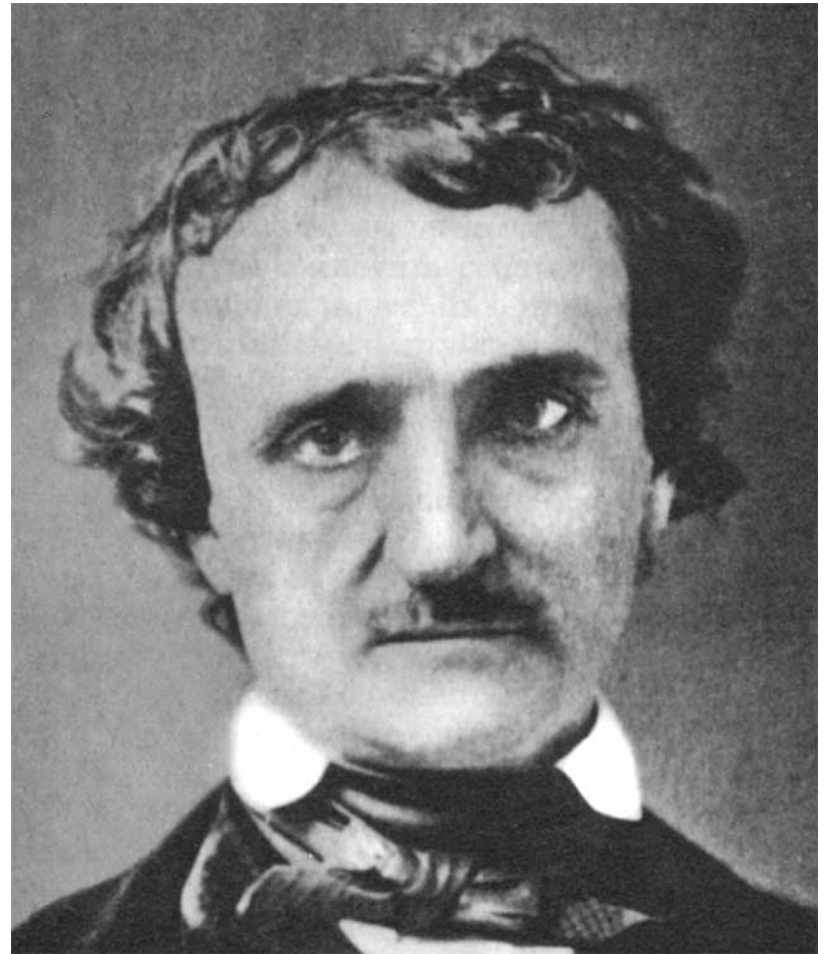


Edgar Allan Poe,
1809-1849

E.A. Poe

- Poe is a romantic figure, the archetype of the extravagant genius, an embodiment of the satanic characters he developed in his fiction.



Life

- Son of travelling actor
- Raised in Richmond, Virginia by the Allan family
- Attended the University of Virginia
- 1827 left the Allan home, left for Boston
- 1827 Joined the Army
- 1829 Discharged
- 1835 married his cousin
- *1835-37 Southern Literary Messenger* in Richmond
- *1839 Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* in Philadelphia
- 1847 Virginia dies
- 1849 October 7 dies in Baltimore

Poe's literary facets

- Poet
- Writer of fiction: horror, mystery, macabre, (gothic romance), detective stories
- Theoretician of the short story
- Critic
- Editor
- Figure of influence

Poetry

- 1827 *Tamerlane and other poems*
- 1829 *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane and Minor Poems*
- 1831 *Poems;*
- 1845 *The Raven*
- 1848 *Eureka*

Fiction

- One of the earliest American practitioners of the short story
- Known for his mysterious tales of horror
- Considered the inventor of the detective-fiction genre

Classification of his tales

1) Gothic tales, (“tales of the arabesque”):
often told either by mad or unreliable
narrators or by decadent aristocratic narrators
who seem traumatized by the events they
relate: “The Fall of the House of Usher”, “The
Cask of Amontillado”, “The Black Cat”....

2) Tales of sensation, a sub-type of the Gothic in which a victim records his sensations while being trapped in some horrible situation: "The Pit and the Pendulum"

3) Comic tales

4) Tales of analysis, e.g. "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" or "The Purloined Letter".

