

# THE NIGHTMARES OF EDGAR ALLEN POE

Written by

Philip Levens WGA  
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*Based on the works of  
Edgar Allan Poe*

VENICE CALIFORNIA  
1998

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"On September 27, 1849, Poe set out from Richmond for Baltimore on the 4 am Steamer. No reliable evidence exists about what happened to Poe between that time and October 3, a week later, when a printer named Joseph Walker saw him at Gunner's Hall, a Baltimore Tavern, strangely dressed and semi-conscious."

Kenneth Silverman, Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-Ending Remembrance.

Three days later, Edgar Allen Poe was dead.

For a hundred and fifty years, Poe's final few days have been an enigma. Why had he disappeared? --Where did he go, and what happened?

Our story reveals the mystery of the last week of Poe's life, when, at forty years of age, the line between his fiction and reality irrevocably blurred, trapping Poe in the labyrinth of his own tales...

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We open with a vision that could have come straight out of a Poe story: a swift pursuit through a Gothic cemetery at night, a veritable city of the dead. A harried, feverish man chases a dark figure past ornate tombstones and rococo angels, their arms outstretched to heaven. He corners his prey inside a massive sepulcher, following him down a Escher-like staircase that seems to spiral into infinity ...but, at the bottom --nothing. How did his enemy escape? Then --ambush! It was a trap! In the ensuing struggle, he is hit on the head. Our view fades to black, but we hear the sound of someone being dragged across a stone floor. Then... a massive marble lid falling shut with a reverberating thud

--the sound of permanence.

The hallucinatory visions belong to a John Doe being carried into a hospital after being found, in near hysterics, in a local tavern. He's trembling and feverish, soaked in sweat. As he is rolled into a hospital bed, he hisses a single word, "Wilson..."

The hospital's attending physician, Dr. Moran, notices something familiar about the man. He locates a volume of his favorite stories. He turns to the title page engraving, holds out the image of the author and compares it with his new patient. There's no doubt, they are one and the same: Edgar Allen Poe.

Like a detective, Dr. Moran tries to piece together Poe's actions of the past week, to discover how he came to such a state...

...One week earlier. A coal black steam engine roars across the snow covered Maryland countryside. Aboard the train, Poe suffers a slight cough, but otherwise looks the part of the dashing Southern gentleman he is. He reads over a letter from Miss Mary Shelton, a wealthy Richmond devotee of the arts, who is sponsoring his visit (she's absolutely sure the poem, Anabel Lee, was written for her). She has arranged for him to do a reading of his masterwork, The Raven, but her interest in him is clearly more than literary. Poe folds the letter, noticing the lingering scent of perfume on the paper...

At the bustling train station in Richmond, Poe shows a porter Miss Shelton's address and asks for directions. When he turns to replace the letter in his valise, he finds that it and his winter overcoat are missing. In the distance, he spots a man scurrying off with them. He gives pursuit, but to no avail. The cowardly thief has disappeared.

The reading takes place in a grand ballroom. As he performs before the rapt audience, Poe becomes lost in his own words, and begins to see the Raven itself in his mind's eye...beckoning, full of portent, and dread! Miss Shelton, unaware of Poe's vision, is captivated by his performance.

After the reading, conversation turns to a journalistic expose on the rash of misdiagnosis' by physicians leading to premature burial.

Poe informs the others of his propensity toward narcolepsy, where he can suddenly succumb to a deep sleep resembling death. Because of this condition he has taken precautions to guard against premature internment – his family crypt is equipped with a lever allowing it to be opened from within. Noticing his developing cough, Miss Shelton evinces concern. Poe, too proud to admit what occurred at the train station, dismisses it as nothing. Miss Shelton, fascinated by Poe's clever conversation and gentlemanly manner, asks to meet him later, over dinner.

That evening, Poe has a cup of tea at a local cafe, as he writes out a copy of *Anabel Lee*, dedicating it to Miss Shelton. His cough is rapidly worsening. An early winter has sent severe winds and soaking rains to Richmond. His exposure to the oncoming winter, coupled with Poe's nervous disposition, combine to initiate a scenario of nightmare proportions...

