

POE 103

by

Ken Goldman

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POE 103

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*From The Springfield County Community College
Fall 1999 Course Catalog :*

*POE 103 : (3 cr) Instructor : Dr. Simon Chambers
An in-depth study/critical analysis of Edgar Allan
Poe's poems and short stories, with emphasis on
several of his tales of terror. A history of the
Romantic poet/author will illustrate the writer's life as
it influenced his literary works. Dr. Chambers has
written extensively on the author, and his Ph.D.
dissertation, *Unearthing the Real Edgar Allan Poe*,
has been published by Norton Press.*

Smiling students with brightly colored notebooks purchased from The Book Mark entered Room 14-B still wearing their summer vacation tans, and their laughter punctuated conversations as they took their seats. Wafting through open windows, warm end-of-summer breezes toyed with the hair of two blonde coeds. The sun that shone through the swaying window blinds painted zig-zagging zebra stripes along the far wall of the classroom. Judging from the short sleeves and the shorter skirts, one could easily have mistaken September for April today. September was that kind of month.

But Dr. Simon Chambers was not one of those easily fooled by September's pretenses. He stood behind his podium wearing the same Boston tweed sports coat with the elbow patches that he wore throughout the winter, despite the warmth of today's sun. Although the rumpled jacket belonged more appropriately on someone pushing retirement than on an instructor in his mid-thirties, it did not seem entirely out of place on Professor Chambers.

Simon made a mental note of the sophomores' fresh faces. He knew that in approximately two weeks their crisp notebooks would be dog-eared and covered with the strange cryptic scrawl so common to the undergraduate. Summer clothing soon would yield to Springfield sweaters and sweats once the wind developed her October bite and her nasty snarl. And the smiles that seemed so abundant today would dissipate daily in inverse proportion to the hours spent behind textbooks the night before. Those fresh faces would soon show the first signs of wear. In short order, summer would be effectively dead. And only then would the fall semester properly have begun.

One thing dies, another is born. The seasons-as-metaphor would relate nicely to Mr. Poe's theme of death and rebirth in the afterlife. Might as well use that, Simon thought as he sorted out the pink attendance cards. Typical for the first day of class, someone had forgotten to fill out his name on the computerized admission card he had handed the instructor. Simon took a moment for a head count. He counted twenty-seven students seated, but he had counted twenty-eight cards. There was no computerized student ID number on the card and no computer printed name or address, but the card numbered 28 had been listed for POE 103 right there in black and pink.

The Dean of Admissions would not think kindly on a cash-paying customer having paid his good tuition dollars for diddleysquat because of a computer screw-up at the registrar's office. Some secretary - Ellen, maybe - would have a lot of explaining to do. But go explain how the cash-paying customer was not here and his card was. Neat trick.

No point in asking the class, he thought. They're all present and accounted for. Perhaps Poe's detective Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin could apply some healthy ratiocination to this one. 'A posteriori, the card exists in your hand but the student does not sit in your class. Fuck it, then.' He put the card into his coat pocket and promptly forgot about it.

Simon stepped behind his podium. "Good morning. Welcome to POE 103, a course I prefer to think of as an Edgar Allan Poe smorgasbord

rather than the sampler that your catalog suggests. If you'll permit me a slight digression, I'd like you to look outside this window for a moment." He walked the six paces to the half-opened window and pulled the blinds up so quickly they hissed. A light breeze blew Chambers' coffee-colored tie over his left shoulder.

"It's a lovely day, wouldn't you agree?" he began, pointing to the campus outside the window behind him as a weatherman might point to his map. "Sun shining. Light breeze blowing. I believe I even hear a few birds out there as well. All in all, a picture perfect day worthy of a Hallmark card."

The blonde coed in the third row glanced at the blonde coed seated to her right with a look that said 'Love your nails. When's this class over?'

Dr. Chambers continued undaunted. "Look at that old oak tree out there on the quad. Do you see it? The one that's all plush and green and so very much alive after what must be, oh, maybe two hundred years?"

Twenty-seven students gazed obligatorily at the old oak without a clue what in Christ the professor's point was.

"Two hundred winters she has shivered through, folks. Winters perhaps during which time Thomas Jefferson might have blown on his hands for warmth as he contemplated what words would go nicely following 'We hold these truths to be self-evident.' Winters when Abe Lincoln's cheeks might have glowed red as he agonized about the body-count required for his more perfect union. Winters when Edgar Allan Poe might have pulled his collar to his chin to brace himself against a stiff wind as he thought about talking ravens. Two hundred winters have tormented that old oak, 'chilling her, killing her.' And you can rest assured, class, that on another 'dull dark and soundless day in the autumn of the year' she'll see the last of those leaves blow off into the wind. Does anyone see my point?"

Silence. The kind of silence found only in graveyards and college classrooms. From the back of the room a bespectacled girl sheepishly raised her hand. Dr. Chambers quickly rifled through his pink cards.

"Yes? Miss . . .?"

"Brown. Theresa Brown. I think what you mean is that everything dies. That no matter how alive something may be today, that it will eventually wither away and die tomorrow, and that there's no getting away from it."

The two blonde coeds rolled their eyes. Dr. Chambers himself might have added a chorus of "Brown is the color of my true love's nose."

"That's quite true, Miss Brown. No matter how vibrant and peachy keen we might feel today, we all eventually keel into our mashed potatoes. And are there any other feelings about--?"

Another hand shot up, this one muscular with a small dagger tattoo on the shoulder. Dr. Chambers nodded to the student in the black Twisted Sister tank top. "Yes, Mr. . . .?"

". . . Yeah. Anderson. Mike. What you mean is like, dead things can come back to life too. Like that tree out there, or, you know, like Jason, Freddy Kruger . . . or whenever there's a revival of old Humphrey Bogart movies on cable."

