Edgar Allan Poe was a nineteenth-century American poet, author and critic who is best remembered for his short stories and for helping define the genre of detective fiction. He was one of the first major literary figures in America to publicly declare writing to be his sole source of income. He died at the age of forty in 1849 under mysterious circumstances, and the cause of his death has yet to be determined.

**KEY FACTS**

1. Poe’s death remains a mystery and has been variously attributed to cholera, epilepsy, syphilis, heart disease, and rabies in the decades since he passed away.

2. While alive, Poe was better known as a critic than a writer and was famous for his scathing reviews of other people’s work.

3. Poe inherited an enormous amount of money when his uncle died in 1825, leaving the poet a fortune worth nineteen million dollars in today’s currency.

4. Poe achieved instant fame upon the publication of *The Raven* in 1845, and he even came to be known by the poem’s title.

5. Poe is widely regarded to have authored the first ever detective story and his work had an enormous influence on subsequent writers in that genre, including Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of Sherlock Holmes.
Edgar Allan Poe was a member of the American Romantic movement and thus found inspiration for his work in the natural world. Poe’s life was defined by loss, as many of his loved ones died prematurely. This theme permeates many of his poems, including *The Raven*, *Lenore*, and *The Conqueror Worm*. Many of Poe’s poems are preoccupied with notions of the subconscious and suppressed mind. This is best expressed in poems such as *The Raven* and *A Dream Within a Dream* and shows how far ahead of his time Poe was.
1809
Poe is born in Boston to a family of actors.

1811
Poe’s mother dies of tuberculosis, one year after his father abandoned the family.

1825
Poe inherits a large fortune from his uncle.

1827
Poe’s first collection, *Tamerlane and Other Poems*, is published.

Poe’s only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, is published.

1845
Poe’s poem, *The Raven*, is published.

1849
Poe dies at the age of forty.
POE IN CONTEXT

Does Poe’s range harm his legacy?

It might be an overstatement to suggest that Poe’s artistic range actively harms the way he is regarded today, but the adage, jack of all trades master of none, can be difficult to shake. The fact of the matter is that, despite dying at forty, Poe produced several iconic poems and short stories, wrote a novel, and helped launch one of history’s most successful literary genres.

KEY POEMS

The Raven - Poe’s most famous poem, made him an overnight celebrity when it was first published in 1845.

Annabel Lee - The last poem Poe completed before his death, it presents the death of a beautiful young woman in keeping with many of the poet’s works.

A Dream Within a Dream - This poem dramatizes the experience of its narrator, who appears to realise the transient nature of the world around them.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Which fellow poet did Allan Poe review harshly?
   - Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

2. Name the literary genre Poe is credited with inventing.
   - Detective fiction

3. True or false: Poe did not achieve success during his lifetime.
   - False: He was already a respected critic, but became an overnight celebrity after The Raven was published in 1845.