As Poe awaits Miss Shelton, he spots an ominous face in the crowd -- the same man who stole his overcoat and bag at the train station. Poe, a fever causing sweat to bead on his brow; works up the courage to follow the thief out into the bleak and enveloping night. At that moment, Miss Shelton arrives at the cafe. Confused to see Poe hurrying out a side door, she calls after him. Heedlessly, Poe pursues the thief. A gust of wind carries the poem from the table Poe was sitting at, sending the piece of paper spiraling off into night...

Shivering, his breath fogging in the cold air, Poe follows his prey through the maze of narrow cobblestone streets, past the deserted wharves and stone warehouses along the docks of Richmond. But when Poe finally gets a close look at the man, he realizes this is no ordinary thief -- it's a face that has haunted him since childhood. It is William Wilson.

...Wilson, the spectral figure who for years has incessantly appeared to Poe in his nightmares, torturing him with his failures, provoking him, besting him at every turn, is finally within his grasp...

From this point on, Poe becomes an integral player in his most terrifying tales of terror, navigating a frightening landscape populated with characters from his most famous stories: The Tell-Tale Heart, The Black Cat, William Wilson, A Man in the Crowd and The Pit and the Pendulum. As Poe spirals deeper and deeper into mystery and intrigue, he crafts his final and most iniquitous revenge --upon himself!

All the imaginary demons Poe believed he had excised through writing return with terrifying results as *The Nightmares of Edgar Allen Poe* ends with a frightening variation on *The Premature Burial*, in which Poe arrives at the very fate he most fears...

...Poe regains consciousness in utter darkness. Frightened, confused, he strikes a match to see the cramped space he is confined to --he does a quick calculation and realizes they are the exact dimensions of a coffin. He has been buried alive! Only not in his modified family crypt, but one from which there is no escape. Only eternity. He beats on the tomb lid, shouting, "I'm alive! Alive!" His desperate shouts echo back in the claustrophobic confines. Despair crowds his face as the match burns out!

...And we come full circle, realizing how Poe came to be in such a condition. Dr. Moran, with Miss Shelton's help, has pieced together the facts of the mystery: a terrified grave digger found Poe, but upon freeing him, Poe ran off into the night, seeking refuge in the tavern, from where he was brought to the hospital.

While Miss Shelton and Dr. Moran discuss their plans for him, Poe deliriously rises from his bed and sets out into the gathering storm. They try to stop him, but lose sight of him in the swirling mist of snow. Poe ventures onward, disregarding their fervent pleas for him to remain, his gaze fixed on something in

the distance...someone he alone can see, his doppelganger --William Wilson --waiting for Poe, taunting him with a leering grin, daring him to continue his eternal struggle with the dark side of his nature...

Three days later, Edgar Allen Poe was found dead.

Months later... A lavish garden, blooming with spring flowers. Miss Shelton, sits by a grave stone, still grieving over Poe's death. A flapping sound announces a large raven, which alights on Poe's tombstone, carrying a tattered piece of parchment in it's beak. Miss Shelton takes it, to find, in Poe's own hand, the copy of the poem Anabel Lee, he had written at the café. It is signed by Edgar Allen Poe, with much affection and gratitude, to the beautiful Miss Shelton.

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**OPEN ON: A BLACK SCREEN. A VOICE SPEAKS...**

V.O. (EERIE VOICE)  
*Deep into that darkness peering, long I  
stood there wondering, fearing, doubting,  
dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to  
dream before...*

CUT TO:

**A STARK WHITE background, crowded with...**

...THREE, BLACK-HOODED JUDGES. Their thin lips are stern. They look down at the NARRATOR, (our view) with eyes full of contempt.

V.O.  
*I see them fashion the syllables of my  
name and I shudder, for no sound issues  
forth. Only the hideous pronouncement of  
my fate...*

JUDGES  
GUILTY. GUILTY. GUILTY...

The words seem to writhe as the SOUND of the inquisitorial VOICES merges into a dreamy, indeterminate HUM, as...

