

## THE PROBLEM OF POE

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**T**O solve a problem, the first thing to do is to put it clearly. Though a hundred years have now passed since the birth of Edgar Allan Poe, discussion about him and his work is still as rife as ever. Nevertheless, the labors of so many biographers have not been wholly in vain. It is now possible, perhaps, to see more clearly into the puzzle of his life than formerly. Here are the two problems which call for an answer:

1. Why was Poe such a failure in life, in the sense of being frequently unable to support himself, let alone his family?
2. Whence the hatred which pursued him when alive and his memory, when dead?

Let us take up these two points in order.

The commonest explanation of Poe's pecuniary troubles used to be that he was an habitual drunkard and, therefore, unable to work efficiently. This explanation has always been a favorite with women, clergymen and some ingenuous college professors. To what extent Poe did drink ought to be pretty clear nowadays, and a word or two on this matter may fail to be said a little later. The fact is, if Poe had been an habitually hard drinker, this, by itself, would not necessarily be an explanation of his failure to support himself. Till recently at least not a few commercial houses employed successful travelling salesmen who were chronically hard drinkers. In the same way, at least a large minority of newspaper men in America are still regularly hard drinkers. The truth is, this explanation of Poe's failure to succeed, put forward at first by personal enemies during his lifetime and shortly after his death, has been taken up and advocated by those who are "green."

A deeper explanation puts the drinking to a natural defect of character, of which it thus becomes one symptom. To this natural de-

fect is ascribed his instability, his drinking, his failures. Some such explanation has been given of the erratic lives of some French literary men, and, on its face, this explanation is not to be rejected. The question is: Does it meet the facts?

The answer, is: It does not. That Poe from early youth was proud, headstrong and more or less willful is saying no more than has been said of men conspicuously successful as, for example, of Disraeli. That Poe continued to be so to the end is more to the point. But, why, with his intelligence and energy did he continue so?

In early youth we know Poe as shy, fond of day dreams, keeping to himself and so on. There is nothing very remarkable about this. Poets who possessed such qualities, like Shelly, for instance, have not always been greenhorns in life. Was there really something congenitally faulty about Poe which impeded his work? Since the publication of the variorum texts of his poems and of many of his stories we can say, No, to this, without difficulty. Those who have worked on newspapers, whether as reporters, copy readers, editorial writers or editors, when they first learn of the matter, are stirred with surprise at the output of Poe in the year and a half he was with the Southern Literary Messenger in Richmond. There was nothing the matter with the quantity of Poe's work in the first half of his literary life any more than there ever was with its quality. The trouble was, that he was constantly getting "done," unable to get good returns for the work he gave. He was not able to mix with men and hold his own among them in business relations. He "made" the Southern Literary Messenger and he "made" Graham's Magazine, in Philadelphia. He brought what were then extraordinary monetary returns to the proprietors, yet he was shabbily treated by both, unable to look after his own interests properly and flung away by them when their magazines had had their circulations built up by his editing and writings. Both of these men were clever enough to perceive the literary greatness of Poe and to pose as his friends after his death. But of the funds he brought in for them—which men of more practical ability would have shared by a high salary, a business interest or something of the sort—Poe obtained next to nothing.

If we look at the matter with our eyes open, it is evident enough that a man of Poe's calibre would normally have become a desirable citizen of a community once he learned practical wisdom and self-restraint. And such wisdom and self-restraint, being but the blossoming of intelligence in maturity, will be learned by no one surer than one of his capacity, if, in the multitudinous conflict within him

of desires, ideals, hopes and ambitions he does not so entangle himself, that self-development along true lines become impossible. That Poe did so entangle himself in life I propose to show here, and the explanation will be concrete and definite.

