

The poet and the sick mind: the neurosis behind Edgar Allan Poe's genius

E. D. Guzmán-Ríos

Autonomous University of Nayarit, Tepic, Nayarit, Mexico.

ABSTRACT

Introduction. During his last years, Edgar Allan Poe, the master, and an emblematic figure of Gothic literature, remained confined between the shadows of his mind and his human body. His existence, marked by anguish and internal conflict, was the landscape from which his stories sprang. This analysis explores how his illnesses—epilepsy, mental disorders, and delirium tremens—influenced the creation of his tormented characters and narratives, embodying the darkest extremes of the human condition.

Development. Clinical evidence and contemporary theories suggest that Poe experienced epilepsy, distorting his perception and enabling explorations of surreal and phantasmagorical boundaries in his work. Psychiatric illnesses, such as depression and possibly bipolar disorder, echo through his melancholic and emotionally charged poems like *The raven* and *Annabel Lee*. Alcohol dragged him into delirium, transforming his reality into a confused chaos and leaving its mark in his final years. Due to possible poisoning or infection of the nervous system, Poe's mind collapsed to the rhythm of his body, which led him to explore, through his work, the borders between lucidity and madness.

Conclusions. Edgar Allan Poe's legacy transcends his literary creation and interacts with science and the human soul. His genius, forged in agony, illuminated the fragility and depth of the human heart. His poetry and stories resonate with the broken but intensely lucid dictation of a spirit linking creativity and psychological agony. His face remains a reminder that art, in its purest form, often emerges from the collision of light and darkness.

KEYWORDS

Edgar Allan Poe, Neurological diseases, Psychiatric disorders, Epilepsy, Depression, Gothic literature.

Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe (Figure 1), one of the most influential writers of the 19th century, left an unparalleled legacy in Gothic literature and the psychological horror genre. His work, characterized by its deep understanding of the human mind and its darkest aspects, has fascinated literary critics and scientists alike. However, beyond fiction, Poe's personal life was marked by episodes of mental illness and possible neurological deterioration, which have led to speculation about how his ailments may have

influenced his literary creation. Some studies have explored this connection, suggesting that his experience with neurological disorders may have informed his narratives of madness and suffering.^{1,2}

Throughout his life, Poe experienced emotional crises, episodes of disorientation, and erratic behavior that have been interpreted as signs of epilepsy, bipolar disorder, chronic alcoholism, and other possible neurological diseases. These disorders not only affected his physical and mental well-being, but also seem to have permeated his

work, especially in his vivid depictions of anguish, madness and death. Works such as *The raven*, *The fall of the House of Usher* and *The tell-tale heart* suggest a profound knowledge of the altered mind, which some academics have interpreted as a form of externalization of his own sufferings.^{2,3}

The medical context of the 19th century, a period in which neurology and psychiatry were beginning to develop as scientific fields, also had an influence on the public perception of neurological diseases. Poe's narratives contributed to this environment by offering a detailed view of characters tortured by mental and physical afflictions. This bidirectional influence between his work and the growing medical interest in neurological disorders opens a window to examine how Poe's life and ailments not only shaped his work, but also how the society of his time understood mental illness^{4,5}.

This article seeks to explore how the neurological diseases that Edgar Allan Poe may have suffered influenced both his literary production and the social perception of neurological suffering in the 19th century. Through the analysis of his biography, his literary works, and the medical context of the time, it intends to trace the connections between the deterioration of his mental and physical health and the creation of some of the most important works of world literature.

