



HORROR, DELIRIUM AND LITERATURE: THE ANNIVERSARY OF EDGAR ALLAN POE

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POE: A COMPLICATED LIFE

Edgar Allan Poe was a prolific horror and mystery writer who exerted significant influence over the horror genre. He was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1809, and died under very mysterious circumstances in Baltimore, Maryland in 1849. Poe went through difficulties all his life. After his parents' death, he was sheltered by the Mrs. Allan, his mother's close friend, and her husband, but he was never adopted by them. Nevertheless, he included the surname Allan between his first and last names. After spending one year at University of Virginia and an embarking upon a short career in the army, he started his literary career while living in Baltimore and New York. During this time, he worked for the magazine *Southern Literature Messenger* writing short tales and poems.

His turbulent life and the death of his wife contributed to his descent into alcoholism, causing him to suffer from hallucinations and *delirium tremens* (symptoms that appear after a long periods of alcohol abuse). Indeed, his extraordinary narrations seem to offer a description of these episodes. *The Black Cat* is one such example in that depicts the terrible consequences of temporary insanity brought on by alcoholism and the resulting obsession with a cat. The detailed narration of insanity during this frightening episode stemmed from Poe's anxieties, resulting in a pathological tale of alcoholism. Thus, Poe's experiences with intense states of inebriation resulted in the creation of a unique literary style. As Stephen Rachman states, "it is not *any* confessional narrative that is being "penned" but a drunken one" (Rachman 2011, 28).

Poe's death is still a mystery and there are several hypotheses about it. What is known for certain is that Poe died on a rainy day in Baltimore on October 3rd, 1843. Joseph W. Walker, a compositor for the newspaper *Baltimore Sun*, found him lying in



the gutter and wrote a letter to an acquaintance of Poe, Dr. Joseph E. Snodgrass, affirming that: ““There is a gentleman, rather the worse for wear, at Ryan's 4th ward polls, who goes under the cognomen of Edgar A. Poe, and who appears in great distress, & he says he is acquainted with you, he is in need of immediate assistance”” (Geiling 2014). It has been said that it could have been by heavy metal poisoning, a brain tumor or murder. Clearly, Poe’s dark and mysterious life was mirrored in his death.

POE: HIS WORKS & LEGACY

Among his works, *Berenice* (1835), *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1843), *The Black Cat* (1843) are some of the most popular short tales. Charles Baudelaire would later write that “for him, imagination is the queen of faculties; but by this word he understands something greater than that which is understood by the average reader. [...] Imagination is an almost divine faculty which perceives immediately and without philosophical methods the inner and secret relations of things, the correspondences and the analogies” (Baudelaire 1964, 127). His mastery over detailed observation of the world allowed Poe to deploy irrationality and drive readers into a world which could be twisted and unruly by the rational mind. Thus, familiar spaces would become uncanny territories that threatened stability.

The Fall of the House of Usher perfectly captures societal changes and the transformation of a familiar world into an unfamiliar one. Industrialization placed the bourgeoisie in a superior place and blood privileges were no more. The past vanished as “the deep black lake closed darkly over all that remained of the house of Usher” (Poe 1839, 33). The “deep black lake” represents industrial capitalism, a system that was destroying the ancient world and values, and Usher’s disappearance symbolizes the rupture with the previous values. As Poe’s tale suggests, the world would be led by a new pragmatic philosophy marked by money.

POE IN POPULAR CULTURE: FILM & MUSIC

Poe’s legacy would go on to pervade popular culture through film adaptations and music. Roger Corman’s film version of *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1960) reflects this influence, especially Poe’s ability to observe decay. Poe’s attention to decay is especially highlighted in Vincent Price’s portrayal of Rodrick Usher. Price’s monologue elucidates the suffering behind the Ushers’ agony and torment: “Madeline and I are like figures of fine glass; the slightest touch and we may shatter. Both of us suffer from a morbid acuteness of the senses. Mine is the worst for having existed the longer, but both of us are afflicted with it” (DialogX5 2011). The monologue highlights their weakness and emphasizes the moment before collapse. Philip Winthrop and the



spectator are forced to listen to Usher's cries while he is walking towards a wooden bed in a luxurious chamber. His words emphasize what his red jacket and his blonde hair reflect, allowing him to blend in with the mansion, which is about to self-destroy. Previously, Philip Winthrop's blue suit contrasts with the red setting which distances him from Usher's decline. Through this scene, Corman adapts Poe's literary style into a film language, where visuality is as essential as words in literature.

This film adaptation was preceded by a series of films, adapted by the same filmmaker, Roger Corman, and known as Corman-Poe cycle. Some of these adaptations included *The Pit and the Pendulum* (1961), *The Premature Burial and Tales of Terror* (1962), *The Raven* (1963), *The Masque of the Red Death* and *The Tomb of Ligeia* (1964). These movies differed from other adaptations, which commonly used as gimmicks. In William Castle's films, for example, a baroque use of color often exceeded the narrative (Leeder 2018, 200). Corman's titles, however, would frequently play with purple, red and green, overlaying the mise-en-scene with these hues in order to twist reality or represent deliriums and dreams that characters had. In this way, Corman used color to visually evoke Poe's writing, rather than to overpower it.

Although Poe's stories are frequently adapted to film, as seen in *The Black Cat* (Lucio Fulci, 1981), and *Morella* (James Glenn Dudelson, 1997), Poe's persona has also inspired movies like *The Raven* (James McTeigue, 2012). *The Raven* turns the writer into an amateur detective who is involved in a police investigation of serial murders in Baltimore. Music has also paid homage to this master of horror and gothic literature in genres ranging from classical (the opera *Ligeia* composed by Augusta Read Thomas in 1994) to popular (Lou Reed's album *The Raven* in 2003). There is also a heavy metal band called Nevermore, founded in 1991, whose name honors the famous line of Poe's poem *The Raven*.

Crucially, horror, gothic, and our world would not have been the same without Poe. His tales taught us that darkness is always lurking behind hidden places and waiting to challenge our rationality through spectral images. Additionally, his influence on writers like Ray Bradbury and filmmakers like Alfred Hitchcock reveals that we will never stop reviewing his works and remembering him.



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