





# DARK DEATHS

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UNOS & OTROS



EDICIONES

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## INTRODUCTION

Let's start to enter the subject, by narrating some details of a case of which I had reliable references, even written, and that served for the colleagues who were leaving me alerted about the healthy doubt that all medical professionals must have before the death, any death, especially when we are the ones who must certify their causes clinically and legally.

While doing the rural medical service in Oriente Province, Cuba, in the 70s, I learned about the case of an old man who had died several years earlier in my work area, around 1964 or 1965, apparently of cerebral hemorrhage. The truth is that a young and inexperienced doctor, like almost all of us at that time, had issued, after a brief physical examination of the corpse, without carrying out an autopsy because it was not considered necessary, the corresponding death certificate corroborating this diagnosis.

Well, when unleashed a disagreeable family dispute after a few plots of land, a modest house, some cash and animals, all inheritable inheritance of the old man, the problem escalated to the extreme of taking action on the matter the police and decree the prosecution an exhumation of the body of the deceased. And yes, in fact, once the legal order was carried out, the cerebral hemorrhage, which must have been very abundant, was confirmed as the cause of death, but not produced by an atherosclerotic vascular accident as it was believed and how it had been legally certified. but by a line nail, a railroad pole about ten centimeters long that penetrated the occipital region (covered the flat head of the metal object by the abundant hair of the neck) and remained, as an accusing witness, inside the skull of the deceased .

That, without a doubt, had once been an unthinkable, obscure death, actually a murder, although the innocent doctor who filled the initial certificate of death did not even think of such an event.

Why? Because in his inexperienced youthful candor he believed what he saw superficially and what they told him: Man in the third age with years of suffering from recognized and well documented

chronic diseases, among them arterial hypertension, a respectable peasant family composed of healthy people dedicated to the hard work, a rustic but friendly and socially recognized environment, an explicit family harmony apparently seamless, in short, the ideal ... to make mistakes and screw up.

And deaths like that, dark, strange, suspicious, without clear and definite explanations, or with many possible contradictory explanations, not concordant, anomalous, is full of the hazardous history of medicine that is nothing more than the history of humanity.

Of course we are not implying that everyone dies murdered, no, and less with an iron nail inside the head, but what we are reasonably sure, after a fairly extensive medical experience and reading history, good story for many years, is that many causes of death, especially in powerful and / or famous people, but also in ordinary mortals of the bunch, deserve, in the name of historical justice and a reasonable approach to the truth, a new and closer look .

We do not intend to do in this simple volume paleopathography, that relatively new forensic specialty that studies in situ, and with advanced technology, bones, mummies and tombs in order to diagnose, as would be done in an ultramodern hospital, the most recondite diseases and causes of death of the deceased that lie under the microscopes and magnetic resonance devices.

Our expectations are much more modest but they are fed by the same enthusiasm to go a little further in the diagnosis, the medical key par excellence, to offer a new vision of certain terminal events, to deepen, with the scalpel of clinical logic and common sense, in some topics, narrations of facts that are repeated again and again and not always conform to rational thinking. We do not aspire, that is obvious, to find nails of line in all the skulls; we are satisfied that the reader finds, once in a while, a detail or a possible explanation that has been overlooked previously or that could tempt a budding researcher to a more detailed historical investigation.

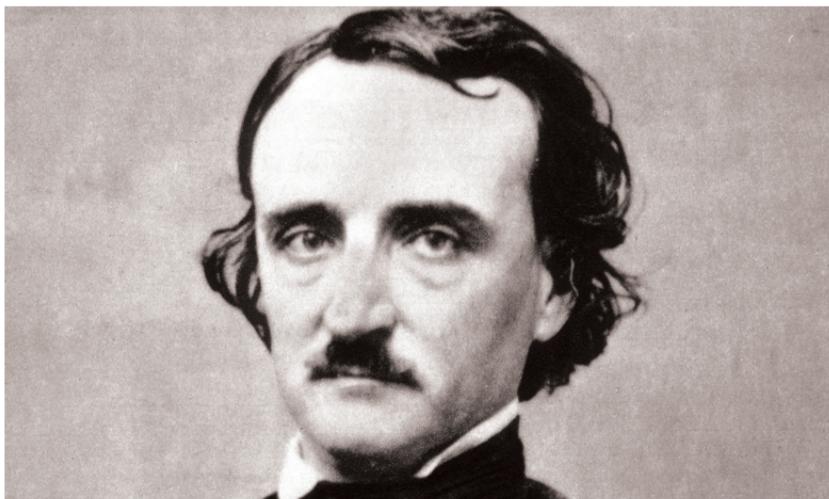
But if all this is very complicated, we feel satisfied then to tell our readers some new historical facet, reveal the final episodes of certain characters that have gone unnoticed and above all, and I think is the most important, entertain, legitimate end and last of the literature.

