

**University of Richmond**

---

**From the Selected Works of Scott T. Allison**

---

2018

# Edgar Allan Poe: The Tell-Tale Hero

Michael David Bonifonte



Available at: [https://works.bepress.com/scott\\_allison/57/](https://works.bepress.com/scott_allison/57/)

# 3

## EDGAR ALLAN POE: THE TELL-TALE HERO

MICHAEL DAVID BONIFONTE

He was among the most influential authors of all time, a visionary, a man celebrated in modern society, a man criticized during his own time and who lived a life of poverty and addiction, never knowing how popular his works would one day become. What people know of him, or more likely what they think they know of him, is a blend of fact and fiction, a mix as intricate and often confusing as the man himself. His name was Edgar Allan Poe, the dark, mysterious figure in almost every school curriculum in the United States of America, and on the bookshelves of almost every library in the country, if not the world. Not only was Poe a wildly successful author, and an innovator of many different styles of writing, he is also a hero to the city of Richmond, and a hero to the world at large.

While Poe was not widely recognized in his own time, he did receive one small award that helped to catapult his career. That award was the first prize from the Baltimore Saturday Visitor for his short story, “MS. Found in a Bottle” (Fisher, 2014). Poe’s poem “The Coliseum” almost won best poem from the same competition, but the Baltimore Saturday Visitor did not want the same man to win both categories, so they denied him the achievement. This

award allowed Poe to become a widely known literary critic, and gave him the opportunity to publish more of his work in a place where people would see it. If Poe had not won this seemingly small recognition, his life could have gone in a completely different direction. Arguably one of his most famous poems, “The Raven,” was said to have brought Poe “wide and almost instant acclaim” but not enough popularity that it helped his financial struggles (Fisher, 2014). Although Poe had become more recognized, he was no better off and continued to struggle not just financially but also physically and emotionally.

How does an author and literary critic who never achieved success in his own time period become a hero? Like much of his own work, there is more to Edgar Allan Poe than first meets the eye. Poe generated brand new ideas, improved ideas that already existed, inspired others, and ultimately changed the world for the better. This chapter seeks to explore Edgar Allan Poe’s heroism, incorporating many of the ideas from recent heroism science to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was not just a gifted yet impoverished writer, he was a bona fide Richmond hero.

#### WHAT MAKES POE A HERO

##### The Great Eight

Allison and Goethals (2011) have used the methods of social science to study how society perceives heroes, why groups create heroes, how heroes give us purpose, and perhaps most importantly, what makes a hero. These researchers asked representatives of the general population to describe the traits of a hero, and from these lists of traits, they made a master list of the characteristics most often attributed to heroes. This list of heroic traits is referred to as the *great eight traits* of heroes (Allison & Goethals, 2011). The eight traits consist of intelligent, strong, reliable, resilient, caring, charismatic, selfless, and inspiring. No one trait is more important than another, and heroes do not need to possess all eight of these traits, although they often display multiple characteristics from this list. While there is no threshold of how many traits a hero must possess, it is safe to say that Edgar Allan Poe can be called a hero

because he displayed a remarkable four out of these eight character traits throughout his life and works.

The first trait that Poe exhibited was, without question, intelligence. Even if he was not fully appreciated in his own time, Poe has received extravagant amounts of praise, such as “Each [of Poe's detective stories] is a root from which a whole literature has developed.... Where was the detective story until Poe breathed the breath of life into it?” (Frank & Magistrale, 1997). His works, such as “The Tell-Tale Heart” “The Raven” and “Annabel Lee” are taught in numerous schools around the globe, in the hopes that some of Poe’s creativity and intelligence will be understood by a student, and inspire them to become literary icons themselves. To attain such praise and recognition, intelligence is certainly a necessary quality. Poe’s intelligence is also shown by the mere fact that he managed to survive and prosper through all of the misfortune in his personal life.

The next trait that Poe displayed is resilience. Throughout his life, Poe faced seemingly insurmountable hardship, yet almost always prevailed. When Poe was two years old, his mother died, and since his father had left the family a year before that, Poe had to be taken in by a foster family in Richmond, Virginia (Fisher, 2014). Poe often got into arguments with his adoptive father, John Allan, with Allan wanting his son to become a tobacco merchant like he was, and Poe refusing, wanting to become a writer instead. Poe attempted to go to college, but had to quit when John Allan refused to pay for his tuition, leaving Poe broke and on his own in the world. In this situation, Poe proved his resilience, moving to Boston and following his dreams, writing his first set of poems, then later joining the army, and after that a military academy.

