

THE TRIAL OF EDGAR ALLAN POE

by

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FADE IN:

EXT. BALTIMORE - NIGHT - DRIVING RAIN - 1849

A pair of frothing black horses pulling a torch lit brougham carriage race down a cobblestone street.

POE (V.O.)
(quiet Southern accent)
From childhood's hour I have not
been as others were, I have not
seen as others saw.

A stovepipe hat and cape wearing CAB DRIVER arduously pulls back on the reins, bringing the horses to an abrupt stop.

POE (V.O.)
I could not bring my passions from
a common spring.

Elegant in tails and top hat, THOMAS CHIVERS, 40, Southern, explodes out of the carriage door and races into a dark alley.

EXT. ALLEY - NIGHT - RAIN

POE (V.O.)
From the same source I have not
taken my sorrow...

Chivers sprints down the dark, wet, trash-strewn brick alleyway; rats scurry into crevices.

POE (V.O.)
I could not awaken my heart to joy
at the same tone.

At the end of the alleyway, a WHITE MAN in a straw hat and a stained white suit, two times too big for his frame, lays face down, surrounded by several empty liquor bottles.

POE (V.O.)
And all I loved...

Chivers grunts as he flips the man over, revealing a dark haired, unconscious, spasming, feverish, EDGAR ALLAN POE, 40.

POE (V.O.)
I loved alone.

Chivers struggles to lift Poe.

CHIVERS

Come on, Edgar. We've got to get you to a hospital.

INT. HOSPITAL CORRIDOR - 1849 - NIGHT

Thunder booms and blinding flashes of lightning intermittently illuminate the flickering, gas-lit hallway.

Rapidly rounding the corner, the middle-aged DOCTOR MORAN and TWO NURSES storm down the dark hall. One of the nurses carries a large, white candle and protects the flame with a hand.

NURSE #1

... admitted on Wednesday, didn't regain consciousness for ten hours. Spent the next two days talking at the walls to someone named Virginia. These hallucinations have been accompanied by tremors in the limbs.

DOCTOR MORAN

Treatment?

NURSE #2

Mustard plasters applied to his feet and stomach, cold compresses to his head.

DOCTOR MORAN

Hmm. Could be any number of things. Epilepsy. Delirium Tremens. Late-stage rabies. Brain fever...

The trio take a sudden, sharp turn into a dark room.

NURSE #1 (O.S.)

We administered an stimulating alcoholic cordial this morning at three, and that's when he became violent.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - NIGHT

Curtains dance in the stiff wind.

The candle light produces exaggerated shadows as Poe, half-naked and bathed in sweat, attempts to escape the bed by scaling the walls backwards at the sight of the Doctor and two nurses. The Doctor pulls him back down to the bed.

POE
 (terrified, hysterical)
 Reynolds!?!

The Doctor pushes Poe flat.

DOCTOR MORAN
 (calmly)
 No, I'm Doctor Moran.

The first nurse helps to restrain Poe by grabbing his legs.
 Wild-eyed, Poe turns to look at her.

POE
 REYNOLDS!!!

The second nurse puts the candle down on a small table near the window and hurries out of view to help restrain Poe.

POE (O.S.) (CONT'D)
 Lord help my poor soul.

The candle flickers violently... and then goes out.

INT. ART NOUVEAU WROUGHT IRON ELEVATOR - DARKNESS

The raven-haired, frail, pale, Southern, VIRGINIA POE, 14, dressed in 1840's attire, bathed in shadow, holds both hands in a muffler and coughs slightly as she looks up at the gilded arm marking off the descending numbers of the floors.

Shafts of celestial light emanate from behind her as the elevator passes each floor.

EXT. WROUGHT IRON ELEVATOR

Stifling a cough, Virginia slides open the gate and exits; she looks left and right, then heads away to the right.

INT. MARBLE HALLWAY

Virginia meekly approaches an AFRICAN-AMERICAN MAN in a 1930's Depression-era Chicago policeman's uniform, twirling a nightstick.

She produces a sheet of paper and points at it. The policeman disinterestedly shrugs his shoulders and looks away.

Virginia produces a silver flask and a \$20 bill and hands them out to the policeman. He surreptitiously takes them, and with his nightstick, points right. Virginia curtsies.

EXT. COURTHOUSE DOOR

The door has "UNIFIED PURGATORY COURTHOUSE #27" chiseled into the granite above it.

INT. LARGE OFFICE ROOM

Virginia, holding a ticket with the number 83 on it, sits on a wooden chair in a large sparse room, watching a high ranking, be-medaled SS OFFICER in a black uniform with swastika armband fill out paperwork from a giant stack of forms on his desk some distance from her.

Without looking up he lifts and rings an ornate bell.

SS OFFICER
(irritated)
Dreiundachtzig?

Virginia stands and coughs.

The SS officer sighs and rings the bell again.

SS OFFICER (CONT'D)
Vierundachtzig?

Virginia meekly approaches and hands him her number 83 ticket. He glances at it and returns to his paperwork.

SS OFFICER (CONT'D)
Number 83 has already been called.
You'll have to go back to
registration, get in line and wait
to be issued a new number. Could
take up to two weeks.

Virginia reaches into her muffler.

VIRGINIA
I was told to have you authenticate
this form.

He takes it, sighs.

SS OFFICER
Name?

VIRGINIA
Virginia Eliza Poe.

SS OFFICER
Maiden name?

VIRGINIA

Clemm.

SS OFFICER

Date of birth?

VIRGINIA

August 15th, 1822.

SS OFFICER

Date of passing?

VIRGINIA

January 30th, 1847.

SS OFFICER

Cause of death?

A tear escapes Virginia's eye.

VIRGINIA

Mycobacterium tuberculosis.

Disinterested, the SS Officer flips the paper over.

SS OFFICER

The purpose of your visit?

VIRGINIA

To set a trial date for my husband.

The SS Officer looks up at her in incredulity.

SS OFFICER

This late in the session?! To even set up a preliminary hearing you'd need an AQR4, not to mention a form SG-67, and that's just for starters...

VIRGINIA

(stifling a cough)

I was told I just need you to stamp that paper.

SS OFFICER

Look, *Fraulein*, I don't give the orders or make the rules. I just follow them...

Virginia reaches into her muffler.

VIRGINIA
I have a special dispensation from
Saint Peter.

The SS officer's face drops.

SS OFFICER
(quietly)
Let me see that...

Open-mouthed, the SS Officer reads the Holy Writ; his face slowly breaks into a grin and he shakes his head, handing the paper back to Virginia.

SS OFFICER (CONT'D)
(snorting)
This is no good. It has to be in
triplicate.

Bemused, he returns to his paperwork.

Virginia produces two more sheets of paper from her muffler and hands them to the officer.

Stone faced, his eyes dart over the papers, and then, glaring at her, irritated, he forcefully stamps the three papers.

INT. COURTROOM HALLWAY - DOOR

THE DEVIL, 40, WHITE, blonde haired and blue eyed, exhausted, carrying a leather satchel and dressed in a business suit, closes his eyes as he wearily leans his horned head against the imposing door, which has bolted to it, a sign reading:

"Use of supernatural activity by non-authorized personnel prohibited beyond this point."

His jaw suddenly clenches in grim determination.

THE DEVIL
Okay!

With a quick breath, he snaps his fingers.

THE DEVIL (CONT'D)
Animated!

He waves a hand in a semi-circle across his mouth and opens his eyes.

THE DEVIL (CONT'D)
And smile!

INT. COURTROOM

Virginia, coughing, sits in the first row of the noisy, full gallery, watching the buzz of activity.

The Devil, smiling and pointing fingers of "Hey there, big guy!" recognition at various personages, bursts through the door, makes his way through the gallery and sits at the defense table.

At another table, Thomas Chivers quietly confers with a seated, morose, defeated, Edgar Allan Poe, who never once looks up.

The juror's box is filled with a motley crew of disinterested people; A 12th century MONGOLIAN WARRIOR, a white, suburban KAREN with her spiky, combed-over haircut, an 18th century sash wearing HUNGARIAN COUNT, an AK-47 toting 13-year-old pigtailed female KHMER ROUGE soldier in black pajamas, CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS, a RUSSIAN CZAR, a 20th century BUSINESSMAN, A WWI FRENCH GENERAL, A KLANSMAN, AN EGYPTIAN PHARAOH, A FEMALE VIKING, A CAT and a ridiculously hip dressed 21st-century TIK TOK INFLUENCER, scrolling through her phone.

A PONTIFICAL SWISS GUARD, in his red, yellow and blue striped uniform, bangs his halberd on the floor and the room grows quiet.

PONTIFICAL SWISS GUARD

Levez-vous!!!

Everyone in the courtroom rises as THE ARCHANGEL GABRIEL, 40, Middle-Eastern, bathed in blinding light, descends into the judge's chair.

The light fades away, as does his wings.

GABRIEL

Be seated.

All sit except Chivers.

GABRIEL (CONT'D)

You wished to speak?

CHIVERS

Yes, your Honor...

GABRIEL

Counsel may approach the bench.

Chivers and the Devil do so.

GABRIEL (CONT'D)
 What is it, Dr. Chivers?

CHIVERS
 (whispering)
 Well... it's the jury, sir.

The Devil turns sharply to Chivers.

THE DEVIL
 (almost whining)
 What about the jury?!

CHIVERS
 My client doesn't feel that they
 are his peers.

GABRIEL
 Mister Poe seems to possess a
 remarkable lack of humility.

Virginia looks over at Poe, who doesn't look up.

CHIVERS
 That is completely and
 unfortunately true, your honor.

Chivers hands Gabriel a piece of paper.

CHIVERS (CONT'D)
 I've drawn up a list of candidates
 from the alternates.

Gabriel scans it and then hands it to the Devil.

GABRIEL
 Does counsel have any objections?

THE DEVIL
 (smiling)
 I see no point in wasting time on
 objections to alternates,
 Gabriel...

GABRIEL
 Then this jury is dismissed.

The jurors exit the box and leave via the gallery as Gabriel hands the paper down to a 70-Year-Old ETHIOPIAN DEBTERA carrying prayer sticks, dressed in a white turban, white clothes and a loose fitting white shamma.

GABRIEL (CONT'D)
 Call in the alternates.

THE DEVIL

... when the trial itself is
illegal and should be thrown out.

Gabriel rolls his eyes and breathes an exasperated, heavy
sigh.

ETHIOPIAN DEBTERA

Samuel Langhorne Clemens.

The 19th century, cigar smoking, wild white haired,
mustachioed, WHITE AMERICAN, MARK TWAIN, 60, enters and sits.

Gabriel and the Devil lean in towards one another to argue
the same point they've been chewing over since the beginning
of time as the alternates enter one by one.

GABRIEL (O.S.)

(whispering)

We've been over this already...

ETHIOPIAN DEBTERA

Oscar Fingal O'Fflahertie Wills
Wilde.

The tall, cigarette smoking, flamboyant, 19th century, IRISH,
OSCAR WILDE, 30, dressed in a lilac-colored shirt and cape,
enters carrying a sunflower in one hand.

THE DEVIL (O.S.)

(tersely whispering)

I don't think I'm being
unreasonable! I am simply asking
that legal contracts, which have
been drawn up and signed in
advance, be honored.

ETHIOPIAN DEBTERA

Count Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy.

The bearded and balding, 19th century, RUSSIAN, LEO TOLSTOY,
80, dressed in a peasant's frock, enters, humbly kneels
before Gabriel, crosses himself and then takes his seat.

GABRIEL (O.S.)

Contracts, whether signed
beforehand or not, are void the
instant the terms are broken.

ETHIOPIAN DEBTERA

Donatien Alphonse François, Marquis
de Sade.

The 18th century, FRENCH, MARQUIS DE SADE, 50, dressed in silk finery, powdered wig and rouge, storms to his seat.

THE DEVIL (O.S.)
Contractually, the accused is
legally mine.

ETHIOPIAN DEBTERA
Gabriel José de la Concordia García
Márquez.

The mustachioed, 20th century, COLUMBIAN, GABRIEL GARCIA MARQUEZ, 70, dressed in a "professorial" wool jacket and cravat enters and sits.

ETHIOPIAN DEBTERA (CONT'D)
Emily Dickinson.

GABRIEL (O.S.)
You know very well that you
rescinded all claims of legality in
the inappropriate timing of your
greedy soul collecting.

The gaunt, 19th century anthropophobic and agoraphobic, WHITE AMERICAN, EMILY DICKINSON, 30, dressed in a modest but immaculate white dress, enters and squats behind her chair, peeking out at the gallery.

ETHIOPIAN DEBTERA
Sylvia Plath.

The bob-haired, 1950's WHITE AMERICAN, SYVIA PLATH, 25, dressed in Capri pants and man's white button-down shirt with a bunny ears knot, cigarette dangling from her lips, saunters in, and sits.

THE DEVIL (O.S.)
The case was so obviously
egregiously filled with sin that
the timing was irrelevant.

ETHIOPIAN DEBTERA
Durante di Alighiero degli
Alighieri.