We invite you then to a trip through somewhat macabre and somber places, it is true, but at the end of the day interesting.

We aspire to enjoy it.

The author





## EDGARD ALLAN POE. BRIEF CLINICAL HISTORY

Only forty years. Yes, believe it or not, the American Edgar Allan Poe, journalist, editor, poet, story teller, novelist and essayist, the father of the crime novel, of symbolism, of the so-called dark romanticism, and to some extent of the American Gothic and Science Fiction, one of the most influential literary personalities of the last two centuries, barely lived forty years, from January 19th, 1809 to October 7th, 1849.

And let us not be surprised, my reading friend, the work of Poe, that master of the rationalization of the irrational, portrays and announces death in all its

forms and manifestations: natural, premeditated, mysterious, accidental, misleading, placid, truculent, imagined, dreamed, wanted, rejected. Poe had an obsession with death, no matter whether friend or foe, who announces and fulfills its early destiny. A trait that, I don't know if it has been pointed out earlier, relates him to another early dead, the Cuban José Martí, who, incidentally, left unfinished the Spanish translation of Poe's poem *Annabel Lee*, but that is a story that doesn't belong here.

The surprising thing is that a man who actually began to do full-time literature at 27 (At 18

he published a small book of poems, *Tamerlane and Other Poems*; and from 22 or 23 (did some journalism), and so he had only thirteen years to develop it, marked so profoundly so many writers, painters, musicians and even much later, filmmakers: Baudelaire and Rimbaud, Robert Louis Stevenson and H.P. Lovecraft, Conan Doyle and Mark Twain, Oscar Wilde and Jules Verne, Dostoyevsky and Valdimir Nabokov, Mallarmé and Rubén Darío, Andrés Bello and Julián del Casal, Wilkie Collins and Agatha Christie, Cortázar and Jorge Luis Borges, Ray Bradbury and Stephen King, Manet and Matisse, D.W. Griffith and Roger Corman, Federico Fellini and Alfred Hitchcock, Lou Reed and David Bowie, Debussy and Ravel, and many, many more who openly acknowledge and thank him or who don't mention and hide him, doesn't matter.

As expressed in a poem dedicated to Poe the Argentinian Jorge Luis Borges:

*Perhaps, on the other side of death, he continues to erect, solitary and strong, splendid and atrocious wonders.*

More surprising, however, is the knowledge that in that

short life Poe suffered major health burns and addictions, including alcohol, opium, and gambling, as well as the abrupt loss of several women he loved, also in an addictive way, including among them the image of his mother (he didn't really know her, she died when he was two years old) and his extremely young wife, and also niece Virginia Clemm, whom he married when she was thirteen years old, this facts conspired, or perhaps favored, against his literary productivity.

Let's try then, it may be interesting, to establish a brief clinical history of the hypothetical "patient Poe", knowing in advance that the diagnosis of symptoms and clinical signs in the writer's health hardships is complicated by the fact that he had very aggressive enemies, perhaps the proper adjective would be envious, they negated to roll up blunders, exaggerations and misrepresentations about the social and physical difficulties of the man, which has brought about all kinds of confusion in the attempt to biograph and pathograph Poe.

An anecdote illustrates our statement. On one occasion, one of many, he was accused of having plagiarized the Ger-

man writer E.T.A. Hoffmann, who had worked a little before Poe on a horror story: «Horror (stories) come from Germany», they said to him, and Poe, who wasn't very good at defending himself, but did own an exquisite sensitivity, replied: "Horror comes from the soul".

And to top it off, the "friend" and self-titled executor of Poe, the mediocre and proven counterfeiter R.W. Griswold, appropriated his papers and wrote, two years after the death of the poet, a preface to his complete works and a biography that have gone down in history as one of the most perfidious and slanderous documents ever written about a first class literary person. The so-called *Griswold Memory* disrupted the public perception of Edgar Allan Poe for more than a century, and even today some of his assertions continue to be repeated without serious criticism.