Development

Biographical context

Edgar Allan Poe was born on January 19, 1809 in Boston, Massachusetts, into a family dedicated to the theater. His childhood was marked by tragedy from an early age, as he lost both parents before he was even three years old. Poe was taken in by the Allan family in Richmond, Virginia, but was never formally adopted. His relationship with his adoptive father, John Allan, was strained, due to conflicts over financial management and lack of support for Poe's literary interests. This family and emotional instability were a persistent feature throughout his life.³

During his youth, Poe attended the University of Virginia, but had to drop out due to financial problems, stemming in part from his own gambling debts. This experience echoes themes explored in his short story *William Wilson*, where the protagonist grapples with issues of identity and self-awareness while being pursued



Figure 1. Graphic representation of Edgar Allan Poe. Original image by the author.

by his enigmatic double. Gambling addiction and the tragic consequences of debt are central to the narrative, suggesting a possible autobiographical reflection. The story not only delves into the moral and psychological conflicts of its main character but also draws parallels to Poe's personal struggles, including the losses and instability caused by his gambling habits.⁶ Subsequently, he attempted to establish a career in writing, constantly facing poverty. He briefly enlisted in the army and later entered the West Point Military Academy, from which he was expelled for insubordination. His financial situation never improved, which aggravated his already fragile emotional state.^{3,4}

One of the most devastating moments in Poe's life was the death of his wife, Virginia Clemm, in 1847, due to tuberculosis. Virginia, who was Poe's cousin and whom he married when she was only 13 years old, was a central figure in his emotional life. Her illness and eventual death marked the climax of a series of personal losses, which exacerbated Poe's depressed state. From this event onward, the writer fell into a deep melancholy and indulged more frequently in alcohol consumption, a problem that had been recurrent throughout his adult life.³

Biographers have debated the extent to which Poe's alcoholism was a symptom or a cause of his mental instability, but it is clear that it contributed to the deterioration of his physical and emotional health.⁴

Notably, Poe was highly sensitive to small doses of alcohol, a detail documented by contemporary accounts.⁷ This heightened sensitivity probably amplified the detrimental effects of his drinking. Additionally, during the hospitalization that preceded his death, alcohol was reportedly offered as a treatment for the delirium he experienced, a practice aligned with 19th-century medical norms, but Poe rejected it—an incident that adds a layer of complexity to his final days.⁷

Besides alcohol, there is evidence suggesting that Poe may have had contact with opium, a substance frequently associated with Romantic writers of his era. This, together with his alcoholism and gambling addiction, suggests a pattern of “multidependence,” which could be considered part of a broader clinical picture of his mental health struggles.⁸ These dependencies not only exacerbated his personal and financial difficulties but also reflect a self-destructive tendency that permeated both his life and his work.

In addition to his struggles with substance use, Poe had a complex relationship with the physicians of his time. Doctors treated him on several occasions for problems related to his alcohol abuse and possible neurological diseases.⁶ In the 19th century, knowledge about neurological and psychiatric disorders was at an early stage of development, which may have influenced the lack of a clear diagnosis for Poe's health problems.^{9,10} His interest in the morbid and in the human mind, recurring themes in his work, could also have been a way of processing his own mental and physical distress.⁵ This is reflected in characters tormented by madness, illness and death in his stories, as in *The tell-tale heart* and *The fall of the House of Usher*.^{11,12}

Poe died tragically on 7 October, 1849 at the age of 40, under mysterious circumstances. He was found on the streets of Baltimore in a state of delirium, with no clear explanation as to how he came to that condition.⁸ Theories about his death vary, ranging from poisoning to undiagnosed neurological problems, which has kept his final days a mystery.⁷ His untimely death sealed his image as the “tortured genius,” a romantic figure whose life and work have fascinated readers and critics for more than a century.^{4,11}

Clinical analysis of the neurological diseases

— Epilepsy

One of the most discussed theories surrounding Edgar Allan Poe's neurological illnesses is the possibility that he suffered from epilepsy. Scholars have speculated that several episodes of disorientation and loss of consciousness that he experienced throughout his life may have been manifestations of complex partial epileptic seizures or generalized tonic-clonic seizures. These episodes, described by friends and acquaintances, often included periods of confusion and erratic behavior, followed by slow recovery, which is characteristic of epileptic seizures of the temporal lobe type.¹

In literary terms, the experience of epilepsy may have influenced the creation of characters with a distorted perception of reality.⁵ In works such as *The tell-tale heart*, where the narrator hears a heartbeat that seems real but is actually a product of his own mind, one can see a possible representation of auditory hallucinations, which are common symptoms in temporal lobe epileptic seizures¹¹: “It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but once conceived, it haunted me day and night.”¹² In addition, the sense of fatalism and recurrent visions of death in Poe's work may reflect postictal experiences of bewilderment and anxiety, which often accompany epileptic episodes.⁵

