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Edgar Allan Poe: A question of sport

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Howard Cosell, an American sports journalist, once said that “sport is human life in microcosm”.¹ Sport has been a source of inspiration for numerous artists and appears in their artistic output in miscellaneous forms.

As for writers, Albert Camus and Vladimir Nabokov loved soccer, Robert Frost said that he never felt more at home than at a ballgame (baseball), John Irving competed as a wrestler for twenty years. Similar examples could be given endlessly. It also concerns the place of sport within the literary output of numerous authors. Sport was also present in the life of the most unique figure in American literary history — Edgar Allan Poe.

The aim of this article is to examine the role which sport played in Edgar Allan Poe's life and literary output, as well as his influence on different aspects of American sport. Poe was an excellent runner, jumper, boxer and swimmer, which is analysed here. His love for sport is reflected in some of his stories, like *The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall* (ballooning), *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (swimming, riding, horse racing and rowing) or *Metzenstein: A Tale in Imitation of the German* (equestrian sports).

The paper also scrutinizes Poe's impact on contemporary American sport, concentrating on the football team from Baltimore (Ravens), which was named after his poem. The team's mascots — three ravens, appropriately named Edgar, Allan and Poe — are also presented.

¹ C. De Vito, *The Ultimate Dictionary of Sports Quotations*, New York 2001, p. 243.

Famous writers and sport — selected cases

It is in games that men discover their paradise [...]

Robert Lynd, Irish writer²

I am delighted to view any sport that may be safely engaged in [...]

Charles Dickens³

Sport is a ubiquitous phenomenon whose powerful impact on people is undeniable. Moreover, it seems that nowadays there is no institution or social stratum which is not touched in some ways by sport. As a matter of fact, “it is impossible to fully understand contemporary society and culture without acknowledging the place of sport”.⁴

Sports inspirations are visible in miscellaneous spheres of life. As the American sociologist Harry Edwards remarks,

In the humanities and arts, one finds manifestations of considerable interest in athletics. Literature, painting, sculpture, philosophy, and even ballet have all attempted to capture and interpret athletics in terms of their respective mediums.⁵

As for literature, sports episodes and sports heroes appeared in many works and the list of writers who loved sport seems to have no end. Some of them had previously made a name for themselves in sports before achieving successes in the field of literature. For example, Samuel Beckett was a talented cricket player, Malcolm Lowry won the junior golf championship, Stephen Crane played baseball very well, and Albert Camus and Vladimir Nabokov were soccer goalkeepers, which probably helped them use sport as a tool to demonstrate different aspects of life.

Sports struggle and drama have inspired writers for ages. Through sport, they explore the complexities of life, from its challenges and disappointments to its great pleasures. Sport entered the world of literature as early as in ancient times.⁶ As for modern literature, one can mention such works as: *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) by

² Ibid., p. 242.

³ Ibid., p. 241.

⁴ G. Jarvie, J. Thornton, *Sport, Culture and Society. An Introduction*, London-New York 2012, p. 2.

⁵ H. Edwards, *Sociology of Sport*, Homewood 1973, p. 7.

⁶ Epinikia (written in ancient Greece) are a good example. These were songs of triumph or choral lyric odes in honour of victors in war or in the great Hellenic games. They reached their zenith in the literary output of Pindar and Bacchylides (see W. Lipoński, *Historia sportu / The History of Sport*, Warszawa 2012, pp. 118–120). The analyses of literary representations of sport of the past provide us with an insight into the ways in which literature and sport were always connected. See for example: A. Penjak, H. Karnincic, “Sport and literature: An overview of the wrestling combats in the early literary texts”, *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 3, March 2013, no. 5, pp. 49–55.

Ernest Hemingway, *The Natural* (1952) by Bernard Malamud, *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner* (1959) by Allan Sillitoe, and many more. Let us now focus our attention on one of the greatest American literary figures of the nineteenth century — Edgar Allan Poe. He was not impervious to the charms of sport as well, which is visible in his biography and some part of his literary output.