Chambers should have seen this one coming. There would always be at least one Mike Anderson per class allotted to him.

And will this semester's real wise ass please stand up?

He stepped toward the burly sophomore with the razor sharp buzz cut and bent down so that he was face to face with him. Dr. Chambers simply stared at him and smiled.

For a moment Mike Anderson's eyes darted toward his classmates, as if he hoped one of them might offer another punchline that might divert the good professor. But no punchlines came. Dr. Chambers' smile disarmed him into venturing half a grin.

"And tell me, Mr. Anderson. How do you feel about life after death? Does that old tree out there hold any meaning for you? Perhaps it has occurred to you that maybe we should not whisper 'Nevermore' upon our death beds just because we are about to sleep the eternal sleep?"

Mike Anderson sat mute as if his tongue had been surgically removed. The red haired boy in the seat behind him broke the silence. "Maybe you should ask Mike if he really saw Elvis over at Phi Kappa's beer blast last night."

Giggles from the blondes.

Chambers sensed his advantage now. "And what of that, Mr. Anderson?" Dr. Chambers leaned forward, as if at any moment he might thrust both hands around the sophomore's throat. "What do you see when you've had your fill of the old barley juice? Would you take an oath that you didn't really see The King doing 'Hound Dog' last night while you chug-a-lugged that last cold one? I'd be willing to bet that after the last keg you might have sworn he was alive and kicking, wouldn't you? Hell, the two of you may have even sung a duet."

Mike Anderson stopped smiling.

Chambers turned toward the class. "And what of the rest of you? When in your lives has nice old Mr. Reality shaken hands with mean old Mr. Illusion? Maybe when you were twelve, when your deceased grandmother spoke to you from her casket that time you went to visit Happy Acres? Or maybe Grandma spoke to you in your dreams just last night? Ever picture Jim Morrison passing the joint to his pals Janis and Jimmi up there in rock and roll heaven? Maybe John Belushi doing Samurai Dead-Man for Gilda Radner in that great Studio-B in the sky?"

Chambers now even had the blondes' attention as he knelt between their desks and placed a hand on each of their shoulders. "Or, ladies, perhaps Studio-B is not up there, but is down here, and maybe old Freddy Astaire is puttin' on his top hat right alongside the rest of us. Maybe even right now in this room as I speak!" He walked forward and knelt down again, practically whispering into the ear of the frail black girl who sat nearest his podium, but the words were loud enough for everyone to hear. "'Yet mad am I not, and very surely do I not dream,' you say? But ah knows what ah sees, right?"

He turned toward the entire class. "Take another look at that old tree out there, gang, that old tree whose leaves were as dead as stones last winter. Look at that tree all plush and green and tell me death is our grand finale. Look at that tree and tell me for a fact you know that I am wrong. 'A mystery all insoluble . . . nor could I grapple with the shadowy fancies that crowded upon me as I pondered , 'perhaps you are thinking?"

Mike Anderson jotted down feverish notes. The blondes' mouths each hung open in either wonderment or bewilderment. Theresa Brown had not taken her eyes from the old oak tree. And the frail black girl's eyes seemed to bug out of her head as if she were one of those bakery fresh gingerbread cookies.

Now Chambers added his *pièce de résistance*. He stepped behind his podium and looked directly at each student seated before him. Reaching into his jacket pocket he put on his glasses as he leaned forward. "And after you've taken a long look, read the words of Mr. Edgar Allan Poe during these next few weeks, then come back and tell me for a fact that you know I am wrong. Tell me about life and death, tell me about dreams, and tell me which is the reality, which the illusion."

A mystery all insoluble, Dr. Simon Chambers thought. Like a goddamned pink attendance card that comes from out of nowhere.

Reality and illusion was a theme applicable to Simon Chambers' apartment. The illusion was that cleaning had not been one of Simon's specialties. But a first impression of the small walk-up apartment would be deceptive, for in reality there was disorder without dirt. Although books littered the floor and tables, they had been stacked neatly wherever they had been placed. The ones in the large cinder block book case had been stacked in piles rather than placed on-end with their spines showing. None of their titles mentioned anything about Edgar Allan Poe. These were dry, serious tomes: 'Grammatical English in the Twentieth Century', 'The Gothic Imagination', 'Romanticism and the Novel.' Poe's classic tales of terror Simon kept in a large crate by his bed to be read only amid the soft shadows of night.

Ellen was fifteen minutes late to a dinner that would have been fine fifteen minutes earlier but shortly might be consumed only by the garbage disposal. Already the spaghetti had boiled over and the meat sauce was good for maybe another minute before it also would be past its prime. Simon turned the stove to 'Lo' and covered the sauce before another angry bubble found its way over the top of the pot. He poured the spaghetti into a colander and hoped Ellen would arrive before it had turned into a gelatinous pile of goop. The sauce would simmer. So would he.

Ellen had also been late on her first day of class two years ago. She had apologized as she dashed into Simon's classroom with the pink card registered for POE 103. Unlike today, it was a rainy first day and her pink card was wet when she practically stuffed it into his hand before she took her seat. Trying so hard to be unobtrusive, she was nothing but obtrusive in the attempt. Eleanor P. Dogan her card read, but she corrected him the first time he called her that. After class she confided to him, "'Eleanor' makes me sound so dowdy, like Mrs. FDR. I'd prefer something more mysterious, something Poe-like. Maybe Virginia, Ligeia, or how about Lady Madeline?" She paused for a moment before adding, "I'm not crazy about Annabel."

Simon suggested she might try 'Lenore' if she wanted to go for the full Poe effect. "Eleanor . . . Lenore Hey, I like that!" she had said, smiling at the thought. "Maybe in my next life, huh?"

