

# Midnight Dreary: The Mysterious Death of Edgar Allan Poe Short Guide

## Midnight Dreary: The Mysterious Death of Edgar Allan Poe by John Evangelist Walsh

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# Contents

<a href="#">Midnight Dreary: The Mysterious Death of Edgar Allan Poe Short Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Overview.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">About the Author.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Setting.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Social Sensitivity.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Literary Qualities.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Themes and Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Ideas for Reports and Papers.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">For Further Reference.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Related Titles/Adaptations.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Copyright Information.....</a>	<a href="#">19</a>



## Overview

Walsh begins his examination into the death of Poe by writing, It is a century and a half since the death of Edgar Allan Poe and still there exist urgent questions about what happened, both circumstances and cause. In that situation, surely, there resides a macabre rightness. The man who invented the detective story, in his own sudden and bizarre demise, provided American literature with its most enduring real-life mystery.

From the moment Poe's death was announced to the world, until now, the nature of his death has been uncertain. Perhaps he was found lying in a gutter, or found staggering in the street, or found seated in a tavern; perhaps he died of blows to the head, or died of alcohol poisoning, or died of an infection, or died of exposure. The possible explanation for Poe's passing has challenged scholars for decades. Some biographers sidestep the issue; others offer theories. After a century and a half, the trails would seem to have grown cold, but in *Midnight Dreary* Walsh amazes readers as he pulls together data from a multitude of sources, arranges the data so that the result makes sense, and offers a gripping account of love, betrayal, hope, and murder.

Is Poe's death worthy of a book to itself?

Yes, it is. Poe was no ordinary man and no ordinary writer. Even in the present day he is among the world's most read authors, and probably millions of people learned to love literature by reading Poe's fanciful, compelling tales. He died prematurely, under dubious circumstances, robbing America and the world of one of the greatest writers when he was at the height of his powers and seemingly on his way to composing works even more impressive than what had already been published. These factors make the nature of his death of interest for many readers, and if Walsh is correct that he was murdered in a cruel, vile manner, then the perpetrators should have their names connected with infamy.

## About the Author

John Evangelist Walsh is one of America's most distinguished historians, gifted with an ability to make his mountains of research flow into narratives that entertain as well as inform. He often makes his work seem like adventures in which exciting discoveries are to be made. Like *Midnight Dreary: The Mysterious Death of Edgar Allan Poe*, his *Unraveling Piltdown: The Science Fraud of the Century and Its Solution* is another investigation of a real-life mystery. *Midnight Dreary* is Walsh's second book about the famous American poet. His 1967 work *Poe the Detective* won an Edgar (an award named for Poe) from the Mystery Writers of America.

# Setting

The events of *Midnight Dreary* take place primarily in Richmond, Virginia, and Baltimore, Maryland. Poe had been raised in Richmond. Soon after his birth on January 19, 1809, in Boston, his father abandoned his family. In 1811, his mother, Elizabeth, died of tuberculosis in Richmond. Her children were split among other families to be raised, with Edgar being sent to live with John and Frances Allan. John owned a successful import-export business. By many accounts, Poe seems to have been very spoiled, with Frances Allan doting on him, but John Allan may have been a parsimonious man, for he sent Poe to college with less money than was needed to pay for food, housing, and books. Poe's debts outraged him, and Poe's college career ended when Allan refused to send him any more money.

Allan always felt betrayed by Poe's behavior, saying that Poe was ungrateful for the many years of comfort he had enjoyed while being raised in the Allan household. In this, he may have been right, for Poe seemed to think Allan owed him a living.

Poe's life before the main events of *Midnight Dreary* was very difficult. After a promising start, illness may have made him a failure in the army. He bounced among cities along the East Coast, landing and losing editorial jobs, although he had considerable success as editor of the *Southern Messenger* in Richmond before his bizarre behavior became too much for the magazine's owner. Then in 1834 John Allan died, making no mention of Poe in his will.

