

# EDGAR ALLAN POE

—Some critical notes on his life—

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## 1

No one can deny that Poe is one of the greatest poets that we have ever had. And we agree that he is one of the greatest short-story writers, and that, of all his horrible and terrible stories nothing is so dreadful as "Poe's Life". In his long agony which seemed only his perverseness, we find the active acuteness of his talent. He was a born critic; that is not to say that he was a great critic but that he had a keen sense to know the crisis of the present. In other words he gave voice to eternal human hungers for the unrealizable and the unrealized.<sup>1)</sup>

Put one thing on a plane board and make the board inclined slowly. At one point the thing begins to slide down and is forced to make the value of its potential energy fall to zero. We call this point 'critical point' or 'critical angle'. Anyone can recognize the point when the thing begins to glide. And it is the great critical mind that can perceive the point before it begins to fall down. So subtle and sensitive is the critical mind that he sometimes makes a great mistake: even when the board is quite level and not inclined, he cannot help thinking it leaning. And he always feels uneasy. Eventually happiness for all is not happy for him and, strange to say, despair turns joy.

"What is to be," was a dominating subject for him and that notion had gradually destroyed him. Even when Poe was happy, he could

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1) Cf. Robert E. Spiller: *The Cycle of American Literature* (New York, 1955), IV, p. 69.

not get mental security, but queerly enough he seemed to be easy when he was at the bottom of the Fortune's wheel, surrounded with grey walls of poverty.

In a gloomy circumstance he found a wild and crazy pleasure. Many of his masterpieces were composed in those days. Why was he doomed in the habit of liquor, when he was a bright young editor of a magazine? Why did he addict himself to the use of alcoholic stimulants so deeply as to lose all the future, soon after his engagement with a lady of beauty and tenderness?

Happiness for us seemed to be unhappiness for him, misery for us seemed to be joy. His letter to Royster, who was to be his bride, says, "My life has been whim — impulse — passion — a longing for solitude — a scorn of all things present in an earnest desire for the future."

## 2

*The Raven* is the most popular of Poe's poems. The raven which says only "never more," symbolizes somewhat devilish power that may show the dark and bottomless stretch of the Poe's World, and at the same time it symbolizes the young genius who has suddenly come out of the darkness and abruptly disappeared in a jet-black night.<sup>1)</sup>

Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December,  
 And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor.  
 Eagerly I wished the morrow; — vainly I had sought to borrow  
 From my books surcease of sorrow — sorrow for the lost  
 Lenore —

For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore —  
 Nameless here for evermore.

After the poem was published, Poe showed us *The Philosophy of Composition*, which was the lamp that would guide us through the darkness of his World into the deep abyss of Poe's World. Edward

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1) Cf. *ibid.*, IV, p.69.

H. Davidson, however, said, “. . . which (*The Philosophy of Composition*) in its own time as in after years, cast a little light and much confusion on the poem . . .”<sup>1)</sup> Many students agree to his opinion and I myself admit that this essay is one of the proposals or trials of poetry rather than it is the explanation of the steps—how *The Raven* was composed. And yet isn't it too much to say that *The Philosophy of Composition* has nothing to do with *The Raven* and that it does nothing but make us embarrassed? We can appreciate the long vowel *o* in connection with *r* in such words as *lore*, *door*, *more*, *floor*, *Lenore*, *before*, *implore*, *explore*, *shore*, *bore*, *store*, *yore*, *core*, *ashore*, *adore*. As regards the length of the poem, he found the limit of a single sitting, and he insisted that the refrain should be monotone—both in sound and thought. Death of a beautiful woman, he says, “is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world.” Reading *The Raven*, we cannot find any repugnancy. Yes, all the misunderstandings begin when we take his essay for “Philosophy” in the strict sense of the word.

This essay is only the lamp that shows us into Poe's World; his dark, pictorial and lifeless movement of a hideous throng. Of all the devices he has shown us, we are much interested in—“When it (melancholy) most closely allies itself to Beauty: the death, then, of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world, . . .”

