



# It'll Be the Death of Me

## Content Overview

Students can read/listen to this interactive story to explore the many theories of Poe's death. Each section below is a "page" in the online "book".

We have included the story in the text below, along with the scene designations. The highlighted portions are parts of the story that require choices or exploration. Depending on the choices students make while reading the story, they may not read all the information available.

The major "interactive" in the story is an exploration of a filing cabinet. Students can explore the theories that real historians have about why and how Poe died. Consider having students select a folder and make a presentation to the class.

Please alert students that some links will take them on the internet (to <http://www.eapoe.org/> for example). Once students have read the information, they should close the pop-up window to return to the story.

Scene	TEXT
A	"If only . . ." you think to yourself.
B	If only your plan to start the paper last week hadn't failed so miserably . . . If only your hard drive hadn't crashed so totally last night. . .
C	If only you had never even heard of Edgar Allen Poe . . .
D	Then you wouldn't be slogging off to the town library . . . In the rain.
F	And not the bright, shiny new library. The old one. The only one you could walk to. Because parents are not amused when you don't do what you are supposed to do. And you only have a learner's permit.
G	You don't know if it's the cold rain or the creepy old building, but you are shivering.
H	Great. Just great.
I	You know the drill here. Turn in your card and get access to the computer – if someone else isn't using it. The other library had a whole bank of computers. But not this one. There's only one ancient machine here.  And it is down in the basement.

J	<p>What do you want to do?</p> <p>[choice] Go down to the basement and start working. [go to K]</p> <p>[choice] Talk the librarian. Perhaps she can help you. You'll go to the basement soon enough. [go to J1]</p>
J1	<p>"Yes, dear,"</p> <p>she answers to the question you ask.</p> <p>No one really knows why Poe died. It's a mystery. And I'm sure if Poe were living today, he'd use it to write another one of those fabulous stories of his.</p> <p><i>"But if you want to know what I think . . . I think it was just the way the poor man lived his life.</i></p> <p>"I did some research on it myself. I keep the files in the basement."</p>
J2	<p>There are hardly any people in the library. You know she'd like to talk more. But you have work to do. So, you thank her and turn away.</p> <p>As you leave, she stops you.</p> <p>"Rabies," she says.</p>
J3	<p>"What?" you ask.</p> <p>"Rabies. Some think Poe died from rabies. You might want to start there"</p>
J4	<p>You nod and start for the basement. But you're really not sure about the advice.</p> <p>"And cooping," you hear the librarian say from far away. Cooping? As in chicken coops?</p> <p>Whatever.</p>
K	<p>The basement smells old and unwelcoming.</p> <p>And it is.</p>
L	<p>As you walk down the stairs, you hear a slight cough. Someone else must be down here . . .</p>
M	<p>But, no one is in the room when you go in. These old buildings, you think. They always sound funny. Probably mice.</p>
O	<p>Work to do, you think. Let it go.</p> <p>But . . . where do you start?</p> <p>[choice] You'll read a brief biography to get an overview. [links to an outside site.]</p> <p>[choice] You'll read about Poe's death.</p> <p>These links will open new browser windows. Remember to close the new window to return to your adventure. [links to an outside site.]</p>

