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# SCIENCE FICTION Quarterly

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2  
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3

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*Cover by Milton Luros, from "The World She Wanted!"  
Interior illustrations by Beecham, Luros, Murphy and Orban*

**ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor**

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# EDGAR ALLAN POE — ANCESTOR



Whether Poe can be accepted as an ancestor of science-fiction is a moot point, but here's some evidence for your consideration.

**by Robert A. Madle**

*(illustrated by Milton Luros)*

**A**LMOST from the dawn of time, tales of fantasy, fear, and the cosmic unknown have been an essential portion of the literature of all races of the world. Folklore and ballads, replete with strange and unexplainable occurrences; satiated with demons, alien beings and similar creations of supramundane minds; have been passed down through untold centuries. It has been claimed that the only advance made during the dark ages (500-1300) was the intense propagation of fanciful expression inherited from previous eras. It was during these centuries that tales of vampires, werewolves, witches, and ghouls were first prevalent, and today they are still part of literature—perhaps even more so than they were in previous ages. However, it was not until the advent of Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) that the

tale of fantasy and the unknown, as we know it today, was perfected.

One of the basic emotions of man is fear, and perhaps fear of the unknown is most fundamental. Poe realized this, but what he did not realize was that the reader of fantasy, in order to appreciate it thoroughly, must have an imaginative mind, and must be able to detach himself from the humdrum of everyday life. Most of Poe's material was unappreciated, except in minor literary circles, because in his era people were either too absorbed in making a fortune, or in keeping themselves from starving to death. As a matter of fact, Poe was often on the verge of starvation himself, because of his inability to market, for any appreciable amount, articles and stories which later were accepted as literature.

Two of Poe's fantastic short stories have attained the stature of "classics

of literature." The reference is to "Ligeia" and "The Fall of the House of Usher." The first concerns a mysterious former wife who takes possession of the dying body of the narrator's second wife. The story is logically presented in the first person, but the reader is left with certain unanswered questions in his mind. For instance, did Ligeia really exist, or was she only the creation of the narrator's opium-infected mind?

Some consider "The Fall of the House of Usher" Poe's greatest story. It is amazingly well-written, artistically developed, and the continuity is exceptionally well-conceived from beginning to end. The opening line of the story is a masterpiece in itself:

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; and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher.

The story builds up to a spine-tingling climax in which the entire remaining branch of the famous House of Usher is destroyed: the sister, brother, and the actual house itself. Poe, in this tale, makes obscure references to the possibility of inorganic life—to the possibility that the House of Usher possesses a certain life itself. It might be mentioned that this concept has been utilized quite often by Poe's successors.

**P**OE WAS the originator of the now-prevalent custom of referring to dark, dank, mysterious volumes of forgotten lore, presenting titles of such non-existent volumes. This literary trick has also been employed very effectively by his successors. H. P. Lovecraft, who is rated above Poe by many fantasy connoisseurs, created the forbidden "Necronomicon" so effectively that collectors have advertised for it in

trade papers. Poe was unsurpassed in depicting eerie and unknown lands and times: sometimes he would originate the names of various eldritch countries, and sometimes he used mythology as his source. He employed this device quite often in his poetry. To illustrate, here follows a few lines from "Ulalume," a poem which "has proved very much of a riddle to the commentators":

It was night in the lonesome October  
Of my most immemorial year;  
It was hard by the dim lake of Auber,  
In the misty mid region of Weir—  
It was down by the dank tarn of  
Auber,  
In the ghoul-haunted woodland of  
Weir.

Undoubtedly *Auber* and *Weir* were merely figments of Poe's intense imaginative mind. As mentioned before, Poe had a penchant for using dark references to the dim, distant, eldritch past. He subtly hinted of things half-forgotten and better not remembered from bygone years and forgotten lands. He created an atmosphere which cannot fail to capture the fancy of an imaginative mind. The following quote from "Dream-Land" is appropos:

By a route obscure and lonely,  
Haunted by ill angels only,  
Where an Eidolon, named NIGHT,  
On a black throne reigns upright,  
I have reached these lands but newly  
From an ultimate dim Thule—  
From a wild weird clime that lieth,  
sublime,  
Out of SPACE—out of TIME.

