

3. Alcohol

"A lot of the ideas that have come up over the years have centered around the fact that Poe couldn't handle alcohol," says Semtner. "It has been documented that after a glass of wine he was staggering drunk. His sister had the same problem; it seems to be something hereditary."

Months before his death, Poe became a vocal member of the temperance movement, eschewing alcohol, which he'd struggled with all his life. Biographer Susan Archer Talley Weiss recalls, in her biography "The Last Days of Edgar A. Poe," an event, toward the end of Poe's time in Richmond, that might be relevant to theorists that prefer a "death by drinking" demise for Poe. Poe had fallen ill in Richmond, and after making a somewhat miraculous recovery, was told by his attending physician that "another such attack would prove fatal." According to Weiss, Poe replied that "if people would not tempt him, he would not fall," suggesting that the first illness was brought on by a bout of drinking.

Those around Poe during his final days seem convinced that the author did, indeed, fall into that temptation, drinking himself to death. As his close friend J. P. Kennedy wrote on October 10, 1949: "On Tuesday last Edgar A. Poe died in town here at the hospital from the effects of a debauch. . . . He fell in with some companion here who seduced him to the bottle, which it was said he had renounced some time ago. The consequence was fever, delirium, and madness, and in a few days a termination of his sad career in the hospital. Poor Poe! . . . A bright but unsteady light has been awfully quenched."

Though the theory that Poe's drinking led to his death fails to explain his five-day disappearance, or his second-hand clothes on October 3, it was nonetheless a popular theory propagated by Snodgrass after Poe's death. Snodgrass, a member of the temperance movement, gave lectures across the country, blaming Poe's death on binge drinking. Modern science, however, has thrown a wrench into Snodgrass's talking points: samples of Poe's hair from after his death show low levels of lead, explains Semtner, which is an indication that Poe remained faithful to his vow of sobriety up until his demise.