

THE **POE** MUSEUM

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TEACHING AID:
POE IN CONTEXT





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This teaching aid highlights the historical context which surrounded and influenced Poe's literature. This aid provides primary sources, paired literature/media, historical context, programs, and activities/assessments to pair with these contextual lenses

Inventor of the Detective Story

In 1841, before the word “detective” had entered the English language, Poe published the first modern detective story “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” In this tale, Poe established the prototype future mystery writers would follow. First, there would be a seemingly impossible crime, in this case a double murder occurring inside a room still locked from the inside. Then the detective character analyzes the clues in order to solve the mystery. To show the audience just how intelligent the detective is, the narrator is not the detective but his less brilliant side-kick. “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” was so well received that Poe decided to follow it with two sequels also featuring his detective, a Parisian named C. Auguste Dupin. So assured of his own powers of analysis was Poe that in his tale “The Mystery of Marie Roget,” Poe claimed to have solved a real-life crime that had baffled the New York City police. This would be the first detective story based on a true crime. Poe’s “Thou Art the Man” became the first comic detective story and the first mystery in which the culprit turned out to be “the least likely suspect.” During the author’s lifetime, “The Gold Bug” was so popular it was adapted into a stage play. In this tale, an eccentric detective and his confused side-kick/narrator decode an encrypted treasure map in order to find Captain Kidd’s gold. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of the Sherlock Holmes mysteries, once wrote, “Where was the detective story before Poe breathed the breath of life into it?” He considered Poe the father of the detective genre. In fact, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes is so closely based on Poe’s C. Auguste Dupin that early filmmakers looking for more Holmes mysteries to adapt to the screen merely changed the names of Poe’s characters to turn “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” into “Sherlock Holmes and the Great Murder Mystery.”

Pioneer of Science Fiction

In 1835, Poe published “The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall”, the story of a trip to the moon. Although other writers had written fantastic stories, Poe added realistic scientific details to make his stories more believable. Thus the modern science fiction story was born. Throughout his career Poe wrote stories about the limits of technology. In “The Man Who Was Used Up,” a man injured in war has his body parts replaced with synthetic ones. “Mellonta Tauta” is the tale of a future in which regular, trans-Atlantic air travel is possible. In “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” a doctor is able to communicate with a man whose body had already died. This tale was so realistic that it was reprinted in a medical journal in England. Poe’s science fiction tales were so believable that he once reported in the New York Sun that someone had crossed the Atlantic Ocean in a balloon—decades before it would actually happen. Eager to learn all about this fantastic voyage, New Yorkers rushed to buy the paper, only later to discover they had been fooled. The story is now called “The Balloon Hoax.” Jules Verne, who was only seven years old when “Hans Pfaall” was published, grew up considering Poe his favorite author. Verne would later become the first writer to specialize in the science fiction genre. His tales of balloon trips and space travel borrowed themes already seen in Poe’s works. In *The Sphinx of the Ice Fields* Verne showed his admiration of Poe by writing a sequel to Poe’s novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*.

Master of the Psychological Horror Story

Much of Poe’s popular appeal rests on a few of his tales of terror, but the horror genre has frequently been ignored or derided by critics. This was the case even in Poe’s day. When Poe’s critics complained about his “German” (or “Gothic”) tales, Poe answered, “Terror is not of Germany, but of the soul.” Poe believed terror was a part of life and therefore a legitimate subject for literature. By Poe’s time, Gothic fiction had already been popularized by Horace Walpole and Charles Brockman Brown. Their tales typically centered around family curses and haunted castles. Poe’s first published tale “Metzengerstein” falls into this genre, but in Poe’s next horror tales he would move the action away from a remote castle and into an everyday setting like a home (“The Tell-Tale Heart,” “The Black Cat”) or a school (“William Wilson”). Even when Poe set his horror tale in a distant land he focused less on the location than on the psychology of his characters. Poe also wrote about the subjects that were generating newspaper headlines in his day—murders, premature burials, and grave robberies. Author H.P. Lovecraft devoted an entire chapter of his book *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1935) to Poe. In the passage excerpted below Lovecraft

