



A Midnight Dreary

By Scott Dixon

Study Guide



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Directed by Hal Cropp

Stage Manager	Troy Iverson
Production Assistant	Andy Bakehouse
Set Designer	.....	Kit Mayer
Lighting Designer	.....	Jason Underferth
Costume Designer	.....	Janis Martin
Sound Designer	.....	Stan Peal
ASL Interpreter	.....	Gail Deveraux

(Nov 8 Performance)

Cast (in order of appearance)

Poe	.....	Jerome Yorke
Elizabeth; Frances; Nurse	.....	Stef Dickens
Griswold	.....	Stan Peal
Allan	.....	David Hennessey
Graham; Dr Moran; Longfellow	.....	Sheldon Rogers
Virginia	.....	Stela Burdt

Setting

A hospital room on the campus of Washington Medical College in Baltimore, October 1849. Then, various times & places from the memory and imagination of E.A. Poe.

This play will be performed with one intermission

THE STORY

Act One

As the lights rise, we see Edgar Allan Poe – delirious with fever and lying in a hospital bed. His mind, however, begins to experience a series of visions and memories. He sees old friends and family, including his mother Elizabeth, his late wife Virginia, and his foster parents John and Frances Allan. The memories lead to a particularly eventful party hosted by one of his publishers, George Graham, where Poe meets a rival critic and editor, Rufus Griswold. Griswold is compiling an anthology designed to be the definitive collection of American poetry. Poe recognizes an opportunity to advance his own standing by submitting his greatest piece of writing for inclusion in Griswold's anthology. Trouble is, the poem Poe has in mind is one he hasn't written yet. The stress to produce is heightened further by reliving tumultuous scenes with his foster father John Allan – all of which feeds his thirst for drink. When Virginia attempts to intervene, the couple argue and the confrontation ends with Virginia succumbing to an attack of tuberculosis, the symptoms of which she's been hiding from her husband for some time.

Act Two

Poe continues to struggle to work under the shadow of Virginia's growing illness. He is beset by memories of death and loss and his relationship with Griswold takes a major downturn when Poe writes a review of Griswold's anthology that is not wholly positive. Under pressure from both Griswold and Graham, Poe quits his editor's position with Graham and attempts to go into publishing himself. His magnum opus, "The Raven", is now finished and while it brings him great fame, there is no fortune to go along with it. As illness claims Virginia and Poe can feel his own clock winding down, he returns to Griswold to ask for help preserving his writing legacy. Griswold, however, greets him with scorn and derision. Poe fights back and soon finds the figure of Griswold replaced by that of John Allan. Poe and Allan have the final confrontation they never had while Allan was alive, which gives Poe the closure that finally allows him to let go of this world.

ABOUT EDGAR ALLAN POE

Edgar Allan Poe (January 19, 1809 – October 7, 1849) is a celebrated author and critic, perhaps most famous for his poems and stories of the macabre. The son of actors, Poe's father abandoned his family when Edgar was very young and his mother died of consumption soon after. Young Edgar was then taken into the household of a Richmond, Virginia trader and merchant, John Allan.

As a young man, Edgar tried and failed at several endeavors. He attended the University of Virginia for a year, joined the Army, and was even appointed to West Point as a cadet. However, Edgar found neither happiness nor success in any of these places and found his relationship with his foster father growing increasingly tense – especially after the 1829 death of Allan's wife, Frances, to whom Edgar was particularly attached as a mother-figure.

Through all his attempts to identify a career path, one thing which sustained him throughout was his writing. Even as a teenager, several of his poems had attracted popular and critical attention. After leaving the Allan household, Edgar went to live with his father's sister, Maria Clemm and Maria's

daughter Virginia. Edgar provided primary financial support to the household working as an editor and literary critic for several magazines and journals, all the while continuing to publish his own work. In 1835, Edgar married his cousin, Virginia. Although such a marriage within the family was relatively common at the time, Virginia's young age (she was 13) was borderline scandalous, and the subject was considered fair game by those who felt wronged by Edgar's literary criticism.

