Amy Koppen  
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Dr. Ruie Pritchard & Dr. Kevin Oliver

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A Causal Analysis: Edgar Allan Poe

Edgar Allan Poe lived the “most bizarre, grotesque, horrific, and pathetic life of any literary figure” or person I have ever encountered (Engel 63). Poe’s forty years on earth intrigue me to the point of obsession.  I find it fantastically fascinating that someone can be that unfortunate in life. If Poe played Milton Bradley’s LIFE, it wouldn’t be long before he picked up the LIFE tile informing him that his pink, plastic wife had tuberculosis and to move back twenty spaces. Playing LIFE requires the players to select a banker. I certainly would steer clear of electing him as my banker; considering Poe managed to receive a whopping $0 for his most famous work.  Not only was Poe broke and hapless, but alone. Orphaned by the age of three, Poe was rejected by the two father figures in his life, and witnessed the deaths of the four most important women in his life. If my mother, childhood crush, stepmother, and wife had succumb to disease (3 out of the 4 died of tuberculosis), you’re darn right it would spark a fire in my pants to write about women dying of the Red Death. If I was fond of a drink (or seventeen) because I was constantly depressed and lonely, I would not be writing about happy beach trips with the quintessential family or the beautiful facets of nature.  No, I would probably paint my mood by concocting some terrifying, depressing, haunting, and freakish stories.

Copious pages have been written about the biographical connection between Poe’s life and works. As Dr. Engel notes, Poe’s life affected his works “because his mind was so warped and influenced by his miserable childhood and all the deaths, the only thing he seemed able to write were stories and poems about dead people who return to the grave” (Engel 71). Fortunately for us, Poe’s twisted childhood and insanity gave us “the tale of terror”, and the first detective stories that would later influence Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s *Sherlock Holmes*.  It would be insane to argue that Poe’s life experiences did not propel his works. Given the misfortunate experiences of Edgar Allan Poe and focusing on the tone, subject, characters, and setting of his works, he just had to produce the kind of writing that Edgar Allan Poe is infamous.

Poe said himself, “the death then of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world, and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover” (Poe, *The Philosophy of Composition*). Poe had no shortage of beautiful woman throughout his life to inspire him.  His mother, Elizabeth, possessed an exquisite beauty, matched by Poe’s wife, Virginia. “[Virginia] was young and beautiful in the exact way his dead mother, Elizabeth, had been- a fatal resemblance” (Engel 72). However, before Poe laid eyes on his ten-year old first-cousin and future wife, he loved Mrs. Stanard. Poe’s teenage, tortured heart belonged to his friend Richard’s mother. She was another dead ringer for his late mother.  Hopefully, Richard knew Poe only hung around Richard because he had the hot’s for his mother (cue Fountains of Wanye’s one hit wonder “Stacey’s Mom”). These love birds didn’t let their thirty year age gap hinder their budding love.  Unfortunately, the giant brain tumor growing inside Mrs. Stanard’s brain impeded the romance.

John and Frances Allen took Poe in after his mother’s death.  John resented Poe because Poe acquired so much of France's attention. To rid himself of Poe, John enrolled him in a school in England. This so-called “private church school” only added to Poe’s dismal background.  According to Dr. Engel, the headmasters forced teachers to utilize the cemetery in their lesson plans. For instance, “when students had to learn subtraction, they were given a piece of chalk and a slate and were then sent out to the cemetery” (Engel 68). These disturbing school days would later entice Poe into creating some of the most vivid and horrifying settings in literature. But when Poe wasn’t busy calculating math problems on a dead guy’s tombstone for a school assignment, he was by Mrs. Stanard’s bedside watching her die. Like his mother’s death, Poe was holding Mrs. Stanard’s hand and gazing into her eyes when she met her demise.

Poe composed “To Helen” about Mrs. Stanard. In the poem, Poe describes a beautiful woman guiding him home.  With his stepmother in America and Poe in school in England, Mrs. Stanard acted as a motherly figure to Poe. Poe wrote the poem 1831, the same year as Mrs. Stanard’s death. After her death, Poe returned to school in America and refocused on his step-mother, Frances Allan.  Poe’s step-father continued to despise him, but Frances protected Poe until tuberculosis took her life. He writes “Sonnet To My Mother” about Frances. The actual use of her name and Virginia’s, mention of his “own mother, who died early”, and the remark “mother of the woman I loved so dearly” makes this connection obvious (Poe 86). Doesn’t that make it autobiographical!? In this one instance: yes. “Sonnet to My Mother” is the one exception.  All other 776 works by Poe are fiction: generated by the perfect mixture of his illusive imagination and morbid life experiences.