"Maybe," Simon answered. But it was Ellen's current life he had found interesting. That and her long dark hair, still glistening from the rain. Eleanor Dogan had the darkest raven-black hair. That morning was the only time in his career he invited a student to dinner. And that night was the only time in his life he had invited a student to his bed.

"Ellen, thy beauty is to me like those Nicéan barks of yore," he whispered into her ear while Ellen giggled like a school girl that first night beneath his covers.

"Oh, Mr. Poe, you're making me so wet . . ."

Sensing his advantage, Simon grinned. "Quoth the Raven, 'Nevermore.'"

"No, no!" Ellen had laughed. "Much more! Much much more!"

Simon felt like some vaudevillian juggler trying to keep three flying plates in the air as he attempted to salvage the sauce, check the spaghetti, and peek in on the garlic bread warming in the toaster oven. The three knocks on his apartment door could not have come at a more inopportune time.

"Who's that rapping on my chamber door?" he yelled with a trace of irritation directed more at the pots and pans.

"Cute. Real cute, professor. Let me in!" Ellen's voice could have belonged to a girl of fourteen.

"You're late, and I've got my own problems! Use your key!"

"Can't. I haven't got my hands free. I think maybe you'd better come

out here, Professor. I look pretty ridiculous standing here in your hallway and you might want to see why before your neighbors do."

The spaghetti could wait. Ellen obviously couldn't. Simon opened the door. With one look at her his mouth flew open.

"What the--?"

"Okay, okay! I know I'm impulsive," she said bustling past him using both hands while struggling with the large box-like bird cage. "But this seemed so appropriate, it being your first day back in class with our pal Edgar. And you know how sentimental we young girls are. Humor me and say hello to your new roommate."

She placed the cage on the kitchen table and Simon stared at the coal-black bird inside. The bird cocked its head and eyed him right back without so much as a blink. Its feathers shone like black marble.

Then this ebony bird beguiling my sad fancy into smiling . . .

The words from *The Raven* simply appeared in his head, like a page had turned inside Simon's brain. Poe's words brought with them a sudden uncomfortable thought.

"Oh, Jesus, Ellen. It's not a raven, is it? Christ, I can't--"

"Relax, Monsieur Dupin. Herbie's a mynah bird and completely tame. He only looks Gothic. You want me to take him out and show you--?"

"No . . . no, let me just absorb this for a minute. " Simon sat in front of the cage and watched the bird as it watched him. Occasionally it extended the long neck without taking its eyes from him, while its pupils dilated like small kaleidoscopes. "Herbie, huh? You couldn't be more creative?"

Ellen sat on Simon's knee and watched the bird climbing the bars of the cage. "You're the Poe expert. Wasn't Herbie Usher the brother

Roderick never liked to talk about?"

"No, that was little Zeppo Usher." He kissed her softly on the cheek.

"Better watch it, lover. I've still got this cough I can't seem to kick, and you may not feel like sharing it with me." As if on cue, Ellen hacked a cough that caused the mynah to flutter from his perch clear to the other side of his cage.

The cough made Simon wonder if Ellen had lately been sun bathing inside a meat freezer. He hadn't recalled her mentioning having a cold. "Remember 'Cask of Amontillado'? That guy Fortunato also said 'I shall not die of a cough.' You'd better have a doctor look at--"

"--all right, all right, enough with the Poe witticisms," she said, unable to conceal the rasp in her voice. "I'm okay, really. But about the bird . . . I brought enough seeds to last him a few days, but you'll have to supply the veggies. The guy at the store said he's a talker, so he'll be good company for you." She made a puckering sound with her lips and the mynah immediately moved toward her again. "Besides, since you obviously are not ready to risk your reputation by living with the girl who works in the registrar's office, I figured maybe you needed a companion you could put back into a cage when you were through playing." Ellen's eyes dropped, avoiding Simon's. "Sorry, I guess that was a bitchy thing to say." She used the moment as an excuse to clear her throat. "So, you gonna feed me, or what? I believe I smell burning garlic. You expecting vampires?"

"Christ, my spaghetti sauce!" Simon practically spilled Ellen from his lap as he raced to the stove. The sauce had turned a dark mud color, the garlic bread charcoal. "Looks like dinner may no longer be a problem."

But something else was . . .

Ellen had mentioned the registrar's office, and a flash cube suddenly went off inside his head. "Listen, while I'm here trying to determine

whether we should give Domino's Pizza our business, reach into my sports coat. It's on the couch. Maybe you can make sense out of something for me."

Ellen rifled through the pocket of the Boston tweed. "Yep. It's a pink card. You use it to take attendance, right? Gee, this is easy. Can we play some more? You know, maybe I can trade in the bird for a new sports jacket."

"--The bird stays and so does the jacket," Simon interrupted. He carried a bowl of spaghetti covered in sauce that was more black than red and placed it in front of her alongside the fluttering Herbie. "Listen, this affects you too. There's no name on that card. The computer only issues a card once a student has registered for the course, and his name should be on it the moment the computer spits it out to avoid class over-crowding, right? And don't students usually sign the cards themselves so no one will steal them? That's always been the time-honored paranoid Springfield College tradition."

"Yes to your questions, and no to this spaghetti," Ellen answered, ending her sentence with a cough she quickly stifled with the back of her hand. "To tell you the truth, I don't know how this could have happened, but it could mean my ass if anyone finds out. Keep it to yourself, and I'll ask around the office. Somehow that card got past me. How'd it wind up in your class if no one dropped it off?"

"My very senses reject their own evidence. Yet mad am I not," Simon answered in his best Vincent Price voice, allowing his teeth to show sardonically as he smiled. He never had tried to memorize the line, but it seemed to fit. "From 'The Black Cat.' Impressed?"