Poe's Method

- *The Poetic Principle,*
- Against didacticism (the heresy of the didactic) and allegory
- Brevity; general design; nothing is irrelevant
- Single effect to which all elements must be related; the structural unity of effect
- Stories were products of superior minds & logic & design; not outbursts of a Romantic genius
- *The Philosophy of Composition*

The Philosophy of Composition

- description of principles employed in the process of writing *The Raven*
- comments on the purpose and ideal form of poetry

- *In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design.*
- *(A work of art) should be universally appreciable. In the contemplation of universal Beauty we alone find it possible to attain that pleasurable elevation, or excitement, of the soul, which we recognize as the Poetic Sentiment. (...). Beauty is the sole legitimate province of the poem (...) and melancholy is the most legitimate of all the poetical tones.*

Poe's Reception

- Emerson: The Jingle Man
- Henry James: “enthusiasm for Poe is the mark of a decidedly primitive stage of reflection”.
- T.S. Eliot: Poe's intellect was that of a “highly gifted young person before puberty”.
- Huxley: The substance of Poe is refined; its is form that is vulgar. He is [...] one of Nature's Gentlemen unhappily cursed with bad taste

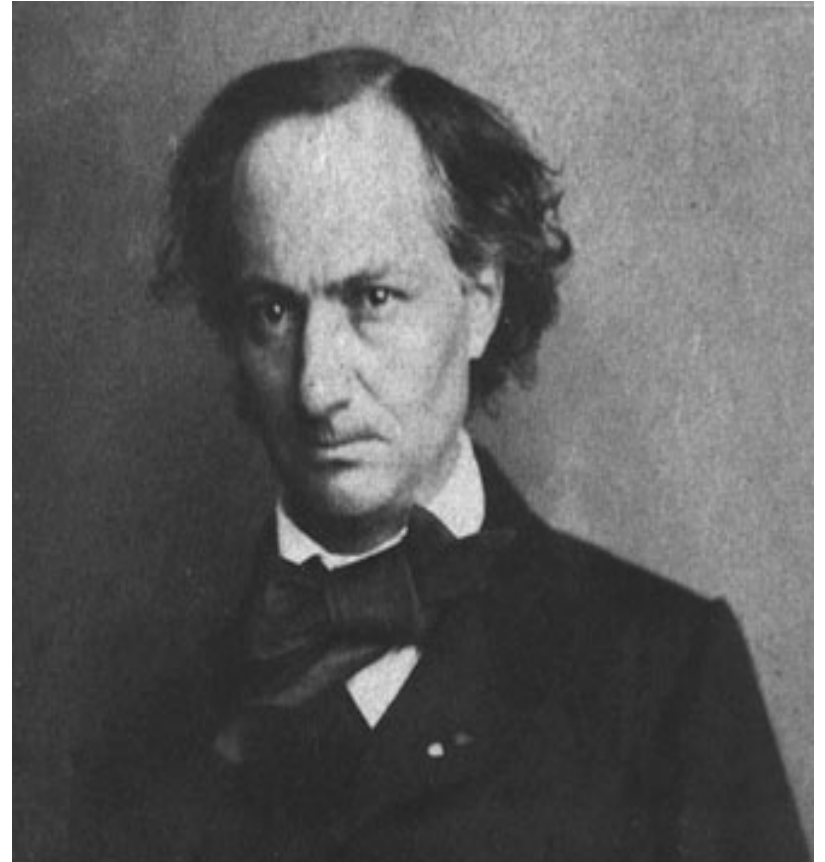
Poe's Reception

- Discovered by symbolist and imagist poets in France; Baudelaire in 1850s, propagating and translating his works;
- Poe - an isolated and brilliant victim of his artistic temperament, Neo-European and artistic, essentially opposed to his bourgeois American milieu of 'money-making' and democratic mediocrity" (Allen 11)

Poe's Reception

... Poe was fated to become a most unhappy writer. In Paris, in Germany, he would have found friends; in America he had to fight for his bread. Thus his drunkenness and nomadic habits are easily explained. He went through life as if through a Sahara desert...

- Charles Baudelaire



- **Contemporary views:**
- The enormous, unbroken popularity that Poe has enjoyed has obscured the fact of his being.. the only serious literary critic of his generation, and America's first man of letters. This was remarkable in the 1830s and the 1840s. Poe's contemporaries were bent on making money. To be bent on making nothing more substantial than literature was eccentric; to spend time *judging* it, or formulating theories about its creation, was aberrant. (Goode, *American Literature*, 1983)

- There was hardly any public in America that could have understood what Poe was trying to do. The only serious literary culture was in Boston, where the high-minded Transcendentalism which animated it rendered Poe anathema (...). There was no place in Boston, stiff with notions of social and religious reform, for a writer preoccupied with artistic integrity, clarity of effect, and purity of style.
(Cunliffe, *The Penguin History of American Lit.*)

- With Poe we confront the paradoxical fact of his being positioned in the category of the “Southern writer”, yet there is nothing in his works to fit the profile of the southern regional writer. Poe wrote almost nothing about the South, or about living there, or about Southern history and society, or for that matter about any kind of history whatsoever. (Louis Robin, *A Study of the Literature of the Old South*, 1986).

- American fiction is essentially and at its best non-realistic, even anti-realistic (...). It is not merely in flight from the physical data of the actual world, in search of a (sexless and dim) ideal. It is a gothic fiction, non-realistic and negative -a literature of darkness and the grotesque in a land of light and affirmation. (Richard Chase, *The American Novel and its Tradition*, 1957)



