

EDGAR ALLAN POE

Edgar Allan Poe was born at Boston, Massachusetts, 1809, and died at Baltimore, 1849. To thus sum up the life of the average individual of the last century might be considered as sufficient, but certainly not for one of the activity and genius of Poe. It is not, however, our intention or purpose here to write a biography of Poe's life—there have been many such written—but rather an appreciation of his character and of his writings.

Acknowledged almost everywhere to-day as one of America's greatest writers, Edgar Allan Poe originated the detective story, perfected the mystery short story, and wrote America's first great poems.

His prose tales form an entirely new addition to the world's literature. We can trace the development of story-telling back to the earliest centuries. There have been folk tales—legendary ones preserved to us by tradition—tales of merriment and of grief, stories in prose and in verse, as those of Hawthorne and Coleridge, but there have never been any quite like Poe's. He has given us one of the most highly imaginative and interesting collections of tales written since *The Thousand and One Nights*. It is somewhat difficult to establish definite distinctions between the tales of adventure, of mystery, of horror, of phantasy, and of mocking, ironical humour.

In his analytical tales, of which the *Gold Bug*, a prize story, is possibly the finest example, Poe develops and solves the clue to a mystery by the aid of science. The "*Murders in the Rue Morgue*" is a striking type of the modern "Detective" story. The "*MS. Found in a Bottle*" contains a problem combined with narrative description.

Then there is the "*Black Cat*," a story of a dual personality and of the soul struggle between the forces of good and evil. Filled as it is with great horror it produces a powerful effect, which is its main object. But it is in the realm of the supernatural that Poe's unique genius finds its true sphere. Here he fairly expands in the vigor and excellence of his expression. Examples are: *Shadow*, *Ligeia* and, in particular, the *Fall of the House of Usher*, which, fantastic and terrible, is yet softened in tone by its surpassing beauty. In the creating of such an effect Poe is unequalled. The Aesthetic Passion seemed a part of his very nature.

The characters which Poe has created are never real, never of this earth. They seem creatures of another world, half human, half visionary. Airy spirits clothed in earthly garments.

In the descriptive passages, however, such as the Domain of Arnheim, Poe excels. Here acuteness of analysis is replaced by artistic skill. Scenes of transcendent beauty and majesty appear, almost miraculously, to the delight of that mental eye with which the reader sees them. The charm of language—rapid and powerful or lyric and emotional; the magnificent scenes ranging from the terribly mysterious to the sublime, the perplexing magic and supernatural qualities, all these lead the reader into an enchanted realm, and make him feel as an explorer and a traveller in alien lands. Yet his narrative is clear, condensed and forcible. His favorite themes were death, insanity and terror in his prose works, and beauty and weirdness in his poetry.

Poe's poetry is ethereal; it abounds in rhythm, melody and imaginative power. The structure of his verse is built upon poetic laws as exact as the most accurate principles of science. Poe declares that the source and fount of all poetry lies in a thirst for a Beauty wilder than that of Earth; that poetry itself is the imperfect effort to quench this immortal thirst; that it is, as it were, a lament of the soul for the grandeur of its lost Eden and a longing for what once was. "That pleasure," he says, "which is at once the most pure, the most soul-elevating and the most intense, is derived from the contemplation of the beautiful." This is the Poetic Sentiment.

Love, Beauty and Death—these are his inspiration. All his best poems are inspired with the sense of the irreparable and the cry of the nevermore. "The Raven" is one of the best known poems in the English language, and there are few lovers of verse who cannot recite at least some of its lines. Written in memory of his lost Lenore, it has been translated into the language of many nations. That it is symbolical of mournful and never-ending remembrance is evident, especially from the last lines:

"And my soul *from out that shadow* that lies floating on the
floor
Shall be lifted—nevermore."

But the real test of a poem is its total impression.

And the total impression of "The Raven," with its weird beauty and sustained energy, is deep and unforgettable. In its dark, haunting intensity it will live as one of the few remarkable poems of the world.

Of Poe's other poems some of the most noted are: "Ulalume" beginning,—

"The skies they were ashen and sober;
The leaves they were crisped and sere—"

"The Haunted Palace" ending with,—

"A hideous throng rush out forever
And laugh—but smile no more."—

"The Sleeper," a poem wrapped in the mysterious beauty and remote setting of a night in June. "Annabel Lee," of which the first lines are:

"It was many and many a year ago,
In a kingdom by the sea,"—

"The City in the Sea," reminding one by its theme and its romantic touch of Thomas de Quincey's Savannah-la-Mar; "Lenore," an exultant defiance of Death; and "The Lake" containing these lines:

"And the mystic wind went by
Murmuring in melody."