Gullible scholars firmly believe Poe was a happy guy, that his works were merely a parody of forlorn stories. Others wrongly note Poe’s works as strictly autobiographical, along the lines of Harper Lee’s *To Kill A Mockingbird.* Scholars arguing the biographical angel will tell you Poe owned a pet raven named Lenore.Lenore was a nasty, old bird found hovering on the steps of Poe’s apartment complex in Richmond. Lenore talked incessantly, however, her limited vocabulary haunted Poe and she wouldn’t quiet down until Poe wrote a poem about her. Truthfully, Poe never had a raven. Charles Dickens owned a raven, and told Poe of its tragic death over lunch. When Dickens mentioned the words death and tragic in the same story, Poe’s eyes lit up like fireworks on the Fourth of July. So we see, Poe’s life influencing his works, not solely autobiographical. If you’re still weary, please know that Poe never sealed anyone up in brick wall (“Cask of Amontillado”), he never murdered an old man burying the remains underneath a floor (“The Tell-Tale Heart”), and he never was a mistreated-midget who sought revenge on those who mistreated him (“Hop-Frog”).

While many of Poe’s works may seem autobiographical, they are merely a correlation to his life. It wasn’t that Poe was a mistreated-midget who sought revenge on those who mistreated him, but rather he knew one (although, names were changed to conceal the abbreviated man’s identity). Focusing briefly on the subject, setting, and tone of a few of Poe’s works will conclude: Poe’s desolate, calamitous private life directly fed into his tormented, grotesque, and horrific works.

With numerous deaths in Poe’s life, he became obsessed with all aspects of death including: disease, murder, revenge, and reincarnation. The subject of Poe’s works always revolves around “innumerable beautiful, dead young women” that “refuse to stay dead.  They seem dead in the beginning, they come back to life in the middle, and someone stabs them in the final paragraph” (Engel 65). The cause is simple: Poe watched his mother die and return to life every night growing up because she played Juliet from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. Nightly, young Poe enjoyed a front row seat to his mother’s fictional suicide. After the show, Poe witnessed his mother removing the knife from her chest, alive and well again. This continuous stabbing and reincarnation of his own mother blurred Poe’s vision of the barrier between life and death.

In Poe’s poems and short stories, his dead women needed an equally morbid setting to die and haunt their loved ones. The settings in Poe’s stories and poems create the tone.  For example, “The Masque of the Red Death” consists of six different rooms differentiated by color.  The sequence of the rooms shows that one cannot avoid death. Prospero, hoping to escape the Red Death, hides in his palace. Somehow the Red Death manages to enter the palace, sending everyone inside, including Prospero, to their death. The message: The Read Death (tuberculosis) cannot be stopped. Elizabeth, Mrs. Stanard, and Virginia all died from tuberculosis, and Poe watched on helpless to their cause. His settings always portray the same horror and anguish, ultimately foreshadowing the protagonist’s eventual doom.

Another example comes from “The Cask of Amontillado”. The short story takes place in the the catacombs, underneath an unnamed Italian city. As the two characters go further underground, the reader becomes weary of Fortunado’s outcome. Poe describes the creepy, underground tunnels as wine storage; however, storing wine in catacombs does not sound pleasant. Dating back to the Romans, catacombs were a system of underground tombs. As a reader, you couldn’t bribe me with enough wine to go down there with Fortunado and Montresor. Like countless Poe characters before, Fortunado reaches his ultimate demise when Montresor buries him alive behind a wall of bricks. As the last brick falls into place sealing off Fortunado, Montresor shows a slight remorse. He quickly shrugs it off, blaming the dampness of the catacombs. This chilling tale could only be constructed by a man whose imagination thrives off of his own haunted life.

The nature of Poe’s characters always reflects the same doom and self-destruction Poe tormented himself with throughout his life. In “The Raven”, the character must already know the answer will be “nevermore” but continues to inquire about his lost love. While Poe was writing “The Raven”, Virginia was home running a fever of 113, coughing up hairballs of fur, and violently shaking from chills. Poe knew the outcome a little too well. Because Poe was so poor, all he could offer his beloved wife was their cat to sit on Virginia’s chest and provide her warmth.

Even on his own deathbed Poe managed to portray scenes that could have been straight out of one of his stories.  On his way to New York, Poe stopped in Baltimore.  The reason for his visit remains uncertain. Onlookers described a very intoxicated Poe incoherently stumbling his way through the streets, dressed in bizarre clothing far too big and worn for the successful author. One confused witness watched the famous writer aimlessly collapsed into a gutter knocking him unconscious, “I knew he had been sober since the death of his beloved Virginia, but I’m sure he was wasted”.  Engel reports that a “horse ambulance happened by” and carried the unconscious drunk to the gate of the hospital (78). Remarkably, Poe survived three more days; mostly coming in and out of a drunken coma.  On the third day, a strange moment occurred: as if startled awake, “he opened his eyes wide, raised his head from his pillow, and screamed out in a voice so loud the entire ward heard him, ‘God have mercy on my soul!’ And then he fell back, dead” (Engel 78).  No one knows what he meant but this peculiar outburst; however, his troubled soul was finally laid to rest. Copious years later the mystery surrounding Poe’s death remains uncertain. The paradox of Poe’s death adds an eerie element when reading works.

Poe’s ending was much like that of his works: unhappy. At forty, “he had never had a complete success in his life” (Engel 78).  The two father figures in his life neglected him, and “the four women he had loved all died in agony in front of him” (78). The death and depression that haunted his life matched with his disturbing imagination sparked the best short stories and poems of any American author to date.

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