

Example Student

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EN223: American Literature 1

26 October 2019

The whole paper is double spaced, 12-point Times New Roman font. The heading is your name, professor, class, and the date formatted day month year. Page numbers include your last name.

The title is centered with no other special formatting. The essay will follow right after.

Poe's Avatars

Edgar Allan Poe is renowned for his gothic short stories and poetry. His tales of the dark and macabre engrossed the morbidly curious readers of his time and continue to do so today. Many of his stories have the recurring themes of loss and sorrow, and several of those plots reveal those themes with the same device: the death of a beautiful, young woman. Poe himself said that this was "the most poetical topic in the world" (Poe "Philosophy" 165). It is ironic, then, that this most poetical of topics would occur in his own life with the death of his wife.

That blurring of the lines between literature and reality is a common occurrence for Poe, as several of his narrators could be viewed as versions of himself projected onto the page. Many scholars have explored this interpretation among several other thematic meanings. This paper observes and addresses those different views while defending the thought of Poe using himself as a model in his stories. Three of his works in particular, "The Raven," "The Fall of the House of Usher," and "Annabel Lee," seem to best reveal this concept of literary avatars.

THE RAVEN

The most ob

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tor of the poem lost

his love, "the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore," like Poe lost his wife (Poe "The Raven" 1226). However, upon examining the timeline, that connection weakens. "The Raven" earned its creator much praise and success in 1845, two full years before Virginia Poe would die (Belasco and Johnson 1020). This does not mean that the poem is completely

disqualified as a bearer of Poe's image. Virginia Poe died after a five-year battle with tuberculosis ("Virginia Clemm Poe"). In a source with no author, use the title of the source. her suffer continuously through the progression of the disease and probably thought she would die more than once. In fact, that is exactly what Poe wrote to a friend. He said that at every relapse, he "felt all the agonies of her death" ("Virginia Clemm Poe"). It is not unreasonable to think that Poe imagined what it would be like if Virginia died when he wrote his most well-known poem.

The narrator of "The Raven" ends his tale by lamenting that "my soul...shall be lifted nevermore!" (Poe "The Raven" 1229). This sounds strongly of a depressive state, which Poe was known to experience (Belasco and Johnson 1020). If a source has two authors, name them both. n of Poe dealing with the possible death of his wife, anticipating it worsening his preexisting depression. He writes that the narrator has no hope of seeing his love ever again, so if it is an avatar, the poem reveals his fear of eternal separation from Virginia.

Objections. This level three heading is in italics, and the paragraph begins immediately after it. Headings are really only needed for essays over ten pages. "The Raven" being a version of Poe. For one thing, he has explained where his inspiration for the poem came from in his essay "The Philosophy of Composition." Nowhere in that piece does he mention that his ailing wife adding to his inspiration. He claims to have chosen every single detail out of necessity to reach the intended effect. This would seem to remove any possibility of the poem representing Poe. There is, however, a belief that this particular essay was less about the actual method of composing the poem than about capitalizing on and enhancing its popularity (Pahl). That is not to say that Poe is a liar, but that the essay may not be completely truthful (Pahl). If this view is accurate, the case for Poe using himself as a model is still a valid possibility.

Another argument against this view is the fact that the narrator of "The Raven" is a scholar, a young man (Poe "Philosophy" 166). This is evident by the presence of a "bust of

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chamber door” (Poe “The Raven” 1227). Poe was not; he had only

of college and had been kicked out of West Point (Belasco and Johnson

make the two identities irreconcilable. Poe could have been recalling his

days at school, when he had been a pretty good student, especially in Latin and French (Belasco

and Johnson 1019). Also, as a writer and editor, Poe was scholarly in a non-traditional sense. The

narrator of “The Raven” could be an exaggerated version of himself, an avatar designed to help

him express his impending grief.

THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER

In the dreary tale of “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Poe places the readers in the head of the

narrator, letting them watch and live the story through his eyes (Timmerman). That would

seemingly disqualify this narrator from being Poe, as the narrator represents the reader, but it

does not have to. This writer would argue that the intimacy of the narrator’s thoughts points to

him representing his creator. Poe described such a convincing thought world by modeling it off

his own.

The prevalent mirror motif is another trail back to Poe. Roderick Usher’s mental state

reflects the “mansion of gloom” (Poe “Usher” 1031). Roderick is a mirror to his sister, and the

narrator becomes a mirror of Roderick (Timmerman). Initially, the narrator was a rational man of

observation, with an inclination towards the fantastic (Benoit). That can be seen in his many

descriptions of the house; in one he fancifully observes “the ebon blackness of the floors, and the

phantasmagoric armorial trophies” (Poe “Usher” 1033). This parallels Poe’s own journey with

balancing technique with the beauty he deemed necessary in his compositions. Through the

course of the story, the narrator takes the final step towards insanity in letting Roderick influence

him (Timmerman). Many have argued that Poe also was insane; he even said it of himself

(“Virginia Clemm Poe”). That similarity makes the avatar concept even more feasible in this piece.

There is also the connecting factor of depression, a common thing in Poe’s work. The narrator of the short story felt “a sense of insufferable gloom” from the moment he first saw the house (Poe “Usher” 1031). That state of mind worsened throughout the story until he was just as manic as Roderick Usher (Benoit). As stated before, Poe suffered from depression through much of his life, showing how at least part of himself is found in this narrator (Belasco and Johnson 1020).

