Annabel Lee

POEM TEXT

It was many and many a year ago,
In a kingdom by the sea,
That a maiden there lived whom you may know
By the name of Annabel Lee;
And this maiden she lived with no other thought
Than to love and be loved by me.

I was a child and *she* was a child,
In this kingdom by the sea,
But we loved with a love that was more than love—
I and my Annabel Lee—
With a love that the wingèd seraphs of Heaven
Coveted her and me.

And this was the reason that, long ago,
In this kingdom by the sea,
A wind blew out of a cloud, chilling
My beautiful Annabel Lee;
So that her highborn kinsmen came
And bore her away from me,
To shut her up in a sepulchre
In this kingdom by the sea.

The angels, not half so happy in Heaven,
Went envying her and me—
Yes!—that was the reason (as all men know,
In this kingdom by the sea)
That the wind came out of the cloud by night,
Chilling and killing my Annabel Lee.

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;

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;
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.

SUMMARY

Many years ago, there was a kingdom by the sea. In this kingdom lived a young woman called Annabel Lee, whom the speaker suggests the reader might know. According to the narrator, Annabel Lee's only ever thought about the love between them.

They were both children, but their love went well beyond what love can normally be. In fact, this love was so special that the angels of heaven were jealous and desirous of it.

For that reason, back then, Annabel Lee was killed by wind from a cloud. She was then taken away by people the narrator calls "highborn kinsmen," who could be the angels or Annabel Lee's own family members. They enclosed her in a tomb, still within the same kingdom.

Retrospectively, the speaker believes that the angels, unhappy in heaven and envious of the love between him and Annabel Lee, caused the wind that killed her.

Their love, says the speaker, was more powerful than the love between people older and wiser than them. Furthermore, no angel from heaven or demon under the sea could ever separate his soul from Annabel Lee's.

Every time the moon shines, it brings the speaker dreams of his beloved. When the stars rise, he can sense her sparkling eyes. Every night the speaker lies down alongside Annabel Lee—whom he calls his "life" and "bride"—in her tomb, with the sound of the sea coming from nearby.

THEMES

LOVE

"Annabel Lee" tells the story of young love cut short by tragedy. As the speaker (often assumed to be based on Poe himself, whose young wife died shortly before he wrote this poem) discusses his relationship with the now-deceased Annabel Lee, he presents the love between them as pure, eternal, and all-conquering. The love between the

speaker and Annabel Lee may have been short-lived, but it remains too powerful to be defeated, even by death. Through describing this intensely idealized love, the poem argues that love is the strongest force on earth.

The speaker establishes from the beginning that there was something magic about his and Annabel Lee's love. The opening stanza sounds like the beginning of a fairy tale, giving the poem a supernatural atmosphere. The first stanza places the story "many and a year ago"—like the classic "once upon a time"—which helps to underline the way in which this love is in part defined by its ability to survive eternally. As the poem progresses, the speaker builds his case for the rare power of this love, insisting on his conviction that his soul will never be separated from Annabel Lee's (line 32), which again highlights the idea of eternal survival against the odds.

In fact, this love was and is so powerful (according to the speaker) that it goes beyond the normal limits of how other people experience love. Lines 5 and 6 portray Annabel Lee's entire existence as built around her love for the speaker. Line 9 develops this further idea, paradoxically suggesting that their love was "more" than love itself. Indeed, not only does their love go beyond other loves, it also transcends the earthly realm. Their love is so pure that even angels envy the young lovers (lines 21-22). Angels are normally morally good creatures, but here it's as if seeing something even *more* good than themselves (the lovers' extraordinary love) makes them jealous and even murderous. This remarkable change shows that this love can alter even the powerful rules of the spiritual realm, and what's more, it conquers the vengeful angels themselves in the end--they kill Annabel Lee, but the speaker still claims that he and Annabel Lee will be linked forever (line 32). Throughout, the speaker contends that love will ultimately triumph over everything else.

