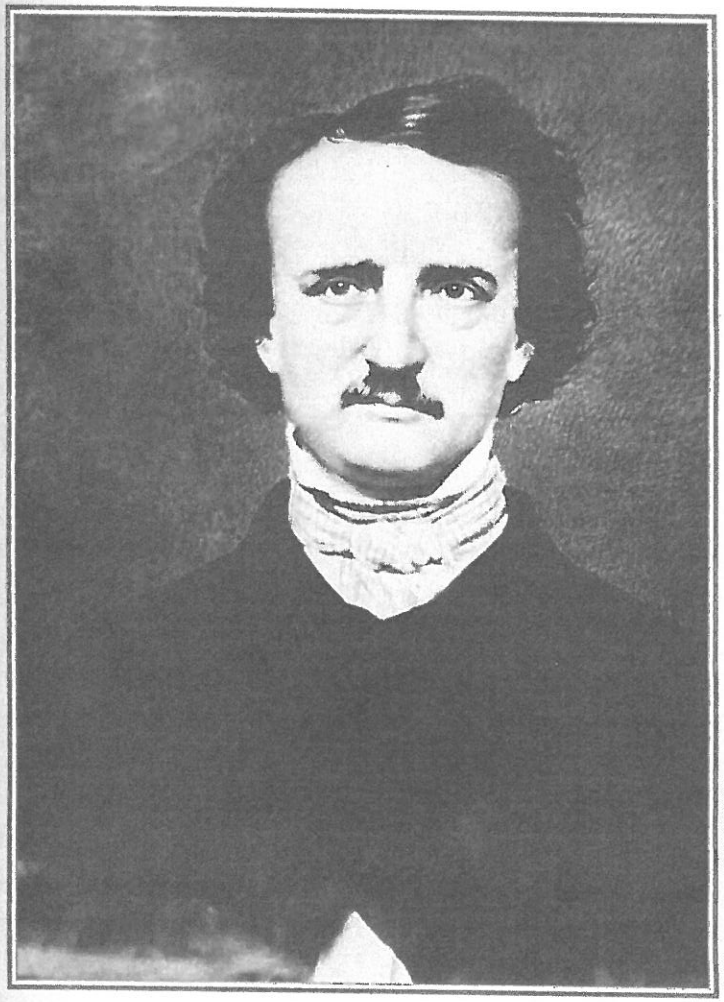
Dickensian is a perfect word if you love Dickens, because *Dickensian* is a kind, gentle word, rather like the soft sentimentality of Dickens himself.

There are Jane Austen Societies as well, people who love Austen. You might think that if Dickens lovers were called Dickensians, Austen lovers would be called Austenians. But if you are in a Jane Austen Society, you are called a Janeite. And that is the perfect word for a lover of Jane Austen. As opposed to *Dickensian*, *Janeite* has a bite to it, an intellectual snap. So the difference between the sound of *Dickensian* and *Janeite* fairly well sums up the divergent gifts of these two great authors.



Edgar Allan Poe

(1809–1849)

Everyone wants to know, "Was Poe's life really as horrible as I have heard?" Actually, it was far worse: Edgar Allan Poe had what could be considered the most bizarre, grotesque, horrific, and pathetic life of any literary figure we ever studied in school. And when Poe picked up his pen to write a short story or a poem, he distilled his horrible life into everything he wrote. Nothing he wrote was strictly autobiographical, but everything he wrote ultimately had to do with his personal history.