The stern, 13th century, ITALIAN, DANTE ALIGHIERI, 65, dressed in a red cape and hat, to which a garland of leaves are attached, storms in, twirls his cape and imperiously sits.

GABRIEL (O.S.)

For the contracts to be valid, you agreed, in all cases, no matter how egregious, to wait for collection until the natural death of the parties in question.

THE DEVIL (O.S.)

What can a collection a mere day or two premature in contrast to eternity matter?

ETHIOPIAN DEBTERA

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

The 18th century, GERMAN, GÖETHE, 70, enters and sits.

GABRIEL (O.S.)

Assuming a human form, dressing yourself up in a white suit and taking the name Reynolds in order to trick someone into an alcoholic bender which you know will kill him to achieve an early collection SHOULD constitute a mistrial, but for the opposite of your given reasons...

ETHIOPIAN DEBTERA

Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov.

The 20th century, RUSSIAN, VLADIMIR NABOKOV, dressed in a checked tweed suit, carrying a butterfly net, enters and sits.

ETHIOPIAN DEBTERA (CONT'D)

Emily Jane Brontë.

GABRIEL

... I have half a mind to throw him into Heaven this instant and be done with it...

The 19th century, ENGLISH, EMILY BRONTË, 30, the saddest girl in the world, dressed in a dark, conservative dress, meekly enters.

She casts a furtive glance at Virginia as she sits, and lets loose a quick smile of sisterly comradeship for an instant before returning her morose gaze to the floor.

GABRIEL (O.S.) (CONT'D)
 But, to settle this point once and
 for all and forever, we shall
 proceed and your request for a
 mistrial is denied.

ETHIOPIAN DEBTERA
 Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche.

The 19th century, GERMAN, NIETZSCHE, 35, more mustache than
 man, enters. He sits, crosses his arms defiantly and scowls
 at nothing and everything.

GABRIEL (O.S.)
 Counsel may be seated.

Gabriel bangs his gavel.

GABRIEL (CONT'D)
 Lucifer? You may proceed with your
 opening statement.

The Devil gets up and approaches the bench, bows, smiles,
 turns first to Chivers and then the jury.

THE DEVIL
 (gregarious)
 May it please the court...
 counsel... members of the jury. I
 would like to make it perfectly
 clear from the outset that I am by
 no means here to mete out some
 terrible, vindictive punishment. I
 am here to do nothing more
 nefarious than see that a legal
 contract is fulfilled.

The Devil walks up and down in front of the jury box.

THE DEVIL (CONT'D)
 If a person, of their own free
 will, takes it upon themselves to
 fill a lifetime with idleness,
 drink and depravity; if arrogance,
 baseness and vanity are the
 substance of their relationships
 and the currency of their language;
 if such a person chose to fill each
 and every day with vulgarity,
 insanity and the abuse of a
 child...? With a life such lived,
 should they be rewarded with the
 sweetest gifts that Heaven allows?

The Devil walks over to the empty witness stand.

THE DEVIL (CONT'D)

Simply put, this is a trial of two choices. One. That Mr. Poe breached his contract and therefore belongs in Hell as was agreed. Or, in the unlikely alternative it is decided that Poe did not breach his contract; he nonetheless belongs in Hell due to his life of sins.

GABRIEL

Mr. Chivers. Your opening remarks.

The Devil sits as Chivers gets up and approaches the jury.

CHIVERS

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury. I do not, and in good conscience cannot, dispute the debased and depraved occurrences that will be testified before you. But is that the entirety of the story? Verily, should it be? Are we to judge something only at its result, and ignore each and every one of the causes which led to it's conclusion?

Chivers walks to the empty witness chair.

CHIVERS (CONT'D)

An artist's work should have value and be judged alone, in its own right, no matter what sort of life the artist led, and even if they have damaged or hurt others...

Chivers turns to look at Virginia.

CHIVERS (CONT'D)

... including the very ones who so desperately want to spend eternity with them.

The Devil loudly applauds Chivers as he returns to his seat.

THE DEVIL

Interesting strategy!

GABRIEL

Mephistopheles?

He rises and passes Chivers, muttering under his breath.

THE DEVIL
(sing-song)
It's not going to wo-rk...

The Devil approaches the bench.

THE DEVIL (CONT'D)
Your Honor, for my first witness, I
would like to call Mister John
Allan to the stand.

The Scottish JOHN ALLAN, 60, sits in the witness stand.

THE DEVIL (CONT'D)
Mr. Allan. You were Mister Poe's
father?

ALLAN
Foster father. My wife and I took
him in following the untimely
death of his young mother, Eliza.

THE DEVIL
But for over a decade you performed
all of the duties of a father...

ALLAN
Naturally. Clothed him, fed him,
housed him...

THE DEVIL
Now, now, Mr. Allan! You did so
much more than that! Is it not true
that under great personal peril you
selflessly took this young boy from
Richmond, Virginia clear across the
tumult of a storm tossed ocean to
England to have him educated in a
the manner befitting a gentleman?

ALLAN
Well... I was there on a business
venture and did bring the boy
along...

FLASHBACK TO:

EXT. SOKE NEWINGTON CHURCH STREET, NORTH LONDON - 1825 - DAY

30-YEAR-OLD John Allan, walking outside the length of his
store, meticulously studying and checking off figures in a
ledger book, walks along barrels of bale, nails and molasses.

END FLASHBACK:

INT. COURTROOM

THE DEVIL

And was it not at this point his proclivity for the sin of idleness was first revealed? His generously gifted education, taken at great expense from your own hard won purse, instead of being put to productive use, was carelessly wasted, frivolously tossed aside, in pursuit of fantasies, daydreams, sloth!

ALLAN

(back in the moment)

Him and his blasted stories! I was fully prepared to hand the family business over to him should he want it. I endeavored to train him for a career in the mercantile arts, but he had no drive, no work ethic! He instead spent his time deluging me with letters, endlessly begging for money, blathering on about "art" and "originality" and refusing to listen to common sense or reason! I wrote him back, reminding him of the words of Aristotle; that every story had already been written.

THE DEVIL

And his response to this sober advice?

ALLAN

Like the egoist he is, he wrote, "Not every story."

The Devil returns to his table.

THE DEVIL

(smirking)

Your witness.

Chivers doesn't leave his table or look up.

CHIVERS

Mr. Allan you stated you brought the young Mr. Poe along with you to England on a business venture?

ALLAN

That is correct.

CHIVERS

Was this venture the same business
that you ran in Virginia?

FLASHBACK TO:

EXT. RICHMOND, VIRGINIA - HARDWARE STORE - DAY - 1825

30-YEAR-OLD John Allan, walking outside the length of his
store, meticulously studying and checking off figures in a
ledger book, walks along barrels of bale, nails and molasses.

END FLASHBACK:

INT. COURTROOM

ALLAN

It was.

CHIVERS

You were a rather successful
businessman in Richmond.

Allan nods.

CHIVERS (CONT'D)

But not so in England?

ALLAN

The business didn't progress there
as I had expected.

CHIVERS

Again, what business was that?

ALLAN

Mercantile.

CHIVERS

Mercantile. You ran a hardware
store.

ALLAN

Correct.

CHIVERS

You sold barrels, hammers, rope,
nails, et cetera.

ALLAN

That's right.

CHIVERS

But your business in England was not as prosperous as the one you ran in America.

ALLAN

Unfortunately, no. We tried to make a go of it for five years or so but then had to give it up.

CHIVERS

Mr. Allan, would you say that the English need for barrels, hammers, rope et cetera would run more or less concurrent with those of the Americans?

Allan stares at Chivers but doesn't answer.

CHIVERS (CONT'D)

Is it not true that there was one "mercantile commodity" that brought you a very great profit indeed in America but was deemed against the law to bring into, much less buy or sell, in England?

Allan's eyes narrow as he glares at Chivers.

CHIVERS (CONT'D)

Would you agree that servitude is a far greater sin than art?

FLASHBACK TO:

EXT. RICHMOND, VIRGINIA - HARDWARE STORE - 1825 - DAY

Blood slowly drips off links on a chain.

The chain attached to handcuffs on wrists.

The wrists of AFRICAN SLAVES.

30-YEAR-OLD John Allan, walking outside the length of his store, meticulously studying and checking off figures in a ledger book, walks along barrels of bale, nails, molasses and the slaves.

END FLASHBACK:

INT. COURTROOM

ALLAN

(indignant)

I tried to tell him, warn him! That this destructive mania for writing was folly! A foolish waste of time and energy! I pointed out that no American writer had ever supported themselves through their writing alone! And that any of the few Americans who had found success as a writer were either married into money, landed gentry or already independently wealthy!

CHIVERS

And what did Mr. Poe have to say to that?

ALLAN

(dismissive)

Something flippant and vainglorious.

CHIVERS

(sharply)

His response, Mr. Allan.

ALLAN

"Then I shall be the first to do it."

CHIVERS

And was he?

ALLAN

(frustrated)

I don't know. We had the argument on my deathbed. I gave him \$40 to go away. I died a few hours afterwards.

Chivers rises, approaches the Ethiopian Debtera and hands him a sheet of paper.

CHIVERS

May the record show that Mr. Poe never once held any other type of job, and though impoverished and in a state of near starvation from the day he left John Allan's house as a teenager until the very day of his death, through his work as an editor at four literary journals, his one thousand essays, reviews, articles and critical notices, his 30 novels, 50 published poems and 70 short stories, he was the first American writer, ever, to support himself solely through his writing.

The Devil grins sardonically as Chivers returns to his seat.

CHIVERS (CONT'D)

Hardly the thing the mind conjures when one envisions idleness or a lack of work ethic.

THE DEVIL

I should like to call Mr. James Russell Lowell to the stand.

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL, 30, bearded, speaking with an upperclass Boston accent, sits in the witness chair.

THE DEVIL (CONT'D)

Mr. Lowell. You were a writer?

LOWELL

Yes; as well as a critic, editor and poet.

THE DEVIL

And also a professor at Harvard?

LOWELL

For twenty years.

THE DEVIL

And later an ambassador?

LOWELL

First Spain and then to the United Kingdom.

THE DEVIL

Ambassador Lowell. You first made your name as a member of the Fireside Poets, if I remember correctly?

LOWELL

That is so.

THE DEVIL

Would you please state who the Fireside Poets were for the benefit of the jury, please?

LOWELL

We were the first group of American poets who rivaled the popularity of the British.

THE DEVIL

You're speaking of the Romantics; Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron, Keats.

Lowell nods.

THE DEVIL (CONT'D)

At any point during your illustrious career, did you happen to chance upon a certain poet named Edgar Allan Poe?

Lowell casts a disdainful glance at Poe.

LOWELL

Yes. We once met at a party...

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. DINGY BOARDINGHOUSE - LIVING ROOM - 1845 - NIGHT

The room contains a rickety wooden table and chair, a battered piano, a single, threadbare plush chair and has hundreds of books stacked floor to ceiling against every wall.

Poe, dressed in black, distraught, anxiously paces the living room back and forth in front of the opened bedroom door.

His aunt, MARIA CLEMM, 40, has her back to the living room, and is hunched over a coughing Virginia sitting on the bed.

POE

Muddy. We've got to be there by seven o'clock.

MARIA

Almost ready Edgar... *oh...*

POE

What is it?

MARIA

Nothing! Nothing. Just got to get
Sissy cleaned up, then we'll be
off.

Poe stops and turns to the opened door as Maria reaches for a towel, revealing Virginia, mouth agape, staring blankly ahead, blood dripping off her soaked chin.

Maria furiously wipes Virginia's face clean as Poe tilts his head back to lean against the door frame and closes his eyes.

MARIA (CONT'D)

(whispering)

Come on now Ginny. This is an
important night for Edgar's career.
You can do this.

Poe pulls out a silver flask and drinks deeply from it.

MARIA (CONT'D)

You can do this for Eddie.

EXT. MANHATTAN - COLONIAL HOUSE - 1845 - SPRING - NIGHT

Fashionably dressed couples exit horse drawn carriages in front of the brimming lights of the three story house.

INT. COLONIAL HOUSE - NIGHT

DRAWING ROOM:

A CLASSICAL QUARTET plays Robert Schumann's "Piano Quartet in E Flat Major, Op. 47: 3/ Andante cantabile".

The house is filled with scores of people, all glad-handing and drinking punch from crystal glasses.

The guests are all dressed in vibrant, gay colors, in sharp contrast to Poe's black suit.

FOYER:

Poe, pulling from his silver flask, scowling and a little drunk, a dazed Virginia and concerned, anxiously hovering Maria enter the foyer.

The effervescent hostess in yellow, ANNE LYNCH, 30, briskly approaches Poe with outstretched hands.

LYNCH

Mr. Poe, Mr. Poe! How thrilling it is to welcome a man of such great letters into my home!

Poe leans down to kiss her hand.

POE

The honor, my dearest Anne Lynch, sits squarely upon me to be invited into your exquisite and handsomely furnished domicile.

LYNCH

(beaming)

And a profound joy it is that such a man of letters also be a chivalrous Southern gentleman such as yourself!

