

# Edgar Allan Poe's Life and Times

## Poe's Life

### 1809

Born in Boston, Massachusetts, January 19, second of three children, to actors David and Eliza Arnold Hopkins Poe. Eliza Poe, born in England, is a wellknown ingenue and comedienne whose mother, Elizabeth Smith Arnold, was also prominent in early American Theater. David Poe, son of an Irish-born Revolutionary War patriot, abandons the family the following year; Eliza, with children, continues touring.

### 1811

Mother dies December 8 in Richmond, Virginia. Children William Henry, Edgar and Rosalie become wards of different foster parents. John Allan, a prosperous Richmond merchant born in Scotland, and his wife Frances, informally adopts Edgar. He is renamed Edgar Allan.

### 1815

John Allan, planning to set up a branch office abroad, moves family to Scotland briefly, then to London. Edgar attends school in London and in suburban Stoke-Newington.

### 1820

Allan family returns to Richmond via New York, July 1820. Edgar resumes schooling in private academies, shows aptitude for Latin, acting, swimming, and poetry.

### 1824

Serves on the junior honor guard that escorts Revolutionary War hero Lafayette through Richmond on the latter's return to the United States. Allan's firm dissolves in 1824, but an inheritance he receives two years later leaves him a rich man.

## World Events

### 1809

*Abraham Lincoln and Alfred, Lord Tennyson born; Madison becomes President*



*Left: Washington Irving, one of the most popular writers in the United States during Poe's childhood. Among his best-known tales are "Rip Van Winkle" (1819) and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." (1820)*

### 1812

*War of 1812 begins, Louisiana becomes a state.*

### 1814

*Washington burned by the British, 1814. 1815  
Napoleon defeated; Walt Whitman born.*

### 1817

*Monroe becomes President; Henry Thoreau born.*

### 1820

*Missouri admitted as slave state.*

### 1823

*Monroe Doctrine proclaimed.*

*Right: General Lafayette, the Frenchman who aided the Continental Army during the American Revolution. He visited the United States to great fanfare in 1824.*



## 1825

Poe becomes devoted to Jane Stith Craig Stanard, mother of a schoolmate, later immortalized in Poe's lyric "To Helen."

## 1826

Enters the University of Virginia and distinguishes himself in ancient and modern languages. Allowed insufficient funds by Allan, resorts to gambling and loses \$2,000. Allan refuses to back the debts, and Poe returns to Richmond to find that John Allan and the Roysters have quashed his engagement to Elmira

## 1827

Quarrels with Allan and sails for Boston. Enlists in U.S. Army as "Edgar A. Perry" and is assigned as an artilleryman to Fort Independence in Boston Harbor.



Persuades a young printer to issue his first book, *Tamerlane and Other Poems* ("By a Bostonian"), which goes unreviewed. Transfers with his artillery unit to Fort Moultrie in Charleston, South Carolina.

*Left: Cover of Poe's first book Tamerlane, published in 1827.*

*Right: Poe's drawing of Elmira Royster, copied by Nora Huston.*



## 1825

*John Q. Adams becomes President.*

## 1826

*Deaths of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, July 4, 1826. James Fenimore Cooper publishes The Last of the Mohicans*



*Above: The University of Virginia as it appeared in Poe's time.*

## 1827

*Death of Ludwig van Beethoven*



*Above: Poe's room at the University of Virginia.*

## 1828

Poe is appointed an artificer. Transfers with his unit to Fort Monroe in Virginia

## 1829

Attains rank of Sergeant Major. Foster mother Frances Allan dies February 28, 1829. Poe reconciles with John Allan, is honorably discharged, and seeks appointment to United States Military Academy at West Point. Awaiting word, lived with various Poe relatives in Baltimore and asks Allan to subsidize second volume of poems. Allan refuses, but *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane and Minor Poems* is published under Poe's name in December 1829. It sells poorly, but advance sheets of the volume receive encouraging notice.

## 1830

Enters West Point; excels in languages and lampoons officers in verse. John Allan remarries, severs relations with Poe.

