Prestwick House Literary Touchstone Classics

The Best of Poe

The Tell-Tale Heart, The Raven,
The Cask of Amontillado, and 30 Others

by Edgar Allan Poe

UNABRIDGED WITH GLOSSARY AND NOTES

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Edgar Allan Poe

Prestwick House

LITERARY TOUCHSTONE CLASSICS™

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This Prestwick House edition is an unabridged republication, with some emendations, of thirty-three of Edgar Allan Poe's short stories and poems, taken from various nineteenth-century sources.

ISBN: 978-1-58049-387-1

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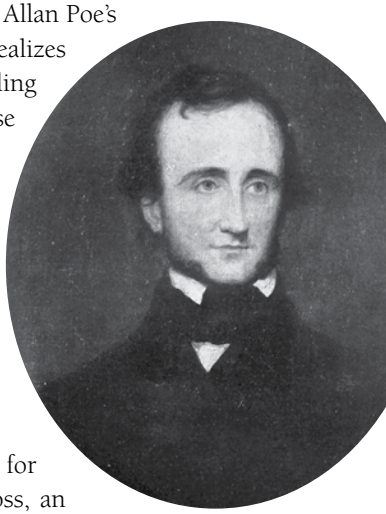
What are literary classics, and why are they important?
A literary classic is a work of the highest excellence that says something important about life and the human condition—and says it with great artistry. It has withstood the test of time and is not bound by any specific time, place, or culture. For this reason, a classic is considered to have universal appeal and significance. It speaks to us today as forcefully as it spoke to readers when it was first written, and its power will continue to give future generations new perspectives on life.

Edgar Allan Poe

While even casual readers are familiar with Edgar Allan Poe's more famous stories and poems, not everyone realizes the depth and richness of his other writings. In compiling this collection of his poems and stories, Prestwick House has made a deliberate effort to include some lesser-known works, along with the ones that are usually included in anthologies. We hope readers will come to see that Poe should be remembered for works in addition to "The Raven" and "The Tell-Tale Heart."

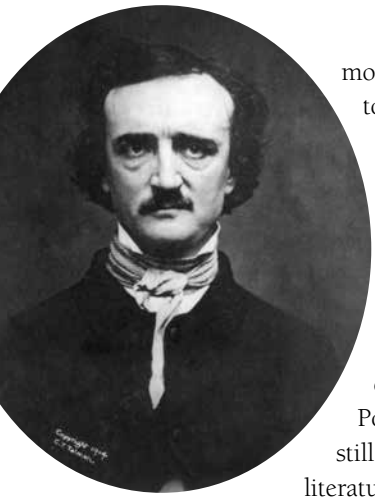


Portrait of Edgar Allan Poe painted by Samuel Stillman Osgood, circa 1840s

One reason that Poe is one of the most widely read of all American authors is his subject matter and his imaginative use of words, syntax, and sound. The selections in *The Best of Poe* highlight these literary traits.

Poe's stories and poems are remarkable, not only for an unusual anxiety about life, a preoccupation with loss, an all-consuming terror, and a unique perspective on death, but also for their rich mixture of beauty, the sensual, and the supernatural. Many readers wonder whether Poe's odd perspectives were the result of his unconventional lifestyle, but the debate over whether drugs or alcohol fueled his imagination and caused his death is inconclusive.

Most modern critics recognize the emotional difficulties that Poe experienced in his life, but they also doubt that binge drinking and opium use were the inspirations for his fascination with the macabre. It is just as likely that Poe's series of wrenching losses contributed to a lifelong struggle with depression. His



A photograph of a daguerreotype of Edgar Allan Poe 1848, first published 1880

mother and two other women who served as mother figures to him died prematurely. His wife was ill for years before she succumbed to tuberculosis, and a fiancée rejected him.

It is obvious that an artist as sensitive as Poe would reflect this pain in his writings. In addition, it is well known that he revised his work painstakingly. The hours that Poe spent revising his work also belie any claim that his work was the product of something other than his own innate genius and craftsmanship. Poet, storyteller, respected literary critic—Poe was and still remains one of the defining contributors to American literature. It is our hope that this collection will not only afford you the opportunity to revisit some of your favorite Poe writings, but also give you the chance to experience a side of his genius that, perhaps, you never knew existed.

