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Poe, Guilt, and Mental Illness

Edgar Allan Poe teeters on the brink of extremes between death and the mental psyche of his characters in his poems and short stories. Poe uses symbolism, like the vultures eye in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” to signify death and the extremes people will sometimes go to avoid or come to terms with death. His poems, like “Annabel Lee” and “The Raven,” explore the effects of losing a loved one and the grief process, while “The Fall of the House of Usher,” and “The Tell-Tale Heart” explores the maddening effect death has when it is looming towards a person. The acts committed by characters in some of Poe’s works are in definite relation to the looming shadow that death casts upon us all. Poe easily illustrates the extremes some people will go to either reconcile with death or ward death off.

The death of a loved one is always hard, especially for a man who considers the now dead woman to have been his soul mate, or something just as close. In “Annabel Lee,” Poe tells the ending of a romance between the narrator and Annabel Lee, and his grief driven decision to stay by her side, committing a slow and possibly painful suicide in the process. The narrator’s extreme grief is driven by the love he had for Annabel Lee, before she was taken from him and transported to the next life.

But our love it was stronger by far than the love

Of those who were older than we –

Of many far wiser than we –

And neither the angels in heaven above,

Nor the demons down under the sea,

Can ever dissever my soul from the soul

Of the beautiful Annabel Lee: (643)

The narrator makes the claim that his and Annabel Lee’s soul are connected, very reminiscent of soul mates. Soul mates, a belief that there are pairs of people who together make up one soul, gives reason to why the narrator is so grief stricken, especially with how Annabel Lee died. A quick and sudden death would be very traumatic and not allow for quick closure. “A wind came out of the cloud by night, / Chilling and killing my Annabel Lee.” (643) A wind coming from a cloud is rather sudden, since one does not see the wind, suggesting that the death was sudden. Such a death would take a toll on the claimed unity of souls between the narrator and Annabel Lee. As a result, the extremes the narrator performs of staying by her sepulcher and committing slow suicide is reasonable, if not a little insane. However, while he is there he starts to see Annabel Lee in everything.

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: (644)

The narrator cannot get over his grief if he is constantly thinking of his Annabel Lee, and it will be detrimental to his health if he continues to stay by her side. The sudden death, the constant reminders are all factors that contribute to his decision to stay by her side, ultimately seeling his own death.

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. (644)

Of course, his lying by her sepulcher, or place of burial, could cause his own death. Lying outside, waiting, waiting for his love either to come to him or he to go to her. This almost suicidal thinking is a rather extreme, grief-driven decision. It is one thing to grieve, another to perpetually be by the burial site allowing the feeling of his love to look down upon him. It is a tragic almost death, because the narrator is not going to commit a fast suicide, but a long and slow one. The narrator’s grief is leading him to madness, and he is doing nothing to stop it.

The death of a woman takes its toll on everyone, especially on those who loved her most dear. The grief born from the death of someone that is loved can take many forms, but in “The Raven” the narrator is looking for answers. However his grief, answer-seeking madness drives towards the answers he wants to hear, not the ones he knows are true. Instead of laying next to sepulcher of his love, he thinks on her in the comfort of a roof over his head. “And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor. / Eagerly I wished the morrow; – vainly I had tried to borrow / From my books surcease of sorrow – sorrow for the lost Lenore –“ (638). The narrator here, as is the one in “Annabel Lee,” is also dwelling on his sorrow from losing Lenore when he hears something at his door. It is natural for buildings to creak and give the illusion of someone at a door and the narrator wonders if there might actually be someone out there. He peers into the darkness around him, listening for sounds of a stranger that has come to speak with him possibly giving him relief from the grief that grips him so. When the silence is broken and he hears a single word. “And the only word there spoken was the whispered word, ‘Lenore!’ / This *I* whispered, and an echo murmured back the word, ‘Lenore!’”(638). He answers the darkness with the name the darkness gave him, and the narrator gains hope as a tapping comes upon his window. He thinks that it might be his Lenore come back to give him relief for her passing, or even her come back to stay with him. Unlatching the window he is greeted by a raven hopping into the room. As the raven comes into the room he “[p]erched upon a bust of Pallas just above my chamber door –“ (638), which gives evidence that Poe is using the raven for not only its death symbolism that has popped up in modern times but also its wisdom and role as a messenger. Ravens, in many ancient cultures, are thought of as wise oracles that whisper secrets to those they serve. The narrator originally picks up on the wisdom as he starts to question the raven hoping to get word of his Lenore, anything to relieve his grief, but only gets the single answer of “nevermore.” He wants an answer so badly that he tries to put words in the raven’s beak. “Respite – respite and Nepenthe from thy memories of Lenore! / Let me quaff this kind Nepenthe and forget this lost Lenore!’ / Quoth the raven, ‘Nevermore’”(639). The narrator obviously wants respite for his grief and he begs this creature for the answer, yet he will not get one, at least nothing more than “nevermore.” The narrator, rather than the narrator of “Annabel Lee,” wants an answer to how he shall live on without his Lenore. He needs it so desperately that he is trying to put meaning to the single word uttered by the raven.

