An Unrequited Obsession:

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The Oxford Handbook of Edgar Allan Poe

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Poe’s influence on modern horror fiction has been more often asserted than proven. His sway over modern horror largely appears in the need for writers and directors in an allegedly disreputable genre to legitimize their work with a literary legacy. Filmmakers have used horror films of the 1930s and continuing through Roger Corman’s famous, and famously loose, adaptations of Poe’s work with American International Pictures in the sixties. Horror fiction, and some of the field’s most celebrated writers such as Lovecraft and Bradbury, have exhibited little relationship to it. These popular culture forms have extended the anxiety of influence generated by Poe in the horror tradition even when adaptations of his work owe little to the texts from which they borrow.

Keywords: Poe, horror-weird fiction, Arthur Machen, Ambrose Bierce, Lugosi, Roger Corman

Stephen King’s 411-page love letter to the horror genre, Ramsey Campbell, H. P. Lovecraft, The Twilight Zone, and numerous B-movies and monster magazines of the fifties and sixties. Edgar Allan Poe shows up on exactly two pages, even though one of those pages calls Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” the “best tale of inside evil ever written.” Like so many contemporary masters of horror, King feels obliged to pay tribute to Poe but shows little, if any, evidence of Poe’s influence on his own fiction. In a later essay, King elaborates, calling the tale “still gruesome enough to produce nightmares” and describing it as the first real story dealing with sociopathic horror, presaging Thomas Harris’s creation of Hannibal Lecter. King’s unstinting praise of an author whose influence over his own work has been negligible embodies how Poe’s sway over modern horror fiction has frequently been assumed though seldom proven. This essay shows that efforts to use Poe in the modern horror tradition—in both fiction and film—are ultimately efforts to legitimize what remains a largely disreputable genre by providing it with a canonical literary legacy that stretches farther back than the pulp magazines of the early twentieth century.

Attempts to locate the roots of twentieth-century horror fiction in the influence of the eighteenth-century Gothic novel, with Mary Shelley, Bram Stoker, and the world of the penny dreadful and the Grand Guignol, have often failed to take into account how social and cultural history in the 1910s and 1920s shaped the popularity of horror. Many of the authors discussed in this essay, and certainly the first horror films, attained mass appeal in the aftermath of the Great War, its horrors providing nightmare fuel for generations. This has not prevented numerous auteurs of the unseemly from claiming that they represent Poe’s heirs, stretching farther back than the pulp magazines of the early twentieth century.

These points are not meant to suggest that horror writers and directors should adhere to a single, stable core of meaning in Poe or else leave him be. As Dennis R. Perry and Carl H. Sederholm suggest, Poe is best...
understood as something like John Orr’s concept of Alfred Hitchcock as a “matrix figure,” or “an individual whose ideas, work, and influence intersect other areas of life at so many points that it becomes impossible to understand the world without him or her.” But if we consider Poe as the “master of horror,” we learn much about both the modern horror tradition and what Poe has come to mean outside his own texts. Although it may be more accurate to call Poe the father of the detective novel (for instance) than the father of modern horror, we should not ignore how much his image, if not his actual work, has shaped the horror tradition. This is particularly so, given how much that tradition has sought to connect itself to him.

The difficulty of classifying Poe’s tales of psychological and philosophical trauma dates to the nineteenth century. A few perceptive contemporaries recognized that he was more than, as Ralph Waldo Emerson infamously referred to him, a “jingle man.” He also represented something other than the original goth, a romantic antiromantic who relied on visionary experience. A few months after his death, John M. Daniel in Southern Literary Messenger, for which the deceased had previously worked as an assistant editor, recognized the breadth of Poe’s ambition in contrast with his pathetic demise: “Edgar Allan Poe, who re-organized the universe, and subverted the theory of a world’s belief and a world’s science… died of drink, friendless and alone, in the common wards of a Baltimore hospital.”

The “reorganization of the universe” through horror as we would understand the term. Instead, Daniel found this reorganization of the world in works that explore the boundaries of life and death, including the cosmological work Eureka. Moreover, the Messenger’s description of Poe’s demise became one of the first times his image as troubled artist, in love with death in the way his characters often seem besotted with the dead, had been put on public display. The macabre iconography of Poe helped make him the putative father to the twentieth-century horror tradition.

Poe’s path toward becoming known as the progenitor of the horror tradition of his own reputation, and it had an intimate link with his literary reputation long intertwined with attacks and defenses of his character, especially in association with his alcoholism and alleged opium addiction. Some admirers, most famously Charles Baudelaire, praised Poe precisely for these supposedly unseemly biographical facts. In the eyes of Baudelaire, Poe’s supposed transgressive behavior made him the epitome of the rebellious romantic artist. His long-time nemesis, the Reverend Rufus Griswold, likely did Poe a favor in emphasizing his drinking and addictive habits, feeding his dark legend and unwittingly helping to fashion him into modern horror’s dark mascot.

