



0. COOPING and the FINAL MYSTERY - Story Preface

1. "CHILDHOOD'S HOUR"
2. ORDER and CHAOS
3. POE FALLS in LOVE
4. POE and HIS WRITINGS
5. "THE RAVEN"
6. ANNABEL LEE

**7. COOPING and the FINAL MYSTERY**

8. RUFUS GRISWOLD and POE'S LEGACY

Cooping, an illegal election-day tactic, was reported in Baltimore during an October 1849 election. The process involved kidnapping victims, plying them with drugs and liquor, then sending them out to vote—again and again and again—for candidates selected by the kidnapers. Edgar Allan Poe, who'd been missing for days before the October 1849 election, was found in front of a tavern which also served as a Fourth-Ward voting place. Although he was conscious, he was never able to explain what had happened to him. Was he a cooping victim?

Although he was devastated by the death of his wife, Poe-the-widower courted other women. By the early fall of 1849, he had proposed marriage to Elmira Shelton. The pair had been teenaged sweethearts (in Richmond, Virginia) when Edgar was still living with his foster family (and Elmira was known as Sarah Elmira Royster).

Poe's fiancé was a financially secure widow, but her husband's Will had a potential stumbling block. If she remarried, Elmira would have to forfeit three-quarters of the income she received from her husband's estate. She would also lose her status as the estate's executor.

After giving the proposal much thought, Elmira apparently decided to marry Poe. She wrote a letter introducing herself to Maria Clemm - Virginia's mother and Poe's aunt (and mother-in-law) - on the 22nd of September, 1849.

Before marrying Elmira, Poe wanted to travel North. Always moving around, due to his work as a critic, he had business issues to resolve. He also wanted to provide a home for Maria Clemm - who was still living in the Bronx cottage - and planned to travel back to Richmond with her.

Poe left a trunk of belongings in his room at the Swan Tavern, in Richmond, on or about September 27th, then traveled by boat to Baltimore (where he arrived on September 28). Some of Poe's acquaintances, in Richmond, later indicated that his engagement to Elmira Shelton may have been broken by the time Poe left for Baltimore.

To this day, no one knows for sure what happened to Poe after he reached Maryland. There is some evidence that he made a trip to Philadelphia (which was part of his original plan). If that occurred, he was back in Baltimore by the 3rd of October.

An election in the city, at the very time of his disappearance, later raised suspicions about "cooping" - an illegal process in which people were "cooped-up," against their will, plied with liquor and drugs and then sent to various polls to vote over and over and over again for someone else's favorite candidate.

We know that cooping occurred in Baltimore, in October of 1849, because it was referenced at least twice - if not always by that exact name - in a local paper (the *Republican and Argus*):

*On October 1st - Democrats of the Fourth Ward protect your rights - yours is the ward that will receive the great mass of foreign Whigs. It is in your ward that they expect to swell the vote.*  
(*Republican and Argus*, 1 October 1849, at page 2).

*On October 3rd - Beware of the Whig tricks. Our opponents are at their old game again ... Illegal votes will be polled from a distance and otherwise. Coops have been started by them. All this and more the Whigs are doing - see Democrats that they do not succeed. LET US ALL BE ON THE ALERT.* ( *Republican and Argus*, 3 October 1849, at page 2).

Poe was seen again on the 3rd of October - the day of the election. Outside a Baltimore tavern known as Gunner's Hall - which was also used as a voting place for the city's Fourth Ward - a printer by the name of Joseph Walker saw a very ill and disheveled man who identified himself as Edgar Poe.

At Poe's request, Walker summoned Dr. Joseph Snodgrass:

*There is a gentleman, rather the worse for wear, at Ryan's 4th ward polls, who goes under the cognomen of Edgar A. Poe, and who appears in great distress, & he says he is acquainted with you, and I assure you, he is in need of immediate assistance.*

*Yours, in haste,  
Jos. W. Walker*

When Dr. Snodgrass arrived, he was shocked at Poe's appearance:

*His face was haggard, not to say bloated, and unwashed, his hair unkempt, and his whole physique repulsive. His expansive forehead ... and that full-orbed and mellow, yet soulful eye, for which he was so noticeable when himself, now lusterless and vacant. (J.E. Snodgrass, *The Facts of Poe's Death and Burial*, page 284.)*

Dr. John L. Moran, Poe's attending physician, describes Edgar's clothes:

*... a stained, faded, old bombazine coat, pantaloons of a similar character, a pair of worn-out shoes run down at the heels, and an old straw hat. (J.L. Moran, *Defense of Poe*, at page 59.)*

Poe was taken to Washington College Hospital where he slipped in-and-out of a coma. Extremely ill, he was unable to provide a history of his time in Baltimore.

On the night of October 6th, according to Moran, Poe kept repeating the name "Reynolds." No Poe scholar is sure what that could have meant. Not long after, during the early morning hours of October 7, 1849, Moran reportedly heard Edgar's last words:

*Lord help my poor soul.*

Because Moran prevented Edgar's relatives from visiting his patient, Poe died separated from his loved ones. Soon after, Rufus Griswold - the person who wished to manage Poe's literary estate - published a shocking obituary.

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## Questions 2 Ponder

### What is "Cooping" and Did It Contribute to Poe's Mysterious Death?

In mid-19th-century America, "cooping" was an illegal process in which people were "cooped-up," against their will, plied with liquor and drugs and then sent to various polls to vote over and over and over again for someone else's favorite candidate.

When Edgar Allan Poe went missing for several days, at about the time of an 1849 election in Baltimore, people at the time wondered whether he had been targeted for a cooping event.

Although we may never know, do you think "cooping" played a role in Poe's mysterious final days? Why, or why not?

Do you think the mystery surrounding Poe's final days explains why this poet is still popular? Why, or why not?

## Media Stream



### Elmira Shelton

Image of Elmira Shelton, online courtesy Poe Museum.

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