And the raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting

On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;

And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon that is dreaming,

And the lamp-light o’er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;

And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor

Shall be lifted – nevermore! (640)

The narrator finally realizes that he will never be able to rise above the grief that grips his soul. He will forever see the “pallid bust” of Lenore and he will never be rid of the image. The raven has not done much, except repeat a single word and sit upon his Greek patron. The narrator has put the words in the beak of the raven, grown angry, and finally accepted that he will never be rid of the grief that Lenore has left him with. This narrator’s madness is not as strong as the narrator’s of “Annabel Lee,” but the narrator of “The Raven” will forever be haunted and weighed down by the death of Lenore.

The paranoia of death looming just around the corner is amplified in “The Tell-Tale Heart” as the narrator tries to come to terms with the old man’s vulture eye. The narrator’s paranoia, extreme suspicion of something that has not caused him harm, starts with the eye of his employer and allows for the extreme decision to kill the old man. The narrator has a stable madness – cleaning up the blood, hiding the body – while committing the act of removing the symbol of death from his sight, but soon spirals out of control upon the living officers coming and trod upon the remains of his disposed death. “The disease had sharpened my senses – not destroyed – not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute.”(691) The narrator recognizes that he has a disease, his paranoia, but he also recognizes that it has strengthened his senses, which unfortunately drives him to give up the game. This paranoia also makes him hyperaware of the old man’s eye, and drives death symbolism for the eye deep into his psyche. He had reason enough to off the old man, the old man’s eye reminded him of a vulture. A scavenger of death, an omen of what is to come for him. “He had the eye of a vulture – a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees – very gradually – I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever.” (691). The eye is later referred to as the “evil eye” but it is evident that the narrator links the eye to that of death. This leads us to realize that the narrator has a fear of dying, yet he is all right with killing to get rid of that reminder. “All in vain; because death, in approaching the old man, had stalked with his black shadow before him, and the shadow had now reached and enveloped the victim.” (693) The narrator is obsessed with death, he describes the old man slightly waking up at the feeling of death looming over him, but it is not enough to save him. The narrator quickly and efficiently cleans up his kill, however the police are there to investigate a noise complaint from a neighbor. At the time, the narrator is calm, easily talking to the cops. Secure in the knowledge that he had removed death from his sight. This narrator however starts to hear a noise that slowly builds as he talks with the police over where he buried the old man. “The ringing became more distinct: I talked more freely, to get rid of the feeling; but it continued and gained definitiveness – until, at length, I found that the noise was not within my ears.” (694) The narrator tries to hide the noise that only he can hear; yet he cannot hide it. His paranoia starts to come in as the realization that he has not gotten rid of the death omen starts to build. He did not mean the old man harm, just the eye. The eye that reminded him that death is looming. His paranoia driven hallucination makes him hear a heart beat under the floorboards, and finally he cannot take it anymore. “’Villians!’ I shrieked, ‘dissemble no more! I admit the deed! – tear up the planks! – here, here! – it is the beating of his hideous heart!’”(695) The narrator’s psyche cannot take the clashing of life and death in one room, especially with the death omen still under his feet. He realizes that he cannot run from death, but he still cannot deal with that and instead has a break in his mental stability. In contrast to “Annabel Lee” and “The Raven” the narrator does not have the grief that those narrators had. Instead he started with paranoia of death watching him, amplifying his senses to the point of hearing things. The narrator would have gotten away with it if he had not had the overwhelming madness that was brought on with the thought of death.