The clarification is important because many of Poe's real or supposed antisocial attitudes we know through the filter of these people. There is no doubt that the writer had problems, behavioral oddities, addictions, diseases, even some attitudes that may have bordered sociopathy, but the true magnitude

of these manifestations must be taken with tweezers.

That said, let's review the more or less confirmed anamnesis of this artistic genius.

Poe, after a lonely and unhappy childhood brought on by the premature death of their parents, but with the luck to live a released adolescence thanks to their adoption relatives, Frances and John Allan, who gave him education, surname and offered him a home, began drinking at just seventeen years of age. At the same time he manifested mood swings that ranged from depression to euphoria. Poe himself described them in a letter to a friend:

*I have such marked changes, from the greatest persistent depression I can pass to immense exaltation or jubilation with a great voracity to work.*

A rather obvious bipolar condition that couldn't be diagnosed at that time because it hadn't yet been described. His alcoholism was sporadic, but intense. His years in the military were very good from the point of view of his mental stability but his attempt to study at the university didn't end well, among other things due to gambling debts and the (definitive)

fight with his adoptive father, a dispute that left him without funds and forced him to write some mercenary works.

It should be noted that Poe's alcoholism was very *sui generis*, only one or two drinks were enough for his personality and behavior to deteriorate rapidly. Today we know that in some people there is a congenital deficiency of a liver enzyme, Alcohol

Dehydro-  
genase  
(ADH),  
which,  
when ab-  
sent, greatly

...As an insult, my ene-  
mies attributed my madness  
to alcohol instead of alcohol  
abuse to madness...

increases the to-  
xic effects of alcohol. It's possi-  
ble that Poe may have suffered  
from this not very common  
condition researcher Arno  
Karlen's theory, but we have  
no way of knowing for sure. At  
any rate, he relapsed frequently  
into drinking, knowing the dis-  
astrous effects he would have  
to deal with later. It's very sig-  
nificant this autobiographical  
fragment of the writer:

*As an insult, my enemies attribu-  
ted my madness to alcohol ins-  
tead of alcohol abuse to madness.*

Is it possible that Poe confu-  
sed with madness what was only  
a genetic condition? It's perfectly

possible, but the addiction was  
there. However, his problems  
didn't end with alcohol.

In 1999, neurology professor  
C. Bazil (neurologists Weissberg,  
Zumbach and Ingram, in different  
works, agree with this diagnosis)  
postulated the possibility that  
Poe was a carrier of a temporal  
lobe epilepsy of the brain brought  
upon, or not, by the consumption  
of alcohol. This neurological di-  
sease would explain the

confusion so com-  
mon in Poe, the  
psychomotor au-  
tomatisms (strange  
movements with  
hands, grimaces and  
dreams) that many of his  
contemporaries refer to seeing in  
him (or narrated by himself) and  
the absence of convulsions.

This type of epilepsy, called  
Jacksonian epilepsy, was not  
described until about forty years  
after Poe's death by neurologist  
John H. Jackson. In some pa-  
tients with Jacksonian epilepsy,  
the development of larval psy-  
chosis (postictal psychosis) has  
been confirmed, which could  
explain, if so, the deterioration of  
Poe's psyche in the last months  
of his life.

A doctor who treated Poe's  
wife and nurse Maria Luisa  
Shew (whom Poe tried her to

fall in love with him after his wife's death), a friend of the marriage, describe facial asymmetries «and a rare weakness in the face» of the writer, signs that may coincide with temporal lobe epilepsy. It is suggestive to point out that Poe, who wasn't a physician, describes very well epileptic seizures with hallucinations in several of his stories. The small cranial traumatism repeated in the course of his drunkenness and confusion, including, of course, the much more serious one that seems to have killed him, have not been ruled out as the cause of the writer's neurological problems.

In the last months of his life, the confused state that Poe sometimes presented, becomes more frequent, is aggravated, and some of his contemporaries refer to having witnessed in him fabulous and expressed thoughts that bordered the delirious in the course of conversations and discussions. In periods of exaltation or under the influence of alcohol, Poe became very loquacious, exuberant, sometimes verbose, and that symptom seems to be exacerbated in this final stage.

Let's talk about Poe's controversial physical end.

Edgar Allan Poe's death is

one of the most commented tragic episodes of modern literature. In fact, twenty different versions (we have found 22) of the causes and facts related to that death have been postulated, but at least all agree with the place of his death, George Washington College Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland.

