

An exploration of the
biography of edgar
allan poe and its
influence on his
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When writing short stories and poetry, authors have the tendency to add components of their life experiences into their literature. Allowing their emotions to shine through often makes their work easier to understand and relate to. Life experiences coupled with literary devices, such as symbolism, permit the author to add another layer of complexity to their work.

Edgar Allan Poe is an example of an author who has allowed his life to influence some of his most famous works. It is evident that when an author experiences tragedy or depression they tend to write in a dark and gloomy tone. The emotions of authors create a slight bias in the emotional undertones of the literary devices used in both their short stories and poems. The tragic life of Edgar Allan Poe is behind many of the symbols in *The Tell-Tale Heart*, *The Pit and The Pendulum*, and *The Raven*. The works themselves paired with the devastating history of Poe will reveal a concrete relationship with the symbols used and the events that occurred during the author's lifetime.

Initially, the numerous tragedies in Edgar Allan Poe's life had an evident effect on his behavior and psychological state. Poe was exposed to death at the early age of two, when his mother passed away (Quinn 51). Left without a mother and forced into foster care, Poe had an especially harsh childhood. Poe was again faced with the devastating reality of inevitable death when both his foster mother and wife suddenly died. After the passing of his wife, Poe was completely shattered and unsure of how to live on. Due to the tragedies he faced, Edgar Allan Poe suffered from recurring depression, which suggested he had bipolar disorder. At the time of Poe's life, mental illness was not a well-researched subject and was not discussed freely. The

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science of psychology was undeveloped, so diagnosis of mental illness was rare. Those with psychological issues often suffered in silence and turned to self-medication or religion as a remedy. Unlike modern times, Poe was unable to confide in a therapist or anyone for that matter. His writing was his only way to express himself and explore his many unordinary feelings.

In the story of *The Pit and the Pendulum* written by Edgar Allan Poe, a man is trapped inside a prison room with a deep pit in the middle. The man is imprisoned by the Catholic Church at the time of the Inquisition. The Inquisition was a group of Catholic institutions dedicated to combat religious dissent in France. Those accused of heresy against the Catholic Church were imprisoned and eventually killed. During the story, the prison walls surrounding the man are slowly closing in, forcing him to become closer to falling into the pit. The man throws a fragment into the void, For many seconds I hearkened to its reverberations as it dashed against the sides of the chasm in its descent; at length, there was a sullen plunge into water, succeeded by loud echoes. The fragment symbolizes the last ounce of sanity the man encompasses. When he throws the fragment, the man realizes how deep the pit is and loses all hope of survival. The moving walls pushing the man towards the pit symbolize how he is being driven to insanity. The room the man is held inside is pitch black, so he is completely blind to his surroundings. The man is experiencing a high degree of uncertainty and confusion.

The symbols used in *The Pit and The Pendulum* coincide with Edgar Allan Poe's battle with mental illness and religion. Poe had an internal conflict with the idea of Christianity and believed in freedom of religion. He famously said <https://assignbuster.com/an-exploration-of-the-biography-of-edgar-allan-poe-and-its-influence-on-his-writing-style/>

My own faith is indeed my own. Poe was born into a religious background, but he did not agree with all of the constraints of Christianity. Poe is also quoted as saying, All religion, my friend, is simply evolved out of fraud, fear, greed, imagination, and poetry. Poe's story, The Pit and The Pendulum, explores his criticism of religion, especially Catholicism, by telling a tale of a man tortured as a result of The Inquisition. The idea of uncertainty symbolized by the dark room the man is placed in equates to Poe's uncertainty about his religious values, as well as his mental illness. The ambiguities in Poe's life drove him to insanity, similar to the symbol of the moving walls in the story. The symbols used in The Pit and The Pendulum prove that Poe uses his literary works as an outlet for the unknown. In the story, the man is only released from the torture chamber after he discovers the depth of the pit he is faced with. Jeanne Malloy, author of *Apocalyptic Imagery and the Fragmentation of the Psyche: "The Pit and the Pendulum"*, confirms the above plot analysis when she states, General Lasalle only after the narrator is forced to he has devoted himself to avoiding ever since his discovery of it (Malloy 94). The way Poe structures the plot of his story against his use of symbolism suggests that he feels trapped by his mental illnesses and the only way to escape his entrapment is to understand the thoughts he experiences. The liberation of the prisoner in The Pit and The Pendulum enhances the correlation between the life of Edgar Allan Poe and his most famous literary works.

