Poems of Edgar Allan Poe Study Guide

Poems of Edgar Allan Poe by Edgar Allan Poe

Contents

Poem 1: "To Helen"

Poem 1: "To Helen" Summary

This is a quintessential love poem. In it, the writer waxes poetic about someone named Helen, evoking Greek and Roman images to form a comparison between the real object of his affection and Helen of Troy, wife of Menelaus whose abduction by Paris started the Trojan War.

Poem 1: "To Helen" Analysis

It is believed that Poe wrote this poem in honor of Jane Stith Stanard, the mother of one of his school friends; she went mad and died not long after Poe met her. His use of Greek imagery, especially his references to Helen of Troy, sets the subject of his poetic affection up on a romantic pedestal, making her untouchable.

Poem 2: "Eldorado"

Poem 2: "Eldorado" Summary

In this poem, a knight has been searching for Eldorado, a city of tremendous riches reputed to be in South America. As he grows old, he begins to give up hope, and when he encounters a "pilgrim shadow" (line 15, pg. 234), he inquires as to where Eldorado is. The shadow replies:

"Over the Mountains

Of the Moon,

Down the Valley of the Shadow,

Ride, boldly ride,"

The shade replied,

"If you seek for Eldorado!"

Poem 2: "Eldorado" Analysis

This can be seen as a comment on any search for happiness or opportunity. The shadow's instruction to the knight is a general lesson to all who are seekers - to go all out and "ride boldly" for the goal.

Poem 3: "The Raven"

Poem 3: "The Raven" Summary

The poem begins as a man reads alone in his chamber, trying to find solace from the memory of his late love Lenore. He is almost asleep when he hears a knock at the door. At first he thinks he is dreaming, and when he finally opens the door, no one is there. As soon as he closes the door, there is a knock on the window — a large, beautiful raven enters and immediately sits itself above the entrance of the room on the bust of Pallas Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom. When he asks the bird its name, the raven replies "Nevermore." The narrator muses about the bird, then turns his thoughts inward to he fact that the bird will probably leave him, just like everyone else — the raven replies "Nevermore." Unable to think about anything other than his lost love for very long, the narrator's thoughts quickly turn again to Lenore. As he is thinking of how she will never again sit in his chamber, he decides the bird has been sent to help him with his grief, and again the raven replies "Nevermore." Things go downhill from there, with the narrator finally trying to send the bird back to Hell - the raven replies "Nevermore." The poem ends with the raven still sitting on his spot on the bust.

Poem 3: "The Raven" Analysis

One of Poe's most well-known works, "The Raven," like many of his other works, is centered on melancholy and thoughts of death by a man who yearns for a lost loved one, Lenore. The raven's refusal to leave is symbolic of the narrator's sorrow, which will be with him forever. Poe's references to myths, superstitions, legends and the symbolism of the raven again show that even when he travels over territory that is familiar to him, he has a great command of language.

Poem 4: "Sonnet - To Science"

Poem 4: "Sonnet - To Science" Summary

Here, Poe laments the advent of science, claiming that science "alterest all things with thy peering eyes." (line 2, pg.241). He uses literary and fantasy references, such as Diana, the Roman goddess of the moon, animals, and hunting, Hamadryad, a wood nymph (and a large venomous snake), and elves to contrast against the dull realities of science.

Poem 4: "Sonnet - To Science" Analysis

Poe wrote in a note, published in *The Raven and Other Poems* (1845), claiming that this was one of the poems he had written in his youth. It does indeed seem to be a youthful piece with idealistic leanings toward the superiority of imagination.

Poem 5: "Ulalume"

Poem 5: "Ulalume" Summary

"Ulalume," is the tale of the narrator and his soul, Psyche. The two are following a star through the woods, and though he hopes it will bring happiness, she does not trust the star. Instead, the two come across a tomb engraved with the name of the man's recently deceased lover. The narrator realizes that the tomb of Ulalume has been occupied barely a full year, and he man realizes he's stumbled upon her grave on the anniversary of her the night he buried her.

Poem 5: "Ulalume" Analysis

"Ulalume" deals with human struggles on numerous levels. On its surface, this is an account a person trying to move on with life following the death of a loved one. There is a slight overtone of guilt, as if somehow the narrator bears some responsibility for the death. On another level, the poem details a struggle between a person's romantic side and their reason.

Poem 6: "The Bells"

Poem 6: "The Bells" Summary

On first reading, "The Bells" seems to read like a happy song, detailing the stages of man's life and the significance of different sounds; hence, 'the bells,' repeated in almost musical cadence.

Poem 6: "The Bells" Analysis

A deeper reading, however, makes it clear that this poem is actually more melancholy in nature, and though it does mention the four stages of life, it is definitely not happy. The first stage is seen as being the happiest, yet shortest stage, with the last two being stages being sadder yet longer. Childhood is seen as the most carefree time in one's life, but it lasts for a very short amount of time. Growing older and being near death, the sorrowful times, seem to last so much longer. In the first stanza of the poem the bells chime merrily, while in the second stanza, the wedding bells ring a mellower chime, but still speak of happiness. By the third stanza, the bells begin to elicit terror, as in a fear of inevitable death — in the fourth stanza, the bells are said to be evoking funereal sounds.

