

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-85967-7 - The Cambridge Introduction to Edgar Allan Poe

Benjamin F. Fisher

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*The Cambridge Introduction to
Edgar Allan Poe*

Much remains uncertain about the life of Edgar Allan Poe, the mysterious author of one of the best-known American poems, “The Raven,” the Gothic romance “The Fall of the House of Usher,” and the first detective fiction, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” This book provides a balanced overview of Poe’s career and writings, resisting the tendency of many scholars to sensationalize the more enigmatic aspects of his life. Benjamin F. Fisher outlines Poe’s experiments with a wide range of literary forms and genres, and shows how his fiction evolved from Gothic fantasy to plausible, sophisticated psychological fiction. Fisher makes new and fruitful connections within this diverse body of work, and offers analyses of the major works. The critical afterlife of Poe’s work is charted, and the book includes a guide to further reading, making this a handy starting-point for students and readers new to Poe.

Benjamin F. Fisher is Professor of English at the University of Mississippi.

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Preface

This book is aimed at advanced high school and lower-level college/university students. It consists of chapter 1, “Life,” in which the mythologies (often quite negative) that have grown up around Poe the person are avoided in favor of a factual account. Chapter 2, “Works,” provides coverage of Poe’s works and their place in the literature of the world. After all, what initially gained Poe widespread attention was his critical writings, an irony since during his teens and early twenties he intensely wanted to be regarded as a poet. An additional irony is that Poe very deliberately turned to the writing of fiction, chiefly short stories, which appeared in newspapers and literary magazines, because such wares had wide circulation and usually paid sooner and better than the process of turning copy into books tended to do. As scholars have discovered, some of Poe’s works were copied from their original sources by newspapers in distant locales, or were pirated by British periodicals. Poe’s fiction and some of his poems continue to be read, to be sure, as his most appealing imaginative writings. Because his critical ideas appeared mainly in reviews instead of in a single, extended book, they have, with few exceptions, not attracted a readership so large as that for the poems and tales. Great controversies enliven biographical and critical approaches to Poe and his writings, as will be apparent in the following pages. Chapter 2 treats “Contexts.” Chapter 4 focuses on “Critical reception,” followed by a “Guide to further reading.”

Abbreviations

- E&R* *Edgar Allan Poe: Essays and Reviews*, ed. G. R. Thompson. New York: Library of America, 1984.
- H* *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. James A. Harrison. 17 vols. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1902; reprinted New York: AMS Press, 1965; reprinted (with “Introduction” by Floyd Stovall) New York: AMS Press, 1979.
- M* *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott, with the assistance of Eleanor D. Kewer and Maureen Cobb Mabbott. 3 vols. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968–78.
- O* *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. John Ward Ostrom. rev. edn. New York: Gordian Press, 1966.
- P* *Collected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Burton R. Pollin. 5 vols. Vol. 1 Boston: Twayne, 1981; vols. 2–5 New York: Gordian Press, 1985–97.
- P&T* *Edgar Allan Poe: Poetry and Tales*, ed. Patrick F. Quinn. New York: Library of America, 1984.