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| Kevin Reynaud. The Loss of the Ideal Woman in Edgar Allan Poe's Poetry. Literature. 2013. <dumas-00936674>

HAL Id: dumas-00936674

<https://dumas.ccsd.cnrs.fr/dumas-00936674v1>

Submitted on 27 Jan 2014

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The Loss of the Ideal Woman in Edgar Allan Poe's Poetry

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UFR de langues étrangères:

Mémoire de Master 1 Recherche – 18 crédits

Mention: Langues, littératures et civilisations étrangères

Spécialité: Etudes Anglophones

Sous la direction de Dr. Caroline Bertonèche

Membres du Jury: Dr. Caroline Bertonèche et Dr. Cyril Besson

Année universitaire 2012/2013

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Acknowledgements

Foremost, I would like to sincerely thank my advisor, Caroline Bertonèche, for her help and guidance throughout the writing of my dissertation, but also for all her support and attention during my time abroad, and for being inspirational to so many students. I would also like to thank Mr. Cyril Besson for taking the time to read and evaluate my work.

Secondly, I would never have finished this dissertation without the boundless love and support of my parents and siblings, as well as my friends Morgane and Camille's tremendous help. I would also like to acknowledge my friends Marie, Surya and Juliette for motivating me when I was down and pushing me to outdo myself.

Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe was an outstanding American writer of the 1800s. Mostly praised and renowned for his short stories, he is widely considered as one of the fathers of the American detective fiction genre, thanks to world-famous tales such as “The Murder in the Rue Morgue.” He is also thought a pioneer in the field of science-fiction, thanks to stories such as “The Fall of the House of Usher” or “Ligeia.” New literary landscapes helped bring Poe worldwide recognition nowadays as a master of the mysterious and the macabre, but during his lifetime his fictional works were more popular in Europe than in the United States, where he was mostly regarded as a literary critic. France, especially, recognized Poe as a great author of fiction, thanks to Charles Baudelaire's translations of his works.¹ Poe's popularity in Europe may be easily explained by the fact that, although he was born in Boston in 1809, he sailed to Britain when he was six years old, and only returned to the New World when he was eleven. These years spent in England obviously shaped his art, and the European influence was always palpable in his works.

Influenced by the Romantic movement then at its height in Great Britain and Continental Europe, Poe drew his influence from numerous poets, such as John Keats, William Wordsworth, and especially William Blake, whose influence on Poe's work has often been commented on. Poe was definitely one of the major actors in the development of Romanticism in America, through his use of typically Romantic themes and ideals such as the

¹ Meyers, *Edgar Allan Poe: His Life and Legacy*, p. 258

paramount role of nature and the praise of childhood. Nevertheless his work could be distinguished from those of his fellow writers thanks to his fascination with dark themes rather uncommon in Romanticism. Poe's work was thus labelled as Gothic, but regarding his lifelong work as merely part of Gothicism would be simplistic. Some authors tried to define the relation between these two genres, admitting that Gothic derives from Romanticism. In an essay entitled "Varieties of the Gothic: A New Anthology," Robert D. Hume discusses this duality:

The Gothic is closely and significantly related to Romanticism. Is Gothic a subdivision of Romantic? Is Gothic really "the other side" of Romantic – perhaps best dubbed "dark Romantic"?²

Influenced by the Romantic Poets, Poe developed a passion for poetry. Although his talent in narrating mysterious events and macabre love stories was acknowledged by most of his contemporary writers, Poe used many more formats to create his art. More than simply a prose writer, he was also a poet, a literary critic and a philosopher. According to him, Poe's true passion was poetry, but as he was one of the first writer to try to live off his writing, he had to put aside his poetry writing and focus on what allowed him to earn a living: his tales.

Events not to be controlled have prevented me from making, at any time, any serious effort in what, under happier circumstances, would have been the field of my choice. With me poetry has been not a purpose, but a passion; and the passions should be held in reverence; they must not -- they cannot at will be excited, with an eye to the paltry compensations, or the more paltry commendations, of mankind.³

Poe kept on writing poetry throughout his life, not for commercial success, but to stay true to his passion and to his calling, although his poetry was only critically acclaimed after his death, in 1849. His poetry, like his tales, mostly focuses on women and death. Poe's harsh

2 Hume, *Varieties of the Gothic: A New Anthology*, p. 13

3 Poe, in *Poems and Miscellanies*, "preface"

personal life, characterized by tumult and passion accounts for the writer's obsession with such themes, and one can notice how most of his poems are inspired by a woman who had a special part to play in his life, often ending tragically:

In narratives of his life, women fuel the writer's imaginative processes: they are his love objects and, therefore, his poetic inspiration. Recall the famous sequence of beloved women that he lost too soon to illness: his mother Eliza; his foster mother Fanny Allan; his childhood friend's mother Jane Stanard (the fabled inspiration for his first poem "To Helen"); his child bride Virginia (the possible inspiration for "Annabel Lee"). Recall still other, frequently rehearsed, romantic interests: the enchanting, tubercular, childlike poetess Frances Sargent Osgood, whose name threads through a valentine poem by Poe; Marie Louise Shew, "The Beloved Physician," who nursed Poe's dying wife and the Poe in his grief, and whose initials entitle "To M.L.S."; Poe's Providence fiancée Sarah Helen Whitman, the subject of the second "To Helen"; Nancy Richmond, the young woman to whom Poe wrote begging for solace near the end of his life, and the anesthetizing healer in "For Annie." In each case, the life story and the poem reciprocally inform each other so that they are difficult, if not impossible, to separate.⁴

This prevalence of women in Poe's poetry is revealing in terms of his deep sorrow surrounding his private life. Poe put down in writing the desperation he felt, as he never managed to reach happiness for a long period of time. Poe may have gotten his talent from his mother Elizabeth, who was also an artist, an actress to be exact, but his weakness for alcohol might have come from his father leaving when he was still an infant. Poe's alcoholism is a known fact, but many think that he was addicted to opium as well. Regardless, Poe's tragic life led him to turn to anything that could make him forget his pain, as he himself confessed:

I have absolutely no pleasure in the stimulants in which I sometimes so madly indulge. It has not been in the pursuit of pleasure that I have periled life and reputation and reason. It has been the desperate attempt to escape from torturing memories, from a sense of insupportable loneliness and a dread of some strange impending doom.⁵

Therefore, Poe put the pain of his miserable existence into his poetry, and the women

4 Richards, *Women's Place in Poe's Studies*, p. 1

5 Poe quoted by Mrs Whitman in her book *Edgar Poe and His Critics*, p. 74-75

that mattered to him became his favorite subject. His poetry is imbued with the dark despair felt by a grieving lover, and Poe uses his art to mourn the death of his loved ones. Through his poetry, he attempts to cope with his own sorrow, as well as to study the very essence of love. He therefore created a whole collection of poems on the loss of the ideal woman.

In the first part, the representations of women will be analyzed, on the basis of women studies as well as on a study of three women renowned for their beauty, whether in religion, mythology or history, leading to the importance of these notions in Poe's fiction. The second part will be centered on Poe's Romantic legacy with discussions on the importance of nature, dreams and childhood. Eventually, Poe's poetry will be gazed at through a Gothic lense: focusing first on his ability to create these glum atmospheres around his characters that lead them to death then seeing how Poe's narrators deal with their beloved's death. Finally, we will study the question of the afterlife. Each of Poe's poem is particular and unique but this reflection will try to make sense out of the author's tragic experiences as regards his poetical work on the question of the ideal woman.

CHAPTER I:

THE REPRESENTATION

OF WOMEN

A. A Look into Women Studies

1. Womanhood: A Construct?

The first wave of feminism occurred in the nineteenth century, although it was only thought upon as a feminist movement later on. Mainly focused on gaining the right to vote and to own property for women, this movement opened the door for the second and third waves of feminism that started respectively in the 1960s and 1990s. Whereas, in the United States, the movement was mostly focused on granting women the same rights as men through action, it developed differently in Europe, and especially in France with French Feminist Theory. This part of the movement differed from the Anglo-Saxon movement by straying from the political and social aspects and by taking on a more philosophical and literary form. It witnessed the emergence of a specific literature as female authors started developing – and writing – theories about the female body, their mind, and condition.

Simone de Beauvoir's "Second Sex" published in 1949 initiated the second wave of feminism. Considered as a key work in feminist philosophy and one of the most influential piece of writing in the history of women, the book analyzes female oppression in society and develops some of the most fundamental theories of feminism. Being an existentialist, Simone de Beauvoir supported her life-long companion Jean-Paul Sartre's theory according to which existence precedes essence:

L'existentialisme athée [...] déclare que si Dieu n'existe pas, il y a au moins un être chez qui l'existence précède l'essence, un être qui existe avant de pouvoir être

défini par aucun concept et que cet être c'est l'homme [...]. Qu'est-ce que signifie ici que l'existence précède l'essence ? Cela signifie que l'homme existe d'abord, se rencontre, surgit dans le monde, et qu'il se définit après. L'homme, tel que le conçoit l'existentialiste, s'il n'est pas définissable, c'est qu'il n'est d'abord rien. Il ne sera qu'ensuite, et il sera tel qu'il se sera fait. Ainsi, il n'y a pas de nature humaine, puisqu'il n'y a pas de Dieu pour la concevoir. L'homme est seulement, non seulement tel qu'il se conçoit, mais tel qu'il se veut, et comme il se conçoit après l'existence, comme il se veut après cet élan vers l'existence ; l'homme n'est rien d'autre que ce qu'il se fait. ⁶

This led her to believe and theorize that not only manhood, but more precisely womanhood, is a social construct. She argues that women have always been considered as the *other sex*, mostly from a male point of view, and demonstrates that historically, women have been regarded as lesser individuals, thought deviant or abnormal. She states how women are taught to believe men are the ideal to which women should aspire. Consequently, she emphasizes how women are raised from birth to believe their inferiority is innate, and thus deconstructs this very assumption:

On ne naît pas femme : on le devient. Aucun destin biologique, psychique, économique ne définit la figure que revêt au sein de la société la femelle humaine ; c'est l'ensemble de la civilisation qui élabore ce produit intermédiaire entre le mâle et le castrat qu'on qualifie de féminin. Seule la médiation d'autrui peut constituer un individu comme un *Autre*. En tant qu'il existe pour soi, l'enfant ne saurait se saisir comme sexuellement différencié. Chez les filles et les garçons, le corps est d'abord le rayonnement d'une subjectivité, l'instrument qui effectue la compréhension du monde [...]. Si, bien avant la puberté, et parfois même dès sa toute petite enfance, [la fille] nous apparaît déjà comme sexuellement spécifiée, ce n'est pas que de mystérieux instincts immédiatement la vouent à la passivité, à la coquetterie, à la maternité : c'est que l'intervention d'autrui dans la vie de l'enfant est presque originelle et que dès ses premières années sa vocation lui est impérieusement insufflée. ⁷

This portrayal of women as the *other sex* is explained by different processes throughout life. Because of their misincomprehension of women, of their alterity, men reject the *other*, and use

6 Sartre, *L'Existentialisme est un Humanisme*, pages 29-30

7 De Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe*, p. 423 et 424

this to create and maintain a patriarchal society. Women are therefore forced to build their identity in opposition to masculinity instead of simply being who they are. Simone de Beauvoir called for a moral revolution for women, in order to escape their condition, but claimed that this cannot be done by women alone and that men have to recognize women as their equal.

2. Women's Voice: Ignored?

To this extent, Edgar Allan Poe could not have been considered a feminist, as most of his poems are phallogentric. Indeed, whereas Simone de Beauvoir advocated years later for a moral and sexual revolution in order to give women a voice for equality, Poe's poetry focuses on men and their feelings. Of course, women are not absent from most of Poe's poems, whether they deal with love, pain, loss, sorrow or death, but, narrators are exclusively men. This exposure of male narrators is not problematic in itself, but raises the question of women's position in Poe's poetry, as well as in poetry and literature in general. Absent from the action, women are passive in Poe's poetry, whereas men are always portrayed as active. This distinction is reminiscent of the separation historically made between the mind and the body.