Throughout his life, Poe often moved, and struggled with addictions not only in drinking, but in gambling as well (Fisher, 2014). The fact that Poe endured all of the challenges that he did and fought all of the personal demons that he did is a remarkable testament to his heroic fortitude. His first fiancé, left him for another man, and later Poe suffered greatly when his first wife died. Despite these setback, Poe managed to write all that he did, demonstrating perseverance and strength. Some may argue that these haunting and harrowing experiences are what allowed Poe to write with the passion that he did,

and while that may be true, it takes a special kind of resilience to be able to turn your inner suffering into coherent, beautiful words and images like Poe did. Whereas a lesser man may have stumbled and even given up, Poe forged on, not allowing anything in his life to hold him back from experiencing a legendary career as a writer.

To be a successful author and critic, one needs to have a certain “it” factor about you, commonly known as charisma. Edgar Allan Poe was brimming with charisma, always with a witty remark on the tip of his tongue and on the tip of his pen, ready to write it down and publish. Poe “became best known for his caustic literary criticism” such as the line “We do not mean to say that there is positively nothing in Mr. Fay’s novel to commend—but there is indeed very little” (Fisher, 2014). It is arguable that this sentiment isn’t charisma, but rather bitterness or anger, but Poe’s remarks were engaging; they captivated his audiences and compelled them to read what he had to say whether or not they wanted to. The Messenger prospered when Poe was employed under its ranks as a critic, which proves that the general public enjoyed reading the reviews from Poe, whether or not they were caustic. Poe’s ability to elegantly express his inner thoughts and emotions through writing reveals his confident charisma, and the fact that many people consistently admired the artistry of his opinions is a part of what makes him heroic.

Finally, and perhaps the great eighth trait that best defines Poe is his ability to inspire others. Poe is said to be the father figure of the detective story, writing “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” a work of fiction that would inspire Sir Arthur Conan Doyle to write Sherlock Holmes at a later date (Fisher, 2014). Many other authors have admitted to being stirred by Poe, a subject that will be touched upon later. To this day, the Mystery Writers of America give awards entitled Edgars to up and coming mystery writers in honor of Edgar Allan Poe, and they also include his likeness as their logo (About MWA, 2016). To have an award named after you in the field of your work is a remarkable feat and speaks to Poe’s legendary status. The Mystery Writers of America see in Poe a hero, one who has inspired them and countless others, and one who is worthy of representing their group. In our contemporary world, one would be hard pressed to find any educated person who has not read at least one short story or poem written by Poe. Many young writers base their own

stories on the dark and macabre themes that appear in Poe's work, even if that basis resides in the recesses of the unconscious mind. If Poe is nothing else in this world, he is inspiring, arguably even more so in death than he ever was in life.

### Central and Peripheral Traits

Kinsella, Ritchie, and Igou (2015) expanded on the work of Allison and Goethals (2011) by developing a prototype methodology for identifying 12 central characteristics of heroes, and another 13 peripheral characteristics. The central characteristics were found to be brave, moral integrity, conviction, courageous, self-sacrificing, protecting, honest, selfless, determined, saves others, inspiring, and helpful. The peripheral traits were determined to be proactive, humble, strong, risk-taker, fearless, caring, powerful, compassionate, leadership skills, exceptional, intelligent, talented, and personable. These traits do not define a hero objectively; rather, they describe the general public's perception of a hero, much like the great eight. Also like the great eight, a hero does not need to possess all twelve or all thirteen of these traits, and there is no set number that automatically makes a person a hero or disqualifies someone from becoming a hero.

### Central Characteristics

Regarding the central heroic traits, Edgar Allan Poe possessed moral integrity and conviction, while also being honest, determined, and inspiring. Poe's integrity and conviction can be seen during his days as a literary critic when he wasn't afraid to write unpopular opinions about other authors of his time. Integrity and conviction are based upon being true to oneself in the face of adversity, and that certainly characterized Poe when he received widespread backlash for his articles as a critic. It is a rare individual who stays true to himself and avoids conforming to societal norms. These outliers are the heroes of society. In fact, defying social norms is a hallmark characteristic of heroes and is a quality that Poe certainly exemplified. The fact that Poe did not allow anybody to affect his opinion makes him more of a strong-willed man than most, showing a type of existential courage. The same events demonstrate Poe's honesty. Although his biting literary criticism can be seen as

simply attacking other authors, there is something heroic in the ideals of a man who speaks his mind and does not bother with white lies and insincerity that are characteristic of most people. Poe did not try to hide his inner demons, nor his struggles with addiction, depression, and despair; he instead took an honest look inside himself and put his suffering into words, an artistry that most people lack the ability to do. The determination of Poe can be highlighted in much the same way as his resiliency.