Since Poe's poverty is an important element in *Midnight Dreary*, Allan's leaving Poe nothing is significant. So is the cheating of Poe by publishers, who took advantage of his desperation for money when his wife fell ill. He had married his cousin Virginia E. Clemm, in 1836, whom he adored, and the couple moved to New York. Virginia contracted tuberculosis and slowly died while Poe frantically tried to earn enough money to afford medical treatment for her.

Virginia's death at age twenty-four in 1847 marked the beginning of Poe's final decline into ill-health and death. The once robust, athletic man became a forlorn, tired figure, impressing those who saw him with an air of melancholy.

During the last two years of his life, Poe formed close attachments to three women, one of whom was married. One of the three was Sarah Elmira Shelton. She had been a neighbor of Poe's when he was a teenager, and they had fallen in love. Poe's disreputable behavior at the University of Virginia had caused her father to put an end to any communication between the two. After becoming a wealthy widow, she and Poe rekindled their relationship in Richmond.

Perhaps Poe was only interested in the financial security her wealth offered him, but more likely he was finally overcoming a dismal part of his past by regaining the affection of the first woman he had loved.



His renewed love affair with Sarah, which gave him much to live for and reason to be happy, defies biographers who speculate that Poe died from an alcoholic binge.

In *Midnight Dreary*, Walsh focuses on Poe's last days in Richmond, providing closely observed details of the streets, restaurants, and hotel where Poe spent much of his time. It is almost as if Poe's fictional detective Dupin were reconstructing events as he does in the short story "The Purloined Letter," pulling together information about the weather and who lived where to recreate a trail of Poe's movements leading up to his fatal journey to Baltimore. The recreation of 1849 Richmond is one of the pleasures of *Midnight Dreary*, capturing the flavor of the place and time.

Little is known of the events during Poe's last visit to Baltimore. It is possible that he had one last fatal drink of alcohol; or it is more likely that illness overcame him, perhaps a virus such as the flu, which had afflicted him before; or perhaps a neuromuscular disease that had long gone undiagnosed because of ignorance and the supposition that Poe's physical problems were caused by alcoholism—a view encouraged by Poe's enemies. Walsh has his own view, based on a gathering and arrangement of details about Poe and Baltimore, and makes a strong case in *Midnight Dreary* for Poe having been murdered by the brothers of Shelton. In any case, after a few days of delirium, Poe died on October 7, 1849. He was already buried by the time Shelton arrived in Baltimore to see him.



# Social Sensitivity

Midnight Dreary is a marvel, and one of the ways in which it is marvelous is in how it makes the society in which Poe lived seem natural and everyday, as if it were the reader's own. Some of the problems of that society are still problems in today's society.

That there was a temperance society in Richmond attests to that. In those days, an alcoholic was asked "to take the pledge" and forswear ever imbibing alcohol again.

That Poe did this in a very public way that led to newspaper accounts and to the temperance organization itself cheering its winning over a very famous man, means, as Walsh points out, that taking the pledge was a very serious matter for him.

Walsh is very particular in his discussion of Poe's drinking: "Once and for all, let it be stated that Poe was not a drunkard," he insists. According to Walsh, Poe spent most of his life sober; his problem was "periodic binging." Once Poe took a drink, he was hooked until he was drunk, but this happened only rarely. It caused Poe acute embarrassment and occasioned much remorse; he was humiliated by his conduct. Had he married as he planned and had he settled in Richmond, which was likely, the support of the local temperance group might have been what he needed in order not to take that first fatal drink. Further, his public disavowal of alcohol meant that at home everyone would know not to serve him anything with alcohol in it. Thus a stable home life would have additionally helped him to live up to his pledge, suggests the author. It is Walsh's opinion that Poe had the strength of character, motivation, and situation in which to leave his binges in the past.

Midnight Dreary mentions in passing the possibility that Poe took laudanum, a liquid form of opium, as a medication. Laudanum was frequently recommended by physicians in Poe's day for a sleeping aid and as a painkiller, especially for headaches. That Poe may have drunk laudanum on occasion would not have merited more excitement than a modern person taking aspirin, although history has proven laudanum to be very destructive if taken often. In any case, Walsh rightly dismisses tales of Poe's abusing opium or other narcotics. According to him, these tales are fabrications meant to enhance an image of Poe as a crazed genius.