Let's try to reconstruct the facts. 1849 was a particularly complicated year (weren't the previous ones too?) for Poe: He had gotten into his head, once again, to establish a literary magazine but didn't have the funds to run such a company; he was in love with a stubbornness with an old love from his adolescence (Sarah Elmira Royster) but at the same time had become entangled with Helen Whitman and probably also with Annie Richmond, sentimental situations that he carried with little skill, which caused him great anxiety. Supposedly he was trying to quit drinking (his difficult girlfriends demanded it), which may have made him even more nervous and irritable.

Now the final events.

There are several witnesses that claimed that Poe suffered a confusional crisis in the train in

which he traveled to Philadelphia to give a conference (the editor John Sartain was one of those witnesses), but couldn't do it, couldn't control his thoughts properly, and decided to return to New York.

This is where everything gets confused as Poe actually appeared in Baltimore, a city where he was found several days later wandering the streets, or in a tavern (the tavern existed, it was called Gunner's Hall and was at 44 East Lombard St.), there is no definite agreement on that. The truth is that he was dressed in ragged clothes and a straw hat that were not his and was in an shabby and incoherent condition. Some acquaintances rescue him and he is taken to the hospital. Mr. Soundgrass, known to Poe and one of those who lead him to the health center (Baltimore journalist Joseph P. Walker was the other), claims that the writer was in poor physical condition "he was hard to look at", he said, but still conscious.

Dr. Moran, the doctor that receives him at the hospital, diagnosed him with delirium tremens (an alcoholic intoxi-

cation) but at the same time writes that he didn't have ethylic breath and refused to having drink alcohol (we are in 1849 and doctors also thought, logically, in a deprivation crisis). In a few hours he falls into a coma and dies two and a half days later. The case was closed as a liver crisis due to customary alcoholism and a "brain inflammation", a very common term at that time to refer to deaths of causes not well defined but generally related to drunkenness and tavern fights.

An autopsy was not performed, which leaves us blind about the poet's organic state (especially the liver and brain).

The truth is that Poe wasn't drunk at the time of his hospital admission and so is stated in the reference written by Dr. Moran. He states very clearly that the patient had no ethylic breath or alcohol odor in his clothes. What tragic situation brought him there and subsequently to death? Let us briefly review some of the many hypotheses that have been shuffled over and over again.

1. Was Poe murdered to rob him? Poe was penniless and probably didn't carry anything of value. His economic invalidity was widely known. He didn't have penetrating wounds of importance if we were to believe Dr. Moran.
2. Was he drugged by the vote hunters, there were elections in Baltimore on those days, and things like that often happened, and then abandoned in a tavern (the cooping theory)? Much has been discussed about this and I have no elements to confirm or deny it. It may have happened and is one of the most popular theories to explain the facts.
3. Was it really a hepatic coma? Dr. Moran appeared to have been a well-trained physician and doesn't refer in his examination jaundice or the typical breath of these patients (hepatic foetor).
4. Did he suffer a severe fall or blow of a criminal nature in the head and developed a subarachnoid hemorrhage? It is a diagnosis that seems very probable and explains the progressive deterioration of the patient's condition, ending in deep coma and death. In my opinion, it is the picture that comes closest to the (narrated) symptomatology of the patient.
5. Was it the accelerated deterioration of his epileptic condition that killed him? It's possible, considering that at that time there was no such diagnosis, much less an appropriate treatment. Today, a Jacksonian epilepsy ending in death is very rare, unusual, but not at that time.
6. Apoplexy? Poe was still walking when he was rescued and no sign of focus was noted in Dr. Moran's examination. Such an event seems extremely improbable.
7. A brain tumor? Brain neoplasms sometimes produ-

ce very erratic symptoms, but it is difficult for them to explain Poe's neurological condition for so long. Here we miss the absence of an autopsy.

8. Suicide? An obscure incident occurred a year earlier, apparently related to an overdose of laudanum (legal at that time). But this time the symptomatology doesn't correspond and much less the outcome.
9. Was Poe tuberculous and hid it? It could be, but no symptoms and signs of such illness have been reported, although his wife did die tuberculous. His way of dying doesn't correspond to this disease.
10. Pneumonia? There are endless things that this diagnosis doesn't take into account. The symptomatology doesn't correspond either (Absence of cough, fever, sputum, shortness of breath).
11. Hypoglycemic crisis? The symptomatology doesn't correspond and it has never been proven that Poe was diabetic.
12. Syphilis? Although he may have suffered it, occasions of contagion he certainly had, tertiary syphilis presents other very different neurological signs.
13. Poisoning by heavy metals, especially mercury? It is an interesting hypothesis, but there is a report, a sample of hair taken many years later, that seems to deny the fact.
14. Cholera? No one has mentioned diarrhea among the signs that Poe presented.
15. Did a stray dog bite him and died of rabies? Symptoms don't correspond and no lesions of this type were described.
16. Carbon monoxide poisoning? It seems to us an absurd theory.

