

Overview of "Annabel Lee"

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"Annabel Lee" was the last of Edgar Allan Poe's poems to be published, appearing October 9, 1849, in the *New York Tribune*, two days after the author's death. Since the poem first appeared in print--and continuing to the present day--there have been competing claims as to the source of Poe's inspiration for this work. His wife Virginia had died in 1847 after suffering a prolonged illness, and many readers have believed that the poem was written in her memory. Frances ("Fanny") Osgood, a poet and a friend of both Poe and his wife, stated unequivocally that the poem was written to celebrate his love for Virginia (A. H. Quinn, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography*). Fanny, with whom Poe carried on a long and intimate (though largely literary) correspondence is herself thought by some to be a candidate for the muse of "Annabel Lee." In addition, there are two other women who might have inspired Poe in the writing of this poem: Nancy ("Annie") Richmond and the poet Sarah Helen Whitman, both of whom Poe met and fostered relationships with in 1848. According to the literary critic J. Gerald Kennedy, Poe "seems to have regarded [Annie Richmond] as a virtual reincarnation of the dead Virginia Poe" (*Poe, Death, and the Life of Writing*), and Kennedy has no doubt that it is with Richmond in mind that Poe writes. Other readers have imagined that a more likely muse was Sarah Whitman, to whom Poe was briefly engaged in late 1848.

Of all the possibilities, the case for Virginia seems strongest, if only because the narrator of "Annabel Lee" emphasizes that "*She was a child and I was a child.*" When Poe married Virginia, she was indeed a child: his wife was just 13 years old at the time of their wedding, while Poe was a less youthful 27. Of course, in composing the poem Poe chooses his words in large part for their figurative value. The quality of their youth--especially the speaker's--seems more metaphorical than literal: Poe uses the word "child" to emphasize the innocence and purity of their bond. Because of his beloved's youth and their untainted love for each other, he is a child in spirit, if not in chronological age.

Given the importance of figurative meaning, we cannot depend solely upon literal interpretations of poetry, nor read them as simple statements of autobiographical fact. Thus perhaps we need not choose from among the several candidates for a specific source of inspiration for "Annabel Lee," or even enter this debate at all. Poe indirectly offers some insight into his purpose for the poem in the essay "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846). In it, Poe dissects his earlier work "The Raven" (1845),

reconstructing the deliberate process by which he chose the style, form, tone, and subject of his most famous poem. It is not clear whether Poe intends for us to take seriously every detail of his sometimes outrageous "philosophy." Nevertheless, he is sincere on at least one point: that "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" (*Edgar Allan Poe: Poetry, Tales, and Selected Essays*).

Poe developed this theory of the "most poetic topic in the world" several years before he composed "Annabel Lee," which suggests that the general theme was a greater influence on its composition than was a particular person. He used the death of a beautiful woman as his topic not only in "Annabel Lee" and "The Raven" but in many of his other poems, most notably "Lenore" (1831) and "Ulalume" (1847). Poe also visited this grim subject several times in his fiction, and the narrator mourns the loss of his fair beloved in the tales "Ligeia" (1838) and "Eleonora" (1841).

Not only is the theme of "Annabel Lee" one that is common to multiple works by Poe, but several of its phrases echo earlier compositions. For instance, many critics have noted the similarities between "Annabel Lee" and Poe's first published poem, "Tamerlane" (1827). In "Tamerlane" the love of which the poet speaks "was such as angel minds above might envy," while in "Annabel Lee" "The angels, not half so happy in Heaven, / Went envying her and me." "Thus," comments Poe's biographer, Arthur Hobson Quinn, "in his first and in his last poem he thought in terms of a spiritual passion that transcended human limits" (*Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography*). This is an idealized view of love Poe held throughout his life, from the time before he met Virginia to the time after her death. And it is largely his interest in examining a "spiritual passion that transcended human limits" which inspired Poe to write this poem.

Though Poe argues in "The Philosophy of Composition" that the death of a beautiful woman is the most poetic topic, he makes a slightly different claim in the article "The Poetic Principle." The essay is based on the text of a lecture frequently presented by Poe during 1848 and 1849, and it overlaps with "Annabel Lee" both in the time period in which it was written and in subject matter. In "The Poetic Principle," Poe declares that though beauty is the goal of poetry, its proper topic is love: "Love ... love--the true, the divine Eros--the Uranian, as distinguished from the Dionaeon Venus--is unquestionably the purest and truest of all poetic themes" (*Edgar Allan Poe: Poetry, Tales, and Selected Essays*). "Uranian Venus" refers to love that is spiritual, pure, and eternal. It is a rare love that transcends the physical world, as opposed to a "Dionaeon," or earthly, common, and finite, type of love.

