

# Cause of Death Unknown?

The troubled genius was dead. But what had brought on his death?

Last fall, Dr. Michael Benitez created quite a stir in the literary world. What did he do? He said, "I think Edgar Allan Poe might have died not from alcohol but from rabies."

Rabies?

Rabies is a deadly disease that destroys nerve cells in the brain. All warm-blooded animals can get the disease, which is caused by a virus most often found in saliva. Dogs, cats, wild animals, and bats are the usual carriers.

The word *rabies* is Latin for "rage" or "fury." A victim first feels burning or numbness at the site of the infection. Then come restlessness and headaches. Muscle spasms make the throat feel full, and swallowing becomes difficult. (Because of the victim's inability to swallow water, rabies is sometimes

called *hydrophobia*, "fear of water.")

In later stages, the rabies victim usually suffers violent convulsions and delirium, followed by periods of quiet. Finally, the victim loses consciousness and slips into death.\*

## The Benitez Arguments

Enter Dr. Benitez, a heart expert at the University of Maryland in Baltimore. He based his startling new theory about Poe's death on several pieces of information:

Edgar Allan Poe apparently did not smell of alcohol when he was found. He had had a serious alcohol problem but, because of his love for Elmira Royster, had stopped drinking about three months earlier.

In 1849, a standard treatment for symptoms of alcohol withdrawal was to administer more alcohol. Poe struggled to resist Dr. John Moran's attempt to try that cure.

When the doctor then tried to give Poe water, he could barely swallow it.

Poe had periods of physical trembling and delirious babbling followed by periods of calm.

He slipped into a coma despite any treatment the doctors tried.

He died after four days in the hospital, a period that falls into the usual amount of time in which rabies brings death to a victim.

## The Critics' Arguments

Since Poe is one of this country's best-known and most popular authors, the Benitez theory made newspapers and radio news shows all over the country. Critics of the theory were

\*Today, early rabies infection can be treated by an injection of antirabies globulin followed by five injections of rabies vaccine.

quick to respond with their own arguments.

The first three men to see Poe after he appeared so mysteriously at the Baltimore tavern—the young printer, Dr. Joseph Snodgrass, and Dr. Moran—were certain that he had been drinking.

Without doubt, Poe had a serious alcohol problem. Several times before, he had managed to give up drinking—only to relapse once more into his old pattern.

In 1885, John Moran issued a statement saying that Poe, far from rejecting water, had swallowed it eagerly.

Poe's body had no signs of bites or scratches from a rabid animal. The author's beloved pet cat, Caterina, could not have been involved because Poe had left her in New York three months earlier.

Critics charged that Dr. Benitez was trying to whitewash the last days of the famous author. But there was no need, they argued, to distort history and cover up the self-destructive behavior of a literary genius.

Dr. Benitez was quick to reply. Rabies can be picked up, he said, through means other than a bite or a scratch. He added that a tiny wound on Poe might well have gone undetected by the doctors involved, especially since they were not thinking of rabies as the cause of Poe's sickness.

## Heart Problems?

With the arguments flying back and forth, other researchers entered the fray. One pointed out that Poe had had



Dr. Benitez sits at Poe's grave and ponders the poet's fate.

a history of heart problems, which might have accounted for so many of his stories equating terror with the sound of a beating heart. Perhaps, the researcher added, the fluttering of Poe's own telltale heart caused his hallucinations and collapse into unconsciousness.

So now there are three possible causes—alcohol, rabies, heart failure—for Poe's death. Will we ever know for certain what caused Poe's death in the grim prison-like room at Washington College Hospital? Most unlikely.

Will we ever know the full story of what happened during the mysterious week when Poe, on his way to New York, disappeared from sight and then reappeared in Baltimore in such a pitiful and broken condition? The odds are very small.

What we do have are the works he left behind—the scary, hypnotic, fascinating stories and poems that flowed from his brilliant imagination. They, not the cause of his death, are what make his life so memorable.