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**THE TWO SIDES OF EDGAR POE'S PERSONALITY. PERSONAL TRAGEDY
REFLECTED IN WORKS**

Abstract

The present article deals with the life and works of Edgar Allan Poe. It is an attempt at analyzing Poe's personality and works in the light of his personal experiences, particularly the tragic events that can account for most of the negative opinions associated with his name. This paper looks at the American poet, writer and literary critic from the point of view of his greatest, most famous creations reflecting his authentic self. While considering all the negative factors his lifestyle and activity were largely conditioned by, the focus is made on Poe's genius, his deserts and his role in the development of different literary genres and enrichment of world literature.

Keywords: *Poe, poet, writer, literary critic, literary genres*

1. Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), a great 19th-century American writer, poet, editor and literary critic, is known as one of the most versatile figures in world literature. His gothic tales gave birth to modern detective and horror stories. He also paved the way for the development of science fiction and adventure genres. As a romantic poet, he was admired by French symbolists who considered him their predecessor.

However, Edgar Poe was one of the most controversial figures. On the one hand, he was valued for his talent and admired as an aesthete creating perfect beauty in the form of his poetic masterpieces. He had many admirers among his contemporaries and was very popular with women. On the other hand, people either envied Poe's talent or held a grudge against Poe-critic for the uncompromising reviews he had published in magazines and newspapers for which he worked. The latter category included Rufus Wilmot Griswold (1815-1857), who published a posthumous collection of Poe's works accompanied by a slanderous biographical sketch titled "Memoir of the Author". In that piece, Griswold presented Edgar Poe as a mentally ill alcoholic, drug addict and hell-raiser. Unfortunately, despite Poe's friends' and followers' befitting reply to the slanderer,

Griswold's attempt at discrediting Poe's name was not altogether unsuccessful, as some negative sentiments are still associated with him. This article is a modest attempt at representing Edgar Poe's tragic life and seeking the reflection of his tragedies in his works to explain the darker side of his imagination and behaviour.

2. Methodology

As regards the research methodology, this paper represents a systematic review summarizing books and research articles about Edgar Allan Poe's life and works. It is based on a thorough study of Edgar Poe's prose and poetry analyzed by taking into account autobiographical elements revealing the writer's personality. The paper describes several periods of Poe's life and different aspects of his personality and draws parallels between them and the great author's works. There are many research articles about Poe's works and quite a few biographies describing his life. However, the present paper is original as it presents Poe's entire life reflected in his works and what they say about him. It is an attempt of compiling all the negative factors determining Poe's dark side to explain the weaknesses used by his ill-wishers for discrediting the great author's name.

When discussing Edgar Poe's works, the methods used are stylistic analysis (determination of different stylistic devices employed by the author and assessing their effect); their examination from the perspective of literary criticism, dealing with different literary genres influenced by Edgar Poe and literary motifs like that of a doppelganger.

3. Edgar Poe's Personal Tragedies That Found an Echo in His Works

3.1 Bereavement and Loneliness

While an author's life, background, interests and personality are generally reflected in all his works. Some works are more autobiographic than others because the author speaks about himself more directly and openly, thus revealing his personality to the readers. Amongst Poe's works, the poem "Alone" (1830) stands out for its frankness. In this poem, the author speaks about his being different from others since childhood. The poem begins with the following confession:

*From childhood's hour I have not been
As others were—I have not seen
As others saw—I could not bring*

*My passions from a common spring—
From the same source I have not taken
My sorrow—I could not awaken
My heart to joy at the same tone—*

Further, Poe says that everything he loved, he loved by himself, that mystery used to come to him from waterfalls of springs, red rock mountains, golden autumn sun and lightning. This beautiful and sad poem has an appalling ending:

*From the thunder, and the storm—
And the cloud that took the form
(When the rest of Heaven was blue)
Of a demon in my view—¹*