## 1831

Edgar deliberately absents himself from classes and roll calls, and is court-martialed and expelled in February 1831. In New York, publishes *Poems: Second Edition* with subscriptions raised from fellow cadets. Resides in Baltimore with paternal aunt, Maria Clemm, and her daughter Virginia. Household includes paternal grandmother and Poe's brother, William Henry, who dies of tuberculosis in August 1831. Submits five tales to Philadelphia *Saturday Courier*.

## 1832

Lives in Baltimore in the home of his paternal grandmother. Also present are Poe's aunt Maria Clemm and her children Virginia and Henry.

## 1833

Submits tales and poems in *Baltimore Saturday Visitor* contest; "MS. Found in a Bottle" wins first prize for best tale, and "The Coliseum" places second for poetry. Both appear in *Visitor* in October 1833.

## 1834

His tale "The Visionary" appears in January 1834 issue of *Godey's Lady's Book*, a national publication. John Allan dies in March 1834 and leaves Poe nothing.

## 1828

*Birth of Jules Verne; construction begins on first American railroad.*

## 1829

*Andrew Jackson becomes President.*

## 1830

*Revolution forces France's Charles X to abdicate; Emily Dickinson is born.*

## 1831

*Nat Turner leads unsuccessful slave rebellion; William Lloyd Garrison helps launch abolitionist movement.*



*Above: West Point in Poe's day.*

## 1833

*Slavery abolished in British Empire.*



*Above: Baltimore in Poe's day.*

## 1835

In March 1835, he begins contributing to Richmond's *Southern Literary Messenger*, which prints "The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall," the first modern science fiction story. Moves to Richmond, joins *Messenger* staff, and dramatically increases magazine's circulation and national reputation. Returns to Baltimore to court his cousin Virginia; admonished for his drinking by *Messenger* proprietor Thomas W. White. Returns to Richmond with Mrs. Clemm and Virginia.

Right: Portrait representing Poe as he would have appeared while he was working at the *Southern Literary Messenger*.



## 1836

Marries Virginia Clemm in May, shortly before her fourteenth birthday. Moves wife and Mrs. Clemm to Richmond. As its new editor, writes book reviews, stories, and poems for *Messenger*, borrows money from relatives for a boarding house to be run by Mrs. Clemm. Fails to find publisher for his early *Tales of the Folio Club*, despite assistance from established authors.



Left: The offices of the *Southern Literary Messenger* in Richmond, Virginia. Poe's office was on the second floor of this building.

## 1835

Death of John Marshall, longest serving Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.



Above: John Marshall attended Monumental Episcopal Church in Richmond, which Poe and his foster parents also attended. Today he is best known as the Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court who established the Court's use of judicial review, the power to overrule laws it deems violate the Constitution.

## 1836

Dickens' *Pickwick Papers* published. Texas gains independence from Mexico. Ralph Waldo Emerson publishes *Nature*.

Right: Charles Dickens, a British author whose works Poe admired. Poe and Dickens would meet in Philadelphia in 1842.



Left: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Transcendentalist writer who disliked Poe's works almost as much as Poe disliked his. Emerson derided Poe for writing poetry without a moral, and Poe called the Transcendentalists "ignoramuses."

## 1837

Resigns from *Messenger* in January 1837. Takes family to New York to seek employment but is unable to find editorial post.

## 1838

Publishes poems and tales, including "Ligeia." Mrs. Clemm manages a boarding house to help make ends meet. In July 1838, Harper's publishes *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, Poe's only completed novel. Moves family to Philadelphia, continues to freelance but considers giving up literary work.

## 1839

In financial straits, agrees to let name appear as author of a cut-price naturalists' manual, *The Conchologist's First Book*. "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "William Wilson" appear in William Burton's *Gentleman's Magazine*. Late in 1839, Lea and Blanchard publish *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (two volumes).

## 1840

Poe attempts to lay groundwork for *The Penn Magazine*, to be under his own editorial control. Quarrels with Burton and is dismissed from the magazine. George Rex Graham buys *The Gentleman's Magazine*, merges it with own to create *Graham's Magazine*, to which Poe contributes "The Man of the Crowd" for the December issue.

## 1841

Becomes editor of *Graham's Magazine*; contributes "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," the first modern detective story, with new stories and poems, and articles on cryptography and autography; by year's end, *Graham's* subscriptions more than quadruple. Inquires after a clerkship in Tyler administration. Revives plans for *The Penn Magazine*.