Throughout all of his struggles in life, Poe persevered and held onto the dream of becoming an established author. He wrote through tragic deaths of loved ones, failed publications, depression, and alcoholism, among other challenges. Perhaps the only motivations keeping him fighting were his wife Virginia and his determination to become a successful writer, making it even more ironic that Poe was only given full credit decades after his passing. Poe's inspiring nature was touched upon in the discussion of the great eight traits of heroes, with a literary award being named after him, and entire genres being based on his work, along with the litany of people who quote Poe as an inspiration for them. Edgar Allan Poe not only possessed these traits, he embodied them and lived them in his everyday life, almost flaunting them in his literary work for the world to see.

#### Peripheral Characteristics

Turning next to Kinsella et al.'s (2015) thirteen peripheral characteristics of heroes, we see that Poe was strong, exceptional, intelligent, talented, and risk-taking. Poe's strengths were moral, emotional, and intellectual in nature rather than physical. As previously mentioned, Poe had integrity and determination, along with intelligence. The strength of Poe is shown in these areas. Surely a man who loses both of his parents, his fiancé, and leaves his home at a young age yet still has the resolve to continue upon his journey, is strong indeed. Poe's life journey was a bumpy one, and it took remarkable willpower and emotional fortitude to endure it. The fact that Poe never took the easy way out and always fought for his dreams shows his moral strength, along with his integrity and determination. Edgar Allan Poe is both exceptional and talented in many obvious of ways, but also in the most subtle of ways. Poe knew from a young age that he wanted to write, a passion that

his adoptive father discouraged. What Poe possessed was perhaps a natural talent, one that certainly distinguished him from other writers in his time period, and even most writers outside of his time period.

Although Poe's talent was not recognized during his life as much as it is today, suggesting that talent and heroism are in the eye of the beholder, we would be negligent not to comment on his exceptional writing ability. He not only excelled in one genre, he revolutionized the detective genre as well as the horror/mystery genre (Fisher, 2014). He also excelled as a literary critic, proving that he was not unidimensional but rather a well-rounded individual with multiple talents. His prodigious intelligence made him an exceptional and talented man, allowing him to write in the gifted way that he did.

Edgar Allan Poe was also a risk-taker, having complete faith in his writing abilities which enabled him to move all over the country while chasing his dream. Poe lived in Boston, Virginia, Maryland, and New York for periods of time, mobility that was much harder to do in Poe's primitive time period than it is today (Fisher, 2014). He lived in poverty, risking everything on his literary skills. This level of commitment is the ultimate risk, because bad situations could and did occur, such as being without a real home, or being without enough money to live comfortably. For a literary hero, being willing to take risks is an almost essential trait, as it is impossible to pursue such an uncertain career and to get your work in the public eye without taking chances along the way. In the end, somehow Poe survived it all, proving once more that he is more than worthy of the status of hero.

#### THE MONOMYTH OF THE HERO

Joseph Campbell (1949) was a pioneer in developing a framework for understanding heroic development. Campbell discovered that almost all heroes' journeys from myths all around the world follow the same pattern. This monomyth consists of a temporal sequence of *departure*, *initiation*, and *return*. During departure, the hero is missing a necessary inner quality, such as humility, courage, or morals. The hero embarks on a journey to either acquire that missing quality or to complete an important mission (Campbell, 1949).



Often heroes do not volunteer to leave their familiar worlds; they are forced to depart against their will. The initiation phase of the monomyth includes the challenges, obstacles, and adversaries that heroes face along their journey. Often heroes receive help from a mentor figure in the form of a friend, teacher, or kind stranger, and it is this help that allows heroes to obtain whatever inner quality they were missing and triumph over their foes while overcoming obstacles.

Finally, in the all-important return portion of the monomyth, heroes return to where they started their journey, and they give back to their community, either physically or as a role model for the people around them (Campbell, 1949). Their positive impact is not limited to their small community; the return more generally refers to what the hero does to help the world at large once he has obtained his missing inner quality. For example, a former alcoholic who has been sober for years would give back to his community by speaking at AA meetings, sharing his experience about how to become sober like himself. While not every hero will undergo this exact path with these exact steps, this is the most common journey for a hero, and one that can be applied to most people who are considered heroic. Edgar Allan Poe, although he was a writer and not a stereotypical action hero, is no exception.

To fully understand the journey of Poe, his first familiar world must be completely understood. Edgar Poe was born the second child to two travelling actors, David Poe and Elizabeth Hopkins (Fisher, 2014). David Poe left the family when Edgar was only about a year old and died shortly afterward. Elizabeth Hopkins passed away in Richmond, Virginia when Poe was only two years old, leaving young Edgar to be adopted by John and Frances Allan, a couple who lived in Richmond. Poe was separated from his biological siblings for the rest of his life (Fisher, 2014). Poe's brother died from tuberculosis, and his sister ended up as a teacher later in her life. It is in Richmond under the roof of John and Frances Allan that Poe spent his childhood became immersed in his familiar world.