explains why Poe's tales of terror were so revolutionary: Before Poe the bulk of weird writers had worked largely in the dark; without an understanding of the psychological basis of the horror appeal, and hampered by more or less of conformity to certain empty literary conventions such as the happy ending, virtue rewarded, and in general a hollow moral didacticism, acceptance of popular standards and values, and striving of the author to obtrude his own emotions into the story and take sides with the partisans of the majority's artificial ideas. Poe, on the other hand, perceived the essential impersonality of the real artist; and knew that the function of creative fiction is merely to express and interpret events and sensations as they are, regardless of how they tend or what they prove -- good or evil, attractive or repulsive, stimulating or depressing, with the author always acting as a vivid and detached chronicler rather than as a teacher, sympathizer, or vendor of opinion. He saw clearly that all phases of life and thought are equally eligible as a subject matter for the artist, and being inclined by temperament to strangeness and gloom, decided to be the interpreter of those powerful feelings and frequent happenings which attend pain rather than pleasure, decay rather than growth, terror rather than tranquility, and which are fundamentally either adverse or indifferent to the tastes and traditional outward sentiments of mankind, and to the health, sanity, and normal expansive welfare of the species. As a magazine editor, Poe knew what kinds of stories sold magazines. Since he was the first American author to try to live entirely from his writing, he needed to write things that would sell. After having submitted a particularly gory tale entitled "Berenice" to The Southern Literary Messenger, Poe wrote the magazine's owner Thomas White on April 30, 1835 to explain why he had written the story. A word or two in relation to Berenice. Your opinion of it is very just. The subject is by far too horrible, and I confess that I hesitated in sending it you especially as a specimen of my capabilities. The Tale 14 originated in a bet that I could produce nothing effective on a subject so singular, provided I treated it seriously. But what I wish to say relates to the character of your Magazine more than to any articles I may offer, and I beg you to believe that I have no intention of giving you advice, being fully confident that, upon consideration, you will agree with me. The history of all Magazines shows plainly that those which have attained celebrity were indebted for it to articles similar in nature -- to Berenice -- although, I grant you, far superior in style and execution. I say similar in nature. You ask me in what does this nature consist? In the ludicrous heightened into the grotesque: the fearful coloured into the horrible: the witty exaggerated into the burlesque: the singular wrought out into the strange and mystical. You may say all this is bad taste. I have my doubts about it... But whether the articles of which I speak are, or are not in bad taste is little to the purpose. To be appreciated you must be read, and these things are invariably sought after with avidity. They are, if you will take notice, the articles which find their way into other periodicals, and into the papers, and in

this manner, taking hold upon the public mind they augment the reputation of the source where they originated... Thus the first men in [England] have not thought writings of this nature unworthy of their talents, and I have go[od] reason to believe that some very high names valued themselves principally upon this species of literature. To be sure originality is an essential in these things -- great attention must be paid to style, and much labour spent in their composition, or they will degenerate into the turgid or the absurd... In respect to Berenice individually I allow that it approaches the very verge of bad taste -- but I will not sin quite so egregiously again. I propose to furnish you every month with a Tale of the nature which I have alluded to. The effect -- if any -- will be estimated better by the circulation of the Magazine than by any comments upon its contents. This much, however, it is necessary to premise, that no two of these Tales will have the slightest resemblance one to the other either in matter or manner -- still however preserving the character which I speak of.

America's First Great Lyric Poet

"If the volume [of Poe's poetry] of 1829 contained poetry unlike any that had as yet appeared in the United States, the volume of 1831 gave us in "To Helen," "Israfel," "The Doomed City," "The Valley of Nis" and "Irene," poetry of a kind that had not yet been written in the English language." ~Arthur Hobson Quinn, Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography Poe's America was still young and struggling to establish its literary identity. Readers across the Atlantic considered American literature inferior to their own. Then Europeans discovered Poe's poetry. British Poet Laureate Alfred, Lord Tennyson called Poe "the most original American genius." Oscar Wilde called him "marvelous lord of rhythmic expression," and poets Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Algernon Swinburne were also among the British admirers of his work. In France the poets Charles Baudelaire and Stephan Mallarme revered Poe and his work. Poe wrote only about forty-five poems, but these include some of the best-known in the English language: "The Raven," "Annabel Lee," and "The Bells." Even though Poe made a living writing short stories and magazine articles he considered poetry his true calling. He described poetry as "the rhythmical creation of beauty." He thought the sound of the poetry should do as much as the words to convey the meaning of the poem, and for him a poem had no other purpose than to be beautiful. Some of his poems sounded so much like music that he included words like "hymn," "song," or "ballad" in the titles. It is said that when he gave public readings he almost sang his poetry. To fully appreciate the musical quality of Poe's poetry, one must read it aloud. The poetry lends itself so well to performance that after Poe's death many composers, including Sergey Rachmaninoff and John Philip Sousa, adapted Poe's poems to music. As opposed

to many other poets of his day like Ralph Waldo Emerson, who derided Poe as the “jingle man” for his musical poems, Poe did not feel that a poem should instruct or edify the reader. In his essay “The Philosophy of Composition,” Poe wrote that he began each poem by considering the emotion “effect” or mood he wished to evoke with the poem. After determining the proper mood, Poe chose words, rhymes, and rhythms he thought would best convey that effect.