## 1842

In January 1842, Virginia bursts a blood vessel, exhibits signs of tuberculosis. Poe meets Dickens. Publishes "The Masque of the Red Death" and the short story-defining review of Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales*. Resigns from *Graham's* in May 1842 and is succeeded by Rufus Wilmot Griswold (later Poe's literary executor). Fall publications include "The Pit and the Pendulum."

## 1837

Victoria becomes queen of Great Britain;  
Van Buren becomes President of United States.

1837" causes a depression, Mob kills Elijah P. Lovejoy, Illinois abolitionist publisher.

## 1838

Frederick Douglass escapes from slavery..

Right: Nathaniel Hawthorne, author of *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and *Twice-Told Tales* (1837), was one of the few American authors Poe admired.



Nathaniel Hawthorne

## 1840

"Log Cabin and Hard Cider" campaign of 1840; William Henry Harrison elected president.

## 1841

President Harrison dies one month after inauguration, April 1841; John Tyler becomes President.

## 1842

"Great Migration" to Oregon begins.

## 1843

Contributes “The Tell-Tale Heart,” “Lenore,” and an essay later titled “The Rationale of Verse” to James Russell Lowell’s short-lived magazine *The Pioneer*. Goes to Washington D.C. to be interviewed for minor post in Tyler administration and to solicit subscriptions for his own journal, retitled *The Stylus*; gets drunk and ruins his chances for the job. Resumes writing satires, poems and reviews but is pressed to borrow money from Griswold and Lowell. “The Gold Bug” wins \$100 prize in newspaper contest and is reprinted widely, then dramatized on the Philadelphia stage, making Poe famous as a popular writer. The first and only number of a pamphlet series, *The Prose Romances of Edgar A. Poe*, appears in July and includes “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” Enters the lecture circuit with “The Poets and Poetry of America.” Fall publication of “The Black Cat.”

## 1844

Moves family to New York, creates a sensation with newspaper publication of “The Balloon Hoax,” which purports a transatlantic crossing by air. Works on nevercompleted *Critical History of American Literature* and contributes articles on the literary scene and the lack of international copyright law.

Right: Poe in 1845 from an engraving published in *Graham’s Magazine* in 1845.



## 1845

Poe’s “miracle year.” “The Raven” appears in the January *Evening Mirror* and creates a national sensation; Poe enters New York literary society. *Graham’s* publishes Poe’s portrait with a laudatory profile by Lowell, Wiley and Putnam publishes Poe’s *Tales*, then *The Raven and Other Poems*. Borrows money from Griswold, Greeley, and others to acquire controlling interest in *The Broadway Journal*. Conducts literary courtship in verse with poet Frances Sargent Osgood. Initiates the “Little Longfellow War,” a private campaign against plagiarism, with Longfellow the most eminent of those accused. Campaign brings notoriety and alienates friends such as Lowell. Negative publicity from his reading at the Boston Lyceum, and the insulting jibes against Boston with which Poe responds, further damage his reputation and increase his fame. In the fall, Virginia Poe’s illness becomes acute.

## 1843

*Elizabeth Barrett Browning publishes Poems.*

Right: Poe as he appeared in 1843.



## 1844

*Democratic convention calls for the annexation of Texas and acquisition of Oregon; Samuel F. B. Morse demonstrates the telegraph.*

Right: Circa 1846 illustration for “The Raven” by British artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti. In 1848, Rossetti became a founder of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood of artists.



## 1845

*Polk becomes President; Congress adopts joint resolution to annex Texas; Florida enters the Union; Frederick Douglass publishes Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass.*



Left: Title page for Poe’s *The Raven and Other Poems* (1845) the poet’s final and best-known collection of poetry. The book is dedicated to Elizabeth Barrett Browning. It was reprinted the following year in London, where it earned Poe more European admirers.