About this same time, Edgar began shifting his focus away from poetry to the relatively recent genre of the short story. He advocated that the short story should be built around a single effect on the reader and that all the elements of the story (mood, setting, action, etc) should be devoted to achieving that single effect. Besides writing some of the great works of Gothic horror in American fiction, Edgar also laid the groundwork for what would become detective stories and science fiction, and is cited as a prime influence on such authors as Arthur Conan Doyle and Jules Verne.

Many of Edgar's poems and stories center around the untimely death of a beautiful young woman, doubtlessly a result of the tragedies in his personal life. Just as he had to endure the loss of his birth and foster mothers, Edgar lost his wife Virginia in 1847. She was only 25 years old. Her death set off a downward spiral for Edgar, professionally and personally. In October of 1849, after having disappeared for three days, Edgar Allan Poe was found in an alley in the streets of Baltimore. He was incoherent, showed signs of having been out in the elements for at least twenty-four hours, and was wearing clothes that were not his own. He died in the hospital a few days later – modern evaluation of his symptoms suggest meningitis, alcohol poisoning, or brain aneurysm as possible causes. His whereabouts and activities during the missing three days remains a mystery to this day.

Edgar Allan Poe was buried in the city of Baltimore. Every year on his birthday, a mysterious figure known as "The Poe Toaster" visits Poe's grave to leave three red roses and half a bottle of cognac on the grave.

Notes from the director

As we begin the pre-production planning process for our latest world premiere, *A Midnight Dreary*, I began thinking what it was that drew me to the play in particular. First off, it fits the basic rule for all Commonweal productions, it's a good story told in a very unusual style. Then too, it has some themes that are near and dear to me and to all artists, I believe, as well as to most people anywhere. This telling of the life of Edgar Allan Poe centers around the questions of an artist's worth in a free market society, the obligations a child owes to a parent and the role the parent plays in shaping the child's life, the ghosts that "haunt" us as we move through our daily lives, and ultimately what is it about our lives that may outlive us. And the questions are raised in a manner that infuses the story with the beauty of Poe's poetry and the titillation that accompanies his most famous stories. The manner in which the story is told also allows us to bring to bear another Commonweal hallmark, the versatility of the actor as the central theatrical convention. From seeing old favorites playing against type – whether its Stela Burdt as the child bride Virginia or Jerome Yorke as the tortured, egocentric Poe – to watching actors move seamlessly between characters – Stef Dickens from mother to stepmother to nurse, or apprentice Sheldon Rogers essaying publisher, dying relative, doctor, and more – the company's talent is once again front and center in our production.

~ Hal Cropp

Edgar Allan Poe – The Gothic Prince of Fiction

Think of Edgar Allan Poe, especially this time of year, and it's easy to conjure a host of spectral images – black cats, ghostly figures wandering through graveyards, things that go bump in the night. But as sensational as the content of Poe's fiction and poetry is, it has a tendency to overshadow the influence of this artist across all genres of literature.

In his own lifetime, Poe was as well-known as a critic as he was an author. In this dual capacity, he could expound on his theories in the various magazines he edited and then exemplify his own ideas in the works he wrote. Two of his most influential ideas were articulated in an article titled "The Philosophy of Composition". With that article, Poe countered the more romantic myth that art was the result of spontaneous creation and declared instead that the most artists work from careful process and technique. He also advocated an idea he called "the unity of effect", which states that all elements of a story or poem (theme, setting, atmosphere, et al) contribute to eliciting a single, intended effect on the reader.

But perhaps more tangible are Poe's contributions to the early development of several literary genres. Generally speaking, the roots of the detective story (at least in the Western world) trace back to Poe's 1841 story, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and its protagonist C. Auguste Dupin. Dupin, in this story as well as "The Purloined Letter" and "The Mystery of Marie Roget", solves mysteries using a combination of keen observation, forensic analysis, and deductive reasoning that would later inspire the creation of literature's most famous detective, Sherlock Holmes. Appropriately enough, the Mystery Writers of America have named their annual award for excellence "The Edgar".

Science fiction writers also owe a debt to Poe. Although his fantasy stories ("The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym", "A Descent Into a Maesstrom", e.g.) are not as widely known as his macabre ones, they did break new ground for exploring alternate realities in fiction. Jules Verne and H.P. Lovecraft specifically cited Poe as being an inspiration and both authors wrote stories directly inspired by "The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym".

