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EDGAR ALLAN POE IN CONTEXT

Edgar Allan Poe mastered a variety of literary forms over the course of his brief and turbulent career. As a storyteller, Poe defied convention by creating gothic tales of mystery, horror, and suspense that remain widely popular today. This collection demonstrates how Poe's experience of early nineteenth-century American life fueled his iconoclasm and shaped his literary legacy. Rather than provide critical explications of his writings, each essay explores one aspect of Poe's immediate environment, using pertinent writings – verse, fiction, reviews, and essays – to suit. Examining his geographical, social, and literary contexts, as well as those created by the publishing industry and advances in science and technology, the essays paint an unprecedented portrait of Poe's life and times. Written for a wide audience, the collection will offer scholars and students of American literature, historians, and general readers new insight into Poe's rich and complex work.

KEVIN J. HAYES is a professor of English at the University of Central Oklahoma. Editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, he has published several books on American literature, history, and culture, including *Poe and the Printed Word* (2000) and *The Road to Monticello: The Life and Mind of Thomas Jefferson* (2008).

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Preface

The speaker of “Dream-Land,” a poem Edgar Allan Poe published in 1844, tells his readers that he comes from “a wild weird clime,” a mysterious place “Out of Space – Out of Time.” Since Poe’s death in 1849, many commentators have used this memorable pair of prepositional phrases to characterize his imaginative writings, which have seemed to them separate from the times in which he wrote, beautiful creations with little relevance to their cultural contexts. In what may be the biggest sea change in Poe studies over the past two decades, his writings are now recognized as having very much to do with his time. But this crucial shift has not occurred all at once. In recent years, Poe’s writings have been studied in relation to economy, photography, phrenology, and many other cultural, historical, and intellectual phenomena, yet no one has attempted to systematically situate Poe in the contexts of his time. Such is the purpose of *Edgar Allan Poe in Context*.

This collection consists of thirty-seven short chapters grouped into thematic parts: geography, society, publishing, literature, and science. Though Edgar Allan Poe is the subject of this book, the chapters do not provide in-depth critical explications of his writings. Instead, each chapter provides a general overview of its subject and uses whatever pertinent Poe writings – verse, fiction, reviews, essays – to suit. Though some of the contributors are Poe specialists, many are not. Instead, I have selected contributors for their expertise regarding the individual contexts, thus bringing fresh perspectives to the study of Poe. I have given the contributors considerable latitude, insisting only that they write in a jargon-free style that all readers can appreciate. *Edgar Allan Poe in Context* should enhance everyone’s appreciation of Poe’s richly complex work.

In the first chapter, Christopher Gair examines the importance Great Britain played in Poe’s life and work. Besides providing an overview of its subject, this chapter functions as an introduction to the collection as a whole: Gair touches upon several topics other contributors develop more

fully. He uses Charles Dickens as an example to show the influence of English literature on Poe. The figure of Dickens recurs frequently in this book, culminating in Tara Moore's discussion of Dickens's influence on American literary culture. Gair further develops his topic by comparing Poe's attitude toward Nathaniel Hawthorne, a theme Meghan A. Freeman develops in her chapter on Hawthorne and the art of the tale. Gair closes his essay with a brief discussion of "The Man of the Crowd," a short story Poe set on the mean streets of London that is becoming increasingly important in terms of Poe's portrayal of the modern world, as Bran Nicol explains in his treatment of Poe and the urban environment, the chapter that opens Part Two.

Other chapters in Part One discuss the importance of place in Poe's life and writings. Some treat places where he lived; others treat places he only imagined. All consider different regions of the world that figure in his writings. Though born in Boston – a fact he often regretted – Poe identified more closely with the South, the subject of Chapter 2. Born just a few years after Lewis and Clark completed their epic transcontinental journey and dying the same year as the California Gold Rush, Poe lived during a time when the settling of the West was the single most important occurrence in America culture. The West forms the subject of Chapter 3. The sea, the subject of Chapter 4, is a closely related topic. As Poe himself suggested, the journey across the prairies was akin to an ocean voyage. Poe's parallel between the two is not unique: it is no coincidence that the covered wagon, the vehicle that took countless American settlers west, became known as the prairie schooner. The last three chapters of Part One treat other regions of the world. Andrea Goulet surveys Poe's relationship to France, exploring what it was that attracted him to France and what has attracted France to him. Travis Montgomery discusses Poe's creative use of materials regarding the Near East. And Mark Canada treats Poe's depiction of the polar regions. In Poe's mind, the ends of the earth became distant places where only the imagination could go.