In "Annabel Lee," the poet celebrates this true Uranian love: "we loved with a love that was more than love." Poe repeats the word "love" three times, as if to demonstrate the inadequacy of that human word for a condition that is divine. Even though Annabel and

her lover were young, the speaker contends that their feelings surpassed those of all others: "our love it was stronger by far than the love / Of those who were older than we-- / Of many far wiser than we...." The poet argues that wisdom and age do not determine one's power to love deeply and honestly, and he then goes on to proclaim that "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."

Even though the speaker claims to possess an everlasting love that transcends all physical boundaries, he feels compelled to visit Annabel's grave again and again. The poet tells us that not only does he visit the gravesite, but he enters her tomb in order to lie down next to her corpse. What is more, it is clear from the present verb tense that this is a repeated action: "all the night-tide, I lie down by the side / Of my darling, my darling, my life and my bride / In her sepulchre there by the sea-- / In her tomb by the side of the sea." The poem ends by emphasizing the material location of their union: the final two lines are nearly identical as they point us to the "sepulchre" or "tomb" in which the lovers lie. Given these circumstances, J. Gerald Kennedy asks, "why does he try to achieve physical proximity to the corpse if his love is indeed spiritual and lasting? His action seems an unconscious betrayal of anxiety, a reflexive acknowledgment of the very separation which the poem itself seeks to deny" (*Poe, Death, and the Life of Writing*). In other words, the poet has boasted of the strength and significance of his spiritual bond with Annabel Lee. Yet, in his need to be near the body of his beloved, he seems to contradict his own assertions and indicate that a physical connection is just as important as a non-physical one.

We may better understand this apparent contradiction if we recall that the poet's tale is poignant because he loses not only love but beauty. Poe revised the poem a few times, making some minor alterations which nevertheless affect the overall meaning of the poem. In an earlier version of the poem, Poe writes in the third stanza, "A wind blew out of a cloud, chilling / My beautiful Annabel Lee." In the final version of the poem, Poe changes the lines to read: "A wind blew out of a cloud by night / Chilling my Annabel Lee." With the revision, Poe infuses the event with the mysterious and potentially sinister characteristics of night-time. Furthermore, the addition of two syllables ("by night") to the third line requires Poe to shift "Chilling" to the fourth line, and it allows him to delay using the word "beautiful" to describe Annabel. He does not include this word until the fifth stanza, at which point we know that she has died. This is significant because one of Poe's main projects in this poem is to explore the link between beauty and death.

Through the first two-and-a-half stanzas, the speaker never explicitly reveals that his beloved has died. In the first four lines of the third stanza, he refers to a time at which Annabel was still alive: when she experienced a fatal chill. The action of death is so abrupt that the poet appears not to have the time to name it: "A wind blew out of a cloud by night / Chilling my Annabel Lee; / So that her high-born kinsmen came / And bore her

away from me, / To shut her up in a sepulchre / In this kingdom by the sea." One moment Annabel Lee is hypothermic, and the next moment she is being buried by her relatives. Only a semi-colon signals the change from life to death, and the sentence recreates the swift and sorrowful transformation that occurs in the lovers' history.

In the fourth stanza, the poet is able to slow his recollections somewhat, and there he speaks directly of that moment which is so painful to him: "the wind came out of the cloud, chilling / And killing my Annabel Lee." The poet has explicitly acknowledged her death, and in the final stanzas he can now refer to her beauty. Between the fifth and sixth stanzas, the speaker repeats the phrase "Of the beautiful Annabel Lee" three times. The poem is full of repetition--this is a favorite technique of Poe's--but this triple refrain is unique because it occurs in such rapid succession, and the poet thus calls attention to this line.

Why does the poet want to underscore at this point in the piece that Annabel Lee was beautiful? Surely we are led to believe that she was attractive in life, but there is a particular kind of beauty that comes with her death. In the fifth and sixth stanzas the poem shifts from narrative to memorial. That is to say, in the first part of the poem, the speaker has told the story of his relationship with his beloved and of her death. In the latter part, he tells us what his life is like now and the way that he tries to honor her memory. As the poem turns from story to commemoration, the vocabulary also changes. There is in the sixth stanza a notable emphasis on visual imagery that is not present in the rest of the poem. For instance, the poet mentions the moon and the stars in which he observes "the bright eyes" of his dear Annabel. His love becomes not just something to feel or imagine but to touch and to see. In fact, the beauty that he conjures comes to replace the "love" about which the poet has spoken earlier in the poem: he uses "love" eight times in the first five stanzas, but this word disappears in the sixth. The theoretical idea of "love" gives way to a more concrete notion of loveliness, and the absence of the former term in this last stanza suggests that, though we may want to value the ethereal qualities of true love, its tangible elements are what we ultimately cherish most.

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