



Edgar Allan Poe, the creator of the detective-story genre, left-behind a major mystery involving his own life. Actually, the biggest mystery Poe left-behind involved his own death. How did it happen? What were the circumstances leading-up to it?

Missing for a few days, Poe turned-up on a Baltimore street on October 3, 1849—the day people in Baltimore were voting. He was seen outside a Baltimore tavern known as Gunner's Hall—used as a voting place for the city's Fourth Ward—by Joseph Walker, a printer.

Walker saw a very ill and disheveled man who identified himself as Edgar Poe.

Dazed, essentially incoherent and wearing someone else's clothes, Poe died soon after he was found. He was never able to tell anyone what had happened to him.

Some Poe relatives and scholars think that Poe was a victim of “cooping,” an illegal election-day tactic where kidnapped individuals were plied with liquor, dressed in clothes not their own, then sent to vote—again and again and again—for a particular candidate.

We learn more about this theory from The Edgar Allan Poe Society (based in Baltimore). See “The Mysterious Death of Edgar Allan Poe - The Cooping Theory” (which provides evidence that cooping was actually a problem in Baltimore at the time Poe disappeared):

Coincidence or not, the day Poe was found on the street was election day in Baltimore and the place near where he was found, Ryan's Fourth Ward Polls, was both a bar and a place for voting.

In those days, Baltimore elections were notorious for corruption and violence. Political gangs were willing to go to great extremes to ensure the success of their candidates. Election ballots were stolen, judges were bribed and potential voters for the opposition intimidated.

Some gangs were known to kidnap innocent bystanders, holding them in a room, called the "coop." These poor souls were then forced to go in and out of poll after poll, voting over and over again. Their clothing might even be changed to allow for another round.

To ensure compliance, their victims were plied with liquor and beaten. Poe's weak heart would never have withstood such abuse.

This theory appears to have been first offered publicly by John R. Thompson in the early 1870s to explain Poe's condition and the fact that he was wearing someone else's clothing. A possible flaw in the theory is that Poe was reasonably well-known in Baltimore and likely to be recognized.

... William Hand Browne's letter to J. H. Ingram, August 24, 1874, includes these comments "The general belief here is, that Poe was seized by one of these gangs, (his death happening just at election-time; an election for sheriff took place on Oct. 4th), 'cooped,' stupefied with liquor, dragged out and voted, and then turned adrift to die" (Miller, *Building Poe Biography*, p. 69).

According to Elizabeth Ellicott Poe and Vylla Poe Wilson, "The conclusion to be drawn, in view of all the factors and probabilities, is that he [Poe] was shanghai'd shortly after his arrival in Baltimore, given liquor and opium to which he was peculiarly susceptible, and while in that irresponsible condition held until election day. A certain Passano, associated with that 'coop,' is said to have confessed to relatives in after years that this is what happened to the poet, but no formal record was made of his testimony to this effect" (E. E. Poe and V. P. Wilson, *Edgar Allan Poe: A High Priest of the Beautiful*, Washington: The Stylus Publishing Company, 1930, p. 79).

A legitimate question is why there seems to have been very little attention to the "cooping" theory of Poe's death until J. R. Thompson began his lecture tour. A reasonable answer is the fact that "cooping" was, under the best of circumstances, highly illegal, and being connected to an actual death would certainly make the spotlight of attention even less attractive.

Only someone closely associated with the operation would have known the details of what occurred, and such a person would hardly be likely to publicize the information. The Whigs were also a party with considerable power, featuring such notable names as the great Daniel Webster (of Massachusetts) and Zachary Taylor (who was elected president in 1848).

A delegate in the Eighteenth Ward was none other than Edgar's cousin, Neilson Poe. (On October 2, 1851, Neilson was removed from his position for opposing the slate of judges approved by the official Whig committee. Neilson's side of this judicial matter was made public as a pamphlet called *An Appeal from the Politicians to the People: In a Letter to Dr. John Hanson Thomas, President of the Whig City Convention*, Baltimore: Sherwood & Co, 1851.)

We also do not know how the idea occurred to Thompson, or precisely when he incorporated it into his lecture. A small notice in the *Southern Literary Messenger* for November 1860 comments: "We learn that John R. Thompson, Esq. . . . intends delivering his Lecture on Edgar A. Poe in the Southern cities during the coming winter. Delivered first in Baltimore, and subsequently in Richmond and other cities of Virginia, this Lecture excited the highest encomiums" (p. 393).

To this day, Poe's death is shrouded in mystery. No one can say, for sure, what caused it. Equally, however ... no one has completely ruled-out cooping—in a city where cooping was known to occur at the time Poe disappeared—as a contributing factor.

Credits:

Collage image based on an illustration included in "*History of the United States*," volume V, a book by E. Benjamin Andrews and published in New York, during 1912, by Charles Scribner's Sons. The [main illustration](#) depicts a New York polling place, showing secret voting booths on the left side of the drawing. Public Domain.

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