It has been said that Poe betrayed his utter impracticability at West Point, in deliberately forcing the authorities to expel him when he found he could get away from the academy in no other way. No one, so far, has examined this matter very thoroughly. We know Poe had reason, on Mr. Allan's second marriage, to give up a military career, and we know that his life at West Point was not one of roses. We learn of one bloody fist fight and it is easy to infer annoyances and hazings. To the occasional bullies from well-to-do families who in a peaceful time get into a military academy, Poe, the youthful poet, must have been a "mark." A self-respecting young man in his position would have need of very full physical powers to defend himself adequately; and these Poe did not possess, as he was not above medium height and, though wiry and agile, was rather lightly built.

Nevertheless, Poe's withdrawal from West Point must be viewed as one phase of the crisis through which he passed in 1830 to 1831. It came home to him at last, on Mr. Allan's second marriage, that he was to be disinherited. Poe's friend, the young artist Sully, seems to have been the only one who has fittingly appreciated the meaning of this fact to Poe; to it he ascribes his failure in life. Poe was, in fact, curiously and unfortunately situated. The average young American, now or then, who, on attaining manhood, should be deprived of his patrimony, would find himself, it is true, very much at the foot of the ladder; yet, by early training and habits of thought, he would likely, if naturally gifted as was Poe, be fitted to recover from the shock and win pecuniary independence. Not so Poe. When barely turned of age, with the light of great travels, great loves and great deeds in his heart, he was flung out, a waif, into the world. The one means—wealth or, at least, a competence—by which he could hope to realize even one of his boyish day-dreams, he was, not only by his education but by the effects of those very day-dreams themselves—badly fitted to attain. The very first step to their realization would have been to turn steadily for years to business pursuits alien to his bringing-up, to his habits of life and to the proud strain of his character. At the close of his life, Poe realized the fact, and in the last two years of his career the recurrence of the expression "I must get rich" or its equivalent, becomes like a refrain, in his talk and correspondence with those intimate with him.

Yet, from such a crushed condition in early manhood, one might expect Poe to have aroused himself in a few years. Here comes in the tragedy of his life, M. Emile Lauvriere, in his very suggestive, but, to my mind, largely mistaken analysis of Poe, points out that it is well-known to psychiatrists, that a depressed nervous condition from which the patient would normally recover may become hopeless, if, during its continuance a series of shocks or even a single great shock affect him. The shock seems to act like an hypnotic suggestion to hold him in his bewildered state. This is what happened to Poe. Onto the depressed, crushed spirit of the young man, at the very time when, owing to an improvement in his outward circumstances, he was about to re-assert himself successfully, came the results of the mistake which blasted and made a desolation of his life.

In September 1835 Poe was wedded to Virginia Clemm, his cousin, then a month over thirteen years of age. Of his home life, some years later, remarks by English visitors and some American acquaintances began to be published after his death. A letter of his, exhibiting intense grief at the bursting of a blood-vessel in Virginia's neck, has become almost classic with his biographers. Then a crowd of ardent admirers arose. Poe's marriage became a legend, a sacred myth, and at the very point where the real explanation of his failure in life lay, clustered the craziest adulation and the most knotted-up nonsense. For this marriage with Virginia was the ruination of Poe as man and citizen. Even twenty-five years ago, Prof. Woodberry, in his first Life of Poe, seems to have felt vaguely that there was something odd about Poe's "platonic love" letters to other women in the latter part of his married life and in their encouragement by his own wife—something uncanny, if the story of the ardent love of the two as husband and wife was to be accepted as a fact. How could any man loving his own wife at all, not to speak of "idolizing" her, as Poe was said to have done—have written such letters as we know Poe wrote to Frances Sargent Osgood? And yet Poe did care deeply for Virginia. The one fact is as certain as the other. Not till the publication of Mrs. Weiss' "Home Life of Poe" might one with a mind for the truth do more than make a guess, and in the last edition of his biography of Poe, Prof. Woodberry seems plainly alive to the long hidden truth, though he will not quite say it out. For the plain fact is, Poe and Virginia were not real husband and wife at all.

Before touching on the consequences of this ill-fated wedding, let us examine the facts more closely.