In "Unbearable Weight", Susan Bordo, a modern Feminist American philosopher, discusses that dichotomy :

But what remains the constant element throughout historical variation is the *construction* of body as something apart from the true self (whether conceived as soul, mind, spirit, will, creativity, freedom...) and as undermining the best efforts of that self. That which is not-body is the highest, the best, the noblest, the closest to

God; that which is body is the albatross, the heavy drag on self-realization. ⁸

She then explains how this relates to gender and the question of femininity in society and, by extension, in art:

What is the relation of gender to this dualism? As feminists have shown, the scheme is frequently gendered, with woman cast in the role of the body, “weighed down,” in Beauvoir’s words, “by everything peculiar to it.” In contrast, man casts himself as the “inevitable, like a pure idea, like the One, the All, the Absolute Spirit.” [...] The cost of such projections to women is obvious. For if, whatever the specific historical content of the duality, *the body* is the negative term, and if the woman *is* the body, then women *are* that negativity, whatever it may be: distraction from knowledge, seduction away from God, capitulation to sexual desire, violence or aggression, failure of will, even death. ⁹

This darkness laid upon women definitely shaped literature and the arts, and Poe himself is no stranger to these attributes given to that gender. The author is well-known for his portrayals of women, always beautiful, sometimes intelligent. Physical appearance is indeed prominent in Poe’s fictions, whereas the mental capacities of women are rarely discussed, and even if they are, female characters still have no life of their own, and simply embody the narrator’s desires and fantasies.

3. Naming Women: Matters of Labeling?

This theory stating that women and men are respectively associated with body and mind can be developed even further. As women are connected to the body, they become objects, properties to be owned and only their class will determine if their body is to be loved or hated, decorated or used, worshipped or destroyed. As women are objectified, men need to

⁸ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, p. 5

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5

name them. Contrary to the narrators whose identities are often kept silent, women in Poe's poetry rarely remain nameless.

Women are the subject of numerous poems by Poe, and a lot of them are entitled after the female character. "To Helen" (1831), "Lenore" (1831), "Eulalie – A Song" (1845), "Ulalume – A Ballad" (1847), "To Helen" (1848), "For Annie" (1849), and "Annabel Lee" (1849). All take on the name of the women addressed by Poe. A lot of other poems dedicated to women could be added to these examples, but their titles are incomplete, often following the pattern: "To —" (the number and length of the lines can vary). Such titles were given to poems in 1829 (twice) and in 1848. Other poem titles followed the same pattern but with added initials: "To F—" (1935), "To F—s S. O—d" (1835), "To M. L. S—" (1847). "The Lake: To —" (1827) follows a similar idea. Whereas the first poems give the female characters fake names to – arguably – talk about a woman present in Poe's life, the latter ones just delete the name of these women to keep them anonymous.

Nevertheless, in the former poems, it is worth noticing the way names are chosen. With the exception of "For Annie," the letter *L* is present in all of these names. The use of this letter is common in Poe's fiction, as most of the deceased women of his poetry bear a name with this sound. Like the eponymous short story "Ligeia", the names of Lenore, Ulalume and Annabel Lee all have this lulling sound of the liquid letter *L* that confers a mournful feeling to the story, giving the poem its dark and melancholic atmosphere. These names also have a rather musical rhythm to them, and their musicality as well as their melancholy often dominate the poems.

B. On Mythological Women

Whether in religion, mythology or history, women have always taken on an important role. Sometimes praised for their beauty, or dreaded for their intelligence, women have shaped these fundamental stories, regardless of their accuracy.

1. The Image of Beauty

In the Bible, once God had created Adam, he had him take care of the Garden of Eden and brought him the animals to name. But as none was found to be a suitable companion for Adam, God put him to sleep and created the woman from one of his limbs: Eve. Although there is no physical description of Eve in the Bible, Christians believe she was the most beautiful woman to ever walk the Earth. Created by a perfect God, she embodied divine perfection. In “Paradise Lost,” a twelve book-long blank verse poem, John Milton thus describes her beauty :

[...] So lovely fair
That what seemed fair in all the world, seemed now
Mean, or in her summer up, in her contained
And in her looks; which from that time infused
Sweetness into my heart, unfelt before,
And into all things from her air inspired
The spirit of love and amorous delight.
She disappeared, and left me dark; I walked
To find her, or for ever to deplore
Her loss, and other pleasures all abjure:
When out of hope, behold her, not far off,
Such as I saw her in my dream, adorned
With what all Earth or Heaven could bestow
To make her amiable: On she came.
Led by her heavenly Maker, though unseen,

And guided by his voice; nor uninformed
Of nuptial sanctity, and marriage rites:
Grace was in all her steps, Heaven in her eye,
In every gesture dignity and love.¹⁰

Her beauty is also celebrated in the Bible. Adam's first reaction when he saw her was to invent the first poem ever spoken by mankind:

She now is bone of my bone,
And flesh of my flesh:
She shall be called Woman,
For from man she has been taken.¹¹

Mythology also counts numerous beautiful women, goddesses or humans, but one stands out. In Greek mythology, Helen, the daughter of Zeus and Leda, was so overwhelmingly beautiful that many admired her good looks, including the famous female poet Sappho who wrote:

Some say a host of horsemen, others of infantry, and others of ships, is the most beautiful thing on the dark earth: but I say, it is what you love.
Full easy it is to make this understood of one and all: for she that far surpassed all mortals in beauty, Helen, her most noble husband
Deserted, and went sailing to Troy, with never a thought for her daughter and dear parents.¹²

Her beauty was so, that when she was to be executed by Menelaus, the husband to whom she had been unfaithful, she dropped her robe and showed her naked body as he was raising his sword. This caused Menelaus to drop the weapon, according to Ancient writers, such as Aristophanes, who wrote: “Ainsi Ménélas, ayant reluqué les seins nus d'Hélène, lâcha, je crois, son épée.”¹³

10 Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book VIII, lines 471-489

11 *The Holy Bible*, Genesis 2:23

12 Sappho, *Fragment 16*, from Page's *Sappho and Alcaeus*, p. 52-53

13 Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, p. 126

One other woman's beauty greatly influenced history: Cleopatra's. Her good looks have long been commented on, although they are being questioned nowadays, because of different aesthetic norms. Regardless, numerous writers from Antiquity have mentioned her beauty. Appian notes in "Roman History" that "Antony was amazed at her wit as well as her "good looks"¹⁴ and her beauty is also discussed at length by Cassius Dio :

For she was a woman of surpassing beauty, and at that time, when she was in the prime of her youth, she was most striking; she also possessed a most charming voice and a knowledge of how to make herself agreeable to every one. Being brilliant to look upon and to listen to, with the power to subjugate every one, even a love-sated man already past his prime, she thought that it would be in keeping with her rôle to meet Caesar, and she reposed in her beauty all her claims to the throne. She asked therefore for admission to his presence, and on obtaining permission adorned and beautified herself so as to appear before him in the most majestic [...] guise. [...] Caesar, upon seeing her and hearing her speak a few words was forthwith so completely captivated that he at once, before dawn, sent for Ptolemy and tried to reconcile them, thus acting as advocate for the very woman whose judge he had previously assumed to be.¹⁵

2. Traits of Character

As shown above, those three women's looks have been praised and remembered, but what about their personalities?

Eve, although created in God's image and thus supposed to be divinely perfect, showed weakness. When God put Adam on Earth and had him take care of the Garden of Eden, he warned him that "from every tree of the garden [he] may eat; ¹⁷ but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil [he] must not eat; for the day [he] eat[s] of it, [he] must die."¹⁶

14 Appian, *Roman History*, Volume IV, Book V, fragment 8

15 Dio, *Roman History*, Volume IV, Book XLII, p. 169

16 *The Holy Bible*, Genesis 2:16-17

But tempted by the Serpent, Eve bit the apple, thus betraying God's trust:

The woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: 3: But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, Goth hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die. 4: And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: 5: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil. 6: And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her, and he did eat. 7: And the eyes of them both were opened.¹⁷

Helen of Troy also yielded to corruption. Her actions differ from one author to the next, but some relate her despicable actions during the Trojan war. In his “*Odyssey*”, Homer narrates the moment the Trojan horse created by the Greeks entered Troy and how Helen mentally tortured the men inside the horse by reminding them of their loved ones at home.

Melenaus explains, addressing Helen:

What a thing was this, too, which that mighty man wrought and endured in the carven horse, wherein all we chiefs of the Argives were sitting, bearing to the Trojans death and fate! Then thou camest thither, and it must be that thou wast bidden by some god, who wished to grant glory to the Trojans, and godlike Deiphobus followed thee on thy way. Thrice didst thou go about the hollow ambush, trying it with thy touch, and thou didst name aloud the chieftains of the Danaans by their names, likening thy voice to the voices of the wives of all the Argives. Now I and the son of Tydeus and goodly Odysseus sat there in the midst and heard how thou didst call, and we two were eager to rise up and come forth, or else to answer straightway from within, but Odysseus held us back and stayed us, despite our eagerness. Then all the other sons of the Achaeans held their peace, but Anticlus alone was fain to speak and answer thee; but Odysseus firmly closed his mouth with strong hands, and saved all the Achaeans, and held him thus until Pallas Athena led thee away.¹⁸

Yet, in the “*Aeneid*,” Virgil relates a different version of the entrance of the wooden horse into Troy. A dialogue takes place between Aeneas and Deiphobus, as the former finds the latter wounded and covered in blood. Deiphobus then explains to his friend what happened to him:

¹⁷ *The Holy Bible*, Genesis 3:2-7

¹⁸ Homer, *Odyssey*, Book IV, lines 270-285

Nay, friend, no hallowed rite was left undone,
But every debt to death and pity due
The shades of thy Deiphobus received.
My fate it was, and Helen's murderous wrong,
Wrought me this woe; of her these tokens tell.
For how that last night in false hope we passed,
Thou knowest, –ah, too well we both recall!
When up the steep of Troy the fateful horse
Came climbing, pregnant with fierce men-at-arms,
't was she, accurst, who led the Phrygian dames
In choric dance and false bacchantic song,
And, waving from the midst a lofty brand,
Signalled the Greeks from Ilium's central tower
In that same hour on my sad couch I lay,
Exhausted by long care and sunk in sleep,
That sweet, deep sleep, so close to tranquil death.
But my illustrious bride from all the house
Had stolen all arms; from 'neath my pillowed head
She stealthily bore off my trusty sword;
Then loud on Menelaus did she call,
And with her own false hand unbarred the door;
Such gift to her fond lord she fain would send to blot the memory of his ancient
wrong!
Why tell the tale, how on my couch they broke,
While their accomplice, vile Aeolides, Counsell'd to many a crime.¹⁹

Looking at narrations of this time in mythology, Helen's inner beauty did not match her looks.

This duality in her character raised aesthetic questions: can someone so beautiful be so vile?

Cleopatra might be one of the most beautiful woman in history, but she was also extremely clever as many texts describe. Contrary to Eve or Helen, she was not corrupted, nor did she obey to people labeled as superior to her, but she knew how to use her good looks to her advantage, in order to obtain what she desired. Thanks to the outstanding education she received, she was able to speak numerous languages, and in “Life of Antony,” Plutarch describes her personality and wit:

[...] converse with her had an irresistible charm, and her presence, combined with the persuasiveness of her discourse and the character which was somehow diffused

¹⁹ Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book VI, lines 494-534

about her behaviour towards others, had something stimulating about it. There was sweetness also in the tones of her voice; and her tongue, like an instrument of many strings, she could readily turn to whatever language she pleased, so that in her interviews with Barbarians she very seldom had need of an interpreter, but made her replies to most of them herself and unassisted, whether they were Ethiopians, Troglodytes, Hebrews, Arabians, Syrians, Medes or Parthians. Nay, it is said that she knew the speech of many other peoples also, although the kings of Egypt before her had not even made an effort to learn the native language, and some actually gave up their Macedonian dialect.²⁰

3. The Spectre of Death

These three women's fates are all closely linked with death, whether their end was tragic or necessary because of what they later brought onto the world.

As Eve bit the apple God had forbidden her to, she showed she was fallible, and therefore lost her god-like image. Moreover, her error caused humanity to be forever cursed:

16: To the woman [God] said: "I will make great your distress in child-bearing; in pain shall you bring forth children; For your husband shall be your longing, though he have dominion over you." 17: And to Adam he said, "Because you have listened to your wife, and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat: Cursed be the ground because of you; in toil shall you eat of it all the days of your life; 18: Thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to you, and you shall eat the plants of the field. 19: In the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, Since out of it you were taken; for dust you are and unto dust you shall return."²¹

God punishes Adam and Eve, but mostly blames her and asserts that man shall be superior to woman and that all females should obey their male counterparts. This is undoubtedly, one of the main roots for the development of most Western gender prejudices; the fact that women were considered as lesser beings than men, especially to these ones who believed this is the

²⁰ Plutarch, *Life Of Antony*, Section XXVII, Segments 2-4

²¹ *The Holy Bible*, Genesis 3:16-19

origin of life and in a way, the origin of death as well, since God removed the Tree of Life from the Garden after this incident.