The whole courtship of Poe and Shelton is of interest for what it tells of Richmond society in the late 1840s, as well as for what it tells us about Poe's state of mind when he left Richmond on a business trip. That Poe should simply present himself at Shelton's door on Sunday would have been remarkable, at the time. That Shelton retained her composure when Poe showed up at a time when people went to church tells something of her character and her almost lost affection for a man she had not seen in years. On the other hand, that Poe would come to her was expected of a man. She could not go to his place to see him. In the eyes of society, a woman would demean herself if she visited a man at his residence.



That she should receive a suitor into her home was the proper course of action; he was expected to press the courtship and she was expected not to give in to her feelings quickly. In this, Shelton's behavior may have seemed just a tad unseemly. In a few weeks, according to Walsh, and his evidence supports him, Shelton was madly in love with the once dashing young man she had loved twenty years before, and she was ready to marry, perhaps with the requirement that he give up alcohol.

That her brothers would take it upon themselves to destroy her proposed marriage seems callous and cruel, not only now, but also in Poe's day. Men were expected to look after their female relatives, with the excuse that men would know more about the world than women would and would be better able to look after a woman's welfare than the woman herself would be.

In this case, however, Shelton had a resource that could enable her to defy her male relatives—a fortune. Money of her own could give a woman independence, allowing her to make her own choices about her life. That Shelton was willing to lose some of her independence by losing to a trust fund for her children, most of the money her husband left her, suggests that she had much confidence in her love for Poe.

But, thinks Walsh, readers should not imagine that Shelton's murderous brothers were merely acting for her welfare. Had she died, control of the trust fund would likely have been theirs, and two children might have been left as penniless as Poe had been as a young man. Further, Walsh's reasoning that Ann and Southall's pleadings were coached, that their implorings of their mother not to marry the awful Edgar Allan Poe were the words of grownups, not youngsters, is sound. This would mean that the brothers used Shelton's own children to work against her happiness. Even by the patriarchal social structure of the day, they were cowards and scoundrels. Their behavior, had it become public, would have been mitigated by their wealth and social standing—but murderers, even in the second degree, tended to be hanged in those days.





# Literary Qualities

It is Walsh's hope that the "stark truth" of Poe's death will emerge as *Midnight Dreary* progresses. In this, he is not entirely successful, because the possibility of illness still lingers, even if only tenuously. His own evidence points to Poe having had a fever; Shelton tried to keep him in Richmond because of it. The mistake of taking Dr. Carter's cane instead of his own could be explained as the lapse of a man who was sicker than he realized. So to, his leaving his case at a hotel may have been another absentminded lapse. He took an unnecessarily long journey on a boat to Baltimore when he could have taken a train; there, he worked hard for a commission. Having to work even while ill nearly all his life, resting was not an option. Perhaps, he worked while ill one time too many, and instead of being drunk, was dehydrated and exhausted when he was found.

On the other hand, *Midnight Dreary* is a rip-roaring good read, and Walsh weaves his evidence together in a beguiling tapestry. Every fact seems to be accounted for, every loose end tracked down and explained, every red herring eliminated.

"George, James, and Alexander Royster," Shelton's brothers, stand accused of a crime that might well be called "lurid." It seems too much like someone's clever novel, yet one can track down Walsh's sources, check for quotations out of context, and look for missing data. *Midnight Dreary* is no novel, which adds to its narrative power. It is an enveloping experience in which one may don the clothes of the era and walk the streets of Richmond, Baltimore, and Philadelphia as if there, at Poe's side. It is crucial to Walsh's solution that these cities and their environments be carefully, accurately displayed. He succeeds.

Motive for the murder is sordid, unclean. For a modern American reader, the attitudes of the Royster brothers is vile.

