19th Century American Literature

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**“The Tell-tale Heart” by Edgar Allan Poe**

**Lecture Notes**

1. Biography
   1. Poe was born in Boston on January 19, 1809, the second of three children to Elizabeth Arnold and David Poe Jr. His mother and father were a popular actress and actor, but his father left his mother soon after Edgar was born and she died two years later while acting in Richmond, Virginia. His father died around that time as well.
   2. A wealthy Richmond tobacco merchant named John Allan and his wife Francis, who raised him as their own son but never adopted him formally, took in Edgar. Later, when Poe was studying at the University of Virginia, Allan’s business failed. Poe began to drink and got into debt at school. Allan refused to support him financially and ordered him out of the house.
   3. Poe moved to Baltimore to be with his brother Henry, who was also an alcoholic, and then joined the army after changing his name to “Edgar A. Perry” to avoid his debts. He published a book of poems “Tamerlane and other Poems.” After his successful discharge from the army he was reconciled with his father and asked him to help him gain an appointment to the military academy West Point.
   4. Francis Allan died in 1829. His father had inherited a large amount of money from an uncle and Poe believed that he would inherit a large fortune from his father. However, he was very disappointed when his father married a much younger woman and had a son. He became very discouraged and missed classes at West Point and was expelled. When John Allan died in 1834, Poe received nothing.
   5. Poe’s professional career began at this point, when he was twenty-one, and lasted until his death at the age of 40. During this time he lived in Baltimore, Philadelphia, Richmond, and New York. He published poems, criticism, and stories in a variety of newspapers and magazines. He later became the editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, an important literary magazine.
   6. During this period he was supported by and at times lived with his aunt Maria Poe Clemm in Baltimore. Poe apparently fell in love with and was secretly married to her young daughter Virginia. They were publicly married in 1836 when she was only 13. Although people married at a younger age at that time, this young age was considered scandalous at the time.
   7. Virginia’s death in 1847 of tuberculosis was a turning point in Poe’s life. Although his drinking a marriage were a constant impediment to his career ambitions, he had become by this time an internationally famous writer and editor. After her death his health failed and he began to drink more and more.
   8. Poe was found unconscious drunk near a polling place on Election Day (October 3rd) in 1849. He was taken to a hospital and died four days later. The cause of death was listed as “congestion of the brain.”
2. Themes
   1. Terror: Poe was very aware of the popularity of horror in fiction and many of his writings were designed, first and foremost, to be marketable. However, it would be wrong to say that his stories are merely “freak shows” designed to sell lots of copy. There is a subtle brilliance in all of his writing and he carefully chose every word in his stories and layered them with complex symbolism.
   2. The Supernatural: Study of the “occult” was very popular at this time and Poe’s stories reflect this interest in the dark side and attempt to find out what fascinated people with death and the afterlife.
   3. Crime: Poe wrote what was possibly the first detective story, a genre which has become perhaps the most popular ever. He was very interested in human motivation, and the crime story was a perfect method of research.
   4. Romance: Although limited mostly to his poetry, Poe wrote some very romantic works. His passion for Virginia was very real, and his poems about her are an incredible expression of human love.
   5. Psychology: Madness, self-torment, irrationality, motivation…these form the core of Poe’s material. He studied mainly “the terrifying dimensions of [the human] mind.”
   6. Philosophy: Poe was also a very serious philosopher and attempted to understand the world and the place of the human in it. He also wrote about writing and the relationship between the reader and the writer.
3. Style
   1. Poe believed that a story or poem should be short enough to be read in one sitting. This way the reader could experience the work as a whole. He wrote no long poems and only one novel.
   2. In Poe’s stories every word is chosen very carefully. He rewrote his stories many times, experimenting with the language until he found exactly the right words.
   3. Poe’s language is very symbolic and has many different meanings. It is impossible in many of his stories to discover One Truth. The reader must decide.
4. Texts
   1. Poe wrote many stories and poems but very few of them were published in book form.
   2. For a complete list of publications see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edgar\_Allan\_Poe\_bibliography
5. Discussion Questions
   1. In this story Poe describes a person who is really not sure what is real and what is in his imagination. I think that this happens to everyone. For example, we may imagine that someone dislikes us and become uncomfortable around them, only to learn later that they actually like us and don’t understand why we act that way. Have you ever had a situation where you were tricked by your imagination?
   2. The “old man” in this story has a very strange looking eye, and this causes the main character to become very disturbed. Do you find it difficult to be around people with some physical deformity or handicap? Have you ever been in a situation where you had the opportunity to be kind to someone whose body was not “normal”?
   3. This character is criminally insane, meaning that he has a mental illness that causes him to hurt others. In some countries, people like this can be placed in prison or even executed for their crimes. Do you think this is right?