The first important detail of Poe's life concerns the one person who shaped his imagination more than anyone else. That person was his mother. Poe's mother was not like yours or mine. Anyone who ever met his mother always had the same thing to say about her: "Edgar Allan Poe's mother has to be one of the most beautiful women who ever lived." She was, in fact, so exquisite that when she was only eight years old, her parents schemed a way to profit from her looks. Poe's mother was born in England, but when she was only eight, her parents left England and came to America. They thought that because Elizabeth was so beautiful, clever, and "foreign," she could be cast in starring roles in plays written for American audiences. Sure enough, by the age of ten

Elizabeth was a prominent child star. When she was only thirteen, her parents married her off to the comedian who was the opening act of their theatrical company. He died within the first year of their marriage; at the age of fourteen Elizabeth was a widow, wearing black onstage. The theater company now had no opening act, so little advertisements were placed in journals throughout the country, advertising for men to audition. Many tried out; one man got the job, David Poe. He was not a comedian but a dancer, such a good dancer that even though the company had been looking for a comedian, when they saw this man perform, they hired him on the spot. David Poe was young, thin, pale, and handsome; Elizabeth was gorgeous. The two took one look at each other, fell in love, and married. It was a doomed marriage, but it did produce this one child, Edgar Poe.

Three weeks after the baby was born his father lost all interest in his newborn son, his wife, and his marriage. He perfected a new act—a disappearing act—and he was gone. He was found, eventually, in a cheap Chicago hotel room, dead of alcoholism.

Elizabeth had to return to the stage three weeks after young Poe was born because without a husband she needed to earn money. Elizabeth was sixteen, lovely, and possessed of a wonderful British accent, so you may intuit what role she was given—Juliet in Shakespeare's famous tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*. She performed Juliet eight times a week, every night but Sunday, and on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons. She was onstage most of the time and she had her little Edgar; what could she do with him while she was performing? The only thing she could think to do was to reserve the middle seat of the front row of whatever play-

house she was performing in, and there she would leave him during the play.

So when Poe was one, two, and three years old, he sat in the front row of the theater, watching his mother perform *Romeo and Juliet* eight times a week. Was this exposure wise? You may remember that the last scene in *Romeo and Juliet* takes place in a crypt, an underground burial vault. The newly wed Juliet comes to the crypt early for a secret rendezvous with her husband, Romeo. She drinks a magic potion that causes her to fall asleep on a tomb amid the bones of her ancestors. Romeo enters the crypt, sees his beautiful wife sleeping, but believes she is dead. Wild with grief, he takes poison and falls dead at her feet. Juliet then wakes and finds Romeo dead. Distraught, she seizes the dagger from Romeo's belt, plunges it through her heart, dies, and the final curtain comes down.

Well, there was little Edgar sitting in the front row, watching his mother take a knife, eight times a week, put it right in the middle of her heart and die. Then the stage manager would come out from behind the curtain, take little Edgar by the hand, and escort him backstage, where he watched his mother take the knife out her heart, get up, and take him out to dinner.

Was this a healthy environment for the young Poe? Hardly. Did it affect the future writing of Edgar Allan Poe? Most certainly. Scholars can tell you that in the stories and poems of Edgar Allan Poe, innumerable beautiful, dead young women refuse to stay dead. They seem dead in the beginning, they come back to life in the middle, and someone stabs them in the final paragraph. Poe was always confusing life and death within his women characters because,

when he was age one, two, and three, he saw his mother die and come back to life over and over.

Unfortunately Edgar discovered the reality of death when he was three and a half. He and his mother moved to Richmond, Virginia, where she was to star in *Romeo and Juliet*. Elizabeth never performed again because once they arrived in Richmond, she fell ill with the most deadly disease of that era—consumption. It is called consumption because the disease attacks the lungs and consumes, or eats away, the lung lining. The infection made the lungs so weak that the blood the heart was supposed to pump to the rest of the body would accumulate in the lungs. The test for consumption was simple: you took a handkerchief and you coughed into it. When you took that handkerchief away from your mouth, if even one bright red drop of arterial blood was on your handkerchief, it meant you had consumption and were fated to die a lingering, painful death. The cause of death was actually drowning—eventually so much blood would fill your lungs that you literally drowned.