Poem 7: "Annabel Lee"

Poem 7: "Annabel Lee" Summary

In this poem, the narrator laments the death of his young bride, Annabel Lee. He claims that their love was such a great love that even the angels were jealous, and this is why they have taken her from him. He claims that even death cannot sever their love, and that he has spent many nights next to her tomb by the sea.

Poem 7: "Annabel Lee" Analysis

This poem, published two years after the death of Poe's wife Virginia, is a melancholy poem of remembrance and sadness. The narrator, which in this case probably *is* Poe, feels that his love was too strong and too true to be allowed to survive and so, was thwarted in its prime by nothing less than angels. Some critics have delved a little too deeply into the last few lines:

And so, 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 sounding sea. (lines 38-41)

Some have claimed Poe is confessing necrophilia tendencies; it seems, though, that it is more likely that this is simply a pretty straightforward poem of love and loss.

Characters

Knight: "Eldorado"

A gallant knight seeking his fortune in the legendary town of Eldorado. He can literally stand for anyone who has sought opportunity all of his or her life but has started to grow tired and give up.

Pilgrim Shadow: "Eldorado"

Shadow that encourages the knight to continue to seek his treasures; represents the voice that tells all of us that if we are seeking, we should go boldly to our goal.

Narrator: "The Raven"

Lonely man who is pouring over old books, trying to deal with the memories of his lost love Lenore. He is hounded by a raven that arrives at his door and repeats the phrase "Nevermore" at oddly appropriate moments. The raven echoes the narrator's inner struggle with grief.

Narrator: "Ulalume"

Grief-stricken narrator whose love, Ulalume, has been dead for one year on the night of the poem. He represents the romantic, lofty side of himself and hopes to find a resolution to his grief by following a star, but finds instead his dead lover's tomb.

Psyche: "Ulalume"

Female representation of the narrator's soul. She represents his reasonable side - she doesn't trust the star or its direction.

Themes

Sanity and Insanity

Poe uses the theme of insanity vs. insanity, and all the nuances in between, in many of his short stories, often charging his insane narrators with the futile task of proving that they are not mad. Often, in stories such as *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Imp of the Perverse*, though the respective narrators of each claim they are of sound mind and seem completely unremorseful, they are driven to confess by a persistent reminder of their crime. In other tales, such as *The Cask of Amontillado*, the narrator is unquestionably insane, and yet there is no remorse *and* no confession, and though his *actions* are insane, he is very levelheaded when it comes to their execution. Crime is not the only indicator of insanity, however. In *Ligeia*, the narrator commits no crime that is spoken of, yet there is an air of instability to his narrative. He does admit to heavy opium use, but it is his overwhelming grief and obsessive love for Ligeia that cast a questioning light on his state of mind. All this mental instability leads to a stable of unreliable narrators; Poe was a master at creating believable, unreliable narrators, so much so that many historians have cast him as much less stable than he was, instead of recognizing his skill at crafting first-person narration.

Death and Mortality

In almost all of Poe's works, death is a central issue. Whether a tale of murder (*The Cask of Amontillado*, *The Tell-Tale Heart*), a tale of horror (*The Fall of the House of Usher*), a Gothic horror romance (*Ligeia*), or an allegory (*The Masque of the Red Death*), Poe's stories, by nature of his preferred genres, are full of death. Though many of his stories deal with either the murder of someone, the solving of a murder, or the supernatural resurrection of someone who has died, it is his allegorical look at mortality, *The Masque of the Red Death*, which most clearly sums up Poe's themes of death. Here, very simply, death is seen as inevitable, something that can be avoided by no one, no matter what precautions they take or how wealthy they are. Poe used death to terrify people, as he was a writer of horror stories and most people are afraid of death. Yet he seemed fascinated by it, and with his use of dark and Gothic elements seemed to embrace it.

Isolation and Confinement

Throughout many of Poe's short stories, characters are placed in stifling, claustrophobic settings that add to the overall feeling of panic and fear. In some, such as *Ligeia* and *The Fall of the House of Usher*, most of the action occurs in one room or one house, closing off the characters to any outside influence. *The Pit and the Pendulum* takes this idea a step further, imprisoning the narrator in a dungeon. Poe highlights this theme in *The Cask of Amontillado*, in which the murderous narrator literally encloses his victim in

a tomb. In *The Masque of the Red Death*, the castle is completely cut off from any means of entrance or exit. The most intense confinement, however, can be found in the minds of Poe's narrators. While we as readers experience physical isolation (i.e. one, room, one house, one walled-up vault), the intensity of the confinement is exacerbated by the point of view of the narrators. We see the world through one set of eyes, and the thoughts of these narrators, often thoughts that are unstable at best, imprison us in a non-physical "prison" of panic and fear.

Quotes

These quotes are taken from the Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe.