## 3

One day in 1823, Poe called on his classmate Robert Stanard, to see his domestic animals. There he was introduced to his mother Jane Stanard who was very beautiful and of a somewhat classical figure dressed in grandeur and nobility of antique time. When he was warmly welcomed by her, he was so enchanted that he could not answer to her lovely voice. He found his idol in her to be an

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1) Edward H. Davidson: *Poe, A Critical Study* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1957), III “*The Raven*” and *Afterward*, p. 84.

embodiment of Beauty. It was in these days that he, a boy of 14 years old, began to love solitude in his closed room and was absorbed in composing some early verses, dreaming a day-dream.

Mrs. Stanard was a kind lady and willingly read some verses of the boy. And she gave some suggestions and encouragement to him. He listened to her advice delightedly. But in the early spring of 1824 she met her dreadful fate and died in distracted condition when she was 31 years old.

*To Helen* was published first in 1831. But Poe insisted that it had been written earlier in his youth. Indeed it is very hard to decide when, where and why he made such poems. R. E. Spiller says, "... but many of them (the known facts of his life) were planted in his own day by contemporaries... The myth of blighted genius which early grew up about him was fostered also by his own self-pity and his consequent eagerness to arouse the pity of others... It has been further augmented by the psychological interpretations of later biographers..."<sup>1)</sup>

Helen was a favorite name with him and so we can easily accept his device to change Jane into Helen. We have two *To Helen*; one is to Jane Stanard, the other to Mrs. Whitman who once made a promise to be his bride. The latter seemed to have written letters to Mrs. Clemm who was the aunt and mother-in-law of Poe. It proved that "few months after her death it was his habit to visit nightly the cemetery where the object of his boyish idolatry lay entombed." Unfortunately, we cannot get any authentic record concerning the former Helen. Many students are now in suspicion even of her existence.<sup>2)</sup> And yet the lyric *To Helen* is so sonorous:

Helen, thy beauty is to me

Like those Nicéan barks of yore,

That gently, o'er a perfumed sea,

The weary, way-worn wanderer bore

1) Robert E. Spiller: *The Cycle of American Literature* (New York, 1955), IV, p.68.

2) Cf. Arthur H. Quinn: *Edgar Allan Poe* (New York, 1941), IV, p. 86.

To his own native shore.

On desperate seas long wont to roam,  
 Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face,  
 Thy Naiad airs have brought me home  
 To the glory that was Greece  
 And the grandeur that was Rome.

We can easily find that this is quite different from his later poems, as he relies on the fixed images of the fixed and ancient ones; Nicéan hyacinth, Naiad, and above all, Greece and Rome. And these words are still wanting in the mellowness to express his World. The only colorful word we find is "agate lamp" in the third stanza. After all, we cannot go far in deciding that this is the lyric composed, or at least, inspired in his boyhood. He firmly denied the Wordsworthian premise that the impression received early in life remains until his last day and everything that he had seen or heard might be affected by it. Remember the lines of *My Heart Leaps Up When I Behold*. Poe rejected that notion. He could not agree.<sup>1)</sup>

On the contrary, Poe built up, or more exactly, wanted to show, a World which is quite isolated from all, and in which Poe is a priest who devotes himself to the goddess Beauty. The early impression has nothing to do with him, he is likely to say in his early poem *The Tamerlane*. Poe showed us a World in which he was the only king, where everything should be under his control. The memory and impression one had gotten in one's youth should be destroyed and perished, Poe ordered in his World.

Then when, where and why did he get the peculiar principle, "... death of a beautiful woman is the most poetical topic in the world." Could he be quite free from his early days?

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Poe was born in Boston, Mass., on 19 January 1809. His mother

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1) Cf. Edward H. Davidson: *Poe, A Critical Study* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1957), I p. 7.

