

Edgar Allan Poe, Unknown artist

Edgar Allan Poe

Unknown artist
American, Lowell,
Massachusetts, late May to
early June 1849
Daguerreotype
4 13/16 x 3 1/2 in.
84.XT.957

“A noticeable man clad in black, the fashion of the times, close-buttoned, erect, forward looking, something separate in his bearing...a beautifully poetic face.”

—Basil L. Gildersleeve to Mary E. Phillips, 1915 (his childhood recollection of Poe)

Many of Edgar Allan Poe's contemporaries described him as he appears in this portrait: a darkly handsome and intelligent man who possessed an unorthodox personality. Despite being acknowledged as one of America's greatest writers of poetry and short stories, Poe's life remains shrouded in mystery, with conflicting accounts about poverty, alcoholism, drug use, and the circumstances of his death in 1849.



This daguerreotype was made several months before Poe's death at age 40. After his wife died two years earlier, Poe met Annie Richmond at a poetry lecture that he gave when visiting Lowell, Massachusetts. Although she was already married, they developed a deep, mutual affection. Richmond is thought to have arranged and paid for this portrait sitting. Poe is so forcibly portrayed that historians have described his appearance as disheveled, brooding, exhausted, haunted, and melancholic.

Like his life, Poe's poems and short stories are infused with a sense of tragedy and mystery. Among his best-known works are: “The Raven,” “Annabel Lee,” and “The Fall of the House of Usher.”

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Questions for Teaching

Using as many details as possible, describe what you see in this image. (This image depicts a man wearing a dark coat, vest, and tie and a white shirt. His hand is thrust inside his vest at about breast level. The man's hair is disheveled and tumbles over his ears. He is cleanly shaven except for a small, neat mustache. The man is not perfectly centered within the image. Half of the man's face is illuminated by light, and the other half is in relative shadow.)

As a portrait this image was intended to capture the likeness and personality of the sitter. Based on what you see, what do you imagine Poe's character was like? (Scholars agree that this image seems to capture the darkness in Poe's personality, particularly since the image was taken two years after his wife's death and only a few months before his own mysterious death. There is a sense of melancholy in Poe's eyes that is reflected in the unusual lighting, which throws half of his face into light and the other half into shadow.)

Although this image is a portrait, it also expresses many strong formal qualities. Which of the elements and principles of art are most strongly represented here? (The artist uses light and value to create areas of *emphasis*. This is apparent in the contrast between the bright white collar of the shirt and the dark suit. There are shapes that stand out as well: Poe's upper body is composed like a pyramid, pointing up towards his face, and there is another triangle formed by the top of his vest and shirt, which creates a white triangle pointing down. These shapes create a sense of *movement*, into and through the composition.)