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Eng 368: American Poetry to 1900

The Raven vs. Annabel Lee

Edgar Allan Poe is known for the darkness in his writings. His poems *The Raven* and *Annabel Lee* continue this tradition. There are a multitude of similarities and differences between the two poems. Similarities include mythological references, strong symbolism and repetition; these identify parallels between the narrators and alter the settings of both to outside the realm of reason. The differences between the poems serve to depict the dissimilarities between the narrators; the first difference is in the tone of the poems, next is each poem's specificity, and finally the effects of the women's deaths on the narrators. The similarities and differences act together to create two very different yet hauntingly familiar poems when read in succession.

In both poems there are mythological references. These references focus mainly on religious concepts of souls, angels and demons. These references add an otherworldly sense to both poems by displacing the settings outside the realm of reason into a more mystical location. The setting in *Annabel Lee* is extremely general, repeated only as a "kingdom by the sea." This generality allows the poem's audience to place the setting just about anywhere they please. Even with *The Raven*, though the setting is more concrete the reference to "a midnight dreary" and the "ghost[s]" created by the fire's dying embers create an alternate reality. The "midnight dreary" line indicates a time in the space between two days. This space sets the narrator up to be between two worlds, before the loss of Lenore, and the time when he will have accepted and recovered from her loss.

Both of the poems make references to souls. In *Annabel Lee* the narrator indicates that his and her soul were linked and could not be torn asunder. In *The Raven* the narrator's soul burns with fear during the beginning of his interaction with the raven, and yearns to be reunited with Lenore throughout the rest of his encounter. These references to the soul indicate that both of the narrators must believe in some kind of afterlife. Otherwise they would be unable to reunite with their lovers whether their souls were connected or not. This belief in the afterlife is further supported in the references of angels and demons in both poems.

The references to angels, or seraphim, and demons not only continue to support aforementioned beliefs in the afterlife but also in the balance of good and evil, yet in the poems, malicious evil triumphs over good. The seraphim in *Annabel Lee* are described as jealous and covetous. They crave the love shared between the two mortals within the poem. However, religiously, seraphim are typically depicted as entities that are solely devoted to the worship and service of God and would not have a covetous inclination towards two young lovers. This is significant because it depicts not only the narrator's outward blame for the death of Annabel Lee, but it also alters the worldview of the audience.

The narrator consistently blames outside forces for Annabel's death, first the seraphim, then her kinsman; finally he begins to blame even the weather and the sea. These assignments of blame demonstrate to the audience how lost and confused the narrator is without Annabel. He cannot accept her death and is instead placing blame on anything and everything. Also, this alteration of the intentions of seraphim changes what the audience has to accept about the world within the poem. Rather than the widely recognized and accepted ideal that seraphim, or angels, are of good and typically wanted to be involved in one's life,

the narrator is turning them into evil beings. This forces the audience to accept that, in this poem, things they thought were good are now bad. This alteration of thought adds to the otherworldly sensations of the poem. The seraphim in *The Raven* act differently from those in *Annabel Lee* yet still alter the realm of the poem. They act as passing spirits seemingly filling the room with the smells of incense from a censer, the vessel used for the burning of incense, the most common is a covered box with holes in it that is swung back and forth on a chain in holy locations such as cathedrals. The narrator's recognition of change in the atmosphere of the room is indicative of transportation to another place. Rather than sitting in a study in his house, the narrator is now transferred to a holier place, usually associated with refuge, forgiveness and healing. However, the narrator continues to be denied in comfort from the pain of Lenore's death. This lack of comfort once again alters how the audience views a common image. Rather than being consoled and strengthened by the religious imagery, the narrator is removed from his comfort zone and cast into an unfamiliar area where he must still suffer greatly with the pain of his lost lover.

Both poems make some sort of reference to demons or a demonic force. In *Annabel Lee* the demons are described as being within the ocean. This creates a sense of darkness in the water, and since it surrounds not only the narrator's supposed home in the poem but also Annabel's tomb, it is indicative that the narrator feels as though he is surrounded by the evil of the spirit world. This swirling pool of evil removes the narrator from the realm of reality. In *The Raven* the bird is treated as a demon sent to torment the narrator, he even asks the bird his name while referencing a Plutonian shore. Here "Plutonian" is a mythological reference to Hades, indicating that the narrator sees the raven as a messenger sent from Hell. Since the bird is a demonic presence its perch upon the Pallas bust above the narrator's door is also

significant. Pallas is the goddess of wisdom in Greek mythology. Since the raven is supposedly a dark messenger its seat upon the goddess of wisdom foreshadows that it will be bringing a dark knowledge set to the narrator, which it does by indicating that he will receive not reprieve from his pain over the loss of his lover. Further still, because the raven will not leave his perch on the bust, it is indicative of two things. First, that the dark knowledge it brought with it hangs over the narrator, and secondly that the narrator is literally being stalked by his demons after Lenore's death.