From this poem, it is clear that the person whose worldview was so different and negative would be doomed to be lonely. His loneliness and alienation grew as more tragic events occurred in his life, and finally, “the demon” that used to appear to him in the blue sky overcame him and ruined him. On the path of his life, he started from being “alone” and ended up seeing himself as an “outcast”, as the narrator of his story “William Wilson” (which is remarkable for containing numerous autobiographical elements) is addressed by his double: “Oh, outcast of all outcasts most abandoned! – to the earth art thou not forever dead?”²

Edgar Poe became an orphan at the age of three. His mother died of tuberculosis, and his father, who had already left the family, soon died too. The boy was adopted by the Allan couple living in Richmond, Virginia. John Allan was a successful tobacco merchant, a pragmatic, cold-hearted businessman, who never understood and supported his foster son. Unlike him, his wife Frances loved Edgar like her own child and Edgar reciprocated. Therefore, it was a terrible blow for him when Frances died of tuberculosis when he was 20 serving in the Army, which dismissed him too late to attend Frances’ funeral.

Being devoid of a mother’s love, Poe became attached to his classmate’s mother Jane Stenard. Stenard appreciated Poe’s talent; from her, he received the encouragement and support he needed. That woman was not only sympathetic and clever, but she was also beautiful and young Poe was platonically infatuated with her. Later he described her as “the first, purely ideal love of my soul.”

¹ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46477/alone-56d2265f2667d>. Last visit: 5/24/22

² Захаров В. Томашевский Б. An anthology of English and American Verse, 1972 По Э. p.147

He dedicated the poem “To Helen” (1831) to Stenard, in which the woman was compared to Helen of Troy, also to other mythological characters like Naiad and Psyche.³ Unfortunately for Poe, Jane Stenard also died from illness at a young age.

The greatest tragedy for the poet was the death of his young wife, Virginia. Edgar and Virginia were first cousins. After the final break with his foster father, Poe found refuge at his aunt’s home in Baltimore. Aunt Maria Clem was very kind and supportive to her nephew, who was striving to get his works published to earn some money. Poe paid tribute to her in the sonnet “To My Mother”; He gave her priority over his biological mother, addressing her with the following words:

*My mother—my own mother, who died early,
Was but the mother of myself; but you
Are mother to the one I loved so dearly,
And thus are dearer than the mother I knew.⁴*

During Poe’s stay in his aunt’s Baltimore home, he and Virginia fell in love with each other and got married when Edgar was 27 and Virginia only 13. Their marriage was a happy one except for constant financial difficulties. However, in January 1842, Virginia contracted tuberculosis and, after five years, died at the age of 24. The loss of the beloved one, particularly the death of a beautiful young woman, has always been one of the favourite themes for romantic prose-writers and poets, including Poe. This motif is often encountered in his works (e.g. the poems “Lenore” (1831), “To One in Paradise” (1833), “Morella” (1835), “Ligeia” (1838),

“Eleonora” (1842) “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839), and others), but after Virginia’s death, it became the major theme of his writings. The disease and death of his dear wife inspired Poe to create such literary masterpieces as “The Raven” (1845), “Eulalie” (1845), “Ulalume” (1847), “Annabel Lee” (1849) and “The Bells” (published after his death in 1849). In these poems, the narrator mourns the death of his sweetheart. Overwhelmed with unbearable pain, he seeks oblivion but cannot find consolation. The mentioned works are also remarkable, as the most masterful from the aesthetic point of view, thanks to various poetic devices like rhyme, alliteration, assonance, consonance, repetition, refrain and others, Poe achieved the euphony that made his

³ Захаров В. Томашевский Б. An anthology of English and American Verse, 1972 По Э. p. 463

⁴ Poe E. A. Prose and Poetry. Избранное. Сборник. На англ. Яз. Сост. Е. К. Нестерова. М.: Радуга, 1983. p. 56

poems sound like music. It is not surprising that the mentioned works inspired many composers, including Rachmaninoff and Debussy, to base their compositions on Poe's creations.⁵

The most autobiographical work about Virginia's death is probably the story titled "Eleonora." Its narrator lives with his aunt and cousin Eleonora in "The Valley of the Many-Colored Grass", an idyllic paradise full of fragrant flowers, fantastic trees, and a "River of Silence". After fifteen years, the narrator and his cousin fall in love with each other and are very happy until Eleonora gets sick. She is afraid that, after her death, the narrator will leave the valley, which symbolizes their love and marry another woman. The narrator vows to her never to remarry. Nevertheless, after Eleonora's death, he marries a woman named Ermengarde. Eleonora appears to him and blesses the couple with the words "Thou art absolved." Was there a real woman who inspired Ermengarde's fictional character?

