

ENGLISH TEXT SUMMARY NOTES  
**“Great Short Works”**

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Note: All page numbers provided throughout this piece are taken from *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, (2006) ed. Gerald J. Kennedy, Penguin Classics, Penguin Books: Camberwell.

# AREA 1: READING & RESPONDING

## *Chapter 1* **AUTHOR NOTES**

Edgar Allan Poe was an American writer born January 19, 1809 in Boston. Known for his macabre and suspense-filled poems and stories, Poe was born the middle child of itinerant actors and was orphaned in 1811. His father was an alcoholic and abandoned the family and is believed to have died in 1811 around the same time that tuberculosis, or 'consumption' as it was called, took his English-born mother's life. Edgar Poe became the ward of John and Frances Allan of Richmond and travelled with them to England in 1815 and returned to Richmond in 1820. His younger sister was given to the care of another family, the Mackenzie's, and his older brother was sent to live with their grandparents in Baltimore. Despite their care and attention, his guardians did not adopt Poe.

An avid reader from a young age, Poe was said to have been reading newspapers at age five. He was sent to boarding school in Chelsea and then Stoke Newington and his experiences at this latter school provided the foundation for some of the events detailed in 'William Wilson'. He was educated at the University of Virginia however he fell into gambling and drinking with other rough, hot-headed young fellows at the university. His studies were promptly ended however when he was asked to explain his involvement in prohibited gambling acts and his guardian was called to cover his gambling debts. He was sent home to Richmond in disgrace.

Suffering a chequered career beset by lapses into alcoholism and an expulsion from the U.S. Military Academy, he married his cousin Virginia Clemm in 1836 and moved around America often during the 1840s until his wife's death in 1847. His alcoholism troubled him throughout his life, as did financial frugality.

Poe received critical acclaim for his poem 'The Raven' which still enjoys much success as one of his best known works, even being employed as a plotline in the satirical cartoon 'The Simpsons'. 'The Tell-Tale Heart' is also widely recognised as one of his greatest short stories.

A highly politically minded, intelligent and often contradictory man Poe showed a remarkable capacity for diversity in his writing, which can seem to be masked on superficial reading. His poetry also shows a satirical quality, which he developed even at school.

Poe's tumultuous and often turbulent life ended as it was lived. After an election day spent drinking himself to ruin, Poe died in Baltimore on October 7, 1849, aged forty.

## *Chapter 2*

# **HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

Poe was writing in nineteenth century America though his tales cover both the 'Old World' of England and also newer American works, which were principally written during the 1840s. He had much disdain for the growth of capitalism and also the culture of slavery that existed in Southern America during the early nineteenth century. The sinister and macabre quality of Poe's Gothic writing reflects much of the pain, despair and poverty he witnessed and experienced in his own stormy lifetime. His writing also shows a broader cultural concern with slavery during this time in America.

Poe has been credited with bringing Gothic fiction to America, as it was a style that developed with Romanticism in Britain during the latter part of the eighteenth century. Gothic fiction looks at the darker side of human nature such as fear, death, suffering and the supernatural world.

Poe's writing was often aimed against literary or cultural movements that existed in his time. He set himself in opposition to German romantics, Gothic Terror, contemporary religionists, Transcendentalism and liked to consider himself above mere categorisation despite the fact that he employed many of the techniques characteristic of some of these movements. Poe deliberately wrote of the baser aspects of life in order to offset the cruder sentimentalism of many of his forbears who spoke of death in vague or idealised terms. Poe's intense and vivid depictions of corporeality accentuate his fixation with the very physical nature of existence but this is also accompanied by an often tremulous, yet equally virulent, spiritual experience that is drawn out of and enhances the physical rather than dampening the effects of it.

Poe was writing in the context of an America influenced by the nation-building spirit and the rise of the capitalist free market economy, with a growing secularism that lessened the authority of the Church and brought on the rise of the scientific paradigm. 'As compellingly as any writer of his time, Poe intuited the spiritual void opening in an era dominated by a secular, scientific understanding of life and death... he staged the dilemma of the desolate self, confronting its own mortality and beset by uncertainties about a spiritual afterlife.'<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kennedy, J.G., (ed) Introduction to *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, p.xxix