

# The Bells

by Edgar Allan Poe



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# Notes

## What is a literary classic and why are these classic works important to the world?

A literary classic is a work of the highest excellence that has something important to say about life and/or the human condition and says it with great artistry. A classic, through its enduring presence, has withstood the test of time and is not bound by time, place, or customs. It speaks to us today as forcefully as it spoke to people one hundred or more years ago, and as forcefully as it will speak to people of future generations. For this reason, a classic is said to have universality.

Poe's stories and poems are remarkable, not only for an unusual anxiety about life, a preoccupation with loss, an all-consuming terror, and a unique perspective on death, but also for their rich mixture of beauty, the sensual, and the supernatural. Many readers wonder whether Poe's odd perspectives were the result of his unconventional lifestyle, but the debate over whether drugs or alcohol fueled his imagination and caused his death is inconclusive.

Most modern critics recognize the emotional difficulties that Poe experienced in his life, but they also doubt that binge drinking and opium use were the inspirations for his fascination with the macabre. It is just as likely that Poe's series of wrenching losses contributed to a lifelong struggle with depression. His mother and two other women who served as mother figures to him, died prematurely. His wife was ill for years before she succumbed to tuberculosis, and a fiancée rejected him.

It is obvious that an artist as sensitive as Poe would reflect this pain in his writings. In addition, it is well known that he revised his work painstakingly. The hours that Poe spent revising his work also belie any claim that his work was the product of something other than his own innate genius and craftsmanship.

Poet, storyteller, respected literary critic—Poe was and still remains one of the defining contributors to American literature. It is our hope that this collection will not only afford you the opportunity to revisit some of your favorite Poe writings, but also give you the chance to experience a side of his genius that, perhaps, you never knew existed.

Edgar Allan Poe was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on January 19, 1809. Both his mother, Elizabeth Arnold Poe, and his father, David Poe, Jr., were employed as actors in the Boston Theatre. After his father abandoned the family and his mother's death a year later, Poe was taken in by Mr. and Mrs. John Allan, but they never adopted him. While they lived in England, Poe and his stepfather began to argue fiercely and frequently. Mrs. Allan died, John remarried, and he and Poe became even further estranged.

In 1826, Poe began attending the University of Virginia, but was expelled later that year. He attended West Point for a short time; while there, he accumulated some gambling debts. John Allan would not help pay them and Poe left the Academy. He went to Boston in 1827 and, finding that he could not support himself, enlisted in the United States Army under the name Edgar A. Perry. After two years, he was released and moved to Baltimore, Maryland, where his maternal relatives lived. During this period, newspapers and literary magazines began to be published Poe's work. *Tamerlaine and Other Poems* appeared in 1827 and *Al Aaraaf* in 1829. His *Manuscript Found in a Bottle* won a literary contest in 1833.

Three years later, however, his life would change drastically. In May of 1836, he married his 14-year-old cousin, Virginia Clemm, who convinced Poe to settle in Philadelphia, where he obtained regular employment as an editor. In 1844, Poe moved to New York City, taking a job as editor for another literary magazine, *The Evening Mirror*. His most famous and popular poem, *The Raven*, was published in this magazine; through this one poem, Poe finally achieved his well-deserved reputation as a great writer. In January of 1847, however,

after a long illness, Virginia died of tuberculosis. Poe's grief, combined with the stress caused by years of caring for his invalid wife, caused him to collapse emotionally after her death; it is believed that this loss accelerated his drinking problem.

Yet two years later, in 1849, he moved back to Richmond and planned to wed Sarah Elmira Royster Shelton, a woman Poe had been engaged to marry earlier in life. (John Allan had forced Poe to abandon any thoughts of marrying her because of a lack of money.) Poe and Shelton, both now having lost a spouse, renewed their relationship. They would, however, not marry due to Poe's untimely death, the circumstances of which remain a mystery, even today.

He had left Richmond for Baltimore on September 27, 1849, and was found unconscious in a gutter there on October 3<sup>rd</sup>. Poe had collected approximately \$1,500 for subscriptions to his literary magazine, *The Stylus*, but no money was found with him, leading to the speculation that he might have been robbed. He was taken to a hospital where he regained consciousness a few times, but Poe was never coherent enough to explain what had happened to him. Edgar Allan Poe died on October 7, 1849.

One doctor reported to the newspapers that Poe died from a “congestion of the brain.” Poe was known to have a tendency toward binge drinking; this, along with the subject matter of his stories and poems, caused many contemporaries to speculate that alcohol or drugs played a role in his death, but the truth may never be known. Some modern critics speculate that he might have been an undiagnosed diabetic. Other theories include the possibility of a brain lesion. One historian theorizes that Poe was kidnapped, given alcohol, beaten, and forced to vote time and again for sheriff; this was called “cooping” and was a practice in Baltimore elections at the time. The possibility also exists that Poe encountered a spurned lover, who wounded him in the neck. What is certain, however, is that Edgar Allan Poe left behind an enduring legacy of work that will long outlive the circumstances of his death.

# Reading Pointers for Sharper Insights

As you read these stories and poems, pay attention to the following:

Poe's depiction of death:

- Death is not only inevitable, but it also can be beautiful, especially as it is portrayed in the poems.
- Death can be horrific when someone realizes it is imminent.
- Guilt, hatred, or revenge are appropriate justifications for murder.
- Impending death can be postponed, but not always.
- Death may actually enhance a loved one's beauty.