Poe was rumoured to have made his sick wife suffer even more from jealousy. People discussed Poe's relationships with other women. One of such women was Frances Sargent Osgood, a popular American poet and writer. She was Poe's friend, to whom he dedicated quite a few poems: "TO F--" (1845), "To F--S S. O--D" (1845), "The Divine Right of Kings" (1845), "A Valentine" (1846) etc. In those poems, he described her as "An Eden of bland repose ... In some tumultuous sea",⁶ praised her gentle ways, her grace and beauty, and her virtue. From these poems, one could see that in Frances, desperate Poe found refuge from the terrible storms of his life. The poems he wrote for Osgood were filled with admiration and gratitude. Although some of them sounded flirty they lacked the deep feeling permeating Poe's poems dedicated to Virginia.

3. 2 Poverty and Despair

Poe's foster father, John Allan, tried to bring him up as his successor, who would take over the family business, but the boy's romantic nature was incompatible with that kind of career. Young Poe rebelled against Allan by writing poems on the back of his business papers. Seeing that he could not count on his foster son, Allan lost interest in Poe and decided not to waste any more money on him.

⁵ <https://sites.utexas.edu/ransomcentermagazine/2009/11/12/music-inspired-by-poes-works/> Last visit: 5/24/22

⁶ <https://poets.org/poem/f#:~:text=BELOVED!%20amid%20the%20earnest%20woes,An%20Eden%20of%20bland%20repose.> Last visit: 5/23/22

Young Poe fell in love with his neighbour in Richmond, Sarah Elmira Royster. Their relationship started in 1825 when Poe was 16 and Sarah was 15. They were secretly engaged and exchanged letters during Poe's study at the University of Virginia. However, Royster's father, who did not want his daughter to marry Poe, intercepted their communication. Thinking that her sweetheart had forgotten her, 17-year-old Sarah Elmira married a well-off Virginia businessman Alexander Shelton. Poe expressed his disappointment in the poems "Song" (1827) and "Bridal Ballad" (1837), both describing a bride marrying a rich man while she loves a different person. Like Sarah, some scholars claimed that Poe's Lenore and Annabel Lee were inspired by Royster, but there is more evidence in favour of the young Virginia Clemm, especially the fact that the "radiant" and "beautiful" "maiden" figuring in Poe's poems was dead.

At the University of Virginia, Poe found himself among rich heirs, who spent most of their time drinking and gambling. Poe, whom Allan had given too little money to survive at the university, tried getting some money by gambling. As a result, he found himself deep in debt, which Allan refused to pay. The atmosphere at the University of Virginia and Poe's misfortune are described in an almost autobiographical story "William Wilson". This story is remarkable for the doppelgänger motif – the hero leading a life of a gambler and reveller is chased by his double, whom he finally murders. It is noteworthy that Wilson's downfall begins during a card game played in a college dorm.

Drowning in debt, Poe decided to join the Army for five years. He took a false identity of Edgar A. Perry, claiming that he was a 22-year-old Boston clerk while he was only 18. After two years of military service, he decided to leave, for which he needed Allan's permission. However, Allan did not respond to his letters and only after the death of Frances Allan did the two men reconcile. Allan helped Poe to leave Army to enrol at West Point military academy. Not interested in military life, Poe decided to leave it forever. Again, Allan ignored his request to give him permission, and he had to get himself expelled for purposefully unruly behaviour. Poe never received help and support from John Allan. Even after his foster father's death, he inherited nothing, as Allan left all his property to his children from the second marriage, completely disowning Edgar.