More guests are arriving and the butterfly Anne rushes off to greet them.

Poe returns to pulling off his flask and scowling over the room as Maria tenderly helps Virginia sit at the first available chair in the hallway; a stiff, wooden affair under the hanging coats.

Thomas Chivers approaches Poe, smiling.

CHIVERS

There you are! C'mon, let's take a walk around.

Poe finishes his flask.

POE

Yes, let's go get a drink.

Chivers holds him by the arm.

CHIVERS

Let's not go get a drink.

DRAWING ROOM:

Poe and Chivers enter, looking over the other guests.

CHIVERS

Most of the New York Literati are here tonight.

(MORE)

CHIVERS (CONT'D)

Washington Irving, Herman Melville,
Ralph Waldo Emerson... and you've
attacked all of them in print with
your "tomahawk" reviews.

POE

I don't go for this mutual
admiration society business. Feeble
puffing is not my forte. It does
them good to hear the truth. Might
stimulate them to worthier efforts.

CHIVERS

I know it did me.

POE

Chivers, even your worst nonsense,
and some of your poems are truly
horrible, still have an indefinite
charm and sentiment of melody.

CHIVERS

(smiling)

You know Edgar, if I didn't think
you were one of the greatest men
who ever lived, I believe I'd punch
you in the face right now.

Poe blankly looks at Chivers, then again moodily scans the
crowd. His face breaks into a slow smile.

Across the room, the vain but unattractive RUFUS GRISWOLD,
40, is beside a cluster of women.

He is holding the hand of, and attempting to flirt with, the
beautiful, but frail, dark haired, extremely pale, Southern
poet FANNY OSGOOD, 30.

She looks like a version of Virginia; but fifteen years
older.

Fanny is bored, disinterested, scanning the room.

She smiles suddenly, frees her hand and rapidly crosses the
room, along with the cluster of women in tow.

Griswold glares at their destination.

OSGOOD

Oh, Mr. Poe! We've all so wanted to
meet you. I'VE so wanted to meet
you. Mrs. Samuel Osgood.

Poe stares hard into Fanny's eyes and takes her hand.

POE
It's Fanny, isn't it?

OSGOOD
(blushing)
Yes, Mr. Poe.

POE
Edgar.

Fanny turns to address her friends.

OSGOOD
Mr. Poe... Edgar, as you know, is the severest critic of our day, so imagine my reaction when he gave one of my poems a favorable review!

Poe again takes her hand, staring hard into her eyes.

POE
(double entendre)
I judge Mrs. Osgood less by what she has done, and more by what she has the ability to do.

Fanny lowers her gaze and blushes again as her friends all flash telling smiles at one another; A bemused Chivers leads Poe away.

CHIVERS
We're to meet Mr. Lowell?

POE
Au Revoir, Ladies.
(beat)
Fanny.

Chivers and Poe exit the room. Fanny, overlywhelmed and utterly charmed, pulls in and huddles with her excited group of friends.

OSGOOD
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating
hair!

HALLWAY:

Maria and Virginia have been watching this exchange. Concerned, Maria strokes Virginia's hair.

MARIA
Doesn't it make you jealous?

Virginia shakes her head no.

VIRGINIA
 (whispering)
 Not if it keeps him away from the
 bottle.

Poe and Chivers enter.

POE
 Where is Lowell? This bastion of
 Harvard?

CHIVERS
 Around here somewhere, talking to
 Mr. White, I think.

POE
 (sneering)
 "Hub of the Universe." *I loathe
 Boston.*

Chivers points back into the drawing room.

CHIVERS
 There they are.

Poe pulls out his flask.

POE
 He doesn't look half the noble
 looking person I expected.

CHIVERS
 What did you expect?

POE
 (gloomily)
 For some reason, I feel extremely
 nervous in meeting him.

CHIVERS
 Edgar, you're acting quite mad this
 evening.

POE
 I have become insane, Thomas.

Poe shakes his empty upside down flask.

POE (CONT'D)
 With long intervals of horrible
 sanity.

The diminutive THOMAS WILLIS WHITE, 60, and Lowell, chatting, walk over.

WHITE
... Griswold's soul... Edgar? May I
introduce Mr. James Russell Lowell.

LOWELL
(smugly)
So... I meet "The Raven" at last.

White is exasperated while Lowell is surprised as Poe unexpectedly bows deeply in an exaggerated manner instead of shaking Lowell's outstretched hand.

POE
And a profound joy it is to meet an
upper class Boston Brahmin. Such as
yourself.

WHITE
Yes... well...

POE
My family, Mr. Lowell. My mother-in-
law, Maria Clemm.

MARIA
(star struck)
It's a very great pleasure to meet
you, Mr. Lowell. I've read *so many*
of your...

Poe forcefully pulls Virginia up from the chair; her face is weak, anxious.

POE
My wife, Virginia.

All of her strength has been used to rise from the chair.

Lowell hesitates, and then steps forward to take her hand. He looks deeply into her eyes with a pained expression.

LOWELL
Mrs. Poe.

It takes Virginia two breathes, and all of her energy, to answer him.

VIRGINIA
(barely audible)
... *Mister... Lowell.*

Poe slaps his hands together violently.

POE

Well! What shall we discuss?
Something Bostonian? The
Transcendentalists? That should
make you feel at home! Did you
know, *Mr. Lowell*, that there ARE
literary people outside of Boston?

CHIVERS

(diffusing a bomb)
Come on, Edgar. Let's take a walk
around.

POE

(manic)
Yes!!! Let's go get a drink!

Poe turns and storms into the drawing room as Chivers chases after him, grabs his arm and begins whispering in his ear.

MARIA

Please don't get the wrong
impression, Mr. Lowell. Eddie is
not himself tonight.

Across the room, Poe turns sharply to Chivers.

POE

(WAY too loudly)
Well, sir! I do not care what any
sulfur-tongued, sanctimonious,
Yankee **ABOLITIONIST** may think!

MARIA

(embarrassed)
Excuse me.
(exits)

Chivers drags Poe, sloshing two glasses of punch, from the room.

POE (O.S.)

I AM A SOUTHERNER!!!

LOWELL

There goes Poe, with his Raven,
like Barnaby Rudge. Three-fifths of
him sheer genius, two-fifths sheer
fudge.

White snorts knowingly as Lowell turns his gaze back to the seated Virginia. His face regains its pained expression as he watches her.

Virginia is staring blankly at the opposite hallway wall, mouth agape, silently trying breathe.

END FLASHBACK:

INT. COURTROOM

THE DEVIL

Mr. Lowell. You were quite active in the anti-slavery movement before the American Civil War; in Boston, in Philadelphia... would you say that Mr. Poe, as previously claimed, found the practice of slavery abhorrent?

LOWELL

The impression I received was that Mr. Poe should more likely find the idea of "abolition" abhorrent.

THE DEVIL

(smug)
Your witness.

CHIVERS

No questions.

GABRIEL

You are dismissed, Mr. Lowell.

THE DEVIL

I would like to call Mr. Thomas Willis White to the stand.

White sits in the stand.

THE DEVIL (CONT'D)

Mr. White. You were the proprietor of the Southern Literary Messenger; a monthly magazine out of Virginia with a rather large, if not the largest, subscription bases in the country, if I recall.

WHITE

Indeed.

THE DEVIL

Did your magazine have a motto?

WHITE

At that time, Boston, in particular, but also New York, growing in affect, dominated the intellectual concentration of the country; it was my aim, *my magazine's aim*, "To awaken and stimulate the genius and pride of the South".

THE DEVIL

We're you successful?

WHITE

I would like to think so.

THE DEVIL

Would that be because of, or in spite of, your one-time editor, Mr. Poe?

WHITE

(irritated)

He was a fine editor and an even better writer, but his methods were... unconventional, to say the least.

THE DEVIL

You in fact had to let him go.

WHITE

After several repeated warnings, yes. Unfortunately.

THE DEVIL

(innocently)

Several warnings?

WHITE

I could have been sued! Lost everything due to his frivolity! His propensity to defame and slander his fellow writers with his diabolical "tomahawk" reviews and his libelous claims of plagiarism against Longfellow!

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. SOUTHERN LITERARY MESSENGER - 1845 - EVENING

Two writing desks are pressed head-to-head against one another; Poe, head bowed and writing furiously, sits at one, Griswold, lazily skimming a book, the other.

Chivers, and two others, labor at desks some distance from Poe and Griswold.

Poe suddenly rises, scooping up a large stack of papers and three scrolls.

He strides across the room and places the stacks on White's desk, but keeps the three scrolls in his hand.

POE

I've finished the twelve notices,
six book reviews and...

WHITE

Good.

Still half-absorbed in the mountain of his own work, White blindly reaches for the first paper on the stack and reads.

WHITE (CONT'D)

"The Swiss Heiress should be read
by all who have nothing to do."

White looks up at Poe askance; Poe smiles innocently at him.

White reads from the next sheet.

WHITE (CONT'D)

"If James McHenry should ever be
arraigned for writing poetry, no
sane jury would ever convict him."

Irritated, White shakes his head.

WHITE (CONT'D)

"Paul Ulric is of the class of
absurdities with an inundation of
which our country is grievously
threatened. We shall spare no pains
in exposing fully its four hundred
and forty-three pages of utter
folly, bombast and inanity."

END FLASHBACK:

INT. COURTROOM

THE DEVIL

Was this the only reason for Mr.
Poe's termination?

WHITE

The daily "tomahawks" combined with
his pre-breakfast rituals...

THE DEVIL

"Pre-breakfast rituals"?

FLASHBACK TO:

EXT. SOUTHERN LITERARY MESSENGER - SPRING - 1845 - MORNING

White, lips pursed, watches from the window as Poe draws a long pull from a whiskey bottle, retches, spits, finishes the bottle and then dumps the bottle in the bushes.

INT. SOUTHERN LITERARY MESSENGER - DAY

Poe enters and staggers to his desk. White approaches him.

WHITE

Edgar. No man is safe who drinks
before breakfast. I told you in
September if you separated yourself
from the bottle, and bottle
companions, forever, I would always
have a place for you here.

Poe sits at his desk and begins furiously writing.

WHITE (CONT'D)

You've flown off the track. Your
habits are very poor, and it would
appear that you are the victim of
melancholy. I should not at all be
astonished to hear one day that you
have been guilty of suicide.

Poe snorts and continues writing.

POE

I can quit drinking whenever I
choose to.

WHITE

This was your third chance, Edgar.
Gather your things. I'm going to
have to let you go.

Poe looks up at White in angry astonishment. He abruptly stands up, scoops up tens of scrolls and a dozen books.

POE

My situation here is the cause of my indulgences; it has been disagreeable to me in every respect! My salary is contemptible, the drudgery excessive.

Poe storms out of the room; books and scrolls falling in his wake.

POE (O.S.) (CONT'D)

You have neither the capacity to appreciate my labors, nor the will to reward them!

In silence, Chivers, White and Griswold watch Poe's exit.

Griswold rises and approaches White.

GRISWOLD

I should be happy to replace Poe as editor this very moment. Think of all the money you'd save by not having to place an ad.

White turns to Griswold.

GRISWOLD (CONT'D)

You can add half those savings to my salary.

END FLASHBACK:

INT. COURTROOM

The Devil turns and sits down.

THE DEVIL

Your witness.

Chivers rises and approaches the stand and leans against it; White is not a fan of how close Chivers is leaning in.

CHIVERS

Mr. White... would you say the poetry of James McHenry and the novels "The Swiss Heiress" and "Paul Urlic" were the apogee of American Literature?

WHITE

(snorting)

The antithesis. They were all three abysmal.

CHIVERS

So Mr. Poe's criticisms did not include knowingly false statements.

White wriggles uncomfortably in his chair.

CHIVERS (CONT'D)

While you did not exaggerate Mr. Poe's arrogance or drinking habits, is it possible that you may have skipped over several less dramatic moments of that evening and subsequent morning that had a larger import?

White wiggles in his chair uncomfortably.

WHITE

Well... I can't be expected to remember every detail...

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. SOUTHERN LITERARY MESSENGER - 1845 - EVENING

A seated White reads aloud from a sheet of paper as a standing Poe watches him.

WHITE

"... We shall spare no pains in exposing fully its four hundred and forty-three pages of utter folly, bombast and inanity."

White lowers the paper and looks up at Poe.

WHITE (CONT'D)

Is your only aim in the review of a book to ridicule the author?

POE

Subscriptions have more than tripled since I began writing reviews.

WHITE

(clearing his throat)

Yes... well. What are those?

POE
Three new works.

White reaches for the scrolls.

WHITE
And they are?

POE
The first one is in a new genre
I've just created. Science fiction.

Shaking his head, White unfurls the scroll.

WHITE
(exasperated)
"Science... fiction..."

POE
Yes; It follows the adventures of
Hans Pfaal; a man who rides a hot
air balloon to the moon.

White sighs as he skims the document.

POE (CONT'D)
The next is a System of Testaceous
Malacology...