Sports in Poe's life

One might find it surprising that this classic author of gloomy, macabre tales and poems which were rooted in his difficult life was a sports lover. Interestingly, insights into the shadowy places of the human mind was not everything that absorbed him. In ordinary circumstances the poet turned out to be a pleasant companion. He talked brilliantly, mostly of literature, and read his own poetry and that of others in a voice of surpassing beauty. It should be noted that he admired William Shakespeare and Alexander Pope. He had a sense of humour, for example apologizing to a visitor for not keeping a pet raven. Sport also played an important role in his short and tragic life. Many biographers confirm that as (especially) a young man, Poe was an excellent runner, jumper, boxer and swimmer, and that he enjoyed hiking through the countryside as well.

As a juvenile, Poe was good looking, very lively, and of great intelligence. He spent a portion of his childhood in England. While living there with his foster family — John and Frances Allan — he was entered at the Reverend John Bransby's Manor House School at Stoke Newington, then a suburb located north of London, where he was (among others) taught dancing. According to the headmaster Bransby, Poe "was a quick and clever boy and would have been a very good boy if he had not been spoilt by his parents".⁷ He also stated that his pupil "was intelligent, wayward and wilful".⁸

After coming back to America, Joseph H. Clarke, the director of the school he attended, described Edgar as: "playful as most boys".⁹ He also emphasized: "His natural and predominate passion seemed to me to be an enthusiastic ardor in everything he undertook".¹⁰ William Burke, whose school Edgar entered in 1823, described his pupil as a boy bursting with energy and an extrovert.¹¹ Young Edgar also made an impression on one of his then mates, Thomas Ellis, who recollected:

⁷ A.H. Quinn, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography*, Baltimore 1998, p. 71.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ A. Misrahi, *Człowiek i twórca. Edgar Allan Poe / El lector de... Edgar Allan Poe*, transl. G. Ostrowski, Warszawa 2007, p. 30.

No boy ever had a greater influence over me than he had. He was, indeed, a leader among boys; but my admiration for him scarcely knew bounds [...] He taught me to shoot, to swim, and to skate, to play bandy¹², &c.; and I ought to mention that he once saved me from drowning...¹³

At that time Poe distinguished himself with his physical strength, which manifested itself in many ways:

Poe at this time was in fine physical condition. The story has often been told of his swimming in the James River from Ludlam's Wharf six miles to Warwick in a hot June sun, against the tide. He was an able boxer and a swift runner, and he was chosen to represent the school in competition with others.¹⁴

Poe's feats in swimming are quite a feature of his youth. As a teenager he dived off a wharf into the James River near Richmond and, escorted by several friends in a rowboat, began his famous swim:

Mr. Poe, now of the Gentleman's Magazine, swam from a point in James' River, called Ludlam's wharf, to a wharf at Warwick — a distance of seven miles and a half, in a hot June sun, and against a tide of three miles per hour. He was then but 15 years of age. The difficulty of swimming with a current is absolutely nothing; that of swimming in perfectly still water is, to a really able swimmer, but little greater than the difficulty of walking — merely requiring patience. But to swim against a strong current — hic labor, hoc opus est. There can be no interval for rest by floating, as in the two other cases; and this makes all the difference. There is no properly authenticated fact on record equal to that of Mr. Poe.¹⁵

This is how Poe himself described his achievement:

I swam from Ludlam's wharf to Warwick, (six miles,) in a hot June sun, against one of the strongest tides ever known in the river. It would have been a feat comparatively easy to swim twenty miles in still water. I would not think much of attempting to swim the British Channel from Dover to Calais.¹⁶

Poe did not seem at all fatigued and capped his outstanding feat by walking all the way back to Richmond. This definitely corroborates his great form.¹⁷

Rufus W. Griswold, one of his biographers (who had a complicated relationship with Poe), tells us that during his stay at the University of Virginia, Poe distinguished himself through his extraordinary audacity, strength and physical agility, and that he achieved renown as a good athlete.¹⁸ He was a champion long jumper, bursting his only pair of shoes during the contest. He won it with a person-

¹² It is a team winter sport similar to ice-hockey. Bandy enjoys great popularity in the Scandinavian and Baltic countries. A team is composed of from eight to eleven players.

