Edgar Allan Poe Author Study

AMERICAN GOTHIC LITERATURE
American Gothic

The Dark Side of Individualism
Gothic Literature came to be in part from the Gothic architecture of the Middle Ages.

Gothic cathedrals with irregularly placed towers, and high stained-glass windows were intended to inspire awe and fear in religious worshipers.
• Gargoyles—carvings of small deformed creatures squatting at the corners and crevices of Gothic cathedrals—were supposed to ward off evil spirits, but they often look more like demonic spirits themselves.

• Think of the gargoyle as a mascot of Gothic, and you will get an idea of the kind of imaginative distortion of reality that Gothic represents.
Romanticism developed as a reaction against the rationalism of the Age of Reason.
- The romantics freed the imagination from the hold of reason, so they could follow their imagination wherever it might lead.
- For some Romantics, when they looked at the individual, they saw hope (think “A Psalm of Life”).

For some Romantic writers, the imagination led to the threshold of the unknown—the shadowy region where the fantastic, the demonic and the insane reside.
- When the Gothic's saw the individual, they saw the potential of evil.

Gothic writers were peering into the darkness at the supernatural.

Romantic writers celebrated the beauties of nature.
Gothic Movement in America

The Gothic Tradition was firmly established in Europe before American writers had made names for themselves.

By the 19th century, Edgar Allan Poe, Nathanial Hawthorne, and to a lesser extent Washington Irving and Herman Melville were using the Gothic elements in their writing.

Edgar Allan Poe was the master of the Gothic form in the United States.
Edgar Allan Poe

His stories have:

- Settings that featuring
  - Dark, medieval castles
  - Decaying ancient estates

- Characters that are
  - Male—insane
  - Female—beautiful and dead (or dying)

- Plots that include
  - Murder
  - Live burials
  - Physical and mental torture
  - Retribution from beyond the grave

For Poe, it was only in these extreme situations that people revealed their true nature.
The Gothic dimension of Poe’s fictional world offered him a way to explore the human mind in these extreme situations and so arrive at an essential truth.
Nathaniel Hawthorne

- He also used Gothic elements in his work to express what he felt were essential truths.
- Instead of looking at the mind for its dysfunction, Hawthorne examined the human heart under conditions of fear, vanity, mistrust, and betrayal.
Southern Gothic

- After the real horrors of the Civil War, the Gothic tradition lost its popularity.
- During the 20th century, it made a comeback in the American South.
- Authors like William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, Truman Capote, and Flannery O’Connor are grouped together because of the gloom and pessimism of their fiction.
Edgar Allan Poe

During a life marked by pain and loss, Edgar Allan Poe wrote haunting tales in which he explored the dark side of the human mind.
A well-read man with a taste for literature, Poe was cursed with a morbidly sensitive nature and made his feelings of sadness and depression the basis of a distinctive body of literary work.

The following is a look at the life and work of a mysterious American master.
Poe’s Childhood
Marked by Loss

- Poe was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1809, one of three children born to a couple who toured the East as actors.
- Before he was three years old, his father had abandoned the family, and his mother had died of tuberculosis.
- John and Francis Allan, took Poe to their home in Richmond, Virginia and became his foster parents.
  - With the Allan’s he briefly lived in England, and continued his education in the United States.
This period in Poe’s life was full of high’s and lows.

- 1826, he started at the University of Virginia, where his reckless habits led to heavy debt, forcing him to leave school.
- He moved to Boston, where he published his first book, *Tamerlane and Other Poems* in 1827.
- In 1828, he was flat broke and enlisted into the army. John Allan got him an appointment at West Point, but he found the school confining and made sure he was expelled.
Poe’s Career

A Man of Letters

- After leaving West Point, he moved to Baltimore to live with his aunt Maria Clemm and her young daughter Virginia. There he began writing short stories.
- In 1834, he moved to Richmond to work for the *Southern Literary Messenger*. His reviews in the *Messenger* led to increased circulation.
- In 1836, Poe married his cousin. Soon after, a disagreement led to him leaving the *Messenger* and moving again, this time to New York City.
- After publishing another short novel, he moved again searching for work, this time to Philadelphia.
His years in Philadelphia would be Poe’s most productive.

- In 1839 he was the editor of Burton’s Gentlemen’s Magazine, to which he contributed both reviews and stories.
- His first collection of short stories was published, Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque.
- He was then fired from Burton’s in 1840.
- He attempted to begin his own literary magazine, but it failed.
- He accepted an offer as editor of Graham’s Magazine, where he published his groundbreaking story The Murders in the Rue Morgue
  - The was considered groundbreaking because it was the first detective story.
Poe’s trouble vs. success

The real trouble begins

- Poe was awarded a $100 prize for his short story “The Gold Bug” published in 1845.
- This brought him the recognition and success that he had always wanted.
- With the success, he was hit with a major personal blow; Virginia, who had been battling illness since 1842, died.
In the years following Virginia’s death, Poe struggled with despair as well as his own failing health. He moved back to Baltimore in 1849, where his health declined quickly.

- He collapsed on a Baltimore street where he was taken to a hospital. He died a few days later.
Poe’s Reputation

- Poe’s work generated strong responses. Critics either loved his work, or they hated it.
- Shortly after his death, a one-time friend published a biography on Poe.
  - This work established the view of Poe as a gifted, but socially unaccepted writer.
  - This tainted his reputation in America for many years.
  - Eventually in the United States, his reputation was regained.
- Today, Poe is recognized as a master of poetry, a superb writer of short stories, and a profound explorer of the torments of the human soul.
- He wrote only one novel, around 50 poems, and 70 short stories.
Timeline of Poe’s Work

- **1809**: Poe was born on January 19th.
- **1827**: Poe published *Tamerlane and Other Poems*.
- **1831**: Expelled from West Point, Publishes *Poems*.
- **1836**: Poe married Virginia Clemm.
- **1839**: Poe published *Tales of Grotesque and Arabesque*, including “The Fall of the House of Usher”.
- **1841**: Poe wrote “The Murders of Rue Morgue”.
- **1845**: Poe published “The Raven”.
- **1847**: Poe dies in Baltimore on October 7th.