— Psychiatric disorders (depression, bipolar disorder)

Poe also showed signs of psychiatric disorders, particularly severe depression and possible bipolar disorder. The deep melancholy that marked his life, especially after the death of his wife Virginia, can be understood as a manifestation of major depressive episodes. In personal letters and descriptions of acquaintances, Poe mentions feelings of hopelessness, isolation, and loss of interest in life, all typical symptoms of clinical depression.³

On the other hand, the possibility that Poe suffered from bipolar disorder has been proposed by several biographers because of his extreme mood fluctuations¹³: “I became insane, with long intervals of horrible sanity.”¹² He would go from periods of intense creativity and productivity to episodes of inactivity and withdrawal. These fluctuations are evident in his poetry, as in *The raven* and *Annabel Lee*, where themes of grief and loss are explored, but with a tone that varies between melancholic introspection and acute grief. In particular, the somber mood

of *The raven*, with its obsession with death and the afterlife, reflects the depths of despair, while the idealized love in *Annabel Lee* resonates with the cycles of exaltation seen in bipolar disorder¹¹:

But our love it was stronger by far than the love
Of those who were older than we—
Of many far wiser than we—
And neither the angels in Heaven above
Nor the demons down under the sea
Can ever dissever my soul from the soul
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee.¹²

— Delirium tremens and alcoholism

Alcoholism was one of the most notorious problems in Poe's life, and its effects on his mental and physical health were devastating. At various points in his life, Poe attempted to give up alcohol, but relapsed frequently.⁸ Chronic alcohol abuse may have precipitated episodes of delirium tremens, a state of severe mental agitation, hallucinations, and confusion that occurs during alcohol withdrawal in dependent persons.⁷ "I have, indeed, no abhorrence of danger, except in its absolute effect – in terror."¹² Cases were documented of crises in which Poe was found in states of profound disorientation, with incoherent and delusional behaviors, which could be indicative of this condition.

Delirium tremens not only affected his behavior, but may also have aggravated his physical condition. During his later years, Poe is known to have experienced episodes of delirium and paranoia, possibly exacerbated by chronic alcohol abuse. These crises not only affected his ability to maintain stable personal relationships, but also contributed to his public image as a mentally unstable figure, a perception that influenced how the society of the time interpreted his literary work.⁴

— Neuroinfections or poisoning

In recent years, it has been hypothesized that Poe may have suffered some form of neuroinfection or poisoning that caused his final episodes of mental confusion and delusions. One recent theory suggests that Poe may have been exposed to rabies, which in its final stages can cause hallucinations, agitation, and erratic behavior⁷: "I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him."¹² This hypothesis is based on the rapid deterioration of his mental and physical state in his final days, although there is no conclusive evidence to confirm this.

Another possibility is that Poe may have been the victim of poisoning, accidental or intentional, which would explain his delirious state at the time he was found on the streets of Baltimore. At that time, poisoning by heavy metals such as lead was not uncommon, and could have caused severe neurological symptoms.⁷ This type of poisoning could have generated the cognitive impairment and hallucinations that characterized his final days, adding to the mystery of his premature death.¹¹

Influence of diseases on Poe's work

— Tortured creatures and distorted realities

One of the most outstanding characteristics in Edgar Allan Poe's work is his ability to depict tormented minds and distorted states of perception, which indirectly reflects the episodes of confusion and hallucinations he may have experienced. In stories such as *The tell-tale heart*, the protagonist suffers from extreme paranoia and auditory hallucinations, believing he hears the heartbeat of his victim buried under the ground.¹¹ This type of episode has been compared to the auditory hallucinations that sometimes accompany or rather precede complex partial seizures, a condition that some researchers have suggested Poe may have suffered from.¹ The way in which the narrator in this story loses touch with reality also reflects the experience of epileptic seizures, which can cause episodes of profound disorientation and depersonalization.⁵