America’s First Great Literary Critic

Poe is considered America’s first great literary critic. During his lifetime American authors were generally considered inferior to their British counterparts, and many American authors imitated British literature. As a critic, Poe frequently attacked authors he considered guilty of imitation, and he was often the first to accuse an author of plagiarism if their work too closely resembled that of another author. The popular American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was a favorite target. In a review of Longfellow’s poetry, Poe wrote, “A few insist on his imagination—thus proving the extent of their own—and showing themselves to be utterly unread in the Old English and modern German literature of which, the author of “Outre Mer” is unquestionably indebted for whatever imagination or traces of invention his works may display.” Many critics in Poe’s time knew the authors whose work they were reviewing, and, instead of writing honest critiques, these critics used their reviews to exaggerate the merits of a book in hopes of boosting sales. Poe called this practice “puffery.” In a December 1835 Southern Literary Messenger review of the anonymously published novel Norman Leslie, Poe ridiculed the New York Mirror’s excessively flattering review before revealing that the author worked at the New York Mirror. Poe also thought that many American critics praised American novels written about American subjects merely because they had been written about those subjects. James Fenimore Cooper (right), author of such novels as *The Last of the Mohicans*, was one of these writers. In a November 1843 Graham’s Magazine review of Cooper’s *Wyandotté*, Poe wrote that “the interest, as usual, has no reference to plot, of which, indeed, our novelist seems altogether regardless, or incapable, but depends, first, on the nature of the theme...It will be seen that there is nothing original in this story.” Poe’s tendency to ridicule what he considered inferior writers offended many of the most important authors and editors of his day, including Rufus Griswold, who would later write Poe’s biography. Poe’s reviews were not, however, all negative. He called a young Nathaniel Hawthorne “a man of the truest genius” (Review of *Twice-Told Tales*, Graham’s Magazine, May 1842), and he wrote that “it is scarcely possible to speak of [“The Old Curiosity Shop” by Charles Dickens] too well.” Poe so admired the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning that he

dedicated his book *The Raven and Other Poems* to her. When judging the quality of an author's work, Poe also explained his definition of good writing. In his May 1842 review of Hawthorne, Poe defined the criteria by which he reviewed a short story. He said such a work should be original and should have an emotional impact on the reader. Poe thought that the entire story should be composed with that emotional impact in mind. He wrote that when a great writer composes a tale "he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or singular effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents—he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect." In other words, Poe believed a great writer begins his story by determining how it will end and what emotional effect the end should have on the reader. Every event in a story should maintain the desired emotional effect, and all unnecessary details should be eliminated. For this reason he thought a short story or poem should be brief, "requiring from a half hour to one or two hours in its perusal." Poe considered a short story superior to a novel because "as it cannot be read in one sitting, it deprives itself, of course, of the immense force derivable from totality." If one were to take breaks in the middle of reading, the emotional impact the story is intended to evoke would be diluted by all the distractions of the real world. With this review, Poe helped to define the modern short story for years to come.

POE IN CONTEXT: Poe in Richmond

Guiding Question: How did Poe's upbringing in Virginia influence his literature and what role has Poe had in shaping Richmond, Virginia today?

Historical context:

- [Poe in Richmond](#)
- [Poe's Childhood Home](#)

Guided Readings:

- "Alone"
- "To Helen"
- "To One in Paradise"

Paired Readings:

- Select passages from [Richmond in Bygone Days](#) by Samuel Mordecai

Primary Sources:

- [Edgar Allan Poe to George Washington Poe — July 14, 1839](#)

Activity/Assessment:

- Visit the physical remainders of Poe's past in Richmond and discuss how Richmond has changed over time.
- [Primary Poe](#)
- Compare the how Richmond influenced famous figures such as Edgar Allan Poe and Chief Justice John Marshall

POE IN CONTEXT: Antebellum South

Guiding Question: How does Poe's literature reflect his Southern identity and his political views during the Antebellum period?

Historical context:

- [Slavery in the Allan Home](#)

Guided Readings:

- "The Gold Bug"
- "Hop Frog"

Paired Readings:

- "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass" (1845)
- Harriet Beecher Stowe "Uncle Tom's Cabin" (1852)

Primary Sources:

- [Irons from the Allan Home](#)

Activity/Assessment:

- Poe and Douglass are often compared for their time spent in Baltimore, Maryland. Compare and contrast Poe and Douglass's views on slavery as well as what influenced their views.

POE IN CONTEXT: The Gothic

Guiding Question: How does the gothic genre reflect the societal fears of the 19th century? How is the gothic genre reflected in Poe's literature especially compared to other romantic writers of his time?