They believe that they are best suited to decide who their sister should marry (if they actually intended anyone to marry her and possibly take from them all that money she had). As Walsh sees it, their attitude was, "Duped as she was, [Shelton's brothers] would not permit Elmira to throw her life away on a money-chasing, womanizing drunkard." Did they threaten to lie to Shelton about Poe's unsavory exploits in New York? Walsh thinks they did. Did they take it upon themselves to "protect" her from Poe, thereby ruining her best chance at happiness? Walsh is willing to allow this idea to them, but does not find it likely.

They had a rich sister, and she had two children that they easily manipulated, but Poe could bring Shelton a degree of independence that would put much of her life out of their reach, and her children would have a charming foster father who could win their affections. Greed and jealousy combined with a callous unconcern for their sister's happiness are the likeliest motives.

Whatever their motives, they were murderers according to Walsh. The author ends his account by remarking that the Royster brothers probably went on to live happy lives.



On the other hand, the few public remarks that Shelton made about Poe suggest that until she died, she was bitter and angry, perhaps at her brothers, perhaps at Poe. As Walsh points out, the notion of family was important in Richmond; the brothers and their sister all lived close together. Even if she knew what her brothers had done, she might have kept silent for her family. Perhaps they told her their lies about Poe and she believed them, although as an intelligent woman, she may have realized that what cold-blooded murders had to say should not be trusted.

One remains somewhat curious about the fate of Ann and Southall, with a mother bitter with grief and three murderers for uncles. In Poe, of all people, they would have had a father who knew about family devotion, how the lack of it could do great harm, and how its presence enhances life.

He knew how a father's abandonment could hurt and how a father's lack of forbearance could ruin a child's life. It is perhaps Walsh's greatest achievement in *Midnight Dreary* that one can speculate on such matters. His portrait of Poe is amazing, as if the man could take a seat in one's living room and one would recognize him and know what to expect. Walsh's Poe would have cared for those children, and he would have defied his brothers-in-law. The author proposes that if only he had stayed in Richmond to be cared for by Shelton and if only he had remembered to carry Dr. Carter's walking stick, Poe might have been able to survive and devote himself to Ann and Southall.



## Themes and Characters

"[Poe] was not a man who held his liquor well," notes Walsh. Indeed, Poe may even have been allergic to alcohol. In any case, only a little could seize him and embarrass him. Yet, Walsh does not view Poe as a weak, wasting-away man. His view is that Poe was robust and energetic, and that most of the time, he was sober and hardworking. He notes that Poe had been athletic when young and proposes that Poe would still have put up a good fight if he were attacked.

Walsh also believes that Poe's love for Shelton was sincere. While Poe probably hoped that he could use some of her wealth for starting up a magazine that he would edit, he remained passionate after learning that she would lose most of her money to a trust fund. The picture he paints of Poe is of a man deeply in love and, by the time of his death, a devoted lover looking forward to the love and stability that marrying Shelton would bring to his life. Poe was not a perfect man; his flirtations with women were well known, and he had sometimes had drinking binges. Yet, as Walsh notes, he joined a temperance society in such a public way that anyone in Richmond would likely know that he was to be served no alcohol.

Walsh takes this as a sign of his sincerity in his love for his childhood sweetheart; it may also be taken as a sign of the positive effects Shelton was having on him. The intensity of the love of Poe and Shelton enhances the poignancy of *Midnight Dreary*, for it is a foregone conclusion that something evil will part them.

In *Midnight Dreary*, Poe is not the mad, frightening eccentric often said to have been the source of mad, frightening stories. He is poor, but upright. Except for the last day or so of his life, he wears his frayed clothing with dignity. Further, he is a man with a purpose. Not a wanderer, he is a man looking to settle down in the city where he grew up, Richmond. Hoping to start a magazine there, Poe chooses a place where he had enjoyed success as an editor many years before. Thus his movements have meaning; he is making considered choices. Therefore *Midnight Dreary* is in part a portrait of how even careful choices can conspire with circumstances to end in disaster. Had Shelton's brothers been honest men, Poe's choices may have finally brought him to prosperity. Walsh points out the significant detail that he actually had a goodly sum of money resulting from his lectures; he was finally beginning to prosper.