WHITE
A system of Tescus...?

POE
It's an illustrated textbook on
mollusk shells I made when I
noticed the differences between the
creatures along the Atlantic
seaboard between Nova Scotia and
Rhode Island.

WHITE
(he's out of his mind)
And the last?

POE
It's about a man named Egeaus. His
cousin is his lover, but she's
epileptic. The nearer their wedding
day draws, the more sickly, wasted
and corpse-like she becomes. It is
then that Egeaus notices how
perfectly white her teeth are.

(MORE)

POE (CONT'D)

He begins to covet them, because,
as visible bones, they transcend
death.

Stunned, White looks up at Poe, eyebrows raised, mouth open.

Poe stares ahead at nothing, his eyes growing wilder with
each sentence.

POE (CONT'D)

(becoming manic)

His lover dies before they are wed
and is hastily buried. Egeaus goes
into a trance and hears a woman
screaming. A servant wrests him
from his trance to inform him that
the grave has been disturbed, and
that his lover had been buried
alive! We then find out Egeaus is
covered in splatters of mud, with
tiny bite marks on his hand and
blood on his sleeves. Wanting
something permanent, he had dug up
his own cousin's grave, and with
instruments of dental surgery, had
removed from his still living
lover, thirty-two small, dazzlingly
white, perfect, teeth!

Poe's almost fiendish grin subsides at the end of his tale
and disappears completely as he looks down at White, who is
staring up at him open mouthed, ashen, in frozen horror.

POE (CONT'D)

(regaining composure)

It's called Berenice.

WHITE

(quietly)

That will be all for today, Edgar.

END FLASHBACK:

INT. COURTROOM

Chivers is walking along the jury box, back to White, with
three fingers raised.

WHITE

More than tripled your
subscriptions. You must have
rewarded him handsomely with this
amazing windfall from your new
editor;

(MORE)

WHITE (CONT'D)

what exactly would be the financial reward for a writer whose work offered readers a dazzling varied choice of extremely popular critical reviews, poetry, scientific articles, innovative genre inventions, the macabre...

Chivers, not receiving an answer, turns to White; in unison, so does every member of the jury.

White squirms even more.

CHIVERS

Mr. White?

WHITE

(quietly)

Eight dollars.

CHIVERS

Per article?

WHITE

Per month.

CHIVERS

Let me see if I understand this correctly. If Mr. Poe turned in only one review for the whole month, he would be paid...?

WHITE

(embarrassed)

Eight dollars.

CHIVERS

Even if this one review caused such a sensation that demand to read his critiques more than tripled your subscriptions?

Uncomfortable, White looks off to the side.

CHIVERS (CONT'D)

Can we safely assume that the volume of Mr. Poe's work exceeded that of once a month?

WHITE

You could.

CHIVERS

Generally how many poems, reviews,
scientific articles, short stories
and the like did Mr. Poe submit?

White looks down at the floor.

WHITE

Ten to twelve...

CHIVERS

A month?

WHITE

A day...

CHIVERS

(doing the math)

Twelve submissions a day, everyday,
for thirty days; why that's three
hundred and sixty submissions!
Enough to fill several magazines
many times over. And all that work
for only eight dollars! Tell me Mr.
White, do you think this mental
effort combined with such a scant
reward could have had any negative
effect on his private life?

WHITE

I knew nothing of Mr. Poe's private
life!

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. DINGY BOARDING HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - 1845 - MORNING

Maria cleans away the breakfast dishes as Virginia, eyes
closed, sits at the piano, playing BEETHOVEN'S "MOONLIGHT
SONATA".

Poe sits in the threadbare plush chair, reading Charles
Dickens' novel "Barnaby Rudge."

Virginia hits a *sour note* and Poe looks up from his book at
nothing, and then back down at his book.

Poe continues to read, then lets out a short snort.

POE

Talking raven...

Virginia hits another *sour note*, this time out of time with
the melody.

Poe looks up at her; *two more missed notes* are played.

Poe closes his book, rises and walks over to Virginia. He stands behind her as she continues to play, eyes closed, mouth opened.

Poe looks down at the piano keys.

There are four thick drops of BLOOD on the keys.

His eyes well as he watches a fifth HEAVY, thick, drop of blood SLOWLY DRIP from her opened mouth and strike a key.

Poe lowers his head and squeezes Virginia's shoulders. She stops playing. He leans in.

POE (CONT'D)

(whispering)

Ginny. Let's get you to bed.

EXT. SOUTHERN LITERARY MESSENGER - 1845 - MORNING

White, lips pursed, watches from the window as Poe draws a long pull from a whiskey bottle, retches, spits, finishes the bottle and then dumps the bottle in the bushes.

END FLASHBACK:

INT. COURTROOM

WHITE

(aggravated)

I thought highly of his talents,
but I simply could not be cramped
by him in the exercise of the
judgments of which articles I
should or shouldn't put in my own
magazine!

CHIVERS

Even if the articles were wildly
popular and cost you almost nothing
to procure?

WHITE

Buried cousins?! Plagues?!
Pendulums?! Cat's eyeballs?!
Catacombs?! Beating Hearts?! No,
Dr. Chivers! My tolerance had it's
limits. It's *limits!*

CHIVERS

No further questions.

GABRIEL
You may be seated.

THE DEVIL
I would like to call Maria Clemm to
the stand.

Maria, not wanting to do this **at all**, sits in the stand.

THE DEVIL (CONT'D)
(reassuring)
Mrs. Clemm. Mr. Poe's habitual
drinking was at the root your
emotional pain...

MARIA
Well...

CHIVERS
Objection your Honor! Counsel is
leading the witness.

GABRIEL
Sustained.

The Devil rephrases the question to Maria but stares,
smiling, at Chivers.

THE DEVIL
Mrs. Clemm. Poe was a habitual
drunk who regularly indulged to
excess, was he not?

MARIA
(sniffles)
If he had one he had to finish the
bottle.

THE DEVIL
Did Mr. Poe begin drinking at a
young age?

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

INT. DINGY HOTEL - 1809 - NIGHT

An infant in a wooden crib WAILS as the pale, beautiful,
raven-haired Englishwoman ELIZA POE, 22, drops the pages of
the play she's memorizing to her side.

She looks like a version of Virginia; but eight years older.

ELIZA

Muddy! Could you please do something about Edgar?

The 20-Year-Old MARIA CLEMM enters and lifts the infant from a wooden crib.

20-YEAR-OLD MARIA

Yes, Eliza.

Maria sits, lifts the infant, rocks him in her arms, pulls the plug out of a bottle of GIN, pours some into a cup, dips a crust of bread in the cup, and sticks the soaked bread in the infant's mouth.

Eliza glances at her stack of papers and then closes her eyes.

ELIZA

"A joyless, dismal, black, and sorrowful issue! Here is the babe, as loathsome as a toad amongst the fair-faced breeders of our clime. The Empress sends it thee, thy stamp, thy seal, and bids thee christen it with thy dagger's point."

END FLASHBACK:

INT. COURTROOM

MARIA

He started about the same time as most anyone else, I suppose.

THE DEVIL

Could you state your relationship to the plaintiff.

MARIA

He is my sister Eliza's child.

THE DEVIL

Meaning you are his aunt.

MARIA

Yes.

THE DEVIL

Is that the only way you are related?

MARIA

Well. He is my son-in-law.

THE DEVIL

Making you his mother-in-law.

MARIA

Correct.

THE DEVIL

That means Mr. Poe married your daughter.

MARIA

Virginia...

THE DEVIL

His cousin.

Maria blinks rapidly.

THE DEVIL (CONT'D)

That must have come as quite a shock to you after you found out.

MARIA

Found out?

THE DEVIL

That your nephew had run off with your daughter.

MARIA

(confused)

Found out? No... I was at the wedding...

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. DINGY BOARDING HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - 1845 - NIGHT

Virginia, confused look on her face, is seated behind the desk, staring at a piece of paper. She looks up as Poe, behind her, places a book on the desk, opens it, leans over her and points.

POE

Here we would say that "y" equals three is a solution to the equation four times "y" plus seven equals nineteen.

(MORE)

POE (CONT'D)

Replacing each occurrence of "y"
with three gives us four times
three plus seven equals nineteen,
or twelve plus seven equals
nineteen. So here, nineteen equals
nineteen, which is true.
Understand?

Maria knitting in the threadbare plush chair, looks up at
Poe.

VIRGINIA

(lightly coughing)

Sort of...

MARIA

Eddie, that's enough for today.
Ginny. Why don't you sing us
something?

Virginia gets up and sits in front of the piano.

VIRGINIA

What would you like to hear, Muddy?

MARIA (O.S.)

Oh, sing us that new one. "Tell Him
I Love Him Yet."

A calm comes over Poe as he watches Virginia reverentially
while she plays.

VIRGINIA

(singing)

Tell him I love him yet,
As in that joyous time!
Tell him I ne'er forget;
Though mem'ry's now be mine!
Tell him when fades the light
Upon the earth and sea,
I dream of him by night
He must not dream of me!

LATER:

Poe, Virginia, Maria and Chivers watch a white haired
REVEREND, 70, pen in hand, read a certificate.

REVEREND

There must be an error. This looks
like it says Virginia is...

CHIVERS

Twenty-one, Reverend.

Poe looks at Virginia, who looks down at her shoes as Maria, her face buried in a handkerchief, sobs loudly.

The Reverend looks at Chivers and then looks Virginia up and down, pursing his lips. He looks at the certificate, furrows his brow and then begins writing.

REVEREND

(dubiously)

...Twenty... one...

(beat)

Now, if you two will join hands. Do you, Edgar, take Virginia, to be your lawfully wedded wife? Do you promise to faithfully love and cherish her, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, as long as you both shall live?

POE

(solemnly)

I do.

REVEREND

And do you, Virginia, take Edgar to be your lawfully wedded husband? Do you promise to faithfully love, cherish and obey him, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, as long as you both shall live?

VIRGINIA

(proudly)

I do.

REVEREND

By the power vested in me by God and the Commonwealth of Virginia, I now pronounce you man and wife.

Edgar and Virginia kiss with the awkwardness and innocence of the first time.

END FLASHBACK:

INT. COURTROOM

THE DEVIL

And was she?

MARIA

Was she what?

THE DEVIL

Twenty-one?

MARIA

Well... the certificate states...

THE DEVIL

You are under oath, Mrs. Clemm. Was Virginia Clemm twenty-one years old when she married Edgar Poe?

MARIA

She was not.

THE DEVIL

How old was she?

MARIA

(quietly)

Thirteen.

THE DEVIL

So you're saying that your nephew married his thirteen-year-old cousin?

Maria looks at the floor.

THE DEVIL (CONT'D)

And that in entering this incestuous relationship with your daughter, he not only broke the laws of man and nature...

Maria sobs into her handkerchief.

THE DEVIL (CONT'D)

... but began seven continuous years of rape upon a minor!

VIRGINIA (O.S.)

(screaming)

No!!!

Every head in the room turns to look at Virginia.

She is leaning forward; desperately clutching the rails of the gallery, tears in her eyes.

VIRGINIA (CONT'D)

It wasn't like that at all!

FLASHBACK TO:

EXT. MANHATTAN - WINTER - SNOWING - BLUSTERY - 1845 - NIGHT

Poe, his tattered grey West Point overcoat blowing in the stiff wind, sees DR. CALEB ABERNATHY, 50, a man with a beak-like nose, dressed in a glossy black suit, carrying a leather medical bag, enter a tavern.

Poe rapidly crosses the street to the tavern.

JACK CLARKE, 30, dressed in a checkered suit and bowler hat stealthily follows Poe.

INT. TAVERN - WINTER - NIGHT

From the other side of the boisterous tavern, Rufus Griswold sips his drink and watches as Dr. Abernathy places an order with the BAR WENCH as Poe rapidly approaches.

POE
(anxious)
Dr. Abernathy. Were you able to see
Virginia today?

Dr. Abernathy receives a steaming hot toddy and begins sipping and never once looks at Poe.

ABERNATHY
Yes. Earlier this evening.

POE
What is it? What's wrong with her?

ABERNATHY
It's an lung infection, Mr. Poe. It
will be \$50 for the in-house visit
and the examination.

POE
Lung infection?

ABERNATHY
Mycobacterium tuberculosis.

POE
Then you mean, she has...

ABERNATHY
Consumption. The bill is \$50. If
you cannot pay it in it's entirety
this evening you can leave
incremental payments at my office
or at home with my wife starting in
the morning.

POE

Consumption? Is there a cure?

ABERNATHY

None. She will remain in this condition evermore.

POE

Well... what can be done? What can I do?

ABERNATHY

Spend as many hours as possible with her; for you won't have many more.

POE

But... I... can't we...

Abernathy brusquely finishes his drink.

ABERNATHY

Excuse me. I've got a dozen other cases waiting for me tonight.

Abernathy turns to leave the tavern.

ABERNATHY (CONT'D)

The bill is \$50, Mr. Poe.

Griswold watches as Poe, distraught, scans the bar in anxious desperation.

