

The Tell-Tale Poe

My Interview With the Master of Macabre

By Bryon Cahill

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary, over many a quaint and curious volume of celebrated lore—I came upon a book of measure, full of dark and eerie splendor. The author's name, a guilty pleasure, lay before me as a dare upon the cold and lonely floor.

"'Tis some literature," I muttered, "tapping at my cranium's door—only this and nothing more."

But there *was* more.

The book was a monstrous anthology of Edgar Allan Poe's stories and poems. I had read various bits of it in the past, but on this fateful night, the words contained within hypnotized and captivated me. My appetite for Poe was insatiable. I read for hours and for hours. And then ... I read some more.

It was sometime between midnight and 1 a.m. I was immersed in either "Annabel Lee" or "The Masque of the Red Death." I distinctly felt a draft coming from the hall. I looked up and took note that a rolling fog had filled the room. As I rubbed my eyes for assurance, a figure, all dressed in black, appeared in my doorway. His moustache moved hypnotically above his lip when he spoke.

"All that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream," he pronounced as he moved toward me.

"If this is a dream," I said, "then you must be Edgar Allan Poe."

"In life that was my name. I suppose in death it is as well. The boundaries which divide life from death are at best shadowy and vague. Who shall say where the one ends and the other begins?"

On this, he had certainly stumped me. I made up my mind to question him further on all matters ominous and strange—that is, all things Poe.



Illustration by Keith Seidel

Bryon Cahill: Your life, sir, if I remember correctly, had its fair share of disappointments and tragedies.

Edgar Allan Poe: Yes. My life was riddled with disaster. I was born in Boston on January 19, 1809. When I was but 3 years old, my mother died. My father was not with us at the time. I heard that he died within days of my mother.

After my parents' death, I was adopted by a tobacco merchant named John Allan. He was kind and he supported me financially. When I was older, his affections soured, and he put me out of his house. I had a bit of a gambling problem, you see. My outrageous debts were more than he could bear.

Cahill: Yikes.

Poe: Oh, there's more. After a brief stint in the Army, I attended the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. I quickly realized that it was not for me. I stopped attending class and was court-martialed and dismissed. From there, I moved on to greener pastures and married my 13-year-old cousin, Virginia Clemm—

Cahill: Eww.

Poe: Yes, well, it was a rather common practice in those days. Anyway, the marriage didn't last very long. When she was 19, Virginia contracted tuberculosis and died. What an ugly word that is. *Tuberculosis*. It took my brother, too, you know.

Cahill: How did you cope with all that tragedy?

Poe: Mostly with drugs and alcohol. I wouldn't recommend either. Those vices only worsened my already miserable condition. I experienced bouts of depression and madness. I even attempted suicide.

Cahill: Boy, that's rough. Do you attribute your macabre style of writing to your many hardships?

Poe: No doubt my misfortunes contributed to the dark nature of some of my works. I always felt that evil is a consequence of good, so, in fact, out of joy is sorrow born.

Cahill: See, when you say things like that, people are bound to pigeonhole you as a tortured soul. They don't always know you for the eclectic, seasoned writer that you were.

Poe: True. When I was just starting out, I worked hard to be an incisive critic and a meticulous editor for several newspapers and magazines. I wrote numerous stories that are filled with humor and biting satire. Many people have even heralded me as "the father of detective fiction." Above all else, I believe I was a romantic when it came to poetry.

Cahill: What does poetry mean to you?

Poe: I would define, in brief, the poetry of words as the rhythmical creation of beauty. Observe: *Oh, from out the sounding cells, / What a gush of euphony voluminously wells! / How it swells! / How it dwells / On the Future!—how it tells / Of the rapture that impels / To the swinging and the ringing / Of the bells, bells, bells—*

Cahill: Classic. Listen, there is a question I am just dying to ask you.

Poe: Outstanding! There is an eloquence in true enthusiasm. Ask away.

Cahill: If you could name one thing that inspired

you, what would that be?

Poe: The murmur that springs from the growing of grass.

Cahill: That's pretty. I don't think I've ever heard it.

Poe: Are you calling me insane? TRUE!—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad?

Cahill: Oh, no ... I didn't mean to imply ...

Poe: I suppose your allusion is justified. I would not pretend to be a figure of well-mindedness. I became insane, with long intervals of horrible sanity. I never suffered from insanity but enjoyed every minute of it.

The fog in the room is thinning. Is there anything else you want to ask me before I go?

Cahill: In October 1849, you disappeared for three days. When you resurfaced, you were found in a delirious condition, lying in a Baltimore gutter. A few days later, you died. Everything from alcoholism to cholera has been blamed for your demise. Mr. Poe, can you set the record straight once and for all? How did you die?

Poe: There are some secrets which do not permit themselves to be told. Men die nightly in their beds, wringing the hands of ghostly confessors and looking them piteously in the eyes—die with despair in their heart and convulsion of the throat, on account of the hideousness of mysteries which will not suffer themselves to be revealed. You ask me how I died. I ask you, how do you live?

Cahill: Touché!

Poe: I must go now. Read often and well. And here is a parting bit of advice: Never regret. If you wish to forget anything on the spot, make a note that this thing is to be remembered. Evermore. 🦋

*Be silent in that solitude,
Which is not loneliness—for then
The spirits of the dead who stood
In life before thee, are again
In death around thee—and their will
Shall overshadow thee: be still ...*
—Edgar Allan Poe, "Spirits of the Dead"