

Commentary

An Analysis of “Beauty of Death” in Edgar Allen Poe’s Poetry

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Abstract: Edgar Allen Poe was one of the greatest poets in America and the poems he created have a great impact on not only American literature but the whole world. In many of his poems, “death” is almost everywhere, and through these poems his aesthetic view was revealed. In Poe’s mind, the terror and ugliness of death is another form of beauty, and this sort of beauty is eternal and transcends time and space. The author analyzes different presentations of “beauty of death” in Poe’s poems and finds that, in Poe’s mind, death does not mean the end of life, but a kind of rebirth and a sublimation of soul, and it helps people to find the “supernal beauty” which only exists in another world. To explore this is of great value to study his extraordinary and unique poems and further explore his view of death and aesthetics.

Keywords: Allen Poe, Poetry, Death, Beauty, Aesthetics

1. Introduction

Edgar Allen Poe (1809—1849) was one of the greatest and the most widely read writers in America, who had a deep influence on not only American literature but the world arena. Just as Hammond said, “Poe is a poet in the first place and then a short story writer.” [1] Poe’s writing career began with poems and also ended with it, and he was also a prolific poet since his four collections of poems were published. However, although he devoted himself in writing, he did not get a foothold in mainstream American literature when he was alive. On the contrary, his life was filled with sneer and disesteem and he was not accepted by American literary circle at that time. To make things worse, Poe’s beloved families passed away one by one, leaving him alone in this indifferent world, which led to his death at a young age.

During Poe’s lifetime, there were three important women who were Muse in most of his poems. They are his mother, Mrs Stannard, and his wife Virginia Clemm. Unfortunately, his mother died when he was very young. This tragedy leads to his desire for maternal love throughout his life, which is reflected in literary creation. It has been said that a series of his heroine such as Ligeia, Eleonora, Berenice and Lenore are

modeled on his mother. Mrs. Stannard, Poe’s classmate’s mother, was a beautiful, melancholy, sentimental and fragile woman who provided him with consolation, sympathy and maternal love. In Poe’s mind, Mrs Stannard was his mother, his lover and his bosom friend. Unfortunately, Mrs. Stannard died of tuberculosis, the disease same as his mother’s. *To Helen* was to commemorate his “first and purest and ideal love” [2] to this lady. Poe’s wife, Virginia Clemm, was also tortured by tuberculosis and died at the same age as his mother. Virginia was smart, beautiful and brave, and Poe’s love to her had a love-like attachment to his mother. Just like Poe’s mother and Mrs Stannard, Virginia was also the Muse in many of Poe’s poems, among which the most famous is *Annabel Lee*. These three important females’ deaths are undoubtedly a heavy blow to Poe, which laid a deep imprint on his works. It is no wonder that Poe was so sensitive to death and beauty.

In Poe’s poetry, aesthetics is the most important thing rather than profound thought and philosophy. Poe thought that among all the melancholy topics, death was the saddest one and “the death of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world”. [3] Thus, most of his works are dark and pessimistic, and his heroines are all beautiful, clever and kind, but no one escaped the fate of dying at a

young age. Therefore, to analyze “death of beauty” not only is conducive to further understanding Poe’s aesthetic view and exploring his artistic achievements, but has a guiding significance to study modern American poetry.

2. Previous Studies on Allen Poe

In recent 100 years, Edgar Allan Poe has been always within the spotlight of critical attention and evaluation. Just as T. S. Eliot said, Edgar Allan Poe was indeed “a stumbling block for the judicial critic.” Studies on him covered many aspects, including biography, psychology, and his literary creations. In early years, most studies on him tried to probe into his personal life to find the root of his creations, such as Hervey Allan’s *Israfel: The life and Times of Edgar Allan Poe* (1934) and Arthur Hobson Quinn’s *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography* (1969). In the first half of the twentieth century, critics turned to study his works, such as Allan Tate’s *The Angelic Imagination* (1968). D. H Lawrence’s *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1977). After that, critics began to analyze Poe’s works from the perspective of structuralism, socialism, feminism and so on, such as David Ketterer’s *The Rationale of Deception in Poe* (1979) and Leland S. Person’s *Aesthetic Headaches* (1988).

