The Tale of the Poe Toaster
by Curt Rowlett

"There are some secrets that do not permit themselves to be revealed."

Edgar Allan Poe

For over 50 years since 1949, on the night marking the anniversary of Edgar Allan Poe's birth, a mysterious man-in-black has entered the cemetery where the master of the macabre lies buried, and, making his way through the dark shadows to Poe's grave, he places a partial bottle of expensive French cognac and three blood-red roses there, presumably as tokens of admiration and in tribute to the great author. This ritual completed, he then slips away into the night as quietly and as mysteriously as he came.

The identity of this dark stranger (dubbed the "Poe Toaster" by observers) has never been revealed. And out of respect to the memory and legacy of Poe, and with a desire to preserve the sanctity of the performance of the ritual, no attempt has ever been made to stop or hinder this enigmatic admirer.

Poe's grave is located in the 200 year-old Old Western Burying Ground cemetery on the corner of Fayette and Greene streets in Baltimore, Maryland, not far from the house where Poe once lived and wrote. The story surrounding his death is a tale in the true gothic fashion that even Poe himself would have approved of: he arrived in Baltimore for a brief visit while en route to New York and ended up staying forever. (Poe had lived in the city years before). Details about his activities during that period of time are uncertain, but apparently, he was in the midst of a troubled time in his life. Soon after his arrival, he disappeared and was later discovered lying in the gutter outside of a well-known tavern in an incoherent stupor, wearing someone else's clothes and carrying a cane that was not his. He was sent by friends to Washington College Hospital in Baltimore where he lapsed in and out of consciousness and finally, into a coma. During his third night at the hospital he went into a violent rage and could not be held down, screaming the name "Reynolds" several times throughout the night. (No one knows what significance that name may have had as supposedly the only "Reynolds" that Poe knew was a person with whom he was barely acquainted). He died on the morning of October 7, 1849 after whispering the last words, "Lord help my poor soul!" His exact cause of death, often wrongly presumed to be the result of a prolonged alcoholic binge, has never been determined and remains a mystery to this day.

The true meaning of the Poe Toaster's ritual and exactly what message is implied by the items left behind remains unexplained: the meaning of the French cognac is not completely clear as references to cognac did not appear as a prominent feature in Poe's works. The mysterious stranger leaves behind a partial bottle each year, presumably having imbibed the other part himself (which would explain why he is referred to as the "toaster." Several bottles of the Toaster's cognac from previous years are on display in Baltimore's Poe House and Museum). The consensus opinion regarding the three roses is that they represent Poe's aunt/mother-in-law, Maria Clem, his cousin/wife, Virginia Clemm, and Poe himself (the three persons buried beneath the monument).

The Poe Toaster is described by witnesses as a somewhat sinister-appearing person dressed completely in black, sporting a black fedora and a black (or white) scarf, wrapped in
such a manner as to hide his face, and carrying a walking stick. Once he enters the cemetery, he carefully places the cognac and roses on the grave, sometimes bending to kiss the effigy of Poe inscribed on the monument, then stands, tips his hat and walks away. The items left behind have been the same each successive year, but on some occasions, have been accompanied by unsigned notes, one that read simply, "Edgar, I haven't forgotten you."

For the past 15 years, Poe admirers, including the curator of Baltimore's Edgar Allan Poe House and Museum, have gathered on the night of Poe's birthday (January 19th) in nearby Westminster Church to observe, but not hinder, the Poe Toaster's private act of remembrance. (These same Poe devotees, to their credit, have successfully kept others from trying to uncover the man's identity).

It is commonly believed that there may be more than one person performing the ritual over the years, perhaps even that it is part of some sort of initiation rite of a secret society that passes the duties from one person to the next in succession. (In the beginning, witnesses to the ritual described an older, white-haired gentleman, while those in later years report a much younger-appearing man with black hair, the speculation being that the latest person observed may be the son of the man who originated the Poe ritual. It appears that the same person carried on the tradition until 1993 at which time a cryptic note was left on Poe's grave that read, "The torch will be passed." Ever since, a much younger man has been reported).