John L. Hervey, writing in 1933, asserted that “The Raven” had already become something of a standard text in public education. However, Hervey did note that Poe’s work bore the whiff of the “charnel house” and that “there was not a breath of plain air in it.” This comment underscored Poe’s undeniable fixation on death, though this conception does not connect him simply with the horror genre. J. Gerald Kennedy has noted that Poe’s morbid interest is best understood against the backdrop of the “contemplative pleasure” related to death and the art of mourning in Poe’s time. Hervey’s comment regarding the “charnel house” nature of Poe’s work should be read in this context of changing funerary rites and popular speculations about the fate of the soul after death common in the nineteenth century. The ambiguous lines between life and death, explored by...
the Spiritualist movement, inform his poems and prose much more than the recognizable lineaments of
modern horror. 9

Contemporary readers are well served in considering that such discussions took place before the full emergence of the concept of genre in its most modern form, certainly before the emergence of the idea of the “genre writer.” Although Poe carried the taint of “the charnel house,” he wrote works that we would classify as comedy, suspense, mystery, and philosophy. Given this varied experimentation with styles, why would the horror tradition of the twentieth century see Poe’s work as a tomb worth raiding for stories and tropes that could appear in the horror tradition? There are really two intertwined answers to this question. First, Poe’s image as a romantic, transgressive renegade, indeed the suggestion that he had an especially well-developed death drive, comports with modern horror’s sense of itself as transgressive, the bad boy of genres that revels in its own disreputability. Second, though related, Poe’s work came into prominence at a time in the late nineteenth century when the concept of genre began to emerge. In this new reimagination of popular culture, many of Poe’s tales fit most closely with what editors at the time called “horror fiction” (a term that seems to have first appeared in advertising for Universal Studios’ line of monster films that began with Dracula and Frankenstein, both in 1931).

When the Munsey magazines began their publication in the late nineteenth century, a much more recognizable concept of genre began to develop, in some sense as the commodification of what had been thought of as writing styles. With the appearance of the first issues of these magazines, readership began to develop a taste for a wide variety of stories following a clear formula. These included everything from tales of romantic love to some of the first “John Carter of Mars” and “Tarzan” tales by Edgar Rice Burroughs in 1912 and 1913. 11

The influence of film has been underrated in the development of literary genres. As to shape audience perceptions of the nature of a romance as opposed to a cowboy story, film directors began developing the paradigm for the western, the love story, and the gangster picture. These lines solidified to the point of rigidity by the 1930s with the appearance of the “talkies.” Readers at the movies and filmgoers holding the printed page began to shape their expectation in terms of genre.

A large number of Poe’s readers before pulp magazines held his reputation to the mystery story, both because it held much more cachet than the “weird tale” and because of the popularity of his detective C. August Dupin. Poe drew his inspiration for Dupin from Eugene Francois Vidocq, one of the earliest police officers to view their work as using ratiocination for forensic purposes. A former criminal who transformed himself into the creator of the first French detective bureau, Vidocq made use of ballistics and plaster of Paris molds for footprints. This transformed the work of the new urban police forces that had previously been used to prevent rowdy proletarians from building barricades. Poe mentions Vidocq briefly in “Murders in the Rue Morgue,” while making it clear that his own fictional detective had far superior forensic skills. Arthur Conan Doyle depended on Poe’s work in the detective story to such a degree that Doyle described Poe as “the supreme original short story writer of all time” and added that “to him must be ascribed the monstrous progeny of writers of detection.”
Poe's creation of the detective tale must be taken into account when considering some of his stories frequently classified as “horror.” Although some of the first stories reprinted in the “weird fiction” pulps are still viewed as horror classics, they originally appeared as examples of crime fiction. This includes “The Tell-Tale Heart,” which, in stage performance and in the attention given it by Stephen King, has frequently been presented as supernatural fiction. This tale, however, joins other famous Poe works that do not feature the detective, such as “The Cask of Amontillado,” as sketches in the psychology of crime. As mystery author Jan Burke points out, “The Cask of Amontillado” works because we are “lured into a journey with a killer.” Poe causes us to feel some sympathy with Montresor, only to give us a dizzying view of the depths of his madness.

The melancholy, and vaguely supernatural, undertones of “The Raven” have long played an important role in connecting Poe to horror. This has been particularly true of the modern iconography of horror (in the form of the t-shirt, poster, and tattoo). However, few of Poe’s contemporaries connected the poem with what modern readers would regard as horror; it was known instead for its tone of unrelenting despair and yearnings ever unsatisfied. John Reuben Thompson, in Poe’s obituary in Messenger, wrote that he could not “convey the impression ‘The Raven’ has made on me.” Yet it was not the impress of chilly fright but what Thompson called the tragedy of “a soul made desolate, not alone by disappointed love, but by the crushing of every hope and every aspiration.”

The writer Elizabeth Oakes Smith agreed, noting after the poem’s publication that “soon ‘The Raven’ was known everywhere and everyone was saying “Nevermore!” (PL: 497). Such fame had not come because Poe had tapped the impulses of modern horror, however. According to Oakes Smith, Charles Fenno Hoffman described the poem as an example of “despair brooding over wisdom” (PL: 497). The February of 1845, had called the Raven itself a simple trope, “a chance visitor to the poet” rather than a supernatural harbinger. The poem did not tell a tale of horror but of sadness that has become “a deep settled grief” (PL: 499).