"Very. You're ready to face Regis if he ever has a Poe night. Now let's see if you remember the number to Domino's Pizza. Maybe we can pass this spaghetti off on Herbie. Leave the card with me. I'll track down student 28. Now beat it!" She held her fork as if she intended to stab him in the thigh.

Simon hopped over a small pile of books and searched for the cordless phone that he always managed to lose between the cushions on his couch. He remembered he had left it in the bedroom and looked over at Ellen who coughed thickly as she played with the copper bell hanging in the mynah's cage. The clang sent a pinprick to Simon's frontal lobe.

Words, lots of them, filled his head, and his brain felt like a whirling dervish.

. . . To the tintinnabulation that so musically wells from the bells bells bells bells bells bells bells . . .

Without any help from him, those pages had flipped again, and were turning faster.

At the bedroom door Simon turned to watch her as he rubbed his temple. Ellen had a way with animals, no doubt about--

God, this hurts!

Herbie cooed and gurgled at her, having one hell of a good time with that bell.

Jesus!

Brazen bells! What a tale of terror now their turbulency tells!

For a moment he felt a wave of dizziness. What in the name of God--?

For the love of God, Montresor!

What kind of thoughts were these? With the back of his hand Simon wiped off the beginnings of a cold sweat from his forehead. Was this the kind of shit that came from reading so much Poe? He stepped into the bedroom and shut the door behind him, leaning against it.

Blood, gore, and pizza. Talk about free association.

Simon sat on the edge of the bed and found the phone half hidden under a pillow. Inside his brain a Concorde revved its engines. He had to dial the number twice, and the kid on the other end asked him if he could speak up.

He had been halfway through ordering a large pepperoni pie with extra cheese when he heard Ellen scream.

Excerpt from Unearthing the Real Edgar Allan Poe

Doctoral Thesis of Simon Chambers

Published August 1994

*From Pp. 6-7: The Disease of Blood Common
Among Poe's Women*

The common denominator in the deaths of the women whom Edgar Allan Poe loved was that each died of tuberculosis, or consumption as it was then known. Poe's mother, Elizabeth Arnold Poe, died at the age of twenty-four of tuberculosis when he was four. Francis Allan, Poe's beloved foster mother, died of tuberculosis in 1829 when he was twenty. Virginia Clemm, his fourteen year old child-bride (and first cousin) whom he married when he was twenty-eight, died of tuberculosis seven years later in 1844 when he was thirty-five.

The true Poe-phile has only to trace the man's history to learn that virtually every female he had dared to love died shortly thereafter of this 'disease of blood.' Poe wrote two lines that confirm this:

*"I would not love except where Death
Was mingling his with Beauty's breath."*

Simon Chambers entered Room 14-B without having slept the night before. No students had arrived yet, and he felt grateful for that. The first streaks of the morning sun had begun to filter through the blinds of the empty classroom, but his head throbbed too much to pull them open. Instead he buried his face in his hands wondering where he would find the strength to spend two hours teaching "The Tell-Tale Heart" after what he had just been through.

Ellen's screams had become grotesque gargles for air as if explosives had been set off inside her. The night nurse at Saint Mary's had said that there was nothing more Simon could do if he hung around outside Ellen's room, that the tests usually showed something like this looked much worse than it probably was. If she were right, her coughing seizure sure seemed one hell of an illusion.

But what about the blood? That was real.

"You're going to be okay," he had insisted as an orderly wheeled Ellen into the examination room. "We have a bird now."

"I shall not die of a cough," she answered, but her smile seemed unconvincing. "Besides, I intend to die in your arms looking into your tear-filled eyes and ruining you for any other woman."

He did not let go of her hand. "Dreamer," he told her.

The large ugly brown smear near Simon's breast pocket suggested an obscene Rorschach test. There had been very much blood last night, mouthfuls of it, and Ellen's pupils had dilated, like . . .

. . . like two tiny kaleidoscopes. Like the eyes of the mynah bird still perched in his kitchen.

. . . never flitting! Still is sitting! Still is sitting!

That was the other thing Simon had been through. During the night as he waited in the hospital corridor, the words written by Poe over a hundred and forty years ago had bored their way through to his consciousness like voracious rats. The throbbing inside his head became an increasing tattoo of jungle drums with occasional interruptions from Mr. Poe.

"Are you trying to tell me something, Edgar, ol' pal?" Simon had muttered outside the room where Ellen lay semi-conscious. "The doctors won't tell me what she's got, buddy, but I think you know something they don't. Is that what this transcendental seminar is all about, my good friend? Will you let me in on it?"

There in the corridor Simon felt his lips move as if some distant puppeteer were pulling his strings. Although the words came from him he had the odd sensation that he had not selected them. Simon had no idea why he even spoke them.

"I would not love except where Death . . . was mingling his with Beauty's breath."

This morning the classroom seemed smaller, almost suffocating, as if the walls might at any moment grind together and squash him like a roach.

Had he ever felt so claustrophobic? The tightness reached his lungs, and Simon pushed his chair from behind the desk. He needed air badly. And he needed light. The hell with the percussion symphony inside his head. He tugged the cord of the blinds and squinted his eyes shut against the sun's glare. He pulled the window open and breathed deeply. Filling his lungs he slowly exhaled and opened his eyes.

He opened his eyes wide.

The oak tree out there on the quad, plush and green yesterday morning, bowed in the breeze like an arthritic hag. There was not a single leaf on it.

Excerpt From Unearthing the Real Edgar Allan Poe

Doctoral Thesis of Simon Chambers

From Pp. 26-27: Poe's Obsessive Fear of Enclosure

The obsessed character was a favorite of Poe because the author/poet was quite an obsessed character himself as demonstrated by his themes of death and burial.

Notice how bells are used as a symbol of death in his poem, "The Bells." Possibly he selected bells to symbolize the tentative nature of man's mortality because he was so terrified of dying prematurely. In fact, he insisted upon being buried with a bell tied to his toe. He claimed he intended to wiggle his toe in the event he might be accidentally buried alive.