In *The fall of the House of Usher*, the protagonist, Roderick Usher, suffers from extreme hypersensitivity and a progressive mental deterioration that culminates in a kind of psychological breakdown³. "During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country."¹² This story has been interpreted as a representation of Poe's own experience with the fear of madness and illness. Roderick Usher could be seen as a reflection of the author himself, a man who lived in constant fear of losing his mind, exacerbated by the death of his wife, Virginia Clemm, and the recurring illnesses in his life.¹³ Usher's physical and psychological decline may symbolize the impact of alcohol abuse on Poe's health, which ultimately led to his premature death under mysterious circumstances.⁷

Furthermore, *The fall of the House of Usher* can be seen as a precursor to the degeneration theories that emerged



Figure 2. Graphic representation of *The Raven*. Original image by the author.

in the mid-19th century, such as Bénédict Morel's *Théorie de la dégénérescence* (1857). These theories, which influenced fields like literature (eg, Émile Zola), criminology (eg, Cesare Lombroso), sociology (eg, Maurice Barrès), and medicine, described the progressive decline of individuals and families due to hereditary and environmental factors.¹⁴ Poe's narrative, published in 1839, masterfully anticipates these ideas by portraying the physical and mental degeneration of a once-noble family, highlighting the interplay of genetic decline and psychological fragility.¹⁵ The links between degeneration theory and phrenology further reinforce the relevance of Poe's work in the context of 19th-century European intellectual discourse.

In literary terms, the theme of degeneracy among the nobility and well-off families, as portrayed in *The fall of the House of Usher*, was later expanded upon by the French decadent writer Joris-Karl Huysmans in his novel *À rebours* (*Against the Grain*, 1884). This work, replete with neurological descriptions, further illuminates the clinical aspects of degeneracy and its influence on narrative structure.¹⁶ Therefore, Poe's portrayal of Roderick

Usher not only foreshadows these developments but also establishes him as a forerunner of degeneracy theory, blending psychological insight with literary innovation in ways that profoundly influenced both clinical and literary traditions.

— Depression and bipolar disorder in Poe's poetry

Poe's poetry is fertile ground for analyzing the influence of the affective disorders he probably suffered from. *The raven* (Figure 2) is perhaps his most emblematic work in this regard, where the narrator's deep sadness over the death of his beloved Lenore reflects the intense despair and grief that Poe experienced after the loss of Virginia.³ The melancholy tone and obsession with death in this poem have been interpreted as a manifestation of the major depressive episodes that affected the author. "Quoth the Raven, 'Nevermore.'"¹² Notably, the raven's repetitive utterance "Nevermore," which appears precisely 11 times, adds a symbolic and esoteric dimension to the poem.¹³

In various cultural and spiritual traditions, the number 11 is associated with transition, incompleteness, and duality. It is often considered a "number of crisis," standing at the threshold of completion (12) but never reaching it. This could reflect the narrator's perpetual mourning, as he remains trapped in a cycle of despair with no resolution. Additionally, in numerology, 11 is viewed as a master number symbolizing heightened intuition and a bridge between the material and spiritual worlds; this aligns with the poem's themes of existential questioning and communication with the supernatural. Furthermore, in religious and mythological contexts, 11 is linked to trials and transformation—similar to the unresolved grief and psychological torment that define *The raven*.^{17,18} Thus, the recurring "Nevermore" may not only reinforce a sense of hopelessness but also imply an ongoing struggle between despair and the possibility of transcendence.

On the other hand, in *Annabel Lee*, although the theme of death is also explored, there is a more exalted tone that suggests an emotional alternation that could be related to manic or hypomanic episodes of bipolar disorder.¹ Poe describes a love so strong that not even death can destroy it, an almost idealistic and exalted approach that contrasts sharply with the more somber tone of *The raven*. This shift in tone may reflect the mood cycles that are characteristic of bipolar disorder, where episodes of

euphoria and grandiosity may alternate with periods of despair and depression.¹³

Ultimately, Poe's poetic works not only reflect his personal struggles with mental illness but also incorporate layers of symbolic meaning that align with mystical and esoteric traditions. The recurrence of "Nevermore" 11 times reinforces both the weight of the narrator's despair and the liminality of his existence, caught between memory and oblivion, grief and redemption.