Though all this discussion of love's power seems beautiful and romantic, it also hints at a darker possibility: at times, the speaker's love seems to have overwhelmed even his own sanity. The speaker has clearly been traumatized by the loss of Annabel Lee, and his ceaseless insistence on the supernatural power of their love can be read as a window into a troubled or even obsessive mind. For example, in the final stanza the speaker says that he is unable to experience the moon, stars, or sea without being consumed by thoughts of Annabel Lee. Furthermore, he claims to lie down beside Annabel Lee's body every night--an unsettling image, if taken literally. On the one hand, these lines are a moving demonstration of the speaker's undying love, but on the other, they are a troubling picture of how love's power can actually destroy those who experience it. This suggestion of insanity also casts some doubt on the speaker's romantic claims; if his memories are clouded by some kind of madness, then was his love really as wonderful as he says?

Part of poem's power, then, lies in its resistance to a single clear interpretation. It is an expression of the beauty of love *and* an examination of the intense (and perhaps troubling) way it can affect people.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-6
- Lines 7-12
- Lines 21-22
- Lines 27-33
- Lines 34-41

DEATH AND GRIEF

"Annabel Lee" takes up a common subject in Edgar Allan Poe's writing: the death of a beautiful young woman. It portrays this as the most tragic death of all—robbing the world of youth, beauty and innocence. The tragedy of this loss is mostly explored through the portrayal of the narrator's grief, which colors every line of the poem. The poem shows the way grief attaches itself to a person and refuses to let go, an experience intensified here by the added tragedy of a life cut short. The poem doesn't make a clear, neat argument about death and grief—and in a way, that's the point. Grief is disorientating and overpowering, and the poem embodies this from start to finish.

The speaker is completely defined by the death of his lover. They were children when they met and the speaker seems to have remained locked in this childhood love throughout his life. That is, as the poem unfolds line after line, it becomes clear that there's only one thought in the speaker's mind: "the beautiful Annabel Lee." This grief defines not just the speaker's past, but his present and future as well. To him, the entire world and all of nature are nothing more than reminders of Annabel Lee: the chilly atmosphere of moonbeams, starlight and the sea are all eternally linked to his lover. As he tells the reader, his soul will *never* "dissever" from Annabel Lee's; that is, he will be connected to her forever, which means that grief will rule his world forever. The state of grief is presented as being just as unchangeable as the state of death. That's why every other line either ends in "Annabel Lee" or rhymes with her name—the speaker's mind keeps circling back to the trauma of losing someone so young and beautiful. At play here, too, is the Romantic idea of innocence. Annabel Lee's youth and beauty make her pure, and her death both compounds the poem's sense of tragedy *and* preserves her in this eternal youthful beauty.

Another key element of the poem is the way in which the narrator's grief seems to have no possible outlet. Whereas some grief-stricken people might turn to family or spirituality for solace, the narrator can do no such thing. Any possible comfort from religion has been destroyed by the angels' role in Annabel Lee's death—he believes that their jealousy and malice

killed her. Likewise, if "highborn kinsmen" (line 17) is taken to refer to Annabel Lee's family, the narrator has no positive connection with them either; he mentions only that they took her away. He also disparages the "older" and "wiser" people in his world (lines 28-29), saying that they wouldn't understand the perfect young love he shared with Annabel Lee. In other words, he is entirely isolated—suggesting perhaps that the pain of losing a loved one can be made even worse by feeling alone in that pain.

The poem ultimately seems to suffocate under the pressure of this endless grief, with no suggestion of a way out. In fact, the poem's conclusion shows the speaker's environment merging with his grief. The moon and the stars exist only to bring back memories of Annabel Lee. The sea, too, is defined by his grief—its constant "sounding" underscoring the eternal silence of his deceased lover. In the end, the speaker says that he joins Annabel Lee in her tomb, and though it's unclear whether he does so literally or only figuratively (by *feeling* as if he is lying there beside her), it's nonetheless certain that the speaker is emotionally imprisoned by his grief.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 11-12
- Lines 13-20
- Lines 21-26
- Lines 27-41

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

It was many and many a year ago,
In a kingdom by the sea,
That a maiden there lived whom you may know
By the name of Annabel Lee;