Elizabeth was a pretty actress and was strolling with a company in America. She was married with David Poe, after she lost her first husband. Poe's father seemed to have been a young student and had been fascinated by her on the stage and later become an actor. But Edgar had not seen his father. Unhappily we have no authentic account. It is said he may have run away with another girl, and unhappily enough Mrs. David, his mother, was pregnant when he disappeared.

The destiny shadowed upon him; it was not to his mind but to his innocent heart that he felt dimly the mournful tears of his mother who was on the verge of death in Richmond holding firmly to her heart a boy of two years old and a baby—his sister Rosalie. In a few days after her death, her children were separated: Edgar was taken by a rich tobacco merchant John Allan and his sister to Mackenzie. Rosalie Poe, his sister, was a poor girl, for in spite of her physical maturity, she was always only a little girl in her mentality—used to be called a “natural”. In addition, his brother who was the son of his mother and her former husband, and who had already been taken in by his grandfather was “feeble”.<sup>1)</sup> Goddess Fortune seemed to have lost her balance: some factors in Rosalie were combined so as to repress each other, and, on the contrary, in Edgar they were combined to make a brilliant genius. And is it too much to say that these factors, after all, were abnormal?

Poe was taken in the family of Allan after his mother's death. John Allan was a rich merchant exporting tobacco and general goods. His wife and sister were the fans of Elizabeth and were very kind to her boy Edger. In Allan's shop he may have heard many grotesque and arabesque stories of sailors. In Poe's World we haven often come across “sea”, which is the symbol of the devilish power; for instance, *The City In The Sea* in which everything is destroyed by “The Wave” and in his early poem *A Dream Within A Dream* (1827) we read:

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1) Cf. Edward Shanks: *Edgar Allan Poe* (London, 1937), II, p. 21.

I stood amid the roar  
 Of a surf-tormented shore,  
 As I hold within my hand  
 Grains of the golden sand  
 How few! yet how they creep  
 Through my finger to the deep,

.....

O God can I not save  
 One from the pitiless wave?  
 Is *all* that we see or seem  
 But a dream within a dream?

Golden sand may be the imagery of reality or happiness and the pitiless wave may symbolize horror or devilish power which may destroy our blessing. Of his prose tales *A Descent into the Maelstrom* may be the best one that shows the fear of the "sea".

Not only the sea but also everything movable is the symbol of the evil power that will destroy happiness; in his famous *The Haunted Palace* we read:

And travellers, now, within that valley,  
 Through the red-litten windows see  
 Vast forms, that move fantastically  
 To a discordant melody,  
 While, like a ghastly rapid river,  
 Through the pale door  
 A hideous throng rush out forever  
 And laugh—but smile no more.

5

He could not admit that "The Child is father of the Man," partly because he wanted to build up his own peculiar World in which everything should be dedicated to Supernal Beauty, and partly because he hated his boyhood which was full of miserable events. Again we ask, "Is he quite free from his young experience?"

His wife Virginia died on January 30, 1847. She was buried in the vault belonging to the Valentines, the owners of the cottage. Years later her body was taken to Baltimore and rests now beside the husband she adored. She had been ill in bed with consumption. They seemed to be badly off. Well known as he was, owing to *The Raven* and *The Philosophy of Composition*, he could not find any job. Some seemed to believe that Poe himself was ill with the brain fever.<sup>1</sup> Though his famous essay was published before the death of Virginia, Poe was sure of her fate being near at hand. Then "the death of a beautiful woman," includes not only the image of his early idol Jane but also that of Virginia. The letter that Poe had written to his best friend the day before Virginia's death is quite impressive:

"Kindest — dearest friend — My poor Virginia still lives, although failing fast and now suffering much pain. May God grant her life until she sees you and thanks you once again! Her bosom is full to overflowing—like my own—with a boundless—inexpressible gratitude to you. . . . But come—oh come tomorrow! . . ."