Desired by many, Helen was once abducted by Theseus. Kidnapped just before her marriage to Menelaus could be celebrated, when she was rescued, brought back and finally married, all her suitors swore to help bring her back should she be abducted again. When Paris of Troy kidnapped her, those suitors had to honor their promise: hence the Trojan war. The war being fought to bring her back to Greece, she inherited her nickname of “the face that launched a thousand ships.”

FAUSTUS: Was this the face that lauched a thousand ships?
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?
Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss!
Her lips suck forth my soul, see where it flies!
Come, Helen, come give me my soul again.
Here will I dwell for heaven be in these lips
And all is dross that is not Helena! [...]
O, thou art fairer than the evening air,
Clad in the beauty of a thousand stars,
Brighter art thou than flaming Jupiter
When he appeared to hapless Semele,
More lovely than the monarch of the sky
In wanton Arethusas's azured arms,
And none but thou shalt be my paramour.²²

Her beauty caused an immense war between Trojans and Greeks that lasted ten years, but according to all those writings, it appears that she actually rejoiced from the carnage and all the deaths around her.

As for Cleopatra, her ambition caused many to die but it also caused her to take her own life when she had no more ways to escape. Overall, her life was surrounded by death,

²² Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, Act V Scene 1

from her youth onwards; when all of her family members killed each other to get closer to the throne that her father will leave after his death, to her (in)famous love affairs with Caesar or Antony that both ended in them – and eventually her – passing. In “Pharsalia,” Lucan relates a meeting between Cleopatra and Caesar, where she asked for the throne of Egypt back. Lucan mentions her confidence but also her manipulation skills, as she takes on a dark appearance to show her despair, yet still looking quite beautiful, in order to seduce him with her looks, if not with her words:

Trusting in her beauty, Cleopatra approached him, in sorrow but not in tears: she had decked out her feigned grief, and her hair, as far as became her, was disordered, as if she had torn it [...]. Vain would have been her appeal to the stern ear of Caesar; but her face supported her petition and her wicked beauty gained her suit.²³

His use of the word “wicked” to describe her beauty, clearly expresses his feelings towards the Queen, but also hints at her unsettling kind of beauty. Similarly, Lucan later uses the term “baleful” to describe her looks, as he relates the events of a banquet Cleopatra attended:

Cleopatra, not content with a crown of her own and her brother for husband, was there, with her baleful beauty painted up beyond all measure: covered with the spoils of the Red Sea, carried a fortune round her neck and in her hair, and was weighed down by her ornaments. Her white breasts were revealed by the fabric of Sidon, which, close-woven by the shuttle of the Seres, the Egyptian needle-worker pulls out, and loosens the thread by stretching the stuff.²⁴

In those lines, his choice to use the terms “wicked” and “baleful” to describe her beauty is very interesting. It is reminiscent of death, something threatening, malevolent, which foreshadows evil and definitely suits Cleopatra, who in this particular instance, attends a banquet with Caesar that will soon die.

23 Lucan, *Pharsalia*, Book X, p. 597

24 *Ibid.*, p. 601

C. Poe's Feminine Aesthetics

Widely inspired by the women present in his life, Poe praised them and immortalized in his poetry the love and admiration he bore them. Through his craft, he studied their aesthetics, questioning the true nature of beauty and art, and often incorporated mythological references.

1. Pictures of Goddesses

One of Poe's poem in which he praises a woman's beauty to the highest, is his 1831 poem "To Helen." It is believed to have been written for Jane Stith Stanard, the mother of one of his childhood friend, Rob, whom he met when he was 14-years-old. He began idolizing her and later referred to her as his "passionate boyhood, [...] the first, purely ideal love of [his] soul"²⁵ in a letter to Sarah H. Whitman. Poe wrote the poem "To Helen" shortly after J. Stanard died and aspired to thank her for being a second mother to him, as he did not feel welcomed into his own home (Poe's father had abandoned him and his siblings, and after his mother's death a year later, he had been taken in by John Allan and his wife). Judging Jane's name too dull for such an amazing woman, he gave her the name of Helen, referring to the Classical figure of Helen of Troy, and thus giving Jane great praise for her beauty. Poe mentions her "hyacinth hair"²⁶ (v. 7) and her "classic face"²⁷ (v. 7), two female features which are part of the Ancient ideal of beauty. Moreover, Poe uses an elevated diction to refer to

²⁵ Poe, *Letter to Sarah H. Whitman*, October 1, 1848

²⁶ Poe, *To Helen* (1831), p. 66

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 66

Classical ideas such as “the glory that was Greece, / And the grandeur that was Rome”²⁸ (v. 9-10) and therefore gives his poem a larger context. Furthermore, in the last stanza, he compares her figure to a statue: “How statue-like I see thee stand, / The agade lamp within thy hand!”²⁹ (v. 12-13). This last verse evokes Psyche, who in mythology was the most beautiful mortal woman in the world. She and Cupid fell in love, but she could not see him, and the “agade lamp”³⁰ (v. 13) refers to the lamp she used to uncover his face with, when he was asleep. In these verses, Poe compares Jane Stanard to Psyche, whose beauty rivaled with Venus's splendor, the goddess of love herself. He also uses the image of a statue, comparing her to a perfectly crafted work of art.

In “Lenore,” published in 1831, Poe's verses deal with the death of a young woman. The poem is made up of a conversation between an unnamed narrator, a member of Lenore's family, and Guy de Vere, the mournful lover of the woman he was supposed to marry. The conversation between the two is conflictual as Guy de Vere blames Lenore's family for her death, explaining how their attitude to her when she was alive was despicable and that they were happy she died:

Wretches! Ye loved her for her wealth, and ye hated her for her pride;
And, when she fell in feeble health, ye blessed her – that she died: –³¹ (v. 8-9)

The poem focuses on Guy de Vere's grief and presents different way to remember the dead, whether it is by mourning or by celebrating life. Indeed, the late lover, although sad, does not cry because he believes he will see her again in Heaven. Moreover, the two characters are

28 Poe, *To Helen* (1831), p. 66

29 *Ibid.*, p. 66

30 *Ibid.*, p. 66

31 Poe, *Lenore*, p. 73

opposed in their speech. The narrator appears to speak very superficially of Lenore, mentioning her beauty and physical characteristics. Instead, Guy de Vere mentions her happiness, how her family wronged her, as well as her feelings. When the narrator refers to her beauty, saying she is “the queenliest dead that ever died so young”³² (v. 6) and that she was “fair and debonair,”³³ (v. 17) her lover discusses her luck to have left the “damned Earth”³⁴ (v. 24):

[...] To friends from fiends the indignant ghost is riven—
From Hell unto a high estate within the utmost Heaven—
From moan and groan to a golden throne beside the king of Heaven.³⁵ (v. 20-22)

Guy de Vere therefore says Lenore was such a beautiful person, both physically and morally that she deserved a seat beside God in Heaven. This insistence on her fair beauty and on her pleasing personality seem to raise the question of aesthetics and what really defines beauty.

This issue also appears in “Ulalume,” one of Poe's latest poem. The poem deals with a narrator wandering through the woods on a grim night in October. His heart is “volcanic”³⁶ (v. 13) as he did not pay attention to the date or to the place. As dawn approaches, he sees a bright star in the night sky that, he feels, is leading him the way. He actually mistakes the moon for Astarte, the moon goddess of fertility, love and reproduction in Ancient Middle Eastern beliefs, and decides to follow her, for she is “warmer than Dian,”³⁷ (v. 39) the virgin moon goddess in Roman mythology. He praises her beauty and thinks she will take him to a happier place, because “she has seen that the tears are not dry on / These cheeks”³⁸ (v. 42-43),

32 Poe, *Lenore*, p. 73

33 *Ibid.*, p. 74

34 *Ibid.*, p. 74

35 *Ibid.*, p. 74

36 Poe, *Ulalume – A Ballad*, p. 102

37 *Ibid.*, p. 103

38 *Ibid.*, p. 103

due to the loss of his beloved. His soul warns him not to trust the star, but he replies that there is no danger in following her, because her prophetic powers offer only hope: “its Sillybic splendor is beaming / With hope and in Beauty to-night”³⁹ (v. 64-65). But as he ends up by the door of a tomb, his soul tells him it is that of his beloved, the late Ulalume, that he buried here exactly a year before. Upon this realization, his heart grows “ashen and sober / As the leaves that were crisped and sere— / As the leaves that were withering and sere”⁴⁰ (v. 82-84). The narrator's quest for happiness ends at the sight of the tomb of his beloved Ulalume for whom he still has not finished grieving. There could not have been a saddest place for the narrator to arrive to. In the study of the poem's aesthetics, “Ulalume” can therefore be read as a tragedy of mankind. The narrator's path reveals the limits man faces when attempting to achieve perfect beauty, truth or any sort of ideal. His hopeful quest to find happiness by believing in what is beautiful shows the determination one can have to reach the Sublime, as defined by Edmund Burke. In his 1757 essay, the philosopher discusses the Sublime, describing it as what has the power to destroy one's mind:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. I say the strongest emotion, because I am satisfied the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure. Without all doubt, the torments which we may be made to suffer are much greater in their effect on the body and mind, than any pleasure which the most learned voluptuary could suggest, or than the liveliest imagination, and the most sound and exquisitely sensible body, could enjoy.⁴¹

39 Poe, *Ulalume – A Ballad*, p. 104

40 *Ibid.*, p. 104

41 Burke, *Of the Sublime*, Part I, Section 7

2. Odes to Psyche

In “Ulalume,” as the narrator takes a walk through the woods, he sees a bright star and decides to follow it, against his soul's warning not to trust the star. As he ends up at the door of the tomb of his deceased lover Ulalume, he realizes that it has been a year since the day that he came down the same path to bury his beloved. Throughout the poem, the narrator and his soul are two distinct characters and entities. Psyche understands the signals around them, she knows he is mistaking the moon for Astarte, and that he shouldn't trust the star. She also knows whose grave they have arrived to, whereas the narrator has to ask her. Although the soul knows this, she has no influence on the narrator who does not listen to her advice, and decides to follow the beauty and hope projected by the star:

Ah, we safely may trust to its gleaming,
And be sure it will lead us aright –
We safely may trust to a gleaming,
That cannot but guide us aright,
Since it flickers up to Heaven through the night.⁴² (v. 67-71)

In this sense, the narrator can be associated with the conscious mind, in opposition to his soul, Psyche, who knows the truth, but their intuitive connection has been lost. This confusion between the two reveals the existence of an inner conflict, originating from the death of his beloved Ulalume. This duality inside the narrator's mind, unveils the destructive inner conflict the character is facing. His conscious mind is desperately looking for happiness, but he unconsciously follows a star that brings him to the tomb of his beloved, because he is unwilling to believe that all beauty and hope are gone forever. However, he ends up in a place where he can only encounter further despair and distress. The poem draws to a close with a

⁴² Poe, *Ulalume – A Ballad*, p. 104

feeling that all hope is forever lost and that there will never be any joy for the narrator again:

And I cried: "It was surely October
On this very night of last year
That I journeyed –I journeyed down here! –
That I brought a dread burden down here –
On this night of all nights in the year,
Ah, what demon hath tempted me here?"⁴³ (v. 85-90)

What is also very relevant to notice in the relationship between the narrator and his soul, is that he projects his own Psyche as a woman, and not a man, as one would expect. On the one hand, this could be associated with the inner composition of everyone's self, a mixture of what is to be associated with masculinity and what is to be related to femininity. As such, it would then mean that the narrator's feminine side has been torn apart from his male half, and Psyche would thus represent the mind whereas the narrator becomes the body. His soul can only advise him and think about the consequences of his actions, but the narrator is the only one who can make a decision, and his body leads him to the place he most fears, both physically and psychologically. The traditional dichotomy between mind and body (women have historically been associated with the body and men with the mind) is here reversed, meaning Poe might be playing with social standards, which seems unlikely. On the other hand, Psyche could be portrayed as a woman, because she represents the feminine part the narrator has lost when his beloved Ulalume passed. This would therefore involve the narrator's Psyche having a connection to Ulalume's very soul. In this case, it would explain Psyche's attempts to prevent the narrator from following the bright star:

But Psyche, uplifting her finger,
Said: "Sadly this star I mistrust –
Her pallor I strangely mistrust:
Ah, hasten! –ah, let us not linger!