The poem begins in a way that is deliberately close to the typical beginning of a fairy tale—an allusion to the genre, in a way. The first line is like an echo of "once upon a time," and the second line brings to mind the figure of a lone maiden locked up in a faraway kingdom--another classic feature of fairy tales. This beginning lets the reader know that what follows is an idealized account and involves a degree of fantasy. But the opening lines also lure the reader into a false sense of security—they put a sweet, simple face on what will later turn out to be a psychologically troubling poem. That is, the fairy tale beginning sets up the expectation of a fairy tale ending that fails to arrive—there is no "happily ever after" here, and the contrast between this opening and the lines to come highlights the sense of ongoing grief that colors the entire poem.

The first four lines also establish an objective and omniscient narrative tone. Of course, this is another a false promise—lines 5 and onward show that the speaker is very much invested in what he's telling the reader, and that he was directly involved in the life of Annabel Lee.

Additionally, the first four lines set up the prominent /e/ vowel sound that continues throughout the poem. It is found here in "sea" and "Annabel Lee," and it has a relentless quality that here starts to hint at the obsessive state of the speaker's mind. Just as the poem keeps returning to this sound, the speaker's thoughts keep returning to his long-gone beloved. It's a hypnotic effect that draws the reader deeper into the poem's psychology and the speaker's agonizing experience of grief.

Line 3 also presents an interesting challenge to the reader. The speaker suggests that the reader might know, or know of, Annabel Lee. This could imply that there is a notoriety about her life and/or death. Or, perhaps, it is the speaker's hint that this is a universal story, one that—like a fairy tale—is common to people throughout the world.

LINES 5-6

And this maiden she lived with no other thought
Than to love and be loved by me.

Lines 5 and 6 undo much of the set-up of the first four lines. The reader learns suddenly that the speaker is not an omniscient narrator, but rather someone deeply involved in the short life of Annabel Lee. The question of reliability starts to creep into the poem—how much can the speaker be trusted to present the truth of this story?

These lines also establish the purity and intensity of the love between the speaker and Annabel Lee, characterizing it as the defining feature of Annabel Lee's entire life and identity. In essence, the speaker is trying to say that, for both him and Annabel Lee, their love was the only reason for living. The speaker uses hyperbole here, claiming that Annabel Lee literally had nothing else to think about other than loving and being loved by the speaker.

Though seemingly romantic, the extremity of this description is also a bit unsettling for the reader—surely Annabel Lee's life involved *something* other than this overpowering love. The speaker begins to reveal himself as somewhat obsessive here, and it's up to the reader to decide whether these lines reveal pure love or, perhaps, a degree of mental instability.

The use of antimetabole in "to love and be loved by me" (line 6) reinforces the speaker's point that Annabel Lee had only two important elements in her life, which ultimately are one and the same. Ending on the stanza on the word "me" not only continues the haunting /e/ sound running throughout the poem, but it also creates a dramatic pause that makes the poem suddenly feel as if it is as much about the speaker as it is about Annabel Lee.

LINES 7-12

I
was a child and
she
was a child,
In this kingdom by the sea,
But we loved with a love that was more than love—
I and my Annabel Lee—
With a love that the wingèd seraphs of Heaven
Coveted her and me.

The second stanza gives the reader further information about the story of Annabel Lee.

The first three lines are the speaker's take on the love between him and Annabel Lee. The speaker consistently reinforces the togetherness between him and his lover, to a degree that may either seem deeply romantic or somewhat troubling, depending on the reader's interpretation. The parallelism of line 7 yokes the speaker together with Annabel Lee, emphasizing their shared innocence at the time of meeting. The emphasis on childhood also subtly hints that the speaker has also had his life cut short. That is, Annabel Lee's death preserved her in her youth—and the effects of this death on the speaker keep him stuck in that moment, too.

Line 8 is almost an exact replica of line 2. It doesn't add any further information to the reader's understanding of the story, and so it can be interpreted as an indication of the speaker's psychological state. That is, he keeps restating the story's setting as though it is a place that he cannot escape. The line also functions as a kind of echo, suggesting a sense of hauntedness that runs throughout the poem.

