



Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses

Terence Whalen

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Edgar Allan Poe has long been viewed as an artist who was hopelessly out of step with his time. But as Terence Whalen shows, America's most celebrated romantic outcast was in many ways the nation's most representative commercial writer. Whalen explores the antebellum literary environment in which Poe worked, an environment marked by economic conflict, political strife, and widespread foreboding over the rise of a mass audience. The book shows that the publishing industry, far from being a passive backdrop to writing, threatened to dominate all aspects of literary creation. Faced with financial hardship, Poe desperately sought to escape what he called "the magazine prison-house" and "the horrid laws of political economy." By placing Poe firmly in economic context, Whalen unfolds a new account of the relationship between literature and capitalism in an age of momentous social change.

The book combines pathbreaking historical research with innovative literary theory. It includes the first fully-documented account of Poe's response to American slavery and the first exposé of his plot to falsify circulation figures. Whalen also provides a new explanation of Poe's ambivalence toward nationalism and exploration, a detailed inquiry into the conflict between cryptography and common knowledge, and a general theory of Poe's experiments with new literary forms such as the detective story. Finally, Whalen shows how these experiments are directly linked to the dawn of the information age. This book redefines Poe's place in American literature and casts new light on the emergence of a national culture before the Civil War.

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