P	You look at the list your teacher gave you to investigate. She gave you so many theories—rabies, tuberculosis, carbon monoxide poisoning, heart problems, brain lesions, mercury poisoning, alcoholism, foul play of some sort, perhaps a botched robbery . . .
Q	You think for a bit. When people die, they usually put a notice in the paper, don't they?  Might as well look for Poe's.  Your web search yields just a few clues.
R	The Baltimore <i>Clipper</i> says he died from congestion of the brain.  The Baltimore <i>Sun</i> says he died of an "illness."  Both had the age wrong, but you remember your teacher saying something about Poe often changing the details of his life story if he felt like it.
R1	Baltimore <i>Clipper</i> : "Died: - On the 8 <sup>th</sup> instant of <u>congestion of the brain</u> . <a href="#">[link to R1a]</a> Edgar A. Poe, Esq. aged 38 years. Mr. Poe was well known as a writer of great ability."
R1a	"Congestion of the brain" was a catchall phrase doctors at the time used when they didn't have any real explanation for a death. It was generally used to describe someone who died with neurological problems.  Since there was no autopsy, Poe's doctors couldn't have known for sure that a swelling in the brain caused his death.
R2	Baltimore <i>Sun</i> : "Death of Edgar A. Poe. We regret to learn that Edgar A. Poe, Esq., the distinguished American poet, scholar and critic, died in this city yesterday morning, after an illness of four or five days. This announcement coming so sudden and unexpected, will cause poignant regret among all who admire genius, and have sympathy for the frailties too often attending it. Mr. Poe, we believe, was a <u>native of this State</u> , <a href="#">[link to R2a]</a> though reared by a foster-father at Richmond, Va., where he lately spent some time on a visit. He was in the 38 <sup>th</sup> year of his age.
R2a	Poe sometimes said he was born in Baltimore. The Poe family had lived in Baltimore many years. But Edgar Allan Poe was born in Boston.
S	Not many answers there. You stare at the long list of causes. Way too many to tackle in the short time you have.  There's got to be a way to sort them out. Perhaps the old files the librarian told you about will help.
T	But right now, you have a more immediate problem. All of sudden, the few dim lights overhead flicker and die.  You think you hear someone coming down the stairs, but you're not quite sure.
U	The lights come back to life.  But, for some reason, the computer never does.  Mice, you think. It must be the mice nibbling on the wires.
V	Except that – in a dark corner of the library shelves -- you think you see someone.

W	<p>Or at least you thought you did.</p> <p>But there's nothing there but a dirty old filing cabinet.</p> <p>The one the librarian told you about. Might as well take a look.</p>
X	<p>You find the files in an old musty filing cabinet. Way too old school. There's even a cobweb spun neatly over one of its drawers.</p>
	<p><b>FILE: POISONING</b> (Cholera and Mercury Poisoning)</p> <p>Clue One: In his letters during 1849, Poe writes that he had been suffering from cholera.</p> <p>Clue Two: At that time, cholera was treated by blood letting (cutting a vein and letting the blood run into a bowl) and by using a substance called calomel.</p> <p>Clue Three: Calomel is mercury chloride, a form of mercury that is considered to be highly poisonous. It is harmful if you swallow it or inhale it.</p> <p>Clue Four: Medicine dosages in Poe's time were inexact. He may have received high dosages of mercury without even knowing it.</p> <p>Clue Five: Since Poe's body was never examined to find out what caused his death, no one can be sure that Poe died from mercury poisoning.</p> <p>Read more about:</p> <p>Poe's death <a href="#">[links to an outside site]</a></p> <p>Letters from family and friends about Poe's death <a href="#">[link]</a></p> <p>Poe writes about his attacks of cholera <a href="#">[links to an outside site]</a></p> <p>Poe writes about calomel <a href="#">[links to an outside site]</a></p> <p>Mercury <a href="#">[links to an outside site]</a></p>

**FILE: CONSUMPTION**

(Symptoms of Tuberculosis)

Clue One:

Tuberculosis was a very deadly disease during Poe's time. It was the leading cause of death in the United States. No one knew what it was or how to treat it.

Clue Two:

Poe's beloved wife Virginia, his brother, and his mother all died from tuberculosis.

Read more about:

Poe's death [\[links to an outside site\]](#)

Letters from family and friends about Poe's death [\[link\]](#)

Tuberculosis [\[links to an outside site\]](#)

The history of tuberculosis [\[links to an outside site\]](#)

All about tuberculosis [\[links to an outside site\]](#)

**FILE: HEART OF POE**

(Heart Disease)

Clue One:

In May of 1848, a doctor diagnosed that Poe had heart problems.

