



## [William Wilson](#), by Edgar Allan Poe

### **In A Nutshell**

“William Wilson” was first published in October 1839 in *Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine*. The story is written by Edgar Allan Poe, an American writer famous for his works of short fiction and of poetry, both in the horror genre. The story tells the tale of a man and his doppelganger, or ghostly double, who pursues the man around the world trying to keep him away from vice.

We might suspect that there is an autobiographical element to this story, since Poe gives his narrator (and his narrator’s doppelganger) Poe’s own birthday (January 19th), and much of the narrator’s description of his boyhood days resembles that of Poe’s, right down to the name of the school William Wilson attends as a child (Dr. Bransby’s). (See a Poe biography as a source, such as *Edgar Allan Poe* by Arthur Hobson Quinn.) But the question of whether Poe is personally invested in the themes and psychology of the work is certainly subject to debate.

“William Wilson” is significant among Poe’s work for being less Gothic, less horrific, and less melodramatic than most of his other stories or poems. It is a bit of a departure, both in style and in plot, from the theatrical horror of stories like “The Tell-Tale Heart” or “The Fall of the House of Usher.”

While it is missing much of the Poe gore, it does have all of the Poe psychological suspense. So feel free to really get into the story.

---

Visit Shmoop for full coverage of [William Wilson](#)

[Shmoop: study guides](#) and [teaching resources](#) for [literature](#), [US history](#), and [poetry](#)



Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0

This document may be modified and republished for noncommercial use only. You must attribute Shmoop and link to <http://www.shmoop.com>.

Visit *Shmoop* for much more analysis:

- [William Wilson Themes](#)
- [William Wilson Quotes](#)
- [William Wilson Summary](#)
- Also: literary devices, characters, trivia, audio, photos, links, and more

## Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 Poe gives his own birthday – January 19th – to William Wilson and his double. Is Poe making a point here about similarities between himself and his character, or is this just akin to Hitchcock and his famous cameo appearances?
- 2 How much does William Wilson understand about his own situation? What do we know as readers that he does not?
- 3 Does this story read differently the second time around than it does your first read through? What changes about the way you understand each scene?

Visit *Shmoop* for many more [William Wilson Study Questions](#)

---

Visit *Shmoop* for full coverage of [William Wilson](#)  
*Shmoop*: study guides and teaching resources for literature, US history, and poetry



Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0

This document may be modified and republished for noncommercial use only.  
You must attribute *Shmoop* and link to <http://www.shmoop.com>.