

## Edgar Allan Poe : A Short Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) is universally regarded as a great American writer of gripping tales of horror and ratiocination. He was a poet, a critic and a magazine editor but his stories form a more substantial claim to remembrance. He wrote about seventy stories. If we leave out the comic ones, most of his stories are painful and even horrible. They fall roughly into two kinds: those of horror and those of ratiocination. Under the first head may be listed such stories as 'The Black Cat', 'The Cask of Amontillado', 'The Fall of the House of Usher' and 'Ligeia' while the second group includes 'The Gold Bug', 'The Purloined Letter' and so on. The distinction is not a precise one: stories like 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' combine the macabre with the methodical. And indeed all his stories have the special Poe flavour. Many of them are set in strange places, a ruined abbey, a castle on the Rhine. Things usually happen at night, or in unlit interiors. The heroes and heroines, who are rarely Americans, are of ancient and aristocratic lineage. They are erudite and accomplished, yet doomed. The hero in Poe's tales destroys himself. Yet his destruction involves others, and in particular the heroine.

In creating the atmosphere of sensation and horror Poe hardly differs from the mass of sensational writers who used the devices of the Gothic novelist. Poe was by no means the inventor of the 'tale of effect.' He acknowledged the success of the examples that appeared in Blackwood's Magazine but what Poe takes out of the ruck in his quality of intelligence and self awareness. His stories, as Baudelaire noted, show absurdity installing itself in the intellect, and governing it with a crushing logic. Though the ghostliness is occasionally overdone as in 'Ligeia', it is made all the more nightmarish

by the measured deliberation with which it is unfolded.

What is after all Poe's idea of a short story? In his review (1842) of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, Poe has made clear his idea of a short story. He says that the wise literary artist does not start out with incidents and then fashion his thoughts to accommodate them, but he begins by conceiving "a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out", and then invents "such incidents as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. In this regard, Poe makes no essential distinction between the poem and the story - or, for that matter, between verbal and other arts. Unity in the work of art is fundamental.

Poe is acknowledged as the father of the detective story. Stories like 'The Murders in the Rue Margue', 'The Mystery of Marie Roget', and 'The Gold Bug' reveal Poe as the originator of the detective story as it developed in the later nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. They are written in the straight forward prose of Poe, the practical journalist and they, more or less, observe the 'rules' of the detective tale - namely that realism should prevail, and that the author should not conceal from the reader any of the clues which can lead to the solution of mystery. As founder of the tradition of the mystery and the detective thriller, Poe deserves a high place in the history of literature. He will be remembered as the creator of Inspector Dupin, who was the ancestor of such detectives as Inspector Maigret, Sergeant Cuff, Inspector French, Lord Peter Wimsey and Sherlock Holmes. The grotesque, the fantastic, the surrealistic, the obsessive, the psychopathic, the horrible - these are the aspects of life which appealed to Poe's romantic and perhaps diseased imagination. He made use of the machinery of the Gothic school in a number of stories like 'The Fall of the House of Usher', 'The Masque of the Red Death', 'The Cask of Amontillado' and 'The Black Cat.'