Jack Clarke, hat in hand, approaches Poe.

CLARKE

Say... aren't you Edgar Poe? I'm a big fan. I've read everything you ever wrote. The extremes of the light and shadow in your poems... I've never read anything like it. My name is Jack Clarke.

Poe stares wild eyed at the bar, not seeing Clarke's outstretched hand.

CLARKE (CONT'D)

(beat)

In addition to being your biggest fan, I've also been hired as a debt collector? By Thaddeus Walker? Your landlord?

Clarke puts his hat on the bar.

CLARKE (CONT'D)
It's about the rent, Mr. Poe.

Poe looks down.

CLARKE (CONT'D)
It's seven months overdue... if I
don't collect the rent... I'll have
to call for the police, Mr. Poe.

INT. DINGY BOARDING HOUSE - WINTER - NIGHT

LIVING ROOM - NIGHT:

The room is barely illuminated by a dying coal fire. A frozen bush outside gently taps against the frost-covered window as Poe enters the room, bangs the snow from his feet, shivers and rubs his hands together.

BEDROOM - NIGHT:

He enters and kneels next to the bed.

Virginia lays sleeping with no blanket; shivering and wheezing. Poe wraps her in his grey coat.

She stirs and faintly smiles at him. He smiles back.

POE
I'm going to do some writing
tonight.

Virginia attempts to stifle a cough.

POE (CONT'D)
I'll make my own supper.

VIRGINIA
(whispering)
There's nothing to eat.

Virginia *BARKS* out a wet cough. Poe strokes her hair.

POE
Shh. Shh. You just lay quiet.

Poe looks at her tenderly.

POE (CONT'D)
Can I get you anything?

Virginia shakes her head no, holds back a cough, and then dislodges four successive *VIOLENT, HACKING* coughs.

The last one shoots a stream of blood across Poe's face.

His eyes well and his mouth breaks into a curious, demented half-smile; his voice is an intense whispering sob.

POE (CONT'D)

I love you so.

(beat)

Much.

Virginia places her hand upon his, closes her eyes, and turns her head away from him.

Poe stands, tenderly kisses his wife's head, and shakily leaves the room.

LIVING ROOM - NIGHT:

Wild eyed, Poe removes a handkerchief and wipes the blood off his face.

He rapidly approaches the desk, brusquely removes two medical books from one of the stacks, opens one to the letter "T", and quickly reads:

"Tuberculosis, commonly called Consumption; no known cure."

He throws the book down, rips open the other book, scans it rapidly and then, defeated, slumps down into the rickety chair, letting the book fall to the floor.

He stares up at the multitudes of books lining the walls.

He leans back and stares at the dancing shadows from the coal fire, listening to the howling of *THE WIND* and the bush against the window...

Poe suddenly bolts upright.

POE

Once upon a midnight dreary,
while I pondered weak and weary...

Poe picks up his pen and writes furiously.

POE (CONT'D)

Over many a quaint and curious
volume of forgotten lore,
while I nodded, nearly napping,
suddenly there came a tapping,
As if some one gently rapping,
rapping at my chamber door.

(MORE)

POE (CONT'D)

*'Tis some visitor,' I muttered,
'tapping at my chamber
door. Only this, and nothing more.'*

BEDROOM - NIGHT:

Virginia's head turns towards the living room.

POE (O.S.)

Ah, distinctly I remember
it was in the bleak December,
And each separate dying ember
wrought its ghost upon the floor.
Eagerly I wished the morrow;
vainly I had sought to borrow,
From my books surcease of sorrow,
sorrow for the lost Lenore.

Silent tears begin to stream down her cheek as she listens to her husband.

POE (O.S.) (CONT'D)

For the rare and radiant maiden
whom the angels named Lenore.
Nameless here for evermore.

INT. SOUTHERN LITERARY MESSANGER - WINTER - SUNSET

Poe watches a seated Willis White read dubiously from a scroll.

WHITE

(muttering)

"...Tell me what thy lordly name is
on the Night's Plutonian shore..."

White sighs, and as if he were having teeth removed, reluctantly pulls out eight bills from his wallet and holds them out to Poe.

Poe hesitates, then snatches them from White's hand.

EXT. SOUTHERN LITERARY MESSENGER - WINTER - DUSK

POE (V.O.)

Deep into that darkness peering,
long I stood there wondering,
fearing, doubting, dreaming dreams
no mortal ever dared to dream
before.

Poe exits as Dr. Abernathy, pleasantly surprised to have run into Poe, "hellos" him with his cane and hands him a medical bill.

Poe looks down at the icy sidewalk and hands Dr. Abernathy five bills. Abernathy takes the money and stuffs them in an overflowing wallet as he continues down the sidewalk.

Despondently, Poe looks at the remaining three bills, turns to head in the opposite direction, only to bump into Jack Clarke, hat in hand.

INT. DINGY BOARDINGHOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Poe, silver flask in hand, distraught, anxiously paces the living room back and forth in front of the opened bedroom door, where Maria has her back to the living room, and is hunched over a coughing Virginia sitting on the bed.

POE (V.O.)

And the raven, never flitting,
Still is sitting, still is sitting
Just above my chamber door...

BEDROOM - NIGHT:

Maria moves, revealing Virginia's blood soaked chin and her open-mouthed blank stare as she silently tries to breath.

Poe closes his eyes, tilts his head back against the door frame and draws deeply from the flask.

POE (O.S.)

And my soul from out that shadow
that lies floating on the floor
shall be lifted... *nevermore*.

END FLASHBACK:

INT. COURTROOM

The Devil, standing, gigantic smirk on his face, his arms raised in incredulity, shakes his head back and forth.

THE DEVIL

Your Honor! Rambling, irrelevant
testimony from a witness no one
called?!

Gabriel lowers his gaze.

GABRIEL

If there is another disturbance
from the gallery I will clear the
courtroom.

ETHIOPIAN DEBTERA

Mrs. Poe's words will be stricken from the record. The jury will ignore the unwarranted outburst and will not take it into consideration in the rendering of their verdict.

The jurors all look at one another like... "*Forget?!"*

THE DEVIL

The defense rests.

GABRIEL

Dr. Chivers?

CHIVERS

In responding to the accusations of sexual violence, I would like to call Caleb Abernathy to the stand.

Abernathy sits.

CHIVERS (CONT'D)

Mister Abernathy, would you please state your profession.

ABERNATHY

I was a Doctor.

CHIVERS

You practiced in New York?

ABERNATHY

Yes. There and in the Union Army...

CHIVERS

(not interested)

But your private practice was in Manhattan.

ABERNATHY

Just so.

CHIVERS

Does it get cold in New York?

ABERNATHY

I'm sorry?

CHIVERS

In the winter. In New York. Does it get cold?

ABERNATHY

Yes?

CHIVERS

When?

ABERNATHY

I'm not sure I understand...

CHIVERS

When does it typically start to get cold in New York City?

ABERNATHY

Sometime in October?

Chivers turns to the jury.

CHIVERS

Sometime in October! That's very interesting. And if people had not enough money to pay for wood or coal, which has the added expense of having to be shipped onto the island of Manhattan, what would they do to stay warm in the winter?

ABERNATHY

I suppose they would bundle.

CHIVERS

Dr. Abernathy. Could you explain to the court what exactly was "bundling"?

ABERNATHY

It was a practice that started back in the colonial days in New England, where people of the opposite sex would lay in bed together under a blanket with their clothes on.

CHIVERS

And would you say bundling was a custom that was both honored and revered?

ABERNATHY

It was certainly not looked down upon, especially amongst the lower classes;

(MORE)

ABERNATHY (CONT'D)

it saved on lighting and heating a separate room with candles and firewood for overnight guests.

CHIVERS

How typical would you say it was for the clothes of these poor people of the opposite sex to remain on when they were bundling for four to five straight months of cold winter nights?

Abernathy, embarrassed, looks away as the gallery *laughs*.

Gabriel looks sternly at them and bangs his gavel.

ABERNATHY

Not being under those blankets, it would be impossible for me to say.

CHIVERS

As a Doctor, how frequently would you dispense birth control to your female patients?

ABERNATHY

Never.

CHIVERS

Why was that? Did it violate a moral code of yours?

ABERNATHY

At that time, there was no such thing as "birth control" to dispense.

CHIVERS

In all of the decades of your professional practice, did you ever attend any births?

ABERNATHY

Hundreds.

CHIVERS

So a large family was common.

ABERNATHY

Only the high rate of infant mortality kept it from being universal.

The Devil taps his chest, raises both hands and flashes a self-congratulatory "I did that" grin at the gallery.

CHIVERS

When would you say you delivered most of these births?

ABERNATHY

Probably in the spring.

CHIVERS

In June?

ABERNATHY

Thereabouts.

CHIVERS

So a majority of babies are born into large families with no birth control, nine months after it starts to get cold, where people who cannot afford the cost of coal shipped into the city start bundling.

ABERNATHY

Well... that's one way to put it.

The gallery *laughs* and Gabriel again bangs his gavel.

CHIVERS

As her physician, could you tell the court how many children Virginia Eliza Poe had?

ABERNATHY

None.

CHIVERS

Abortions?

ABERNATHY

None.

Chivers turns and stares hard at the Devil.

CHIVERS

Still births?

ABERNATHY

None.

CHIVERS

Miscarriages?

ABERNATHY

None.

CHIVERS

Your witness.

THE DEVIL

No questions.

CHIVERS

In response to the charges of Mister Poe's profession leading to his drunkenness and idleness, I would like to call Mister Ernest Hemingway to the stand.

The Devil explodes out of his chair.

THE DEVIL

Objection!!! Your honor, that man was a sexual deviant, an alcoholic and a suicide! He does not belong in Heaven!

GABRIEL

Old Scratch. Mr. Hemingway is being called to the stand as an expert on alcohol and literature, not whether or not he belongs in Heaven. Overruled.

The Devil, arms crossed, sits down, pouting.

White haired, bearded and plump, ERNEST HEMINGWAY, 60, sits on the stand.

CHIVERS

Mr. Hemingway. Who would you say is the most successful writer in the English language?

HEMINGWAY

In what way? Innovation, influence or money?

CHIVERS

Let say, financially. In sales.

HEMINGWAY

I'd say... James.

CHIVERS

Henry James?

HEMINGWAY

King James, of England. His version
of the Bible.

The gallery *laughs*. Gabriel and Chivers smile.

The Debtera does not.

CHIVERS

Quite so. But putting aside a
translation of the Holy text; who
is the most successful writer in
the English language?

HEMINGWAY

Well... probably the Duchess of
Death.

Chivers turns towards the jury.

CHIVERS

"The Duchess of Death"?

HEMINGWAY

Agatha Christie. I once read she
sold an estimated 4 billion copies
of her novels.

CHIVERS

What were her novels and short
stories about?

HEMINGWAY

Detectives. Murders. Mysteries.
Miss Marple. Inspector Poirot.
Whodunits.

CHIVERS

"*Whodunits*." In other words,
ratiocination. Tales of an amateur;
a detective who has no connection
with the police, who sees clues no
one else does, and employs a
systematic pattern of investigation
based on mental deductions...

HEMINGWAY

... where often-times the murder
takes place in a single room with
only one exit...

CHIVERS

... which has been locked from the
inside.

Hemingway *laughs*.

HEMINGWAY

Exactly!

CHIVERS

Would you say Miss Christie was the inventor of this most popular style and type of character?

HEMINGWAY

Absolutely not. Arthur Conan Doyle, with his Sherlock Holmes in 1887, came decades before her.

CHIVERS

So it was Doyle...

HEMINGWAY

... though he got his ideas of deduction from watching a surgeon in Edinburgh in 1877. Joseph Bell, I believe it was.

CHIVERS

So the Scotsman Bell...

HEMINGWAY

... but all that was 41 years after Dupin.

CHIVERS

"Dupin"?

HEMINGWAY

C. Auguste Dupin. The Murders in the Rue Morgue. Poe laid down the template for the whole thing in that one short story. There wasn't even the word "detective" when he did it. And that was while he was simultaneously perfecting the art of the short story, creating science fiction and shaping horror from the Gothic into the psychological of how we know it today.

CHIVERS

So you could say, without Edgar Allan Poe, there wouldn't be...

HEMINGWAY

No. You CAN say without Edgar Allan Poe there wouldn't be a Doyle, a Christie, a Wells, a Verne, a Bradbury, or a Lovecraft...

CHIVERS

Your witness.

Chivers sits as the Devil stands.

THE DEVIL

Certainly, Poe was an accomplished and influential author; but surely these literary achievements must be tempered by and weighed in consideration of his private behaviors.

The Devil turns to the jury.

THE DEVIL (CONT'D)

I mean, the man was prideful, envious, wrathful, gluttonous and slothful! A loner and a drunk!

HEMINGWAY

To anyone who strives to be a writer, alcohol and loneliness are the two essentials.

The jury full of writers all look dubiously at one another; this has not been their experience.

The Devil smiles a "go ahead, hang yourself" smile.

THE DEVIL

How so, exactly?