Studies on Poe in China began during “the May 4th” period when the highly reputed Chinese writer Lu Xun translated and introduced Poe’s *The Gold-Bug* to Chinese readers, and Lu highly praised the effect of Poe’s works. Since then, more scholars began to read Poe’s works and the aesthetic theories in Poe’s work do have a profound impact on the formation and development of Chinese modern poetry, especially the development of Crescent School. However, for a long period, studies on Poe in China remained on a superficial level as Chinese scholars just either studied Poe’s life or translated his works. Fortunately, in the late 1990s, more researches began to apply some literary theories to the analysis of Poe’s works, and noticed the theme and the aesthetic value of Poe’s poetry, such as Zhu Zhenwu and Wang Erlei [4] who talk about Poe’s aesthetic interest and his poetic theories in his poetry concerning death and dreams, and Yu Lei [5] who analyzes the cognitive mechanism in Poe’s fictional aesthetics and he also discusses four aspects of Edgar Allen Poe’s fictional aesthetics [6]. In addition, some Chinese scholars compare Poe with Chinese poets. For example, Zhang Junru and Zheng Fei [7] compare Poe with Haizi to analyze their view on death. Liu Shijun [8] compare Poe’s *Annabel Lee* with *Jiangchengzi* which was written by Sushi, a great Chinese Ci poet, to talk about the eternal and immortal love to their respective wife.

After analyzing current studies on Poe’s poetry in China, the author finds that although there is an increasing number of researches on Poe’s view of death and his aesthetic view, few of them combine these two together. In this paper, the author will analyze three poems to conclude different presentations of “death of beauty” in Poe’s poetry and his view of death and aesthetics, so as to better understand Poe’s poetry and his profound impact on American literature.

3. Different Presentations of “Beauty of Death” in Poe’s Poetry

“Death” and “beauty” have always been the two major themes in Poe’s poems. In Poe’s poetry, “beauty” has always been closely linked to “death” in a melancholy and horrific atmosphere. Different from traditional beauty which is pure and is usually linked with good morality, “beauty” in Poe’s poetry tends to be absurd and creepy.

3.1. The Horrific and Mysterious Beauty of Death

Death is undoubtedly the most horrible and mysterious thing in the world, and it appears repeatedly in Poe’s poetry, forming a horrific and mysterious atmosphere. There are different kinds of horror in his poetry, such as the horror of death, the horror of disillusionment, and the horror of weirdness. Horror in Poe’s poetry is not only revealed from the words and senses, but emerges from the bottom of readers’ heart. In this way, the effect of horror is achieved and beauty of death is depicted. Poe has a great number of poems that manifest horrific and mysterious beauty, such as *The Conqueror Worm*, *Ulalume* and *The City in the Sea*. The author will analyze *The City in the Sea* to explore how Poe manifests the horrific and mysterious beauty of death.

*Lo! Death has reared himself a throne
In a strange city lying alone
Far down within the dim West,
Where the good and the bad and the worst and the best
Have gone to their eternal rest.
There shrines and palaces and towers
(Time-eaten towers that tremble not!)
Resemble nothing that is ours.
Around, by lifting winds forgot,
Resignedly beneath the sky
The melancholy waters lie.
No rays from the holy heaven come down
On the long night-time of that town;
But light from out the lurid sea
Streams up the turrets silently—
Gleams up the pinnacles far and free—
Up domes—up spires—up kingly halls—
Up fanes—up Babylon-like walls—
Up shadowy long-forgotten bowers
Of sculptured ivy and stone flowers—
Up many and many a marvellous shrine
Whose wreathed friezes intertwine
The viol, the violet, and the vine.
Resignedly beneath the sky
The melancholy waters lie.
So blend the turrets and shadows there
That all seem pendulous in air,
While from a proud tower in the town
Death looks gigantically down.
There open fanes and gaping graves
Yawn level with the luminous waves;
But not the riches there that lie*

