characters in Poe's stories, Poe himself has fascinated the public. He is often portrayed as a creepy, enigmatic figure who haunts dark, spooky places. This is the legend of Poe. However, a lot of what we believe about Poe is incorrect, stemming from a biography written by someone who wanted to ruin his reputation.

The real Poe was born in Boston in 1809. Sadly, his parents died when he was very young. Poe went to live with a wealthy family in Richmond, Virginia, while his siblings lived with other families. The family wanted Poe to be a businessman, but he wanted to be a poet like Lord Byron². Poe would often write poems instead of focusing on his family's tobacco business.



In 1826, Poe left Richmond to go to the University of Virginia. He did really well in his classes, but he ended up owing a lot of money. John Allan, a wealthy tobacco merchant who took in Poe after his parents died, didn't give Poe enough money to cover his expenses, so Poe started gambling to try to make enough money. By the end of his first term, Poe was so poor that he had to burn his furniture to stay warm. He felt really embarrassed about being so poor and was really angry with Allan. Poe had to leave school and go back to Richmond. And things kept getting worse. He went to see his fiancée, Elmira Royster, but found out she was engaged to someone else.

STOPPING POINT

What are the 5 W's for this section?

- **Who:**
- **What:**
- **When:**
- **Where:**
- **Why or How:**

¹ A literary critic reads an author's writing and judges and comments on how good (or bad) it is.

² George Gordon Byron, 6th Baron Byron FRS was an English romantic poet and peer. He was one of the leading figures of the Romantic movement, and has been regarded as among the greatest of English poets.

Poe's last few months in the Allan mansion were filled with growing anger towards Allan. Eventually, Poe left the home to chase his dreams of becoming a poet and seeking excitement. He achieved his dream by publishing his first book called *Tamerlane* at the young age of eighteen. To seek more adventure, he joined the United States Army. However, after two years, he enrolled in the **United States Military Academy at West Point**. Unfortunately, Poe's time at West Point was cut short as he was expelled after only eight months.

Broke and alone, **Poe went to Baltimore**, where his father had lived, and asked his relatives there for help. Unfortunately, one of Poe's cousins stole from him while he was sleeping. However, another relative, **Poe's aunt Maria Clemm**, took him in and treated him like a son. **Clemm's daughter, Virginia**, started by delivering letters for Poe, but eventually became the person he loved.

While Poe was in **Baltimore**, **John Allan died, leaving Poe out of his will**. However, the will did provide for an illegitimate child whom Allan had never seen. **Poe was living in poverty at that time but had started publishing his short stories. He even won a contest sponsored by the *Saturday Visitor*, which helped him make important connections in the publishing industry.** As a result, Poe was able to publish more stories and eventually secure an editorial position at the *Southern Literary Messenger* in Richmond. This job became Poe's true calling as a magazine writer.

Within a year, Poe helped make the *Messenger* a very popular magazine in the South with his exciting stories and his strong book reviews. **Poe quickly became known as a bold critic who not only criticized an author's work but also insulted the author³ and the literary establishment in the North.** Poe focused on some of the most well-known writers in the country, and one of his targets was the **anthologist and editor Rufus Griswold**.

STOPPING POINT

Has anything changed regarding the 5 W's now that you've read a little more? What can you add to help better summarize the background information?

- **Who:**
- **What:**
- **When:**
- **Where:**
- **Why or How:**

³ How would you feel if someone wrote an article to attack your work AND insulted you personally?

At the age of twenty-seven, Poe brought Maria and Virginia Clemm to Richmond and married Virginia, who was not yet fourteen⁴. The marriage was happy but money was always tight. Poe moved to New York City and Philadelphia to write for different magazines. Despite his growing fame, Poe struggled to make a living. For his first book of short stories, he was paid with twenty-five copies of his book. He wanted writers to be paid more and for there to be an international copyright law. He wanted to start his own magazine, but couldn't find the money.

In January 1845, Poe's publication of "The Raven" made him famous. He was living in New York City and gained a large audience for his lectures. He also demanded better pay for his work. He published two books that year and briefly owned his own magazine, the *Broadway Journal*. However, the venture failed, and Poe's wife's health deteriorated. Rumors about his relationship with a married woman drove him to leave the city in 1846. He moved to a small cottage in the country. In the winter of 1847, Virginia, his wife, passed away from tuberculosis at the age of twenty-four. This event devastated Poe⁵ and prevented him from writing for months. Critics believed he would soon die, and they were correct. Poe only lived for another two years, spending much of that time traveling and seeking support for his proposed magazine, *The Stylus*.

He went back to Richmond in the summer of 1849 and found his first fiancée, Elmira Royster Shelton, who was now a widow. They planned to get married in Richmond after Poe returned from a trip to Philadelphia and New York. But on his way to Philadelphia, Poe stopped in Baltimore and disappeared for five days. He was eventually found in a bar at a public house that was being used as a polling place for an election. The magazine editor Joseph Snodgrass sent Poe to Washington College Hospital, where Poe spent the last days of his life far from home and surrounded by strangers. Neither Poe's mother-in-law nor his fiancée knew what happened to him until they read about it in the newspapers. Poe died on October 7, 1849, at the age of forty. The exact cause of Poe's death is still unknown.

After Poe died, his rival Rufus Griswold wrote a mean obituary and memoir about him. Griswold wanted to get back at Poe for saying bad things about him. In the memoir, Griswold made up stories about Poe being a drunk, a womanizer, and crazy. Griswold hoped that people would stop liking Poe and his books. But instead, more people started buying Poe's books after reading Griswold's biography. Griswold's lies about Poe created the Poe legend that people still talk about today. Griswold is only remembered as Poe's first biographer, if he's remembered at all.

⁴ In the past, it was quite common for very young teenage girls to get married, often to men who were much older than them.

⁵ Grief over a loved one's death is a common theme in several of Poe's poems.

Update the 5 W's for section 3. Be sure to explain *What* we know about Poe's final years and *Why* there was conflict in his life.

- **Who:**
- **What:**
- **When:**
- **Where:**
- **Why or How:**

Put it all together. In the space below, write a 5 to 7 sentence summary of the life of Edgar Allan Poe.