¹³ A.H. Quinn, op. cit., p. 82.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 84.

¹⁵ E.A. Poe, "Swimming", *Alexander's Weekly Messenger* 4, 1840, February 12, no. 7, p. 2, <http://www.eapoe.org/works/misc/SWIMNGA.htm> (access: 10.10.2016).

¹⁶ E.A. Poe, "Swimming", *Southern Literary Messenger* 1, May 1835, no. 9, p. 468, <http://www.eapoe.org/works/misc/swimming.htm> (access: 5.10.2016).

¹⁷ J. Meyers, *Edgar Allan Poe: His Life and Legacy*, New York 2000, p. 15.

¹⁸ F.K. Mathys, "Edgar Allan Poe and sport", *Olympic Review* 286, 1991, p. 389.

al best of 21 feet, 6 inches — or just 20 feet, depending on the teller. His fellows in the late 1820s described him as “graceful, sinewy, and lithe”.¹⁹

Poe also enjoyed rowing around in New York City²⁰ and wrote about pleasant days spent in the little Turtle Bay, named for the abundance of turtles that has populated it.

His commentary for the Columbia Spy newspaper was the following:

I procured a light skiff and made my way around Blackwell’s Island on a voyage of discovery and exploration. The chief interest lay in the scenery of the Manhattan shore, which is here particularly picturesque.²¹

Illustrious French poet Charles Baudelaire, who kept Poe’s reputation alive in France while he was not appreciated in America (“not a commercially successful writer in his lifetime”²²), and spent nearly fourteen years translating Poe into French, states in his essay *Edgar Poe: Sa vie et ses oeuvres / Edgar Poe: His Life and Works* (1856):

He was remarkably gifted in every way. As a boy, he displayed rare aptitude in all physical exercises, and although he was slight, with hands and feet like a woman’s, his whole being had delicacy but was tough and capable of extraordinary feats of strength. As a boy, he won a wager for swimming a distance ordinarily considered impossible. One might say that Nature provides her chosen ones with an energetic stamina, just as she endows with an abundant vitality those trees which most symbolize hardship and grief. Such men, who sometimes appear slight, are built as athletes.²³

Baudelaire also recalled the good looks of Edgar Allan Poe — “his strange and singular beauty is discussed in several biographies”.²⁴

Poe apparently tried to maintain his form in spite of numerous obstacles and complications that arose on his way. In a letter to George W. Eveleth²⁵ (Feb. 29, 1848), he explained what his real life looked like, realising that the general impression of people around him was often false:

¹⁹ S.D. Peterson, “Scholar, athlete, and artist: Edgar Allan Poe at University of Virginia”, *Literary Traveler* 2002, October 2, <http://www.literarytraveler.com/articles/scholar-athlete-and-artist-edgar-allan-poe-at-university-of-virginia/> (access: 15.05.2016).

²⁰ L. Cullen, “11 things you didn’t know about Edgar Allan Poe”, *The Huffington Post* 2014, January 23, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lynn-cullen/11-things-you-didnt-know-_1_b_4059140.html (access: 10.09.2016).

²¹ *History of Turtle Bay*, <http://www.turtlebay-nyc.org/history.html> (access: 5.07.2016).

²² I.M. Walker, “Edgar Allan Poe”, [in:] *American Literature to 1900*, “Penguin History of Literature”, vol. 8, ed. Marcus Cunliffe, London-New York 1986, p. 132.