In later years, a few of the notes left by the Poe Toaster have taken on a more “topical” tone, and in two instances, even stirred up a bit of controversy; once in 2001 for making a locally unpopular prediction about the outcome of the Super Bowl in which the Baltimore Ravens were being opposed by the New York Giants and again in 2004 for taking a jab at the French, possibly for their opposition to America’s involvement in the Iraq war. The online web encyclopedia *Wikipedia* reported how the Poe Toaster left the following two notes:

The [2001] note read: The New York Giants. Darkness and decay and the big blue hold dominion over all. The Baltimore Ravens. A thousand injuries they will suffer. Edgar Allan Poe evermore. The news of the note's content caused a minor furor for several reasons. Never before had the Toaster commented on current events such as sports, and no one could explain why the Toaster would not favor the Ravens, who were named for Poe's most famous poem. In 2004, the Poe Toaster appeared to take a dig at the French; the note discovered among the roses stated: The sacred memory of Poe and his final resting place is no place for French cognac. With great reluctance but for respect for family tradition the cognac is place. The memory of Poe shall live evermore! Many interpreted this as a condemnation of France's opposition to the war in Iraq.

Whatever the case may be, when all is said and done, it must be noted that whoever is performing this ritual is surely doing so in sublime homage to what is the true essence of Poe's work and of the gothic horror tale itself: a dark and mysterious rite performed in an old graveyard by the light of the moon!
**Plays**
- Politian

**Short Stories**
- The Assignation
- Berenice
- The Black Cat
- The Cask of Amontillado
- A Descent into the Maelstrom
- The Devil in the Belfry
- The Domain of Arnheim
- Eleonora
- The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar
- The Fall of the House of Usher
- The Gold-Bug
- The Imp of the Perverse
- The Island of the Fay
- Landor’s Cottage
- The Masque of the Red Death
- Mesmeric Revelation
- The Murders in the Rue Morgue
- The Oblong Box
- The Pit and the Pendulum
- The Premature Burial
- The Purloined Letter
- Silence -- a Fable
- The Tell-Tale Heart
- The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade
- Von Kempelen and his Discovery
- William Wilson
- Ligeia
- Morella
- A Tale of the Ragged Mountains
- The Spectacles
- King Pest
- Three Sundays in a Week
- The Angel of the Odd
- Lionizing
- X-ing a Paragrap
- Metzengerstein
- The System of Dr. Tarr and Professor Fether
- How to Write a Blackwood Article
- A Predicament
- Mystification
- Diddling
- Mellonta Tauta
- The Duc de L’OMElette
- Loss of Breath
- The Business Man
- The Landscape Garden
- Maelzel's Chess-Player
- The Power of Words
- The Colloquy of Monos and Una
- The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion
- Shadow
- A Tale of Jerusalem
- The Sphinx
- Hop-Frog
- The Man of the Crowd
- Never Bet the Devil Your Head
- Thou Art the Man
- Why the Little Frenchman Wears His Hand in a Sling
- Bon Bon
- Some Words with a Mummy

**Essays**
- Death of Edgar A. Poe
- Edgar Allan Poe: An Appreciation
- Life of Poe
- Philosophy of Furniture
- The Poetic Principle
- Old English Poetry

**Poetry**
- A Dream
- A Dream Within A Dream
- A Paean
- A Valentine
- Al Aaraaf
- Alone
- An Enigma
- Annabel Lee
- Bridal Ballad
- Dreamland
- Dreams
- Eldorado
- Eulalie
- Evening Star
- Fairyland
- For Annie
- Hymn
- Hymn to Aristogeiton and Harmodius
- Imitation
- In Youth I Have Known
- Israfel
- Lenore
- Romance
- Silence
- Song
- Sonnet: To Science
- Spirits of the Dead
- Tamerlane
- The Bells
- The City in the Sea
- The Coliseum
- The Conqueror Worm
- The Forest Reverie
- The Happiest Day
- The Haunted Palace
- The Lake
- The Raven
- The Sleeper
- The Valley of Unrest
- The Village Street
- To - -
- To F
- To Frances S. Osgood
- To Helen
- To Isadore
- To Marie Louise (Shew)
- To My Mother
- To One in Paradise
- To The River
- To Zante
- Ulalume