Clue Two:

Poe denied that this diagnosis was true.

Clue Three:

Without an autopsy (or examination of a person's body after they have died), no one can be sure if Poe had heart problems.

Read more about:

Poe's death [\[links to an outside site\]](#)

Letters from family and friends about Poe's death [\[link\]](#)

Symptoms of heart disease [\[links to an outside site\]](#)

**FILE: IN HIS BRAIN**

(Brain Lesions)

Clue One:

In 1847, a doctor agreed with the nurse who took care of Virginia Poe before her death. He said that Poe had some sort of lesions on his brain and suffered from "brain fever."

Clue Two:

Without an autopsy (or examination of a person's body after they have died), no one can be sure if Poe had lesions on his brain.

Clue Three:

A Poe biographer noted that a modern doctor had said that Poe had brain lesions, based on the way he looked in the few pictures we have of him. The twists of Poe's face were the basis for his diagnosis.

Read more about:

Poe's death [\[links to an outside site\]](#)

Letters from family and friends about Poe's death [\[link\]](#)

Lesions [\[links to an outside site\]](#)

**FILE: GAS LIGHTING**

(Gas Lighting and Carbon Monoxide)

Clue One:

Baltimore installed gas lighting in 1817. It was the first American city to do this. Others such as Philadelphia and Boston soon had gas lighting of their own.

Clue Two:

Gas lighting produces carbon monoxide.

Clue Three:

Some symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning include chronic tiredness, headaches and blurred vision. Its effects also show up in the face. One eye droops lower than the other, while the mouth slants the other way. Pictures of President Lincoln and Edgar Allan Poe show this happened to both of them.

Clue Four: Poe's symptoms often got worse when he lived in urban areas.

Read more about:

Poe's death [\[links to an outside site\]](#)

Letters from family and friends about Poe's death [\[link\]](#)

Poe and carbon monoxide poisoning symptoms in his stories [\[links to an outside site\]](#)

## **FILE: CROOKED ELECTIONS**

(Crooked Elections in Baltimore)

Clue One:

On the day Poe was found on the streets, Baltimore was having an election.

Clue Two:

Baltimore's elections were often full of violence and wrongdoing. This led many to call Baltimore "Mob Town."

Ballots were often stolen. Election judges were bribed. And people were "cooped." This was a very strange and illegal practice. People were captured and kept in a "coop," or some small room. They were given a lot of alcohol to drink. Sometimes, they were even beaten. Then, they were taken to polls throughout the city and illegally forced to vote many times.

Clue Three:

Poe was widely known in Baltimore. People would have recognized him if he had been cooped.

Clue Four:

When Poe was found, he was wearing strange clothing – a straw hat, and old, torn, and stained pants and a jacket that didn't quite fit. When people were cooped, their captors sometimes switched their clothing to confuse poll observers into thinking they were some other voter.

Read more about:

Poe's death [\[links to an outside site\]](#)

Letters from family and friends about Poe's death [\[link\]](#)

The history of Baltimore City government and elections [\[links to an outside site\]](#)

The cooping theory [\[links to an outside site\]](#)

**FILE: ALCOHOLISM**

(The Perils of Alcoholism)

Clue One:

One of the two doctors who cared for Poe in the last days of his life (J. E. Snodgrass) swore that alcohol caused his death. He was a member of a temperance society. This group believed people should not drink alcohol. Experts think Snodgrass exaggerated or invented the circumstances behind Poe's death to make his point -- that people shouldn't drink.

Clue Two:

The other doctor (J. J. Moran) stated frequently that he did not smell any alcohol on Poe's breath when he was admitted to the hospital. He firmly believed Poe did not die from alcoholism.

Clue Three:

In 1889, one of Poe's relatives said that Moran's public statements about Poe's death surprised him, because it contradicted the story Moran had told him personally.