Edgar Allan Poe was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on January 19, 1809. Both his mother, Elizabeth Arnold Poe, and his father, David Poe, Jr., were employed as actors in the Boston Theatre. After his father abandoned the family and his mother's death a year later, Poe was taken in by Mr. and Mrs. John Allan, but they never adopted him. While they lived in England, Poe and his stepfather began to argue fiercely and frequently. Mrs. Allan died, John remarried, and he and Poe became even further estranged.

In 1826, Poe began attending the University of Virginia, but was expelled later that year. He attended West Point for a short time; while there, he accumulated some gambling debts. John Allan would not help pay them, and Poe left the Academy. He went to Boston in 1827 and, finding that he could not support himself, enlisted in the United States Army under the name Edgar A. Perry. After two years, he was released and moved to Baltimore, Maryland, where his maternal relatives lived. During this period, newspapers and literary magazines began to publish Poe's work. *Tamerlane and Other Poems* appeared in 1827 and *Al Aaraaf* in 1829. His *MS. Found in a Bottle* won a literary contest in 1833.

Illustration 14 for "The Raven" by Edgar Allan Poe for the line "Not the least obeisance made he" by Gustave Dore

Three years later, however, his life would change drastically. In May of 1836, he married his 14-year-old cousin, Virginia Clemm,

who convinced Poe to settle in Philadelphia, where he obtained regular employment as an editor. In 1844, Poe moved to New York City, taking a job as editor for another literary magazine, *The Evening Mirror*. His most famous and popular poem, "The Raven," was published in this magazine; through this one poem, Poe finally achieved his well-deserved reputation as a great writer. In January of 1847, however, after a long illness, Virginia died of tuberculosis. Poe's grief, combined with the stress caused by years of caring for his invalid wife, caused him to collapse emotionally after her death; it is believed that this loss accelerated his drinking problem.

Yet, two years later, in 1849, he moved back to Richmond and planned to wed Sarah Elmira Royster Shelton, a woman Poe had been engaged to marry earlier in life. (John Allan had forced Poe to abandon any thoughts of marrying her because of a lack of money.) Poe and Shelton, both now having lost a spouse, renewed their relationship. They would, however, not marry due to Poe's untimely death, the circumstances of which remain a mystery, even today.

He left Richmond for Baltimore on September 27, 1849, and was found unconscious in a gutter there on October 3rd. Poe had collected approximately $1,500 for subscriptions to his literary magazine, *The Stylus,* but no money was found with him, leading to the speculation that he might have been robbed. He was taken to a hospital where he regained consciousness a few times, but Poe was never coherent enough to explain what had happened to him. Edgar Allan Poe died on October 7, 1849.

One doctor reported to the newspapers that Poe died from a "congestion of the brain." Poe was known to have a tendency toward binge drinking; this, along with the subject matter of his stories and poems, caused many contemporaries to speculate that alcohol or drugs played a role in his death, but the truth may never be known. Some modern critics speculate that he might have been an undiagnosed diabetic. Other theories include the possibility of a brain lesion. One historian theorizes that Poe was kidnapped, given alcohol, beaten, and forced to vote time and again for sheriff; this was called "cooping" and was a practice in Baltimore elections at the time. The possibility also exists that Poe encountered a spurned lover, who wounded him in the neck. What is certain, however, is that Edgar Allan Poe left behind an enduring legacy of work that will long outlive the circumstances of his death.

Edgar Allan Poe's grave, Baltimore, Maryland

Reading Pointers

Reading Pointers for Sharper Insights

As you read these stories and poems, pay attention to the following:

Poe's depiction of death:

- Death is not only inevitable, but it also can be beautiful, especially as it is portrayed in the poems.
- Death can be horrific when someone realizes it is imminent.
- Guilt, hatred, or revenge are appropriate justifications for murder.
- Impending death can be postponed, but not always.
- Death may actually enhance a loved one's beauty.

Poe's portrayal of love and beauty, especially in the poems:

- Love is chosen by the individual, not determined merely by fate.
- Love has historical, sometimes mythological, references.
- Love has no boundaries, not even in death.
- Beauty is only an idea, one that even death cannot weaken.
- Beauty in its ideal form cannot be attained.

Poe's innovative and unusual use of words in both genres:

- Words are frequently used for the way they sound, as well as for their meanings.
- Poe's rhythm and internal rhyme becomes almost hypnotic in many poems.
- The difficult vocabulary reflects the style of Poe's time period.
- Every important word is intended to evoke a mood or atmosphere in the reader, and Poe aimed for the same effect regardless of whether the work was prose or poetry.