*In each idol's diamond eye—
Not the gaily-jewelled dead
Tempt the waters from their bed;
For no ripples curl, alas!
Along that wilderness of glass—
No swellings tell that winds may be
Upon some far-off happier sea—
No heavings hint that winds have been
On seas less hideously serene.
But lo, a stir is in the air!
The wave—there is a movement there!
As if the towers had thrust aside,
In slightly sinking, the dull tide—
As if their tops had feebly given
A void within the filmy Heaven.
The waves have now a redder glow—
The hours are breathing faint and low—
And when, amid no earthly moans,
Down, down that town shall settle hence,
Hell, rising from a thousand thrones,
Shall do it reverence. [9]*

There is a mysterious and unforgettable atmosphere in *The City in the Sea*. Something unknown is hidden in this seemingly peaceful sea, which is manifested as a mysterious and horrible scene. In this poem, sea is not just a background but is indispensable to form the whole picture. In the first section, Poe first depicts a city which is "strange" and lies "alone", in which the throne of "Death" is erected. This provides readers with a horrible scene and arouses readers' interest to explore this city. Then, Poe uses "far", "dim" and "eternal rest", all of which not only vividly depict a dark and cold atmosphere but also show that everything here is static just like "the melancholy waters lying resignedly beneath the sky". However, this seemingly peaceful sea is going to have a striking change.

In the second section, Poe tells us that rays are not from "the holy heaven" but "the lurid sea". These rays are not static but "streams up the turrets silently" and "gleams up the pinnacles far and free". This scene undoubtedly shows that the sea is going to change. In addition, both of "the kingly hall" and "Babylon-like walls" reveal the power of the invader. In the fourth section, Poe also portrays that the sea is "less hideously serene" with "no ripple" and "no swellings". But is it true?

In the last section, the city is destroyed all of a sudden. Poe depicts a "stir" in the air and a "movement" in the sea, and that "the tower had trust aside" and "the wave have a redder glow". All of them lead to the sinking of the city, with which hell rises "from a thousand of thrones". This perfectly echoes the first sentence "Death has reared himself a throne".

Poe successfully created a horrific and mysterious atmosphere by using different artistic techniques to illustrate the surrounding environment and the supernatural phenomenon. For example, he used personification in the sentence "the hours are breathing faint and low", suggesting that the fainting time provides the sea with life and power to engulf the city. Readers can imagine that a terrible monster with dark wings hovers in the vast sky, with its blue eyes

staring at the vast sea to find treasures to build a palace for itself. In addition, Poe also took advantage of the techniques of contrast and comparison to strengthen the horrific and mysterious "beauty of death".

3.2. *The Melancholy and Romantic Beauty of Death*

In Poe's mind, the death of a beauty is undoubtedly the most poetic thing. In order to pursue "beauty" in poetry, Poe portrayed a great many females in his poems, all of whom are beautiful, young, loyal to love, and are the representation of perfection. However, they all die in their bloom of youth and in the hug of love, which does not conform to the law of nature. These beauties are the true portrayal of those important females in Poe's life, like his mother, Mrs Stannard and Virginia. It is easy for readers to be touched and immerse themselves in a sorrowful mood upon seeing the death of those beauties, for their death has a melancholy and romantic beauty. Many of Poe's poems depict this kind of beauty, such as *Annabel Lee*, *Israfel*, *Lenore*, and his well-known poem *The Raven*. The author will analyze *The Raven* to explore how Poe described the melancholy and romantic beauty of death in his poetry.

"Prophet!" said I, "thing of evil!—prophet still, if bird or devil!

By that Heaven that bends above us—by that God we both adore—

*Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn,
It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels named Lenore—*

Clasp a rare and radiant maiden, whom the angels named Lenore."