Poe's portrayal of love and beauty, especially in the poems:

- Love is chosen by the individual, not determined merely by fate.
- Love has historical, sometimes mythological, references.
- Love has no boundaries, not even in death.
- Beauty is only an idea, one that even death cannot weaken.
- Beauty in its ideal form cannot be attained.

Poe's innovative and unusual use of words in both genres:

- Words are frequently used for the way they sound, as well as for their meanings.
- Poe's rhythm and internal rhyme becomes almost hypnotic in many poems.
- The difficult vocabulary reflects the style of Poe's time period.
- Every important word is intended to evoke a mood or atmosphere in the reader, and Poe aimed for the same effect regardless of whether the work was prose or poetry.

Poe's ability to instill fear in the reader, primarily in the short stories:

- Poe builds suspense throughout the stories, revealing some facts while withholding others.
- Because the element of danger is usually present, the reader can feel the intensity of the emotions.
- The narration is frequently first person, which makes the reader's connection to the story more intimate.
- Poe's descriptions are usually minutely detailed to give a sense of verisimilitude to the stories, despite their supernatural atmosphere.
- The use of irony and black humor is common.
- Gothic elements are usually prominent in his writing: the supernatural, evil animals, and dark, gloomy settings
- Poe's depictions of how the human mind works heighten a reader's connection to the story.
- The surprise endings provide a reason to go back through the work to look for clues missed on the first reading.

# The Bells

## I.

Hear the sledges with the bells—  
Silver bells!  
What a world of merriment their melody foretells!  
How they tinkle, tinkle, tinkle,  
In the icy air of night!  
While the stars that oversprinkle  
All the heavens, seem to twinkle  
With a crystalline delight;  
Keeping time, time, time,  
In a sort of Runic rhyme,  
To the tintinnabulation that so musically wells  
From the bells, bells, bells, bells,  
Bells, bells, bells—  
From the jingling and the tinkling of the bells.

## II.

Hear the mellow wedding bells,  
Golden bells!  
What a world of happiness their harmony foretells!  
Through the balmy air of night  
How they ring out their delight!  
From the molten-golden notes,  
And all in tune,  
What a liquid ditty floats  
To the turtle-dove that listens, while she gloats  
On the moon!  
Oh, from out the sounding cells,  
What a gush of euphony voluminously wells!  
How it swells!  
How it dwells  
On the Future! how it tells  
Of the rapture that impels  
To the swinging and the ringing  
Of the bells, bells, bells,  
Of the bells, bells, bells, bells,  
Bells, bells, bells—  
To the rhyming and the chiming of the bells!

## III.

Hear the loud alarum bells—  
Brazen bells!  
What a tale of terror, now, their turbulency tells!  
In the startled ear of night  
How they scream out their affright!  
Too much horrified to speak,  
They can only shriek, shriek,  
Out of tune,

In a clamorous appealing to the mercy of the fire,  
In a mad expostulation with the deaf and frantic fire,  
Leaping higher, higher, higher,  
With a desperate desire,  
And a resolute endeavor,  
Now—now to sit or never,  
By the side of the pale-faced moon.  
Oh, the bells, bells, bells!  
What a tale their terror tells  
Of Despair!  
How they clang, and clash, and roar!  
What a horror they outpour  
On the bosom of the palpitating air!  
Yet the ear it fully knows,  
By the twanging,  
And the clanging,  
How the danger ebbs and flows:  
Yet the ear distinctly tells,  
In the jangling,  
And the wrangling,  
How the danger sinks and swells,  
By the sinking or the swelling in the anger of the bells—  
Of the bells—  
Of the bells, bells, bells, bells,  
Bells, bells, bells—  
In the clamor and the clangor of the bells!

#### IV.

Hear the tolling of the bells—  
Iron Bells!  
What a world of solemn thought their monody compels!  
In the silence of the night,  
How we shiver with affright  
At the melancholy menace of their tone!  
For every sound that floats  
From the rust within their throats  
Is a groan.  
And the people—ah, the people—  
They that dwell up in the steeple,  
All alone  
And who, tolling, tolling, tolling,  
In that muffled monotone,  
Feel a glory in so rolling  
On the human heart a stone—  
They are neither man nor woman—  
They are neither brute nor human—  
They are Ghouls:  
And their king it is who tolls;  
And he rolls, rolls, rolls,  
Rolls  
A paean from the bells!

And his merry bosom swells  
With the paeon of the bells!  
And he dances, and he yells;  
Keeping time, time, time,  
In a sort of Runic rhyme,  
To the paeon of the bells—  
Of the bells:  
Keeping time, time, time,  
In a sort of Runic rhyme,  
To the throbbing of the bells—  
Of the bells, bells, bells—  
To the sobbing of the bells;  
Keeping time, time, time,  
As he knells, knells, knells,  
In a happy Runic rhyme,  
To the rolling of the bells—  
Of the bells, bells, bells:  
To the tolling of the bells,  
Of the bells, bells, bells, bells—  
Bells, bells, bells—  
To the moaning and the groaning of the bells.