Historical context:

- [Poe's First Horror Story](#)

Guided Readings:

- "The Fall of the House of Usher"
- "The Tell-Tale Heart"
- "Berenice"
- "The Premature Burial"
- "The Black Cat"

Paired Readings:

- Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" (1818)
- Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birthmark" (1843)
- Washington Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (1820)

Primary Sources:

- [Letter from Edgar Allan Poe to Washington Irving](#)

Activity/Assessment:

- Compare and contrast the influences of American and British gothic Literature.
- [Write your own gothic story](#)

POE IN CONTEXT: Women

Guiding Question: How did the Poe's female contemporaries (family, lovers, and writers) impact his literature? How does Poe's female character represent daily life for women in the 19th century?

Historical context:

- [The Women in Poe's Life](#)

Guided Readings:

- "Annabel Lee"
- "Lenore"

Paired Readings:

- Emily Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for Death" and "We talked as Girls do"
- Christina Rossetti's "Remember" and "When I am dead, my dearest"

Primary Sources:

- [Godey's Lady's Books](#)

Activity/Assessment:

- Rewrite a Poe story from the point-of-view of one of his female characters.
- Compare and contrast Poe's female characters with the actual women who surrounded him.

POE IN CONTEXT: Poetry

Guiding Question: How did the works of British poets such as Byron and Shakespeare influence Poe's poetry?

Historical context:

- [How Poe Wrote the Bells](#)
- [Byron and Poe](#)

Guided Readings:

- "The Bells"
- "Annabel Lee"
- "A Dream within a Dream"
- "Fairyland"
- "The Raven"

Paired Readings:

- Lord Byron's "When We Two Parted," "She Walks in Beauty," and "Love and Death"
- Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream"

Primary Sources:

- [Poe's notes studying Shakespeare](#)

Activity/Assessment:

- Create a poem using Shakespeare's structure while keeping the theme/tone of Poe's literature.
- [Poe-try Workshop](#)

POE IN CONTEXT: Illness

Guiding Question: How does Poe's literature reflect advancements, or lack thereof, of mental and physical illnesses in the 19th century?

Historical context:

- [Cholera Pandemic Terrified and Inspired Edgar Allan Poe](#)
- [Madwomen in Nineteenth-Century Literature](#)

Guided Readings:

- "Masque of the Red Death"
- "System of Professor Feather and Doctor Tarr"

Paired Readings:

- Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892)
- Albert Camus's *The Plague* (1947)

Primary Sources:

- [Poe's Sister's Handkerchief](#)

Activity/Assessment:

- Create a mind map on how the rise of tuberculosis impacted major U.S. events and figures.

POE IN CONTEXT: Crime and Detective Fiction

Guiding Question: What real-world influences inspired Poe's detective fiction and how has he influenced the genre today?

Historical context:

- [Poe and Detective Fiction](#)
- [Poe and Victorian True Crime](#)

Guided Readings:

- "The Tell-Tale Heart"
- "The Murders in the Rue Morgue"

Paired Readings:

- Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's "A Study in Scarlet"
- Agatha Christie's "Death on the Nile"

Primary Sources:

- [The Tragic Almanack \(1842\)](#)

Activity/Assessment:

- Investigate the mystery of Poe's death by using the same detective reasoning in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue"

POE IN CONTEXT: Urbanization

Guiding Question: How did living in urban centers such as Richmond, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York influence the settings of Poe's literature?

Historical context:

- [Places Poe Lived](#)

Guided Readings:

- "Man of the Crowd"

Paired Readings:

- Charles Dickens "Oliver Twist"

Primary Sources:

- [Charles Dickens account of Richmond](#)

Activity/Assessment:

- Compare and contrast Poe's depiction of urbanization in the U.S. with Dicken's portrayal of industrialization in U.K.
- Explore a [digital map](#) of Poe's Richmond

POE IN CONTEXT: Scientific Revolution

Guiding Question: How is Poe's interest in scientific advancements throughout the 19th century reflected in his literature?

Historical context:

- [Poe's Early Interest in Science](#)
- [Poe and Some Words with a Mummy](#)
- [Poe and Phrenology](#)

Guided Readings:

- "Hans Pfaall"
- "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar"
- "Some Words with a Mummy"

Paired Readings:

- Jules Verne "Around the World in Eighty Days"
- Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein"

Primary Sources:

- [Poe's West Point Textbook](#)
- [Poe Tintype](#)

Activity/Assessment:

- Draw an invention or scene of the world in 150 years.
- Compare Poe's sci-fi stories with sci-fi media of today.
- Read about a discovery in the 19th century and hypothesize a discovery that will happen in your lifetime.