On this path, as we have already mentioned, more than twenty possible causes of death have been raised, some even far-fetched or unequivocally ridiculous.

We have to give up to the fact that we will never know the truth, but whatever it was, that October day one of the most impor-

tant literary minds in history was gone. A higher mind from the point of view of literary creation that due to its other weaknesses must also carry a true black legend.

Jorge Luis Borges, one of the few who really studied Poe, wrote referring to the writer's final hours:



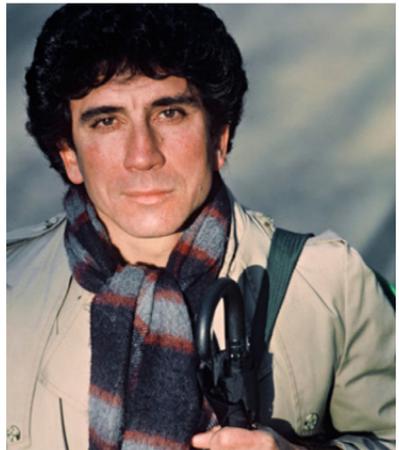
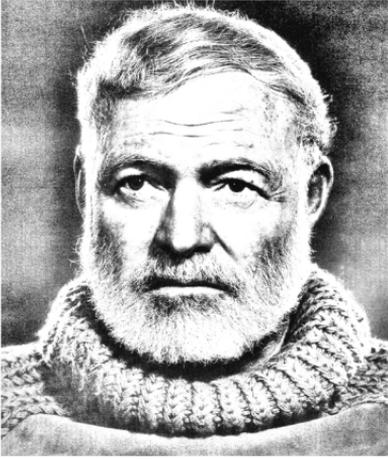
In his delirium he repeated the words he had put in the mouth of a sailor who died, in one of his earliest accounts, on the edge of the South Pole. In 1849, the sailor and he died at one time. Those words were: This is the knell of death.

It's a beautiful phrase, Borges was a master at that, but it doesn't seem to correspond with reality.

With Poe dead, and with the pain of not having unraveled the physical causes of his death, let us close this brief essay with the opinion of the French poet Charles Baudelaire, almost certainly the man who introduced Edgar Allan Poe and made him known in Europe, even before North America itself:

There are in the history of literature destinies of men who carry the word 'fatality' written in mysterious characters in the sinuous folds of the forehead, such was the case of Poe, the most original, the most sensitive and the most unfortunate of the poets.

A worthy epitaph.



## SUICIDE AND POETRY

Why do poets kill themselves so often?

Suicide, the act of ending one's own life, is considered a grave sin by almost all monotheistic religions, and some polytheists, and a serious crime by the jurisprudence of various countries.

For some, suicide is an act of cowardice and for others an action of supreme courage. For us, those who practice medicine, is a sign of maladjustment, outburst or mental illness, except, of course, that there is a cause that makes it practically imperative, but that is something extremely rare.

And it is also, as the Argentinian writer Horacio Gonzalez says: "The non-desire for life and to judge oneself as not deserving to continue enjoying it, implies a special kind of guilt or acceptance of the highest price that is paid to send the posthumous relief or compensation message".

Relief to whom, to compensate what? We ask. Or, as

the French writer and Nobel laureate Albert Camus postulated: "There is only one truly serious philosophical problem: suicide" (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 1942). A statement that points directly to the ultimate meaning of life.

The truth is that the suicidal act, as the psychoanalyst Silvia Tubert tells us, snatches the subject whose speech is the only one that would give us access to its understanding. In short, a theme, without a doubt, complex and changing, nuanced in our days by new legal, moral and even political approaches. But, leaving aside the old and always renewed philosophical, moral and ethical debate. Why is suicide so common among poets of all generations? It is enough to review the history of literature to realize that the prevalence of this phenomenon is very high among the cultivators of the above artistic genre, and not now, but always: