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## Custody Battle--Horror Writers Awarded Poe

Jeffrey B. Burton

"How can they call it a detective story? The thing ends like a Monty Python skit where they suddenly drop sixteen tons on Eric Idle," I protested. "**Edgar Allan Poe** is christened the father of the detective story because an escaped orangutan swung into apartments and smashed the victims apart?"

Professor Houtz probably wanted to pop me one in the mouth, but he satisfied himself with theatrically rolling his eyes, then ambled back to the blackboard. It was my final week of prep school, senior year, and the elderly World Lit instructor was making us college-bound twits read "Murders in the Rue Morgue." The class had collectively sighed in agreement with me about the cop-out ending--it hadn't been murder at all but a rampaging gorilla. It would be like getting to the final page of a **Michael Connelly** or **John Sandford** novel, only to discover that the mysterious champagne villain turns out to be a rabid pit bull.

Now I have no problem granting mystery writers their Blessed Trinity of Saints, **Agatha Christie**, **Sir Arthur Conan Doyle**, and **Dashiell Hammett**, but I draw the line at Edgar Allan Poe. Sorry, mystery hacks, no joint custody allowed. Poe's tortured soul IS the horror genre. Poe is one of ours!

Leaving aside "Murders in the Rue Morgue," can you rattle off any of Poe's other *mystery* stories? Anybody out there have anything come instantly to mind (and no Google-izing)? I'm willing to spot you "The Purloined Letter" (Encyclopedia-Brown-like blackmail yawner; no body count), but beyond "Purloined" we need to consult Professor Houtz or surf Google.

Now raise your hand if you can rattle off any of E.A. Poe's non-detective stories. Slow down, already, I can only write so fast. Each of Poe's tip-of-the-tongue stories is predominantly horror. The classics that pop immediately to mind include:

- "The Pit and the Pendulum": Prisoner's descent into madness is hastened along by unseen Inquisitors. (Predates **Eli Roth** films by two centuries.)
- "The Tell-Tale Heart": Demented caregiver's descent into madness is hastened along by an ever-loudening heartbeat. (Trumps by fifty-odd years Freud's discovery of the id and guilt power.)
- "The Black Cat": Animal-abusing drunkard's descent into madness is hastened along by a feline apparition. (Edgar Allan as Founding Father of PETA.)

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- "The Fall of the House of Usher": An inbred's descent into madness is hastened along by his haunted manor. (The Bronte sisters meet **Peter Straub**.)
- "The Masque of the Red Death": An elitist knothead's descent into madness is hastened along when an uninvited guest wreaks havoc on the knothead's masquerade ball. (Six score and ten years later, a similar kismet awaits Carietta White's classmates at the Ewen High School senior prom.)"The Cask of Amontillado": Winsome bricklayer's descent into madness passes into remission after his premeditated murder of an elitist knothead. (Black humor and Hitchcockian wryness.)

Even Poe's most famous poetry is grounded in horror, not mystery. Dr. Phil at the top of his game would never be able to save the wretched, brokenhearted bastard in "The Raven." Though working in a different medium, Poe covers familiar themes. In this case the narrator's descent into madness is hastened along by the appearance of an ethereal, talking bird.

"Prophet!" said I, "thing of evil!-- prophet still, if bird or devil!  
By that Heaven that bends above us--by that God we both adore--  
Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn,  
It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels named Lenore--  
Clasp a rare and radiant maiden, whom the angels named Lenore?"  
Quoth the Raven, "Nevermore."

Another of Poe's classic poems--and my personal favorite--"Annabel Lee" is a melancholy love sonnet of unsettling proportions. After all, is there anything as cosmically horrific as love lost to death? The narrator of the poem fingers the "winged seraphs of heaven" for stealing away his beloved Annabel Lee.

The angels, not half so happy in heaven,  
Went envying her and me--  
Yes!--that was the reason (as all men know,  
In this kingdom by the sea)  
That the wind came out of the cloud by night,  
Chilling and killing my Annabel Lee.

Sure enough we discover that the narrator's descent into madness is hastened along by the loss of his "love that was more than love."

For the moon never beams without bringing me dreams  
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;  
And the stars never rise but I feel the bright eyes  
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;  
And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side  
Of my darling--my darling--my life and my bride,

In the sepulchre there by the sea,  
In her tomb by the sounding sea.

Not too shabby for an alky who married his thirteen-year old cousin. Not shabby at all. In addition, I posit that Poe's writing philosophy goes more hand-in-hand with the horror genre than mystery. According to one sensitive critic:

Poe developed a theory of composition that he applied to both his short stories and his poems. Its most basic principle was that insofar as short fiction and poetry were concerned, the writer should aim at creating a single and total psychological/spiritual effect upon the reader. The theme or plot of the piece is always subordinate to the author's calculated construction of a single, intense mood in the reader's or listener's mind, be it melancholy, suspense, or horror.

[Edgar Allan Poe: An Introduction (R. Moore. "Edgar Allan Poe: An Introduction." eNotes: [Edgar Allan Poe](#). Ed. Penny Satoris. Seattle: eNotes.com LLC, 2003. 30 August 2007.)]

Isn't that the ideal definition of what the greatest horror writers attempt to achieve? To create a mood piece that lingers, smoke-like, in the mind of the reader long after they put the book back on the shelf? I believe so.

Yes, the yarn spinners of sleuthing can worship Poe as the *inventor* of detective fiction--they can tip back drinks to him at their annual Edgar Awards and fantasize that Poe's genius was their genesis--but we horror writers know the truth of the matter. Sorry, Sherlock, but when all is said and done, **Edgar Allan Poe** is one of ours. We get sole custody.

Of course we'll spot the sleuth crowd their Saint Agatha, their Conan Doyle and all the rest--but when it comes to **Edgar Allan Poe**???

Quoth the raven, "Nevermore."

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