In 1829, Poe moved to Baltimore to stay with his widowed aunt and cousin Virginia. He managed to publish his second collection of poems "*Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane, and Minor Poems*" (he had published the first collection *Tamerlane and Other Poems* in 1827), which received some attention, but brought no money. Desperate to earn some money, Poe started a career as a writer. He

got his stories published in different periodicals. In October 1833, The Baltimore Saturday Visitor awarded him a prize for his short story “MS. Found in a Bottle.” That story was noticed by John P. Kennedy, who helped Poe to publish his stories and introduced him to Thomas W. White, editor of the Southern Literary Messenger in Richmond. White hired Poe as his assistant editor, but soon discharged him for drinking. Later, at different times, he worked as a writer, co-editor and editor at different periodicals publishing his stories, poems and literary reviews, which earned him the reputation of uncompromising and relentless literary critic and also enemies like Griswold.⁷

It should be noted that Edgar Allan Poe spent his entire life struggling with poverty. Even for his masterpiece “The Raven,” which became an instant success and made him famous, he was paid as little as \$5 (some sources mention \$9, still too little money). Poverty, combined with the death of the most precious people in his life, and all the difficulties he encountered in his personal life and literary career, must have been too difficult to endure, especially for a romantic, sensitive and extraordinary person with, probably, genetic inclination (inherited from his father), towards drinking.

4. The Factors That Negatively Affected Poe’s Reputation

4.1 Futile Attempts to Cure the Grief

After Virginia’s death, Poe tried to find a cure for his loneliness in new relationships. He first met Sarah Helen Power Whitman, an American poet and essayist, in 1845 when attending a lecture by Frances Osgood. Whitman was familiar with Poe’s stories and was his great admirer. Their relationship started by exchanging letters and poems, and gradually the two writers developed a deep feeling for each other. Poe dedicated the poem “To Helen” (1848) to Whitman. They were engaged and even ordered the wedding date, but the rumors about Poe pursuing other women, namely Nancy Locke Heywood Richmond, and his breaking the vow to Helen to stay sober reached Whitman’s mother, and she persuaded her daughter to end relationship with Poe. However, Whitman’s love for Poe did not end, and in 1860, eleven years after Poe’s death, she defended him from unjust, slanderous critics, particularly Rufus Griswold by publishing her work “Edgar Allan Poe and His Critics”.

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edgar_Allan_Poe. Last visit: 5/24/22

Nancy Locke Heywood Richmond was the wife of Charles Richmond, a wealthy businessman in Lowell, MA. Not possessing a literary talent and being bored by her life, she took great interest in Poe. While for years after Poe's death, even her closest friends believed that they were only good friends, in the later 1870s, she made public the love letters allegedly written by Poe to her. She also claimed that Poe had dedicated the poem "For Annie" to her. The copies of letters, produced by Richmond (She never showed the originals to anyone), were too untalented to be written by Poe and depicted Poe as an insane, insincere man, who, being in love with Helen Whitman, declared love to Nancy as well. Thus, Poe seemed to have become a victim of gossip and slander.⁸

In July 1848, during a visit to Richmond, Poe came across his first love, Sarah Royster, and that encounter renewed the old love between them. They discussed marriage, and despite such obstacles as Royster's children's disapproval and Poe's drinking, the wedding was planned for October 17, 1849. However, the wedding never took place. On September 27, Poe decided to go to Philadelphia on business but never arrived there, nor did he return to New York to take his mother-in-law Maria Clemm to his wedding. On October 3, he was found delirious in Baltimore. Poe was taken to Washington College Hospital, where he spent his final days unconscious, suffering from hallucinations. He died on October 7, ten days before his wedding. The cause of Edgar Poe's death remained mysterious.⁹

4.2 The Dark Side

Edgar Poe is known to have suffered from recurrent depression. Some even suspected he might have bipolar disorder. He also often turned to alcohol (but not drugs, as Griswold suggested) while coping with grief, which seemed to never end because of so many deaths occurring in his life. Hence the macabre in Poe's literary masterpieces. Poe's tragedies can account for his favourite themes— death, crime and mystery. These themes were also characteristic of gothic fiction, a dominant literary genre in the 19th century, with Poe being an outstanding figure who influenced both gothic and detective fiction. The symbolic, almost allegorical method he employed in his writings and his rejection of reality, his aestheticism, mysticism, pessimism, apoliticism, individualism and formalism were the characteristics Poe shared with Symbolist poets, who were his followers and greatest admirers.