43 Poe, *Ulalume – A Ballad*, p. 104

Ah, fly! –let us fly! –for we must.”
In terror she spoke, letting sink her
Wings until they trailed in the dust –
In agony sobbed, letting sink her
Plumes till they trailed in the dust –
Till they sorrowfully trailed in the dust.⁴⁴ (v. 51-60)

Ulalume would have wanted her beloved to end his wandering, literally and figuratively, and have him stop mourning her death, in order to escape this lasting despair and anguish he has been feeling.

3. The Poetics of Knowledge

Poe's longest poem, “Al Aaraaf” is also extremely important in understanding the poet's ideas and theories on aesthetics. The title refers to the equivalent of limbo in the Koran, that Poe sets on a star discovered by the astronomer Tycho Brahe in 1572, that he also named Al Aaraaf, a place where “sprang the “Idea of Beauty into birth”⁴⁵ (v. 31). This star was peculiar for astronomers for it appeared in the sky one night, but disappeared all of a sudden years after. The poem tells the story of two lovers, Angelo, a “seraph-lover”⁴⁶ (v. 336), and Ianthe, a “maiden-angel”⁴⁷ (v. 336). Towards the beginning, God tells his favorite angel – and the only one who can hear him directly, Nesace, to spread spirituality on Al Aaraaf. So Nesace tells Ligeia, the angel of harmony, to awaken all the sleeping spirits, the lovers are the only ones not to answer the call, too busy with each other to hear the summon:

What guilty spirit, in what shrubbery dim,
Heard not the stirring summons of that hymn?

44 Poe, *Ulalume – A Ballad*, p. 103

45 Poe, *Al Aaraaf*, p. 47

46 *Ibid.*, p. 56

47 *Ibid.*, p. 56

But two: they fell: for Heaven no grace imparts
To those who hear not for their beating hearts.
A maiden-angel and her seraph-lover –
O! Where (and ye may seek the wide skies over)
Was Love, the blind, near sober Duty know?
Unguided Love hath fallen – 'mid “tears of perfect moan.”⁴⁸ (v. 332-339)

Nesace instructs the gathered angels to dedicate their time to the contemplation of beauty, in order to maybe one day access the godly realm of perfect knowledge. This implies that this knowledge can only be reached through art and nature, and not through science, because human knowledge cannot be compared to godly awareness. In this sense, the poem mixes science and poetry, in order to create a world of dream, to reveal Poe's idea of absolute beauty.

Therefore, it appears that for Poe, only those who are willing to give up all earthly material things, and the world's sensual temptations will be able to see absolute beauty. This theory on beauty and absolute knowledge is also linked to the one developed in Plato's “Symposium,” when Socrates narrates a conversation he had with Diotima of Mantinea, his “instructress in the art of love”⁴⁹ in which she taught him about the true essences of Love and Beauty:

He who has been instructed thus far in the things of love, and who has learned to see the beautiful in due order and succession, when he comes toward the end will suddenly perceive a nature of wondrous beauty. [...] Beauty absolute, separate, simple, and everlasting, which without diminution and without increase, or any change, is imparted to the ever-growing and perishing beauties of all other things. He who from these ascending under the influence of true love, begins to perceive that beauty, is not far from the end. And the true order of going, or being led by another, to the things of love, is to begin from the beauties of earth and mount upwards for the sake of that other beauty, using these as steps only, and from one going on to two, and from two to all fair forms, and from fair forms to fair practices, and from fair practices to fair notions, until from fair notions he arrives at the notion of absolute beauty, and at last knows what the essence of beauty is. This [...] is that life above all others which man should live, in the contemplation of

48 Poe, *Al Aaraaf*, p. 55-56

49 Plato, *Symposium*, section 201d

beauty absolute.⁵⁰

Apparently sharing Plato's ideas, Poe uses imagination, and the planet of Al Aaraaf, to convey his message that letting go of all earthly pleasures will allow you to access spirituality, absolute beauty and godly knowledge. He uses the characters of Angelo and Ianthe to show that choosing passion over knowledge will only lead to downfall. This reflects on his own work as a poet, as only poets who leave the material world behind can write true poetry:

Poe might serve as a strong proof of the old belief that all poetry exists already elsewhere and is merely transcribed by an earthly hand from the heavenly original. But the same thought can be put in a different way in terms of a more modern psychology. Poetry, let us say, comes into existence in the subconscious mind and must be brought thence by the conscious effort of the poet.⁵¹

50 Plato, *Symposium*, section 210e to 211c

51 Edward Shanks, *Edgar Allan Poe*, p. 82

CHAPTER II:

THE ROMANTIC

HERITAGE

Originating in Europe towards the end of the eighteenth century, Romanticism soon developed in the United States, but assuming a different form. The historical context extremely different in the Old and the New World, the movement could not have followed the same path, and was therefore characterized by haunted and alienated protagonists. However, when American Romanticism appeared around the 1820s, it did borrow many ideas from its European counterpart, as the love of Nature, the prevalence of dreams, and its praise of childhood.

A. Natural Beauties

1. A Return to Nature

Romanticism developed at first in opposition to the Enlightenment, prevalent at the time. The latter promoted the reform of society, challenging ideas based in tradition and religion, and advised the development of sciences. Authors such as Voltaire or John Locke belonged to the movement and defended their opinions through philosophical works. On the other hand, many rejected this rationality and centered their writings on the importance of nature, faith and the imagination. The Romantics argued that reason and science could not explain everything and that a deeper meaning could be found in life. They emphasized the cult of Nature, and championed the belief that Nature was God's work and that man could not alter it. Edgar Allan Poe was one of the main actors of the Romantic movement in American literature and mostly used his supernatural tales to expose human psychology as more complex than science said it was.

However, Poe's poetry also reveals the poet's Romantic side with references to pure Nature. In his 1829 poem "To the River —," Poe begins by praising the beauty of a stream of water, characterizing it as "fair"⁵² (v. 1) with a "bright, clear flow"⁵³ (v. 1). Poe's description of the landscape, although quite brief, reminds the reader of Romantic pictorial art: "Fair river! In thy bright, clear flow / Of crystal, wandering water"⁵⁴ (v. 1-2). Here, the river seems untouched by man, wild and untamed ["wave"⁵⁵ (v. 7)], which is strongly reminiscent of the Sublime, but the presence of a wanderer around the river would therefore contradict this possibility, pointing towards more of a Pastoral setting. The two forms of landscape painting developed over the course of the eighteenth century and marked a major change in man's relationship to nature. Whereas the Pastoral depicted nature as calm, comfortable and inhabited by lonesome characters, the Sublime showed a wild, untamed, awe-inspiring nature. Regardless, the landscape described here is strongly characterized by the aesthetic ideals of the Romantic era.

In this poem, Poe connects his description of the river to the portrait of a young woman, Alberto's daughter. The descriptions of the water and the girl almost mingle to create a sense of harmony between the two. The beauty of the woman is only seen in the water imagery, and it becomes almost impossible to distinguish one from the other:

In thy bright, clear flow
Of crystal, wandering water,
Thou art an emblem of the glow
Of beauty – the unhidden heart –
The playful mazziness of art

52 Poe, *To the River —*, p. 61

53 *Ibid.*, p. 61

54 *Ibid.*, p. 61

55 *Ibid.*, p. 61

In old Alberto's daughter.⁵⁶ (v. 2-6)

But as the woman and the river become indiscernible from each other, the reader notices that this woman's "worshipper"⁵⁷ (v. 10) is starting to become one with the river. "When within thy wave she looks"⁵⁸ (v. 7), the narrator starts to feel that "in his heart, as in thy stream, / Her image deeply lies"⁵⁹ (v. 11-12). Poe here develops the imagery of the reflection, whether it is intellectual reflection or this woman's reflection in the water and therefore alludes to the myth of Narcissus, the son of a river god and a water nymph who drowned, as he fell in love with his own reflection in the water.

Whoever this poem was written for – if it was indeed written for someone in particular; Poe gives this woman great praise by comparing her to a river, as the Romantics believed there was nothing superior than beauty of Nature.

2. The Power of Creativity

In his "Sonnet – To Science," Poe exposes his views on scientific thinking and how it damages creativity. The narrator of the poem is a poet, probably Poe himself, and he notices in particular how science is dangerous for artists. He focuses on poetry and directly questions Science. He personifies it and asks "her" why she harms the poet:

Science! True daughter of Old Time thou art!
Who alterest all things with thy peering eyes.
Why preyest thou thus upon the poet's heart,

56 Poe, *To the River* —, p. 61

57 *Ibid.*, p. 61

58 *Ibid.*, p. 61

59 *Ibid.*, p. 61

Vulture, whose wings are dull realities?⁶⁰ (v. 1-4)

By calling Science the “daughter of Old Time,” he implies that science was born out of people's mind, is connected to art, and thus grounded to the past. It therefore cannot be totally disregarded:

“Science,” as discursive knowledge at least, is a matter of facts that cannot be wished away nor, in their own realm, denied.⁶¹

To show the importance of past beliefs over a newly-found science, the narrator quotes characters from mythology, whether Roman or Greek, such as Diana, the Roman goddess of the hunt, Hamadryads, Greek creatures that live in trees, and Naiads, the Greek water nymphs:

Hast thou not dragged Diana from her car?
And driven the Hamadryad from the wood
To seek a shelter in some happier star?
Hast thou not torn the Naiad from her flood [...]?⁶² (v. 9-12)

Poe shows how these figures are forced out of the natural environment to prove that science is discrediting his beliefs.

Moreover, through poetry, Poe tries to demonstrate the Classical idea that absolute beauty already exists somewhere but can only be achieved through the crafting of the arts. He worked on the conscious and unconscious mind and believed that art was the creation of the soul and not just of the conscious mind:

If the finished story comes out of the author's deepest feelings, then these feelings have been at work all the time, influencing his choice of plot – from whatever source – as well as the changes he makes in it. When he finally thinks and feels that his story is right, it reflects his deepest feelings, unconscious as well as conscious.⁶³

60 Poe, *Sonnet – To Science*, p. 45

61 Monteiro, *Poe and the New Knowledge*, p. 38

62 Poe, *Sonnet – To Science*, p. 45

63 Rein, *Poe – The Inner Pattern*, p. 2

3. The Influence of Science

In this protest against reason, Poe claims that scientific development is dangerous for society as it destroys all forms of imagination:

How should he love thee? Or how deem thee wise,
Who wouldst not leave him in his wandering
To seek for treasure in the jewelled skies,
Albeit he soared with an undaunted wing?⁶⁴ (v. 5-8)

For him, science is the enemy and it has harmed his imagination with “dull realities” and indirectly advises against the domination of science. Edward Davidson described Poe's intentions:

The sonnet sounds like one more in the long line of Romantic complaints against the destruction “science” has wrought in killing the myths once so meaningful to poets. The protest is, more seriously, against the eighteenth-century world view of an inanimate, mechanistic nature and a presumed animate, thinking man living in it.⁶⁵

In this sense, his poem has a timeless aspect to it, regarding man's common fear that technological progress would destroy humanity, which is still relevant nowadays. But Poe does not surrender and “resists Science's invasion of the private reaches of his imagination.”⁶⁶

Furthermore, to show the superiority of nature, faith and past beliefs, in general, rather than being defeated by science, he uses his art to resist science. First, he makes the format of his “Sonnet – To Science” a traditional English sonnet. It consists of fourteen lines that can be separated into three quatrains and one couplet, where the rhyme scheme is ABAB-CD-CD-EFEF-GG. Poe uses the Shakespearian form, as all lines are iambic pentameters. This

64 Poe, *Sonnet – To Science*, p. 45

65 Davidson, *Poe: A Critical Study*, p. 14

66 Monteiro, *Poe and the New Knowledge*, p. 35

composition of sonnets has existed for centuries, and Poe's use of archaic spellings [“wouldst”⁶⁷, (v. 6) for example] and pronunciations [“realities” (v. 4) here rhymes with “eyes”⁶⁸ (v. 2)] serves to show the beauty of the past and of old forms, as a contrast to scientific progress. Moreover, poetry in itself is a way of defending the beauty of art and of resisting the influence of science:

That stage is marked by the poet's resistance to Science; and rather than being defeated by it, he manages to wrench his account of the conflict into lasting poetry. Poe's sonnet, *I submit*, is an effective, early nineteenth-century example of that kind of resilient, humanistic poetry paralleled in England only on rare occasions [...].⁶⁹

B. Melancholy Dreams

Edgar Allan Poe has written numerous poems about dreams, and how they can merge with reality in confusing ways. In some, dreams are an escape from a reality that is unbearable for the narrator, in others, dreams are responsible for the narrator's despair in life. Finally, some show a narrator too confused to even figure out if he is in a dreaming state or not.