Line 9 is a paradox—the speaker claims that their love was somehow "more than love." This seems impossible, and yet the speaker insists that it's so; what can the reader make of this? One interpretation is that their love was truly rare; that is, it was so immense that language can't effectively capture its power. Or, it could be that this line reveals the incoherence of the speaker's thinking--he can't see beyond his love for Annabel Lee, which leads him to make illogical statements about it. This line is a kind of microcosm of the poem's larger themes of love; it is extraordinarily powerful, but that power may overwhelm those who experience it.

Line 10, like line 8, offers little information. Instead, it restates in the purest form the connection between "I and my Annabel Lee." This sentence contains nothing but the two lovers, which makes it another kind of reflection of the speaker's state of mind.

Lines 11 and 12 start to move the story beyond establishing the intensity of the love between the speaker and Annabel Lee. Here, according to the speaker, is a clue to why she died. So pure and rare was their love, claims the speaker, that the angels in heaven were jealous. They wanted their own share of this love, or to put it out of existence entirely. It's an interesting contradiction; the speaker makes it clear that these angels were from "Heaven," and they should therefore act in a way that is morally virtuous. Yet they "coveted" the lovers, suggesting a surprising moral corruption. That corruption might be an incorrect perception on the part of the speaker, or it might be genuine. "Coveted" is a word that reinforces this idea of a morally corrupt or morally ambiguous world. It alludes to one of the Ten Commandments, which instructs: "Thou shalt not cover thy neighbor's wife." There is a hint, then, of sexual jealousy linked to Annabel Lee (who might have died a virgin, if her description as a "maiden" is taken this way). Whichever way the poem is interpreted, it has clearly moved a long way from its seemingly charmed fairy tale opening.

LINES 13-20

And this was the reason that, long ago,
In this kingdom by the sea,
A wind blew out of a cloud, chilling
My beautiful Annabel Lee;
So that her highborn kinsmen came
And bore her away from me,
To shut her up in a sepulchre
In this kingdom by the sea.

Stanza three describes the separation of the speaker and Annabel Lee. The first line sounds simple, but it's not completely clear what "this" refers to. It could be the jealousy of the angels, or the paradoxical love "more than love" that the speaker shared with Annabel Lee, or the fact that they were children. The lack of clarity here may again be an indication of the speaker's confused psychological state.

As with line 8 in the previous stanza, the poem again employs refrain in line 14, deepening the sense that the speaker is somehow trapped in the place where he loved and lost Annabel Lee.

Lines 15-16 explain that Annabel Lee was "chilled" by wind from a cloud. Though it's not immediately clear, lines 19-20 and the following stanza make clear that "chilling" stands in for "killing." In other words, Annabel Lee was killed by this wind. In the following stanza, the speaker clearly blames the jealous angels for this wind, but in this stanza it's as if he hasn't quite reached that conclusion yet, instead dwelling on the remembered details of the experience of losing her. The lines are heavy with consonance, employing the /l/ sound throughout. The consonance links the blowing of the wind with the cloud through the words "chilling" and "beautiful Annabel Lee." That is, the sound of the lines links the cause of death with the dead person herself. Interestingly, this is not the only poem in which Poe links the melancholy and lilting /l/ sound with the name of a dead young woman (e.g. "Ulalume" and Lenore from "The Raven"). Arguably, this wind is also a kind of pathetic fallacy that points towards the speaker's turbulent mental

state.

Lines 17 through 20 represent a difficult point in the poem in terms of its interpretation. "Highborn kinsmen" essentially means people that are somehow related to Annabel Lee and who are of high status (perhaps hinting at a source of conflict between them and the speaker, who could be of lower status). It's possible that this is meant literally, and that these are actual family members who take Annabel Lee's body and lock it in a tomb. However, "highborn" also carries with it a suggestion of heavenliness that would be in keeping with line 11 and 12's discussion of angels. These angels *could* be Annabel Lee's "kinsmen" by virtue of her heavenly beauty—and perhaps that's why they wanted to take her away in the first place. The poem doesn't offer the reader enough information to view either interpretation as conclusive. Regardless, the next part of the plot, as relayed by the speaker, is that Annabel Lee dies and is entombed. Both lines 14 and 20 *again* restate that this is all happening "in this kingdom by the sea"—the phrase is starting to become almost meaningless, merely a kind of echo. This could indicate the way in which the speaker's obsession with Annabel Lee still exerts an all-powerful hold over him, or even the unravelling of the speaker's mind.

