

1. Beating

swelling of
the brain
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In 1867, one of the first theories to deviate from either phrenitis or alcohol was published by biographer E. Oakes Smith in her article "Autobiographic Notes: Edgar Allan Poe." "At the instigation of a woman," Smith writes, "who considered herself injured by him, he was cruelly beaten, blow upon blow, by a ruffian who knew of no better mode of avenging supposed injuries. It is well known that a brain fever followed. . . ." Other accounts also mention "ruffians" who had beaten Poe senseless before his death. As Eugene Didier wrote in his 1872 article, "The Grave of Poe," that while in Baltimore, Poe ran into some friends from West Point, who prevailed upon him to join them for drinks. Poe, unable to handle liquor, became madly drunk after a single glass of champagne, after which he left his friends to wander the streets. In his drunken state, he "was robbed and beaten by ruffians, and left insensible in the street all night."

2. Cooping

Others believe that Poe fell victim to a practice known as cooping, a method of voter fraud practiced by gangs in the 19th century where an unsuspecting victim would be kidnapped, disguised and forced to vote for a specific candidate multiple times under multiple disguised identities. Voter fraud was extremely common in Baltimore around the mid 1800s, and the polling site where Walker found the disheveled Poe was a known place that coopers brought their victims. The fact that Poe was found delirious on election day, then, is no coincidence.

Over the years, the cooping theory has come to be one of the more widely accepted explanations for Poe's strange demeanor before his death. Before Prohibition, voters were given alcohol after voting as a sort of reward; had Poe been forced to vote multiple times in a cooping scheme, that might explain his semi-conscious, ragged state.

Around the late 1870s, Poe's biographer J.H. Ingram received several letters that blamed Poe's death on a cooping scheme. A letter from William Hand Browne, a member of the faculty at Johns Hopkins, explains that "the general belief here is, that Poe was seized by one of these gangs, (his death happening just at election-time; an election for sheriff took place on Oct. 4th), 'cooped,' stupefied with liquor, dragged out and voted, and then turned adrift to die."