Further, the Poe of *Midnight Dreary* is good company. He knows how to properly court Shelton, after a couple of missteps.

Walsh believes that given a chance he would have made friends out of potential enemies, especially Shelton's daughter and son, Ann and Southall. "When [Poe] really wanted to, he could capture the affections of anyone, youngsters in particular," observes Walsh. There is the ring of truth to Walsh's reconstruction of Poe in his last year of life.

It is a humane view, reconstructing a full man of strengths and weaknesses a man who could have won Shelton's heart for a second time.



"Close familiarity with all the surrounding circumstances," says Walsh, "and with one indisputable fact in particular, amply demonstrates that much of their old love had blossomed again, flourishing in a way that may have taken both by surprise." The theme that gives *Midnight Dreary* its emotional punch is that of love. That Poe would have been drawn to Shelton seems likely at first glance; Poe was chronically poor. Yet, Walsh points out that Poe's lectures had left him with a great deal of money. This means that Shelton's money was not essential to him. Besides, she was to lose most of it if she married him.

Shelton looks forbidding in her photograph in *Midnight Dreary*, but Walsh takes pains to point out that the seemingly dour woman in the picture was actually a charming conversationalist with a sparkling sense of humor, traits that would appeal to Poe.

She brought laughter to Poe's life, which had been beset by tragedies. It is no wonder that he saw in her the teenager he had loved before going to college and falling into misery. It is no wonder, too, that he fell deeply in love with her all over again. He had deeply loved his wife, who died miserably; perhaps Shelton helped heal the wound made by her death.

As for Shelton, she had an older, wiser version of the young man who had hoped to marry her twenty years earlier. His charm was still there; a winning smile and ability to make her feel at ease would have made Poe a welcome guest. Walsh wisely concedes that the workings of love are not entirely to be understood, but he speculates that Poe, in his turn, brought laughter back into her life. She had lost a husband, and in Poe she may have found a man who could help heal old, sorrowful wounds. Further, he gave every proof of devotion to her— except, perhaps, when he chose to make his business trip north, against her wishes because he was sick. Shelton was bringing stability and security back into his life. He had someone to care for and to work for, so readers may ask themselves why had he not listened to her?

In grand romantic novels, love is usually tragic. Lovers die as do Romeo and Juliet or suffer great injury as does Rochester in *Jane Eyre*. In *Midnight Dreary*, the tragedy is true.

The characters are real people acting out a drama that has its own rules. It is history and the facts will not change themselves to suit an author's needs for plot twists or suspense. Even so, *Midnight Dreary* is a mystery focused on a man's death, and death is the theme that gives the narrative its suspense. The love between Shelton and Poe may encourage readers to care about them. Walsh's creative portrait of the days preceding Poe's death features all of the inevitability of a tragic romance novel and gives readers the urge to try and warn Poe of his impending fate.

There is no escaping that Poe died. It is likely that readers of *Midnight Dreary* already know that the book must end with Edgar dead and Elmira bereaved. The trick is to maintain suspense over the explanation for Poe's death. In this, Walsh succeeds admirably. He recounts the different theories that others have proposed and then eliminates them. The "cooping" theory is a strong candidate. Cooping was a voting



scam in which derelicts and other solitary figures on the streets were kidnaped, forced to drink alcohol until drunk, and then taken to various voting areas and forced to cast votes for a particular candidate or party.

Might Poe have been "cooped," then left for dead in the street? Walsh musters evidence to belie the theory; apparently no one was cooping that election day.

The plot thickens when Mrs. Elizabeth Oakes Smith's articles on Poe are mentioned. She asserts that Poe was murdered.

Then there are Sarah Helen Whitman's efforts to cover up the issue of Poe's murder, only to add to the confusion by mentioning brothers of a woman wronged. "Brothers?

