

EDGAR ALLEN POE AND THE GOTHIC NOVEL IN AMERICA

Edgar Allen Poe, 1809-1849, spent his short life in various New England cities, born in Boston and dying in Baltimore. He endeavored to make his living as a writer, and while his writing--spanning essays, short stories, and poetry--met with acclaim, he struggled with poverty much of his life. His death remains a mystery, although the accepted claims that he died of a drug overdose are now being questioned as false rumors spread by literary enemies. For Poe did have and make enemies. He was an honest, but cruel literary critic, whose sharp pen often harshly criticized others.



While Poe made much of his living from these essays, it is the legacy of his short stories and poetry that remain. Poe is credited with the development of the short story form in the United States, and especially of the detective novel. It is in Poe's writing that we can see how horror writing and detective writing grew from the same beginnings, and certainly today we can this same interweaving in crime shows like *Criminal Minds* and *CSI*. They share Poe's formula: a horrific, gory crime solved by the rational, highly moral mind of a protagonist detective.



Yet others of Poe's short stories explore the darker side of human nature, using the perspective of the criminal or aberrant mind. For example, "The Tell-Tale Heart" explores the descent into madness through a 1st person narrator, as does Poe's long poem, "The Raven". Other stories explore the mind of the victim, in "The Premature Burial." Many of Poe's stories return over and over again to the same main themes. Poe's obsessive theme of being buried alive continues in "The Fall of the House of Usher." A number of Poe's poems and stories revolve around the death of a young woman; in his personal life, he lost his mother when he was only two to tuberculosis, and then lost his foster mother in early adulthood. His wife, Virginia Clemm, also died of tuberculosis 12 years after their marriage, and she suffered from the disease for years before her demise. Her illness and death contributed greatly to Poe's increasing struggles with alcohol. His death two years later on the streets of Baltimore, nearly insensible and mysteriously wearing someone else's clothes, continues to be cloaked in mystery, even as to the cause of his death. (Note: the recent movie called *The Raven*, based on this period in Poe's life and filling in the details with some wild fiction, is worth watching if you are a Poe fan.)

While Poe is credited with creating the detective novel and enlarging the narrative sphere of gothic writing with his explorations of the insane or criminal narrator, the United States certainly had earlier contributors to the gothic novel. The excerpt from *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination* by Karen Halttunen, with an excerpt included in this module, provides fascinating cultural backdrop in the puritanical worldview of New England American in this time period. A famous fictional example of the American gothic from this time period is *The House of Seven Gables*, published in 1851 by Nathaniel Hawthorne, also writer of the *Scarlet Letter*. Hawthorne's writings feature prevalent themes of the inherently sinful and disturbed nature of humanity. Most often, however, the truly sinful are not the marginalized or rejected characters, but instead the elite community leaders.

Thus evil lurks not in the monsters on the outskirts of humanity, but within the most privileged and gifted classes. In *The House of the Seven Gables*, a family whose ancestors



participated in the Salem witch trials two centuries earlier, are now a decayed and impoverished remnant of a once powerful family. The home is haunted by a beautiful female ancestor who was killed through witchcraft, and a contemporary

relation has recently returned from prison, having been wrongfully accused of murder. He later struggles with his sanity. While the story ends happily with questions of guilt and wrongdoings resolved, it requires the two main characters to leave the ancestral home to achieve happiness. The adjacent photo shows the actual home in Salem, Massachusetts that inspired Hawthorne's tale.

Hawthorne's writings have been said to deeply influence H.P. Lovecraft, who was obsessed with the notions of inherited sin and madness, and complicated them further with then-popular speculations about "pure" vs. "mixed" races.