Quoth the raven, "Nevermore."

Poe wrote this poem as a narrator and drew a melancholy picture. In a dreary and bleak midnight, The narrator just lost his beloved Lenore. He is weak and weary and tries to indulge himself in the book to forget the pain, but in vain. Suddenly, the narrator hear someone knocking at his door, and he wonders if it is his Lenore. To his disappointment, it is just a raven. The narrator asks it about its name. It replies "Nevermore". Then, the narrator asks whether it is the angel sent by God to give him nepenthe to respite and forget his lost Lenore, and it replies "Nevermore" again. The narrator asks it whether he can clasp Lenore in "the distant Aidenn", but it replies "Nevermore" again. When the narrator asks it to get back into "the tempest and the Night's Plutonian shore", it also replies "Nevermore". There are twelve "Nevermore" in this poem, which implies that Lenore will not come back and "my" soul will never be lifted. Lenore and the narrator are separated by death, making him grief-stricken, frenzy and mad.

Traditionally, raven is regarded to be ominous and usually appears in cemetery. Thus, the poem sets a melancholy, bleak and decaying tone and suggests the loss of Lenore with the appearance of raven. Just as Poe said, the death of a beauty is the most poetic one. The death of this "sainted", "rare and radiant" maiden reveals extreme beauty. In fact, *The Raven* describes a dream in which the narrator's pursuit of Lenore is in vain. The loss of this angel-like Lenore also implies the loss

of beauty. In this way, death is closely linked with beauty. Readers will not only sigh for the loss of beauty but be easily touched by the romantic but grievous love between the narrator and Lenore. Between the lines, the poem sings the praise for the eternal romantic love, and at the same time, shows that the narrator is lingering between the reality and the dream in a melancholy mood. Thus, a melancholy and romantic beauty of death is realized.

3.3. *The Holy and Transcending Beauty of Death*

Poe was pursuing a “supernal beauty” throughout his life, which can only be realized via death because this beauty is spiritual freedom and rebirth of the soul. Many of his poems manifest this sort of beauty, like *Tamerlane* and *To Helen*. The author will analyze *To Helen* to explore how Poe expresses this kind of beauty that is holy and transcends death.

*Helen, thy beauty is to me
Like those Nicean barks of yore,
That gently, o'er a perfumed sea,
The weary, way-worn wanderer bore
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.
Lo! in yon brilliant window-niche
How statue-like I see thee stand,
The agate lamp within thy hand!
Ah, Psyche, from the regions which
Are Holy Land!*

The whole poem is surrounded by an illusory misty and exotic aesthetic color. In the first line of the poem, the narrator declares that he is totally intoxicated with Helen's beauty, and the purpose of this poem is to praise this kind of beauty which can destroy a city or even a state. Traditionally, Helen is the embodiment of classical beauty in Greek mythology. In this poem, Poe does not mention Helen's life experience and social background, but depicts her beauty and her elegant temperament and demeanor with rich imagination and by the use of metaphor. Helen's beauty attracts the narrator and stimulates his sincere love to her, which is emanated from his soul. Readers can imagine that when he wrote this poem, Poe was totally immersed in the beauty of Helen.

In the second section, “I” can be considered as the poet himself because this set of images is also the description of Poe's unfortunate life. His father left him and his mother died when he was very young. Thus, he was “wont to roam on desperate seas” and longed for maternal love. Mrs Stannard provided him with this sort of love and he devoted his loyal love to her in turn. In Poe's mind, she is the embodiment of perfection and has the same transcending beauty as Helen in Greek mythology. “Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face, thy Naiad airs have brought me home” is not only praise for Helen, but for Mrs Stannard. In addition, there are two implications in “have brought me home”. One is the literary meaning while the other is the metaphorical one. “I” understand that “the

glory that was Greece, and the grandeur that was Rome” is actually a synonym for classical beauty. The poet linked Helen's hair, face and elegance with the splendor of Greece and Rome, which represents that Helen's beauty is sacred and immortal and will not fade away as time goes by. This suggests that Mrs Stannard is the embodiment of youth, pureness and transcending beauty. It is from Mrs Stannard that Poe felt the holiness of this transcending beauty.