## Departure

Poe's first heroic departure occurred with the death of his mother, thrusting him into the hands of a Richmond couple before he was old enough to fully comprehend what was going on (Fisher, 2014). While Poe was not missing any important inner qualities at this time, as he was two years old, this departure was significant in shaping his life. He lost both of his parents at an extremely early age, and was separated from both of his siblings, leaving him with only his foster parents. This is extremely important in the development of Poe, as a lack of family can often affect the way a person thinks, acts, and views the world. It could have made Poe more cynical, something that he became famous for as a literary critic later in his life. Any number of things could have been different if Poe had never lost his mother, including his entire career under the right circumstances. While it may not seem significant, this first departure from his birthplace is no doubt an integral part of what shaped Edgar Allan Poe throughout his life.

## Initiation

Edgar Allan Poe faced many villains and obstacles at an early age, and all throughout his life, the first of which being his adoptive father's insistence on Poe joining the mercantile firm of which he was a member (Fisher, 2014). Poe insisted on becoming a writer, specifically a poet, and attended the University of Virginia for one semester, before John Allan stopped paying for his tuition, forcing Poe to drop out. Poe at that time was struggling with gambling debts, which was part of the reason why Allan refused to pay for Poe's education (Fisher, 2014). Shortly after returning to his adopted home of Richmond, Poe found out that his former fiancé Sarah Royster had left him under her family's guidance, and was engaged to an older and wealthier man. This setback emotionally crushed Poe.

After being forced to withdraw from the University of Virginia and finding out that his fiancé had left him, Poe went through his second departure. He left his adopted home of Richmond and headed to his biological birthplace, Boston (Fisher, 2014). This is where Poe faced one of his main challenges during this time in his life and many others -- poverty. Poe's financial

difficulties were a persistent problem in his life. He tried writing a collection of his poetry in the hopes of making a profit, but *Tamerlane and other Poems* was not successful at all, and Poe remained in dire straits (Fisher, 2014). Disheartened, and with a lack of many viable options, he decided to join the military when he was eighteen years old, lying to the recruitment officer and saying that he was in fact twenty-two in order to be recruited. Although Poe succeeded in the military, and climbed the ranks rather quickly, he was unhappy. Not long after the death of his adoptive mother Frances Allan, Poe begged John Allan to help him to get out of his five-year contract with the United States Army. After being released from the army, John Allan strongly urged Poe to attend the United States Military Academy at West Point, which he did attend for a year (Fisher, 2014). However, West Point ended up being another setback for Poe, and he was eventually expelled from the school and disowned and shunned by John Allan as a result. Having nowhere else to go, Poe went to live with Maria Clemm, his aunt, and her young daughter Virginia.

Maria Clemm was a major help to Poe on his heroic journey, giving him reliable housing along with hot meals, allowing Poe to focus entirely on his writings. His third volume of poetry did not attract as much attention as he had hoped, so he instead turned to writing fiction, specifically Gothic-style horror and suspense stories, the genre that he is most well-known for today (Fisher, 2014). The short story "MS. Found in a Bottle" won a Baltimore Saturday Visitor competition, and Poe finally received some of the attention that he craved. John Kennedy, one of the judges who awarded Poe for his short story, acted as one of Poe's mentors on his journey, guiding him in the right direction during a time of need. Kennedy encouraged Poe to return to Richmond and take up an assistant editor role at the *Southern Literary Messenger* (Fisher, 2014). Both Kennedy and Clemm can easily be seen as mentors and friends to Poe on his journey, helping him in different ways to succeed.

Another of Poe's mentors during his heroic journey for literary success was his cousin Virginia Clemm, whom he married shortly after beginning work at the *Southern Literary Messenger* (Fisher, 2014). Poe felt a deep love for Virginia, and so he was devastated when she succumbed to tuberculosis. Poe's

deep depression prevented him from working and it nudged him further into the grips of alcoholism. It is thought that Virginia helped Poe through some of his dark times, and it is possible that she was an inspiration for some of Poe's writing. She eased Poe's transitions between jobs and homes, helping him through his heroic journey. While it was not overt help in the form of financial backing or guidance, Virginia's unwavering affection must have acted as a lighthouse for Poe, representing the one positive constant during his life. But now she was gone.

Throughout his life, Edgar Allan Poe struggled with addictions. As mentioned earlier, Poe's gambling debts at a young age were problematic for him, and throughout his life he also faced the challenge of alcoholism. His addiction to alcohol almost affected his job at the *Southern Literary Messenger*, as Poe got into many fights with his then supervisor about his drinking habits (Fisher, 2014). After the death of Virginia Clemm, it is said that Poe fell even deeper into alcoholic addiction, accentuating his mood swings from a medical condition such as diabetes or hypoglycemia. A major part of Poe's heroic journey was battling his addictions, and trying to achieve his missing quality of self-control. While some may argue that it was Poe's alcoholism and strange behavior that allowed him to craft successful poetry and short stories, as they are often dark in nature, he fought throughout his life to regain control of his body and his actions. With a possible illness resulting in violent mood swings when alcohol was introduced, Poe had a very good reason to fight. It is impossible to say whether or not these addictions contributed to Poe's creative genius, but his uphill battle with addictions clearly placed him on a rocky hero's journey, providing the obstacles that every hero must overcome.

