



Edgar A. Poe

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There have been several stimulating reinterpretations of Poe's writing in recent years, but a full-fledged, accurate, scholarly and readable life has not been available. Kenneth Silverman has remedied this deficiency by producing an engrossing life of the artist, rooted in a sensitivity to psychology and sources, and providing succinct, perceptive reading of the entire Poe canon.

As his subtitle indicates, Silverman traces the biographical thread in Poe's poetry, criticism, and fiction, contending that he never recovered from his mother's early death and his ambiguous plight as an orphan supported but never actually adopted by John Allan. Over and over again, Poe returns to the death of the loved one, the ideal woman, beautiful and maternal, the ethereal creature to whom Poe and his various narrators look for sustenance even while dreading the inevitable approach of death and the reanimation of the beloved dead one in the imagination of the bereaved one.

Silverman is no heavy-handed Freudian, and his biography is not thesis-ridden. On the contrary, he approaches Poe's life and work as a single story upon which Poe worked an extraordinary number of variations. In the notes, Silverman reveals the body of psychological theory on which his interpretation rests. It is too important to ignore, but he does not claim more for it than he can demonstrate in his narrative.

Silverman also solves the problem of potting the plots of Poe's work by giving summaries in several appendices. Poe aficionados, on the other hand, can relish the narrative as it plunges directly into interpretation which assumes basic familiarity with plot elements.

This is an exemplary biography, a major contribution not only to Poe scholarship but to American literary biography.

Sources for Further Study

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Edgar A. Poe: Edgar A. Poe

The Washington Post Book World. XXI, November 24, 1991, p. 1.

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