Although Sigmund Freud would not be born for another seven years following Poe's death, it would not be inaccurate to say that Dr. Freud might have diagnosed the man as a claustrophobic.

That tree, that goddamned barren clump of rotted oak. It was out there as leafless and dead as a gigantic chunk of driftwood for everyone to see. On a campus this large, people were going to have questions. But Simon knew that old oak was there because of him. "How do you feel about life after death, Professor Chambers? Do the dead remain dead in those tiny little boxes?" That's the question the tree had been asking. And maybe someone else had been asking that question of him, someone who had been dead for over one hundred and forty years, who somehow had been able to. . .

. . . But no, these were not the thoughts of a sane man, were they?

"True! - nervous - very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? "

Simon hadn't showered or shaved. Nor had he changed his clothes since last night, and he looked the part of the lunatic narrator whose words he read to his class.

"Well, what do you think?" he asked his POE 103 sophomores, going through the motions of teaching while his thoughts ricocheted from the leafless oak outside the classroom window, to Saint Mary's Emergency Ward, and back. "Is Poe's narrator 'mad'? Do we believe him simply because he tells us he is not?"

And what of your sanity, Simon, old man? Do you believe you are sane when all the evidence around you increasingly suggests that you might be conducting your next class in a rubber room? Another game of checkers, Mr. Bonaparte?

Adele Popper had a ready response from her seat directly in front of Simon's podium. "I think he believes it's sane to kill the old man because he dislikes the old man's eye. But we know that's insane. His sanity exists as an illusion in his head. The reality is that he is insane."

Oh, that's good, Adele. You're really up on your doubletalk. Here's to my old pals Reality and Illusion again. Shake hands, boys, and come out fighting.

Simon responded to the coed with words that sounded distant and mechanical. "So you're saying sanity is in the eye of the beholder. One man's sanity is another man's loony toon, right? Yeah . . . Yeah, I can buy that. But the real question is . . . is sanity real, or is it an illusion?" His voice cracked as he paced before his class like a caged animal, running his hand through his hair while speaking more to himself than to his sophomores. "We know this narrator is crazy as a wedge

because he chops this old guy up into puppy chow. But to him this is brilliance, not craziness. Even we readers can see this is not a stupid man. After all, he has planned the perfect murder. Similarly, some say Poe was a genius. But others say old Edgar was as mad as a hatter. Which is the reality? Which is the illusion? How real does an illusion have to be before it becomes real? Do only the insane see illusions? Maybe a requirement of insanity is that you have to be a fucking genius!"

Simon stopped talking. It took him a moment to realize he had been shouting the last sentences to his class.

"Dr. Chambers?" the soft spoken black girl named Katisi asked, practically whispering to him from the seat nearest the podium. "Are you feeling all right?" She was looking at the dried blood that blotted his shirt.

But why will you say that I am mad? Why will you . . . ?

Shut up, goddammit! Please, just shut up and leave me alone!

"I'm fine. I'm just perfect," he answered as he paced to the window and pointed toward the quad. "But maybe you should ask that tree out there how she's been feeling lately. Not too good, if you ask me, judging by the way the old girl looks today. Not too good at all." His voice had difficulty forming itself around the words he uttered. "No, not too goddamned good at-"

Twenty seven students looked towards the quad. They looked back at Dr. Simon Chambers as if he had just dropped his pants to show them his religion.

A rock slide began inside his head. He wanted to pound against the wall and scream "Let me out of here, goddammit! Make this stop! Let me out of this damned room!" Instead he forced himself to look out the window at the old oak.

She stood there like a proud centerpiece on the quad, a centerpiece that was as plush and green as she had been in April.

Or, yesterday.

The day was shaping up to be a real pisser.

Simon stared into his bathroom mirror. He had not combed his hair in over twelve hours and had not shaved in twice that. He looked at his reflection as if studying the face of a stranger. Then he looked at the magazine photograph in his hand that had been part of an article he had photocopied for his doctoral thesis. Studying the photo as carefully as he had his face, he gazed back at his reflection. He could not remember ever having seen himself so haggard.

Yet despite his tiredness, Simon's face did not appear as wan as did the face of the man in the photo. His eyes seemed more alert, less deep set, certainly not as haunted.

Nor was there much similarity between Simon's sandy hair and the man's coarse black hair, despite both being in bad need of some heavy duty blow drying. Simon held the rat's-tail end of his comb to his upper lip to create a make-shift mustache.

No resemblance, he told himself. No resemblance at all. Sorry, Edgar, old pal, but we haven't got a match. Don Pardo, what consolation prizes do we have for these nice people?

Simon felt ridiculous for the thoughts he had been having the past few hours. Amazing what stress and staying up a few hours past your bedtime could do. Your body's metabolism short circuited while your brain jumped out of your head and shouted "Booga-Booga!"

He carried the cordless phone into the kitchen and sat at the table where last night's spaghetti had turned brown and where Herbie

perched inside his cage. The bird's pointed orange beak had a thick discolored smudge, and a few of his breast feathers seemed pasty. Ellen must have coughed a spray of blood right into the mynah's cage. The bird watched Simon without moving.

No pages had turned inside Simon's head since he had left his class in mid-lecture an hour ago. Excuse me, won't you kids? Teacher's mind seems to have taken the express train out. Don't forget tomorrow's assignment. Call it a momentary lapse into insanity. Hell, any good lawyer would.

Simon poured the pile of spaghetti down the disposal. Although his brain still ached dully, he had begun to feel better once he had time to sort out the last few hours. After a day like he had just experienced reality could easily begin to look like an episode of America's Funniest Home Videos.