— Alcoholism and delirium tremens in Poe's behavior and writing

Poe's chronic alcoholism not only affected his physical and mental health but also influenced his ability to write and relate to others. Episodes of delirium tremens, which often accompany alcohol withdrawal in people with dependence, may have exacerbated his existing psychiatric and neurological problems.⁶ This state of mental confusion and visual or auditory hallucinations is depicted in several of his works, particularly in the altered mental states of characters such as the protagonist of *The cask of amontillado*, who carries out an act of revenge while under the influence of alcohol.³

Alcohol abuse may also have influenced Poe's ability to manage his personal and financial life, increasing his social isolation. Biographical studies have documented how Poe's relapses into alcoholism cost him important literary opportunities and key friendships, plunging him into a spiral of self-destruction.⁸ These emotional and social difficulties not only affected his behavior but also influenced his literary work, where the themes of personal decline and self-sabotage are recurrent.⁴

— Neuroinfections or intoxications in his final days

As for Poe's mysterious death, some recent theories suggest that he may have been the victim of some form of neuroinfection or intoxication that triggered his final episodes of delusions and mental confusion. The hypothesis that Poe suffered from rabies has gained some traction in the medical community, given that in his last days he presented symptoms compatible with this disease, such as extreme agitation and erratic behavior.⁶ However, no conclusive evidence has been found to support this theory.

Another hypothesis suggests that Poe may have suffered from heavy metal poisoning due to substances such as lead, which at the time was present in many products,

including printing materials. Lead poisoning can cause hallucinations, memory loss, and cognitive impairment, symptoms that Poe exhibited in his later years.⁷ While this theory has not been widely accepted, it offers a plausible explanation for the extreme changes in his behavior and mental state in the months prior to his death.³

Nineteenth-century society's perception of neurological illnesses

— Historical context of mental and neurological diseases in the 19th century

The 19th century was a period of significant advances in the study of mental and neurological diseases. The society of the time had an ambiguous and, in many cases, negative view of mental illnesses, considering them a sign of moral degeneration or a curse, rather than understanding them as medical disorders.¹⁰ Psychiatric and neurological conditions were commonly treated with rudimentary measures, such as confinement in asylums, and the treatment of mental illness was often based more on repression and isolation than on an adequate therapeutic approach.¹⁹

This context of misunderstanding of mental illness greatly influenced how nineteenth-century society perceived individuals with mental illness. Epilepsy, for example, was seen as a sign of demonic possession or divine punishment, and individuals with severe psychiatric disorders, such as depression or bipolar disorder, were frequently stigmatized and marginalized.²⁰ In this social context, Edgar Allan Poe's works may have contributed to challenging certain conceptions, exploring the nature of the human mind and its limitations while echoing some of the emerging ideas in neurology and psychiatry.⁷

— Reflection of public perception in Poe's works

Poe's stories, in particular, capture the fear and fascination that nineteenth-century society had towards mental and neurological illness. Stories such as "The tell-tale heart" and "The black cat" feature characters who, on the surface, appear rational but are quickly consumed by irrational impulses, paranoia, and delusions^{11,21}: "No sooner had the reverberation of my blows sunk into silence, than I was answered by a voice from within the tomb!"¹² This type of depiction of characters on the brink of madness reflected both social fears and pseudoscientific conceptions of mental deterioration and criminality, themes

that were beginning to be explored in more detail by researchers such as Cesare Lombroso and later Sigmund Freud.^{20,22}

Furthermore, Poe's characters not only act as a reflection of the social stigma towards mental illness, but may also have influenced the public perception of these disorders. By dramatizing the subjective experience of madness, Poe succeeded in humanizing individuals suffering from neurological diseases, while portraying their inner lives in a style that, at the time, challenged literary norms and social conventions.³ In doing so, he helped shape a public narrative that was beginning to recognize the complexity of the human mind.¹⁹