1. An Escape from Reality

Some of Poe's poems deal with narrators who escape life through dreaming as their own lives does not satisfy them, or because events have made their lives too harsh. For example, in “*To —*,” from 1829, an unnamed narrator relates a recurring dream he has,

67 Poe, *Sonnet – To Science*, p. 45

68 *Ibid.*, p. 45

69 Monteiro, *Poe and the New Knowledge*, p. 39

where he finds himself in a beautiful environment, with “singing birds”⁷⁰ (v. 2) and feels happiness. While dreaming, he can see his beloved, but when he wakes up, he remembers that she is dead:

Thine eyes, in Heaven of heart enshrined,
The desolately fall,
O, God! On my funereal mind
Like starlight on a pall.⁷¹ (v. 5-8)

The poem deals with the great distress the narrator is feeling. He cannot feel whole without his loved one and his only way to be reunited with her is to sleep and meet her in a dream. Therefore, the narrator has nothing to look forward to in life and criticizes the dullness of reality:

I wake and sigh,
And sleep to dream till day
Of the truth that gold can never buy—
Of the baubles that it may.⁷² (v. 9-12)

In his 1944 poem “Dream-Land,” Poe deals with a similar idea. The poem is longer than “To —,” so Poe offers the reader a more complete description of the narrator's predicament. The first verses of the poem let the readers know that they are embarking on a journey, from “an ultimate dim Thule”⁷³ (v. 6) to an unknown place. “Thule” refers to the name given, in Ancient literature, to an island at the end of the world, the farthest place one could go to. “Ultimate Thule” was even farther, referring to a place outside the known world. This unknown place the narrator is traveling to is described at length by Poe and seems very frightening and gloomy:

70 Poe, *To —* (1829), p. 60

71 *Ibid.*, p. 60

72 *Ibid.*, p. 60

73 Poe, *Dream-Land*, p. 90

By a route obscure and lonely,
Haunted by ill angels only,
Where an Eidolon, named NIGHT,
On a black throne reigns upright,
I have reached these lands but newly
From an ultimate dim Thule—
From a wild weird clime that lieth, sublime,
Out of SPACE—out of TIME.⁷⁴ (v. 1-8)

Moreover, the landscape described by the narrator is very confusing and unsettling as nothing seems similar to reality:

Bottomless vales and boundless floods,
And chasms, and caves, and Titan woods,
With forms that no man can discover
For the tears that drip all over;
Mountains toppling evermore
Into seas without a shore;
Seas that restlessly aspire,
Surging, unto skies of fire;
Lakes that endlessly outspread
Their lone waters— lone and dead,—
Their still waters— still and chilly
With the snows of the lolling lily.⁷⁵ (v. 9-20)

But as the poem continues and the narrator travels through this “dream-land,” he encounters people, draped in clothing, that he describes three times over, as if insisting on their exterior forms : “Sheeted Memories of the Past,”⁷⁶ (v. 34) “Shrouded forms”⁷⁷ (v. 35) and “white-robed forms”⁷⁸ (v. 37). Finally, he explains that these ghost-like shapes are actually the “forms of friend long given, / in agony, to the Earth – and Heaven”⁷⁹ (v. 37-38). From this point forward in the poem, there is a clear shift, as the feeling of sadness, loneliness and fear that Poe created during the first four stanzas, transforms into a rather happy feeling for the

74 Poe, *Dream-Land*, p. 90

75 *Ibid.*, p. 90

76 *Ibid.*, p. 91

77 *Ibid.*, p. 91

78 *Ibid.*, p. 91

79 *Ibid.*, p. 91

narrator who actually enjoys this frightening world. The reader understands that the traveler in the poem feels greater joy in this dream-land than in reality, and the comforting presence of these long lost friends gives us a hint as to the reason why. The narrator thus unravels why he actually likes this place:

For the heart whose woes are legion
'T is a peaceful, soothing region—
For the spirit that walks in shadow
'T is – oh, 't is an Eldorado!⁸⁰ (v. 39-42)

Although this place is of great comfort for the narrator, he continues by saying that this place cannot unfortunately be fully grasped:

But the traveller, travelling through it,
May not – dare not openly view it;
Never its mysteries are exposed
To the weak human eye unclosed;
So wills its King, who hath forbid
The uplifting of the fringed lid;
And thus the sad Soul that here passes
Beholds it but through darkened glasses.⁸¹ (v. 43-50)

Thanks to the title of the poem, the reader can also get a better understanding of this mysterious world, and the journey that the narrator takes appears to be a dream, with his arrival to a dream-land when he falls asleep and his awakening when he leaves. The poem's message appears to be that, even though life may be harsh, there is a place of happiness and tranquility that can be reached through dreaming.

2. Lost Hope

Contrary to the poems where the narrator escapes life to find serenity in his dreams,

80 Poe, *Dream-Land*, p. 91

81 *Ibid.*, p. 91

some of Poe's poems deal with characters whose dreams are the reason why they endure their miserable lives. In his poem "Dreams" dated 1827, Poe relates the story of a character who wishes that his "young life were a lasting dream"⁸² (v. 1), even if it is a nightmare of "hopeless sorrow"⁸³ (v. 4), because he does not want to continue on living in "cold reality / Of waking life"⁸⁴ (v. 5-6). Yet although he wants his life to be an everlasting dream, he knows that if it were, he would be deprived of hope:

But should it be – that dream eternally
Continuing – as dreams have been to me
In my young boyhood – should it thus be giv'n,
'T were folly still to hope for higher Heav'n.⁸⁵ (v. 9-12)

He continues by explaining that the reason he has been miserable all his life is because, as a child, he experienced true happiness in a dream, and now he cannot hope to ever feel anything similar again:

For I have revell'd, when the sun was bright
I' the summer sky, in dreams of living light
And loveliness, – have left my very heart
In climes of mine imagining, apart
From mine own home, with beings that have been
Of mine own thought – what more could I have seen?⁸⁶ (v. 13-18)

Here lies the idea, recurrent in Poe's work, that if something which brings us absolute pleasure and happiness is experienced in life, whether consciously or not, then nothing is to be hoped for anymore as regards Heaven. Poe pushes his theory to the point that if one has indeed experienced this, he risks being punished by higher powers, as it is the case in *Annabel Lee*, in which the love between the narrator and Annabel is so perfect that the angels are jealous and they punish the lovers by killing Annabel.

82 Poe, *Dreams*, p. 34

83 *Ibid.*, p. 34

84 *Ibid.*, p. 34

85 *Ibid.*, p. 34

86 *Ibid.*, p. 34

The narrator then quickly evokes another dream, which appears darker but cuts himself short and does not give much information about this particular dream, except for a few details about the gloomy atmosphere. He mentions the wind, before stopping the story with three words, “let it pass”⁸⁷ (v. 26), which echo both the wind of the night in his dream but also the general elusiveness of dreams. Poe thus concludes the poem in a very melancholy fashion, writing that his character has been happy, “tho' but in a dream”⁸⁸ (v. 27), and that for this reason, he loves “the theme: / Dreams”⁸⁹ (v. 28-29). But he will never get to hope again. He ends the poem by claiming the dreams' superiority over hope in the final verses:

Dreams! In their vivid coloring of life,
As in that fleeting, shadowy, misty strife
Of semblance with reality which brings
To the delirious eye, more lovely things
Of Paradise and Love – and all our own!
Than young Hope in his sunniest hour hath known.⁹⁰ (v. 29-34)

3. The Merging Forces of Poetry

Poe has assessed the importance of dreams for people in general and for the artist in particular, but in some poems, his characters cannot even tell one from the other, as the boundaries between reality and fantasy are blurred.

In “A Dream Within a Dream,” Poe raises the question of what reality truly is and how one can be certain of what is real and what is not. In the first stanza, the poem tells the story

87 Poe, *Dreams*, p. 34

88 *Ibid.*, p. 35

89 *Ibid.*, p. 35

90 *Ibid.*, p. 35

of a farewell between a man and his beloved. The tone is quite calm and soft, with a feeling of nostalgia. Then the second stanza finds the narrator on a beach, but failing to grasp a handful of sand. In this part of the poem, the more passionate tone is conveyed through exclamation points such as “O God!”⁹¹ (v. 19 and 21) repeated twice, and numerous questions to transcribe the narrator's anguish. Both parts deal with similar themes: the passing of time, the parting from something, and the forgetfulness of the mind. Whether it is in the first or in the second stanza, the narrator has to let go of something – his lover or the sand – and cannot do anything against it. The story shows how time passes by and there is nothing to be done about it. Moreover, as the narrator moves away from these scenes, they start to feel like dreams. Their essence thus becomes unclear to the narrator who first thinks that everything is just “a dream within a dream”⁹² (v. 11). But as we reach the end of the poem, the narrator is not even sure of that anymore and actually wonders: “is *all* that we see or seem / But a dream within a dream?”⁹³ (v. 24).

The fact that the narrator is unable to distinguish reality from dreams anymore evokes the work of Plato in “The Republic.” The philosopher develops his famous parable of the cave, which begins with Socrates telling Glaucon to picture the setting of his story:

See human beings as though they were in an underground cave-like dwelling with its entrance, a long one, open to the light across the whole width of the cave. They are in it from childhood with their legs and necks in bonds so that they are fixed, seeing only in front of them, unable because of the bond to turn their heads all the way around. Their light is from a fire burning far above and behind them. Between the fire and the prisoners there is a road above, along which see a wall. [...] Then also see along this wall human beings carrying all sorts of artifacts, which project above the wall, and statues of men and other animals wrought from stone, wood, and every kind of material; as is to be expected, some of the carriers utter sounds

91 Poe, *A Dream Within a Dream*, p. 39

92 *Ibid.*, p. 39

93 *Ibid.*, p. 39

while others are silent.⁹⁴

Socrates continues by urging Glaucon to imagine that now the prisoners are being freed. Once they discover what people tell them is the “real” form for something they had only seen the shadow of, they reject this idea of *reality*, in favor of what they have always known. In the same manner, the narrator of “A Dream Within a Dream” wonders whether everything he experiences and sees is a dream or not, thus rendering the knowledge of reality impossible and out of his reach.

C. Portraits of Childhood

Additionally to nature and dreams, Romanticism was characterized by the importance of childhood, and the movement's prevailing attitude towards children shaped some of Poe's ideas about love and what its perfect form would look like.

1. The Idealization of Childhood

Romantics saw childhood as the purest and truest time in man's life. Children embodied innocence and represented an idealized model of mankind for the poet. Babies and children were praised for their unaltered vision of the world, their raw emotions, such as joy, and their relationship with nature. They stood opposite to adulthood, corrupted by urban society, and pressured in a harsh world of experience. In his poem “Ode: Intimations of Immortality,” William Wordsworth praised children, calling them “Mighty Prophet, Seer

⁹⁴ Plato, *The Republic*, Book VII, 514a-515a

Blest!"⁹⁵ and developd his mythology of the infant:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness, and not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing Boy,
But he beholds the light, and whence it flows,
He sees it in his joy:
The Youth, who daily farther from the east
Must travel, still in Nature's Priest,
And by the vision splendid
Is on his way attended;
At length the Man perceives it die away,
And fade into light of common day.⁹⁶

Wordsworth's definition of infancy definitely shaped the Romantic movement's ideas on childhood and as Romantics valued this idealized version of children's vision, Poe's writing was influenced by it.