HEMINGWAY

Writing, at its best, is a lonely life. As a writer grows in public stature, often his work deteriorates, for he does his best work, alone. For a true writer each book should be a new beginning where he tries for something that is beyond attainment. It is because we have had such great writers in the past that a writer is driven far out past where he can go, out to where no one can help him. This is easily facilitated with alcohol.

(MORE)

HEMINGWAY (CONT'D)

To ensure success, follow these two simple rules: write drunk and edit sober.

Irritated, the Devil sits.

THE DEVIL

No further questions.

GABRIEL

You may step down.

The Devil is shuffling through several papers as Hemingway passes his table on the way to the gallery.

THE DEVIL

(quietly)

Perhaps I'll pay you a call later on this afternoon...

CHIVERS

I would like to call Rufus Wilmot Griswold to the stand.

Griswold sits in the stand.

CHIVERS (CONT'D)

Mr. Griswold. You were Mr. Poe's rival...

GRISWOLD

I was his colleague.

CHIVERS

(stunned)

Colleague?! Is that how you saw yourself?

GRISWOLD

Certainly. We were both writers, poets, literary critics...

CHIVERS

And would you also consider yourself colleagues in the affection of Mrs. Charles Osgood?

FLASHBACK TO:

INT. COLONIAL HOUSE - NIGHT - DRAWING ROOM

Griswold is beside a cluster of women.

Griswold holds the hand of, and flirts with Fanny Osgood.

Fanny is bored, disinterested, scanning the room.

She smiles suddenly, frees her hand and rapidly crosses the room, along with the cluster of women in tow.

Griswold glares at their destination.

OSGOOD

Oh, Mr. Poe! We've all so wanted to meet you. I'VE so wanted to meet you...

END FLASHBACK:

INT. COURTROOM

Griswold glares at Chivers.

CHIVERS

Or as an editor?

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

INT. COLONIAL HOUSE - NIGHT - FOYER

Thomas Willis White and James Russell Lowell, chatting, exit the drawing room, heading into the foyer and approach Poe and Chivers.

WHITE

... and as far as being an editor goes, I'd give more for Poe's toe nail than for Griswold's soul... Edgar? May I introduce Mr. James Russell Lowell...

END FLASHBACK:

INT. COURTROOM

CHIVERS

As a poet and literary critic?

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

INT. SOUTHERN LITERARY MESSENGER - 1840

Griswold beams as Chivers, White and the other two writers are pulling freshly printed copies of Griswold's book; "The Poets and Poetry of America" out of boxes.

Poe staggers in, sits at his desk and begins furiously writing.

Chivers holds up a copy of the book.

CHIVERS

Edgar! Have you had a chance to go over Rufus' new work?

Poe doesn't look up.

POE

Ah, yes. "The Poems of influential friends, hacks and plagiarists."

Poe looks up at a glaring Griswold.

POE (CONT'D)

Dreadful.

Poe returns to writing.

Griswold, enraged, fully intending to kick Poe's ass, storms towards him, but is forcefully held in place by Chivers, White and the other two writers.

GRISWOLD

If you dare attack me personally, I shall demand satisfaction!

Poe sighs heavily and exasperated, looks up at Griswold.

POE

I'm attacking you professionally, Rufus, not personally. Please know the difference.

GRISWOLD

And what's wrong with my anthology?!

POE

First rule of making anthologies; you publish *good* poetry, not your *friend's* poetry.

GRISWOLD

I put some of your poems in there!

POE

See? It's not so difficult to differentiate the two. You're already halfway there. Second rule; it's always best not start a book out with plagiarism.

GRISWOLD

Plagiarism?!

POE

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow?

GRISWOLD

Longfellow is widely regarded as one of the greatest living poets!

POE

I feel that I should be given a lot more credit for great moderation in charging Longfellow only with imitation. His friends and other plagiarists have taken exception to this, but, had I accused him, in loud terms, of manifest and continuous plagiarism, I should but have echoed the sentiment of every man of letters in the land beyond the immediate influence of the Longfellow coterie and your ridiculous hero worship!

Shocked, everyone stares, open-mouthed, at Poe.

POE (V.O.)

And as for Mr. James Russell Lowell...!

THE NEXT MORNING:

White enters, removes his coat and is surprised seeing Griswold.

WHITE

Rufus! You're never here this early.

Griswold, ass-kissing, lifts two steaming coffee mugs.

GRISWOLD

Thought I'd pop in early and make my favorite boss his favorite beverage.

He hands a mug to White.

GRISWOLD (CONT'D)

Just as you like it, Mr. White.

WHITE

Thank you, my boy.

GRISWOLD
Wonderful way to start the day.

WHITE
Is there another?

GRISWOLD
Poe seems to think so.

WHITE
What do you mean?

Griswold motions with his head towards the window while sipping his coffee. White puts his cup down and turns.

EXT. SOUTHERN LITERARY MESSENGER - SPRING - 1845 - MORNING

White, pursing his lips, watches from the window as Poe draws a long pull from a whiskey bottle, retches, spits, finishes the bottle and then dumps the bottle in the bushes.

END FLASHBACK:

INT. COURTROOM

GRISWOLD
Poe mistook coarse abuse for polished invective and vulgar insinuation for sly satire. He was not only thoroughly unprincipled, base and depraved, but silly, vain and arrogant. Edgar was profligate in habits and depraved in mind. He never got drunk more than five days out of seven, told the truth sometimes by mistake, and had the moral courage to flog his wife, which he explained away because he was laboring under a fit of insanity to which he was periodically subject.

CHIVERS
And yet upon his death, you became his literary executor...

Griswold fidgets.

CHIVERS (CONT'D)
Leaving Maria Clemm in poverty.

Maria sobs into her handkerchief.

CHIVERS (CONT'D)

One can only wonder how a person
who despised Poe so much could come
into control all of his literary
works?

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

INT. TAVERN - WINTER - NIGHT

On the other side of the boisterous bar, Griswold finishes his drink and motions for the bar wench, staring at Poe the whole time.

Jack Clarke studies Poe, puts on his hat and exits.

CLARKE

I can make up some excuse and wait
to notify Mr. Walker until the end
of the week to give you time to
come up with the \$125, Mr. Poe.

Clarke exits and Griswold approaches, placing the bottle in front of Poe.

GRISWOLD

Here. Have a drink.

Poe takes a long pull off the bottle, retches, spits on the floor and then takes another long pull.

GRISWOLD (CONT'D)

You know... I could loan you some
money, Edgar.

Poe turns to him, tears in his eyes.

POE

Oh, could you Rufus?

Griswold eyes Poe maliciously, watching him take another long pull.

GRISWOLD

Certainly. Just sign this.

Griswold pulls out a contract and pen and places it in front of Poe, whose speed of drinking slows as his glazed eyes scan it.

POE

(slurring)
What's this?

Griswold hands Poe a stack of bills.

GRISWOLD

Power of attorney. Just an assurance that you will someday pay me back.

Poe signs the document.

POE

Oh, Rufus. You know I will! I shall forgo all in my one living aim to pay you back as soon as possible!

Griswold puts the signed contract in his jacket, smiles too sweetly and hands Poe the bottle.

GRISWOLD

No hurry, Edgar. Whenever you can. Bottoms up.

END FLASHBACK:

INT. COURTROOM

CHIVERS

A year after his death, yourself, along with James Russell Lowell, edited a posthumous collection of Poe's works published in three volumes.

GRISWOLD

That is correct.

CHIVERS

This three-volume edition included a biographical sketch you wrote, entitled, "Memoir of the Author".

GRISWOLD

Yes. In addition to his work, I thought it important that the public knew what kind of man he was.

Chivers holds up a paper and reads from it.

CHIVERS

"Few will be grieved by Poe's death as he had few friends.

(MORE)

CHIVERS (CONT'D)

He often wandered the streets,
 either in madness or melancholy,
 mumbling and cursing to himself,
 was easily irritated, was envious
 of others, and regarded society as
 composed of villains. Poe's drive
 to succeed was because he sought
 the right to despise a world which
 galled his self-conceit. He was a
 madman. Addicted to drugs and
 chronically drunk."

GRISWOLD

Just so.

CHIVERS

Is that how someone should write of
 the dead? Of a friend?

GRISWOLD

(indignant)

I was not his friend, nor was he
 mine.

CHIVERS

Come now, Rufus. It's me, Thomas.
 We both knew him. I submit that the
 intent of your "memoir" was nothing
 more than character assassination.
 The betraying of trust and a
 cowardly revenge on the dead...

GRISWOLD

You may guess at the intention, Dr.
 Chivers, but the result was an
 edition that sold tens of thousands
 of copies to a public fascinated by
 an "evil man".

The Devil smiles at Griswold and lightly, rapidly, claps the
 heel of his hand in approval.

GRISWOLD (CONT'D)

Twist it however you like, but I'm
 not the villain here. If anything,
 I should be praised. I did more to
 cement interest in Poe and his
 legacy than he ever had when he was
 alive.

CHIVERS

Your witness.

The Devil rises and starts holding up fingers.

THE DEVIL

Drunk. Idle. Vain. Drug Addict.

Gleeful, he smiles and sits down.

THE DEVIL (CONT'D)

No questions.

CHIVERS

Your Honor. If it pleases the Court? I would like to request a recess.

Gabriel wipes his brow with a handkerchief, then bangs his gavel.

GABRIEL

A ten minute recess is called.

A noisy, gossipy *HUB-BUB* from the gallery arises.

Gabriel rises, downing a glass of water, as the Debtera approaches, turns over a sand timer, and begins whispering in his ear.

The Devil stands up, stretching, cracking his back and fingers, then smiles, shaking the hands of JOSEF STALIN and MAO ZEDONG.

An exhausted Chivers slumps next to Poe.

CHIVERS

(quietly)

If we're to have any chance of winning, I'm going to have to put you on the witness stand.

Poe, still staring at the floor, slowly shakes his head "no".

CHIVERS (CONT'D)

If I don't, you'll spend the rest of eternity in Hell.

POE

My whole life had been a Hell. What difference can eternity make?

CHIVERS

It might make all the difference to Virginia.

POE

It's easy to accuse people decades after the fact.

(MORE)

POE (CONT'D)

What's the best we can hope for,
Thomas? To lessen the sentence,
reduce the charge? To what end?
Even if we win, they'll just hold
another trial in twenty years. And
a totally different jury with a
brand new set of righteous
"advanced morality" will pass
judgement on a time and a people
they don't have the interest, or
inclination, to begin to
understand.

Gabriel bangs his gavel repeatedly.

POE (CONT'D)

Let them damn me. Self-aggrandized
myopics are not the type of people
to whom I would like to convince of
anything...

Chivers stands.

CHIVERS

Your Honor? I call Virginia Eliza
Poe to the stand.

The courtroom is deathly silent as Virginia tries to hide her
coughing and makes her way to the stand.

CHIVERS (CONT'D)

Mrs. Poe... *Virginia*. Was your
marriage a happy one?

VIRGINIA

Very much so.

CHIVERS

Did you love your husband?

Virginia looks over at Poe; her eyes swimming with tears.

VIRGINIA

I did.

CHIVERS

Was this love a romantic love?

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

EXT. CEMETERY - AUTUMN - 1845 - DAY

Poe, arms behind his back, and Virginia, looking down at the ground, walk slowly away from the cemetery gate through the tombstones and colorful and falling foliage.

POE

I stand amid the roar
Of a surf-tormented shore,
And I hold within my hand
Grains of golden sand-
How few! Yet how they creep
Through my fingers to the deep,
While I weep, while I weep!
O God! Can I not grasp
Them with a tighter clasp?
O God! Can I not save
One from the pitiless wave?
Is all that we see or seem
But a dream within a dream?

They continue on through the cemetery in silence.

After a few seconds, without looking over at him, Virginia reaches her hand out for his.

END FLASHBACK:

INT. COURTROOM

VIRGINIA

I thought it was...

CHIVERS

And was this love a sexual one?

The Devil, wide-eyes flashing, grinning ear-to-ear, leans forward in keen interest with his chin in his hands.

Maria sobs into her handkerchief.

Virginia looks away and blushes.

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

INT. DINGY BOARDING HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - WINTER - NIGHT

REVEREND

By the power vested in me by God
and the Commonwealth of Virginia, I
now pronounce you man and wife.

Edgar and Virginia kiss with the awkwardness and innocence of the first time.

BEDROOM - NIGHT:

Edgar, in his nightshirt and cap and Virginia, in her nightgown, night-jacket and nightcap, lay together.

Virginia is childishly, quickly, passionately, pecking Poe's face and neck.

Poe is immobile against the headboard, with an expression that is on just this side of terror.

POE

Actually...

Virginia looks up at Poe.

VIRGINIA

What is it, Eddie?

POE

I'm not very good at this sort of thing.

VIRGINIA

(laughing)

Well, dearest, neither am I! I'm only thirteen.

POE

That's not what I mean. I'm not very good at... this... sort of thing...

Confused, Virginia pulls away, covering her exposed neckline in embarrassed modesty.