Poe existed in a nexus of many opposing social forces: young/old, public/private, rural/urban, sick/well, drunk/sober, clean/dirty, free/enslaved, and maybe even dead/alive. These opposites were responsible for generating much of the tension in his life and his work. Part Two is devoted to the various social contexts that contributed to Poe's writings. Besides looking at the urban environment, Part Two devotes individual chapters to the theme of curiosity, a driving social and intellectual force in Poe's day; alcoholism, a growing social problem in an era when the morning "eye opener" or a "phlegm disperser" was a widespread custom;

Preface

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personal attire and home decor, both of which were important to Poe because they provided external signs he could use to interpret personality; the stage, the place where Poe's actor parents plied their trade; the literary salon, where self-appointed arbiters of taste lionized the latest authors; slavery, the so-called national evil; and the cult of mourning.

Building on many ideas I touched upon in *Poe and the Printed Word*, Part Three treats the world of publishers and publishing. It begins with Chapter 16, in which John Evelev discusses the literary profession in Poe's day and, in so doing, introduces themes his fellow contributors develop in detail. The following chapter surveys the history of magazines, looking specifically at magazines Poe helped edit and others to which he contributed. Kathryn K. Shinn examines another outlet for Poe's imaginative writing: the gift book. Ornately bound and profusely illustrated, gift books gave American authors a comparatively lucrative opportunity to publish tales and poems. Other chapters in Part Three treat literary piracy, whereby American publishers took advantage of the absence of international copyright to reprint British authors, whose works often outsold those of native authors; the practice of book reviewing, which Poe revolutionized by daring to sign his reviews, avoid favoritism, and write focused reviews in a deliberate effort to improve the quality of American literature; and the politics of publishing. In this, the final chapter of Part Three, Amy Branam does something that, to my knowledge, no one has ever done before: identify the politics of editors and publishers and then draw conclusions about how Poe negotiated through the politically charged world of magazine publishing.

In addition to its chapters on Charles Dickens and Nathaniel Hawthorne, Part Four treats several other literary contexts of Poe's writings, starting with Chapter 22, in which Gregory Hays discusses the classical context. Though Poe studied at the University of Virginia with Prof. George Long, one of the leading classical scholars of the nineteenth century, he typically borrowed his classical quotations from secondary sources. In his chapter, Hays surveys some of the complexities involved with understanding Poe's classical references. The next chapter discusses how two particular French authors, François Rabelais and Alain-René Lesage, may have influenced Poe. Other chapters in Part Four treat more obvious literary contexts, examining the impact of gothic literature, the prominence of Lord Byron, and Poe's uneasy relationship with Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Transcendentalists. In addition, Katherine Kim studies Poe's imaginative use of folklore, looking at how he used many traditional genres of oral literature to original ends.

Poe was what would be called in modern parlance a “technology geek.” He was intrigued with the latest scientific developments and discoveries, which influenced his imaginative writings significantly, as the chapters in Part Five demonstrate. Some chapters discuss pseudosciences that were taken seriously in Poe’s day; others treat technologies with implications in the art world; and yet others discuss scientific developments Poe’s fiction foreshadows.

Chapter 37, which tackles the general subject of technology, forms the conclusion to Part Five and, in a way, the conclusion to *Edgar Allan Poe in Context*. The theme of the limits and potential of technology loosely links many of the previous contexts together. The technology of sailing made it possible to know many parts of the world but ultimately left the ends of the earth unknowable. Making gas-lit streets possible, technology changed the urban environment, but the same technology that lit the nighttime streets paradoxically enhanced the city’s darkness, creating urban spaces where evil could lurk. The technology of print provided a way for American authors to widely disseminate their work, but it also gave publishers a way to disseminate the work of foreign authors and thus hinder sales of American authors. And photographic technology made it increasingly difficult for anyone to escape identification, creating a cult of personality that caused authors to be judged by their faces.