

Edgar terms and  
imagery used in at



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Edgar Allan Poe seems fascinated with death.

This is not an exaggerated statement judging from terms and imagery used in at least four of his popular works such as *The Cask of Amontillado*; *The Black Cat*; *The Tell-Tale Heart*; and *The Masque of the Red Death*. It can also be said that he is not only fascinated with death but he is also terrified by it. This explains the way he writes about this subject, placing it front and center. He is not even content to write about it indirectly like murder, accidents or the demise from sickness he writes with a macabre theme of blood spewing, decapitated head, masked figures, psycho killers and terror greater than any horror story ever written. All of these can be understood if one will take a look at Poe's personal life for it is filled with emotional pain, anger, and much death.

### **Acquainted with Death**

In his entire life, Edgar Allan Poe was acquainted with death and also the various things usually associated with it such as disease, despair, and destruction of relationships, financial turmoil and the anguish of the soul. He had his first taste when he was barely two-and-a-half-years old, when his mother died. It is not unusual for children to be orphaned at such a very young age but Poe had a rather unique experience because his mother died in a ramshackle house, that was poorly heated and where he and his brother and sister slept on the floor covered with nothing but straw (Sova, p. 3). When Poe's mother died the three children were with her and they were found huddling close to the dead body of their mother (Sova, p. 3). Even at a young age it can be argued that the future writer was traumatized by that event. The death of her mother was just the beginning.

He also knew the pain of separation because the three children were adopted by different families. Poe went to the Allan family. John Allan and Frances Allan belonged to an affluent and influential family in Richmond Virginia. Aside from the love that he received from Frances Allan, Poe's adoption to this family gave him the means to travel and to have access to some of the best education in the land.

However, his stepfather was cold and distant (Sova, p. 4). He was also protective of his step-mother and angered all the more when he found out that John Allan was unfaithful to her (Sova, p. 4). Their contentious relationship is the reason why Poe will die poor even though he was adopted into a rich family and had the opportunity to study in a university. From his relationship with his step-father Poe's anger was kindled and he also learned how to be a rebel, deserting the family to become a soldier. He also went to West Point and finally when he was dismissed from the military academy became a full time writer.

What happened to him during his younger years was a mere respite from death but afterwards he was reintroduced to the terror and pain that it brings. First of all his brother died young from tuberculosis and then his step-mother died from the same disease at the age of forty-four (Sova, p. 5). But the most painful experience was yet to come. The love of his life was his cousin named Virginia. After a blissful relationship and a string of successful literary pursuits Poe was happy with his life. But Virginia contracted tuberculosis and one day when she was playing the piano a blood vessel in her throat broke and she began spew blood from her mouth (Sova, p. 7).

After that Poe was never the same again and his mind and spirit was overburdened by the fact that he was so poor he could not “ bring the great love of his life to an end in dignity and peace (Quinn & Rosenheim, p. 524). It is now easy to understand where Poe’s unique style of writing came from.

## **Death in the letters**

It is not simply about dying and even getting killed there is something else that separates his writing style from other writers. Poe emphasized brutality and the calculating manner in which the killer dispensed his prey.

There is also the added element of a cat-and-mouse game wherein the killer tries to outsmart the police and to achieve the perfect crime. Finally, there is that common ingredient, a deep-seated hatred or anger that cannot be explained. It comes from deep within the person but the author does not elaborate the reason why a man would murder a friend or a son would murder a father.

In The Cask of Amontillado the reader was acquainted with Montressor, a man who wanted to murder his friend Fortunato. No reason was given as to why Montressor wanted his friend dead. Furthermore, Montressor was not only interested in murder, one of his primary goals was to kill and to hide the evidence of the crime, to hide the body so that no one would know that Fortunato died from the hands of an assassin. For that reason Montressor employed a ghoulish strategy that necessitates the slow and painful death by burying Fortunato alive in the wine cellar under his house. It has to be pointed out that Poe was acutely aware of the dreadful effects of tuberculosis and perhaps his short stories tries to convey the feeling of

suffocation. As Montessor and Fortunato journeyed deeper into the tunnels, the feeling of suffocation was being conveyed. Poe frequently used the idea of burying the person within the confines of the killer's abode.

This can be seen in *The Black Cat* wherein the husband murdered his wife and proceeded to hide her by inserting her into a wall. The same thing can be said in *The Tell-Tale Heart* wherein the murderer hid the victim by burying him underneath the floor of his bedroom. In *The Black Cat* there is reason to believe that when Poe wrote it he was thinking of his wife. The part where the husband accidentally killed her can be linked to the remorse he felt when Poe was unable to care and protect the love of his life from the ravages of tuberculosis. In *The Tell-Tale Heart* the author did not elaborate if the young man was the son to the old man. It is a veiled reference to the fact that the John and Frances Allan took him in but he was not legally adopted. It can also be argued that in this story he vented his frustrations against his step-father.

## **Blood in the Letters**

There is another common denominator in many of his writings aside from death, and calculating murderers. It is the presence of blood, a great deal of blood was always implied through his writing. For example in *The Black Cat* the husband thought about cutting the body of his wife into tiny pieces.

This means hacking or sawing and therefore the release of great amounts blood. In *The Tell-Tale Heart* the killer decided to chop off the head and limbs of the victim and although the killer was pleased to say that not a drop of blood can be seen inside the bedroom he then commented that the slicing and cutting were completed using the bathtub and immediately the image of

a tub full of blood came to mind. His use of blood as a visual tool to bring forth horror and terror was very much evident in The Masque of the Red Death. The color red symbolized blood and this imagery was used often throughout the course of the story. There was the “ red death”, the “ blood-colored panes” and “ scarlet stains” that highlights the idea of blood.

The color red is everywhere in this story from beginning to end. Blood and death is present in his many works but none compares to The Masque of the Red Death. If one will recall his experience with tuberculosis then it is not difficult to understand why blood flowed freely in this story. The image of Virginia with a ruptured blood vessel and thick red blood coming out her mouth would have been in the forefront of his mind when Poe wrote this classic.

He was not contented to simply say that the victims of the “ red death” vomited blood and resulted in a quick end to their lives, Poe wrote that blood came out of the victim’s pores. This provided a vivid image of a person soaked in blood. It is an image not unlike what he saw when Poe desperately tried to save his Virginia amidst the squalor brought upon by his insistence to work full time as a writer (Quinn & Rosenheim, p. 524).

Poe’s life will end much the same way - in poverty and at a relatively young age.

## **Conclusion**

A writer will always be affected by his circumstances and past experiences. This is never truer in the case of Edgar Allan Poe. There is a reason why death and blood figured prominently in his works. His experience with

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tuberculosis and the way the patients waste away while spewing blood impacted his life greatly that it found its way into his writings. But aside from the painful memories, the other aspects of his life experiences gave him the brilliance and the depth to write as he did. This includes his stint in the army and time spent in the university as well as his travels abroad.

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