He leaned toward the mynah and placed both hands on either side of the cage. "Herbie, my feathered friend, it would appear that Mr. Poe has taken his marbles and gone home. Let's hope he hasn't also taken my marbles."

Ellen still was lying alone in the Emergency Ward at Saint Mary's. Simon would catch a few hours' sleep and visit her tonight. For now a phone call would have to do. He dialed her room number as the mynah cocked his head, watching him cut through the administrative hospital rhubarb-rhubarb of establishing a connection. Finally Simon heard her pick up the phone.

"Hello, professor," she answered in a voice that sounded as if it had passed through sandpaper. "I knew it'd be you."

Simon turned on his cheerful voice. "You mean a tracheoscopy and bronchoscopy can make you psychic?"

"No," she answered, clearing her throat. "They can make you sound like Lauren Bacall. That and all the happy pills they've been pouring

into me. But that's just the up side. You want to hear me croak the down side?"

"Are we talking bad news?" The cheerful voice had begun to dissipate.

"We're not talking. Not for very long, anyway, with all this gravel in my throat. The doctor says I shouldn't put too much stress on my - what'd he call it? - my pleural cavity. Dammit, you know I've never touched a cigarette in my whole life!" Ellen's voice cracked, but Simon supposed it was not entirely because of the gravel in her throat.

"Tell me."

"The doctor came to see me about an hour ago. It's my lungs. Caused by the - wait, I wrote this down - the tubercle bacilli. Sound familiar, Poe-man?"

Simon covered the mouthpiece so Ellen would not hear him gasp. "Tuberculosis? Jesus, Ellen. Are they -?"

"Does the Pope ride a bicycle?" She said this without the slightest hint of humor." Nothing's sure until they run more tests. Funny thing is, I can go home tomorrow. Simon, I don't want you getting upended over this, because if you start to go, I will too. Promise. . ."

"Okay," he said, hoping he sounded sincere.

"Listen, I wrote something else down here for you. I had time to kill this morning when it was just the phone and me here, so I called Elsa at the registrar's office about who might belong to pink card 28. She double-checked everyone who registered on that day, and -"

"God, Ellen. That's not import-" Simon caught himself. He realized this was something she had to do for herself to reestablish normalcy in a world that overnight had metamorphosed into a David Lynch movie. "Okay. Tell me. Somehow today I'd even believe it if the kid's name was Eddie Albert Poe." Simon was no longer certain he had meant that as a joke.

"No, nothing quite as Rod Serling as that. Your mystery student has just your normal garden variety Waspish name." Ellen's voice seemed as if it were played on a badly scratched 45. "Listen, I'll have to hang up. I'm beginning to fade here."

"Okay. What's the kid's name?" Simon no longer gave a damn who the kid was.

"Wait . . . wrote it down . . . you got a pencil? Here it is. It's Wilson. William Wilson . . ."

Simon hesitated, gulping air away from the phone's mouthpiece, not wanting Ellen to hear his reaction. She had enough problems. He didn't need a pencil because he knew the name well. He hung up with Ellen not having said a word about it, knowing she would have thought he had batshit in his bell tower. Anyone would have.

William Wilson. It seemed like a common name. It was a common name.

It was also the title of a story written by Mr. Edgar Allan Poe in 1839. Simon had referred to it in his doctoral dissertation describing Poe's characters' schizoid leaps from sanity to madness. It seemed that everywhere William Wilson went, he ran into another man also named William Wilson who wore the same clothing and spoke in the same voice.

Simon flipped through the pages of Poe's Complete Tales & Poems and located the story, searching for the passage he knew would determine his mental balance during the upcoming hours of the night.

"Years flew while I experienced no relief. Villain! - At Rome, with how untimely yet with how special an officiousness, stepped he between me and my ambition! at Vienna, too - at Berlin - and at Moscow . . . And again, and again, in secret communion with my own spirit, would I demand the questions 'Who is he? - whence came he? - and what are his objects?'"

Wilson was, in fact, a mirror image of the story's narrator himself, an image that asked nothing of him but simply took what he wanted when the time was right. And what he wanted was William Wilson's identity.

That apparently was what the late Mr. Edgar Allan Poe wanted of Dr. Simon Chambers.

He sat at the kitchen table in front of the mynah and reached into the cage. The bird obediently hopped upon his hand without a flutter. He brought the bird level with his face close enough so the mynah's beak practically touched his nose. Simon stared directly into its eyes as if studying it, and the bird cocked its head to stare back. For a moment Simon remained silent, just looking at it. Then he suddenly shook his hand hard.

"Hello, pretty bird . . . Hellohellohello . . . Come on, Herb, ol' pal. Humor me, okay? You're a mynah bird, for Chrissakes. You're supposed to talk. Just give me one fucking 'hello' and we'll call it a day."

The mynah looked at Simon. The twin kaleidoscopes for one moment held Simon mesmerized and he felt himself almost nod off.

"Oh, you're clever, Herb . . . very clever for a dumb bird. Nice try, pal. But I'm a whole lot smarter."

He shook his hand again, harder this time.

"Say it!" he demanded, and the fluttering bird almost lost its footing. "You know the word I'm talking about, you goddamned buzzard! You don't need me to teach it to you! Say it!" Again he shook his hand but the mynah held fast this time without ruffling a feather. Like tiny spikes, its talons dug scarlet needle tracks into the back of Simon's hand.

For a moment the mynah gurgled, seeming to imitate the sound Ellen

had made when she had been choking on her own blood. Suddenly it stood proudly erect and extended its beak toward him as if attempting to whisper to him. Simon leaned forward.

It did whisper to him. One word.

"Nevermore . . ."