²³ Ch. Baudelaire, “Edgar Poe: Sa vie et ses oeuvres” / “Edgar Poe: His life and works”, [preface in:] *Edgar Allan Poe. Histoires Extraordinaires*, transl. Ch. Baudelaire, Paris 1856. Cit. by: Ch. Baudelaire, “Edgar Poe: His life and works”, transl. R. Foye, [in:] *The Unknown Poe*, ed. R. Foye, San Francisco 1980, p. 85.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

²⁵ He was a casual Poe correspondent from 1845 on. See: F.S. Frank, T. Magistrale, *The Poe Encyclopedia*, Westport-London 1997, p. 122.

My *habits* are rigorously abstemious and I omit nothing of the natural regimen requisite for health: — i.e. — I rise early, eat moderately, drink nothing but water, and take regular and abundant exercise in the open air. But this is my private life — my studious and literary life — and of course escapes the eye of the world. The desire for society comes upon me only when I have become excited by drink.²⁶

Sport in Poe's literary output

The works of Edgar Allan Poe have influenced literature in the United States and around the world. He refined the short story genre and his reputation today rests primarily on his tales of terror and his haunting lyric poetry. Moreover, he was renowned as the creator of the detective story. What is especially interesting in the context of this paper, in some of his masterpieces Poe reveals his predilection for certain sports.

Metzengerstein — the first short story by Poe to see print (1832) — depicts a clear fascination with equestrian sports. Hunting is also mentioned there (a good example is Wilhelm, Count Berlitzing, remarkable for “so passionate a love of horses, and of hunting, that neither bodily decrepitude, great age, nor mental incapacity, prevented his daily participation in the dangers of the chase”²⁷). *The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall* (1835) — which later might have had an influence on Jules Verne — and *The Balloon Hoax* (1844) reflect the emerging technology of hot-air and gas balloons and growing interest in ballooning in America. In 1838, Poe published a long prose narrative, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, combining (which often happened in his tales) much factual material with the wildest fancies. It is considered as a source of inspiration for Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. Swimming, riding, horse racing, and rowing — fashionable at that time as leisure-time activities — are interestingly shown by the author.²⁸ Let us recall his description of a swimming episode:

The sea was nearly smooth, with a light wind, and still from the northward and westward. The sun coming out hotly in the afternoon, we occupied ourselves in drying our clothes. Found great relief from thirst, and much comfort otherwise, by bathing in the sea; in this, however, we were forced to use great caution, being afraid of sharks, several of which were seen swimming around the brig during the day.²⁹

²⁶ Ibid., p. 8.

²⁷ E.A. Poe, “Metzengerstein: A tale in imitation of the German”, [in:] *The Unabridged Edgar Allan Poe*, Philadelphia 1983, p. 79.

²⁸ F.K. Mathys, op. cit., p. 389.

²⁹ E.A. Poe, “The narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket”, [in:] *The Unabridged Edgar Allan Poe*, p. 406.

To sum up, the influence of sports and popular amusements — although not enormous — is clearly noticeable in some literary works of Edgar Allan Poe. They definitely constitute an important element in the above-presented stories and reflect what the author observed in the then American society.

Poe's legacy — the Baltimore Ravens

Edgar Allan Poe can be called a cultural icon as he “remains one of the few writers to have fully pervaded America's pop-culture consciousness”.³⁰ He and his work have appeared throughout popular culture in literature, comics, music, films, and other media, also — surprising as it might seem — in sport. It is through his poem *The Raven* that Poe has his most direct link to sport, to be more precise — American football. Let us analyse this interesting case.

Birds have inspired numerous football clubs (for example, the Philadelphia Eagles or the Atlanta Falcons). The Baltimore Ravens, established in 1996, are named in honour of one of Edgar Allan Poe's most revered masterpieces, the classic poem *The Raven* (first published in 1845). This constitutes the only example of a big sports team being named after a work of literature.