In 1835 he was an editor of the magazine "Southern Literary Messenger". And it was in these days that he married with Virginia. She was only 14 years old. The young genius Poe had made the subscribers increased from 700 to 5,000. His fine tales and lucid critical articles had increased its readers and at the same time, made him famous day by day. Yet, he himself seemed not so happy, for his letters in those days were full of melancholy. Poe seems to have been always afraid of the shadow in his mind. That shadow was enlarged when he was happy. To forget the shadow, he took to drinking, which was a dreadful demon for him. He was a poor drinker by nature, so a small amount of liquor used to conquer not only his uneasiness but also his lofty reason and personality. It is often said of Poe that he was a true gentleman when he was sober, but when he was drunken he would lie even in the gutter of

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1) Cf. Arthur H. Quinn: *Edgar Allan Poe* (New York, 1941), XVI, p. 525.



the street.

Gradually he was led to his destiny,—in the beginning of 1842, his wife Virginia suddenly clutched her throat and spat crimson blood over her white robe when she was singing.

The final stage of Poe's Life was decorated with many lady poets gorgeously and ghastly. Mrs. Osgood, Mrs. Shew, Mrs. Richmon and Mrs. Whitman were remarkable. Among them we should pay special attention to Mrs. Whitman to whom Poe was bitterly attracted. She was a lady poet of a little trim figure and romantic in her personality. She was very fond of flowers, especially roses, and used to spend much time in roaming among the roses in her garden. On the Valentine party held in a famous lady's house some verses of hers which praised Poe's poem *The Raven* were read. Delighted to hear the verses, he offered his poem *To Helen*; Helen was also her own name.

Was it not Fate, that, on this July midnight  
Was it not Fate, (whose name is also Sorrow,)  
That bade me pause before that garden-gate,  
To breathe the incense of those slumbering roses?

After long hesitation—either of his eccentric habits or her own nature too delicate to bear the life with him, and in spite of many oppositions of her mother and many lady poets, she agreed to his proposal with one promise that he would strictly abstain from liquor. It was on November 14, 1848 and the next day the marriage contract took place between them. On the morning of December 23, Helen and Poe took a drive together, yet late that night there came a fatal report to Hele that Poe was drinking with his friends and was amost deadly drunken. It was so severe a shock for a lady of delicacy that she desperately recognized that their marriage would not bring happiness to both of them. Soon their promise was broken. At their last meeting Poe asked her for a few words, falling upon his knee. "I love you," was the last whisper he could hear.<sup>1)</sup>

1) Cf. Henry Allen : *Israfel* (New York, 1926), XXX, p. 790.

Thank Heaven! the crisis  
The danger is past  
And the living illness  
Is over at last  
And the fever called 'Living'  
Is conquered at last.

(*For Annie*)

It was in 1823 in Richmond—a 14 year old boy, Poe knew a pretty girl to whom he was destined to offer his first love and later his doomed last love shortly before his death. She was Miss Sarah Elmira Royster, a daughter of a neighbor. She was a somewhat trim little girl with charming lips, large black eyes and long dark chestnut hair. They used to take a walk along the quiet streets of Richmond, or in the green field. And it is said that the window of his room faced hers and that they used to visit each other and spent long hours, chattering, singing or listening to the piano played by her. Before Poe went to Virginia University their secret engagement seems to have taken place. But her father did not like him. His letters from the University were put out of her sight. She was married with Mr. Shelton, a rich merchant. Afterwards she gave some accounts: "... Our acquaintance was kept up until he left to go to the University, and during the time he was at the University he wrote to me frequently, but my father intercepted the letter because we were too young—no other reason... He was very generous. Never spoke of his parents. He was kind to his sister as far as in his power. I was about 15 or 16 when he first addressed me and I engaged myself to him. And I was not aware that he wrote to me until I was married to Mr. Shelton when I was 17." His suspicion and fear may have been great when he could not get any letter from her. Disappointed and full of doubt, he came back from Virginia University only to find she had betrayed his love.