VIRGINIA

Do you not desire me?

POE

Oh, sissy! My little darling wife! You are my greatest and only stimulus to battle this uncongenial and ungrateful life!

VIRGINIA

Then... do you want... are we to remain... just as... *friends*?

Poe grabs her hands earnestly.

POE

The best of friends.

END FLASHBACK:

INT. COURTROOM

VIRGINIA
 ... *That's private...* Do I have to
 answer that question?

GABRIEL
 The fate of your husband depends on
 it.

Virginia stares hard at the floor.

ETHIOPIAN DEBTERA
 Take your time, Mrs. Poe.

VIRGINIA
 (beat)
 Well... I think Eddie summed it up
 best the second to last time we
 talked...

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

INT. DINGY BOARDING HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - WINTER - DAY

Poe, coatless, banging through the door frame, leaving the
 door wide open, stumbles outside into the winter storm.

EXT. CEMETERY GATE - WINTER - STORM - DAY

Poe stumbles through the iron wrought gate and into the
 cemetery.

INT. CEMETERY - WINTER - STORM - DAY

Poe stumbles through the snow to a freshly dug grave, sits
 beside the VIRGINIA ELIZA POE tombstone cross legged and
 stares straight ahead at nothing.

POE
 I wrote you something, Sis. I hope
 you like it...
 (beat)
 It was many and many a year ago,
 In a kingdom by the sea,
 That a maiden there lived whom you
 may know,
 By the name of Annabel Lee;
 And this maiden she lived with no
 other thought,
 Than to love and be loved by me.

Virginia's ghostly form watches Poe from behind the tombstone.

POE (CONT'D)

I was a child and she was a child,
 In this kingdom by the sea;
 But we loved with a love that was
 more than love.
 I and my Annabel Lee;
 The angels, not half so happy in
 heaven,
 Went envying her and me.
 Yes! That was the reason,
 As all men know, in this kingdom by
 the sea,
 That the wind came out of the cloud
 by night,
 Chilling and killing my Annabel
 Lee...

Poe descends into tears.

He brusquely wipes the tears from his eyes.

POE (CONT'D)

I'll tell the rest of it to you
 tomorrow.

Virginia is no longer behind the tombstone. Poe grabs each bicep with the opposite hand and slowly rocks back and forth.

END FLASHBACK:

INT. COURTROOM

CHIVERS

The prosecution rests...

GABRIEL

(bored)

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Jury.
 Now that you have heard the
 evidence and the argument, it is
 your duty to decide if something is
 more likely so than not; if
 evidence, when considered and
 compared with that opposed to it,
 has a more convincing force. This
 does not require proof to an
 absolute certainty, since that is
 seldom possible in any case. The
 jury may consider the testimony of
 all witnesses, regardless of who
 may have called them.

(MORE)

GABRIEL (CONT'D)

Anything you may have seen or heard
outside the courtroom is not
evidence, and must be entirely
disregarded.

Gabriel sprouts wings.

GABRIEL (CONT'D)

What the verdict shall be is your
sole and exclusive duty and
responsibility.

The Pontifical Swiss Guard bangs his halberd on the floor.

PONTIFICAL SWISS GUARD

Levez-vous!!!

Everyone in the courtroom stands as Gabriel ascends to
Heaven; disappearing into celestial light.

The Devil and Chivers watch the jury as they file out of the
box; some looking back at Poe, some not.

In the empty gallery, Maria sobs into her handkerchief.

Virginia stares earnestly at the back of Poe's downcast head.

INT. JURY ROOM

The no-nonsense Dante enters, looking around at the bare
wooden table, the twelve austere wooden chairs and the door
with a frosted glass window which reads "Lavatory".

He sighs and heads towards a small table at the far corner
containing cups, jugs of water, coffee and a samovar.

DANTE

(muttering)

All hope abandon, ye who enter
here.

Sylvia Plath, whose moods swing from assured confidence to
black funk, sashays behind him.

PLATH

Good to know that if I ever need
attention, all I have to do is die.

The gregarious Goethe and verbose Mark Twain are the next to
enter the room.

GÖETHE

And how does light travel?

TWAIN

Now, if I recall from my schoolin'
days of yore, it would be in waves.

GÖETHE

How does sound travel?

TWAIN

It too propels itself across the
universe via waves.

GÖETHE

So would it not make sense that
time also travels in a wave? And no
matter where we are dropped onto
this wave, this eternity, from our
vantage point, we are at the
highest point, and able to look
down in one direction into the
future, or in the other back into
the past.

TWAIN

Meine Herr. What a magnificent
blending of the scientific and the
astral!

The arrogant and argumentative Nabokov enters right behind
them.

NABOKOV

I confess, I do not believe in
time...

The clinically, painfully shy Emily Dickinson and coolly
introspective Gabriel Garcia Marquez enter.

DICKINSON

Mary Shelley was writing about re-
animating dead tissue in 1818! How
could he claim to have invented it
in 1835?

MARQUEZ

Well, I think when most people hear
the term they think of outer
space...

Dickinson hurries straight for the lavatory and hides behind
the door; leaving it open just enough to peek out at the
room.

DICKINSON (O.S.)
Frankenstein is *literally*, "a
science fiction..."

The excitable Nietzsche, pious Tolstoy and the silent Marquis de Sade enter.

NIETZSCHE
... and talk about plagiarism!
Hemingway's damned liquor speech.
He stole that from Beyond Good and
Evil! "Whoever attempts
independence, without being OBLIGED
to do so, proves that he is not
only strong, but also daring beyond
measure. He enters into a
labyrinth, he multiplies a
thousandfold the dangers of life;
not the least that no one can see
where he loses his way and is torn
apart by some Minotaur of
conscience. Supposing he comes to
grief, it is so far from the
comprehension of men that they
neither feel it, nor sympathize.
And he cannot go back! He cannot go
back even to the sympathy of men!"

The Marquis de Sade fills a cup with coffee, gives Nietzsche a blank stare and walks away wordlessly.

Tolstoy takes his tea and sits at the far end of the table.

TOLSTOY
Nietzsche. You always were an
idiot.

The flamboyant Oscar Wilde enters and dramatically puts the hand carrying his sunflower on his hip, and loudly addresses the room.

WILDE
When he said James was the most
successful writer in English a
shiver of revulsion ran over my
entire body. I tell you, Henry
James wrote fiction as if it were a
painful duty.

The room is crowded, but it is more crowded still with all these personalities; all these egos.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez warms his hands with his coffee cup as he sits down.

MARQUEZ

The thing that struck me the most
was his step father...

DANTE

Foster father.

MARQUEZ

Si... *Padre adoptivo*... and his
complaints about Poe's compulsion
to write.

Marquez's eyes lose focus as he stares hard at the table;
transported back to 1955.

MARQUEZ (CONT'D)

I remember my first novella. "*La Hojarasca*". Took me seven years to
get it published. From the moment I
wrote "Leaf Storm" I realized I
wanted to be a writer and that
nobody could stop me and that the
only thing left for me to do was to
try to be the best writer in the
world.

Plath stubs out her cigarette, exhaling a cloud of smoke.

PLATH

I loved my rejection slips. They
show me I tried.

Emily Brontë and the Ethiopian Debtera appear in the doorway.
They are quietly arguing and Brontë is refusing to take, or
acknowledge, the paper he is continually trying to hand her.

NABOKOV

When my family fled the Bolsheviks,
the first thing I read in English
was Poe's poem "Annabel Lee." I
became fascinated by the
possibilities of the age
difference. It became this
intricate puzzle I had to solve.
How exactly would a relationship
with a nymphet work?

TWAIN

A nymphet you say?

NABOKOV

A demoniac female creature between
the ages of 9 and 14.

(MORE)

NABOKOV (CONT'D)

To be able to spot one from amongst ordinary children you have to be an artist and a madman; a creature of infinite melancholy. To see a nymphet is to see the slightly feline outline of a cheekbone. The tenderness of a dainty limb. And so I wrote my most difficult work, "Lolita"; inspired by Poe and Virginia. The story of a middle aged man obsessed, driven to begin a sexual relationship with a 12-year-old girl.

Tolstoy's face scrunches in revulsion, horror.

TOLSTOY

Oh. my. God!

Brontë's shoulders slump as she takes the paper and mournfully enters the room.

DANTE

Disgusting. Sounds like a pornography.

NABOKOV

Vanity Fair called it the only believable love story of the 20th century...

The front door *slams* shut.

All heads turn towards it as various locks are heard being *bolted* into place.

Brontë slumps across the room.

BRONTË

(quietly)

"The success is not equal to the abilities of the writer; chiefly because the incidents are too coarse and disagreeable to be attractive, the very best being improbable, with a moral taint about them, and the villainy not leading to results sufficient to justify the elaborate pains taken in depicting it."

Dickinson peeks from the lavatory.

DICKINSON (O.S.)

Exactly!

TOLSTOY

Is she talking about Lolita or Poe?

Brontë stops at the unoccupied chair at the head of the table.

BRONTË

It was the first review of my novel
"Wuthering Heights".

Brontë collapses into the seat.

BRONTË (CONT'D)

I've been forced, quite against my
will, to be foreman of this jury,
so I'd like to get started if you
don't mind. I feel as if I don't
get back to my sisters, the heather
of the heath and the moor, I shall
die.

TWAIN

My dear girl; you are dead.

Brontë drops the paper to the desk.

BRONTË

It's worse than I thought...

WILDE

So how do we start?

GÖETHE

Perhaps argue over the individual
points, take a preliminary vote?

PLATH

Why don't we sit first.

TOLSTOY

Sensible.

DANTE

Anywhere?

DICKINSON (O.S.)

How about alphabetically?

MARQUEZ

Creo que es una buena idea.

TWAIN

Madam foreman?

Brontë reads from her paper and people move, bump into one another, wordlessly apologize and sit.

BRONTË

From my left. Dante. Emily
Dickinson.

Brontë looks around.

BRONTË (CONT'D)

Where's Emily?

Dickinson peeks from behind the lavatory door.

DICKINSON (O.S.)

Can't I just stay in here?

BRONTË

Objections?

(beat)

Goethe. Gabriel Garcia Marquez.
Marquis de Sade. Vladimir Nabokov.

NABOKOV

Na-boe-cough.

BRONTË

Excuse me?

NABOKOV

Not Nah-bah-cough. Na-boe-cough.

Brontë looks back down at her paper.

BRONTË

... Vladimir, Nietzsche, Sylvia
Plath, Tolstoy, Mark Twain, Oscar
Wilde.

Everyone has sat and is smiling at the people next to them, while Plath leans against the wall, smirking, coolly smoking and Nietzsche and Tolstoy battle with elbows for arm room.

DANTE

So now what?

GÖETHE

Why don't we go through the points
in order?

NABOKOV

Does that really matter? The order?

DANTE

Well we can't just have it be a
free-for-all. Chaos.

NIETZSCHE

Out of chaos comes order.

TOLSTOY

(exasperated)

Oh shut up.

BRONTË

(loudly)

Lets start with his drinking.

TWAIN

Sometimes too much drink is barely
enough.

WILDE

Why were we even seated like this
if we're not going to go in order?

BRONTË

Dante?

DANTE

Gluttony is one of the seven deadly
sins.

TOLSTOY

Agreed!

Brontë turns back to the bathroom door.

BRONTË

Emily?

Dickinson opens the door a crack.

DICKINSON (O.S.)

I taste a liquor never brewed
From Tankards scooped in Pearl
Not all the Frankfort Berries
Yield such an Alcohol!

NIETZSCHE

What does that even **mean**?!

A beaming, fun-loving Göethe throws up his hands.

GÖETHE

A girl and a glass of wine! They alleviate all distress. And whoever does not kiss, and whoever does not drink? Has been dead for a long time!

MARQUEZ

For me? I kept thinking about how Hemingway said how drinking was one of the two essentials for writing and how false that felt. Perhaps, when you first start out, you use it as a crutch...

TWAIN

Dutch courage.

MARQUEZ

Exactamente. But later, as you grow in confidence; alcohol becomes a hinderance. A burden. A thing that prevents you from writing.

WILDE

Well, it's one of the old cliches, isn't it? The angry chef. The hooker with a heart of gold. The drunken writer...

PLATH

You skipped de Sade.

The Marquis de Sade turns and stares hard at Brontë, purses his lips and then looks down at the table in silence.

TWAIN

The Marquis is right. It is better to keep your mouth closed and let people think you are a fool than to open it and remove all doubt.

NABOKOV

If you need alcohol to write you're either a romantic or a coward. But the one thing you are not, is a writer.

NIETZSCHE

The two great European narcotics. Alcohol and Christianity. To cloud your mind with either you refuse to go through the creative phase of self-improvement.

PLATH

I began to think vodka was my drink at last. It didn't taste like anything, but it went straight down into my stomach like a sword swallower's sword and made me feel powerful and godlike.

BRONTË

Tolstoy?