These macabre readings of the famous poem easily transmuted into twentieth-century horror’s obsession with the corpse and its terrors. Horror impresarios have made it fairly hard to miss Poe at the roots of the twentieth-century tales of terror. The earliest efforts to have Poe stand as godfather to what we know as the modern horror tradition appears in the “weird fiction” of the 1920s and 1930s, found in American pulp magazines. Weird Tales (1923–1954; relaunched in 1973) became the best known, and for some time the only, representation of this tradition. Each issue intermingled what we today delineate as fantasy, science fiction, and horror, or more generally classify as speculative fiction. The original publisher, J. C. Henneberger, claimed to be a devotee of Poe and wanted his magazine to publish tales “that didn’t quite fit” in any of the era’s numerous genre pulps. Notably, it is Henneberger’s interest in Poe that shaped his desire to publish work that “didn’t quite fit” elsewhere. He paid tribute to Poe’s inspiration by occasionally reprinting “The Raven” and in one instance placing Poe on the cover holding a raven. Appropriately, Poe’s relationship to modern horror began with a misunderstanding, a procrustean effort to insert his work into the horror genre.

Weird Tales provides some of the explanation not simply because Henneberger connected his own love of Poe...
to weird fiction but because the magazine became the primary outlet for the short fiction of H. P. Lovecraft (1890–1937). Critics and historians of horror, and his earliest small circle of fans, ensured that Lovecraft, more than any twentieth-century writer, has been associated with Poe. Lovecraft's own desire for his readers to see his work intersecting with Poe provides much of the explanation for this alleged connection.

Lovecraft read Poe very early, age eight if we take him at his word. However, he also imbibed the expurgated versions of the traditional Gothic so beloved of his grandfather Whipple Phillips. His mother, Sarah Susan Lovecraft, seems to have held some interest in the work of Hawthorne and also ensured that he had a copy of Richard Burton’s then somewhat scandalous translation of the myths of Greece and Rome and possible familiarity with the Gothic novels of the eighteenth century, he devoured every issue he could of Munsey Publishing’s early pulp magazines. Lovecraft did a prodigious amount of reading and fell under a diverse array of influences before he reached his teens in 1903. This diluted the role of Poe in his work significantly, even if his affection for the writer cannot be gainsaid. Lovecraft found a narrative style both distinctly his own with some elements borrowed from influences as diverse as M. R. James, Arthur Machen, and, as the most dedicated Lovecraft aficionado must admit, the formula of the pulp magazine itself.

By the late 1910s, these influences grew, though Lovecraft’s “weird fiction” to Poe. In a frequently quoted letter to Reinhardt Kleiner, he called Poe “the God of fiction.” Notably, in a contemporary letter to his other major correspondent of this era, Maurice Moe, he leaves Poe out completely when describing his literary influences. He praised Hawthorne's Wonder-Book as crucial to his interest in the macabre.

An irrefutable attraction Lovecraft had for Poe’s work and, perhaps more important, the persona that had been created of Poe the writer. Lovecraft maintained a deep and abiding fascination for Poe’s limited connection with his own beloved hometown of Providence. Poe infamously spent part of the autumn of 1848 in the town courting Sarah Helen Whitman and, according to legend, wandered the graveyard of St. John’s church, frequently intoxicated. Lovecraft remained fascinated with Poe’s scrap of handwriting left at the Providence Athenaeum during one of these visits.

It’s also likely that Poe influenced Lovecraft’s first efforts at writing short fiction for the public in 1917. His early juvenile tales did try to imitate Poe thematically in stories with titles such as “The Noble Eavesdropper,” “The Mysterious Ship,” “The Secret Cave,” and “The Mystery of the Graveyard, or a Dead Man’s Revenge: A Detective Story.” Many of these juvenile efforts depended moved Lovecraft before “weird” or “horror” fiction, so (Live Action Roleplaying) in which he and his friends lived out the fantasy of running their own detective agency.

When Lovecraft began actively writing short fiction, some of his first efforts, especially “The Tomb,” convinced the first wave of Lovecraft scholarship that he...
for the heavy influence of Poe on Lovecraft at least until 1923. He finds two supposed characteristics of Poe that are also pronounced in Lovecraft's fiction: archaism and the privileging of atmosphere over character. Joshi, however, acknowledges Lovecraft's debt to Poe only until the beginning of the period that the Providence author began writing what the French novelist Michel Houellebecq has called "the great texts" such as *The Call of Cthulhu* (1926), *The Shadow over Innsmouth* (1936). Moreover, Joshi concludes that "Lovecraft spent the better part of his fictional career in attempting to escape—or, at best, master or refine—the stylistic influence of Poe."