Excerpts From Unearthing the Real Edgar Allan Poe

Doctoral Thesis of Simon Chambers

From p. 56 : Poe's Belief in Life After Death

Perhaps no word so much symbolized Edgar Allan Poe's philosophy more than the word he coined : "Nevermore." True, Poe experienced immense grief over the loss of his loved ones, and his poetry clearly expressed his agony of "never more" seeing the women he loved. Yet just as clearly, he expressed the belief that the dead do not necessarily remain dead. Like Poe's raven,(the reincarnated 'lost Lenore'?) he believed death simply takes a different form. It mattered little to him whether that form were spiritual, undead, or vampiric.

Because to Poe it appeared that death was the ultimate illusion.

Is death, therefore, an example of "nevermore"? If Poe could answer us, the answer would be 'Not always. Sometimes there is more.'

From p. 59 : Poe's Death Mirrors His Life

Three times tombstones had been constructed for Poe's grave site, and three times those tombstones were destroyed under rather unusual circumstances: the first was destroyed by a freight train as it sat in the mason's yard awaiting delivery to the grave site; the second was destroyed by fire; the third by earthquake. The current tombstone is often ornamented by Poe-philas with acanthus leaves and a lyre wreathed with laurel, symbols of immortality. Above his name, this current tombstone contains the words "Shadow of Death."

In addition, several curators of the Poe houses in both Baltimore and Philadelphia have reported hearing footsteps accompanied by mysterious openings and closings of doors during the midnight hours.

Perhaps Edgar Allan Poe simply does not choose to remain dead . . .

Perhaps Edgar Allan Poe simply does not choose to remain dead.

Three destroyed tombstones. That cryptic word, nevermore. A bell tied to his toe as he lay in his casket. Death's mysteries, all insoluble.

Simon lay on the couch in the dark more tired than he had ever been in his life, yet unable to sleep, floating somewhere in the limbo of a waking dream. The mynah bird had perched upon the bookcase and in the darkness cast a vulture-like shadow on the wall.

Confused thoughts rolled through Simon's head like darkening thunder clouds. He struggled to push the clouds away.

Maybe the thing to do was to beat Mr. Poe at his own game. How would his detective Dupin handle this? Perhaps some good old home-grown Poe-style ratiocination might be in order, some ingenious method of discovery worthy of Poe's inspector that would render the impossible possible by the sheer power of logical deduction.

So what do we know, a posteriori, as the man says?

- Why, a very famous dead man seems to be having a rather nasty influence on this nice professor's life during the past twenty-four hours. To wit, a tubercular lover, a schizoid tree out there on the quad, a mynah who believes he's a raven, and our good pal William Wilson. And let's not forget the Poe symposium going on inside our head.

And why is this famous dead man bothering the nice professor?

-Ah, that we do not know.

So how do we find out?

-Elementary, my friend. We talk to the dead man.

A cheap dry red table wine did the trick. Although not much of a drinker, Simon kept a small bottle of cabernet for nights when he had trouble sleeping. He downed the entire contents of Mr. Poe's drink of choice.

Finally sleep came.

The small apartment slowly revolved in the dark like a sluggishly moving carousel, picking up speed as it turned. The floor slipped away from under Simon's couch. The revolutions became a whirlpool, spinning him faster in mid-air. Caught inside a madman's dream, Simon Chambers fell into a swirling deep sleep.

The thundering twister spun and tilted him inside a dizzying gyroscope, flinging off the detritus of reality as it reeled. The whirling

slowed, then stopped. Simon's sleep metamorphosed into fragmented wakefulness. Gathering what remained of his senses he managed to get to his feet. Descending into the maelstrom he stood inside a small darkened study .

The windows are covered by silk curtains of deep purple. Papers and books litter the floor and desk, although some are arranged in neat piles. At the desk sits a man in a black velvet robe, his face almost ashen in the dim lamp light. The man leans on his elbow resting his head in his right hand, his eyes dark and haunted. A pen sits in a small container of ink as if it had been placed there and forgotten. The man appears lost in his thoughts.

Simon approaches the desk and glances at the sheets of paper that cover it. He picks up the one directly in front of the man seated there and reads the single sentence written on it.

"Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary . . ."

The man does not see him.

Simon hears a sound coming from another room, from downstairs. He walks to the door and listens through it. Someone is playing a piano. Simon slowly pushes the door open and it squeaks on its hinges.

The man at the desk does not hear him.

Simon follows the spiral staircase down, grasping the metal railing with each step. The stairs are small and he has to move slowly.

In the dim light of the parlor a woman sits behind the piano near the foot of the staircase with her back toward him. She is dressed entirely in white and her gown seems to flow over the piano bench. Her long dark hair falls in ringlets down her back. Turning the page of sheet music before her she continues playing a somber waltz. The music is as melancholy as it is beautiful.

The large ebony grandfather clock by the staircase begins to chime the hour.

It is twelve o'clock. Midnight.

The woman at the piano stops playing. She sits on the piano bench without moving and without making a sound.

Simon approaches the woman from behind and places his hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. Continue playing. Please. You play beautifully." He looks down at the piano keys as if to encourage her to continue. A wave of nausea fills his stomach.

His mouth opens in a soundless scream.

The ivory keys are smeared with blood, and reddish gore drips down the sides of every key. The woman seated behind the piano turns and looks up at Simon. Thick streaks of blood drool down the sides of her mouth. The entire front of her white dress sops with it. She smiles at him, and blood smears her teeth.

Simon tries to scream but manages only a weak gasp.

The woman has the darkest raven-black hair. And she has Ellen's face.

He can not scream. Nor can he move. Simon feels as if his body has suddenly been encased in cement. From behind him he hears heavy footsteps on the stairwell, but he is unable to turn.

From the bottom of the staircase, another voice speaks, a man's voice. "Perhaps, professor, a cat has got your tongue? A very black cat."

