

Only This and Nothing More: An Illustrated Conversation with Edgar Allen Poe

by [Geoffrey Clarfield](#) (June 2022)



House Crows, Aubrey Williams, 1974

*In memory of my dear, departed parents, Ida and Morry Clarfield, who first read to me from *The Raven* and who kept the complete works of Edgar Allan Poe on their book shelf. When I was fifteen, I read the whole volume.*



I had been drinking with friends, far, far too much. We started with a bottle of wine. Then I opened another and then a friend opened one more. Our hostess brought out a bottle of whiskey. No one would open the Amontillado. It was too old and cost too much. Maybe next New Year's. We were talking, no, we were arguing about literature. I had asked why read anything at all, when everybody is now a writer?

I complained that every waiter and waitress that ever served me wanted to "write a book." I would ask them what they read and they could not answer. I would get irritated which was just a mask for my deep and abiding sense of futility. I had read so much with the hope of writing anything, something of value. And like so many of these young reluctant waiters and waitresses, I too was in show business having landed some decent parts in Hollywood which supported by dissolute lifestyle in Toronto and my almost voluntary summer teaching post in Jerusalem.

Our conversation lasted late into the night, into the early morning. By around five most of us were dozing on couches and chairs. We were too tired to argue. I could no longer criticize Margaret Atwood and gave up defending Alice Munro. The grandfather clock in the parlour rang out at six in the

morning. Most of us got up to wash our faces in the washroom, thanked our host and walked out in to the February weather; grey, icy, foggy, but not so cold as to not believe in the coming of spring.



I walked over to the beltline and found myself alone as I walked back to my house on that former railroad track that is now a public park. Sometimes my mind played tricks on me and I could feel the train coming, triggering memories of primary school when I would stand too close to the train and feel the violence in the air when it swished by me, three feet away.

I felt like I was in a long, grey tunnel. Unusually everything around me was quiet. Even the cars seemed to make no noise. It was slightly uncanny but I had been drinking too much, right? A man was walking behind me and slowly caught up with me. He said, " I have been walking from the church and I am on my way to the village of York to give a lecture to the Upper Canada Literary Society."

He was about my height. He looked as if he was in his early thirties. His face and head were square and cube like. He was wearing an overcoat, what looked like an undercoat, a 19th century style white shirt secured by a tied cravat and he sported a mustache. It looked like he had not washed his longish hair for a week. He spoke with an accent that bespoke

of the deep south and Harvard at the same time. He sported a mustache.

He said, "I have enjoyed Upper Canada. People here are most attentive and they are not put off by the horror in my tales." I was too hung over to pay attention and irritated I said, "Who are you?" He said, with a straight face, "Edgar Allan Poe."

I laughed. I said, "That is rich. Are you in character or something? Is there a play going on around here or are you about do an audition?" He looked at me with astonishment. I asked him to outline one of his stories for me. I did not ask which one.



He looked distracted and said,

"An unnamed narrator approaches the house of Usher on a "dull, dark, and soundless day." This house—the estate of his boyhood friend, Roderick Usher—is gloomy and mysterious. The narrator observes that the house seems to have absorbed an evil and diseased atmosphere from the decaying trees and murky ponds around it. He notes that although the house is decaying in places—individual stones are disintegrating, for example—the structure itself is fairly solid. There is only a small crack from the roof to

the ground in the front of the building. He has come to the house because his friend Roderick sent him a letter earnestly requesting his company. Roderick wrote that he was feeling physically and emotionally ill, so the narrator is rushing to his assistance. The narrator mentions that the Usher family, though an ancient clan, has never flourished. Only one member of the Usher family has survived from generation to generation, thereby forming a direct line of descent without any outside branches. The Usher family has become so identified with its estate that the peasantry confuses the inhabitants with their home.

I asked him sarcastically, "Why don't you call it The Fall of the House of Usher? It sounds tragic." He stopped walking and pulled out a fountain pen and some archaic looking paper. He wrote it down. "It has a poetic cadence. It foreshadows darkness. Thank you."

This guy is good. He is really good. I was beginning to enjoy his company and we continued walking along this park. Whatever momentary auditory hallucination I had had was over and this guy was entertaining. Boy time had flown. Just a few years ago I was studying lit and drama at Vic college before I left for LA. Northrop Frye himself had wished me luck, knowing full well there was no future in old fashioned literary writing. "Screenplays" he said to me. "That is the future!" Now I was walking home from a drinking party in my early forties, unmarried, childless and cranky.

