

Virginia's Illness

In mid-1838 the Poes moved to Philadelphia, where there was a long, uninterrupted stretch between early 1838 and the spring of 1844 that was a period of heightened creativity and domestic tranquility for Poe. At home - in each of the five houses they rented during this time - were Virginia, Maria and their beloved cat, Caterina.

Life had settled into a daily round of contented housekeeping and writing in the evenings, after Poe returned from his day job. Poe celebrated their stability by buying some more expensive furnishings, including a piano and a harp for Virginia.

On January 20, 1842, Virginia was playing the piano and singing when she began to cough and blood poured from her mouth. This pulmonary hemorrhaging was a symptom of tuberculosis (then called consumption), a disease which had already killed so many of Edgar's loved ones.

They moved several times while in Philadelphia and in their last home there, in Spring Garden, Virginia was well enough to tend the flower garden and entertain visitors by playing the harp or the piano and singing. Novelist, Captain Mayne Reid wrote of his friendship with Poe and Virginia there:

In this humble domicile I can say that I have spent some of the pleasantest hours of my life - certainly some of the most intellectual. They were passed in the company of the poet himself and his wife - a lady angelically beautiful in person and not less beautiful in spirit. No one who remembers that dark-eyed, dark-haired daughter of Virginia - her own name, if I rightly remember - her grace, her facial beauty, her demeanor, so modest as to be remarkable - no one who has ever spent an hour in her company but will endorse what I have said above. I remember how we, the friends of the poet, used to talk of her high qualities. And when we talked of her beauty, I well knew that the rose-tint upon her cheek was too bright, too pure to be of Earth. It was consumption's color - that sadly-beautiful light which beckons to an early tomb.

The Poe family next moved to New York City sometime in early April 1844, traveling by train and steamboat. Virginia waited on board the ship while her husband secured space at a boarding house on Greenwich Street. Poe began to drink more heavily under the stress of Virginia's illness. He worked first at the *Evening Mirror*, where his poem, "The Raven," was published on January 29, 1845. It was an instant success and made Poe a household name, though he was paid only \$9 for its publication.

Edgar Allan Poe became associate editor of the *Broadway Journal* in February 1845, and the following month, editor and part owner. There he alienated himself from other writers with his biting literary criticism in that paper, going so far as to accuse [Henry Wadsworth Longfellow](#) of plagiarism, though Longfellow never responded.

At Poe Cottage

In May 1846 Poe moved Virginia and Maria to their final home which still stands in Fordham, The Bronx, about fourteen miles outside New York City - their final home. The cottage was small and simple: it had on its first floor a sitting room and kitchen and its unheated second floor had a bedroom and a study. It is known today as Poe Cottage.

Virginia was by this point an invalid, and Poe was chronically broke but provided as well as he could and despite the scandals involving his attention to other women no one doubted his devotion to his wife. Poe became a workaholic, churning out stories, poems, essays, reviews, whatever he could get, to pay the bills and try to keep Virginia healthy.

By November of that year, Virginia's condition was hopeless. Her symptoms included irregular appetite, flushed cheeks, unstable pulse, night sweats, high fever, sudden chills, shortness of breath, chest pains, coughing and spitting up blood.

Of the recent failure of the *Broadway Journal*, the only magazine Poe ever owned, he said, "I should have lost my courage but for you - my darling little wife - you are my greatest and only stimulus now to battle with this uncongenial, unsatisfactory and ungrateful life."

As Virginia was dying, the family received many visitors. Family friend [Elizabeth Oakes Smith](#) said that Virginia admitted, "I know I shall die soon; I know I can't get well; but I want to be as happy as possible, and make Edgar happy." She promised her husband that after her death she would be his guardian angel.

Virginia was tended to for a time by friend 25-year-old Marie Louise Shew, who had learned medical care from her father and her husband, both doctors. She provided Virginia with a comforter as her only other cover was Poe's old military cloak, as well as bottles of wine, which the invalid drank "smiling, even when difficult to get it down."

On January 29, 1847, Poe wrote to Shew:

Kindest - dearest friend - My poor Virginia still lives, although failing fast and now suffering much pain. May God grant her life until she sees you and thanks you once again! Her bosom is full to overflowing - like my own - with a boundless - inexpressible gratitude to you. Lest she may never see you more - she bids me say that she sends you her sweetest kiss of love and will die blessing you. But come - oh come tomorrow!

Virginia Clemm Poe died the following day, January 30, 1847 at age 24 in the cottage's first floor bedroom. Poe literally collapsed at Virginia's bedside the moment she stopped breathing. Not surprisingly, he became sick for months, suffering from depression and an irregular heartbeat. A friend said of him, "the loss of his wife was a sad blow to him. He did not seem to care, after she was gone, whether he lived an hour, a day, a week or a year..."

<http://www.womenhistoryblog.com/2012/08/virginia-clemm.html>

1. What were some of the symptoms of consumption?
2. How did Poe react to Virginia's illness? How did Virginia handle her illness?