The man in the black velvet robe takes Simon's limp hand in his and clasps it with his other hand as if he were about to introduce himself. "But of course introductions are not necessary, are they?" he says smiling, showing his teeth. "We've known each other for quite a while, you and I, and I believe you have already met Virginia, my wife." He

walks to the woman at the piano and sits beside her, taking the woman's bloody hand into his. He pats it as one might pat the hand of a child.

He turns and stands before Simon. "And of course this introduction has been somewhat expected. In fact, you could say I have gone to great trouble arranging for it." He looks directly into Simon's eyes, and Simon can not turn away. "Mesmerism, Dr. Chambers, or hypnosis as your modern doctors prefer to call it. But, of course you have already read 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar.' If the dead can be mesmerized, professor, you of course can understand how simple it is to arrange for a little dream such as the one you are having. A stroke of genius, wouldn't you agree? A few words written by the immortal Edgar Allan Poe, whispered to you and your friend who works in the registrar's office, and one can be made to believe in metamorphosing oak trees, pink cards that do not exist, intuitive ravens, and perhaps tooth fairies. 'Yet mad am I not, and very surely do I not dream. . .' Untrue, professor, for we most certainly do dream. And each of us is certainly just a little bit mad."

Simon's lips move but no words form on them. He has given up his attempts to scream, for there now is only one thing he really needs to know. But his lips can form only the soundless words as his face contorts in a grotesque frozen mask.

"... Why me? "

"Do you really have to ask, Dr. Chambers?" the man says. "You already know the answer. You might say it's right in front of you. Virginia bears a rather striking resemblance to someone you know, doesn't she? My dear wife lives with no other thought 'than to live and be loved by me', as a famous poet once wrote. But she is ill, very ill, as you can see. The incurable disease of blood, I fear, and for so long I believed there was nothing I could do to alleviate her suffering. But I was very much mistaken, Dr. Chambers. You see, I discovered that you and your Ellen may be of help to my poor wife. I believe that Virginia and your friend could become very close friends, very close

indeed. Perhaps as close as you and I. You need not ask why I chose you."

And that is true, for Simon knows the answer. Mr. Poe has no real interest in Simon Chambers. But he has spent one and a half centuries searching for his lost Lenore. And now he has found her.

Except she is the lost Eleanor!

Edgar Allan Poe and Eleanor P. Dogan. William Wilson and William Wilson. Soul mates in life. And in death. The disease of blood, the common denominator of all the women whom Edgar Allan Poe had ever loved. Another embrace with death for Mr. Edgar Allan Poe and his dying lover.

Death, the ultimate illusion . . .

But sometimes there is more.

The man rises from the piano bench and walks over to Simon. "Allow me to borrow a page from your POE 103 notes, Dr. Chambers. You are perhaps thinking that this is a dream, an illusion, and that nothing here is real? But it was your dream that brought you to me, and you and I are quite real. Can you tell me how real the events of your waking hours have been when you have questioned the evidence of your own eyes? You have read the words of Mr. Edgar Allan Poe, professor. Tell me about life and death, tell me about dreams, and tell me which is the reality, which the illusion."

The woman with Ellen's face rises to her feet to stand by her husband's side. Simon can see the worship in her dark eyes as she takes her lover's hand. She seems to caress it as a child might, holding it close to her face. She gazes at the man whose hand she holds, and a look of agreement passes between them. The husband has silently issued a request of his wife and she has consented. She walks over to Simon as if she intends to embrace him, placing both arms tightly around his neck.

The young woman is close enough to see clearly. Behind her blood-stained teeth is an almost blinding whiteness, and when she smiles her teeth appear very sharp.

She pulls his face down to hers, her breath as soft as an angel's kiss, and whispers gently into his ear.

"Nevermore, my love."

And she sinks her teeth deep into his neck . . .

The alarm hadn't gone off in the bedroom. Or perhaps it had, but he had been so deep in sleep he hadn't heard it from the couch where he had slept the night. The Boston tweed sports jacket lay over him like a shroud.

Ellen pulled the drapes open and bright sun washed over the room. "Wake up, professor! POE 103 awaits, and your woman has been pardoned by the belles of Saint Mary's!" She poked his shoulder, lightly at first, then she put some English into it. "C'mon! It's bad enough you don't call me all night like you promised, but you don't even have the decency to be sleeping naked in your bed when I get here. You're just lucky I'm so high on the crap they shot into me at the hospital that I don't give a flying--"

"--What time is it? Is it morning?" His neck ached and he had good reason to understand why. He turned his collar so as not to expose the two puncture holes he suspected were there.

"Eight-thirty in the a.m. We might even have time for a quickie. The doctor says I can do everything I used to do, so long as I take my medication."

He looked at Ellen and reached out his hand to stroke her cheek. "Will you be able to play the piano again?"

She smiled broadly. "Jesus, you know better than to throw a straight

line like that at me. Wait a minute! Did you hear something?" Ellen put her finger to his lips. "Shhh! . . . It sounded like, like . . ." She looked down at his big toe. "Very cute. Did Herbie do this, or are you afraid you may forget my birthday?"

He looked down at his feet, wiggled his toes, and listened to the tinny clang of the mynah bird's bell. He smiled, a broad smile that showed his teeth. "Why, there appears to be a bell tied to my toe."

Ellen looked at him out of the corner of her eye as if he had just told her he had learned how to fly.

"A unique idea of mine, don't you think? I intend to wear this every day of our lives together. And whenever I wish to think of you, I need only wiggle my toes." He took Ellen into his arms and kissed her gently. "And it will remind me to tell you every day how very much I love you, and how very much I will always love you. And you shall live with no other thought than to live and be loved by me."

Ellen looked at him quizzically. "Am I in the right apartment?"

He smiled. "Indeed you are."

"Oh, Mr. Poe. You're making me so wet," she giggled.

He took Ellen's hand in his and patted it as one might pat the hand of a child.