"True! - nervous - very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why *will* you say that I am mad?" (*The Tell-Tale Heart*, pg. 13)

"'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 Tell-Tale Heart*, pg. 21)

"As the strong man exults in his physical ability, delighting in such exercises as call his muscles into action, so glories the analyst in that moral activity which *disentangles.*" (*The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, pg. 22)

"'The riddle, so far, was now unriddled.'"(*The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, pg. 57)

"Of my country and of my family I have little to say. Ill usage and length of years have driven me from the one, and estranged me from the other." (*MS. Found in a Bottle*, pg, 77)

"When I look around me I feel ashamed of my former apprehensions." (*MS. Found in a Bottle*, pg, 92)

"The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could ; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge." (*The Cask of Amontillado*, pg. 94*)*

"*For the love of God, Montressor!*" (*The Cask of Amontillado*, pg. 104)

"There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart - an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime. What was it - I paused to think - what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher ?" (*The Fall of the House of Usher*, pg. 106)

"For a moment she remained trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold - then, with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated." (*The Fall of the House of Usher*, pg. 133)

"While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened - there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind - the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight - my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder - there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters - and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the *House of Usher*." (*The Fall of the House of Usher*, pg. 133)

"Arousing from the most profound of slumbers, we break the gossamer web of some dream. Yet in a second afterward, (so frail may that web have been) we remember not that we have dreamed." (*The Pit and the Pendulum*, pg. 156)

"Amid the thought of the fiery destruction that impended, the idea of the coolness of the well came over my soul like balm. I rushed to its deadly brink. I threw my straining vision below. The glare from the enkindled roof illumined its inmost recesses. Yet, for a wild moment, did my spirit refuse to comprehend the meaning of what I saw. At length it forced — it wrestled its way into my soul — it burned itself in upon my shuddering reason. — Oh! for a voice to speak! — oh! horror! — oh! any horror but this!" (*The Pit and the Pendulum*, pg. 136)

"The 'strangeness,' however, which I found in the eyes, was of a nature distinct from the formation, or the color, or the brilliancy of the features, and must, after all, be referred to the expression." (*Ligeia,* pg. 163)

"That she loved me I should not have doubted; and I might have been easily aware that, in a bosom such as hers, love would have reigned no ordinary passion. But in death only, was I fully impressed with the strength of her affection." (*Ligeia,* pg. 168)

"I trembled not — I stirred not — for a crowd of unutterable fancies connected with the air, the stature, the demeanor of the figure, rushing hurriedly through my brain, had paralyzed — had chilled me into stone." (*Ligeia,* pg. 182)

"The scarlet stains upon the body and especially upon the face of the victim, were the pest ban which shut him out from the aid and from the sympathy of his fellow-men." (*The Masque of the Red Death*, pg. 184)

"But the Prince Prospero was happy and dauntless and sagacious. When his dominions were half depopulated, he summoned to his presence a thousand hale and light-hearted friends from among the knights and dames of his court, and with these retired to the deep seclusion of one of his castellated abbeys." (*The Masque of the Red Death*, pg. 185)

"There are chords in the hearts of the most reckless which cannot be touched without emotion. Even with the utterly lost, to whom life and death are equally jests, there are matters of which no jest can be made." (*The Masque of the Red Death*, pg. 191)

"And the flames of the tripods expired. And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all" (*The Masque of the Red Death*, pg. 193)

"The intellectual or logical man, rather than the understanding or observant man, set himself to imagine designs — to dictate purposes to God." (*The Imp of the Perverse*, pg. 195)

"Through its promptings we act without comprehensible object; or, if this shall be understood as a contradiction in terms, we may so far modify the proposition as to say,

that through its promptings we act, for the reason that we should not." (*The Imp of the Perverse*, pg. 196)

"They say that I spoke with a distinct enunciation, but with marked emphasis and passionate hurry, as if in dread of interruption before concluding the brief, but pregnant sentences that consigned me to the hangman and to hell." (*The Imp of the Perverse*, pg. 209)

Topics for Discussion

These topics concern the general works of Edgar Allan Poe.

Explain what is meant by the term "unreliable narrator." How does Poe use this technique in different ways with different stories?

Poe has been called "the father of the detective story" - but does he go too far out of the realm of possibility by making an orangutan the killer? Defend your answer.

Are the crewmen on the "Discovery" ghosts? Is there another explanation as to why they do not acknowledge the narrator?

How does Poe portray the doppelganger, or character double, in *The Fall of the House of Usher*?

How does Poe use a closed setting in *The Pit and the Pendulum*, *The Cask of Amontillado*, and *The Fall of the House of Usher*?

What is the role of history in *The Pit and the Pendulum*? How does the reality of the action contribute to the story's terror?

Compare and contrast the narrator of *The Imp of the Perverse* with the narrator of *The Tell-Tale Heart*.

Do you believe Poe meant for us to believe in the resurrection of Ligeia as a means of proving her strength of will and the great love between herself and the narrator, or as a sign of how far the narrator's mind has slipped?

Did Ligeia poison Rowena, or did the narrator?