Poe's ability to instill fear in the reader, primarily in the short stories:

- Poe builds suspense throughout the stories, revealing some facts while withholding others.
- Because the element of danger is usually present, the reader can feel the intensity of the emotions.
- The narration is frequently first person, which makes the reader's connection to the story more intimate.

- Poe's descriptions are usually minutely detailed to give a sense of verisimilitude to the stories, despite their supernatural atmosphere.
- The use of irony and black humor is common.
- Gothic elements are usually prominent in his writing: the supernatural, evil animals, and dark, gloomy settings.
- Poe's depictions of how the human mind works heighten a reader's connection to the story.
- The surprise endings provide a reason to go back through the work to look for clues missed on the first reading.

Edgar Allan Poe

THE BEST OF POE: THE TELL-TALE HEART, THE RAVEN, THE CASK OF AMONTILLADO, AND 30 OTHERS

Short Stories

The Fall of the House of Usher

Son cœur est un luth suspendu;
Sitôt qu'on le touche il résonne.†
De Béranger.†

DURING THE WHOLE of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country; and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. I know not how it was—but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. I say insufferable; for the feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment, with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible. I looked upon the scene before me—upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain—upon the bleak walls—upon the vacant

†Terms marked in the text with (†) can be looked up in the Glossary for additional information.

eye-like windows—upon a few rank sedges—and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees—with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium—the bitter lapse into everyday life—the hideous dropping off of the veil. There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart—an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime. What was it—I paused to think—what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? It was a mystery all insoluble; nor could I grapple with the shadowy fancies that crowded upon me as I pondered. I was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion, that while, beyond doubt, there *are* combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth. It was possible, I reflected, that a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the details of the picture, would be sufficient to modify, or perhaps to annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression; and, acting upon this idea, I reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled lustre by the dwelling, and gazed down—but with a shudder even more thrilling than before—upon the remodelled and inverted images of the gray sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant and eye-like windows.

Nevertheless, in this mansion of gloom I now proposed to myself a sojourn of some weeks. Its proprietor, Roderick Usher, had been one of my boon companions in boyhood; but many years had elapsed since our last meeting. A letter, however, had lately reached me in a distant part of the country—a letter from him—which, in its wildly importunate nature, had admitted of no other than a personal reply. The MS. gave evidence of nervous agitation. The writer spoke of acute bodily illness—of a mental disorder which oppressed him—and of an earnest desire to see me, as his best, and indeed his only personal friend, with a view of attempting, by the cheerfulness of my society, some alleviation of his malady. It was the manner in which all this, and much more, was said—it *was* the apparent heart that went with his request—which allowed me no room for hesitation; and I accordingly obeyed forthwith what I still considered a very singular summons.

Although, as boys, we had been even intimate associates, yet I really knew little of my friend. His reserve had been always excessive and habitual. I was aware, however, that his very ancient family had been noted, time out of mind, for a peculiar sensibility of temperament, displaying itself, through long ages, in many works of exalted art, and manifested, of late, in repeated deeds of munificent yet unobtrusive charity, as well as in a passionate devotion to the intricacies, perhaps even more than to the orthodox and easily recognisable beauties, of musical science. I had learned, too, the very remarkable fact, that the stem of the Usher race, all time-honoured as it was, had put forth, at no

period, any enduring branch; in other words, that the entire family lay in the direct line of descent, and had always, with very trifling and very temporary variation, so lain. It was this deficiency, I considered, while running over in thought the perfect keeping of the character of the premises with the accredited character of the people, and while speculating upon the possible influence which the one, in the long lapse of centuries, might have exercised upon the other—it was this deficiency, perhaps, of collateral issue, and the consequent undeviating transmission, from sire to son, of the patrimony with the name, which had, at length, so identified the two as to merge the original title of the estate in the quaint and equivocal appellation of the "House of Usher"—an appellation which seemed to include, in the minds of the peasantry who used it, both the family and the family mansion.

I have said that the sole effect of my somewhat childish experiment—that of looking down within the tarn—had been to deepen the first singular impression. There can be no doubt that the consciousness of the rapid increase of my superstition—for why should I not so term it?—served mainly to accelerate the increase itself. Such, I have long known, is the paradoxical law of all sentiments having terror as a basis. And it might have been for this reason only, that, when I again uplifted my eyes to the house itself, from its image in the pool, there grew in my mind a strange fancy—a fancy so ridiculous, indeed, that I but mention it to show the vivid force of the sensations which oppressed me. I had so worked upon my imagination as really to believe that about the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their immediate vicinity—an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up from the decayed trees, and the gray wall, and the silent tarn—a pestilent and mystic vapour, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued.