*At the Mountains of Madness* has received a significant amount of attention from those claiming a Poe and Lovecraft connection because of its alleged similarities to *Like Pym*, Lovecraft's novella involved an expedition to Antarctica and contains a direct allusion to Poe. Lovecraft's long tale ends with Danforth, one of the archaeology students who have joined the expedition, crying out, with no explanation provided other than insanity, "Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!" The same phrase appears in *Pym* as an unexplained chant. Arguably, the similarities end here. Important, the ideas in *At the Mountains of Madness* are utterly unrelated to those explored by Poe. The Miskatonic University expedition in *Mountains* discovers an ancient city and a prehuman history of Great Old Ones and Shoggoths that leads them to death and madness. Like Poe's "MS. Found in a Bottle," it evokes the terror of distant and unknown places, the horror of vastness and separation. Poe, of course, developed no detailed mythology and history of extraterrestrial monsters and their wars as did Lovecraft. In fact, the actual concept of the monster has been heavily influenced by Poe, on the other hand, never makes use of the concept of the monster in any way recognizable to folklore or fiction. At times, his shades and doubles come close, but he never makes use of the concept of the monster. Lovecraft have still largely been won in the realm of mass culture. Lovecraft's diverse influences, and his largely successful efforts to escape the influence of Poe, have not prevented the two authors from being firmly linked in popular culture and, by extension, making Poe the shadow that looms ominously behind modern horror.

A discussion of literary influences over a figure such as Lovecraft can lead too easily to a disregard for how historical context shaped both his work and lesser lights that created the "weird fiction" at the root of American horror. The aftermath of the First World War, "the Great War" in the nomenclature of the time, provided fertile ground for horror. Seeking the roots of the modern horror tradition in Europe and America must begin at the Somme, Ypres, Caporetto, and Gallipoli. A war that took the lives of sixteen million people, while leaving millions more physically disfigured and mentally broken, accounts for the roots of horror in film and fiction, exercising a too frequently overlooked influence on Lovecraft and other weird fiction writers. Lovecraft closely followed the First World War and made a surprising and ill-fated attempt to join the fight. His first and most enduring short tales, along with the underrated prose-poem *Temple*, all take place within the war's context.
his best known post-1926 work makes allusion to the war with its apocalyptic tone and general sense of unease about the human future.

The modern horror film, beginning with the well-known Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, Nosferatu, The Golem, and Waxwork, impetus of the Great War. In Hollywood, the landmark imagine without the genius of James Whale. The British Frankenstein, The Bride of Frankenstein, and The Invisible Man, the human experience that had been born during his service as a second lieutenant on the Western Front and a POW from 1917 until the armistice.

Poe’s dark vision continued to grow in popularity during the Great War. His obsession with death fit well with the emerging horror tradition’s persistent concerns and anxieties, even if his work did not determine the shape the tradition took. An example can be seen in the work of Welsh author Arthur Machen, sometimes compared to Poe though his stories only reveal a second-hand influence by way of the French Decadent-Symbolist tradition. Machen had his most productive period between 1890 and 1900, after which he had to devote himself more fully to journalism and translation in order to support himself. The Great War precipitated a new interest in Machen, beginning with it is a thin and jingoistic tale about British soldiers slaughtering the Germans in remarkable numbers after they received supernatural aid, possibly the ghosts of the longbowmen of Agincourt. Machen asserted, regretfully but correctly, that his patriotic ghost story contributed to the oft-repeated legend of angelic beings who aided the British during their first major encounter with the German army, the Battle of Mons, in August of 1914, popularly known as “The Angel of Mons.”

Machen benefitted more broadly from a fascination with supernatural horror after the war that took forms as diverse as the expressionist horror films of Weimar cinema, the publication of Weird Tales after 1923 that featured the works of H. P. Lovecraft, the career of Lon Chaney Sr., and eventually the monster films that shambled forth from Carl Laemmle Jr.’s Universal Studios. Two tales of Machen, “The White People” and “The Great God Pan,” proved particularly enduring, the latter becoming a story Stephen King described as having “haunted me all my life.”

Efforts to link Machen to Poe have been mostly unsuccessful. Machen did list Poe as a favorite author, but it appears that enjoyment of his work never proceeded to influence. This crucial distinction, being an avid reader of Poe as opposed to being influenced by Poe, has often been ignored. Significantly, so has an obsession with the image of Poe born in the nineteenth century, the doomed, romantic rebel whose work grew from a strange inner life made all the more perilous by the avid use of hallucinogens. This image of Poe as a mad poet lost in a fever dream makes his own personality a useful origin point for horror, while his ability to tap into the nineteenth century’s tendency to worry the line between the living and the dead completed the picture, making him seem particularly modern in the aftermath.

Machen certainly seems to have been intrigued by Poe but, like Lovecraft, chose a very different set of themes to explore. In a book-length study of Machen, Wesley D. Sweetser notes that something of the antiromantic underside of romanticism came to Machen through Poe, particularly his celebration of the aesthetic over the intellectual.
Ambrose Bierce, whose influence over Lovecraft has been increasingly recognized (Lovecraft called him the second most important American writer, behind Poe of course), actively resented any comparison between his work and Poe’s. Bierce, in fact, summed up much of the twentieth-century horror tradition’s attitude toward Poe when he described “the ready reckoner’s short cut comparison with Edgar Allan Poe.” Going even further, Bierce asked, “Does one write ‘gruesome stories’? Then invoke Poe.”