...the room begins spinning, blurring like a giant pin wheel, becoming...

SPIN MATCHES TO:

**INT. CIRCULAR PIT - ETERNAL NIGHT**

...a vast, circular, stone-walled pit, fifty feet deep...

Our view descends into the still spinning pit, coming to a COMPLETE STOP on...

EDGAR ALLEN POE

Silence. Then...the tumultuous BEATING OF A HEART.

POE  
*I open my eyes, sick unto death...*

Poe's face, his eyes that seem to tear with lost innocence & fear mashed together. He squints against the darkness to find he's...

...on his back, tied to a circular wooden frame by a long strap, wrapped around him from head to foot.

POE

...finally realizing the full resolve of  
my enemies' deadly intent.

He looks up. A STONE CEILING of the prison, dimly visible by  
the light from the wall torches, fifty feet overhead.

On the wall directly in front of him is a mural of A FIGURE  
HOLDING A GIANT PENDULUM, the edge of which is a glittering  
crescent several feet in length.

He HEARS A NOISE, turns to see A DOZEN LARGE RATS approaching  
with ravenous, red eyes filled with blood.

He hears a HISSING SOUND, looks up to see...

POE

*It cannot be! My senses are leaving  
me...*

But it's true -- the giant pendulum is in motion! It is  
moving in a slow sweep; the razor sharp edge of the crescent  
is revealed to be made of glittering steel and is attached to  
a thick brass rod, swinging through the air.

POE

*Their memory of my past crimes was total.  
Their desire for revenge knew no bounds.*

The razor sharp edge HISSES as it moves through the air.

Poe thrashes back & forth, unable to free himself.

His eyes dart up at the monstrous pendulum as terrified lines  
form across his face as he watches the crescent slowly sweep  
back & forth, steadily descending...

DISSOLVE TO:

**MONTAGE OF TIME LAPSE:**

The pendulum is moving in a wide sweep, thirty feet across...  
Inch by inch, down and still down it comes.

POE

*For long hours of horror, I have counted  
the rushing vibrations of the steel.*

The crescent is at a right angle to his length and is coming  
closer and closer to his chest.

Poe struggles violently to free himself, then falls back  
exhausted...

POE

*It sweeps so closely over me as to fan me  
with it's acrid breath.*

He strains against the strap wound around him, to no avail.

POE

*WHAT DO YOU WANT!?*

He query ECHOES through the pit but the only answer he receives is silence.

POE

*Send it down then! Send it down on a  
speedy descent!!*

He frantically struggles, insanely trying to force himself upward again the sweep of the blade.

POE

*Have it done with!!*

But it's inexorable glide isn't slowed or sped by his pleas. It proceeds with a deadly logic all it's own, steadily creeping downward. RIGHT, LEFT, RIGHT...

Then, suddenly calm, Poe relaxes and lays smiling at the glittering blade as a child would a some shiny bauble and...

...he begins LAUGHING and HOWLING, as if he's lost his mind.

POE

*Death will be a relief from this torment.  
I quiver in every nerve to think morbidly  
how that glistening blade will begin  
sinking into my chest.*

Poe watches the blade come within inches of his chest...

He gasps & struggles at each vibration as the blade whizzes close, slicing the fabric on his suit.

Poe's eyes follow the blade's outward and upward swoop with despair. They close tightly he shrinks convulsively as it passes over him, as if hoping to sink into the stone floor.

POE

*It is hope that prompts the nerve to  
quiver. Hope I no longer possess. Some  
ten or twelve vibrations will bring the  
steel in contact. With this observation  
there comes over my spirit all the keen,  
collected calmness of...despair...*

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The wild, ravenous rats, glare at Poe with their red eyes, boldly moving toward him, waiting for him to become their next meal.

The swinging of the pendulum becomes as LOUD as RUSHING WIND as we...

CUT TO BLACK:

V.O. (EERIE VOICE)

*But the silence was unbroken, and the stillness gave no token, And the only word there spoken was the whispered word, "Nevermore!" Merely this and nothing more.*

**END SAMPLE**