Continuing, Poe also explores the vague subject of human psychology with his use of symbolism in his poem The Raven. The poem tells a story of a man who is mourning the death of his beloved Lenore. The man hears a knock at

his door and opens it to reveal a raven. The raven flies into his home and responds to all of the man's questions with, Nevermore. In the poem, the narrator cries out, Quaff, oh quaff this kind nepenthe and forget this lost Lenore! The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines Nepenthe as a potion used by the ancients to induce forgetfulness of pain or sorrow. It is believed that in ancient times opium-based drugs were referred to as Nepenthes. In this case, Nepenthe symbolizes the narrator's ability to diminish his grief. As previously stated, Edgar Allan Poe experienced an immaculate amount of grief throughout his life. It is evident that the great poet turned to drugs and alcoholism to save himself from his inner pain.

In the short story The Case of The Tell-Tale Heart, Poe's inability to process his mental illness is exemplified through his use of dark symbolism. The Tell-Tale Heart tells of a mad young caretaker that murders the elderly man he is responsible for tending to. The caretaker is terrified by the old man's eye and uses his fear as reasoning for his crime. The murder and the disposal of the remnants is carefully plotted to result in the perfect crime. Everything went according to plan, until the caretaker allowed his guilt to consume him and force him to admit to the crime he committed. The criminal in the story is described as a psychopath, True!" nervous" very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses" not destroyed" not dulled them. The caretaker does his best to deny his insanity, but his admittance of having a disease and his obsessive rambling prove he his mad. Throughout the story, the killer's illness is emphasized through his actions, I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him. The murderer's ability to care

for the man and plot his murder simultaneously show his incapability to express human emotions. Above all, the man refuses to express any guilt towards his actions. He even projects his pounding heart to be that of the old man's. His thoughts are revealed when he becomes paranoid that the police can hear the heartbeat as well, Was it possible they heard not? Almighty God!“ no, no! They heard!“ they suspected!“ they knew! Although his belief of the heartbeat is false and furthers the accusation of his insanity, the heartbeat also symbolizes his humanity. Even with his mental disease, the man knows that he has done something wrong and this is shown by the heartbeat. When a human experiences guilt and anxiety, their first reaction is normally the subconscious quickening of the heart. The man hears the heartbeat when he is being questioned because he is experiencing anxiety about the crime he committed. The heartbeat begins to represent guilt when the man confesses his sins because of the nonstop noise, Villains! I shrieked, dissemble no more! I admit the deed!“ tear up the planks! here, here!“ It is the beating of his hideous heart! The killer's guilt reaches such an extent that he can no longer live in peace, he had to admit to his actions. The heartbeat symbolizes that even though the man was completely insane, he was still a human with emotions. Throughout history, Edgar Allan Poe has been known to be a bit mad. The hardships he faced in life transformed him into a person who experienced a multitude of mental illnesses. Through this symbolism, it is possible that Poe is trying to express that even though he does suffer from insanity, he still experiences human emotions. He is overwhelmed by the loss of his wife, mother, and foster mother and expresses his feelings through the mad nature of his characters.

Further along in the story *The Case of The Tell-Tale Heart*, Poe further investigates the subject of psychology through the symbolism of the old man's eye. The eye of the old man is described as a pale blue eye, with a film over it. The pale blue film over the eye indicates that the man's vision is most likely impaired. The eye symbolizes the narrator's inability to see inside of himself and recognize the sickness he has. The narrator describes the eye as evil and vulture like, similar to his persistent watching and plotting of the old man's death. The narrator blames his madness and troubles on the eye instead of owning up to his downfalls. After Poe's mother died, he was sent to a foster family by the name of Allan. Eventually, Mrs. Allan, whom Poe had grown very close with, passed away to leave him with only Mr. Allan. Poe and his foster father never had any type of real relationship. Allan sent Poe out into the world without any money and refused to pay off his gambling debt, leaving him alone and helpless at University. Allan also remarried before he died, meaning that Poe received no inheritance after his death. Poe came to resent his father and blame all of his misfortunes on Allan, similar to the narrator's ability to blame his wrong doings on the old man's eye. The inability for the narrator to realize his own faults, represented by the blind eye, relates to Poe's refusal to accept any blame for his own misfortunes.