One of Poe's last poems, "Annabel Lee," deals with a narrator grieving the loss of his beautiful lover, as it is often the case in Poe's work, but in this particular case, the writer emphasizes the lovers' youth on several occasions: "I was a child and *she* was a child"⁹⁷ (v. 7), or "Our love it was stronger by far than the love / Of those who were older than we – / Of many far wiser than we"⁹⁸ (v. 27-29). Composed shortly before the poet's death, the poem's Annabel has often been associated with Poe's late wife, Virginia Clemm. This association is first acceptable because of the date the poem was written: composed in 1849, only two years

95 Wordsworth, *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*, p. 703

96 *Ibid.*, p. 702

97 Poe, *Annabel Lee*, p. 116

98 *Ibid.*, p. 116

after Virginia's death in January 1947. Secondly, the poem's emphasis on the lovers' youth is in keeping with Virginia's young age when she married Poe: thirteen years old. Poe was twenty-seven when he married his young cousin in 1836, and although he was not young enough to be called a "child" in his poetry, this youth is not literal but metaphorical and represents more than simply numbers:

Poe uses the word "child" to emphasize the innocence and purity of [the lovers'] bond. Because of this beloved's youth and their untainted love for each other, he is a child in spirit, if not in chronological age.⁹⁹

2. On the Importance of Youth

In "Annabel Lee" the narrator mourns the death of his young beloved and refers to their youth when they fell in love, but looking closely at the poem, the narrator's perspective does not seem to differ much from the time he evokes. He says he "was a child"¹⁰⁰ (v. 7) when he fell in love with her, and that she "was a child"¹⁰¹ (v. 7) as well, but the way the poem is written might actually express that the narrator, even recalling the events from a far future, has remained a child in spirit:

From the subsequent workings of his mind, the narrator's perspective seems to have changed little since that time. He has remained a child, because of inability or unwillingness to change, and this frozen perspective is lent a peculiar strength by the characteristic and simple cadences of the ballad form.¹⁰²

Therefore, Poe tries to recreate a child's vision of this story, in opposition to the understanding of the adult mind. Hence the perception of time, as it "exists for the child as a present in

99 Johnson, *Poetry for Students – volume 9*, p. 22

100 Poe, *Annabel Lee*, p. 116

101 *Ibid.*, p. 116

102 Empric, *A Note on "Annabel Lee,"* p. 26

which, somehow, past and future are simply amalgamated rather than sequential, separate entities.”¹⁰³

Contrary to “Annabel Lee” in which Poe recreates a feeling of innocence and youth, he laments the loss of this very innocence in “A Dream” and in “The Happiest Day, The Happiest Hour.” The latter presents a narrator regretting the past, and lamenting the missed opportunities of his life. He states that he has already seen “the happiest day – the happiest hour”¹⁰⁴ (v. 1) and that he feels “the highest hope of pride and power, [...] hath flown”¹⁰⁵ (v. 3-4). Moreover, it is his youth that he misses and the way one sees the world when young: “The visions of my youth have been – / But let them pass”¹⁰⁶ (v. 7-8). That feeling of lost innocence can also be found in the poem “A Dream” that Poe composed in 1827. This poem shows a depressed narrator, lamenting over the loss of innocence by which he is haunted. To escape this state of depression, the narrator creates a world of dreams in which he is happy and life is beautiful. This poem is one of Poe's most personal ones as it deals with his childhood and his feelings about his family. Abandoned by his father when he was barely one-year-old, his mother died the following year, leaving him, his brother and his sister orphans. He was taken into the home of John Allan, thus separating him from his brother William and his sister Rosalie. His relationship to John Allan was always conflictual and Poe never felt loved in his house. “A Dream” shows how the author was haunted by this long-lost state of innocence and desperately tried to create an imaginary world in which he would be happy, in order to escape reality. The poem shows joy as a dream which is now over, and as the dream ended, all hope

103 Empric, *A Note on “Annabel Lee,”* p. 26

104 Poe, *The Happiest Day, the Happiest Hour,* p. 43

105 *Ibid.*, p. 43

106 *Ibid.*, p. 43

for a chance of future happiness died with it. This poem is important in Poe's life as it allowed the poet to open up about his lost childhood and his desperate attempts to find happiness.

3. Longing for Love

Poe's feelings about his childhood and his family have never been his favorite subject to write about, as only a few of his writings deal with his pain. But other poems let the reader catch a glimpse of Poe's feelings on the matter. The 1848 poem "For Annie" was written to Nancy Richmond, whom he thanks for helping him in his recovery from the severe illness that resulted from his suicide attempt. He also acknowledges his previous "depression" and explains he is now happy to be alive:

Thank Heaven! The crisis,
The danger, is past,
And the lingering illness
Is over at last –
And the fever called "Living"
Is conquered at last.¹⁰⁷ (v. 1-6)

The poem continues with Poe describing all the effects of his illness he managed to overcome and how he feels now, to finally discuss Annie and express his recognition and love for her:

She tenderly kissed me,
She fondly caressed,
And then I fell gently
To sleep on her breast –
Deeply to sleep
From the heaven of her breast.

When the light was extinguished,
She covered me warm,
And she prayed to the angels
To keep me from harm –
To the queen of the angels

107 Poe, *For Annie*, p. 111

To shield me from harm.¹⁰⁸ (v. 73-84)

Annie is shown as a motherly figure, displaying loving and tender gestures toward the patient. The narrator's appreciation of Annie's attitude sheds light on his longing for care and nurturing and reveals how much Poe put of himself into this character. In a 1835 letter, Nathaniel Beverley Tucker mentions Poe's mother and recalls her outstanding beauty, Poe answered:

In speaking of my mother you have touched a string to which my heart fully responds. To have known her is to be the object of great interest in my eyes. I myself never knew her — and never knew the affection of a father. Both died (as you may remember) within a few weeks of each other. I have many occasional dealings with Adversity — but the want of parental affection has been the heaviest of my trials.¹⁰⁹

The poet's life-long desire for a mother is expressed here through the narrator's disease that can be seen as a metaphor for the difficulties of life. The illness the narrator goes through and all its effects, and the way to recovery echo Poe's struggles through life and his late discovery of life's joy.

108 Poe, *For Annie*, p. 113

109 Poe, *Letter to Nathaniel Beverley Tucker*, December 1st, 1835

CHAPTER III:

GOTHIC

HAUNTINGS

The influence of the Romantic movement on society, led to a general nostalgic look back at the Middle Ages. This wistful state of mind triggered the Gothic Revival in architecture in the 1830s, followed by the rise of Gothic art. Gothic literature became really popular as it mixed romances with supernatural and nightmarish aspects. Edgar Allan Poe is considered one of the founding father of the genre in America.

A. Settings and Feelings

Edgar Allan Poe's writings were fundamental in the establishment of the Gothic genre in America, partly thanks to his very detailed settings, particular feelings, and his renowned choice of terms that always convey a peculiar atmosphere.

1. The Symbolism of the Sea

In several of his poems, Poe sets his story on a shore, on an island in the sea, always using the water as a important element of his story. It is the case in “A Dream Within a Dream” in which the narrator sits on the beach reflecting on his life and the passing of time. It is also the case in “The City in the Sea” which tells the story of a city ruled by Death himself and in “Annabel Lee” in which he writes the story of two lovers whose love and joy were so intense that the angels themselves were jealous and took revenge on them by killing the narrator's beloved, Annabel. The recurrent element of all these poems is their setting next to the sea and what it represents in Poe's writing. Indeed, sea is used as a way to convey ideas

and create a specific atmosphere, pictured by Poe. His choice of words is never random and everything is relevant. In these three poems, the sea is used to symbolize darkness, death and decay. "A Dream Within A Dream" uses the sea as a metaphor for time, and as the waves crush onto the shore they slowly cause the shore's disappearance, conveying this idea of the passing of time and the erosion of life that the narrator weeps about:

I stand amid the roar
Of a surf-tormented shore,
And I hold within my hand
Grains of the 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?¹¹⁰ (v. 12-22)

In "Annabel Lee," the sea is connected to the narrator's beloved's death. Poe emphasizes this connection at the end of the poem with the last two verses which are very similar, in which he explains that he often lies next to his beloved's grave, by the sea:

And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side
Of my darling – my darling – my life and my bride,
In the sepulchre there by the sea –
In her tomb by the sounding sea.¹¹¹ (v. 38-41)

The narrator thus reveals his deep emotional connection to the deceased, and explains that he lies by her side because he fears that the sea will separate them again:

Neither the angels in Heaven above,
Nor the demons down under the sea,
Can ever dissever my soul from the soul
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee.¹¹² (v. 30-33)

110 Poe, *A Dream Within a Dream*, p. 39

111 Poe, *Annabel Lee*, p. 117

112 *Ibid.*, p. 117

“The City in the Sea” is the best example among Poe's poetry to show the author's treatment of the sea not simply as a setting but as an important part of the story. In this poem, he creates a kingdom ruled by Death itself where the sun does not shine, but the light comes “from out the lurid sea”¹¹³ (v. 14). Everything seems to be abandoned, and there is simply no life in this “strange city”¹¹⁴ (v. 2), only graves and spirits. Poe uses this imagery of the “hideously serene”¹¹⁵ (v. 41) sea that finally swallows the whole city, as an allegory for the human soul and the fate of mankind. In the poem, the references to wealth are numerous with the “shrines and palaces and towers”¹¹⁶ (v. 6), the “gaily-jewelled dead”¹¹⁷ (v. 34) and the other references to the “riches”¹¹⁸ (v. 32) of the people buried there. These allusions to the past wealth of the city could explain its fall as well. As people worshipped material possessions rather than true values, their sins led to the downfall of the city, described in the last stanza:

But lo, a stir is in the air!
The wave – there is a movement there!
As if the towers had thrust aside,
In slightly sinking, the dull tide –
As if their tops had feebly given
A void within the filmy Heaven.
The waves have now a redder glow –
The hours are breathing faint and low –
And when, amid no earthly moans,
Down, down that town shall settle hence,
Hell, rising from a thousand thrones,
Shall do it reverence.¹¹⁹ (v. 42-53)

This final descent of the city into the sea is compared with a descent into Hell and reminds us of the Biblical tales of Sodom and Gomorrah in which God destroyed four kingdoms to

113 Poe, *The City in the Sea*, p. 69

114 *Ibid.*, p. 69

115 *Ibid.*, p. 70

116 *Ibid.*, p. 69

117 *Ibid.*, p. 70

118 *Ibid.*, p. 70

119 *Ibid.*, p. 70

punish the citizens' sins :

The two [angels] said to Lot : “[...] we are going to destroy this place. The outcry to the Lord against its people is so great that he has sent us to destroy it.”¹²⁰

2. Settings Linked to Feelings

In Poe's poetry, the setting can also work as an influence on a character's feelings and emotions. For example, in his minor poem “Sonnet – To Zante,” Poe starts off by praising the beauty of the island of Zante: “Fair isle, that from the fairest of all flowers / Thy gentlest of all gentle names dost take”¹²¹ (v. 1-2). The island, situated off the coast of Greece in the Ionian sea, takes its name from Zakynthos, who brought the first settlers on the island, as believed in Greek mythology; hence the reference to “hyacinthine”¹²² (v. 13), which was the flower carried by Zakynthos. But regardless of the island's beauty, the narrator cannot fully appreciate the sight of its “charms”¹²³ (v. 10) because of the memories it conjures up. Indeed, the narrator once loved a woman on this very island, and can now only remember the pain and his lost hopes every time he gazes at it:

How many thoughts of what entombed hopes!
At sight of thee and thine at once awake!
How many scenes of what departed bliss!
How many thoughts of what entombed hopes!
How many visions of a maiden that is
No more – no more upon thy verdant slopes!
No more! Alas, that magical sad sound
Transforming all! Thy charms shall please *no more*, –
Thy memory *no more!*¹²⁴ (v. 3-11)

120 *The Bible*, Genesis 19:13

121 Poe, *Sonnet – To Zante*, p. 84

122 *Ibid.*, p. 84

123 *Ibid.*, p. 84

124 *Ibid.*, p. 84

This assortment the narrator is making between the island and his lost love shows how his visions of the island and this particular setting triggers memories of this woman in his mind, preventing him from enjoying the island's beauty and has him loath the scenery against his own impressions of the place.