⁸<http://worldofpoe.blogspot.com/2009/10/poes-weird-women-part-three-annie.html>. Last visit: 5/23/22

⁹ Qinn A., Edgar Allan Poe. A Critical Biography. N.Y., 1963.

Poe was an exceptional intellectual and creative person, a genius, and it is not surprising that he was eccentric and vulnerable. Being a child of two poor actors, who died early, Edgar was very artistic and most likely had a genetic inclination toward drinking. He might have also inherited weak health and emotional fragility, which explains his depression. On the other hand, the blows Poe suffered at a very early age were heavy enough to unnerve even a strong personality. It is not by chance that in the poem “To F-” dedicated to Frances Osgood, he described his life as a “Drear path, alas! where grows / Not even one lonely rose”¹⁰

5. Results & Discussion

Edgar Allan Poe is one of the geniuses who have become the objects of attack from their untalented and uninteresting contemporaries, trying to compensate for their inferiority by discrediting the distinguished men’s names. An American anthologist, Rufus Wilmot Griswold, a worthless poet and vindictive critic, only became famous for his slanderous obituary signed with a pseudonym, depicting Edgar Poe as a madman wandering the streets, cursing himself and despising the whole world, a man who wasted his talent and his life on alcohol, drugs and orgies. The calumniator was soon unmasked, and he received a befitting reply from the admirers of Poe’s talent. However, thanks to him and the likes of him, Edgar Poe’s name is still often associated with alcoholism, mental problems and even drug addiction. Some misjudgments of genius have gone so far as to mistake Poe’s rich imagination and inspiration for the effect of drugs and alcohol, which induced hallucinations and delusions. In this light, it is important to know the truth about the genius, whose strengths and weaknesses need to be assessed because of many factors influencing his personality.

Moreover, in my opinion, reviewing an author’s works in parallel with studying his life is an interesting and correct approach, which makes it possible to gain a better insight into both – Poe’s life and creations. Based on the material reviewed in the present paper, we get a portrait of a highly gifted, sensitive person who went through terrible ordeals from the very beginning of his life. Many of his works are considered autobiographic, although, in his gothic prose, elements of fantasy, adventure, mystery and crime dominate to attract readers. At the beginning of his career, Poe had to struggle to get his works published, and later, as an editor of periodicals, he had to maintain

¹⁰<https://poets.org/poem/f#:~:text=BELOVED!%20amid%20the%20earnest%20woes,An%20Eden%20of%20bland%20Orepose.> Last visit: 5/23/22

popularity with the help of gripping stories. Meanwhile, his true self, his feelings and pain were better reflected in his magnificent, beautiful poems inspired by different events and people that played a significant role in his life.

6. Conclusion

Although they speak about two Edgars, the one being a great author respected for his intellect and talent, a romantic lover, an affectionate husband and a good friend; the other being a drinker, a gambler, a womanizer and a trouble maker chased by the enemies for his merciless criticism. Edgar Poe's genius prevails over his faults caused by factors beyond his control.

Perhaps, it would be reasonable to judge Poe's personality by his works. However, not the adventure or crime stories he used to write to earn a living, but the ones reflecting his true feelings, such as loneliness, love, grief, gratitude... and longing for beauty.

Speaking about Edgar Poe, in the first place, they mention his lyrical masterpieces "The Raven," "Ulalume", "The Bells," and others that made him famous. Most of his horror stories are indeed considered classics, but what makes Poe a genius is his poetry inspired by great love and equally great pain. Poe was one of the most versatile authors who paved the way for the development of many different literary genres, particularly detective and science fiction, and for many people around the world, his name is associated with horror and macabre, to say nothing of rumors and scandals in his personal life. Nevertheless, in my opinion, this great author should be primarily appreciated for the perfect beauty he created, as despite the misery he suffered all his life, he left behind the masterpieces that delight their readers.

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