

Literature final

Literature



“Annabel Lee” stands as one of the most famous “death” poems of the nineteenth century, although its stature is certainly matched by Walt Whitman’s “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” a poem which uses a number of similar poetic devices, but rests upon an entirely different form. Like Poe’s most famous poem “The Raven,” his “other” famous poem “Annabel Lee” is steeped in musical diction and meter, with a view toward creating a lyric tension between the sweetness and musicality of the poem’s meter and form and the more profound and perhaps less idealized potency of the poem’s themes: which is human mortality. By combining technical precision with a theme of magnitude, Poe pursued his policy and prescription for poetic composition as outlined in his essays “The Poetic Principle” and the “Rational of Verse” “The Philosophy of Composition:” “the notions of his negligible ‘Philosophy of Composition’ and ‘The Poetic Principle’.” Its resources seem devices.

Every effect seems due to an expedient. The repetition and the refrain are reliances with him -- not instrumental, but thematic. At least they constitute rather than create the effect -- which has therefore something otiose and perfunctory about it” (Foerster 239).

The opening lines: “It was many and many a year ago/ In a Kingdom by the Sea” signal the intention not only to create a musical pattern with words as by the deliberate redundancy of “many and many” but also to posit and idealized world against that of grim reality. The repetition of many reveals that the ideal time of a “Kingdom by the Sea” has passed and this generates an immediate thematic tension.

Similarly, Whitman's poem begins with an evocation of time past: "When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd,/And the great star early dropp'd in the western sky in the night." In both poems, the hearkening back toward an idealized time first glimpsed at the poem's beginning will recur throughout the body of the poem in both imagery and diction: in Poe's poem, as an obvious refrain, in Whitman's as a series of extended modulations of the original theme; with the free-verse poem flowing through many permutations of the original "lilac-nostalgia" imagery.

It is worth noting that the formality of Poe's stanza forms with carefully placed rhyme and enjambment contrasts not only technically, but thematically, with Whitman's sprawling free-verse form. The former carefully predicts the poem's ending in the meter, the inevitable sway toward a definite conclusion, like fate. The latter's form, loosed from metrical and rhyme constraints seems to "grow" rather than follow its inevitable almost mathematically destined end.

The technical consequences are obvious: Poe's poem will impress itself upon memory much more easily than Whitman's and thus be received more organically; whereas Whitman's (according to Poe's doctrines) is apt to fascinate by virtue of individual images and lines.

The thematic consequence is a different matter. Poe's succinct and mathematical form serves to enhance the poem's grave themes of personal loss and mourning, sparking within the poem an indelible timelessness, an eternal melancholy, which is precisely the theme of the poem. One can imagine the poem's meter and rhyme scheme quite easily projected into a

musical melody without words which would result in much the same manner of “ bright” misery.

On the other hand, the free-verse form of Whitman’s poem, were it projected as a musical number, might be more aptly described as an improvisational melody with a “ pop” arrangement. The impact of the form on the theme of mortality, is to set in motion, the imagination’s perception that death contains within it motion, growing, an evolution of life and rebirth. “ I mourn’d, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.” This line with its conspicuous use of the word “ ever-returning” rather than “ every” indicates the poem’s death-rebirth cyclical theme.

Poe’s poem, by contrast, closes in a monochromatic, monotonic— one might say paralytic submission to death. Though there is a hint of release in the poem’s narrator rejoining his departed lover’s corpse, there is no indication of rebirth or of growth beyond this mutual oblivion. “ In the sepulchre there by the sea,/In her tomb by the sounding sea.” This close is simultaneously an urge toward and away from death: but that ambiguity is trumped by the over-reaching reality of the “ sea” which, in terms of the poem, indicates oblivion.

At the close of Whitman’s poem, nature is viewed as sympathetic and in harmony with the mourning of the observer; a cleansing and cathartic experience is implied. “ For the sweetest, wisest soul of all my days and lands— and/this for his dear sake,/Lilac and star and bird twined with the chant of my soul,/There in the fragrant pines and cedars dusk and dim.”

Rather than oblivion, nature offers brotherhood and renewal, as implied by the continuous symbol of the lilacs.

Poe's poem acknowledges and imparts the sense of life and death being in continuous friction "The angels not so happy in Heaven,? Went envying her and me" while Whitman vies death in life in continuous balance and integration "Come lovely and soothing death,/Undulate around the world. Serenely arriving, arriving,/In the day, in the night, to all, to each,/sooner or later delicate death." Nothing could illustrate the contrast between the two poems and poets more than Whitman's phrase "delicate death." In "Annabel Lee, the delicate ones are the people, the humans who must succumb to death; for Whitman humanity is stronger than death and death is viewed as a part of the universal extension of human experience: it is delicate, not oppressive.