First of all, not one of Poe's famous poems, the Raven, Ulalume,

or Annabel Lee, all deploring the death of a dearly loved woman, has reference to Virginia. The Raven was published in January, 1845, and both of the other two poems were almost certainly either written or drafted long before his wife's death, which occurred in January, 1847. Of his tales, Elenora, published in 1842, if it have any reference at all to her (the lovers are cousins) certainly has about the strangest and most unlikely sort, as the heroine dies, her lover marries another and the spirit of Elenora tells him he has done well in doing so. That any real wife, no matter how child-like, should enjoy a story of this sort, or that any husband should write such a story in reference to a dearly loved wife, is incredible. As a matter of fact, we know from Mrs. Weiss' reminiscences (p. 91) that Virginia had never read half of his poems. "When writing" says the same biographer, "he would go to Mrs. Clemm to explain his ideas or ask her opinion but never to Virginia."

Another series of facts has reference to Poe's "platonic love" for various women while Virginia lived—especially for Frances Sargent Osgood. This affection Virginia herself encouraged: "She was always a child" quotes Mrs. Weiss (same page) from a lady who knew her well, "even in person smaller and younger looking than her real age, she retained to the last the shy sweetness and simplicity of childhood." Again, according to Mrs. Weiss herself, "It would certainly appear that Poe's child wife never attained to the full completeness of the nature and affections of a mature woman. She was never known to manifest jealousy of the women whom he so notoriously admired; neither did scandals disturb nor his neglect estrange her. Mrs. Clemm would sometimes, as in duty bound, take him to task for his irregularities, but no word of reproach ever escaped Virginia. She regarded him with the most implicit and childlike trust." At Virginia's deathbed was an old Baltimore flame of Poe's, whose family name has not yet been published, but whose reminiscences of Poe were printed in Harper's Magazine in 1889. To her Virginia said: "Mary, be a friend to Eddie, and don't forsake him; he always loved you;—didn't you Eddie?"

To get, however, more to the heart of the matter: Poe was twice wedded to Virginia, the first a secret ceremony, occurring in September, 1835, the second a public one, on May 16th, 1836. At the first wedding Virginia was one month over thirteen years of age.

Two questions here arise: Why this strange marriage at all? and, Why the double ceremony? Mrs. Weiss says: "Possible explanation of the mystery may be that Mrs. Clemm having set her heart upon keeping her nephew in the family could think of no

surer means than that of a match between himself and her daughter" (p. 75). This seems hardly sufficient. Three weeks before the first ceremony, Poe wrote his friend Kennedy an extraordinary letter which has been often published without any clearing up of its strangeness. Part of it reads: "I am wretched. I know not why. Console me—for you can. But let it be quickly or it will be too late. Convince me that it is worth one's while to live \* \* \* \* Urge me to do what is right. Fail not as you value your peace of mind hereafter." There is little doubt that Poe, by imploring to be advised to "do what is right" had a clear idea of why he was "wretched," and equally clear that he was unwilling to speak with full frankness even to Kennedy. The obscure point is, Did he wish to be encouraged to wed Virginia, or not to do so. The first marriage (as might have been expected from the age of the bride) was a nominal one (see Mrs. Weiss' work, p. 79, last paragraph, which evidently implies this).