One of the most significant pseudoscientific influences on Poe's work was mesmerism, or animal magnetism, a practice that permeated 19th-century society, including the one in which Poe lived. Introduced by Franz Anton Mesmer and later investigated by the Royal Commission on Animal Magnetism in 1784 (under the auspices of Louis XVI and led by Benjamin Franklin), mesmerism was later dismissed as suggestion-based. However, it remained highly influential in literature and philosophy well into Poe's time.²³ This is evident in *The facts in the case of M. Valdemar*, a short story bearing a greater resemblance to a clinical case study than to a work of fiction in its depiction of mesmerization in a patient dying of tuberculosis, and *Mesmeric revelation*, which explores the theoretical implications of mesmerism and its links to mysticism and spiritism.²⁴ Poe's fascination with these concepts points towards a belief in the transformative and revelatory powers of the unconscious mind, anticipating later developments in psychology and literature.

Another significant pseudoscientific field closely linked to Poe's works was phrenology, a discipline that sought to map mental faculties onto specific brain regions. Perhaps the most direct phrenological reference in his work appears in *The imp of the perverse*, where Poe describes an uncontrollable drive to engage in forbidden or self-destructive actions due to the simple fact that they should not be done. This impulse, which Poe suggests is intrinsic to human nature, mirrors phrenological theories of the time, which postulated the existence of a specific brain organ responsible for perversity.^{25,26} His exploration of this theme preceded Robert Louis Stevenson's *The strange case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) by over

four decades.²⁷ Poe revisited the concept of perversity in other works, such as *The black cat* and his poem *Elizabeth*, reinforcing his preoccupation with the darker, uncontrollable forces of the human mind.

Through his engagement with mesmerism, phrenology, and emerging theories of mental illness, Poe not only reflected but also shaped the cultural and scientific discourses of his time. His works bridged literature, psychology, and pseudoscience, foreshadowing modern understandings of subconscious impulses, personality disorders, and the complexities of human behavior.

— Relationship to the rise of the study of neurology and psychiatry

During the 19th century, the study of neurology and psychiatry began to take shape as independent scientific fields. Physicians such as Jean-Martin Charcot in France and John Hughlings Jackson in England were beginning to explore the biological basis of neurological and mental illnesses, challenging the belief that these disorders were of purely moral or spiritual origin.^{7,28} In this context, Poe's works, which explored psychological terror and the fragility of the human mind, resonated with scientific developments of the time.³

For example, the fear of mental loss of control and the obsession with death in Poe's work can be seen as a reflection of the new theories of brain function that were emerging at the time, as well as the growing interest in the human psyche. Stories such as *The pit and the pendulum* and *The oval portrait* explore the interaction between body and mind in a way that anticipates emerging theories on neuropsychology and the somatization of mental disorders.⁹ Moreover, Poe's interest in the morbid aspects of the human mind and body aligned with the growing scientific interest in understanding mental illness from a clinical approach.¹⁹

Some critics argue that the depiction of madness and torment in Poe's work also inspired certain physicians and scientists to do more research on borderline states of consciousness and perception. Poe's work showed how mental disturbances could be connected to profoundly human experiences, helping to destigmatize, to some extent, some of these conditions and promoting a more empathetic approach to those who suffered from them.¹³

Cultural Impact

— The influence of Poe's work on modern popular culture and Gothic literature

Edgar Allan Poe's work has had an enduring impact on modern popular culture, surrealist art, and Gothic literature, becoming a fundamental benchmark for the genre. From his short stories of psychological horror to his dark and brooding poems, Poe laid the foundation for many of the conventions found in modern Gothic horror.² Recurring elements in his work, such as psychological terror, isolation, obsession with death, and the presence of the macabre, have been referenced and imitated by generations of writers, filmmakers, and artists. Directors such as Alfred Hitchcock have cited his influence, using psychological tension and fear of the unknown as key devices in their films.³

Poe was not only a pioneer in Gothic literature, but also laid the foundations for the detective story and mystery genres, influencing authors such as Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes.²⁹ His impact has been so profound that terms such as "Poesque" are used today to describe works that capture his particular style of horror. In popular culture, his influence is seen in representations ranging from film and theatrical adaptations to music, video games, and comic books.⁴