So many women got consumption in the early 1800s that, if you walked into an antique store today and asked to see a woman's handkerchief from the early nineteenth century, you would know immediately if the one they showed you was authentic. If it was truly a woman's handkerchief from Poe's day, it would not be pure white. At the bottom border the handkerchief manufacturer would have embroidered one of three things: a row of cherries, a row of strawberries, or, the one used most often, a tiny row of roses. All three motifs were, of course, bright red. If a consumptive woman was out in public and coughed into her handkerchief, the cherries, strawberries, or roses would disguise any spots of blood.

The playhouse where Elizabeth was to have performed Juliet set up a little cot backstage that became her deathbed. The wealthy women of Richmond would come to the theater during the day bringing nourishing meals in the hopes of reviving the lovely, dying creature. But their efforts came to naught. Elizabeth died, and it was poor Edgar's ill fortune that he was looking at his mother's face the moment she drew her last breath.

Poe later said something so mesmerizing happened to his mother right after she died that he never forgot it, and he spent the rest of his life writing about it. The ravages of consumption had eventually destroyed his mother's preternatural loveliness. But once she was dead and finally at peace, he claimed that her face became so beautiful again that she looked far better in death than she had ever looked in life. And because he saw his mother transformed from such haggard devastation at the very moment of her death, to ethereal beauty after she was dead, four images fused in his brain that day, and he never forgot them. The images that would haunt him to the end were youth, beauty, women, and death. Poe became fixated on his dead mother's face that day, an obsession that would cause him enormous pain the rest of his life.

Now, at age three, Poe was an orphan. He would likely have starved but for one of those wealthy Richmond ladies, Frances Allan, who had visited the actress before her death. When she heard that Elizabeth had died, she went home and told her wealthy husband, John Allan, that they should adopt Edgar and give him a home since they could not have their own children. Allan rejected the idea because Edgar Poe was the son of an actress. At that time almost the lowest

job a woman could have to make money was as an actress. Prostitutes were at the bottom of the social scale; actresses were only one rung higher. John Allan refused to taint his fine Virginia bloodline by bringing this child into it. Frances Allan gave up on the possibility of adoption, but won permission to absorb the boy into the household, to feed him and rear him. And so Edgar Poe, who should now have become Edgar Allan had he had a compassionate stepfather who had legally adopted him, moved in with the family. Because he wasn't legally adopted, he used Allan in the middle of his name and called himself, for the rest of his life, Edgar Allan Poe.

John Allan did not send Edgar to school in Richmond. He enrolled him in a school in England, in what John Allan thought was an exclusive, private church school. Poe tells us later, this school *was* church and *was* private, but it was hardly fancy. According to Poe, the headmaster was so cheap he would not buy books and texts for the students. Instead, because the school was in a church and right outside the church was the churchyard where all the dead parishioners were buried, the headmaster forced the teachers to use the cemetery in their lesson plans. When students had to learn subtraction, they were given a piece of chalk and a slate and were then sent out to the cemetery. Choosing a tombstone, each pupil had to write down the year the dead person was born, then subtract that date from the year the person died, because the arithmetic problems always concerned how old Mr. X was when he dropped dead—the only way to solve the problem was to use the cemetery. But the oddest schooling concerned physical education. Each child was given a little wooden shovel on the first day of autumn semester. If

anyone subsequently died in the parish, the gravedigger was instructed to stop at the school and commandeer the older children, who were expected to help dig the grave for aerobic activity. Poe said the only benefit he received from his schooling was that it gave him the settings for many future stories. He begged his stepfather to bring him back to Richmond.

And so beginning at age twelve, Poe attended school in Richmond. None of the students liked Poe because they didn't know him; he had grown up in England. It took Poe three years to make one good friend. When he was a sophomore in high school, his best friend was a young man named Richard. One day Richard said to Poe, "I want you to come home with me after school today because I want to show you my squirrels, my rabbit, and my mother."

