
The Portrayal Of Women In Poe's Poems And Short Stories

American writer Edgar Allan Poe is one of the world's greatest crime and horror authors. His tormented stories reflect his tormented life. Poe created some of the most distinctive female characters in the history of fiction.

According to him "the most melancholic and poetical topic in the world is the death of a beautiful woman. Consequently, his tales where women seems to be attractive, but passive victims who are murdered at the start or during the tale are most widely read and are the most popular ones. But why Poe was so attracted by the death of the women?

It seems that his private life fed into his work, both were marked by the loss of all the women he loved. I think he fears them , because they die so easily and he is going to be abandoned yet again. He was "cursed " with the death of four important women in his life: Virginia his young wife, Eliza his dead mother, Sarah Halen a spiritualist poet he nearly married and Frances. These women had a strong influence in his female characters.

In order to portray these characters first we have to classify them. Various researchers have proposed categories in which we can classify Poe's fictional women. To start we will have a closer look at the BBC documentary "Edgar Allan Poe: Love, Death and Women ". In this documentary, we receive an account of his life and how the topics of love, death and women played an important role in it.

The first classification is Poe's real women

There are three main categories discussed in the documentary, first the mother figure, second the virginal maiden and the third one the unobtainable icon. The first category, the mother figure is represented in his life by his aunt and mother in law Maria Clemm, Virginia's mother and his real mother, Eliza Poe. In his work we can find mother figure for example in the poem "For Annie ": " she covered me warm,/ and she prayed to the angels ". Also in Poe's fiction, namely in "Ligeia" which the narrator is referred to with child-like terms and placing Ligeia in the role of mother. The next category is the virginal maiden. In his life this is played by Virginia, his wife. The virginal maiden is the category that appears most often in Poe's works. In his poetry, we encounter the virginal maiden in one of his better known poem " Annabel Lee ". According to some researchers Annabel Lee is based on a real-life character, namely Virginia Clemm. The last category mentioned in the documentary is the unobtainable icon. According to it Frances Sargent Osgood, a poetess in Poe's time, represents this category most strongly.

She is known for her literary relationship with Poe as well and many claim that they had a romantic relationship, but this is not completely certain. However, it is certain that Poe wrote several poems in her honour, for example "To F--s S. O--d" (which easily fills in as "To Frances Sargent Osgood"). Regarding Poe's other works, Lenore from "The Raven" can be placed into this category since she is now unobtainable for the narrator and he converts her into an icon by his nostalgia and repeated ponderings and cries for the "lost Lenore".

The second classification Poe's fictional women

There are a lot of similarities between Poe's fictional women or as they are called the Dark Ladies. We will categorize them based on their role in poem and tales.

The first category, the spiritual beings in feminine form, is accompanied by the examples of Nesace in "Al Araaf" and the angels in "The Conqueror Worm". The next category, namely that of the beautiful, dead or dying woman, is of more interest to us. They refer to the poems "The Sleeper", "Lenore" and "The Raven", but also "To One in Paradise" and of course, "Annabel Lee". This category appears most often in Poe's poetry, but there are definitely examples in his prose as well. The Dark Ladies are generally described as beautiful and all of them die or seem to die at some point. Another category is that of the women who have ideal or preternatural qualities or both. Ligeia (the prose version) is placed into this category, I also believe that we cannot ignore her role in the "death of a beautiful woman" category. The same holds for Berenice and Morella, who are also placed into this "ideal or preternatural" category. I believe that these women are more interesting to investigate because they offer a variation to the typical Poesque theme of the beautiful, dead woman. Not many people know Poe's other stories and it is exactly because some of these stories have received only sparse critical attention that they deserve to be investigated. They appear normal, everyday women, they offer variation in Poe's works. Unfortunately they are lesser-known variations and do not belong to the popular tales.

What we have said before can be summarized in a few words. The women in Poe's fiction are beautiful but unlucky. In Poe's work women have to die.