Evermore

The enduring influence of Edgar Allan Poe

By Paul Lewis January 11, 2009

And the raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting

Born 200 years ago on Jan. 19, 1809 in Boston, Edgar Allan Poe, like his most famous character, hovers over American culture—brooding, scowling, and winking. Arguably the most influential of our great writers, Poe has been condescended to by highbrow authors. Emerson called him the "jingle man." T. S. Eliot said he had a pre-pubescent intellect. Yeats saw him as "vulgar and commonplace." With detractors like these, no wonder his stories are so much fun!

Best known for a few images—a dead man's still-beating heart, a decaying mansion falling into its reflecting tarn, a bricked-up, corpse-concealing wall, and, of course, a black cat—Poe's work is about far more than mere terror.

Poe was our first great critic. In an age of pious reform, he insisted that the main purpose of literature was to move readers, not inculcate truths. The author of political and social satires, hoaxes and parodies, a long nonfiction study of cosmology, and a short novel about polar exploration—he ranged across genres, created the modern detective story, and greatly enriched what the gothic could achieve.

By relying not on ruined castles and disreputable aristocrats but on characters rendered unreliable by their distorted sensations and implausible assumptions, he crafted nightmares worthy of a new land. Part charlatan and part magician, he took readers to moments of frightening confusion and, then from behind the curtain, provided just enough information to sustain ambiguity about the sources of fear: Were they internal or external, psychological or demonic?

Both Ann Radcliffe and Monk Lewis, Poe's gothic predecessors, eventually explain the mysteries that plague their characters either in natural or supernatural terms. It remained for Poe to demonstrate the importance of doubt in maintaining terror: that the gothic lives as long as its questions are unanswered. When the narrator in "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839) pauses to wonder, "What was it that so unnerved me ...," he opens a door into madness. When the student in "The Raven" (1845) addresses his tormentor as "bird or fiend," he allows an ambiguous conjunction to hold him in unending confusion.

Many of Poe's contemporaries Americanized their stories by situating characters in familiar landscapes and historical contexts. Cooper set his warriors loose in the forests of New York. Hawthorne wrote about the world he knew in Boston and Salem. Melville launched his great sea tale from Nantucket. Thoreau "traveled much in Concord." And even Whitman, who peered around the planet and out into space, was mostly interested in the new nation as a source of democratic vistas. Although it often can be difficult to see where Poe's stories are set, their place in the formation of an American mythos is clear. From the

start Poe had in mind something like Tocqueville's observation that democracy focuses attention on the individual. Though some of the dark tales are set in named places (London, the Hudson River Valley), many of them exist inside a single mind responding to dangerous mysteries.

Unfortunate childhood experiences (most notably the early loss of both parents) left Poe with an abiding sense of life as random and cruel but also absurdly comic. Moving beyond the predictability of mind-numbing fear, his genius flashes in moments when responses to the unknown collide and something terrifying suddenly seems funny or vice versa. The speaker's shifting moods in "The Raven" are typical. Brooding and isolated when the creature knocks, he moves through denial to attempts to laugh off his concern to an effort to explain what is happening rationally to mournful despair.

Though he never achieved the commercial success he sought, Poe understood what audiences desire. The father of the psychological thriller, he has influenced every writer in the genre from Bram Stoker to Stephen King and Ann Rice. Every pre-human creature H. P. Lovecraft kept in shadow, every inexplicable disruption that detached Hitchcock's heroes from their normal lives, every debate between Scully and Mulder, every monster seen through the shaking lens of a camcorder owes a debt to Poe.

For a sense of Poe's gift, consider the evolution of DC Comic's villain the Joker. Created in the early 1940s as a brilliant criminal, he followed a tradition that can be traced through Conan Doyle's Professor Moriarty to Poe's Minister D: an opponent clever and evil enough to challenge even the greatest detective, whether it's the Batman, Sherlock Holmes, or Poe's Dupin. In the late 1980s, when superhero comics darkened and Freddy Krueger held sway over American horror, the Joker became a psychopath who taunted his victims. Behind such killing jokers stands Poe's Montresor who mocks the doomed Fortunato as they descend in search of a cask of amontillado. In the most recent avatar, Heath Ledger's Joker has left humor behind entirely. The smiles he leaves on his victims' faces are cut into their cheeks with a blade but with no accompanying quip. Randomly violent, driven by neither greed nor lust, this latest fiend embodies Poe's idea of perverse or unmotivated evil: "the overwhelming tendency to do wrong for the wrong's sake." As with the Joker, so it is with virtually every dark figure or trope in popular culture: Lift the rock and Poe stares up at you.

In the end, then, the question arises: How should we celebrate his birthday? We could raise a glass to the master of mystery, but, given his misuse of alcohol, that might be inappropriate. We could remember the first time a Poe story made us shudder or laugh. Or we could go down to our basements—the darkened cellars in our houses and our minds—and take a look around.

And the raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon's that is dreaming,
And the lamp-light o'er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;
And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor
Shall be lifted—nevermore!"

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