Shaking off from my spirit what *must* have been a dream, I scanned more narrowly the real aspect of the building. Its principal feature seemed to be that of an excessive antiquity. The discoloration of ages had been great. Minute fungi overspread the whole exterior, hanging in a fine tangled web-work from the eaves. Yet all this was apart from any extraordinary dilapidation. No portion of the masonry had fallen; and there appeared to be a wild inconsistency between its still perfect adaptation of parts, and the crumbling condition of the individual stones. In this there was much that reminded me of the specious totality of old wood-work which has rotted for long years in some neglected vault, with no disturbance from the breath of the external air. Beyond this indication of extensive decay, however, the fabric gave little token of instability. Perhaps the eye of a scrutinising observer might have discovered a barely perceptible fissure, which, extending from the roof of the building in front, made its way down the wall in a zigzag direction, until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn.

Noticing these things, I rode over a short causeway to the house. A servant in waiting took my horse, and I entered the Gothic archway of the hall. A valet, of stealthy step, thence conducted me, in silence, through many dark and intricate passages in my progress to the *studio* of his master. Much that I encountered on the way contributed, I know not how, to heighten the vague sentiments of which I have already spoken. While the objects around me—while the carvings of the ceilings, the sombre tapestries of the walls, the ebon blackness of the floors, and the phantasmagoric armorial trophies which rattled as I strode, were but matters to which, or to such as which, I had been accustomed from my infancy—while I hesitated not to acknowledge how familiar was all this—I still wondered to find how unfamiliar were the fancies which ordinary images were stirring up. On one of the staircases, I met the physician of the family. His countenance, I thought, wore a mingled expression of low cunning and perplexity. He accosted me with trepidation and passed on. The valet now threw open a door and ushered me into the presence of his master.

The room in which I found myself was very large and lofty. The windows were long, narrow, and pointed, and at so vast a distance from the black oaken floor as to be altogether inaccessible from within. Feeble gleams of encrimsoned light made their way through the trellised panes, and served to render sufficiently distinct the more prominent objects around the eye, however, struggled in vain to reach the remoter angles of the chamber, or the recesses of the vaulted and fretted ceiling. Dark draperies hung upon the walls. The general furniture was profuse, comfortless, antique, and tattered. Many books and musical instruments lay scattered about, but failed to give any vitality to the scene. I felt that I breathed an atmosphere of sorrow. An air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom hung over and pervaded all.

Upon my entrance, Usher arose from a sofa on which he had been lying at full length, and greeted me with a vivacious warmth which had much in it, I at first thought, of an overdone cordiality—of the constrained effort of the *ennuyé* man of the world. A glance, however, at his countenance, convinced me of his perfect sincerity. We sat down; and for some moments, while he spoke not, I gazed upon him with a feeling half of pity, half of awe. Surely, man had never before so terribly altered, in so brief a period, as had Roderick Usher! It was with difficulty that I could bring myself to admit the identity of the wan being before me with the companion of my early boyhood. Yet the character of his face had been at all times remarkable. A cadaverousness of complexion; an eye large, liquid, and luminous beyond comparison; lips somewhat thin and very pallid, but of a surpassingly beautiful curve; a nose of a delicate Hebrew model, but with a breadth of nostril unusual in similar formations; a finely moulded chin, speaking, in its want of prominence, of a want of moral energy; hair of a more than web-like softness and tenuity; these features, with an inordinate expansion above the regions of the temple, made up altogether a countenance

Glossary
(Poems)

Dreams
—

A Dream
—

To —
—

Alone
—

To Helen
Nicean – from Asia Minor
Naiad – a fresh-water nymph in Greek mythology
Psyche – the Greek goddess of the soul

Lenore
Stygian river – refers to Styx, one of the five rivers that flow in the underworld in Greek mythology; Styx is the river that the gods swore unbreakable oaths to. The other four are Acheron, Lethe, Cocytus, and Phlegethon. Acheron surrounds Hades; Lethe represents the forgetting of the past and all earthly things; Cocytus was formed from the tears of sorrow; and Phlegethon is the river of fire.
Guy De Vere – a minor English nobleman in the 13th century; it could, however, merely be a name Poe chose to rhyme with *tear*.
***Peccavimus* –** [Latin] "We have sinned."