## 1846

Illness, nervous depression, and hardship force Poe to stop publication of *The Broadway Journal*. Moves family to cottage in Fordham, New York, where Virginia, now a semi-invalid, is nursed by family friend Marie Louise Shew. Poe and family mentioned as pitiable charity cases in the New York press. Poe manages to publish “The Cask of Amontillado,” “The Philosophy of Composition,” book reviews, and “Marginalia” in various magazines. Begins series of satirical sketches of “The Literati of New York City” in *Godey’s*. The one on Thomas Dunn English, whom Poe had known in Philadelphia, draws a vicious attack by English on Poe’s morality and sanity. Poe sues *The Evening Mirror*, publisher of the piece, and collects damages the following year. Hears rumors of his nascent fame in France, where translations and a long analysis of *Tales* appear.



Right: Poe as he appeared in 1846.

## 1847

Virginia Poe dies of tuberculosis January 30. Poe falls gravely ill. Nursed back to health by Mrs. Clemm and Mrs. Shew, once more seeks support for literary magazine and fails again. Completes revised versions of Hawthorne review and “The Landscape Garden” and writes “Ulalume.” Increasing interest in cosmological theories leads to preliminary notes for *Eureka*.

## 1848

Begins year in better health. Gives lectures and readings to raise capital for *The Stylus*. February lecture on “The Universe” in New York surveys thematic material elaborated in *Eureka*, published by Putnam in June. While lecturing in Lowell, Massachusetts, forms deep attachment to “Annie” (Mrs. Nancy Richmond), who becomes

## 1846

*Failure of potato crop causes famine in Ireland. United States declares war on Mexico; annexes New Mexico and California; Herman Melville publishes Typee.*



Right: Herman Melville, author of *Moby Dick*, which some Poe scholars claim was influenced by Poe’s novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*.



Left: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, writer of such poems as *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855) and Paul Revere’s *Ride* (1861). Poe considered him unoriginal and thought his high literary reputation was the result of his personal contacts.

## 1847

*Mormons establish Salt Lake City; Henry Wadsworth Longfellow publishes Evangeline.*

## 1848

*Revolutions throughout Europe; Marx and Engels publish The Communist Manifesto. Gold discovered in California.*

his confidante; subsequently, in Providence, Rhode Island, begins three -month courtship of widowed poet Sarah Helen Whitman, to whom he proposes marriage. When she delays answering him because of reports of his “unprincipled” character, Poe provokes a crisis, and their brief engagement is broken off. Reads “The Poetic Principle” as lecture to an audience of 1,800 in Providence. Writes “The Bells.”

*Right: Photograph of Poe taken in Providence, Rhode Island in 1848.*



## 1849

Active as writer and lecturer. In June, leaves for Richmond to seek Southern support for *The Stylus*. Stops in Philadelphia, sick, confused and apparently suffering from persecution mania. Friends care for him and see him off to Richmond. Recovers during two-month stay in Richmond, visits sister Rosalie, joins temperance society, and becomes engaged to boyhood sweetheart Elmira Royster Shelton, now a widow. Possibly intending to bring Mrs. Clemm to Richmond from New York, sails for Baltimore where, a week after arrival, he is found semiconscious and delirious outside a tavern and polling place on October 3. Dies October 7. “The Bells” and



*Left: The last photograph of Poe, taken September 1849 in Richmond, Virginia.*

“Annabel Lee” appear posthumously late in the year. Slandorous obituary notice by Griswold blackens Poe’s reputation for many years.



*Above: Poster drawing people west for California gold.*

## 1849

*Death of Chopin. California gold rush begins.*

*Right: Elmira Royster Shelton*



*Compiled by Norman George, Courtesy G.R. Thompson*



# Poe's Family



## Poe's Mother

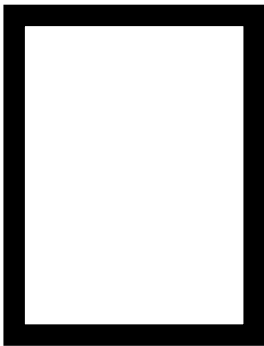
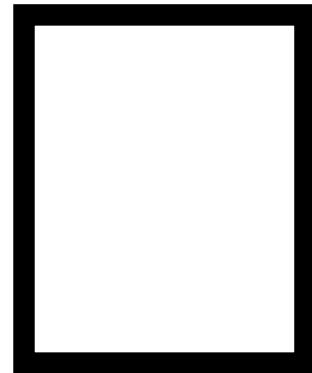
**Elizabeth Arnold Poe 1787-1811**

The British-born actress Elizabeth Poe was a popular performer in theaters from Boston to Charleston. She died when Edgar was only two years old and is buried Saint John's Church in Richmond, Virginia.

