GROUP WORK - ACTIVITY 01 - Reading Comprehension - Short Biography

Who is Edgar Allan Poe?

The name Poe brings to mind images of murderers and madmen, premature burials, and mysterious women who return from the dead. His works include such literary classics as “The Tell-Tale Heart,” “The Raven,” and “The Fall of the House of Usher.” Among his works there are short stories, poetry, a novel, a textbook, a book of scientific theory, and hundreds of essays and book reviews. He is widely acknowledged as the inventor of the modern detective story and an innovator in the science fiction genre, but he made his living as America’s first great literary critic and theoretician. Poe’s reputation today rests primarily on his tales of terror as well as on his haunting lyric poetry.

Just as the bizarre characters in Poe’s stories have captured the public imagination so too has Poe himself. He is seen as a morbid, mysterious figure lurking in the shadows of moonlit cemeteries or crumbling castles. This is the Poe of legend. But much of what we know about Poe is wrong, the product of a biography written by one of his enemies in an attempt to defame the author’s name.

The real Poe was born to traveling actors in Boston on January 19, 1809. Edgar was the second of three children. Within three years of Poe’s birth both of his parents had died, and he was adopted by the wealthy tobacco merchant John Allan and his wife Frances Valentine Allan in Richmond, Virginia while Poe’s siblings went to live with other families. Mr. Allan would rear Poe to be a businessman and a Virginia gentleman, but Poe had dreams of being a writer in emulation of his childhood hero the British poet Lord Byron. Poetic verses reveal how little interest Poe had in the tobacco business. By the age of thirteen, Poe had compiled enough poetry to publish a book, but his headmaster advised Allan against allowing this.

In 1826 Poe left Richmond to attend the University of Virginia, where he excelled in his classes while accumulating considerable debt. The miserly Allan had sent Poe to college with less than a third of the money he needed, and Poe soon took up gambling to raise money to pay his expenses. By the end of his first term Poe was so desperately poor that he burned his furniture to keep warm.

Humiliated by his poverty and furious with Allan, Poe returned to Richmond and visited the home of his fiancée Elmira Royster, only to discover that she had become engaged to another man in Poe’s absence. The heartbroken Poe’s last few months in the Allan mansion were punctuated with increasing hostility towards Allan until Poe finally stormed out of the home in a quixotic quest to become a great poet and to find adventure. He accomplished the first objective by publishing his first book Tamerlane when he was only eighteen, and to achieve the second goal he enlisted in the United States Army. Two years later he heard that Frances Allan, the only mother he had ever known, was dying of tuberculosis and wanted to see him before she died. By the time Poe returned to Richmond she had already been buried. Poe and Allan briefly reconciled, and Allan helped Poe gain an appointment to the United States Military Academy at West Point.

Before going to West Point, Poe published another volume of poetry. While there, Poe was offended to hear that Allan had remarried without telling him or even inviting him to the ceremony. Poe wrote to Allan detailing all the wrongs Allan had committed against him and threatened to get himself expelled from the academy. After only eight months at West Point Poe was thrown out, but he soon published yet another book.

Broke and alone, Poe turned to Baltimore, his late father’s home, and called upon relatives in the city. One of Poe’s cousins robbed him in the night, but another relative, Poe’s aunt Maria Clemm, became a new mother to him and welcomed him into her home. Clemm’s daughter Virginia soon became the object of his desire.

While Poe was in Baltimore, Allan died, leaving Poe out of his will. By then Poe was living in poverty but had started publishing his short stories, one of which won a contest sponsored by the Saturday Visiter. The connections Poe established through the contest allowed him to publish more stories and to eventually gain an editorial position at the Southern Literary Messenger in
Richmond. It was at this magazine that Poe finally found his life’s work as a magazine writer.

Within a year Poe helped make the *Messenger* the most popular magazine in the south with his sensational stories as well as with his scathing book reviews. Poe soon developed a reputation as a fearless critic who not only attacked an author’s work but also insulted the author and the northern literary establishment. Poe targeted some of the most famous writers in the country. One of his victims was the anthologist and editor Rufus Griswold.

At the age of twenty-seven, Poe brought Maria and Virginia Clemm to Richmond and married his Virginia, who was not yet fourteen. The marriage proved a happy one, and the family is said to have enjoyed singing together at night.

Dissatisfied with his low pay and lack of editorial control at the *Messenger*, Poe moved to New York City. Poe struggled to find magazine work and wrote his only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*.

After a year in New York, Poe moved to Philadelphia in 1838 and wrote for a number of different magazines. In spite of his growing fame, Poe was still barely able to make a living. For the publication of his first book of short stories, *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, he was only paid with twenty-five free copies of his book.

In the face of poverty Poe was still able to find solace at home with his wife and mother-in-law, but tragedy struck in 1842 when Poe’s wife contracted tuberculosis.