I saw thee on thy bridal day—  
When a burning blush came o'er thee,  
...

And in thine eye a kindling light  
(Whatever it might be)  
Was all on Earth my aching sight  
Of Loveliness could see.

(*Song*)

In the summer of 1894, he alone went to Richmond. He again returned to his Richmond after the desperate affairs. Walking along the streets, he remembered a girl, his Royster, who was now Mrs. Shelton. She was a widow with a considerable estate. He called on her, and met a lady of motherly tenderness that he had never seen since he left Richmond. Talking with her he regained himself that he had lost. He called up to his mind their old secret promise, and proposed her. She also remembered her girlhood; their misunderstanding being removed, his fame as a great poet being so popular, then nothing could prevent their love. From the spring of the old romance there flowed out a crystalline current shining on gloriously. Their marriage was to be celebrated on October 17. One day after their marriage contract was made, Poe left Richmond for New York. But on the way to New York, he stepped off at Baltimore. Why did he get off there? That may be the lasting question. Three days later he was found in the drain deadly drunken, as if the demon that had always been watching him, jumped over him to crush him away. After the long struggle and agonies both physical and mental for almost five days, it was 3 o'clock in the darkness of the morning when he faintly called the name of God.

6

Mrs. Stanard, his first and last lover, said, "He never spoke of his parents. He was kind to his sister as far as in his power." What did make him so fearful when he was happy? What shadow dwelt in his mind? These questions are very hard to solve. By nature he may have been so characterized. But Mrs. Stanard's words suggest us something. He seemed to have been ashamed of his parents and his sister. He seemed to have been ashamed of defective heredity. He

seemed to have been ashamed that he had not graduated from the University. Everything experienced in his boyhood seemed to have been a shame. So he could not accept the Wordsworthian premise that the early impression or experience remains long and may help the growth of one's thoughts. Wordsworth reflected his boyhood and cherished those memories which he had experienced. And Wordsworth suggested that what one experienced in youth should remain long so as to make an adult. On the contrary, Poe could not reflect his youth without remembering a series of miserable and tearful events.

Then, again we have to come back to the question, "Can he be quite free of his early days?" The answer is, "No!" He had made every effort to get rid of his miserable past. He had fought a dreadful fight with the shadow in his mind. And yet, the more fiercely did he fight, the larger it grew, till it had destroyed all. He could not be free from his early days, not in the sense Wordsworth told us, but just the opposite. He was nothing but a prisoner of his miserable boyhood.

## 7

Amid the severe struggle casually Poe seemed to have experienced curious ease of mind, after the publication of *The Raven*. He was free of tention and could forget the shadow in his mind. Then he need not make a painful effort. Then he could compose poems, sonorous and plain. Those poems are quite different from those poems he had painfully written. They are *Annabel Lee*, and *The Bells* and other minor poems. Grisworld, his friend and at the same time the administer of his poor estate, found the manuscript—they say, written roughly with a pencil. The most sonorous and beautiful was the last stanza of *Annabel Lee* :

For the moon never beams without bringing me dreams  
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee ;  
And the stars never rise but I feel the bright eyes  
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee ;

And so, all the night tide, I lie down by the side  
Of my darling—my darling my life and my bride,  
In the supelchre there by the sea,  
In her tomb by the sounding sea.

I firmly believe he was going to get a higher position of poetry. In this poem we don't find any agony that he was always suffering from. Everything is calm, brightened by the moon-light. Here the "sea" which was always the symbol of devilish power, is now that of peace and tranquility.

He must have got to a higher dimension. He could get rid of the hard struggle with the demon in his mind. That he could have lived longer and shown his talent on that higher dimension! Unfortunately he could no longer bear "the fever called 'Living'." The Devil which was always looking at him from behind jumped over him and tore him, bringing an end to the story grotesque and arabesque, "Poe's Life."