Before the first ceremony Poe had lost his position as assistant to Mr. White, the proprietor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*. Shortly afterwards, he was taken back as editor of the magazine. At the beginning of 1837 came his final separation from this periodical which, in one year, he had made financially successful and among the best known in America. "What part, if any," says Woodberry, "was played in these events by his flirtation with Mr. White's daughter, of which the tradition still survives in Richmond, or whether this was a cause of his hasty marriage to Virginia, are matters too obscure to be more than briefly mentioned. From the beginning his marriage was, in a sense, no marriage; it was a family arrangement. His love for his wife was never that of a man for woman, and, Virginia, on her side, was always contented with the affection shown to a favored child. Poe, himself, was fond of society, mingled with it, danced with much pleasure, used his powers of fascination; he was a ladies' man in Richmond, from the beginning to the end of his career." (Woodberry, vol. 1, p. 185). Mrs. Weiss tells us more of Eliza White, here referred to. When Poe first went to Richmond, in 1835, he stayed at the home of the Whites and the two fell in love. The only other thing in this perplexed matter which, possibly, should be mentioned is, that between the time of the first and second weddings to Virginia it appeared as though she would come into a portion of the estate of a deceased aunt named Mrs. Catherine Clemm. It is possible, in fact, that this happened, although the bequest must have been small. But from 1833 to well into the time of his Philadelphia sojourn it is worth noting that Poe, his wife and

her mother seem to have been in at least fairly easy circumstances. The story of Poe's having been always poverty-stricken is another myth. Poe's poverty and his hard drinking fall almost exclusively in certain intervals in the last seven years of his life.

But, whatever the causes which brought about Poe's union with a child, it is incredible that he should have looked for such a situation to continue indefinitely. Necessarily, he must have thought, Virginia would shortly grow into a woman. But she matured very slowly and in 1841 is described by a friend as looking hardly more than fourteen years of age (Woodberry, vol. 1, p. 297). In 1842 or 1843 she ruptured a blood vessel while singing. She had already shown signs of consumption, and, from this time on, she was not only frail and delicate, but, most of the time, an invalid, troubled with repeated hemorrhages of the lungs, and fit only for the quietest and most uneventful life.

A few words should be added on another matter. When the house or the apartments of the family were large enough, Virginia had her own room; when not, she shared her mother's. Statements to this effect are made by several observers who noted the fact in passing. On the other hand, in all the Poe biographies and reminiscences which the present writer knows of, but one statement occurs which contradicts this assertion in even one instance, and this, by a passage in one of Poe's own letters, can be shown really to confirm strongly the view here taken. In view of the general custom in America, at the time, of the opposite sort, especially among those not well-to-do, this fact seems to clench those which have gone before.

If we accept the foregoing explanation of the character of Poe's marriage, it is easy to explain the chief puzzles in his life—his financial difficulties, his personal quarrels and the detestation of his memory. Stendhal has a remark somewhere, that between men and men, liking and dislike depend on likeness and difference. No man could go about with such a secret on his soul without its affecting him in his relations with other men. And, not only this, but Virginia's mental immaturity made even comradeship between the two impossible; Poe's feeling for her was always as for a little child. Not only was he thus deprived of the natural sources of domestic happiness at times when, from the stress of his work, he most needed a woman's affection, but he was, in his own home, scarcely more than a hermit. In this situation, when he became well-known, the unusual "platonically" relations which developed between him and several women caused an immense amount of adverse comment. Poe was

neither a "sport" nor a "good fellow," and it is quite likely that his attractiveness to women was another cause of dislike for him to the many men whom his personal traits had already repelled. Nowhere do we find in Poe's life any sure instance of his offering an "outside" connection to any woman, but he was too sentimental, too eager for women's sympathy to keep wholly away from them, too high-minded to offer such as would have accepted it, an illegal affection, hard, indeed, then, on the woman, and unable, by reason of his marriage, to offer an honorable love. Most men would have summarily cut the knot by outside affairs of the usual sort. Poe, we know, did not, and, thus, from his very virtue towards the woman to whom he was wedded sprang the sources of the troubles which, in turn, aroused calumny and hatred of him. In this abnormal private status, this utter loneliness of life, there is little doubt, lies the original cause of his frequent irritability, his perverse and foolish conduct at moments when he should most have been himself and the nervous prostrations to which he was subject in his latter years.

The romance of Poe and Virginia must be given up; yet, in its place, we have the awfully tragic story of his love for her as for a child sister, his respect to the vows which bound them together, the agony of his life and the mythology round his memory when dead.