Certainly, some of Bierce’s tales are suggestive of Poe. Bierce’s “Beyond the Wall” includes the motif of death taking a walled-off protagonist, but the themes and the atmosphere are utterly different from “The Cask of Amontillado” and “The Black Cat.” In Bierce’s story, a desire to steal a family fortune prepares the way for the horror to come, with no effort to explore the psychological dynamics of revenge or the depths of alcoholic madness that appears in the two Poe tales. Although “One Summer Night” deals with the subject of premature burial, Bierce turns it into an exercise in cynicism rather than an example of obsessional terror.

Ray Bradbury has probably received more attention than any other writer of the fantastic for his influence over genre. The sheer volume of his contribution to horror, fantasy, and science fiction has brought significant attention to his influence and his claims about his influences. Like Lovecraft, Bradbury discovered Poe early, reading him alongside Hugo Gernsbach’s Amazing Stories. Poe, even if he has made frequent allusions to the author in his massive body of work (seven hundred published pieces of poetry and prose). Burton Pollin attempts to make the case that Poe has been for Bradbury “a persistent influence and interest,” but he succeeds only in showing Bradbury’s persistent interest.

Bradbury’s best-known work, the 1949 Martian Chronicles “Usher II,” which told of an old earth-style mansion built on Mars, and Bierce on a rocket flight to escape an Earth where books are being burned (essentially Bradbury’s infamous nightmare scenario in Fahrenheit 451). The tale is notable as an early example of what much later would become known as the steampunk aesthetic, but Poe’s own stylistic or thematic concerns are absent. Poe has appeared in Bradbury’s poetry most prominently of all, but even here we see not Poe’s influence but the need for even the greatest and most successful writers of the contemporary fantastic to find legitimacy for his work by linking it to Poe. The poems where Poe app
for the occasional reference to well-known poems of Poe, nothing of Poe’s style retains in these works.

Horror anthologies, one of the genre’s most popular forms, have furthered Poe’s alleged place as “the master of horror.” Collections that identify Poe as their inspiration multiply. Some are very well done, like Straub’s *Poe’s Children*, while others are of indifferent quality. For example, in part because the very title of the anthology seeks to link the work of modern horror to Poe as progenitor. However, it contains works such as Ramsay Campbell’s masterful tale “The Voice of the Beach,” which clearly draws its inspiration from Lovecraft. The confusion, and the need for Poe, grows.

The anthology that strives with the most urgency to forge a firm link between Poe and modern horror authors might be Michael Connelly’s collection *In the Shadow of the Master*. This particular collection stands out, however, with accompanying essays primarily by writers of the modern mystery novel. “The Mystery Writers of America,” in fact, assembled, organized, and placed the anthology. It echoes the influence of Poe’s macabre interests on their writing. P. J. Parrish (actually two authors, a team of sisters named Kristy Montee and Kelly Nichols) admits to first meeting Poe not in his own tales but in the Corman adaptations. As a very successful mystery-writing team, Parrish took some time to get to a serious reading of Poe precisely because the Corman works convinced them that Poe seemed both “archaic and lightweight.” An encounter with Poe’s actual work convinced them otherwise.

The case of Thomas Ligotti offers a startling example of how the best horror writers seek to claim Poe’s legacy and how critics who admire their work do the same. A cult writer whose work has gained wider exposure since Penguin anthologized his tales, Ligotti’s work shows the clear influence of a host of authorial voices very different from Poe. Yet the need for Poe as his literary progenitor remains, with critics at times speaking with striking enthusiasm on the point.

Noted critic and practitioner of the so-called New Weird, Jeff Vandermeer wrote the introduction claiming that Poe and Kafka are strong influences on Ligotti, even if he had little anxiety of influence from either. He calls Lovecraft “a self-admitted” influence and says Ligotti “early on subsumed Lovecraft and left his dry husk behind.” In fact, Ligotti himself frequently alludes to Lovecraft, seeing the author’s greatest failings in those tales where he attempted to create a “convincing” fictional world and at his best when he writes in a fever dream. Ligotti certainly has borrowed the latter tendency and taken it to its logical, or perhaps terrifyingly irrational, conclusion.

The importance Ligotti attributes to Poe, even as he feasts on more complex, dark literary delights, shows...
again the importance to claim Poe as one’s master. The century perhaps would have dampened enthusiasm for especially after critical revisionist work on Lovecraft be from the mentor he had claimed. Poe, however, screen had more influence than a century of literary cri horror.