Both poems have strong ties and references to the religious and mythological. Through these references of souls, angels, and demons Poe allows these references to enable the narrators to extricate their events from a normal viewpoint of the world. They are then allowed to manipulate the meanings behind the references and differentiate them to represent the devastation and confusion caused by the loss of their loves. Poe also enables the setting to be displaced from the realm of normalcy. Thus casting the narrators into myth and legend, this disorients the audience slightly, heightening the audience's connection to the narrators by superficially creating a misdirection and differentiation.

Both *The Raven* and *Annabel Lee* are awash in strong symbolism. This symbolism serves to indicate the moods and fears of the narrators and what is going on with them consciously and unconsciously. The symbols serve to set the mood for the poems and indicate the expected response of the audience.

Obviously, in *The Raven* the most dominant symbol is the raven. Historically the raven has come to symbolize many things. In Native American tribes it was considered a bringer of knowledge and light. In Norse mythology it was the bird associated with Odin who was supposed to be accompanied by two ravens, both representing different aspects of

thought and wisdom. It has been seen as an oracle, and its birdcall is said to be it repeating the Latin word, *cras*, *cras* again and again. *Cras* translates to *tomorrow*, which is another indication of the ravens so called prophetic tendencies. However, the tone of Poe's *The Raven* indicated that the narrator is focusing on the more negative aspects of the raven symbol. Since the raven is a carrion bird, it is oftentimes associated with the ghastly images of feeding off the dead bodies of soldiers on a battlefield; for this reason, ravens are seen as harbingers of death and war. There is also an old wives tale indicating that the tapping of a raven on a window means that death is upon that house. *The Raven* supports this tale, rather than tapping on the door the raven raps on the window to get inside; obviously there was death upon that house because of the death of Lenore. The raven is also sometimes associated with the dark side of the human psyche. Since the raven is the only symbol of human psyche in the poem, it could be indicative that the narrator is overrun by the darkness triggered in his mind by Lenore's death. The sea in *Annabel Lee* also symbolizes the overhanging death that is symbolized by the raven.

Typically the sea or the ocean is a symbol of peace and tranquility, however, with association of demons, this sea becomes a place of turmoil and darkness. Within the poem the demons are described as being within the sea. This creates a swirling pool of evil very close to the narrator, removing him further from any realm of reality. Since the sea surrounds the narrator's supposed home (the kingdom) and the sepulcher in which Annabel is entombed it is indicative that both the narrator and Annabel are shrouded in the evil connotations of the demons and the sea. The sea is transformed into a menacing, formidable foe surrounding the narrator. The kingdom by this dark sea can be imagined as having cold stonewalls to resist the erosion and degradation caused by the salt water and cold wind. These combined images

create a sense of isolation, loneliness, powerlessness and desolation of the narrator. This powerlessness is further contributed to by the sheer magnitude and power typically associated with the sea or ocean. An ocean dwarfs man by its sheer size, making him seem weak and insignificant. The narrator, because of his inability to be with or recover his lost love in Annabel, embodies these emotions. The sea could also be a narrative about his unrequited love for Annabel. It is not specifically stated within the poem that she shared his depth of romantic emotion. Rather, the poem seems to indicate that she loved him in childhood as children do, an innocent, nonromantic love.

The imagery in both poems indicated the emotional turmoil of both of the narrators. The raven and the seaside scene show the depression, desperation, insignificance and weakness of both narrators. This weakness is further elaborated upon by the repetition in the poems.

The repetition of phrases, sounds and the women's names demonstrate that both narrators are stuck in their mourning. They are stuck in a repetitive cycle of devotion and devastation because of their lover's deaths. The main repeated phrases, though there are a lot of them, are "kingdom by the sea," in *Annabel Lee* and "nevermore," in *The Raven*. The repeating phrase "kingdom by the sea" is indicative of the narrator's loneliness. It brings to mind the image discussed earlier of the stone castle standing cold and hard against the harsh elements of an ocean front location. Its repetition alludes to the narrator's sentiment of being frozen against his harsh circumstances of lost love. The repetition of the phrase "nevermore" in *The Raven* also indicated the emotions of the narrator. Nevermore basically means never again or that something will not happen at any future time. With each request for peace from the narrator he is met with the raven's response of "nevermore," this demonstrates that the

narrator feels as though he will never escape his pain of losing Lenore, that he will be trapped with her death hanging over his head like a shadow, forever condemned to endure his heart wrenching pain and loss. The repetition of both these phrases allows for the unspoken hopelessness of the narrators to become apparent.