— The image of the "tortured genius"

Poe's life, marked by personal hardship, neurological diseases, and a constant struggle with alcoholism and poverty, helped cement the figure of the "tortured genius" in literary culture. The combination of his extreme creativity and his mental and physical ailments has made him an emblematic example of the artist whose suffering is inseparable from his genius, a recurring theme in Romantic art and literature.³ This image has been studied in the context of the relationship between mental illness and creativity, where suffering has been linked to intense artistic production and deep introspection.¹³

Indeed, Poe has been identified as one of the first writers in whom mental illness and creative genius were intertwined in public perception, setting a model for future artists and writers who would suffer similar conditions.⁵ This concept of the tortured genius has had a lasting cultural impact, influencing modern figures who share similar stories of internal struggle and artistic creation, such as Sylvia Plath and Vincent van Gogh.¹

— Modern studies on the relationship between creativity and mental illness

Today, Poe's life and work continue to be a field of study in research on the relationship between creativity and mental illness. Researchers such as Kay Redfield Jamison¹³ have explored how mood fluctuations and melancholy, characteristic of bipolar disorder and depression, can foster artistic creativity. Poe, with his documented emotional fluctuations, bouts of depression and possible episodes of mania, has been seen as a clear example of how these illnesses can influence literary creation.

One specific study suggests that Poe's creativity was related not only to his depression, but also to his moments of extreme clarity and concentration during periods of mild mania.¹ This interplay between fluctuating moods and artistic creation has been a constant in studies exploring how neurology and psychiatry influence creative output. Moreover, in contemporary culture, his legacy continues to influence debates about the mental health of artists and the impact that neurological illness can have on creativity and the public perception of genius³.

Conclusions

Edgar Allan Poe's legacy transcends the boundaries of literature to penetrate fields such as neurology, psychiatry, and modern popular culture. Throughout this article, we have explored how the neurological diseases and mental disorders that Poe may have suffered from directly influenced his literary output and the creation of an enduring image of the "tortured genius." This archetype has resonated throughout history, shaping our contemporary understanding of the relationship between creativity and mental illness. His work, marked by deep psychological introspection and an interest in altered states of mind, remains relevant not only to literary studies, but also to medicine, particularly in understanding how neurological and psychiatric conditions affect human perception and creativity.

Poe's relevance to the field of neurology lies in his ability to acutely portray psychological terror, mental confusion, and dissociation from reality, experiences that continue to be the subject of clinical study today. While it is impossible to retrospectively diagnose the conditions he suffered from, his life and work offer a useful framework for reflecting on how these illnesses impact perception and behavior. Current research on the relationship between bipolar disorder, epilepsy, and creativity finds

echoes in Poe's literary descriptions, suggesting that his legacy transcends personal narrative to become a resource that illuminates the interactions between pathology and creativity.

Understanding the clinical context behind Poe's experiences is essential to a deeper interpretation of his work. Through exploration of how the symptoms of his possible illnesses influenced the creation of tormented characters, distorted realities, and psychologically complex plots, a new dimension of analysis opens up in his stories and poems. Neurological illnesses are not only part of Poe's biography, but a literary tool he used to capture the fragility of the human mind. This approach offers readers and scholars a more nuanced perspective, where an understanding of his medical conditions allows for a greater appreciation of his work and its cultural impact.

Finally, the study of Poe's work remains relevant not only in literary terms, but also in the way in which he explores the limits of the human mind and the impact of psychological suffering on creativity. His life and work invite future interdisciplinary research that combines neurology, psychiatry, and literary studies, allowing for a broader and deeper analysis of how altered states of mind can shape both artistic production and public perceptions of mental illness. Poe, in his inner struggle and literary genius, remains a bridge between art and science, showing that, through suffering, some of the deepest expressions of the human being emerge.

Conflict of interest and sources of funding

None, the author declares that he has no conflict of interest or source of funding other than his own.