Objections. This short story again includes the element of a young woman dying. In this case, it is Madeline Usher. This piece was published in 1839, so this fictional death cannot be connected to that of Virginia Poe, nor even the thought of it, as she was not yet sick. This is a fair argument, but in this tale, Madeline is not a lover. Virginia’s death inspired Poe to write about the loss of a love, not a sister. Therefore, this argument is not exactly applicable.

Another completely different interpretation of this piece could challenge the argument for Poe’s avatar. Poe believed in a pseudo-science called phrenology (Zimmerman). The practitioners of this science studied different organs in the human mind, which determined certain character traits, its based on the shape of a person’s skull (Wyhe). be an allegory in which each character represents a c ideality, Madeline is amativeness (sex), and the narrator is adhesiveness (friendship) (Zimmerman). This view is certainly a unique one, and it seemingly takes Poe out of the piece altogether. That does not have to be the case though. Poe believed in this science, so it was part of his worldview (Zimmerman). It is possible

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he thought of himself in terms of the phrenological organs as well and projected that into the story.

ANNABEL LEE

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The avatar of Poe can be seen the most clearly in the poignant poem “Annabel Lee.” This poem is narrated by another grieving lover. However, this piece was released two years after the death of Virginia Poe in 1847, making this a much stronger argument that it was inspired by the grief incited by this tragic event (Belasco and Johnson 1020).

Another parallel is that the poem describes Annabel Lee as a “child”, and Virginia was only thirteen years old when she married Poe (Poe “Annabel Lee” 1229) (Belasco and Johnson 1019). The cause of her death reveals another crucial connection. Annabel Lee was killed by getting chilled from the “wind [that] blew out of a cloud by night” (Poe “Annabel Lee” 1229). Virginia died of tuberculosis, which is a less romanticized version of being chilled.

The final clear connection is the portrayal of Annabel Lee and the narrator’s relationship. He describes how “our love it was stronger by far than the love of those who were older than we” (Poe “Annabel Lee” 1230). This sounds very similar to something Poe wrote of his love for Virginia to a friend: “a wife, whom I loved as no man ever loved before” (“Virginia Clemm Poe”). These three connections leave little doubt that “Annabel Lee” is narrated by an avatar of Poe.

Objections. Despite the evidence, there are other views of this poem. Some scholars, in exploring Poe’s military career, found a poem very similar to “Annabel Lee” in the Charleston Courier from 1807 (Peeples). It is possible that while Poe was stationed in South Carolina, he found one of those old papers and remembered the poem years later when writing “Annabel Lee.” This argument states that Poe simply copied that other poem. While it could have been where he got

some of the wording and imagery, that does not necessarily indicate that “Annabel Lee” is not representative of him.

There is also an urban legend in Charleston that Poe’s famous poem was based on a girl he met when he was stationed at Fort Moultrie (Peeples). The story goes that Poe fell in love with a girl that lived on Sullivan’s Island, the “kingdom by the sea,” and her grave is somewhere near Fort Moultrie (Poe “Annabel Lee” 1229) (Peeples). However, since these are simply legends, it feels much less likely than the inspiration from Poe’s grief for Virginia.

One final objection to the narrator representing Poe is the actual cause of Annabel Lee’s death. The poem says it was the wind that chilled and killed her, as mentioned above, but it could have been something else. There are two alternatives: the narrator killed her, or her highborn kinsmen killed her (Richardson).

If the narrator killed her, there are two ways to interpret that. Either he actually murdered her, or he feels responsible for her death, not having enough money to help her (Richardson). In either case, the poem is the narrator trying to assuage his guilt. The murder interpretation seems a bit far-fetched. However, the narrator feeling responsible for Annabel Lee’s death makes sense. In that case, it would not detract from Poe projecting himself into the story. It would, in fact, enhance that belief. Just as the narrator felt responsible for Annabel Lee, it makes sense that Poe felt that he was answerable for the death of Virginia. They were poor as he tried to make a living as a writer (Belasco and Johnson 1020). He did not have the strength or knowledge to fight her drawn-out disease, and he felt “insanity” from the oscillation of good days and bad days (“Virginia Clemm Poe”). It would not be unusual for Poe to feel guilty over her death and then project that into “Annabel Lee.”

If the highborn kinsman killed Annabel Lee, there is more of a struggle to reconcile the literary and real worlds, but it is not impossible. Annabel Lee was born away by her kinsman in the poem. Either that means she was forcibly taken from a disapproved relationship and died of a broken heart on top of disease, or else they locked her in an unhelpful hospital (Richardson). Virginia and Poe were never separated this extremely, so this interpretation seems to remove the possibility of an avatar. Nevertheless, if the kinsmen are symbolic, it may not. Society deemed their marriage odd because they were cousins, and she was thirteen when they got married (Belasco and Johnson 1019). If the kinsmen represent society, it shows the disapproval implied in the poem. The second view of failed treatment, if accurate, may show Poe's frustration with ineffectual hospitals and medical care that allowed Virginia to die anyway.

CONCLUSION

There are many arguments for and against Edgar Allan Poe's use of avatars in his stories and poetry. In every work of writing, part of the author is present in the story, whether that simply be the voice or completely embodied in a character. Each work is part of the writer, and Poe is no different. Even if none of these stories were intended to represent him, part of him is in all three, but the constant presence of depression and the inclusion of a dead woman mirror Poe's life a little too eerily and closely. "The Raven," "The Fall of the House of Usher," and "Annabel Lee" reveal Poe's mind and feelings through their narrators acting as avatars of Poe in literary worlds.

Works Cited

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