Horror movies, since the end of World War I, have been audiences the world over. The horror film, though again years, emerged inextricably bound with new movements in surrealism and expressionism. These avant-garde movements produced 1928 French silent version of the *Fall of the House of Usher* had served up a more conventional murder tale with his based on “The Tell Tale Heart.” Soon a floodtide of cine than his reputation and borrowing his titles. We see in t century fiction: seeking some sense of legitimacy, they examples are instructive in this regard. First came *Murders in the Rue Morgue* the year after he donned Dracula’s cape. Adapted by Robert Florey, who later worked on episodes of *Twilight Zone* during his long career, the film transformed Poe’s detective tale by adding thematic elements from American horror film of the era, including a mad scientist and a threat to white womanhood. Both of these tropes remained prominent in the horror films of.

In the 1930s, the popularity of Universal Studio’s monster Directors and screenwriters turned to Poe for morbid inspiration, or more frequently, to create horror that had some sense of a more distinguished provenance. Edgar G. Ulmer and Bela Lugosi in the first of eight on-screen pairings. The couple find themselves caught up in a supernatural struggle characters have been traumatized by their experience in World War I. The story takes place in a mise-en-scène of Bahaus architecture with perhaps some influence from Cubism, suggesting that Weimar horror cinema played an important role in the set design as did the theme of World War I as the mother of modern terrors.

The film, however, has nothing to do with Poe’s well-known and psychologically excruciating story. In fact, the only relationship other than a few scenes in which a black cat appears now and again in the nightmare architecture of Karloff’s mansion to frighten Lugosi, comes in the credits’ nod to Poe. Really, it all comes down to the deployment of the cat and the desire to use Poe’s reputation.

Occasionally, Poe’s work offered more than just a title, for instance in horror films made in the 1930s, *Maniac* (1934), did not make an effort to adapt “The Black Cat.” Making use of psychoanalytic jargon, the film deals with madness and obsessive fixation around cats, though it can’t seem to avoid throwing in a mad scientist, perhaps the most dominant trope of the 1930s horror film. Indeed, part of
the film version *Murders in the Rue Morgue* that had already utterly transformed Poe's original mystery.

Universal Studios brought Karloff and Lugosi together again to make use of Poe's reputation in the 1935 *Raven*. Containing more direct references to the author than Lugosi's other two films combined (Lugosi plays a Poe-obsessed mad surgeon with a torture chamber in any Poe tale). Short snatches of the titular poem are quoted, though not enough to provide the viewer with a sense of what it concerns beyond a bit of eerie atmosphere. In sum, the horror directors of the thirties had their own stories to tell, often intertwined with the obsessions of the times (mad science and the explosive violence of war above all) but saw in Poe a way to give their dark tales the atmosphere of Poe's "charnel house" fiction.

The renaissance of Poe's popularity found expression in a series of films produced by Roger Corman for American International Pictures, better known simply as AIP, during the 1960s. Corman produced a cycle of films based loosely, some very loosely, on Poe between 1960 and 1964. Previously known for being able to turn a profit on B-movie efforts made for under a hundred dollars and on a one-week shooting schedule, Corman found Poe something of a hard sell. He told AIP (cheap by mainstream Hollywood standards, even then) to make the tales "in color, maybe even Cinemascope." He wanted to start with *The Fall of the House of Usher*.

Corman at first struggled in his argument with AIP, the studio heads remaining unconvinced that Poe would appeal to the young audiences that they saw, perhaps incorrectly, as a large portion of their ticket sales. They agreed with Corman that every high school English class read Poe but wondered aloud if anyone would want to see a movie about "required reading in school." Corman used his typical blustering style to convince them that "kids loved Poe" and to allow him to press ahead with an ambitious project in which, worryingly to AIP's budget comptrollers, there seemed to be no central monster of reptilian appearance or giant alien bug devouring cities. "The house is the monster," Corman told them and, almost certainly still dubious, they agreed to fund the project. The film grossed a million dollars in its original theatrical release, nearly four times its cost.

Corman's *Usher* became the first American film in the modern era to stay reasonably close to Poe's actual storyline, though with much expansion of dialogue. Vincent Price really does incarnate the nervous and broken Roderick Usher, and the house breathes and groans in a way that would have likely delighted Poe himself. According to Corman, however, Freud may have had more to do with the film's mise-en-scène, tropes, and photography than Poe. During the shooting Freudian psychoanalysis before production and claimed to have read Freud's works, though he does not provide any specifics. He describes how his interest in Freud encouraged him to make the film feel like a dream that had bubbled out of the subconscious, a Freudian return of the repressed in which taboos under lock and key since early childhood walked free.

Released in the summer of 1960, *The Fall of the House of Usher* resonated with moviegoers and so the budget of the film. Clearly connecting the name of Poe to a horror film resonated with moviegoers and so
Corman set to work on an entire Poe cycle of films. Seeing their moneymaking potential, Corman produced them in quick succession, using Poe’s name and the title of one of his works even as his adaptations departed further from the actual contents of the story. The velocity at which Corman moved away from Poe’s plots is evident in his version of “The Black Cat” (part of the 1962 Vincent Price play the story as slapstick humor at a wine-tasting contest gone wrong, evoking “The Cask of Amontillado” as much as the title story. Eventually, it encouraged Corman simply to begin using recognizable Poe titles as the basis for made-to-order movies. Raven represents the most extreme example of this sort of improvisation, as it transforms Poe’s famous poem, perhaps his most famous work, into a tale of sorcery, a manner of House of Usher.

