

Sarah Helen (Power) Whitman Biography

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Biography

Sarah Helen (Power) Whitman (19 January 1803-27 June 1878), poet, essayist, and reformer, was born and lived in Providence, Rhode Island, until her marriage in 1828 to a lawyer, John Winslow Whitman. They settled in Boston, but upon her husband's death in 1833 Mrs. Whitman returned permanently to Providence. She had earlier published verses in the magazine her husband edited, and she returned to literature by publishing more poetry and critical essays in a number of major journals. Mrs. Whitman was known as a conversationalist and her salon in Providence attracted many, including George William Curtis and John Neal. While in Boston, she had been caught up by Transcendentalism and continued to support it and other reform movements, including woman's rights, spiritualism, mesmerism, Fourierism, and the progressive educational methods of Bronson Alcott. Her main fame derives from her brief engagement to Edgar Allan Poe in 1848, a confusing and awkward situation soon terminated by mutual consent. In later years she constantly defended Poe against his attackers and provided a constant source of information for his biographers. Her *Edgar Allan Poe and His Critics* (New York: Rudd & Carleton, 1860) is still useful. Both her *Hours of Life, and Other Poems* (Providence: G. H. Whitney, 1853) and *Poems* (Boston: Houghton, Osgood, 1879) are a cut above female poetry of the time. The latter contains a number of poems on Poe and shows his influence on her own verse. The second of Poe's poems "To Helen" commemorates her.