Regardless of the genre or format, no other author before Poe delved as deeply into the psychology of their characters, or made the sensations of terror such a focal point of his storytelling. Even today, 200 years after his birth, his writings continue to set the standard for literature's capacity for emotional resonance. The opportunity for any writer to surpass Poe's accomplishments may very well come "nevermore".

References to the works of Poe in *A Midnight Dreary*

STORIES

“The Fall of the House of Usher”, 1839

This story of the doomed Usher family is considered the finest and perhaps most famous of Poe’s short stories. A masterpiece of Gothic horror, it employs many of Poe’s most familiar themes - including strange physical disease, madness, and resurrection from the grave.

“The Black Cat” & “The Tell-Tale Heart”, 1843

In each of these stories, a murderer believes he has committed the perfect crime only to be haunted by some reminder of his guilt which ultimately leads to his undoing.

“The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar”, 1845

One of Poe’s more gory tales, it was presented as an actual recounting of a man being hypnotized at the moment of death in order to hold his consciousness between the realms of the living and the dead.

“The Cask of Amontillado”, 1846

A tale of revenge, it includes a famous example of one of Poe’s favorite themes – a person being buried alive.

“The Pit and the Pendulum”, 1842

An unnamed narrator is imprisoned and tortured by the Spanish Inquisition for an unknown crime. It is notable in Poe’s body of work for the lack of any supernatural elements, but instead deriving its terror from its intense physical and sensory descriptions.

POEMS

“A Dream Within a Dream”, 1849

The poem questions the ability to distinguish reality and fantasy, particularly when faced by an overwhelming natural force (perhaps Death) and its ability to take away everything that one loves, no matter how hard one tries to hold on.

“Annabel Lee”, 1849

As with much of Poe’s works, this poem expresses the theme of the death of a young and much beloved woman – generally taken in this instance to be Poe’s wife, Virginia. It was first published after Poe’s death.

“The Raven”, 1845

One of Poe's signature works, beginning with the famous line "Once upon a midnight dreary...". Like "Annabel Lee", the woman of the poem is considered to be Poe's wife Virginia and the darkness of this work reflects Poe's dread anticipation of her death. The talking raven of the title is said to have been inspired by a pet bird of Charles Dickens.

"The Sleeper", 1831

A very early poem by Poe's, but one of his personal favorites. Again, it explores what it is like to mourn the death of a young woman and questions the nature of Life and Death.

"For Annie", 1849

One of the last poems Poe wrote, the line "and the fever called 'Living' is conquered at last" proved eerily prescient. It was written for a friend of Poe's who had helped nurse him through an illness the year before. Although there were rumors of a romantic attraction between Poe and "Annie", both parties insisted their relationship was entirely platonic.

Things to look for / Topics for discussion

1. This story takes place mostly in the mind of Edgar Allan Poe. Which scenes do you think are from his memory and which are fantasy? Are there clues in the use of lighting or costumes or sounds or the set that help make that distinction?
2. After seeing this play and learning more about Poe's life, do you think his life had a significant impact on his writings? Do you think that most artists (writers, painters, actors, musicians) use the events of their own life to create their work?
3. Throughout the play, people keep telling Poe that "A man is his work" and "Your pages are empty". What do each of these phrases mean?
4. Does this play have a moral lesson that is learned by the end? If so, what is it?
5. Poe aspired to make a living through his art, a decision that resulted in a hard life of working different jobs, in different places. Do you think his sacrifices and struggles were worthwhile? Do you have a passion or dream in your life that you'd be willing to give up everything else for?
6. Why do you think Poe turns to Griswold for help protecting his literary legacy? Do you agree with Griswold's assertion that stories of horror and suspense are somehow less worthy than other kinds of stories?
7. There is quite a bit of mystery surrounding his death. Do you think his unexpected, mysterious death adds to his reputation? Would he still be considered a brilliant literary mind if he had lived to be an old man?
8. Poe is considered the father of the modern detective story, credited with inventing a character who solves crimes through observation, research and logical reasoning. Can you name other literary detectives who work in the same way?

9. Poe's style of horror is from the Gothic tradition – relying heavily on mood and the decaying psychology of his characters to frighten his readers. Do you like this style of horror or not? How does it compare to other horror stories or movies that you know?