I asked him if he was also writing any poetry. He said, "I am obsessed with birds and I have begun a poem but I have only written ten lines and then I am blocked." I thought to myself that I had seen method actors in character before but this guy would no doubt one day be a successful actor. And I mean Al Pacino style success.

As we walked he droned out the following:

*Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten
lore—*

*While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came
a tapping,
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber
door.*

*“’Tis some visitor,” I muttered, “tapping at my chamber
door—*

Only this and nothing more.”

*Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak
December;
And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon
the floor.*

*Eagerly I wished the morrow;—vainly I had sought to
borrow*

*From my books surcease of sorrow—sorrow for the
lost Lenore—*

*For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name
Lenore—*

Nameless here for evermore.

He lamented, “I have no idea what to do with it. I despair. It has been on my mind for months.”

I said “Why don’t you try this out as the next few lines?” Knowing the whole thing by heart I rattled it out in my Canadian accent. I almost made it sound happy. I felt like Pierre Berton on a bad day.

I leisurely added:

*And the silken, sad, uncertain rustling of each
purple curtain
Thrilled me—filled me with fantastic terrors never felt
before;*

*So that now, to still the beating of my heart, I
stood repeating*

*“’Tis some visitor entreating entrance at my
chamber door—*

*Some late visitor entreating entrance at my chamber
door;—*

This it is and nothing more.”



“Wonderful” he said. I am extremely grateful. “ “May I ask you a question.” “Sure” I said.

“You never joined our revolution. You consider yourselves Englishmen and you admire Queen Victoria. I do not quite understand why?”

I then gave him a long winded history of the English speaking peoples. I started with the Magna Carta, went through the War of the Roses, Elizabethan England, arguing that Americans cannot understand Shakespeare as so many of his plays are about Kings and Queens. I then told him that Lord Simcoe outlawed slavery here in 1793 and it still exists where he comes from.

He changed topic and said. “Let me tell you about another story. I have not written it but it lives in my imagination.

It has given me nightmares. I have had to take laudanum to return to sleep."

The story is told by an old man who reveals that he only appears old—"You suppose me a very old man," he says, "but I am not. It took less than a single day to change these hairs from a jetty black to white, to weaken my limbs, and to unstring my nerves." The narrator, convinced by the power of the [whirlpools](#) he sees in the ocean beyond, is then told of the "old" man's fishing trip with his two brothers a few years ago.

Driven by "the most terrible hurricane that ever came out of the heavens", their ship is caught in the [vortex](#). One brother is pulled into the waves; the other is driven mad by the horror of the spectacle, and drowned as the ship is pulled under. At first the narrator only sees hideous terror in the spectacle. In a moment of revelation, he sees that the Maelström is a beautiful and awesome creation. Observing how objects around him are attracted and pulled into it, he deduces that "the larger the bodies, the more rapid their descent" and that spherical-shaped objects are pulled in the fastest. Unlike his brother, he abandons ship and holds on to a cylindrical barrel until he was saved several hours later when the whirlpool temporarily subsides, and he is rescued by some fishermen. The "old" man tells the story to the narrator without any hope that the narrator will believe it.

"What do you think?" I answered, "You must have seen the Perfect Storm." He said, "Storms are imperfect, terrible and destructive. I do not know what you mean." I thought. I should get paid for this, being a foil for method actors. It is a great way to get over a hangover.



This guy must have had a photographic memory. I suspect that one day he'll be famous. I had spent a couple of years teaching Journalism at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. I had done my PhD there on 19th century Euro American travelers and their literature. I knew that Poe had once extensively reviewed the book called, by an "anonymous American," *Incidents of Travel in Egypt, Arabia Petraea, and the Holy Land*.

I asked him about it. He said. *"This is the third paragraph from my review. I have not quite finished the review but I thoroughly enjoyed the book. I hope to visit Jerusalem and the Holy Land one day."* He then quoted the review word by word.

At Djiddeh, formerly the capital of Upper Egypt and the largest town on the Nile, Mr. Stephens encountered two large boat-loads of slaves—probably five or six

hundred—collected at Dongola and Sennaar. “In the East,” he writes, “slavery exists now precisely as it did in the days of the patriarchs. The slave is received into the family of a Turk, in a relation more confidential and respectable than that of an ordinary domestic; and when liberated, which very often happens, stands upon the same footing with a freeman. The curse does not rest upon him for ever; he may sit at the same board, dip his hand in the same dish, and, if there are no other impediments, may marry his master’s daughter.” [page 355:]

He then paused and told me, “I fear that there will be a great reckoning in our Republic. Slavery cannot be accommodated. It will not go away on its own and many innocent men and women will die to make sure it passes. This is one of the sources of melancholy in the stories that I write.” I was awestruck.