## Poe's Father

**David Poe, Jr.  
1784-1811?**

Poe's father was also an actor. His last known performance was held in New York in 1809. His whereabouts are unknown after he left his wife sometime before July 1811. No portrait of him is known to exist.



## Poe's Brother

**William Henry L. Poe 1807-1831**

As an infant Edgar's older brother, known as Henry, was taken in by his grandparents in Baltimore. Henry published a few poems during his brief life. No portrait of him exists.

## Poe's Sister

**Rosalie Poe 1810-1874**

When Edgar's mother died, he was taken in by the Allans while his sister went to live with the Mackenzie family of Richmond. Rosalie never married. After the Civil War, the Mackenzies could no longer care for Rosalie, and she died in a charity home.



# The Allans

## Poe's Foster Father

### John Allan 1779-1834

The Scottish-born tobacco merchant Allan took in the orphaned Edgar without ever legally adopting him or including Poe in his will. In a letter, Allan once referred to Poe as “quite miserable, sulky & ill-tempered to all the Family.” The Allans are buried at Shockoe Cemetery in Richmond, Virginia.



## Poe's Foster Mother

### Frances Allan 1785-1829

Frances Allan was one of the Richmond ladies who, in response to an advertisement in the local paper, brought Poe's mother meals during her final illness. After Mrs. Poe's death, Mrs. Allan took Edgar into her home. She had no other children and treated Edgar as her own. Mrs. Allan died of tuberculosis while Poe was serving in the army at Fort Monroe, Virginia. He returned to Richmond a day late for her funeral.



## John Allan's Second Wife

### Louisa Allan 1800-1881

After the death of Frances Allan in 1829, John Allan married on October 5, 1830 in New York. Poe was at West Point and did not know about the wedding until after the fact. Allan and his second wife soon had three sons who became the heirs to the Allan fortune.



## The Allans' Homes in Richmond

All the homes in which Poe lived with the Allans have all been demolished. The photos below show some of these houses and the dates in which Poe lived in them.



Second and Franklin Streets, 1820



Fourteenth Street, 1822-1825



Fifth and Main Streets, 1825-1827

# Home Life of Poe

## Poe's Mother-in-Law

**Maria Poe Clemm 1790-1871**



The sister of Edgar Poe's father, Maria Clemm also became Poe's mother-in-law when he married her daughter Virginia. Poe sought refuge in her Baltimore home in early 1831 after his expulsion from West Point. Already living with her were Edgar's brother William Henry Leonard Poe (who would die of tuberculosis later that year), his grandmother Mrs. David Poe, Maria's son Henry, and her daughter Virginia. Mrs. Clemm had lost her husband five years earlier. "Muddy," as Poe called her, cared for the household while Poe sought employment. In 1835, Poe was hired as assistant editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger* and returned to Richmond. After the deaths of William Henry Leonard Poe, Mrs. David Poe, and Henry Clemm, Edgar

Poe brought Maria and Virginia with him to Richmond.

## Poe's Wife

**Virginia Clemm Poe 1822-1847**

Edgar's cousin Virginia Clemm and her mother Maria Clemm moved to Richmond in 1836. On May 16, 1836, a marriage bond was signed between Edgar and Virginia. She was thirteen years old, and Poe still referred to her as "Sissy." At first, their marriage was a happy one. A friend of the Poes, Francis Osgood described Virginia as Edgar Poe's "young, gentle, and idolized wife" and stated, "I believe she is the only woman he ever truly loved." Another friend, Mrs. Mary Grove wrote of Virginia, "Her pale face, her brilliant eyes, and her raven hair gave her an unearthly look." When Virginia was nineteen, she began to show signs of tuberculosis, of which she would die at the age of twenty four, the same age at which Edgar Poe's mother and brother had died.