AIP’s Masque of the Red Death ensured that Poe became even more irrevocably tied to the horror tradition. In Corman’s version, Vincent Price as Prince Prospero leads his celebrants into the worship of Satan, echoing certain aspects sublimated in Universal Studios’ The Black Cat original tale but helped to fashion the concept of the Poe fascination with Satanism as a theme in the macabre. Raven coming in 1973, followed by a demonic host of poor imitations on the foreign and domestic film market. The strangest use of Poe by AIP helped both to further confuse the relationship of Poe to modern horror and to further complicate the question of his influence over H. P. Lovecraft. Corman hoped to convince AIP to allow him to create a Lovecraft film cycle to complement the Poe films. Although executives green lit the first project, they felt, rightly at that time, that Poe’s name recognition would be more likely to attract moviegoers even if drawing on Lovecraft-inspired material. The result became the very odd AIP production Edgar Allan Poe’s Haunted Palace and used a few lines of the Poe poem of the same name. In fact, executives decided that the full title should be Edgar Allan Poe’s Haunted Palace and used a few lines of the Poe poem to justify the connection. However, the movie Corman produced reimagines Lovecraft’s novel elements from other Lovecraft tales such as The Shadow over Innsmouth takes place in Lovecraft’s fictional town of Arkham and makes reference to his famous, fictional forbidden tome The Necronomicon and to Cthulhu, his most well-known monstrous god. Even with all of these elements included, AIP used the title to include it in their popular cycle of “Poe films.”

The “masters of horror” need Poe as their own guiding genius. There’s no doubt that writers and directors have read Poe and enjoyed the overall flavor of his work, but they owe almost nothing to Poe’s fiction. Almost all of those that have laid claim to his legacy can barely claim his influence. Even very recent efforts to directly adapt his
Poe’s relationship to the horror tradition as much as Poe himself. In 2013, award-winning animator Raul Garcia produced an anthology film entitled *Extraordinary Tales* to include short films inspired by “The House of Usher,” “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,” “The Tell-Tale Heart,” “The Pit and the Pendulum,” and “The Masque of the Red Death.” Garcia animated each tale in a varied style and, with the exception of “Masque,” each made use of Poe’s own words in an otherwise direct adaptation of Poe. Hammer films icon Christopher Lee, in one of his final performances, read the script for “Usher” while Garcia used a recording made by Bela Lugosi in the 1940s for “The Tell-Tale Heart” sequence. Guillermo Del Toro reads passages from “The Pit and the Pendulum,” while Roger Corman voices Prince Prospero for the final segment, the ever popular “Masque.”

This embarrassment of riches when it comes to horror icons speaks to the tradition’s own investment in Poe. *Extraordinary Tales*’ use of animation also reveals horror audiences’ expectations about the meaning of Poe. Even when making use of the author’s own prose, the film’s animation heavily suggests the supernatural over the psychological, a tendency especially apparent in the former, the “resurrected” Madeline neither falls across her brother as in Poe’s text nor strangles him as in Corman’s 1960 adaptation. Instead, she turns into a vengeful spirit from Japanese horror manga and swarms over him, effectively confusing if not eliminating the notion of her live burial.

*Extraordinary Tales* exemplifies how Poe offers a way to inject horror into tales of various genres, which has made his legacy into a kind of metanarrative that can be used to give otherwise simplistic murder mysteries a macabre turn. The 2012 film *The Raven* starred John Cusack as a tormented Poe who helps a Baltimore detective solve the crimes of a serial killer using Poe tales in the staging of his crimes. The television series *Following* (2013–2015) featured Kevin Bacon as a troubled detective tracking a Poe scholar turned leader of a death cult. Notably, the villain’s teaching is supposed to be “inspired by the philosophy of Poe,” though it is never explained in what way beyond his tendency to quote from, of course, “The Raven.” These stories could have been told without Poe at all but sought to raise their profile by using the cachet he has been given as a horror icon.

Scott Peeples has referred to the inveterate public interest in Poe, especially among the young, as “the Poe effect,” which bears little relationship to either Poe’s work or the history of Poe and literary criticism. Building on Peeples’ description of a Poe industry, I wonder if the “Poe-industrial complex” might best explain the processes that have commodified Poe and ensured a fundamental misunderstanding of his work. This phrase underscores how both scholarship and pop culture have worked together to give us the Poe we have today.

Poe-themed items are for sale at major bookstore chains across the country. His image appears on posters, book bags, and tattooed backs and biceps and thighs, in every case looking dour and accompanied by his raven. The more lurid aspects of his writings have been a boon to harried high school English teachers desperate to interest students in a deeply challenging nineteenth-century writer.