Read more about:

Poe's death [\[links to an outside site\]](#)

Letters from family and friends about Poe's death [\[link\]](#)

The theory that alcohol killed Poe [\[links to an outside site\]](#)

How alcohol can kill people [\[links to an outside site\]](#)

How alcohol can harm people who drink occasionally [\[links to an outside site\]](#)

One Clue you can find in Poe's letters [\[links to an outside site\]](#)

Another clue you can find in Poe's letters [\[links to an outside site\]](#)



**FILE: NEW THEORY - CATS**

(Rabies and Cats)

Clue One:

Poe and his family had pet cats.

Clue Two:

In Poe's time, animals were not vaccinated against rabies.

Clue Three:

During Poe's final days in the hospital, he was at first delirious. He slipped into a coma. When he came out of the coma, he was calm and could talk to people. People who are in the final stages of rabies often behave like this — having periods of madness and periods when they are fairly normal.

Clue Four:

Some reports of Poe's death say that he didn't (or wouldn't) drink water. This is a classic symptom of rabies.

Clue Five:

Some reports say that Poe drank at least half a glass of water and ate ice chips during his final days in the hospital.

Read more about:

Poe's death [\[links to an outside site\]](#)

Letters from family and friends about Poe's death [\[link\]](#)

The reasons some feel Poe died from rabies. [\[links to an outside site\]](#)

A fact sheet on rabies [\[links to an outside site\]](#)

Poe's Opinion on Cats [\[links to an outside site\]](#)

Y	You don't know what it is . . .  The shadows in the dark corners of the library basement . . . The hours you have spent trying to figure it all out . . .  But there is something . . .
Z	Words.
AA	Someone is talking.  To you.
BB	At first, you can't quite make out what they are saying.  You turn quickly from one side to the other, trying to figure it out.  But you can't see anyone.
CC	You hear the words as if they were inside you.
DD	Poe-like voice:  <i>"Our mortal world is too soon gone.</i>  <i>But, in pages old I still live on . . .</i>

EE	<p>The bones in your legs turn to jelly.</p> <p>Your mouth moves, but you can't hear your words.</p> <p>Or your scream.</p> <p>And you hope no one else can either.</p>
FF	<p>At last, you find your feet, and bolt up the stairs.</p> <p>You don't even stop when you spy the librarian, engrossed in an old book.</p>
GG	<p>"Wait. I have your card," you hear the librarian say as you rush out.</p>
HH	<p>But you don't wait. You don't even slow down.</p> <p>Until you are home again.</p>
II	<p>You still can't seem to forget last night – even when you are back in English class the next day.</p>
JJ	<p>The discussion swirls around you.</p> <p>Little by little, you begin to really listen to what others are saying. Poe's death was a mystery, but people definitely have their theories</p>
KK	<p>You – for one – believe that Poe's death was caused by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>[choice] Alcoholism</li> <li>[choice] Tuberculosis</li> <li>[choice] Rabies</li> <li>[choice] Carbon monoxide poisoning</li> <li>[choice] Heart problems</li> <li>[choice] Brain lesions</li> <li>[choice] Foul play</li> <li>[choice] Mercury poisoning</li> </ul>
KK1	<p><b>You chose: Alcoholism</b></p> <p>Now assign a number to each clue to show how important you thought it was in helping you decide what caused Poe's death, with "1" being the most important and "4" being the least.</p> <p>Drag the statements below to change their order.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Poe had a history of problems with alcohol.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The symptoms he showed are the symptoms of someone who had problems with alcohol.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> One of the doctors who treated him before his death said Poe smelled like he had been drinking.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Evidence in Poe's letters convinced me.</li> </ul>