## Return

Edgar Allan Poe returned to his adoptive home of Richmond, moving back to the city in which he was raised as a child in the Allan household. He began work as assistant editor for the *Southern Literary Messenger*. While Poe's genius still has a positive impact on people today, it was his return to Richmond that underscored his impact as a literary critic. Although he also posted revised versions of his own work in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, the main work that people knew him for were the hard-hitting reviews that

he wrote (Fisher, 2014). One example of Poe's caustic style of critiquing is the quip, "When we called Norman Leslie the silliest book in the world we had certainly never seen Paul Ulric." Although Poe was trying to educate others through his opinions on literature, his reviews mostly made him lifelong enemies, dividing the community more than bringing in together. However, overall, his work at the Messenger was a positive enterprise, either offering entertainment to the public, valuable insight into different writings for his readers, or feedback for the writers that he was reviewing, even if it was perhaps harsh in nature.

So why is Edgar Allan Poe a hero? Poe's true gift to society is his body of literary work, and all of the people whom it has inspired. He is known as the father of the detective genre, and he revolutionized the horror/suspense genre (Fisher, 2014). Being the founder of an entire genre is a monumental accomplishment. Thousands of writers have since adopted the detective genre and the horror/suspense genre, and millions more have been entertained and enlightened as readers of these genres. Countless poems, short stories, novels, television shows, and movies have been based on what Poe started. Poe's gift to the world wasn't appreciated in his time as it is in the present day, but that does not diminish his achievements. It is rare that somebody's influence on the world lasts beyond their lifetime, let alone for untold numbers of generations beyond them. Poe gave back not only to Richmond, or to Baltimore or New York, but to the entire world, for longer than he could have ever imagined. In essence, Poe was an innovator and a perfectionist, creating and improving the starting points for myriad authors who came after him.

Poe's death mirrored some of his most famous work -- it was mysterious, and people are still ruminating to this day over what exactly happened. After Poe returned to Richmond once more to speak at a convention, he met his once fiancé, now a widower, and he planned to marry her and live out his life in Richmond (Fisher, 2014). One week later, Poe was found extremely sick in Baltimore, and he soon passed away in a hospital for unknown reasons (Fisher, 2014). After a career of making enemies, it was not long before somebody attacked the deceased Poe and his legacy, with Griswold twisting some of the facts of Poe's life and outright lying in his memoir of Poe's life.

Griswold did this in the hopes of revenge for the remarks that Poe had made during his tenure as a critic, but his plan backfired. This controversy and confusion only made Poe more popular, and ultimately led to a higher heroic status for Poe, as it gave him a sense of mystique and intrigue that hooked curious readers even deeper into his twisted life.

### Poe as an Underdog

Throughout history, people have told stories about disadvantaged peoples rising up against seeming insurmountable challenges, and eventually overcoming them, defying the odds and achieving a surprising yet extremely satisfying happy ending. This is the classic David and Goliath story, the underdog versus the giant. We as a society seem to relate to the underdog, and are more sympathetic toward their plight, and actually root for them to succeed. But what exactly is an underdog, and why are we attracted to them? According to Vandello, Goldschmied, and Michniewicz (2017), an underdog can be defined as “disadvantaged parties facing advantaged opponents and unlikely to succeed.” Vandello et al. also add that “the competition may be more abstract with no identifiable opponent,” as is the case for Edgar Allan Poe. Humanity’s affinity for underdogs is due to the thrill of the unexpected, hope springs eternal, identifying with the little guy, and balancing the scales of justice. Thrill of the unexpected refers to the idea that the lower the perceived chances of success, the more thrill we will experience if success is achieved. We get a massive emotional payoff if underdogs succeed. Hope springs eternal refers to the idea that underdogs give us hope, causing us to overestimate the likelihood of an underdog succeeding. Identifying with the little guy refers to the idea that most of us can relate to underdogs and to the adversity underdogs face. Finally, balancing the scales of justice refers to the idea that people are inclined to think that disadvantaged underdogs deserve to succeed.

Edgar Allan Poe was clearly an underdog throughout his short life. By the age of three, both of Poe’s biological parents had died, leaving him with adoptive parents John and Frances Allan (Poe’s Life, 2016). Wanting to be a poet, Poe attended the University of Virginia, but was given less than a third of the money required to attend by John Allan, forcing Poe to turn to gambling.