Where did they come from? Whose brothers?" asks Walsh. Like Auguste Dupin sitting at home and solving a mystery that is far away, he begins to piece together the evidence bit by bit until, as in a well-written mystery novel, all the facts are arrayed before his audience. Then he shows how the evidence may be assembled so that all the parts fit together. It is wonderful to race with him through Poe's last few days, breathlessly outrunning murder, only to be seized by evil.

When taken together, the love story and the murder mystery give *Midnight Dreary* poignancy, a feeling of missed opportunities and lost potential. As Walsh says, "The picture of Poe, no longer vexed by life or by his own failings, growing contentedly into old age beside the girl he'd loved in his youth, must remain as a haunting possibility."



## Topics for Discussion

1. How well does Walsh's theory that the Royster brothers forced alcohol into Poe stand under scrutiny? What concrete evidence does Walsh have to support this part of his account of Poe's death? Does he present a persuasive argument?
2. Would it have been better (or worse) if Walsh had written a full-length biography of Poe and included his rationale for Poe having been murdered into the larger context of Poe's life?
3. The news that Poe was murdered and that the murderers have been identified should be a sensation among Poe aficionados. Why would anyone object to Walsh's conclusions?
4. Why would any of the figures who may have known the truth not speak out? Where does Walsh not explain this satisfactorily?
5. How well could *Midnight Dreary* be translated into a motion picture? Would audiences find the ending satisfying?
6. What does Elmira Shelton's refusal to discuss Poe, except on a couple of occasions, suggest about her character?
7. Why would Elmira Shelton be willing to lose most of her wealth in order to marry Poe?
8. Why does Walsh ignore the sensational tales of Poe's drug abuse, womanizing, hallucinations, and the like that are staples of popular accounts of Poe's life?
9. What characteristics does *Midnight Dreary* have in common with mystery novels? Does it have a similar structure? Does it use similar techniques for building suspense?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Who was Rufus W. Griswold, and why would he lie about Poe's death? Why would later biographers accept his lies as if they were true?
2. In what ways does *Midnight Dreary* follow patterns set in Poe's tales of Auguste Dupin? How does Walsh parallel Dupin? Is he as successful at ferreting out the truth as Dupin is?
3. What does *Midnight Dreary* reveal about the culture in which Poe lived? What aspects of that culture made it possible for men to supposedly murder Poe and never be brought to trial?
4. What does the behavior of the Royster brothers reveal about their attitudes toward women? How typical were their attitudes for men in Richmond in their day? Was their sister's reaction to their deed how a woman was expected to react?
5. In a comparison with the Quinn and Silverman biographies, do you think that Poe had the fortitude to stick with his pledge never to drink alcohol again?
6. That there was a temperance union in Richmond suggests that alcoholism may have been a significant social problem in America in the 1840s. Was there one?

How would Poe's behavior fit in among the alcoholics of his era?

## For Further Reference

Deas, Michael J. *The Portraits and Daguerreotypes of Edgar Allan Poe*. Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1989. This is an enjoyable book, full of pictures of Poe. One may find it worthwhile to compare the pictures of Poe late in his life with Walsh's descriptions, especially concerning his moustache.

Hatton, Ed. *Journal of American History* (December 1999): 1340. Hatton Reviews *Midnight Dreary*, giving it high marks for its historical background.

"Literary deaths." *Economist* (April 10, 1999): 3. This review says that Walsh goes beyond what a good detective would do, by going beyond the evidence, but still praises *Midnight Dreary*.

Nash, Charles. *Library Journal* (December 1998): 106. In his review, Nash calls *Midnight Dreary* "a superbly informed speculation on the week proceeding the mysterious death of Edgar Allan Poe 150 years ago."

Review of *Midnight Dreary*. *Publishers Weekly* (October 19, 1998): 65. "Will [*Midnight Dreary*] settle the mystery once and for all? Probably not," says the reviewer.

"But it will behoove future biographers to consider the hypotheses Walsh has laid over the curious blank of Poe's death."

