

Edgar allen poe analysis essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Edgar Allen Poe, poet, critic, and master of the short story, was born in 1809 and died in 1849 in the city of Baltimore. Though Poe gained fame in his lifetime he never became a literary giant. After his death he fell out of favor and was remembered mostly for his dark and scary poetry. Today, though he is still loved, he is thought of mainly as just the author of a handful of dark poems like *The Raven*, *The Bells*, *Annabelle Lee*, and *For Annie*, as well as such short stories such as *The Cask of Amontillado*, *The Masque of the Red Death*, and *Murders in the Rue Morgue*.

His body of work is known mainly to teachers and literature students, while the general public only sees his short stories when they are made into movies by Hollywood. They read the darker poems and end up with a mistaken impression of the author. Poe brought much of this on himself, filling the page with dark words, depressing imagery, and bloody details. He seemed to delight in his dark poems. Poe is said to be the father of the mystery genre with such works as *Murders in the Rue Morgue* and *The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar*.

This is not to say that Poe is not a giant of literature; he is father to many offspring who owe a debt of gratitude to the man. From Samuel Clemmons to Agatha Christie it is clear that authors have read and learned from Poe. It is also not to say that Poe is not read and loved by a 21st century audience over 150 years after his death. This exhibition of Edgar Allen Poe's staying power is a tribute to his genius. Still it seems a worthwhile task to examine some of the original works of Poe and consider why they are still popular today.

In Edgar Allen Poe's *Shadow—A Parable* (Poe 1850), he writes, "Ye who read are still among the living, but I who write shall have long since gone my way into the region of shadows." This line shows Poe's understanding of what it takes to grab and hold an audience. He is saying that he expects to be read after his death, but he paints an extremely detailed picture, using words like 'the region of shadows' to indicate the grave. In the year following his death, N. P. Willis, J. R. Lowell, and R. W. Griswold edited *The Works of the Late Edgar Allen Poe with Notices of His Life and Genius* in two volumes.

Volume One, *Tales*, was published by J. S. Redfield, Clinton Hall in 1850. This volume contains a biography and a tribute to the life and works of Poe, as well as 31 of his short stories, most of which are known and read today, at least by students and Poe scholars. It is the texts found in this anthology (referred to in this paper as the *Anthology of 1850*) which will be examined in this paper, in an effort to try and decide what there is in the literature that makes it remain popular today and to decide what influence Poe had on today's literature.

Poe, the Romantic of the 19th century had a profound effect on American literature that is still being felt in the 21st century. The out-dated language of Poe, sometimes hard to understand, enriches the gothic settings of Poe's most loved stories and draws an audience of many different people. Some readers love Poe for his haunting images, beautiful onomatopoeia, and alliteration. "And the silken sad uncertain rustling of each purple curtain thrilled me," a line from *The Raven*, maybe Poe's most famous work, flows off the tongue like honey.

It is poetry at its best, though modern poets would perhaps argue that it is contrived, with forced rhymes that are too old-fashioned to be worth reading today. “ And, when seen, there will be some to disbelieve, and some to doubt, and yet a few who will find much to ponder upon in the characters here graven with a stylus of iron. ” Edgar Allan Poe’s “ Shadow — a Parable” (Poe 1850). The question of why Poe is still popular must surely seem simple enough to answer when asked of those people who love the works. But a larger question is why people love the works.

What is there in this 150-year-old literature to appeal to a hip and modern audience, accustomed to entertainment that Poe would find unbelievable? Why are there people today still fascinated with Poe’s poems and short stories? Obviously it speaks to a wide audience. In a letter written to William Dean Howells, dated January 18, 1909, Samuel L. Clemens, responding to an article Howells wrote on Edgar Allan Poe, remarked, “ To me his prose is unreadable—like Jane Austen’s. No, there is a difference. I could read his prose on salary, but not Jane’s” (Comeau 1996).

He is saying that he would only read Poe’s stories if someone paid him. In the end no one ever paid Clemens to read Poe, in all likelihood, but it is still clear that he read at least some of the works. He borrowed themes and rhetorical devices liberally. This borrowing apparently increased Clemens’ salary, making his little rant to Howells seem a little false. Clemens wrote a fine but largely unknown short story in 1876. This story, *The Facts Concerning the Recent Carnival of Crime in Connecticut* “ borrows and refashions a major theme from Poe’s *William Wilson*” (Comeau 1996 p 26), an excellent tale found in the *Anthology* of 1850.

Clemens is not being accused of plagiarism, certainly, but it is worth noting that along with this obvious borrowing from William Wilson, Clemens also used a character out of Poe's Hop Frog, along with a plot device likely lifted from The Raven. Clemens recognized, though failed to credit Poe's genius 25 years after Poe's death much like 150 years later, Hollywood produced The Fight Club, borrowing the device of the doppelganger, or alter ego, and its relationship to the narrator, which Poe wrote in the 19th century.

While Clemens leaned on the old master, he seemed to be eager to distance himself from Poe and William Wilson, as well as the other works, denying, in effect, Poe's contribution, and making sarcastic remarks such as having to be paid to read Poe. In fact he had earned a salary by copying from the master. At the time Clemens wrote the story in question he was unknown and it may have been harmful to his reputation in his later years as he established his own identity, and his own voice. But as the Anthology of 1850 clearly proves, Poe came first and was his teacher.

American literature is full of bad writers who have unsuccessfully tried to copy what Poe did with so little apparent effort, which, in itself, is genius, but there are many major writers who came after Poe who generously borrowed from his intellect. Even the British were not above recognizing and paying tribute to him. Conan Doyle's immortal Sherlock Holmes may well be the bastard child of Inspector C. Auguste Dupin. Anthology 1850's inclusions, The Murders in the Rue Morgue and The Purloined Letter, show Poe's early conception of the mystery/detective genre.

He is the originator and while those who came after may have even improved on his methods, as the boy is father to the man, Poe's Dupin is professor to Sherlock Holmes' student. True to the Romantic, Poe gave his inspector not so much super intelligence but rather empathy and cunning. He could, like the great detectives who came after, get inside the mind of the killer. He became involved on an emotional level. Included in Anthology 1850 is *The Black Cat*, considered one of Poe's best, a mystery horror story, with the culprit functioning as the unreliable narrator seen so often in Poe's works.

Clemens, writing as his rough spun alter ego, Mark Twain, adapted this device. What Clemens, the editor and scholar would not do, Mark Twain was more than willing, so with Clemens telling people that he had no use for Poe, Twain was hard at work borrowing themes, motifs and ideas. Tom Sawyer owes a debt to Poe. The *Black Cat* narrator, like others in Poe's stories, blames everyone and everything but himself for his actions. He refers to a 'spirit of perverseness' as the cause for murdering his wife, and he also blames his black cat for seducing him into murder.

As Poe puts it, he has the desire "to do wrong for wrong's sake." And this device, the unreliability of the narrator, is also used successfully in *The Cask of Amontillado*, found in the Anthology of 1850. *The Cask of Amontillado* is also a dark tale of murder justified. In the story there are two characters in one, sort of like the doppelganger twins in *William Wilson*. Montresor, the unreliable narrator of *Amontillado* is much like the narrator of *The Black Cat*, at least in motive, although his hatred is so great that it can be felt.

Both narrators attempt to confuse and lead the reader to the wrong conclusion in order to take attention from themselves as the real murderers. "... the [Montresor] crime is not consciously premeditated. Nor is the narrator able to understand rationally or to persuade convincingly why he has done this terrible deed " (Piacentino 1998). Still he insists that he has good explanations, though hardly what would be acceptable or believable in a court room, for the crime he has committed.