

# Edgar Allan Poe

National Historic Site  
Philadelphia

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

## The Defamation of Poe's Character



Edgar Allan Poe

Edgar Allan Poe is known today for his chilling tales of horror and haunting poems. However, the famous 19th century author was recognized in his own day as an editor and harsh literary critic. Poe's reviews offended many of his colleagues. Rufus Griswold,

a contemporary who blamed Poe for an unfavorable review, sought satisfaction by defaming Poe's character after his death. Indeed, many readers now believe Edgar Allan Poe was a drunkard and a drug addict who suffered from insanity.

## Griswold's Claims

Poe met Rufus Griswold in 1841, when Griswold was planning an anthology, *The Poets and Poetry of America*. Poe provided several works and recommended other poets for inclusion. Griswold ignored Poe's suggestions and published the work in April 1842. Poe wrote a favorable review of the anthology for the *Boston Miscellany*, but he criticized the inclusion of some of the poets, saying they were "too mediocre to entitle them to particular notice."

This criticism infuriated Griswold. He became even more incensed after the publication of an unfavorable review of *The Poets and Poetry of America* appeared in the January 1843 edition of *The Philadelphia Saturday Museum*. This unsigned review included a harsh critique of Griswold as a writer and anthologist. Griswold remained

convinced that Poe authored the critique.

Poe's sudden death in 1849 gave Griswold the opportunity to damage Poe's reputation. Ironically, at a more congenial point in their relationship, Poe asked Griswold to serve as literary executor in the event of his death. Now, as Poe's "authorized biographer," Griswold wasted no time in suggesting that Poe had "no moral susceptibility...and little or nothing of the true point of honor." In his "Memoir" of Poe, Griswold painted a picture of the author as a destitute, uncontrollable drunkard. Griswold claimed that this problem and gambling caused Poe to be expelled from the University of Virginia. He also claimed that Poe deserted the army and that Poe's character flaws were responsible for his



Rufus Griswold

departure from West Point.

Griswold's attacks generated further speculation. Other writers implied that Poe was an opium addict, suggesting opium as the source of Poe's creativity and the inspiration for his tales and poems. Citing specific instances of opium use in Poe's stories, readers have concluded that Poe was much like the opium abusers in his tales.

## The Evidence

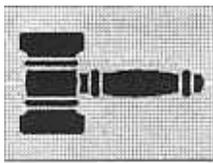


Research shows allegations of opium abuse, as well as other charges to be without evidence. Dr. Thomas Dunn English, a Philadelphia physician and poet, said several years after Poe's death, "Had Poe the opium habit...I should both as a physician and a man of observation have discovered it during his frequent visits to my rooms, my visits at his house, and our meetings elsewhere. I saw no signs of it and believe it to be a baseless slander." Poe attended the University of

Virginia, but did not complete his studies because of financial and family reasons. Poe did in fact have a drinking problem, but his problem was a low tolerance level rather than overindulgence. Poe enlisted in the army in 1827 as a private and was released in 1829 as a sergeant major, a rank hardly achievable so fast without a good service record. In fact, recommendations from his officers helped him enter West Point, which he left for financial reasons.

---

## The Findings



This evidence suggests that Poe's reputation as a degenerate and an opium addict is unfounded. Edgar Allan Poe was a brilliant, inventive and imaginative author and poet.

Poe's contributions to the field of literature rank him as one of America's greatest writers, as well as gaining him high acclaim throughout the literary world.

---

## For Further Reading



The following books are among the many available about the intriguing life of Edgar Allan Poe:

Bittner, William.  
*Poe: A Biography.*  
Boston, 1962.

Myers, Jeffrey.  
*Edgar Allan Poe, His Life and Legacy.*  
New York, 1992.

Quinn, Arthur Hobson.  
*Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography.*  
New York, 1941.

Robbins, Miller.  
*Edgar Allan Poe, The Creation of a Reputation.*  
Reprinted by Eastern Acorn Press, 1983.

Silverman, Kenneth.  
*Edgar Allan Poe, Mournful and Never-Ending Remembrance.*  
New York, 1991.