The last line, in particular, expresses a thought which must have been almost inconceivable when he wrote it. Even today the average man on the street would be unable to think of anything which lies "Out of SPACE—out of TIME." Of course, it's old hat with fantasy fans. The writer was fascinated by his use of the expressions *Eidolon* and *Thule*, and determined to investigate them thoroughly. It seems that there is an all-but-forgotten tome which reposes in the family vaults. This ancient volume has been handed down

from generation to generation, and it has been whispered that all who have attempted to peruse it from beginning to end were driven stark, raving mad. It is a huge volume, sinister in appearance, possessing a binding which is amazingly like—human skin. It is said that the author was that mad sorcerer, Ahnoyah Webuhh Styr who, it has been whispered, was the ill-conceived progeny of the ancient beings who existed billions of years before the dawn of man. The name of this almost forgotten volume is "Ydikhh Tszunn Aai ree." And, sure enough, within this tome were discovered definitions for both *Eidolon* and *Thule*. The former is merely an apparition or a specter, while the latter was the name given by the ancients to the northernmost part of the world. In this case Poe had used mythology as his source of reference.

In his "Philosophy of Composition," Poe states: "I prefer commencing with the consideration of an *effect*. Keeping originality *always* in view..." The following short quote from "The Masque of the Red Death" displays his use of *effect*:

The Red Death had long devastated the country. No pestilence had ever been so fatal, or so hideous... There were sharp pains, and sudden dizziness, and then profuse bleeding at the pores, with dissolution... and the whole seizure, progress, and termination of the disease, were the incidents of half an hour....

The modern writers of fantasy fiction keep Poe's words in mind; to wit, the following quote from "The Fiddler's Fee," a story written by Robert Bloch which appeared in a 1936 issue of *Weird Tales*:

The door of the inn swung open and the Devil entered. He was as thin as a corpse, and whiter than a shroud in which a corpse lies. His eyes were deep and dark as graves. His mouth was redder than the pits below... it was assuredly he: Satan, Father of Lies!

Yes, it must be conceded that it

sounds pretty hammy. But when one considers that it was written by a 16 year old lad it isn't so bad. It is interesting to note that Robert Bloch, a member of the so-called "Lovecraft School," has developed into quite an author. His little classic, "Yours Truly—Jack the Ripper," originally published in *Weird Tales*, has been anthologized ten times and presented via the radio at least four.

IN THE field of science fiction, as distinguished from the field of fantasy and terror, Poe was his usual versatile and prolific self. He conceived many of the basic plots and ideas of science fiction; and, although Jules Verne is generally conceded to be the "father" of science fiction, it is fairly obvious to the student of the genre that Verne owes his inspiration to Poe. A brief inspection of just a few of Poe's scientifiction tales will attest to the logic of this statement.

"The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaal" is a tale involving the earth-to-the-moon concept and, although Poe utilizes a balloon to transport his intrepid traveler, it is as scientifically accurate as one could expect in 1835. The story describes in detail the actual trip—nothing more. Poe had every intention of writing a sequel involving Hans Pfaal's lunar explorations, but it never materialized. It appears that Poe was discouraged by his friends when he informed them that he intended to pass off both Hans Pfaal's voyage and his explorations as factual material.

Poe combined science fiction with the gullibility of the public in several other instances. In fact, the "hoax" appears to have been one of his favorite literary devices. One of the most famous and successful scientific hoaxes on record is "The Balloon Hoax" which was published in the *New York Sun*, April 13th, 1844, as a factual occurrence, and describes the initial crossing of the Atlantic in a large, dirigible-like balloon.

In at least two other instances Poe was rather successful in taking advantage of his public's gullibility. "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," published as a factual article, tells of a scientific experiment in which M. Valdemar is mesmerized and kept alive even though he has, in reality, ceased to live. When the experiment is completed, and the mesmeric field is lifted, the body immediately turns into a pool of putrescent, protoplasmic slime. "Von Kempelen and His Discoveries," also a magazine article, utilizes the theme of transmutation of baser metals into gold. Suffice to say that many of Poe's successors also employed this theme.