Poe goes even further in his amalgamation of the setting with the character's feelings in "The Haunted Palace," a poem that first originated in his short story "The Fall of the House of Usher." Similarly to the short story, the poem tells the events that take place in a King's palace, which is threatened by dark forces trying to destroy it. "The Haunted Palace" is written as a metaphor: although Poe is supposedly describing the palace being slowly corrupted by obscure forces, he is actually giving a detailed description of a man (or a woman) slowly becoming insane. He expressed it himself in a letter addressed to Rufus Wilmot Griswold, in which he wrote: "[...] by the Haunted Palace I mean to imply a mind haunted by phantoms — a disordered brain."¹²⁵ The first stanza describes the person's mind before madness ate him up. The "greenest of our valleys"¹²⁶ (v. 1) and the "radiant palace"¹²⁷ (v. 4) serve to show the intelligence and sanity of that person, followed by a description of his hair in the second stanza: "Banners yellow, glorious, golden / On its roof did float and flow"¹²⁸ (v. 9). The man is still happy thanks to "that happy valley"¹²⁹ (v. 17) and anyone who conversed with him heard only "wit and wisdom"¹³⁰ (v. 32) spoken by a beautiful mouth. The

125 Poe, *Letter to R. W. Griswold*, May 29, 1841

126 Poe, *The Haunted Palace*, p. 85

127 *Ibid.*, p. 85

128 *Ibid.*, p. 85

129 *Ibid.*, p. 85

130 *Ibid.*, p. 86

“pearl and ruby glowing”¹³¹ (v. 25) that were the “fair palace door”¹³² (v. 26) are this person's lips and teeth, and the “two luminous windows”¹³³ (v. 18) are his eyes. But the character's decay soon creeps over him as “evil things, in robes of sorrow”¹³⁴ (v. 33) start to prey on his mind, and as later, “vast forms that move fantastically / To a discordant melody”¹³⁵ (v. 43-44) have taken his mind hostage. The former could symbolize the negative thoughts of depression that settle in one's mind, whereas the latter could refer to mental disorders such as schizophrenia or bipolarity, as his thoughts are disorganized and messy. The last verse of the poem leaves the character in a desperate state as insanity has taken complete control over his brain. Due to his mental illness, his emotions are no longer triggered by exterior influences but from within his own mind: He can “laugh – but smile no more”¹³⁶ (v. 48).

3. On Solitude and Loneliness

A specific feeling that Poe developed in his work is loneliness. Through different stories and atmospheres, he wrote about this feeling that he knew too well. For instance, in “Alone,” Poe discusses his childhood and how he never felt like he belonged. He describes his sorrow and his difference throughout the poem:

From childhood's house I have not been
As others were – I have not seen
As others saw – I could not bring
My passions from a common spring –
From the same source I have not taken

131 Poe, *The Haunted Palace*, p. 85

132 *Ibid.*, p. 85

133 *Ibid.*, p. 85

134 *Ibid.*, p. 86

135 *Ibid.*, p. 86

136 *Ibid.*, p. 86

My sorrow – I could not awaken
My heart to joy at the same tone –
And all I lov'd – I lov'd alone.¹³⁷ (v. 1-8)

He does not directly mention any event of his life, but someone aware of Poe's biography can understand “Alone” is one of his most personal poems. His loneliness comes from his father's abandonment when he was only one year old, from his mother dying when he was two, and from his separation from his two siblings. He continues by mentioning his “most stormy life”¹³⁸ (v. 10) during which he had his fair share of tragedies. The poem ends with the mention of the “demon in [his] view”¹³⁹ (v. 22) that always clouds his vision and prevents him from finding happiness.

This feeling of loneliness is also the main theme of his 1827 poem “Spirits of the Dead” in which Poe relates a conversation between a dead speaker and a silent visitor to his grave. This notion of silence is very important throughout the poem, as everything seems to have stopped and is standing still while the speaker is talking to the visitor. The setting of the graveyard serves this purpose as well, given the fact that it is an isolated place, especially at night. Several verses convey this extremely still atmosphere as “be still”¹⁴⁰ (v. 10), or “the breath of God – is still”¹⁴¹ (v. 23) which suits the major theme of the poem: loneliness. The visitor of the dead is “alone”¹⁴² (v. 1) in the cemetery, but the spirit that addresses him tells him not to feel lonely because he is not alone, even though he cannot see it:

Be silent in that solitude
Which is not loneliness – for then

137 Poe, *Alone*, p. 65

138 *Ibid.*, p. 65

139 *Ibid.*, p. 65

140 Poe, *Spirits of the Dead*, p. 36

141 *Ibid.*, p. 37

142 *Ibid.*, p. 36

The spirits of the dead who stood
In life before thee are again
In death around thee – and their will
Shall overshadow thee: be still.¹⁴³ (v. 5-10)

Throughout this poem, it almost seems like Poe is helping himself cope with his life-long feeling of loneliness. He puts it into words and attempts at convincing himself that he is never alone because the spirits of the ones he loved will always surround him. Poe's predisposition to loneliness and grief will stay with him throughout his entire life and career.

B. Women in Death

Poe himself wrote that there were no topic more poetical than the death of a beautiful woman, and most of his works deal with a narrator grieving for the loss of his beloved. Whether these women are dying or already dead in his stories, all are beautiful and Poe mixes the themes of beauty, love and death so cleverly that they slowly become one.

1. The Forms of Separation

Throughout his life, Poe suffered from the loss of numerous women, whether it was his mother, wife, lover or friend. His tales, poems and other works were therefore obviously influenced by his suffering. His poetry focuses widely on the loss of beautiful women and their lover are left alone mourning for their death. Such themes are explored in “Ulalume,” “Lenore,” “Annabel Lee,” “The Raven,” “To One in Paradise” or “The Sleeper,” to quote just

¹⁴³ Poe, *Spirits of the Dead*, p. 36

a few. In the latter, the narrator grieves the death of his beloved Irene whom he wishes could “awake”¹⁴⁴ (v. 15) towards the beginning of the poem, although he slowly comes to term with her being dead, and hopes that she will rest in peace:

The lady sleeps! Oh, may her sleep,
Which is enduring, so be deep!
Heaven have her in its sacred keep!
This chamber changed for one more holy,
This bed for one more melancholy,
I pray to God that she may lie
Forever with unopened eyes,
While the pale sheeted ghosts go by!¹⁴⁵ (v. 37-44)

This poem, that Poe considered one of his greatest “in the true basis of all art,”¹⁴⁶ marks one of the poet's first exploration of the very state of death and its indefinite nature. He wonders what afterlife is made of, and asks his beloved if she has “no fear”¹⁴⁷ (v. 30) and what art she is “dreaming”¹⁴⁸ (v. 31) of in her everlasting sleep.

“To One in Paradise” was first included in Poe's short story “The Assignation” which tells the story of two lovers who make a suicide pact because they cannot be together in this life; hence their hope to be reunited in the afterlife. The narrator laments over his lost love and through this description of a thriving nature, with “fruits and flowers”¹⁴⁹ (v. 5) he has lost all hope for life:

For, alas! Alas! With me,
The light of Life is o'er!
No more – no more – no more –
(Such language holds the solemn sea
To the sands upon the shore)

144 Poe, *The Sleeper*, p. 71

145 *Ibid.*, p. 72

146 Poe, *Letter to George W. Eveleth*, December 15, 1846

147 Poe, *The Sleeper*, p. 71

148 *Ibid.*, p. 71

149 Poe, *To One in Paradise*, p. 78

Shall bloom the thunder-blaster tree,
Or the stricken eagle soar!¹⁵⁰ (v. 14-20)

Even the hope for an afterlife reunited with his beloved does not relieve him of the despair that is life without love. Both poems deal with narrators trying to cope with the death of their beloved ones, but as one is hopeful for the afterlife, the other cannot deal with the atrocity of life without his loved one by his side.

2. Beauty in Death

But for Poe, beyond love, there is beauty. In his poems there is not one woman loved by the narrator who is not beautiful. Poe focuses widely on the visual aspect of female bodies. Most women in his works, and even more so in his poetry, are only used for the purpose of the story, and are reduced to simple instruments, objects. In this sense, the love felt by the narrators for their beloved ones always seems somewhat superficial. Poe claimed that there was no subject more poetical than the death of a beautiful woman, and this idea definitely defines his poetry, as death and beauty are often at the center of his work. In Poe's stories, one can notice that Poe tends to argue that a woman's beauty reaches its climax when dying. This postulate is more obvious in his tales, where he clearly states so. Yet, it also appears thinly veiled in his poetry. For instance, in "Annabel Lee," Poe does not use the word "beautiful" to describe the woman until stanza three, once he has revealed she is dead. Moreover, the beloved woman is only seen through the eyes of the enamored narrator who suggests that death has frozen her perfect beauty at its climax thus making it unalterable. Similarly, in

¹⁵⁰ Poe, *To One in Paradise*, p. 78

“Lenore,” the dead lover is described as the “queenliest dead”¹⁵¹ (v. 6) strongly establishing the woman's incredible beauty in death. Both examples illustrate Poe's theory that a woman's beauty reaches its pinnacle at the moment of her death, as clearly shown in Poe's short story “Ligeia.”

Poe assimilates death and beauty in many of his works, but there is one poem in which he pushes his theory even further. In his 1829 collection of poems “Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane and Minor Poems,” the poem “Preface”¹⁵², composed of eight stanzas, deals with Poe's idea on beauty and death. The fourth stanza reads:

And so, being young and dipt in folly
I feel in love with melancholy,
And used to throw my earthly rest
And quiet all away in jest –
I could not love except where Death
Was mingling his with Beauty's breath –
Or Hymen, Time, and Destiny
Were stalking between her and me.¹⁵³ (v. 17-24)

Poe through this narration goes even further as not only does he state that death encapsulates the essence of a woman's beauty but that he is unable to love if death does not become a part of that beauty.

3. Necrophilia as a Literary Symptom

This mingling of beauty, love and death into one reality for Poe can be seen as a form

151 Poe, *Lenore*, p. 73

152 The poem *Preface* was shortened to only two stanzas for later editions, and was renamed *Introduction* first and then *Romance*.

153 Poe, *Preface*

of necrophilia. The author's obsession with loving dead women raises the question of sexuality between these lovers. In "Annabel Lee," the narrator claims that neither the angels nor the demons "can ever dissever [his] soul from the soul / Of the beautiful Annabel Lee"¹⁵⁴ (v. 32-33), understating that their spiritual connection is so strong that any physical separation would not alter his feelings. But he still does lie with her every night:

All the night-tide, I lie down by the side
Of my darling – my darling – my life and bride,
In the sepulchre there by the sea –
In her tomb by the sounding sea.¹⁵⁵ (v. 38-41)

This unsettling revelation has the reader wonder about how the narrator lives his physical relationship with Annabel.

Furthermore, in "Ulalume – A Ballad," Poe tells the story of a man wandering in the woods, who decides to follow a star, against his psyche's advice, and eventually finds himself in front of the grave of his beloved whom he buried there exactly a year before. The narrator thinks he is following Astarte, a star traditionally associated with sexuality in Greek mythology. Poe's choice of this particular star cannot be viewed as random, and must be linked to the character's unconscious. In this case, the narrator chooses to follow a sexual path that leads him to his deceased lover. Although he wonders "what demon has tempted [him] [t]here"¹⁵⁶ (v. 90) once he has realized the tomb is Ulalume's, his unconscious mind, following a sexual instinct, takes him to that particular place. The question of the true narrator's desire is thus raised.

154 Poe, *Annabel Lee*, p. 117

155 *Ibid.*, p. 117

156 Poe, *Ulalume – A Ballad*, p. 104

This ambiguity has led Gregory Jay to study the question and draw his own conclusions. In his essay "Poe: Writing and the Unconscious," Jay observes that:

The lament for the lost lady increasingly becomes the hysterical confession of her willful entombment, or in the poems, the delightful expression of necrophilia.¹⁵⁷

Jay makes the point that through the narrator's love and lament for his lost lovers, he actually confesses his own desires of reuniting with his deceased loved ones. Although the supposition that some of Poe's characters might have had necrophilic desires, there is nothing in Poe's own life that could attest of this sort of behavior.

C. Death and Afterlife

Death holds a special place in Poe's art, and deals with the question of its finality. He also wonders about what the afterlife looks like, if there is even one, and what becomes of lovers once they are separated by death.

1. The Tragedy of Humanity

In numerous poems, Poe asks the question of the finality of death. In many, the narrator's grief of his beloved's death reveal Poe's ideals about love and death. In some, Poe goes further as to wonder what death means for two people in love, if it marks the end of love as well as the end of life. Poe writes the tragedy that is humanity and opens up about his own vision of mankind. For instance, the poem "Eldorado" tells the story of a man who spent his

¹⁵⁷ Jay, *Poe: Writing and the Unconscious*, p. 97

entire life searching for an Eldorado, a mystical land full of riches. The man has reached old age but still has not found what he sought and when he encounters a “pilgrim shadow”¹⁵⁸ (v. 15), he asks it where that land can be found. As “his strength / failed him at length”¹⁵⁹ (v. 13-14), the Shadow tells him that the knight can find Eldorado in death:

“Over the Mountains,
Of the Moon,
Down the Valley of the Shadow,
Ride, boldly ride,”
The shade replied, –
“If you seek for Eldorado!”¹⁶⁰ (v. 19-24)

Therefore, here Poe seems to be stating that the only goal of life is death and that in death lies a man's aspirations. The knight of “Eldorado” can only find what he has been looking for his whole life, in death, and thus his quest is completed in the afterlife. Poe asks the question of the finality of death: is death the end of everything, or is it just the door to a different kind of journey?