We don't know what Poe thought about the squirrels and the rabbit, but we certainly know what Poe thought about the mother. Not only was she rather young and very beautiful, but unfortunately for Poe, her petite, dark beauty was uncannily similar to that of his beloved, lost mother. Poe was obsessed by his own mother's face, and this woman, Richard's mother, looked enough like Poe's dead mother to be a sister. Poe fell hopelessly in love.

Two weeks later Richard's mother went to a doctor because she had been having terrible headaches; the doctor informed her she had a brain tumor so advanced it would kill her within five weeks. When Poe learned that this woman he loved was dying, he made a nightly pilgrimage to her bedside, to hold her hand, and he was there the night she died in frightful agony from the brain tumor. For the next year after Richard's mother had died, Poe could be found

every night in the cemetery where she was buried, walking round and round her tombstone as if in a trance. One bizarre critic of Poe's suggested that this did not prove Poe was devoted to Richard's mother. It only proved Poe was confused and thought he was back at that school in England trying to get extra credit.

So here was the second woman that Poe loved who had died before his eyes, but one woman remained who was a source of goodness in Poe's life, Frances Allan, his stepmother. No one could have been a more kind, giving, loving mother than Frances Allan. Unfortunately, as wonderful as Mrs. Allan was as a mother, that is how oppressive John Allan was as a stepfather. Allan despised Edgar Allan Poe and wanted him out of the way, but he could never act against Poe because Mrs. Allan was there to protect the youth. Allen's hatred was due to his intense jealousy of Poe since Frances delighted far more in Edgar's company than in her own husband's, and Allen never tried to overcome his snobbishness regarding Poe's low birth. Poe was sheltered, until he was sent to college at the University of Virginia shortly after Thomas Jefferson opened it, in 1826. Poe came home one spring break, walked into the house, and there was Mrs. Allan in the parlor. She looked at him and said, "I have consumption, I am dying."

After her death, no one stood between Edgar Allan Poe and the stepfather who despised him. As soon as Frances was buried, John Allan threw all of Poe's possessions onto the front lawn of the house (subtlety was not his strong suit) and told him, "I want you out of my house and out of my life today. If you ever come back onto my property, you will be arrested on the spot."

Poe was twenty years old, no mother, no father, and not one person in the world who cared whether he lived or died. He was so poor he had to rent a room that had no fireplace. He tells us that before he could write in that frigid little room, he would have to hold his fingers over a candle to get rid of the frostbite. But at this point, at the nadir of Poe's life, he struck upon the one thing that would guarantee his fame. Alone in his room he decided to write something so beautiful, so moving, that the world would fall in love with him and reward him.

His nature, however, worked against this fantasy. Because his mind was so warped and influenced by his miserable childhood and all the deaths, the only thing he seemed able to write were stories and poems about dead people who return from the grave. At the age of twenty Edgar Allan Poe invented "the tale of terror" when he began writing his first stories.

Am I telling you Poe was the first person to write a scary story? Of course not—scary stories actually go back to the cavemen. But Poe *is* the first to write a scary story from the psychological point of view of the killer or the mad person himself. He crafted the theme of terror into a form both artistic and respectable. For better or worse there could be no Stephen King today without Edgar Allan Poe.

He created something else, far more important than "respectable terror"—he invented the modern short story. Poe developed the principle that every sentence of a story must contribute to a single effect. In the case of Poe, the effect is horror. If you read any short story today, all of them meet Poe's criterion.

How much money did Poe receive for inventing the tale

of terror and the short story? Nothing—no one wanted to read such twisted tales. Poe would probably have starved, except yet another woman took hold of his life, Mariah Klemm. Her brother was David Poe, Edgar's dissolute father, the dancer. She had spent two years looking for Poe, to make amends for her brother's desertion. She had heard from a cousin that her nephew was a struggling writer and therefore felt great pity for his wretched condition. She wished to adopt Poe as her son and give him a comfortable haven in which to write.