TOLSTOY

I have long asked myself, "Why do people wish to stupefy themselves?" When a man is sober he is ashamed of what seems all right when he is drunk. People resort to stupefiers either to escape feeling ashamed after having done something contrary to their consciences, or to bring themselves beforehand into a state in which they can commit actions contrary to conscience.

TWAIN

Well, Count? I do indeed thank you for the Sunday sermon. For as we all know, water, taken in moderation, cannot hurt anybody.

WILDE

Obviously, most of you have not partaken of the intricate delicacy of the green fairy. And what you're missing! The first stage of absinthe is like ordinary drinking, but the second stage is when you begin to see monstrous and cruel things, but if you can persevere, you will enter in upon the third stage where you see things that you want to see, wonderful curious things.

DANTE

(irritated)

Well now that all the sinners have had the chance to boast about their temperance or their capacity, let's talk about how alcohol may have affected the case. Clearly, the worse she got, the more he drank. Or, perhaps, *was it the other way round?*

TWAIN

I'd say it's safe to assume that in the entire history of the consumption of alcohol, watching someone get drunk never gave anyone tuberculosis.

DANTE

You know what I mean...

GÖETHE

It's all a matter of perspective, isn't it? To Virginia and his boss it was a problem, for Griswold, a thing to be exploited, to Chivers and Maria it was like it didn't exist. The way you see people is the way you treat them, and the way you treat them is what they become.

DANTE

But do we not ourselves forge the chains we wear in life?

WILDE

Clearly his drinking wasn't helping, but what actual harm did it cause? He wasn't a violent drunk. An abuser. It didn't make him a philanderer. Certainly he lost jobs because of it, but not because he was late or couldn't do the work, but because of intellectual jealousy and the pedestrian morals of his superiors in the presence of greatness.

DICKINSON (O.S.)

It appeared to me that it wasn't Poe's drinking that made him bad. It was his egotism.

Goethe glances at the bathroom.

GÖETHE

(bemused)

Mastery passes often for egotism.

WILDE

It is absurd to divide people into good or bad. People are either charming...

Wilde looks at Nabokov.

WILDE (CONT'D)

...or tedious.

MARQUEZ

I didn't see egotism in Poe at all. I saw imagination. What always amused me is that the biggest praise for the magical realism of my work came for the imagination, while the truth is that there's not a single line in all my work that does not have a basis in reality. Look at Virginia and the Raven.

DANTE

We were supposed to disregard that testimony, remember?

NABOKOV

Without Poe's "toska" I doubt he would have been half the poet, half the writer he was.

TWAIN

Now what in tarnation is Toska?

NABOKOV

Lugubriousness. Melancholia. There's no single word in English that renders all its shades. At its deepest and most painful, it is a sensation of great spiritual anguish. At less morbid levels, a longing with nothing to long for. At the lowest level it grades into ennui, boredom...

WILDE

Which leads to drinking...

Nabokov turns to Wilde, making rapid, overlapping circles with his hands like a growing snowball going downhill.

Brontë, wild-eyed, stares down at the table.

BRONTË

(quietly)

His madness.

GÖETHE

Who exactly thought him insane? Maria and Virginia certainly didn't.

(MORE)

GÖETHE (CONT'D)

Lowell, White, Griswold and Allan
were absolutely convinced he was.

TWAIN

There is but one rule that is
perfect: in all matters, our
adversaries are insane.

DICKINSON (O.S.)

Much madness is divinest sense
To a discerning eye
Much sense, the starkest madness
Tis the majority...

INT. LAVATORY

Emily stares wild-eyed, hard, at the floor.

DICKINSON

... In this, as all, prevail
Assent, and you are sane
Demur, you're straightway dangerous
And handled with a chain.

INT. JURY ROOM

Nabokov's eyes flit from Brontë to the bathroom door.

NABOKOV

I don't know if you'd call him mad,
but he certainly wasn't as crazy as
some of the people in this fucking
room.

Brontë's staring eyes grow wider.

BRONTË

(quietly)

Their marriage...

NIETZSCHE

There is always some madness in
love. But there is also always some
reason in madness.

EXT. JURY ROOM

The Devil, leather satchel in hand, ear placed firmly against
the door, leans back, waves his hand and fingers across the
door, smiles mischievously, and then hurries away down the
corridor.

INT. JURY ROOM

Dante surveys the room sniffing at the air.

DANTE

Does anyone else smell something
burning...?

PLATH

Sometimes I feel like I'm not
solid. I'm hollow. There's nothing
behind my eyes. I'm a negative of a
person. All I want is blackness,
blackness and silence...

DANTE

There is no place for pity here.
Who is more arrogant within his
soul, who is more impious than one
who dares to sorrow at God's
judgment?

TOLSTOY

Those who profit from the social
order, with its prisons, famines,
gallows and wars, say they are
necessary to society; that still
greater disaster would ensue if
this organization were destroyed;
while the ten times as numerous who
suffer from it, think and say quite
the contrary.

Brontë's staring eyes bulge larger still.

BRONTË

(quietly)

Their love...

Mark Twain places his hand in his coat like Napoleon and
walks about the room.

TWAIN

In compliance with the request of a
friend of mine, who wrote me from
the East, I called on good-natured,
garrulous old Simon Wheeler, and
inquired after my friend's friend,
Leonidas W. Smiley, as requested to
do, and I hereunto append the
result.

Emily peeks from behind the lavatory door.

DICKINSON (O.S.)
 (sobbing)
 ...Susan...Susan...Susan...

WILDE
 There are moments when
 one has to choose between
 living one's life, fully,
 entirely, completely, or
 dragging out some false,
 shallow, degrading existence
 that the world in its
 hypocrisy demands.

GOËTHE
 I know not whether some
 deceitful spirits haunt
 this spot, or whether it
 be the warm celestial fancy
 in my own heart which makes
 everything around me seem
 like paradise.

Nietzsche, in agonizing pain, is grabbing at his hair.

MARQUEZ
 Úrsula, almost blind at the time,
 was the only person who was
 sufficiently calm to identify the
 nature of that determined wind and
 she left the sheets to the mercy of
 the light as she watched Remedios
 the Beauty waving good-bye in the
 midst of the flapping sheets that
 rose up with her, abandoning with
 her the environment of beetles and
 dahlias and passing through the air
 with her...

BRONTË
 I've no more business to marry
 Edgar Linton than I have to be in
 Heaven; It would degrade me to
 marry Heathcliff now; not because
 he's handsome, Nelly, but because
 he's more myself than I am.
 Whatever our souls are made of, his
 and mine are the same.

Nietzsche leans back in excruciating pain, clawing at his
 temples.

NIETZSCHE
Mein Kopf!!!

Nabokov stands up and yells.

NABOKOV
 Enough! People! Don't you see what
 is happening? We're falling for the
 Devil's trick;
 (MORE)

NABOKOV (CONT'D)

arguing over Poe's faults and saying nothing of his work! His art! The very thing about him that is immortal!

Sylvia Plath reaches into her dress shirt pocket and removes sheets of paper and unfolds them.

PLATH

I'm glad you brought that up.

TOLSTOY

What's that?

PLATH

The Gold Bug.

DANTE

"Anything you may have seen or heard outside the courtroom is not evidence, and must be entirely disregarded." Remember?

DICKINSON (O.S.)

I think if we can discuss some of his work than we can discuss all of his work.

BRONTË

All who agree?

Everyone, save Dante, raises their hand.

BRONTË (CONT'D)

The motion passes.

PLATH

One thing that didn't come up at the trial was Poe and his ciphers, which I found queer. He used to hold regular contests in magazines where people would send in their cryptography, secret codes et cetera. He claimed to have solved 99 of them, and the one he didn't he said was just gibberish.

NABOKOV

Where are you going with this?

PLATH

If we're to judge a man by his novels, stories and poems, we should also take into account his ciphers.

TOLSTOY

Why?

PLATH

To get the full measure of the artist.

Plath holds up the sheets of paper.

PLATH (CONT'D)

Inspired by his contests, Poe wrote a story about a man who finds a parchment with a code written in invisible ink by the pirate Captain Kidd.

WILDE

Sounds like just another one of his detective stories...

PLATH

A-ha! But this one differs in that he has added a comedic element! A man named Jupiter...

NIETZSCHE

A comedy? Madam foreman, can't we limit the discussion to things that are important?

PLATH

Poe was paid \$100 for this story, the most he ever made; it was also his most widely read and popular work in his lifetime.

Brontë motions she can proceed. Plath reads from the paper.

PLATH (CONT'D)

"You infernal scoundrel!" cried Legrand, apparently much relieved, "What do you mean by telling me such nonsense as that? As sure as you let that beetle fall! I'll break your neck. Look here, Jupiter! Do you hear me?"
"Yes, massa, needn't hollo at poor nigger dat style. O-o-o-o-oh!

(MORE)

PLATH (CONT'D)

*Lor-gol-a-marcy! What is dis here
pon de tree?"*

"Well!" cried Legrand, highly
delighted, "What is it?"

*"Why taint noffin but a skull,
somebody bin lef him head up de
tree, and de crows done gobble
ebery bit ob de meat off."*

Plath lowers the paper.

PLATH (CONT'D)

This "comedy" goes on like this for
several more pages...

TWAIN

Well if instead of causing outrage,
this was the most profitable,
popular and successful work in his
lifetime; it would appear to me
that Mr. Poe must have accurately
caught part of the zeitgeist of the
time...

PLATH

(angry)

It's racist!

TWAIN

No doubt! However novels or art
should not be seen as manuals of
conduct but merely as depictions of
life.

PLATH

This coming from a man whose Tom
Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn novels
are full of the "N" word!!!

Marquez, confused, leans in towards Nietzsche.

MARQUEZ

"N" word?

Nietzsche, also confused, takes a stab in the dark.

NIETZSCHE

Nihilism?

TWAIN

Poe's story does not advocate racism anymore than Shakespeare's Hamlet advocates killing stepfathers. Subject matter in a work of art is not advocacy.

PLATH

First you defend his violation of a child and now his racism!

TOLSTOY

I believe there has been some doubt laid on to whether or not Poe and Virginia were intimate...

PLATH

Doubt or no doubt, if you're accused of such a thing as that, you're guilty in my eyes!

GÖETHE

(concerned)

People are innocent until proven guilty.

PLATH

Opinions are like orgasms. Mine matters most and I don't care if you have one.

WILDE

So because something did not cause an outcry at the time, we're to simply let it pass forever? There should be no voices raised, no accountability taken for the centuries of horror, the centuries of suffering, the centuries of injustices?

DANTE

And what, sir, do you know of these things?

Wilde looks down and sniffs at his flower.

WILDE

No blacks. No dogs. No Irish.

Nabokov glares at Wilde, Nietzsche and then Plath.

NABOKOV

(muttering)

The sorrows of homosexuals, fake
thinkers, puffed-up poets...

MARQUEZ

If you don't like something, don't
read it. And if it is bad, it will
go away on it's own. We've all
heard of The Raven, The Rue Morgue,
The Tell-Tale Heart; not one person
here had heard of the Gold Bug.
Only you, Miss Plath. Who went out
of your way to seek it out.

PLATH

I have no preconceptions. Whatever
I see, I swallow just as it is,
unmistaken by love or dislike. I am
not cruel, only truthful.

MARQUEZ

Censorship should never be an
option.

PLATH

So because Poe wrote a couple of
good poems, we should let him off
the hook for a lifetime of
troubling and downright offensive
life choices? I'm not talking about
censorship. I'm talking about
accountability!

TWAIN

This accountability sounds an awful
lot like censorship.

PLATH

You're wrong, Twain. It's a point
of view.

Plath holds up the sheets of paper.

PLATH (CONT'D)

And from my point of view, this
should be enough to keep him out of
Heaven.

NABOKOV

And what point of view is that?!
Read 100 years later by a feminist
who went to Smith!?

(MORE)

NABOKOV (CONT'D)

Perhaps you'd like to be judged by
the point of view of Dante's time?
They'd burn you alive at the stake
for simply existing!

DANTE

I'm afraid we'd insist upon it.

Enraged, the Marquis de Sade noisily rises from the table,
strides towards the lavatory and violently kicks the door in.

Emily Dickinson, terrified, staring back into the lavatory,
rushes out into the jury room, turns, then, horrified by
seeing people there, rushes back inside.

A second later, she SCREAMS.

The jury all race into the lavatory.

INT. LAVATORY

The Marquis de Sade, silk pants around his ankles, faces the
wall, on which, in feces, he has handwritten:

TU ES POUR LA LIBERTÉ D'EXPRESSION OU TU NE L'ES PAS

INT. JURY ROOM

The jury, retching, hands covering mouths, race out of the
lavatory and to the front door and yell at and knock
frantically upon it.

JURY

(all at once)

Hurry! Let us out! Open the door!

The heavy bolts on the door are heard *sliding* open as the
heavy door arduously, noisily, grudgingly, moves.

As the jury impatiently attempts to exit, the Ethiopian
Debtera and the Swiss pontifical Guard block their exit.

ETHIOPIAN DEBTERA

(sternly)

Has the jury reached a decision?

FADE OUT:

THE END.