We had arrived at Avenue Road. He told me that he wanted to walk south. He said, “I have an appointment with an actor, Charles Wilkes Booth at St. Lawrence Market.” I told him to continue walking south. In two hours, he would be there. He shook my hand and just before parting he said,

“I have forgotten to post a letter would you be so kind?” And then he took a moment to write out the lines I had quoted. As I thought, what a remarkable memory. He said please make sure

you send him this. I said sure and took the envelope and part of the Raven that I had quoted back to him.

I watched him walk slowly down Avenue Road, dressed like it was the late 1840s, completely oblivious to the traffic around him. Just as he was disappearing from view, I pulled out my cell phone and took two quick pictures of him, walking away from me in the distance. I was so astounded by his method that I forgot to ask him for his real name and card. Had Robertson Davies still been alive he could have joined him on his stroll. They would have had much to discuss. He would have fit right in.

I went home and fell asleep. I was awoken by my own inner voice. It was quoting the Raven

*And the Raven, never flitting, still is
sitting, still is sitting
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber
door;*

*And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon's that
is dreaming,*

*And the lamp-light o'er him streaming throws his
shadow on the floor;*

*And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on
the floor*

Shall be lifted—nevermore!

I made some coffee and opened the Post. The headlines shouted "Harper Set to Lower Taxes" I laughed and thought, that will be the day! I then noticed the letter on the mantle piece. I took a good look at it. It was addressed to The Honourable Edmund Walker



Head, Governor General of the Province of Canada. It had an 1847, unused postage stamp on it and the envelope was empty. Of course, I did not put it in the mail.

A week later I took it to a philatelist. He looked at the stamp carefully. He said the envelope was indeed from the 19th century and the stamp was real, yet unposted. He then sent it to experts in the US and they confirmed that the writing was so close to that of Edgar Allan Poe that they could not say for sure if it was or was not a forgery. I marvelled at this. Why did the actor give it to me? It is probably worth thousands of dollars, if it is real. I have read about method acting but this is ridiculous!

I have also read Car Gustav Jung on Synchronicity. I believe that time is elastic but I do not believe in ghosts. Here is what the encyclopaedia on my shelf says about Jung.

Synchronicity ([German](#): Synchronizität) is a concept, first introduced by [analytical psychologist Carl Jung](#), which holds that events are "meaningful coincidences" if they occur with no [causal relationship](#) yet seem to be meaningfully related

During his career, Jung furnished several different

definitions of the term, defining synchronicity as an “acausal connecting (togetherness) principle;” “meaningful coincidence;” “acausal [parallelism](#);” and as a “meaningful coincidence of two or more events where something other than the probability of chance is involved.”

Jung’s belief was that, just as events may be connected by causality, they may also be connected by [meaning](#). Events connected by meaning need not have an explanation in terms of causality, which does not generally contradict the [Axiom of Causality](#) but in specific cases can lead to prematurely giving up causal explanation.

Perhaps I had somehow communed with Poe. Perhaps I had conjured him out my unconscious. Perhaps ... and then again, I had not been doing too well with my acting career when I met this apparition in the midst of a headache and hangover, walking on the beltline. It is curious. I do not remember hearing anything but his voice and our own footsteps. Everything else was blocked out. When I look back at it the whole thing it felt two dimensional. It was uncanny at the time as I did not feel any time passing when we spoke. A hallucination? A waking dream?



I had just come back from LA after making a few films. The party was a way to reconnect with friends, people who read. I missed them. They are extremely rare in Los Angeles. I once met a very famous actress who thought that Robert E. Lee was the lead singer in an English rock band. She was worth

millions. She had gone directly from high school to Hollywood.

At the time of the party I was in between contracts as they say. One week later my agent called me from LA. He said, "Prepare for an audition. They are looking for someone to play Edgar Allan Poe." I was so distracted that the first thing I said to him was, "Only this and nothing more?" He hung up, but before he did so he told me, "Call me when you are either awake or sober. This is a big deal."

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Geoffrey Clarfield is an anthropologist at large. For twenty years he lived in, worked among and explored the cultures and societies of Africa, the Middle East and Asia. As a development anthropologist he has worked for the following clients: the UN, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Norwegian, Canadian, Italian, Swiss and Kenyan governments as well international NGOs. His essays largely focus on the translation of cultures.

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