Always in search of better opportunities, Poe moved to New York again in 1844 and introduced himself to the city by perpetrating a hoax. His “news story” of a balloon trip across the ocean caused a sensation, and the public rushed to read everything about it—until Poe revealed that he had fooled them all.

The January 1845 publication of “The Raven” made Poe a household name. He was now famous enough to draw large crowds to his lectures, and he was beginning to demand better pay for his work. He published two books that year, and briefly lived his dream of running his own magazine when he bought out the owners of the *Broadway Journal*. The failure of the venture, his wife’s deteriorating health, and rumors spreading about Poe’s relationship with a married woman, drove him out of the city in 1846. At this time he moved to a tiny cottage in the country. It was there, in the winter of 1847 that Virginia died at the age of twenty-four. Poe was devastated, and was unable to write for months. His critics assumed he would soon be dead. They were right. Poe only lived another two years and spent much of that time traveling from one city to the next giving lectures and finding backers for his latest proposed magazine project to be called *The Stylus*.

In Richmond he found his first fiancée Elmira Royster Shelton was now a widow, so began to court her again. Before he left Richmond on a trip to Philadelphia he considered himself engaged to her, and her letters from the time imply that she felt the same way. On the way to Philadelphia, Poe stopped in Baltimore and disappeared for five days.

He was found in the bar room of a public house. He was sent Poe to Washington College Hospital, where Poe spent the last days of his life far from home and surrounded by strangers. Poe died on October 7, 1849 at the age of forty. The exact cause of Poe’s death remains a mystery.

Days after Poe’s death, his literary rival Rufus Griswold wrote an obituary of the author in an attempt at revenge for some of the offensive things Poe had said and written about him. Griswold followed the obituary with a memoir in which he portrayed Poe as a drunken, womanizing madman with no morals and no friends. Griswold’s attacks were meant to cause the public to dismiss Poe and his works, but the biography had exactly the opposite effect and instead drove the sales of Poe’s books higher than they had ever been during the author’s lifetime. Griswold’s distorted image of Poe created the Poe legend that lives to this day.

**A) Comprehension Questions - Answer using complete sentences.**

1. **Who is the Poe of the legend?** Write some of the characteristics usually associated with him.
   He is seen as a morbid, mysterious figure lurking in the shadows of moonlit cemeteries or crumbling castles.

2. **How many brothers and sisters did Poe have?**
   Edgar was the second of three children.

3. **When did his parents die?**
   Within three years of Poe’s birth both of his parents had died.

4. **Why didn’t Poe publish a book when he was thirteen?**
   His headmaster advised Allan against allowing this.
5. What's the main characteristic of John Allan, according to the text?
   He was a miserly wealthy tobacco merchant.

6. What did Poe do to get more money when he was at the University of Virginia?
   Poe soon took up gambling to raise money to pay his expenses.

7. How old was Poe when he published his first book?
   He accomplished the first objective by publishing his first book *Tamerlane* when he was only eighteen.

8. When Mr. John Allan died, did Poe receive money?
   While Poe was in Baltimore, Allan died, leaving Poe out of his will.

9. How old was Virginia when Poe married her?
   At the age of twenty-seven, Poe married his Virginia, who was not yet fourteen.

10. What is the name of Poe's only novel?
    His only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*.

11. When was the poem *The Raven* published?
    It was published in January, 1845.

12. According to the passage, how did Poe feel when Virginia died?
    Poe was devastated, and was unable to write for months.

13. How long did Poe live after his wife died?
    Poe lived two years after his wife died.

14. When and Why did Edgar Allan Poe die?
    Poe died on October 7, 1849 at the age of forty. The exact cause of Poe’s death remains a mystery.

15. What was the effect of Poe's biography written by Rufus Griswold?
    The biography drove the sales of Poe's books higher than they had ever been during the author’s lifetime.

B) WORDS IN CONTEXT - Find in the text, words that can substitute the definitions below:

1. To be recognized as (paragraph 01) - acknowledged
2. To damage the reputation, character, or good name of somebody (paragraph 02) - defame
3. To bring up, “educate” (paragraph 03) - rear
4. To show superiority; to do better than others (paragraph 04) - excelled
5. To succeed in doing; to reach the end of (paragraph 05) - accomplish // achieve
6. The same as finally (paragraph 08) - eventually

C) Organize a TIMELINE of events using the line below and the information from the text. The first event is done as an example. Write at least 4 other important facts about Edgar Allan Poe’s life in chronological order:

1809

Poe was born to traveling actors in Boston in 1809.

1812

His parents died and he was adopted by a miserly wealthy tobacco merchant.

1827

Poe published his first book: *Tamerlane*.

1836

Poe married Virginia. She was thirteen years old.

1845

The publication of “The Raven” made Poe a household name. Poe died four years later.