References

1. Mula M, Hermann B, Trimble MR. Neuropsychiatry of creativity. *Epilepsy Behav.* 2016;57(Pt B):225-9.
2. Bloom H. Edgar Allan Poe. New York: Chelsea House; 2006.
3. Silverman K. Edgar A. Poe: mournful and never-ending remembrance. New York: Harper Perennial; 1992.
4. Peeples S. The afterlife of Edgar Allan Poe. Rochester (NY): Camden House; 2007.
5. Bonaparte M. The life and works of Edgar Allan Poe: a psychoanalytic interpretation. London: Imago Publishing Co; 1949.
6. Bate, NB. I think, but am not: the nightmare of William Wilson. *Poe Stud: Hist Theory Interpret.* 1998;31:27-38.
7. Benitez RM, Costa JJ. Historical Clinicopathological Conference 1995: Edgar Allan Poe. Baltimore (MA): University of Maryland; 1995.
8. Meyers J. Edgar Allan Poe: his life and legacy. New York: Cooper Square Press; 2000.
9. Finger S. Origins of neuroscience: a history of explorations into brain function. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2001.
10. Scull A. The most solitary of afflictions: madness and society in Britain, 1700-1900. New Haven (CT): Yale University Press; 1993.
11. Quinn AH. Edgar Allan Poe: a critical biography. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts; 1941.
12. Poe E. The complete tales and poems of Edgar Allan Poe. New York: Barnes & Noble; 2015. [Literatura.us [Internet]. [s.l.]: Literatura.us; [s.d.]. Edgar Allan Poe; [cited 16 Jul 2025]. Available from: <https://www.literatura.us/idiomas/eap.html>
13. Jamison KR. Touched with fire: manic-depressive illness and the artistic temperament. [s.l.]: Free Press; 1993.
14. Giménez-Roldán S. Cerebral degeneration and Spanish alienists in the 19th century: Cranial and facial features as explained by expert witnesses. *Neurosci Hist.* 2016;4(1):1-12.
15. Buckley G. Edgar Allan Poe's The fall of the House of Usher: a symbol of the crumbling borders of American and psychic consciousness and the birth of gothic transcendence. *J Engl Lang Lit.* 2017;8:654-8.
16. Álvaro González LC. Neurological study of the decadent novel *À rebours* (Against the grain) by Joris-Karl Huysmans. *Neurosci Hist.* 2018;6(4):125-37.
17. Parsons M. Exegesis "By the numbers": numerology and the New Testament. *Perspect Relig Stud.* 2009;35:25-43.
18. Klotz IM. Number mysticism in scientific thinking. *Math Intelligencer.* 1995;17:43-51.
19. Showalter E. The female malady: women, madness and English culture, 1830-1980. London: Virago Press; 1987.
20. Lombroso C. L'uomo delinquente. Milan: Hoepli; 1876.
21. Mathew RV. Depiction of psychological through supernatural: a reading of Edgar Allan Poe's selected short stories. *Int J Engl Lit.* 2021;6(2):421-6.
22. Freud S. Die Traumdeutung. Leipzig (DE): Franz Deuticke; 1899.
23. Falk DV. Poe and the power of animal magnetism. *PMLA.* 1969;84(3):536-46.
24. Lind SE. Poe and mesmerism. *PMLA.* 1947;62(4):1077-94.
25. Stern MB. Poe: "the mental temperament" for phrenologists. *Am Lit J Hist Crit Bibliogr.* 1968:155-63.

26. Williams-Hogan J. Light and dark in the art of Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849). In: Hartney C, McGarrity A, eds. *The dark side: Proceedings of the Seventh Australian and International Religion, Literature and the Arts Conference*, 2002. Sydney: RLA Press; 2004.
27. Clarke C. "Ordinary secret sinners": Robert Louis Stevenson's strange case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde (1886). In: *Late Victorian crime fiction in the shadows of Sherlock*. Crime Files Series. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 2014. p. 13-42.
28. Goetz CG. *Charcot: constructing neurology*. New York: Oxford University Press; 1995.
29. Frank FS, Magistrale T. *The Poe Encyclopedia*. Westport (CT): Greenwood Press; 1997.