Wiley, Elizabeth. *Concordance to the Poetry of Edgar Allan Poe*. Cranbury, NJ: Susquehanna University Press, 1989. If one remembers a phrase from Poe's poetry but cannot remember from which poem, this book will help one find the poem.





## Related Titles/Adaptations

Many scholars consider Kenneth Silverman's *Edgar Allan Poe: Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance* one of the best modern full-length biographies of Poe.

Silverman mentions some of the evidence Walsh mentions in his book, without analyzing it, just letting it stand unadorned. Of the possible causes of death he mentions (murder is not one of them), Silverman seems to lean toward an infection made worse by exposure.

In *Midnight Dreary*, Walsh gives a very good account of the various theories of his death that other biographers have presented about Poe. He notes how nineteenth-century biographies tended to skirt the truth of Poe's life, and he suggests that a few scholars, such as J. R. Thompson who seems to have invented the "cooping" theory, invented causes for Poe's death in order to shield the murderers. There are not only theories about Poe's death but a multitude of inventions, exaggerations, and myths that found their way into biographies until the publication of Arthur Hobson Quinn's *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography* in 1969.

Before Quinn's book, biographies portrayed Poe as a drunken, drugged madman whose hallucinations caused by drug abuse resulted in his bizarre, sometimes surreal tales.

Quinn changed this attitude by looking beyond the many decades of folklore and outright fabrications about Poe to uncover a man who was brilliant, ahead of his time, and by-and-large sober.

Walsh has written about other historical mysteries. One of these, *Unraveling Piltdown: The Science Fraud of the Century and Its Solution*, involves the mystery writer Arthur Conan Doyle. Walsh shows how scientists were fooled and how scientific studies were compromised in a tale of mystery equal to *Midnight Dreary*. Another story of a famous author's last days, *Darkling I Listen: The Last Days and Death of John Keats*, Walsh has, like *Midnight Dreary*, created a true, but tragic, love story. Unlike Poe, Keats had a faithful, stalwart friend in John Severn to care for him during his last days. As in *Midnight Dreary*, Walsh hopes to correct misunderstandings of Keats's relationships during the poet's decline in health.

Another effort to correct misunderstandings of an historical figure is the 1991 work *This Brief Tragedy: Unraveling the Todd Dickinson Scandal*. In it, Walsh shows how Susan Dickinson, sister-in-law of poet Emily Dickinson, has been unfairly portrayed in accounts of a complex love affair involving her son, husband, and the wife of a teacher at Amherst College, Mabel Todd. Like *Midnight Dreary*, it features an involving portrait of an historical era, the 1880s, at Amherst College. In *Moonlight: Abraham Lincoln and the Almanac Trial*, Walsh visits a popular story about how Abraham Lincoln won an acquittal of an accused murderer, William Armstrong. In Walsh's closely observed account, the crime and the trial have the best qualities of good mystery writing, much as *Midnight Dreary* does.

The first motion picture based on Poe's life was probably *Edgar Allan Poe*, released in 1909. It was directed by D. W. Griffith, who co-wrote the screenplay with Frank E. Woods. Herbert Yost plays Poe and Linda Arvidson plays Poe's wife, Virginia. It is an earnest effort, but it draws on the misinformation about Poe's life that was accepted as fact at the time.

The 1942 motion picture *The Loves of Edgar Allan Poe* is an attempt to capitalize on Poe's difficult love life. Directed by Harry Lachman, *The Loves of Edgar Allan Poe* is slow-paced. The plot follows Poe's life from boyhood, emphasizing his relationships with women, beginning with his mother, played by Jan Clayton. Poe is played by three actors, Skippy Wanders as Poe at age three, Freddie Mercer as Poe at age twelve, and Shepperd Strudwick (listed as John Shepperd in the credits) as the adult Poe.

They are sincere enough in their performances, but *The Loves of Edgar Allan Poe* is a "B" film, perhaps due in part to a limited budget. It runs just a little over an hour, which is not enough time to allow the female characters to be developed beyond stereotypes.



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## Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

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