Here, by the combination of pleasing tones, language is made to produce the highest amount of harmonious sound. Within the verse there is a strange, fanciful imagery, and encircling it, the spectral glow that only Poe's imagination could create. It flows with suggestive melody; it quivers with a singular beauty wilder than the beauty of our every-day world.

In his poem, "To Helen," are the following lines:

"To the glory that was Greece,
And the grandeur that was Rome."

In these two mighty lines is expressed all the splendour and magnificence of the classic empires. This, Poe's first great poem, was written at the age of fourteen.

Seven years later he attended West Point, but was expelled for some reason or other, and was disinherited. Is it not strange that West Point's outcast should have become America's first great poet?

Poe had at times a desperate struggle for even a living. He suffered, moreover, a great deal of misfortune during his life. His work for the newspapers was the beginning of a series of writings which have earned for him great literary fame and imperishable honour.

The editor of the New York "Evening Mirror," with which paper Poe was for a time employed, speaks of him as "a quiet, patient, industrious, and most gentlemanly person, commanding the utmost respect and good feeling by his unvarying deportment and ability." It is, perhaps, fitting here to remark that, at a later date, "Graham's Magazine," under Poe's editorship, increased its circulation from 5000 to 37500. Although in the greater number of his works Poe himself figures merely as the spectator and story-teller, his keen powers of analysis and his own personality are invariably present to us.

The charge has been made that Poe had little real scholarship. That this is erroneous is shown by the fact that at the University of Virginia, which he attended, he was officially mentioned as one of those who excelled in the Senior Latin, and Senior French classes. While a student there, he specialized in languages, attending lectures in Latin, Greek, French, Spanish, and Italian. He wrote and spoke French and Latin with great facility, and read Greek with comparative ease.

Poe is also said to have been almost entirely without affection or any of the finer qualities of human nature. We feel that to refute this idea it is but necessary to quote the opening lines of Poe's own poem "To My Mother:"

"Because I feel that, in the Heavens above,
The angels, whispering to one another,
Can find, among their burning terms of love,
None so 'devotional as that of 'Mother'—".

Poe's thoughts were not "of this world." He says himself:

"All that we see or seem
Is but a dream within a dream."

He was continually absorbed in the contemplation of the sublime, as in the words of his vivid drama "Politian,"

"I *cannot* die, having within my heart
So keen a relish for the beautiful."

But Poe's spirit gloried also in the struggle for achievement, in deeds of valor and military renown. This we see in these stirring lines from the Byronic "Tamerlane:"

"O! how my spirit would rejoice,
And leap within me at the cry,
The battle-cry of Victory."

Poe's essay on "The Rationale of Verse" is a searching analysis of structure and form, and an accurate explanation of the art of poetry. His poem "The Bells" is a striking example of the suggestive power of phonetic echo.

Poe's best criticisms of a general nature are his essays on "The Poetic Principle" and "The Philosophy of Composition." In the "Poetic Principle" he unravels the web of which all poetry is woven. He defines the Poetry of words as *The Rhythmical Creation of Beauty*, its sole arbiter being taste. He tells us that a pleasurable sadness is inseparably connected with all the higher manifestations of true Beauty, and that the manifestation of the Poetic Principle is always found in an elevating excitement of the soul. In the "Philosophy of Composition" he advises, for writing a story or poem, to begin with the consideration of an effect, and lays particular emphasis upon originality.

Poe has given to America her first important body of literary criticism. His wide success as a journalist and critic was due to the independence of his views and his candor in expressing them. His essay, "How to Write a Blackwood Article," sparkles with keen, satirical humor.

But Poe's true greatness is found in his imaginative works—his tales and his poems. It is in the "Detective" story that his influence has, possibly, been the widest.

The merit of his ordinary works is overshadowed by the terrific genius of his masterpieces. His writing is unique; he is the only purely original genius in American Literature. His stories and poems are of imperishable beauty and grandeur.

W. A. R. '31

Love is indestructible:
Its holy flame forever burneth;
From Heaven it came, to Heaven returneth.

—*Southey.*