KK2	<p><b>You chose: Tuberculosis</b></p> <p>Now assign a number to each clue to show how important you thought it was in helping you decide what caused Poe's death, with "1" being the most important and "4" being the least.</p> <p>Drag the statements below to change their order.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> In Poe's time, no one knew how to cure tuberculosis.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> The symptoms he showed are the symptoms of someone who had tuberculosis.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> In the early 1800s, many people died from tuberculosis.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Many artists at the time had tuberculosis, and often produced their best works when they were sick.</li></ul>	
KK3	<p><b>You chose: Rabies</b></p> <p>Now assign a number to each clue to show how important you thought it was in helping you decide what caused Poe's death, with "1" being the most important and "4" being the least.</p> <p>Drag the statements below to change their order.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> Poe had pet cats.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> In the 1800s, household pets were not vaccinated against rabies.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> His doctor once said Poe refused to drink water when he was near death in the hospital. This is a classic sign of rabies.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Poe showed other symptoms of having rabies, such as periods of being calm and rational followed by periods when he appeared to be delirious.</li></ul>	
KK4	<p><b>You chose: Carbon Monoxide Poisoning</b></p> <p>Now assign a number to each clue to show how important you thought it was in helping you decide what caused Poe's death, with "1" being the most important and "4" being the least.</p> <p>Drag the statements below to change their order.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> Cities such as Baltimore had begun using gas lighting.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Gas lighting produces carbon monoxide.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Poe's symptoms got worse when he was in an urban area.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Pictures of Poe taken at the time show signs that carbon monoxide had affected his face.</li></ul>	

KK5	<p><b>You chose: Heart Problems</b></p> <p>Now assign a number to each clue to show how important you thought it was in helping you decide what caused Poe's death, with "1" being the most important and "4" being the least.</p> <p>Drag the statements below to change their order.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> One of Poe's doctors had said that he thought Poe had heart problems.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> The symptoms Poe showed are the kinds of symptoms associated with heart problems.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Poe had been sick for a long time. People with heart disease are often sick for long periods of time.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Heart problems could cause blood flow to the brain to be erratic. This may be the reason Poe was mentally unstable.</li></ul>	
KK6	<p><b>You chose: Brain Lesions</b></p> <p>Now assign a number to each clue to show how important you thought it was in helping you decide what caused Poe's death, with "1" being the most important and "4" being the least.</p> <p>Drag the statements below to change their order.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> Brain lesions cause people to behave like he did.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Brain lesions can be formed by all kinds of things, including disease, stress, and alcoholism.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> In modern times, people looking at pictures of Poe thought he looked as if he had brain lesions.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Without an autopsy, no one could say for sure that Poe had or didn't have brain lesions.</li></ul>	
KK7	<p><b>You chose: Foul Play</b></p> <p>Now assign a number to each clue to show how important you thought it was in helping you decide what caused Poe's death, with "1" being the most important and "4" being the least.</p> <p>Drag the statements below to change their order.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> On the day Poe was found unconscious in the street, Baltimore was having an election.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Baltimore's elections were notoriously violent.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> People who were cooped were often given alcohol to drink and were sometimes beaten.</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> Poe didn't have his usual clothing on when he was found. Frequently, the people who cooped others hoped to disguise them by making them wear different clothing.</li></ul>	

KK8	<b>You chose: Mercury Poisoning</b>  Now assign a number to each clue to show how important you thought it was in helping you decide what caused Poe's death, with "1" being the most important and "4" being the least.  Drag the statements below to change their order.  <input type="checkbox"/> According to his letters, Poe had cholera. <input type="checkbox"/> The standard treatment for cholera was bloodletting and calomel. <input type="checkbox"/> Calomel was a form of mercury. Mercury is highly poisonous. <input type="checkbox"/> Mercury poisoning affects the nervous system.
LL	<a href="#">[Results page]</a>
MM	You hear the knock on the door before anyone.
NN	You rise and open the door.
OO	Poe's voice: "Well, hello there. I saw you last night at the library, didn't I?"  "The librarian knew I was coming here today. She asked me to give you this." (Returns library card.)