Poe even burned his furniture for warmth when he lost his remaining money, eventually leading to withdrawal from the school. Shortly afterward, Poe's fiancée left him for another man. After serving in the army for two years, Poe discovered that his adoptive mother Frances Allan was dying, and he could not make it back to Richmond before she was buried (Poe's Life, 2016). Although Poe became more and more famous through his writings and through his post as critic at the Messenger, he still received little to no pay, at one point only being given twenty-five copies of his work as payment. Poe was an underdog because he had little to no family, no money, and almost none of the tools necessary to succeed, but he still managed to achieve his dreams. Poe became a household name after publishing *The Raven*, and he fought for higher pay for poets and authors like himself. His struggles never ended, as his wife Virginia died of tuberculosis, the same disease that had killed both Poe's mother and adopted mother. These losses sent Poe into a massive downward spiral; yet he always fought through the adversity he faced, cementing his place in history as a persistent and ultimately triumphant underdog.

Vandello et al. (2017) make the point that "The heroism of underdogs may not lie in their outcomes so much as in their spirit," and that "The pursuit of a goal, even (or especially) in the face of likely defeat, suggests heroic qualities of perseverance, bravery, and principled integrity." Poe's status as an underdog relates to his heroism in the sense that people admire him for showing moral courage in the face of adversity. If an advantaged author had written as harsh a criticism as Poe had during his time at the Messenger, he would likely not have had the same reception from the public. Because Poe is seen as an underdog, almost anything that he did in his quest to succeed is viewed as not only acceptable, but as the right thing to do in that circumstance. Poe is viewed as a hero in part because people admire his ability to succeed despite experiencing many losses and setbacks.

## POE'S LEGACY

As mentioned earlier, a major component of the hero's journey is the return, and the subsequent gift that the hero bestows upon society. The gift can be physical, financial, or in the case of Edgar Allan Poe, intellectual and artistic. Poe's legacy was not a vault of money, power, or fame; it was his combined works as a critic, horror writer, and mystery writer. Poe's creation of both the mystery/detective fiction genre and the horror genre opened up new worlds to the writers that came after him, allowing them to do work that they could have never imagined.

### Literary Legacy

During his time at the Messenger, along with publishing his own assorted works in the magazine, Poe worked as a critic, reviewing popular authors of the time, and usually attacking them. Poe liked to criticize Northern writers, and made many rivals, such as Rufus Griswold (Poe's Life, 2016). However, Poe's criticisms, along with over 100 short stories and poems, are the remnants of his life, and make up his legacy as an author and as a writer. The criticisms levied by Poe may have upset his targets, but the public loved to read his scathing reviews, and the Messenger enjoyed great popularity while Poe was under its employment. It is likely that some of the people reviewed by Poe actually took his criticism as constructive, and improved their writing styles. Throughout time, through his words and his works, Poe has inspired countless men and women, all contributing to his literary legacy.

One luminary inspired by Poe was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the author of Sherlock Holmes (Eckert, 2016). Poe had written three stories about a detective quite similar to Holmes, whose name was Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin. Doyle is quoted as having said Poe's work is "a model for all time," and this can be seen when comparing Doyle's works to Poe's detective fiction work. It is safe to say that being the founder of detective fiction, and inspiring perhaps the most popular detective fiction novelist of all time, makes Poe a hero of literature. If Poe had not created Chevalier Dupin, the iconic character of Sherlock Holmes may never have been created.



Ambrose Bierce was another author who cited Poe as an inspiration for his works in the horror genre (Eckert, 2016). When we examine Bierce's work such as "The Middle Toe of the Right Foot," the parallels between the style, tone, dialogue, and layout can easily be seen. It has been said that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, and countless others have imitated and replicated Poe, attempting to channel his spirit in their style and writing. With Poe taking the first step in a long literary staircase, we see that everyone literary artist who came after him was at least familiar with his work if not outright influenced by it.

### Pop Culture Legacy

In the world today, there are over 250 songs, movies, and television shows that are either based on Poe, adaptations of his work, or stories based on his work (Eckert, 2016). Even in modern times, Poe has a place in the media, and in Hollywood. *The Raven*, released in 2012, was a movie about a serial killer who killed his victims based on stories authored by Edgar Allan Poe, and it featured the character of Poe himself trying to stop the killer that he inspired. *The Following*, a television show produced by the Fox network, which ran from 2013 until 2015, featured the same idea as *The Raven*, except instead of just one serial killer, an entire cult had been formed under the ideals of Poe's fictitious murders, and the show focused on stopping them (Eckert, 2016).