The repetition of sounds and rhymes is another way in which Poe signifies the entrapment of the narrators. Both the poems contain repeated "L" sounds. Poe uses this device frequently when he writes about beautiful women dying early in their lifetimes. The services provided by the "L" sounds are two-fold they are both lulling and melancholy. Both poems are with rhythm, though different from each other, both become a sort of chant when read. Coupling the chant with the melancholy sound and both poems become almost a desperate pray requesting the return of both the narrators' lost loves. In *Annabel Lee* Poe repeatedly rhymes *Annabel Lee, sea, and me*. This continues to add to the enchanting trance that the chant-like poems create. The women's names become the focal point of the poems also.

By repeating the women's names again and again the narrators seem to begin to pray to the women themselves to return to them. There are many instances in literary history and mythology where the calling of one's name was an extremely significant event, the wielder of one's name in turn wielded power over the named. Also, by repeating their names, the narrators place the women upon pedestals. This repetition, almost worshiping, begins to make the women seem almost godlike, and in turn untouchable. Which only adds to the idea that the narrators will be unable to move past their loss because they are trapped by the shadow beneath the pedestals that they created for the women.

There is so much repetition in both of these poems. The repetition of phrases, sounds and the women's names demonstrates the narrators' inability to move past their phases of mourning. Rather they have entrapped themselves in a cycle of endless, worship-like devotion to the remembrance of their women.

The similarities between these two poems all serve to create an otherworldly atmosphere or indicate the emotions of the narrators. However, the differences between the poems provide even more insights into the narrators' emotional states and the senses associated with the poems individually. Poe provides the poems with different tones, varying levels of specificity and the effects on the narrators caused by the deaths of the women.

The tone of *The Raven* is fierce. It is packed with rage and desperation. Each time the raven croaks "nevermore" the narrator responds with ever growing anger and denial. The tone of *The Raven* identifies the narrator's raw heartache caused by the loss of the woman he loves. The high emotional responses aid the audience in connecting with the narrator on a primal level. *The Raven* is about the rage and unfairness of loosing a lover too soon. *Annabel Lee* is about romanticizing memories after the loss of a loved one. *Annabel Lee* does not contain the raw emotion that *The Raven* does. Rather it romanticizes Annabel's death and life. Because of this lack of raw emotion it is questionable as to whether Annabel and the narrator where actual lovers or if the romance was just a fabrication by the narrator. The tone of *Annabel Lee* is more nostalgic and sentimental than the exposed emotional devastation of *The Raven*. The difference in emotional expression within the poems creates their tone, and this tone serves to enlighten the audience to the possibly true relationships between the women and the narrators. The poems also vary by their level of specificity, further adding to the mystery of actual romantic devotion between the characters.

The specificity of the poems determines how involved and connected the audience will become with the narrator and the poem itself. *The Raven* is stark in its imagery and incredibly specific. Its severity of description throws the audience into the den of the narrator, it creates a fly-on-the-wall scenario; this coupled with the raw emotional scenes drags the audience ever deeper into the emotional pit created by Poe. The narrator is very blunt about the death of Lenore, a pattern not followed by the narrator in *Annabel Lee*. The narrator there only bluntly states that she is dead once. Each mention of her loss before and after that reference (other than the sepulcher of course) she could have simply left him and he is pining for her. The lack of specifics in *Annabel Lee* however, adds to the nostalgic feeling of the poem. It allows the audience to place themselves within the narrator's shoes, possibly by recalling their own loss of a loved one. This is very different from the fly-on-the-wall scenario created in *The Raven* because the audience becomes a participant rather than an observer.

The final difference between the poems is the effect of the women's deaths on the narrators. The effects cause some of the same revelations as the differences in tones do. In *The Raven* the narrator is devastated by the loss of Lenore, and seems as though he will never be able to move past the dark cloud brought about by her death. He is left raw and naked by her loss and wishes he could die with her so that their souls could meet again, to which the raven of course replies negatively. However, in *Annabel Lee* the narrator does not seem as devastated as does the narrator in *The Raven*. Rather, he romanticizes her death. He does not experience the hopelessness of *The Raven's* narrator; he takes solace in his love for Annabel. Yet he too wishes to lie down beside her in her burial tomb. However, here he does not quite

indicate that he wishes to die with her only that he wishes to lay beside her again, another romanticized daydream of their love and devotion.

Both *The Raven* and *Annabel Lee* by Edgar Allan Poe are intent on the darkness and devastation of the loss of a love one. They are similar in that they both contain various references to mythological and religious aspects, strong symbolism and various forms of repetition. However, they also differ in tone, specificity and the effect of the women's deaths on the narrators. These two poems are incredibly similar and yet so different at the same time, and both are haunting and heart wrenching.

Resources

Hollander, John. "Edgar Allan Poe: The Raven" *American Poetry the Nineteenth Century*.

New York: Library of America, 1996. 239-44. Print.

Hollander, John. "Edgar Allan Poe: Annabel Lee" *American Poetry the Nineteenth Century*.

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