In this poem, Poe did not depict Helen's appearance meticulously, but compared her beauty with all kinds of images that transcend time and space, so as to show that her beauty is actually the sacred beauty of another world, a world one can reach only when he dies. In this way, a holy beauty is created which transcends the death of body.

4. The Root of “Beauty of Death” in Poe's Poems

4.1. *Poe's View of Death*

Thompson once said that Allen Poe is a “verbal landscapist of death” [10]. In Poe's poetry, death, like a monarch, looks down on all the living things. Although death is ugly and horrific, it is another form of “beauty” and “rebirth” under Poe's pen. Just as the aesthetician Dufrenne said that this kind of death may lead to “the regeneration of life and surrealism”. Then a more advanced, more beautiful and purer soul is generated. In other words, death is the sublimation of one's soul in Poe's mind.

Poe thought that death was not the end of life but a transcendence and had a metaphysical meaning. He thought that soul could be separated from body, which implies that one's soul is immortal and eternal and it will not disappear even if one dies. In his view, death is neither a natural event, nor an accident, so one can not simply regard it as the end of life from a chronological perspective. Instead, death means rebirth and transcendence of time and space. Thus, death, to some extent, has a metaphysical meaning. Therefore, in Allen Poe's poetry, he usually expressed the desire to transcend life by the death of beauty.

4.2. *Poe's Aesthetic View*

“Supernal beauty” has always been the core concept in Allen Poe's aesthetic view and the ultimate goal in his creations, as he said, “beauty is the atmosphere and the real essence of the poem.” and “I have created beauty with superlative terms, just for beauty is the criteria for all the arts and the source stimulating arts”. In his *The Poetic Principle*, he mentioned that one's feeling of beauty was “an eternal instinct” [11]. He thought that pleasant things, such as form, sound, smell and emotion, etc., were the concrete forms of beauty. The reason why these things are considered beautiful is that they arouse man's instinct to pursue beauty. Thus, when these forms, sounds, smells and emotions are repeated in words, they become the source of pleasure. [12] This sort of pleasure is indeed an instinctive feeling of beauty.

However, Poe’s pursuit of beauty is not just on the stage of materials or forms, but on a much higher level. The beauty he pursued throughout his lifetime is an immortal and eternal one that transcends time and space. This beauty leads to the sublimation and excitement of the soul, which is different from the emotional excitement or the satisfaction of ordinary people. Poe thought that tears people had when appreciating the eternal beauty of poetry were not due to joy but unbearable sorrow. This is because the “supernal beauty” that people feel is vague and obscure. Just as Vico said, “We are not yet able to grasp all the sacred and maniacal pleasures in this world once and for all.” [13] Allen Poe thought that it was hard for people in this particular world to feel that extreme beauty which can only be touched through death. In order to feel, explore and even capture this kind of beauty, living people can only turn to poetry or other forms of art. This idea is clearly manifested in Poe’s poetry where he tried to show the inner world of people and vividly described their desires and thoughts to stimulate readers’ instinct to pursue “supernal beauty”. Therefore, the “supernal beauty” he sought is a beauty existing in the spiritual world.

5. Conclusion

It is the short and unfortunate life that emerges Allen Poe’s “death complex”, and it is those beautiful females in his life that lead to his pursuit of beauty. This sort of beauty transcends time and space, and can only be touched after death. In Poe’s poetry, death does not mean the end of life, but a kind of rebirth and a sublimation of soul. Besides, death helps people to find the “supernal beauty” which only exists in another world. This thesis conducts a study on different presentations and the root of “beauty of death” in Poe’s poetry. Not comprehensive enough though, it still provides a rough glimpse for readers to appreciate the extraordinary style of creation and unique aesthetic view of this genius poet.

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