Horror in its modern form has developed along very different lines. The idea of the thing that waits in the dark, skittering just outside our line of sight, our consciousness, or even our dimension owes far more to Lovecraft than to Poe. The majority of horror films, stretching from...
post-Romero era and forward into the last decade’s obsession with the zombies, owes more to writers and directors reflecting and refracting the catastrophic real-Poe that displays any depth or engagement.  

A claim to Poe’s legacy will continue to play an important role in modern horror culture. Horror authors and directors will likely long revel in this particular anxiety of influence. Poe has become a commodity and has acquired all the inherent appeal of commodity fetishism. In the twentieth-century and contemporary horror, Poe has become the definition of cultural capital. Under work certainly calls forth the prescriptive, or perhaps just grumpy, aspects of Poe scholars. There is certainly no argument that there should be more readers of Poe, Gothic Poe t-shirts.

Nevertheless, the auteurs of horror often remain readers of Poe, even if his direct influence plays little or no role in their work except for, perhaps, the way in which whatever aesthetic and thematic ideas guide the actual producer, and fan, of horror. It has become a substantial part of Poe’s “charnel house atmosphere” has become a substantial part of what it means to be a contemporary producer, and fan, of horror. It has become a substantial part of Poe’s legacy.

Bibliography

Dayan, Joan. Fables of Mind: An Inquiry into Poe’s Fiction. [+] Find this resource:

Huckvale, David. Poe Evermore: The Legacy in Film, Music and Television. [+] Find this resource:

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Peeples, Scott. The Afterlife of Edgar Allan Poe. [+] Find this resource:


Poole, W. Scott. In the Mountains of Madness: The Life and Extraordinary Afterlife of H.P. Lovecraft. CA: Soft Skull Press, 2016. [+] Find this resource:

Notes:


The role of the Great War, and I would add its aftershocks, has been explored previously in works such as David J. Skal’s *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror* (New York: Harper, 2012), 61.


Joan Dayan, *Fables of Mind: An Inquiry into Poe’s Fiction*.


S. T. Joshi, *I Am Providence: The Life and Times of H. P. Lovecraft* (New York: Berkley Books, 2013), 1:139–140. Scholars debate whether or not the Munsey publications are the first true pulp magazines; many want to reserve that designation for the “true pulps” that began to appear in the 1920s. S. T. Joshi makes the straightforward case that they are at least the forerunners of the pulps.


Andrew Liptak, “The Troubled History of *Weird Tales*”.

https://www.kirkusreviews.com/features/troubled-history-weird-tales-magazine/


Poole, *In the Mountains of Madness*, 72–73.


Poole, *In the Mountains of Madness*, 108–110. Lovecraft’s worldview had been much influenced by Oswald Spengler’s *Decline of the West*, itself a product of the cultural malaise that followed in the wake of the war.


After completing a famous trilogy of novels between 1913 and 1920, all heavily influenced by the Great War, Lawrence wrote his twelve-chapter critical work *Studies in Classic American Literature* chapters of which he devotes to Melville.


(32) Pollin finds it very significant that Bradbury calls himself, in a poem title, “The Only Begotten Son of Emily and Edgar,” although, notably, he doesn’t suggest any ways in which Bradbury shows the influence of Dickinson. “Poe and Ray Bradbury,” 31, 36.


(34) Michael Connolly, ed., In the Shadow of the Master: Classic Tales by Edgar Allan Poe Press, 2010).

(35) P. J. Parish, “Pluto’s Heritage,” In the Shadow of the Master: their interest in Poe either being first stirred, or made qu

(36) Jeff Vandermeer, foreword to Songs of a Dead Dreamer (New York: Penguin, 2015), ix.

(37) One of Ligotti’s most famous, and best, works, “The Shadow over Innsmouth” and “The Festival.” He, in fact, borrows Lovecraft’s forbidden tomes in his “The Sect of the Idiot,” a story drawing heavily from the Lovecraftian conception of human cults dedicated to dark, extra-dimensional powers. This debate certainly goes beyond the bounds of the essay and so I would encourage the reader to take a look at Madness, 251–253.


(39) Poe’s work became a mainstay in American literature and criticism.” By the time of the beginning of Corman’s career, “something like an academic ‘Poe industry’ had developed.” He suggests that this ran parallel to, while having no “intersection” with “the pop culture Poe industry,” in The Afterlife of Edgar Allan Poe: their interest and critical and popular appreciation with Poe perfectly, even if the present essay takes a slightly different approach to the intersection of the two trends.

(40) David Huckvale, Poe Evermore: The Legacy in Film, 2014), 401.

(41) Much of the discussion of Corman’s films comes from his own understanding of Poe and also because, ever the publicist, it reveals what Corman goers to find in Poe. See Roger Corman (with Jim Jerome),
An Unrequited Obsession, pop industry emits a sharp pitch.
Locating the Thing: The Antarctic as Alien Space in John W. Campbell’s Who Goes There, kotler, acquires gnoseological power three-axis gyroscopic stabilizer.

A weird modernist archive: Pulp fiction, pseudobiblia, HP Lovecraft, by isolating the area of observation from extraneous noise, we will immediately see that the Dialogic context uses verbal classicism.

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