Poe has fully invaded the pop cultural sphere in America, with his influence ranging from a hardcore brooding professional wrestler named Raven, to the name of the Baltimore Ravens in his birthplace of Baltimore Maryland, to over 250 "writing credits" in film and television (Meslow, 2012). The Simpsons' now famous *Treehouse of Horror* episode focused on *The Raven* as the theme for the episode, with Homer being the main character from the poem and Bart being the raven itself. A computer game from 1995 called *The Dark Eye* took Poe's writings, specifically "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Cask of Amontillado," and "Berenice," and created an entirely new perspective for them, allowing the player to progress through the narration as either the victim or the murderer and showing animations of the gruesome murders on screen (Meslow, 2012). A short animation of *The Tell-Tale Heart* created in Britain in 1953 earned an Oscar nomination, and shockingly enough, an "X"

rating by the British Board of Film Censors, a first-time event for a cartoon of any kind, showing just how dark even an animated adaptation of Poe could be. Poems and short stories such as *Annabel Lee*, *House of Usher*, *The Premature Burial*, and *The Cask of Amontillado* have all been adapted as either movies, animated shorts, plays, or television shows.

How do all of these adaptations and writing credits demonstrate that Edgar Allan Poe was a hero? They show that even over a century after his death, the world at large continues to admire and emulate Poe. They also suggest that compared to all of the authors and writers since his time, Poe's work stands the test of time; he is just as good if not better than anybody else since him. Perhaps most importantly, they show that society genuinely enjoys his works, and they want to experience them over and over again. If being a hero could be condensed into one act, it would be positively changing the world. Positive impact can occur by saving somebody's life, by reforming harmful policies, or by creating lasting genres and ideas that improve society intellectually and provide entertainment for millions. People base television shows, movies, sports teams, professional wrestlers, and animated shorts on Poe's work because he was revolutionary, because he was inspiring, and because he was, and is, a hero.

#### PURPOSE AND CAREER IDENTITY

##### Sense of Purpose and Heroism

Kendall Bronk and Brian Riches (2017) studied what they called the intersection of purpose and heroism, defining purpose as "representing a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once personally meaningful and at the same time leads to productive engagement with some aspect of the world beyond the self" (Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003). For Edgar Allan Poe, it is easy to say that his purpose was to be an author. It was personally meaningful to him, as he wanted to write since he was a child, and he positively engaged with the world beyond himself by putting his writings into the hands of the public. To support this idea, it is said that "for instance a purpose in life may be evident among individuals who seek to contribute

to artistic or spiritual pursuits or to create new musical or structural forms” (Bronk & Riches, 2017).

So how does Poe’s purpose of being an author relate to him being a hero? It is through a concept called purpose-guided heroism, which “proposes that the existence of an enduring purpose in life readies individuals for heroic action” (Bronk & Riches 2017). What this means is that individuals with purpose are more likely to act heroically than those without purpose, as having a purpose generally instills the individual with strong values and beliefs, motivating him to act to advocate for or defend them. A purpose is said to make somebody a “hero in waiting,” and this is certainly the case for Poe. From a young age, Poe knew that his purpose in life was to write, but he faced formidable challenges along the way. His belief in his purpose allowed him to persevere when others may have stopped, and allowed him to finally become a hero when he received the chance to publish more of his works. Without the deep-rooted belief in his goal of writing, Poe could easily have settled for the military, or to follow his adopted father in the trade that he was pushed into. It was the inner compass of Poe that pointed him toward his purpose in life, and allowed him to become a hero.

### Career Identity and Heroism

In addition to a sense of purpose in life, a person’s career identity is very important in regards to heroism. According to Dik, Shimizu, and O’Connor (2017), a person’s occupation can be a job, a career, or a calling. A job serves as merely a way to get paid and support oneself, and one would not hesitate to quit and take another job that pays better, or is more useful. People with a career seek promotions, status, and power within their company, and focus on the achievements possible to them in that career trajectory. A person with a calling finds intrinsic value in his work, and knows that it provides meaning in his life along with making a difference in their community. Edgar Allan Poe’s purpose in life was also his calling -- to become a successful author one way or another, and to hopefully shape the future through his works.

It is said that a calling frequently involves “sacrificing some aspects of well-being (e.g. power, prestige, pay) in pursuit of making a socially beneficial difference (Dik et al., 2017). For Poe, this was giving up a simple life, and often

his very home, to move somewhere else in the country to pursue his calling and give back to the world. With regard to heroism, purpose, and calling, Dik et al. claim that, “within a particular career path, it is also plausible that this focus on pursuing or expressing a broader sense of meaning primes a person for recognizing and responding to opportunities to act in a heroic manner...” Because Poe followed his purpose as a writer and derived from it, he was more readily available to become a hero. If people view their occupation as merely a job or a career, or they don’t find meaning or purpose in their line of work, the chances that they will act heroically in the context of their job are very slim. In essence, there needs to be “the sense that one’s work is not principally carried out for personal happiness or fulfillment but rather to advance the well-being of others, or the greater good” (Dik et al., 2017). While Poe enjoyed his work, he knew, as all writers know, that his writings were not for himself, but for everyone who would eventually read them. Poe is a hero because of the effects of his writings, but his heroism was fueled by the greater purpose and meaning that Poe derived from his occupation and calling.