Roderick Usher is allowed to watch the death and rebirth of his sister, Madeline, every time she has an episode of cataleptical. Instead of the narrator going mad because of death, “The Fall of the House of Usher” gives the reader an outside look at Roderick Usher as his sister haunts him. Madeline has a condition of “partially cataleptical,” which left her looking like she has passed away and is reborn every time she comes out of it. This type of illness would be very trying on Roderick and Madeline alike, though we only get the end of Roderick’s fall into instability. “[B]ut he had buried his face in his hands, and I could only perceive that a far more than ordinary wanness had overspread the emaciated fingers through which trickled many passionate tears.” (658) Roderick gets an entire person as his symbol of death, unlike the eye in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” with Madeline perpetually falling to death and rising again, it is no wonder that Roderick has dangerous thoughts. It is no wonder that at her latest episode he buried her alive in the basement, lid sealed to keep her from rising again. Though he did not have to seal her coffin, but as his mind deteriorates it gives to reason that he would seal the coffin so as to keep his sister from rising again and haunting him. The narrator tries to relieve Roderick of his gloom, thinking that Madeline is actually dead. However, we start to get a clue of how Roderick sees his sister, she is a symbol of death. She is perpetually dying and coming back to life, an endless cycle. “I felt creeping upon me, by slow yet certain degrees, the wild influences of his own fantastic yet impressive superstitions.” (663) Roderick obviously wants to believe that his sister is dead. His hyperaware senses tell him otherwise, but he stays silent, hoping that it is madness that creeps upon him and that Madeline is finally resting in peace. He can hear her scratching and her heart beating, but he dare not speak of it. He does not want to confront that omen of death creeping upon him.

“Not hear it? –yes, I hear it, and *have* heard it. Long –long–long–many minutes, many hours, many days, have I hear it–yet I dared not –I *dared* not speak! We *have put her living in the tomb!* Said I not that my senses were acute? –I *now* tell them – many, many days ago – yet I dared not – I *dared not speak!* And now – to-night– Ethelred – ha! ha! – the breaking of the hermit’s door, and the death-cry of the dragon, and the clangor of the shield –say, rather, the rending of the coffin, and the grating of the iron hinges, and her struggles within the coppered archway of the vault! Oh whither shall I fly? Will she not be here anon? Is she not hurrying to upbraid me for my haste? Have I not heard her footsteps on the stair? Do I not distinguish that heavy and horrible beating of her heart? Madman!” – here he sprung violently to his feet, and shrieked out his syllables as if in the effort he were giving up his soul – “Madman! *I tell you that she now stands without the door!*” (666)

Roderick has a definite fear of death that has led him to the rash decision of burying his sister alive, yet he can hear her living, beating heart. He knows she is still alive, but does not want her to be. He wants to break the cycle his sister is in, not the in-between state that she is forced to stay in. Roderick cannot stand seeing his sister die over and over, yet he cannot stand seeing her come back to life. Roderick like the narrators of “Annabel Lee” and “The Raven” had a woman’s death bring him to madness, and like “The Tell-Tale Heart” he heard her still beating heart, punishing him for leaving her behind.

The looming shadow of death drives many to rash decisions. Poe’s characters are driven to extremes to either avoid death or come to terms with death. “Annabel Lee” and “The Raven” dealt in the decisions of being left behind by the women they loved, while “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Fall of the House of Usher” dealt with the overwhelming weight that death has on the living. These characters were ultimately driven to their decisions by death and through death they tried justify their decisions.

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