This was what Poe had thought he always wanted, a family who could nurture and love him. But like everything else in Poe's life, it turned into disaster. He moved in with his aunt and discovered that she already had five children. Her husband had died and she was the family's sole support. Poe looked over his new brothers and sisters, who were actually, of course, his first cousins, and his heart was immediately snared by the youngest, a lovely creature named Virginia. She was young and beautiful in the exact way his dead mother, Elizabeth, had been—a fatal resemblance.

Within a few months Poe approached his aunt and expressed his yearning to marry Virginia. Mariah refused—not because Virginia was Edgar's first cousin, but because Virginia was ten years old. Mariah told Edgar he would have to wait until Virginia was thirteen; at that time she would allow the marriage. Mariah was as demented as Edgar; it obviously ran through the entire family.

Three years passed. And when Poe was twenty-six and his cousin Virginia was thirteen, they married. Before the marriage Poe was writing stories of the macabre; no one bought them and he was starving. Once married, he continued writ-

ing such stories, which still went unsold—the only difference was that now his wife was starving too. We don't know what would have happened to them without the man who now entered the scene, who turned Edgar Allan Poe's life completely around and made him famous as we know him today. His name? Charles Dickens, the great English novelist.

What does Dickens have to do with Poe? When Poe was starving in Richmond in 1842, Charles Dickens was the most famous young novelist of his time. So famous was he that American readers paid him handsomely to tour America on the first international superstar tour. And a star he was—oglers pulled at his clothes, women fainted in the streets, hordes begged for his autograph. One of the cities Dickens visited was Richmond, where Poe was struggling so hard. When Poe heard that the great Charles Dickens was coming to Richmond, he sent such a clever letter to Charles Dickens inviting him to lunch at a downtown Richmond hotel that Dickens not only accepted, he came alone.

They sat down to lunch. Poe looked at Dickens, realized that Dickens had been crying, and of course asked the reason. And Dickens related the story: "I was hoping you wouldn't notice, Mr. Poe, but since you asked, I'll give you an honest answer. I had a personal tragedy in my family before I left England to come to America, and I was thinking about it. I have a wife and three children, and we had a pet by the name of Grip. We loved our pet Grip almost as much as we love each other. Before I came away, I took my family on a weekend holiday. We did what we always did with Grip: we locked him in our stable. We left plenty of food and water and thought he would be fine during our absence. But we did not realize there was a large can of paint in the stable,

and its lid had fallen off. Unfortunately the paint was of a color that looked just like water. Poor Grip became confused and drank up all the paint by mistake [paint that was heavily laced with lead and of course deadly poison]. Imagine our shock, Mr. Poe, when we unlocked the stable door upon our return, and there was poor Grip, flat on his back, stiff as a board, legs sticking straight up, stone-cold dead."

Of course the moment Edgar Allan Poe heard the phrase "stone-cold dead," he perked up; this was his kind of conversation! Poe asked, "What was poor little Grip? A cat or a dog?" And Dickens replied, "Oh, no, Mr. Poe, we have no normal pets in my family. Actually Grip was a big, lovable black raven." And Poe thought, raven.

He had never really thought about a raven before; we know this from his diary. He went home that night and opened up a drawer. Within was a poem he had already written, about a beautiful dead young woman named Lenore. Poe had sent the poem to publishers—no one had wanted it. But on this evening, because he was inspired by the grotesque story Dickens had told him, he decided to change the poem. He kept as the centerpiece the dead young woman, but he erased the title "To Lenore" and changed it to "The Raven." He put the ominous black bird in every stanza and gave it one mysterious utterance: "Nevermore." And he sent the poem out again. This time, as "The Raven," it was accepted and immediately caught the public's fancy. Everyone wanted a copy of "The Raven." Even in Poe's day it was a mystery why this poem was so wildly popular. It became, indeed, the most popular poem ever published.