#### CONCLUSION

Edgar Allan Poe embodied the traits of a hero, travelled the hero’s journey throughout his life, took on the role of an underdog, inspired countless people through his writing, and lived and worked with a purpose, one that led him to his calling and his heroism. Edgar Allan Poe was an orphan by the age of three, eventually raised by his adoptive parents in the city of Richmond, Virginia, his de facto home. Throughout his life he worked toward his goal of becoming an author, tirelessly publishing poetry, criticisms, and short stories, gaining little to no financial compensation from any of them, all the while battling addiction and dealing with the loss of nearly every loved one.

Today, those same poems and short stories that were overlooked in Poe’s time are used in more than 250 forms of visual media, are taught in nearly every school across the country, and have entertained and inspired millions of people around the globe. To say that Poe is a hero to not only Richmond but to the whole world would be like saying that his now famous works are a

tiny bit dark: a complete understatement. Poe in one way or another changed the lives of countless individuals and left a positive change in the world that even his great mind would have trouble imagining. To put it simply, Edgar Allan Poe was resilient, inspiring, intelligent, an underdog, a visionary, a literary paragon, and above all else, a hero.

## REFERENCES

- About MWA (2016). Mystery Writers of America. (n.d.). Retrieved October 21, from <http://mysterywriters.org/about-mwa/>
- Allison, S. T., & Goethals, G. R. (2011). *Heroes: What they do and why we need them*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Allison, S. T., & Goethals, G. R. (2013). *Heroic leadership: An influence taxonomy of 100 exceptional individuals*. New York: Routledge.
- Allison, S. T., & Goethals, G. R. (2017). The hero's transformation. In S. T. Allison, G. R. Goethals, & R. M. Kramer (Eds.), *Handbook of heroism and heroic leadership*. New York: Routledge.
- Bronk, Kendall, C. and Brian R. Riches. (2017). "The Intersection of Purpose and Heroism." In *Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership*, edited by Scott T. Allison, George R. Goethals, and Roderick M. Kramer. New York: Routledge.
- Campbell, Joseph. (1949). *The hero with a thousand faces*. New York: New World Library.
- Damon, William, Jenni Mennon, Kendall C. Bronk (2003). The development of purpose during adolescence. *Applied Developmental Science*, 7 (3), 119–128.
- Dik, Brian, J., Adelyn B. Shimizu, and William O'Connor (2017). "Career Development and a Sense of Calling" In *Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership*, edited by Scott T. Allison, George R. Goethals, and Roderick M. Kramer. New York: Routledge.
- Eckert, Mallory. (2016). "Writers Inspired by Poe." *Who Edgar Allan Poe Inspired*. Accessed October 21, from <https://www.oswego.edu/~meckert/Poe/inspired>
- Fisher, Benjamin, F., IV Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849). (2014, July 1). In *Encyclopedia Virginia*. Retrieved from [http://www.EncyclopediaVirginia.org/Poe\\_Edgar\\_Allan\\_1809-1849](http://www.EncyclopediaVirginia.org/Poe_Edgar_Allan_1809-1849).
- Frank, Frederick, S., and Anthony Magistrale (1997). *The Poe Encyclopedia*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Goethals, G. R. & Allison, S. T. (2012). Making heroes: The construction of courage, competence and virtue. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 46, 183-235.

- Kim, J., Allison, S. T., Eylon, D., Goethals, G., Markus, M., McGuire, H., & Hindle, S. (2008). Rooting for (and then Abandoning) the Underdog. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 38, 2550-2573.
- Kinsella, Elaine, L., Tim D. Ritchie, and Eric R. Igou (2015). Zeroing in on heroes: A prototypeanalysis of hero features. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 108, 114-127.
- Meslow, Scott (2012). "Pop Culture's Undying Edgar Allan Poe Obsession." *The Atlantic*. Accessed November 10, 2016, from <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/04/pop-cultures-undying-edgar-allan-poe-obsession/256417/>.
- "Poe's Life." (2016). Edgar Allan Poe Museum. Accessed November 10, from <https://www.poemuseum.org/life.php>.
- Vandello, Joseph, A., Nadav Goldschmied, and Kenneth Michniewicz (2017). "Underdogs as Heroes" In *Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership*, edited by Scott T. Allison, George R. Goethals, and Roderick M. Kramer. New York: Routledge.