EDGAR ALLAN POE

OH, WOE IS POE

Writer
Born: Boston, Massachusetts,
January 19, 1809
Died: Baltimore, Maryland,
October 7, 1849
40 years old

POE ATTENDED A lot of funerals. When he wasn't going to funerals, he wrote stories about dead people (or soon-to-be-dead people) living in torture chambers, haunted houses, and other creepy locales with zero chance of escape, like in "The Pit and the Pendulum," "The Fall of the House of Usher," and "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." His stories start out with lines like "I was sick—sick unto death with that long agony," and that's the cheery part. Misery, loneliness, and death are the grim themes of his work . . . and of his life. Lots of bad stuff happened to him, and then he died.

Poe's major woe started when his dad split, leaving Poe's ailing mother and three small children on their own. By the time Poe was three, his mom had died of tuberculosis. He watched her cough up blood and waste away. Little Poe sat in a room with his mom's dead body for a few days until it was taken away and buried. After that, he slept with the covers over his head because he thought a dead person would come get him in the middle of the night.

Abandoned and orphaned, Poe was separated from his brother and sister and raised by foster parents, Fanny and John Allan. Fanny loved Poe, but John hated his guts. Poe grew to have a large forehead, a brooding stare, and a gift for words. When Poe was fifteen, his first girlfriend dropped dead of tuberculosis just like his mother. By the time he was twenty, he'd gone to college, dropped out, joined the army, dropped out, and published his first book of poems; writing became his life's work.

Then stepmom Fanny started coughing up blood and she died of tuberculosis. John told Poe to get lost.

Poe reconnected with his older brother, Henry, but then Henry died of tuberculosis. Poe moved in with an aunt and his first cousin Virginia. He fell in love with Virginia and they got married (acceptable in those days), but then, guess what? Virginia died of tuberculosis.

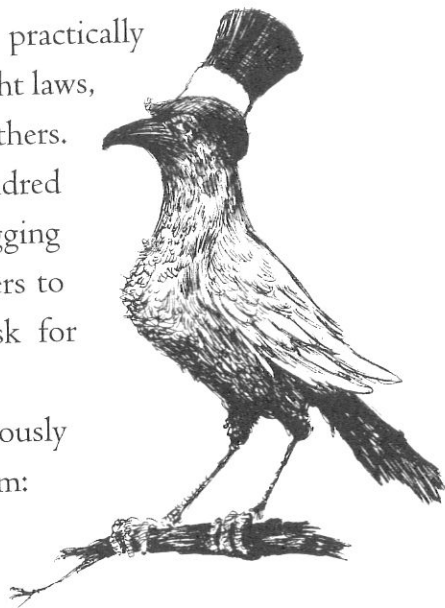There is no denying it: Poe was a disaster magnet.

Poe used his bad case of the gloomies when he put pen to paper. In 1845, his poem "The Raven" was published in the *Evening Mirror*, and it became an instant classic. It turned Poe into a celebrity and everybody wanted to know him, but it didn't pay the bills and he was

starving most of the time. He was paid practically nothing and, because there were no copyright laws, what he wrote could be freely copied by others. In his whole life he earned only three hundred dollars for all his writing. Reduced to begging people for help, sometimes he'd send letters to far-off relatives and acquaintances to ask for money.

Despite these troubles, Poe miraculously kept writing. But there was another problem: he tried to ditch his troubles by drinking. People expected that when he walked into a room he would probably be drunk. Or he'd wander the streets missing a shoe, disheveled and "disoriented" (a polite word used at the time for "drunk"). Though he tried many times, Poe couldn't keep a paying job. He pursued a couple of wealthy women in the hope of finding love and security, but being a drunk is not that attractive. People avoided him like the plague.

"My life seems wasted—the future looks a dreary blank," Poe wrote to his aunt.

Desperate, he left Richmond, Virginia, to head to New York City on a wild goose chase in pursuit of work. Poe's first stop was Baltimore, where he accidentally walked off with someone else's cane and lost his luggage.

And then, for the next six days, Poe completely vanished. There is no record of where he was or what he was doing and, for a relatively famous man, that was hard to do unless he was drunk, facedown somewhere—which was very possible.

On election day, Poe showed up at a bar called Ryan's 4th Ward Polls in Baltimore, so named because it was used as an election-polling place. He was a wreck. He was disoriented (see previous page). His vest and neck cloth (like a tie, only wider and tied differently) were gone, and he was wearing someone else's filthy clothes inside out and backward.

It was a complete coincidence that two of Poe's distant relatives came into the bar. They didn't have any fond family memories; Poe had been drunk and belligerent the last time they saw him, and it looked like he was at it again. They dragged his limp body out of there and dropped him at the hospital so he could sleep it off in the drunk ward.

At the hospital the next day, Poe was jumpy and agitated. He was talking, but it was all gibberish. The doctors assumed he was still drunk.

Overnight he became less erratic, but the next morning he still wasn't making sense. He should have sobered up by then. The doctors offered Poe water to drink, but he wouldn't take it.

Poe woke up the next morning delirious and began calling out the name "Reynolds." He blathered about Reynolds until three the following morning.

Then Edgar Allan Poe died. It was October 7, 1849, and he was only forty years old. The cause of death was given as "congestion of the brain," which was a common medical phrase at the time that explained practically nothing.

Over the years everybody assumed that Poe had died of alcohol poisoning. But how could he still have been drunk after not drinking a drop for four days in the hospital?

Recently, doctors reexamined Poe's medical records. It's possible a rabid animal bit him. He refused to drink water at the hospital; people with rabies are unable to swallow water. And people with rabies also act like they're, well . . . drunk—which would explain why he didn't sober up.
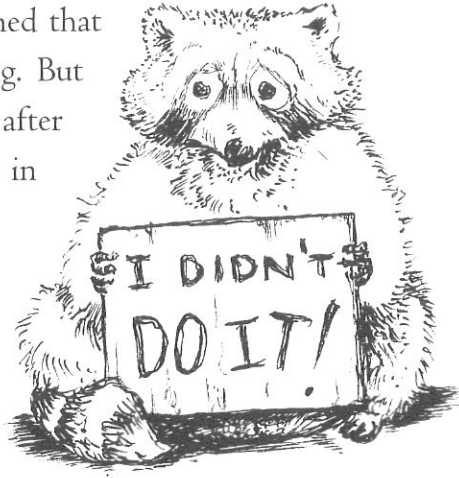
The penniless Poe might have been part of a voter-fraud scheme right before he died. Potential voters at the time were kept in rooms where they would change into various clothes and then go to different polling places so they could vote more than once. The payoff was free alcohol. And "Reynolds"—the name Poe kept calling out at the end—was the name of a polling official.

To this day, no one is completely certain if Poe died of rabies or of something else, but one thing seems clear: Poe wanted to take his place in the realm of the dead in a big hurry. After all, everybody he had ever loved was already there.