This American professional gridiron football team originated when Cleveland Browns owner and president Art Modell made a decision to relocate his historic franchise to Baltimore in 1996. The local fans — after extensive research, exhaustive panel discussions, focus groups, and fan polling — chose to celebrate the city's connections to Poe, who lived in Baltimore for several years, died and was buried there in 1849. As Edward J. Rielly noted, “a Baltimore Sun telephone poll produced a huge outpouring of sentiment for the Ravens”.³¹ Art's son David, then-assistant to the president, stated: “It's a strong nickname that is not common to teams at any level, and it means something historically to this community”.³² Thus the people of Baltimore, who chose the name during the poll conducted by the Baltimore Sun, made their team “the most literary NFL team”.³³

It should be noted as well that for a long time, pre-game introductions of the Ravens' starting lineup would be preceded by a stanza from Poe's poem, usually

³⁰ S. Meslow, *Pop Culture's Undying Edgar Allan Poe Obsession*, 2012, April 26, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/04/pop-cultures-undying-edgar-allan-poe-obsession/256417> (access: 10.12.2016).

³¹ E.J. Rielly, “Poe, Edgar Allan (1809–1849)”, [entry in:] *Football: An Encyclopedia of Popular Culture*, ed. E.J. Rielly, Lincoln-London 2009, p. 272.

³² *Naming Baltimore's Team*, <http://www.baltimoreravens.com/team/history/naming-baltimores-team.html> (access: 7.07.2016).

³³ C. Kellogg, “Inspired by the ravens: Literary NFL teams?”, *Los Angeles Times* 2013, January 29, <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/jan/29/entertainment/la-et-jc-inspired-by-the-ravens-literary-nfl-teams-20130129> (access: 7.07.2016).

the one which ended with the word “Nevermore,” referring to the opposing team’s putative inability to score when facing the powerful Raven defense.

Last but not least, the official mascots for the team were originally three raven brothers, appropriately named Edgar, Allan and Poe, which represented completely different personalities. After the 2008 season ended, however, Edgar and Allan were retired, leaving the raven named Poe as the sole mascot to cheer the players to victory. Later, he was joined by two real live ravens, named “Rise” and “Conquer” (raised and trained by staff at The Maryland Zoo in Baltimore). What is interesting, all the official mascots constitute a source of revenue for the club — they make appearances at numerous events (for example, weddings). Toy bird mascots can be also found in the club’s shop.

Edgar Allan Poe: A question of sport

Summary

The above-presented analysis demonstrates that Edgar Allan Poe — just like numerous other writers — was not indifferent towards sport. Literature does not exist in a vacuum. Sport has a great power of influence. It permeates different spheres of life and constitutes an important segment of culture. It creates a fragment of the world of literature as well. Sport has always occupied an important place in American society. The nineteenth century laid the foundations as far as creation of American sports landscape is concerned.³⁴ This was the time when Poe lived and worked. Paradoxically, the writer whose best work is mostly concerned with terror and sadness, quite often — especially in his youth — abandoned himself to a life of pleasure and sports. The research also touched the question of Poe’s legacy in contemporary world, which is not only visible in literary works or films, but also in the sports realm, namely at American football stadiums. Hopefully, the paper is an eye-opener showing that Edgar Allan Poe, “one of the most controversial figures in American literature”³⁵ had many faces, and exploring his complex personality and rich legacy lets one convince oneself that sport constitutes a part of them.

Thanks to the recent rise of interest in sport among scholars in the humanities and social sciences, there has been a steady growth in the number of academic publications dealing with the subject of connections between literature and sport. Only selected aspects of this relation could be described in this article. Obviously, there is a need for further research as far as the presence of sport both in literature and in biographies of writers is concerned.

³⁴ See for example: B.G. Rader, *American Sports. From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Spectators*, New Jersey 1983.

³⁵ I.M. Walker, *op. cit.*, p. 107.