Although Poe didn't originally conceive of the "Hollow Earth" idea, he was the first to popularize it in fiction. His "MSS. Found in a Bottle" and his "Narrative of A. Gordon Pym" both describe strange oceanic voyages, in which it is apparent that the passengers have as their destination the interior of the earth. These stories were inspired by John Symmes' pseudo-scientific theory that the earth is hollow, with tremendously large openings at the two poles. Probably the most popular stories utilizing this basic theme are the "Pellucidar" novels of Edgar Rice Burroughs. Incidentally, it is interesting to note that Jules Verne wrote a sequel to "A. Gordon Pym" at the turn of the century entitled "The Sphinx of Ice."

Other basic plots of science fiction employed by Poe can briefly be mentioned as follows: "Mellonta Tauta" describes the scientific utopia of the 29th century; "The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion" depicts the destruction of the earth by a cometary collision; "Some Words With a Mummy" deals lightly with suspended animation; and "The Masque of the Red Death" utilizes the concept of earth's population being destroyed by a deadly, unknown plague.

**B**UT ENOUGH of Poe's fantasy and science fiction for the nonce. Poe possessed varied talents, all unusual. It is not generally known, but Poe was indirectly responsible for Dick Tracy; The Saint; Super Detective Stories, et al. Yes, Poe was the originator of the modern detective story. Of course, he didn't apply that terminology to his stories—he termed them stories of "logic and ratiocination." It can readily be seen that his terminology had to be changed somewhat: it is difficult to imagine anyone walking up to his nearest newsstand and requesting a copy of *Super Ratiocination Stories*.

Poe, in Dupin, created the obvious forerunner of Sherlock Holmes. Dupin and the narrator, who are represented in a series of stories, the most famous of which is "The Purloined Letter," are easily identified as the inspiration for A. Conan Doyle's series involving Holmes and Watson. As a matter of fact, if one were to substitute the names of Holmes and Watson for Dupin and the narrator he might think that he were reading one of Doyle's effusions.

In his "Philosophy of Composition," Poe extends his energies to great lengths to inform his public how he created the famous poem, "The Raven"—which attained more response in his day than any other single piece he composed. He stated that every plot should be elaborated "to its denouement" before a word is written, and that when a writer commences to put his ideas on paper he should always start the epic with an effect. It is obvious that Poe followed his own advice, for his stories and poems invariably have effective beginnings. Later in the essay he remarked:

Of all melancholy topics, what according to the *universal* understanding of mankind, is the *most* melancholy? Death—was the obvious reply. . . . when it most closely allies itself to *Beauty*: the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world. . . .

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## Edgar Allan Poe —

### Anccestor

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Poe meant those remarks. As a matter of fact, he believed them so fervently that it is strange that he wasn't termed a "self-hack" by his contemporaries. The following poems express his belief in the poetic beauty of a dead woman: "To Helen," "The Sleeper," "Lenore," "To One In Paradise," "The Raven", "For Annie", and, of course, "Annabel Lee," which was probably inspired by the death of his wife.

This same fundamental idea is used quite effectively in many of his prose tales: "Ligeia" (in which both a dream-wife and a real woman die), "The Fall of the House of Usher" (in which the woman wasn't quite dead when entombed—but everyone makes a mistake once in a while, and "Eleanora" (a beautiful little prose poem). Incidentally, "The Fall of the House of Usher" contains a fantastic poem called "The Haunted Palace" which is supposed to have influenced a poem by Longfellow. In fact, Poe outrightly accused Longfellow of plagiarism, and Longfellow reiterated that Poe copied from him. The writer is not aware of the ultimate outcome of the battle, but it is obvious that "The Haunted Palace" is strictly Poe's type of material.

**P**OE WAS an unusual part of American Literature; his personal life was as tragic as the material he composed. Because of his intense craving for alcohol, and his inability to hold it, he was a failure in every position he obtained. He lived in poverty at all times, and often had to rely on his friends for sustenance. But, even so, Americans should be proud of this strange man who directly affected the future of the short story; who, in reality, moulded into shape the fantasy and science fiction story of today. He possessed a mind which was, indeed, "Out of Space—out of Time."