*Left: The home in which Poe's wife died in Fordham (now The Bronx), New York. When Poe left Manhattan in 1846, he moved with his dying wife and his mother-in-law to this humble cottage in the countryside fourteen miles outside the city. Mrs. Mary Gove, a visitor to the cottage described it as "a little cottage at the top of a hill...The house had three rooms—a kitchen, a sitting-room, and a bed chamber over the sitting room...The cottage had an air of taste and gentility that must have been lent to it by the presence of its inmates. So neat, so poor, so unfurnished, and yet so charming a dwelling I never saw." When Poe left on his lecture tours after the death of his wife, his mother-in-law remained in the cottage. It was here that she learned of his death from the newspapers.*

# Common Poe Myths

Much of what we think we know about Poe is wrong. In fact, many erroneous details are still included in text books to this day. Below are some common Poe myths:

## **He was an opium addict.**

Poe's enemy Thomas Dunn English once wrote: "Had Poe the opium habit when I knew him 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 the charge to be a baseless slander." English is the man Poe sued for libel so English would certainly not have defended the poet's reputation out of loyalty.

## **Poe wrote under the influence of opium or alcohol.**

Given the above statement as well as the fact that excessive alcohol consumption left Poe bedridden for days at a time, he does not seem to have written while under the influence of drugs. His manner of composition is methodical, and his handwriting is meticulous even in his rough drafts. These observations would lead one to believe that he did not write in the heat of passion but in a more calculated manner. Although his essay "The Philosophy of Composition" is generally viewed as exaggerating the methodical nature of his composition of "The Raven," the essay does still give us insight into the approach to writing that Poe valued and hoped to emulate. Mrs. Osgood, a frequent visitor to the Poe home described Poe sitting "hour after hour, patient, assiduous and uncomplaining" as he wrote.

## **He was expelled from the University of Virginia.**

He was not allowed to return because he had not paid all his expenses from the first semester.

## **He was expelled from West Point for attending drill in the nude.**

Although Poe was expelled from West Point, the nudity legend has its origins in the 1920's, and references to it from Poe's time cannot be found. Poe was actually charged with "Gross Neglect of Duty" for "absenting himself from parades and roll calls, between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> of January 1831" as well as for "Disobedience of Orders" for refusing to attend church after having been directed to do so by an officer on January 23, 1831 and for another direct defiance of orders on January 25. Poe pleaded "not guilty" to the first charge and "guilty" to the remaining charges but was found guilty on all charges. In this excerpt from Poe's January 3, 1830 letter to John Allan, Poe explains why he feels he must leave West Point and threatens to get himself expelled if Allan will not allow him to resign.

**Poe died drunk in a gutter.**

He actually died in Washington College Hospital. His attending physician was John Moran. Unfortunately, Poe's medical records do not survive. In a letter Moran wrote to Maria Clemm on November 15, 1849, Moran did not say the cause of Poe's death but cryptically stated "you are already aware of the malady of which Mr. Poe died." The newspapers in the days immediately following his death described his condition as "an attack of mania a potu" (drunkenness), "congestion of the brain," and a chronic condition from which Poe had been suffering "for some years past." Most of the confusion about Poe's cause of death derives from two feuding camps of Poe biographers. On one side Poe's enemies Griswold, Snodgrass, and Stoddard used Poe's death as a morality tale to demonstrate the evils of alcohol. They portrayed Poe as a drunk who died after a drinking binge. On the other side, Poe's defenders Moran, Elizabeth Oakes Smith, and John R. Thompson came up with alternative theories to explain Poe's death without portraying Poe as a drinker, which would have been considered a moral weakness. The latter group perpetuated theories that Poe had been beaten or drugged. Both camps



**Below are a few theories about Poe's death and dates they were published.**

- 1857 Beating
- 1860s Cooping
- 1874 Epilepsy
- 1921 Dipsomania
- 1926 Heart
- 1970 Toxic Disorder
- 1970 Hypoglycemia
- 1977 Diabetes
- 1984 Alcohol Dehydrogenase Deficiency
- 1989 Porphyria
- 1992 Delirium Tremens
- 1996 Rabies
- 1997 Heart
- 1998 Murder (Beating)
- 1999 Epilepsy
- 1999 Carbon Monoxide Poisoning

**Source:**

**Poe Museum (Richmond Virginia) Educator Packet**