Poe was asked why he thought "The Raven" had so captured the public imagination. First, he said, perhaps it was

because he had wanted to write the first adult fairy tale. And people said, well, if you were going to write the first adult fairy tale, why didn't you open it with the four famous words of most fairy tales, "Once upon a time"? And Poe said, "But I did open it that way. In my mind *all* time is midnight dreary."

The other reason Poe gave for the popularity of "The Raven" had to do with rhythm. He said he had tried to capture, in the beat or cadence of each line, the way a stately raven would actually walk. Whether that was actually a consideration we don't know. But we certainly do remember the unusual and haunting beat of "The Raven":

Once upon a midnight dreary,
  while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume
  of forgotten lore—
While I nodded, nearly napping,
  suddenly there came a tapping,
As of someone gently rapping,
  rapping at my chamber door.

How much money did Poe make on "The Raven"? He made nothing because he was ignorant of copyright laws. He decided to bring out "The Raven" in a newspaper first so he could hurry it into print, not realizing that if one published a poem in a newspaper there was no copyright protection. Any second-rate poet could copy out "The Raven" and immediately bring out a book called *My Greatest Poems* including "The Raven Illustrated." It took Poe so long to bring out his own edition, because he needed to find spon-

sors, that by the time it came out no one would buy it because they'd bought someone else's.

It was a costly mistake. One day, not long after "The Raven" was published, Poe went home to his young wife, who told him she had consumption and was dying. Poe had so little money while Virginia lay ill that he could not afford to buy a blanket for her bed, where she lay in chills. They did, however, have a pet, a longhaired cat named Katarina. Poe would pick up the cat and place it on Virginia's chest for her to hug as the only warmth in their tiny apartment.

Virginia died, and Poe was consumed by grief. There was, however, a token silver lining to his misery. He wrote what is perhaps his most brilliant poem to his dead wife, Virginia. He took it to a publisher who refused it because of its title: "To Virginia." Readers wouldn't know if the poem was written to Poe's home state or to his dead wife. Poe changed the name to "Annabel Lee."

"Annabel Lee" was instantly successful, and Poe's career finally seemed to be established. Even the short stories—"The Gold Bug" in particular—were now finding great favor with the reading public. And then the one success he had always prayed for seemed about to happen. A wealthy man in New York City named Davis McCarthy made Poe an offer: "You are the greatest living author. I own the finest poetry magazine in America. If you will move to New York, not only will I hire you to edit my magazine, I'll pay you twice as much as any editor is currently getting." Finally Poe had acquired the respect of the literary world. All he needed to do to start his new life was to move to New York. He tried; he never arrived.

En route from Richmond to New York, travelers had to

change trains in Baltimore, Maryland. Poe got off the train in Baltimore thinking he would walk down the track, get on the train to New York, and begin his new and glorious life.