The Coliseum
Judaean king – a reference to ancient Israel; when joined with the next line, it is likely that the term *Judaean king* means Jesus Christ.
Gethsemane – the garden where Jesus was taken prisoner before he was crucified
Chaldee – a language used during biblical times
Echoes – a reference to Echo, the nymph from Greek mythology who loved Narcissus; Narcissus however, loved only himself. Consequently, Echo languished and withered away, due to unanswered love, until only her voice remained.

Memnon – a monument on the west bank of the Nile; a legend exists concerning one of two very large statues there. Because of a large crack that ran through it, the stone emitted a moaning sound as it was warmed by the sun. The statue was believed to represent King Memnon, and the sound was said to be him greeting his mother, Eos.

To One In Paradise

Hope – here, a reference to the Sun

"By what eternal streams." – Some versions of this poem have the last line written as "By what Italian streams." Some also include an additional stanza. The poem itself comes from a Poe short story entitled, "The Visionary."

The Haunted Palace

Echoes – See note: *Echoes* in "The Coliseum" glossary.

The Conqueror Worm

—

The Raven

Pallas – a reference to Pallas Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom; there are numerous interpretations of why Poe chose this specific reference:

- Poe may be implying that the Raven, a symbol of death, has the wisdom of Athena.
- It is possible that Poe is also belittling wisdom itself by having the bird perch unceremoniously on the bust.
- Being a pagan goddess, Athena also represents an aspect of the "quaint and curious" books the narrator has used to ease his sorrow over the deceased Lenore.

Plutonian – relating to the underworld; Pluto was the Roman god who guarded the entrance to the world of the dead

"Nevermore" – This word can be interpreted as meaning "No," as well as "Never again."

Seraphim – an order of angels associated with the glory of God; according to the Bible they possess six wings and resemble poisonous snakes.

Tempter – the Devil

Gilead – a region of Palestine known for its balm, which has the power to cure illnesses

Aidenn – Arabic for *heaven*

Sonnet—To Science

Diana – the Greek goddess of the hunt, also known as Artemis

Hamadryad – a wood-nymph

Naiad – a fresh-water nymph in Greek mythology

Vocabulary

aberration – an abnormality
abeyance – a state of suspended activity
abhorrence – hatred, loathing
absconded – left quickly; disappeared
abstract – removed; deep in thought
abstruse – difficult to understand
accession – an increase
accurst – being under a curse
acrid – having a strong, sharp odor
acumen – sharp, keen mental insight; wisdom
addling – confusion
admeasurement – the dimensions, size
adown – down upon
advert – to refer to
agate – a type of quartz
aghast – shocked, stricken with horror
alarumed – alarmed
albeit – although
allayed – eased, alleviated
anointed – applied oil
anomalous – abnormal
anon – soon
apathy – a lack of concern
apparition – a ghost
appellation – a name, designation
appertains – belongs; pertains to
arcades – passageways
Archipelago – a group of islands
arrant – extreme
ascendancy – a controlling influence, superiority
ascension – climbing
ascertain – to learn, deduce
asphytic – unconscious
asunder – split apart
athwart – across
atomies – tiny particles, atoms
audacity – boldness
aught – anything
august – dignified, respected
austere – stern

avaunt – leave, go away
avidity – greedy enthusiasm
avow – to declare
axioms – statements generally regarded as true
azure – the color blue
balm – something soothing, an ointment
barks – ships
baubles – trinkets, charms
bayonet – a knife that attaches to the end of a gun
bedight – arrayed
beguiling – deceiving
benignity – kindness, gentleness
bidden – ordered
bier – a stand that holds a coffin
boudoir – a bedroom
bowers – trees, arbors
braggadocio – a boaster
brazier – a holder for burning coals
breadth – a large area; the width of something
bumper – a full glass
burthens – burdens
buskin – a boot reaching mid-calf
cadaverousness – resemblance to a dead person
cant – insincere speech
caparisoned – decorated, adorned
caprice – a whim
car – a chariot
caracols – fancy turns performed by a horse
Caryatides – columns carved in the shape of a draped female figure
casement – a window
catacombs – underground burial places
catalepsy – a condition in which one loses muscular control and the limbs remain in a fixed position
cattymount – a generic term for a wild cat such as a cougar
causeway – a raised road across water
censer – a holder for incense
chagrin – disappointment caused by embarrassment
charnel – deathlike, related to death; a place for dead bodies
chastisements – punishments
chiding – scolding
chimaeras – delusions
circumscribing – encircling; constricting