This essential difference in the poems is reflected in their form and expression. The more controlled and fatalistic intonations of Poe and the "organic" reflective and lyrically introspective tribute by Whitman. In each case, the poet confronts the death of a beloved and reaches through their deep identification with the departed to a summation of the nature of death: for Poe is it everlasting oblivion, and for Whitman it is cyclical renewal. For both poets, the subject of human mortality provided fertile ground to create lasting poems that resonate across time.

SECTION 2

Using a story each by Edgar Allen Poe and Washington Irving, describe how

the Romantic writer used the supernatural to engage the reader's imagination and then explain why Romantics were drawn to the supernatural

Though many Gothic writers have earned a deserved reputation for a preoccupation with the supernatural, it is often the case that this same fascination, slanted toward the rational or “debunking” of commonly held superstitions and ideas about supernatural forces, has been overlooked. Two good examples of this tendency are Washington Irving and Edgar Allan Poe, both of whom are well-revered as writers of “ghost stories” or “scary stories” which deal with the fantastic. However, both Poe and Irving posit a rational, anti-superstitious motif in their well-known stories: as a case in point we may review “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” by Irving and “The Sphinx” by Edgar Allan Poe.

“The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” rather than celebrating supernatural forces or positing them as actual forces at work in the real world, uses the idea or fallacious belief in supernatural forces to drive the story's plot and theme: “Irving's denial of the fantastic begins with *The Sketch Book*, and, although his strategy changes, the goal remains the same in all four works.

John Clendenning has noted the debunking of the Gothic tradition in the three famous inserted stories of *The Sketch Book*: “Rip Van Winkle”, “The Spectre Bridegroom”, and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” (Brodwin 53). The Legend of Sleepy Hollow is based in “the uncanny,” a genre which allows the reader to decide “that the laws of reality remain intact and permit an explanation of the phenomena described. In this case, we know that it is

really Brom Bones, not the Galloping Hessian, who has pursued Ichabod Crane”(Brodwin 54).

This is seemingly an anti-romantic idea: de-emphasizing imaginary or delusional aspects for those drawn out of pure rationality. Similarly, Poe in “The Sphinx” posits opposite minded characters, confronted with an uncanny experience, one which disavows the supernatural, the other, the narrator who claims :” A favorite topic with me was the popular belief in omens— a belief which, at this epoch in my life, I was almost seriously disposed to defend.” This is opposite the attitude of Ichabod Crane who expresses a disbelief in supernatural forces, but harbors a secret fear of them.

“ Because there is already a legend about the Hessian, Ichabod's disappearance can be explained by recourse to the supernatural, although the schoolmaster's rivalry with Brom Bones over Katrina van Tassel is the obvious cause. Once again the possibility of the fantastic is raised for the sole purpose of being denied;” in this way, Irving emphasizes the role of rationality in a disordered world. “ Such a strategy indicates that Irving was not just parodying the excesses of contemporary Gothic and romantic fiction, which can be commended” he was also attempting to magnify the scope of fiction as both philosophically and morally instructive (Brodwin 54)

Poe’s “ The Sphinx” also posits the possibility of a grand “ supernatural” event, only for the purposes of debunking it through rational faculties. “ Poe was also a born humorist equally inspired by parody and self-mockery. In an anti-romantic vein so common among the popular humorists of his time, he

enjoyed applying his acumen to deride the outpourings of emotions too often surging from mediocre fiction and poetry” (Royot 57).

If “The Sphinx” can be profitably viewed as Poe’s gesture toward self-humor and also as a gesture toward the supremacy of rational thought over superstition it is no surprise. Other tales deal in this fashion with the same themes most notably the “Dupin” stories: Murders in the Rue Morgue, The Purloined Letter, and The Mystery of Marie Roget. But Poe also dealt with “ratiocination” in other celebrated stories such as “The Gold Bug” and “Maelzel’s Chessplayer.”

For Poe, it was possible for supernatural forces to exist, as well as for misapprehension of known forces for those of supernatural origin. However, as a plot device in fiction, Poe was notably against the use of supernatural forces without organic cause: “Objecting to incredible or improbable elements in the narrative, Poe claims that unraveling a plot by awkwardly appealing to the supernatural constitutes an affront to artistic standards.

This censure of Poe’s idiosyncratic characters and extraordinary plot devices may seem like an early call for realism in fiction, but the review calls for more than minute attention to credible detail” (Ljungquist 9)

In fact “The Sphinx” hardly reconciles its dichotomy of the known and unknown,

the real and imagined: as a case in point we view his “explanation” for the apparition in the story, of the so-called Sphinx, which turns out to be nothing more than a beetle! However, the beetle in question posited as a scientific

explanation for irrational experience is, in itself, a fancy of Poe's! " Indeed, this synthetic bug is probably, through the story, the best known of all beetles, even if, like the " sea coast of Bohemia," it never existed. Poe at times had almost an impish delight in the inaccuracy of unessentials. (Quinn 131)

The appeal of the supernatural to Gothic and Romantic writers was both genuine and also as a sub-genre within to create cautionary tales regarding the integrity of human rationality in the face of what appear to be illogical, or supernatural occurrences.

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