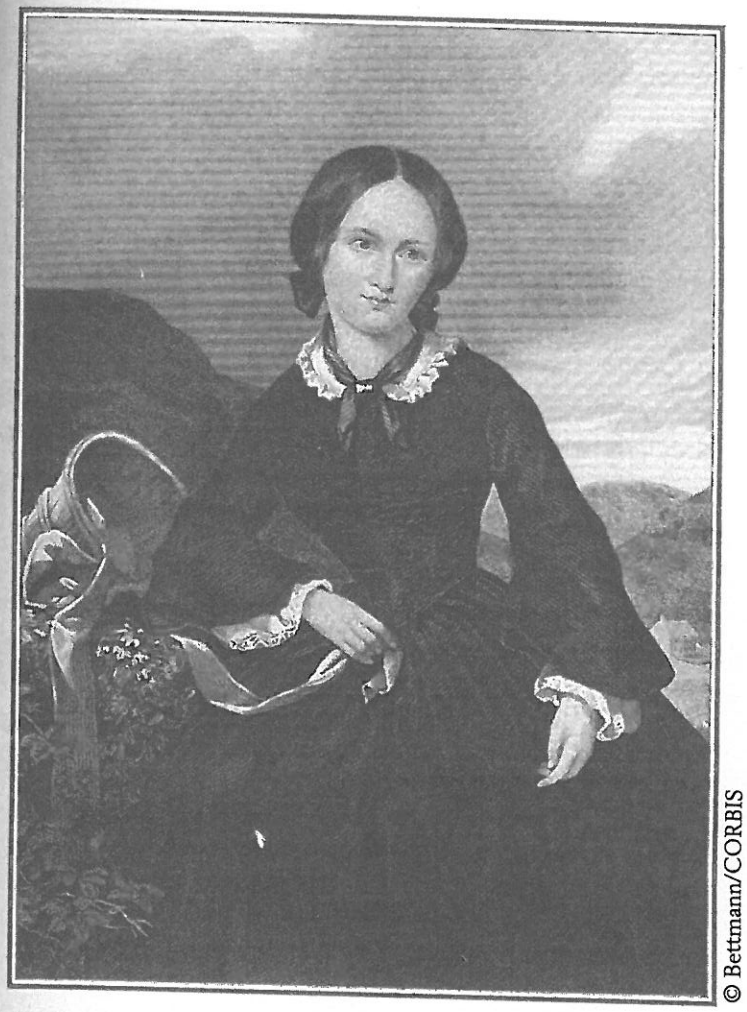
Poe arrived in Baltimore on election day for mayor. If a political candidate wanted more votes back then, he simply found people to vote over and over for him under false names at different polling places. No one in Baltimore would risk doing this for a candidate, because if anyone was caught changing his name to vote illegally more than once, the penalty was ten years in the federal penitentiary. The candidates got around this by sending henchmen down to the train stations, hoping someone gullible would get off a train.

Poe disembarked. A man approached him and said, "This is Baltimore, the friendly city. We'd like to buy you a drink." Poe replied, "You can't buy me a drink, I'm an alcoholic." You have to admire Poe: he had sworn off alcohol for good and had been on the wagon six months. He should have said no more. But just to be friendly he said, "You know, when I used to drink, if I only had one shot of liquor, I'd get so drunk I'd do anything. And then I wouldn't even know I'd done it." "Oh, really?" said the candidate's man. "We didn't want to get you alcohol. It's hot—we thought you might like a lemonade. Do you have time?"

The political flacks took Poe across the street to the railroad tavern where they bought him something called Baltimore lemonade: 5 percent lemons, 95 percent vodka. Poe had seven shots of this deceptive drink, all poison to his system. The men steered the nearly insensible Poe to the polling place, where he cast his vote—and was then cast aside to make his way back to the train station. An eyewitness tells us Poe took only three steps down that Baltimore

street before he collapsed in the gutter in a deep alcoholic coma. A horse ambulance happened by, and they saw Poe. They threw him in the wagon and dumped him at the front gate of the charity ward of a hospital. Poe survived three days. On the third day he opened his eyes wide, raised his head from his pillow, and screamed out in a voice so loud the entire ward heard him, "God have mercy on my soul!" And then he fell back, dead.

He had just turned forty. He had never had a complete success in his life. The four women he had loved all died in agony in front of him. Everything he touched turned into utter disaster. Yet today more people in the world read the poems and short stories of Edgar Allan Poe than the works of any other American author. Poe is our number one literary export, surpassing even Mark Twain. My father, who grew up in Hungary, told me that in Hungary as a young boy he had never heard of Shakespeare, never heard of Dickens, but by sixth grade he was reading the stories of Edgar Allan Poe translated into Hungarian. Ask anyone in France who was the greatest writer in the English language and he or she will answer Edgar Allan Poe. This would sound even more impressive if we could forget that the French also think that Jerry Lewis is the world's greatest comedian. In an ironic twist of fate that Poe himself might have appreciated, his works—like the delicate and ill-fated ladies he created—come to life again and again.



Charlotte Brontë (1816–1855) & *Emily Brontë* (1818–1848)