Along with mental illness, Edgar Allan Poe uses symbols to portray his obsession with the idea of inevitable death. Throughout his life, Poe experienced a multitude of deaths, especially throughout his close family. According to Janice Krupnick, author of *Bereavement: Reactions, Consequences, and Care*, The death of a parent during childhood has been linked with a wide range of serious and enduring health consequences

ranging from schizophrenia to major depression and suicide. The passing of both his mother and foster mother impacted Poe's psychological state more than anything else in his life. The main women in Poe's life, including his wife, all died unexpectedly at a young age. Due to the sorrow he experienced, Poe became infatuated with the topic of death.

In the poem *The Raven*, the narrator is mourning the death of his beloved Lenore. The grief the narrator feels toward Lenore can be compared with the tragedies of the many losses in Poe's life. Each time the Raven enters the narrator's home, he is reminded of the death of loved one. Therefore, the raven itself symbolizes the omnipresent characteristic of death. The description Poe utilizes to describe the bird solidifies its dark characteristics, What this grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird of yore, Meant in croaking Nevermore. (Poe). After every question the narrator poses, the Raven exclaims, Nevermore. The response of the Raven is a reminder that death is inevitable. Poe was forced to quickly come to terms with the idea that everyone will eventually die and he uses the symbolism of the Raven to express his interest in his discovery.

The symbolic properties of death are also showcased in the short story *The Pit and The Pendulum*. One of the torture devices used against the prisoner is a descending pendulum that slowly swings across his body. The pendulum represents the inevitable passage of time and mimics the heartbeat of the narrator. The motion of the pendulum is described, The vibration of the pendulum was at right angles to my length. I saw that the crescent was designed to cross the region of the heart. The pendulum is constantly moving, becoming closer and closer to the terrified narrator with every

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calculated swing. The swinging crescent represents the unstoppable approach of death that every person experiences. Similar to the use of symbols in *The Fall of The House of Usher*, the pendulum coincides with Poe's curiosity and obsession regarding death. As previously discussed, Poe was subject to an amplitude of loss throughout his entire lifetime. His early on exposure caused the reoccurring idea of dying and death in many of his short stories and poems. The pendulum not only represents death, but also reestablishes the idea that dying cannot be controlled. Every human is eventually going to die, and the time or reasoning of their death is unable to be restrained. Poe resents his inability to save his family members and his frequent use of morbid symbols could be considered as a way he handles his intense grief.

In conclusion, the depressing and terrible events of Poe's life has shaped his writing tone and use of literary devices. Poe uses symbolism to add parts of his own life into his work without blatantly giving himself away. The main factor of Poe's life that affected his use of symbolism was the great loss he experienced. Edgar Allan Poe grieved everyone he was close with and the trauma he received from these events sparked a curiosity in him. Through his symbols, Poe explores the unavoidable destiny of death and the inability to control it. Death symbols exist in all three works: the pendulum in *The Pit and The Pendulum*, the watch in *The Tell-Tale Heart*, and the deteriorating house in *The Raven*. Along with dying, Poe's battle with mental illness affect the meaning behind his symbols. The tragedies Poe underwent turned him into a very tormented man, Poe knew that he had issues but, in some ways, he also denied his sicknesses. The inner battle Poe experienced with his

mental health is shown through the fragment in *The Pit* and *The Pendulum*, the creative use of *Nepenthe* in *The Raven*, and the blind eye in *The Tell-Tale Heart*. Overall, if Poe did not undergo the traumas he was subject to he would not have become the known writer he is today. An author's life influences their creativity to extreme extents. Poe's life was sad and tragic, and his reoccurring gloomy and depressing themes resembled that. Poe was able to write so thoughtfully and in depth because of his ability to relate to the stories he was telling. His use of symbolism added a personal level to his otherwise unfamiliar plot lines. Edgar Allan Poe's allowance of his life experiences to influence his use of symbolism humanized and personalized his short stories.