In his poem “The Bells,” Poe apparently discusses the sounds that bells make and uses this poem to assert his talent in writing poems full of musicality. But digging deeper, it appears that each stanza actually stands for a particular stage in life. The first one uses the “Silver bells”¹⁶¹ (v. 2) to describe the “merriment”¹⁶² (v. 3) of youth and the “Golden bells”¹⁶³ (v. 16) of the second stanza evoke a “world of happiness”¹⁶⁴ (v. 17) in marital life. The third stanza destroys the light and happy feeling of the first part of the poem and darkens the mood.

158 Poe, *Eldorado*, p. 110
159 *Ibid.*, p. 110
160 *Ibid.*, p. 110
161 Poe, *The Bells*, p. 118
162 *Ibid.*, p. 118
163 *Ibid.*, p. 118
164 *Ibid.*, p. 118

The “Brazen bells”¹⁶⁵ (v. 37) create a horrific atmosphere, corresponding to old age, and finally the “Iron bells”¹⁶⁶ (v. 71) of the last stanza announce death. This poem deals with the very existence of man and how life always leads to the darkness of death. Here Poe offers no hope in death, as the Ghouls “feel a glory”¹⁶⁷ (v. 84) in ringing the bells at the end.

Similarly, in his poem “The Conqueror Worm,” that Poe later included in his short story “Ligeia,” the author discusses the “tragedy”¹⁶⁸ (v. 39) that is mankind. The poem is structured as a play, in five stanzas, each corresponding to a different act, starting with the exposition, and ending with the resolution. Through this poem, Poe exposes his views on the tragic history of humanity, of which the hero is not man but Death, symbolized by the worm of the title:

Out – out are the lights – out all!
And, over each quivering form,
The curtain, a funeral pall,
Comes down with the rush of a storm,
While the angels, all pallid and wan,
Uprising, unveiling, affirm
That the play is the tragedy, “Man,”
And its hero, the Conqueror Worm.¹⁶⁹ (v. 33-40)

2. Faithfulness to the Dead

In many of his works, Poe deals with the grieving process of a narrator mourning the loss of his beloved. He uses his poetry to discuss his characters' feelings once their loved ones

165 Poe, *The Bells*, p. 119

166 *Ibid.*, p. 120

167 *Ibid.*, p. 120

168 Poe, *The Conqueror Worm*, p. 89

169 *Ibid.*, p. 89

have passed away. Poems such as “Ulalume,” “Annabel Lee” or “Lenore” deal with such questions and show how love stays alive through death for the narrators. “The Raven,” undoubtedly Poe's most famous poem, also looks at the effects of a woman's death on the mind and mood of a lover left behind. Through the intervention of the raven, the narrator realizes many things about his love for his deceased beloved Lenore, and although he will never see her again, he still loves her. The first word he utters when he hears a noise outside is “Lenore?”¹⁷⁰ (v. 28), revealing his hope that she would return to the land of the living, although he has already acknowledged his “sorrow for the lost Lenore”¹⁷¹ (v. 10). His own imprisonment in his house, where he studies books to take his mind off the memory of Lenore, shows his deep devotion to the one he loved and raises the question of one's commitment to promises made to late lovers.

Poe analyses this question further in his 1837 “Bridal Ballad.” This poem tells the story from a woman's point of view, which is very rare in Poe's fiction. It might even be the only occurrence. Here, the author tells the story of a woman getting married but who thinks of her past lover. Her mind is not focused on her wedding and on her new husband, but wanders off to the thought of her previous late lover, to whom she had sworn eternal faithfulness. The poem recreates the bride's thought process, thanks to the refrain used at the end of each stanza, using the words “happy now”¹⁷² (v. 5, 12, 19, 27 and 33). The evolution of this refrain shows the evolution of the bride's emotions as it begins with her being convinced of her happiness, then slowly starts to question her real feelings, and ends with the affirmation that

170 Poe, *The Raven*, p. 93

171 *Ibid.*, p. 92

172 Poe, *Bridal Ballad*, p. 82

her dead lover must “not be happy now”¹⁷³ (v. 33). She only tries to convince herself in order to commit to her new husband, but the irony in Poe's choice of words is obvious and the reader can see that she does not believe it herself. This poem deals directly with the question of fidelity to the deceased, while other works raise the question but do not deal with it upfront. The bride cannot help but feel dishonest as she breaks the promise of eternal loyalty she made to her late husband and her betrayal prevents her to be fully committed in her new marriage:

And my lord he loves me well;
But, when first he breathed his vow,
I felt my bosom swell –
For the words rang as a knell,
And the voice seemed *his* who fell
In the battle down the dell,
And who is happy now.

3. Heaven and Hell: On the Afterlife

The question of the afterlife and the characters' dedication to their deceased lovers is central in Poe's fiction, but his vision differs depending on the poem. The main examples of Poe's dual vision of the afterlife appear in his 1840s poem “Lenore” and “The Raven.” The former tells the story of Guy de Vere mourning the death of his beloved Lenore. The poem assumes the form of a dialogue between the grieving lover and a family member of the deceased. As Guy de Vere argues that Lenore's death is her family's fault, he feels joy from knowing that she is happier now in Heaven. The last stanza of the poem is full of Hope as Lenore's lover plans on celebrating a death that freed her from all the earthly atrocities and the malice of her family:

¹⁷³ Poe, *Bridal Ballad*, p. 83

“Avaunt! – avaunt! To friends from fiends the indignant ghost is riven –
From Hell unto a high estate within the utmost Heaven –
From moan and groan to a golden throne beside the king of Heaven: –
Let *no* bell toll, then, lest her soul, amid its hallowed mirth,
Should catch the note as it doth float up from the damned Earth!
And I – tonight my heart is light: – no dirge will I upraise,
But waft the angel on her flight with a Paean of old days!”¹⁷⁴ (v. 20-26)

Guy de Vere's gaiety for her beloved's ascent into Heaven, and the fact that he does not weep at her funeral, reveal his own hopes of meeting his dear Lenore again in the afterlife. Poe creates a very optimistic feeling regarding his character's shared afterlife.

Poe exposes a completely different vision of the afterlife in “The Raven,” in which the first name 'Lenore' also refers to the narrator's deceased loved one. In Poe's most famous poem, the narrator, a student on the brink of despair, mourns the death of his beloved when a raven enters his room and sits “upon a bust of Pallas”¹⁷⁵ (v. 41). The conversation between the two revolves around Lenore and the afterlife but takes on a much darker tone than “Lenore,” as the narrator's hopes of ever seeing his beloved again are crushed by the seemingly all-knowing bird:

“Prophet!” said I, “thing of evil! – prophet still, if bird or devil! –
Whether Tempter sent, or whether tempest tossed thee here ashore,
Desolate yet all undaunted, on this desert land enchanted –
On this home by Horror haunted – tell me truly, I implore –
Is there – is there balm in Gilead? – tell me – tell me – I implore!”
Quoth the Raven, “Nevermore.”

“Prophet!” Said I, “thing of evil! – prophet still, if bird or devil!
By that Heaven that bends above us – by that God we both adore –
Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn,
It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore –
Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore.”
Quote the Raven, “Nevermore.”¹⁷⁶ (v. 86-97)

174 Poe, *Lenore*, p. 74

175 Poe, *The Raven*, p. 94

176 *Ibid.*, p. 97

The narrator is actually imploring the raven for answers: will he ever find salvation? Does Lenore still exist in Heaven? Will she wait for him? Will they ever be reunited? The Raven's answers confirm the narrator's fears that there is no afterlife and that he will never see his beloved again. The mention of Gilead¹⁷⁷ (v. 90) refers to the Bible in which the balm of Gilead was a healing ointment, implying that the narrator's only cure to depression is to be reunited with Lenore in Heaven. It is mentioned in Jeremiah:

Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wounds of [God's] people?¹⁷⁸

The narrator's hopes to find salvation and ever see his beloved again are destroyed by the Raven whose answers he trusts, although he knows the Raven is typically representative of ill omens. In an essay, Byrd Howell Granger goes even further, stating that it is *because* he trusts the Raven's words that the narrator will never see Lenore again:

For it is the folkloric connotation of the raven as the Devil's bird and as one of the forms he takes upon occasion for convenience which makes clear exactly why the young man will never again see his lost Lenore. It's not simply that she is dead. It is that he has damned himself.¹⁷⁹

For Granger, the narrator curses himself by trusting the devil's word, and Poe thus creates a clearly pessimistic vision of the afterlife and deprives his character of all hope.

177 Poe, *The Raven*, p. 97

178 *The Holy Bible*, Jeremiah 8:22

179 Granger, *Devil Lore in 'The Raven,'* p. 53

Conclusion

In this dissertation, we have studied Edgar Allan Poe's favorite form of writing and his true passion: poetry. Through this form of art, Poe established more than simply a posthumous success, but asserted his talents as a poet and had the chance to explore many subjects that personally inspired and touched him. We have seen, throughout this research, that Poe drew his inspiration from various influences, such as religion, mythology or even from his fellow writers, but his greatest inspiration was always the women in his life. Many of his poems are dedicated to the women he loved and they assume the form of eulogies, thanks to Poe's elaborate choice of words. Gathering references from his knowledge in mythology and religion, Poe crafted various odes to these women who mattered to him and to their beauty. Using the main ideals of the Romantics, he diverged from these ideas, and focused on such Gothic themes as death, loss and depression, becoming one of the most respected author of the "Dark Romantic" genre.

Through Romantic themes such as nature, dreams and childhood and Gothic themes, among which death, disease and afterlife, Poe creates a wide universe for his poetry and manages to deal with his main topic: the loss of a woman. Obviously influenced by his tragic personal life with the death of most of the women he ever cared about, Poe's poems revolve around the issue of coping with the loss of a loved one, and focus mainly on male narrators dealing with the death of their lover. Poe depicts beautiful women, praising their figures, but omits to acknowledge their personalities and moral features, transforming these women into

bodies and objects. Therefore, it appears that what Poe really tries to deal with in his poetry is the very feeling of loss and the loneliness that accompanies it. He writes mournful characters to try to deal with his own grief. Poe's entire career thus seems to revolve around the issue of the loss of the ideal woman and Poe's writing is his therapy. The author tries to cure his sorrow and to conquer the “fever called 'Living’”¹⁸⁰ by discussing his wounds, using the best subject he could have imagined:

The death [...] of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetic topic in the world – and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover.”¹⁸¹

180 Poe, *For Annie*, p. 111

181 Poe, *The Philosophy of Composition*, p. 3

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Summary

Edgar Allan Poe used a lot of different forms to express himself, but according to him, poetry was always his true passion, making his poems very interesting to study as they reveal more of his true feelings and character than any of his other writings. In this dissertation, his poetry is studied through the prism of women, and Poe's macabre interest in beauty and love mingling with death is at the center of the essay. Poe's entire poetic repertoire revolves around the question of the loss of the ideal woman, therefore, his Romantic influences as well as his Gothic legacy are gazed at, focusing on the issue of Poe's own way of dealing with the death of his loved ones.

Keywords

Edgar Allan Poe, Women, Death, Gothic, Romantic.

Résumé

Edgar Allan Poe s'est exprimé de différentes façon, mais selon ses propres dires, la poésie a toujours été sa véritable passion. Ses poèmes sont donc un sujet d'étude très intéressant, puisqu'ils révèlent beaucoup plus sur sa personnalité et ses sentiments profonds que ses autres écrits. Dans ce mémoire, sa poésie est étudiée à travers le prisme de la femme, et l'obsession macabre de Poe avec la beauté et l'amour se confondant avec la mort est au centre de cette analyse. Le répertoire poétique de Poe se concentre sur la question de la perte de la femme idéale ; en conséquence, des influences Romantique et son héritage Gothique sont étudiés, toujours en rapport avec la manière dont Poe gère la mort des êtres qui lui sont chers.

Mots-clés

Edgar Allan Poe, Femme, Mort, Gothique, Romantique.



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