LINES 21-26

The angels, not half so happy in Heaven,
Went envying her and me—
Yes!—that was the reason (as all men know,
In this kingdom by the sea)
That the wind came out of the cloud by night,
Chilling and killing my Annabel Lee.

Stanza 4 in part revises what the reader has just read in stanza 3. It clarifies that Annabel Lee was killed, and that the speaker blames the angels for what happened.

Lines 21 and 22 put forward the speaker's theory that Annabel Lee died specifically because the angels were jealous of the love between her and the speaker. The use of alliteration in "half," "happy," "Heaven" and "her" has a breathless sound, as though the angels were huffing in anger and jealousy. It's a strange idea, because heaven is traditionally seen as a place of ultimate happiness, peace, and tranquility. It's unusual for angels to be associated with jealousy, let alone murder. In the Christian tradition, angels also tend to be sexless creatures—they aren't usually portrayed as feeling sexual desire, as the speaker seems to claim they felt for Annabel Lee. It seems, then, that the power of their love was strong enough to create fundamental change even in supernatural beings. That said, there isn't actually enough information to confirm that all this even *is* happening within a Christian framework—the speaker may be describing a warped cosmology that mirrors his own troubled inner state.

The caesura in line 23 isolates the word "Yes!" This is an exclamation by the speaker, and it could mean a number of different things. It might be the speaker reassuring himself that the version of events that he is narrating—that angels killed his beloved—is accurate. Or he might be cutting off the reader, anticipating (and rejecting) their claims that the story is difficult to believe. That is, the "yes" might be a kind of protest against the reader's doubt, insisting: "Yes! This is really true."

Lines 23 and line 24 contain further ambiguity: "as all men know / In this kingdom by the sea." There's no sense of who these men are, or indeed what it is that the speaker believes that they know. It could be that they all know the story of Annabel Lee, and can confirm that she was killed by corrupt angels. Or the speaker might be saying that these men (and perhaps even people everywhere) intuitively know something of the tragedy of love, even if they've never experienced a love as pure as the speaker's. This grandiose claim reinforces the poem's central claim that love is all-powerful and reaches to every corner of the world.

Line 25 restates line 15 in different words. This repetition shows the fixated state of the speaker's mind as he insists again that Annabel Lee was killed by wind from a cloud. The association of death with the clouds reinforces the speaker's belief that heaven is somehow responsible. On the other hand, it also suggests the possibility that Annabel Lee died from natural causes relating to the weather—e.g. catching pneumonia—and that the speaker has projected a sense of meaning onto the death that wasn't really there.

LINES 27-33

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;

In the fifth stanza, the speaker tries to divide the world into two parts: himself and Annabel Lee on one side, and everybody else on the other. The use of "But" at the start of line 27 indicates that what follows is some kind of counter to the previous stanza, which outlined Annabel Lee's death. In other words, here is the speaker's proof that, though she is dead, their love is not. The first three lines of the stanza compare his love with Annabel Lee to the type of love experienced by older and wiser people, perhaps drawing a dividing line between the lovers' youth and the adult world. Lines 27, 28 and 29 employ parallelism to aid in this drawing of dividing lines. By ruling out any connection to other people who have experienced love, the speaker effectively isolates himself, demonstrating that his grief is made even more painful by the knowledge that no one else understands it.

Lines 30 and 31 outline the speaker's spiritual worldview which, it's worth remembering, treats both angels *and* demons

as morally bankrupt aggressors. Just as the first lines of the stanza argue that the lovers' relationship is somehow untouchable by the human world, these lines insist that the spiritual world cannot affect their love either. That is, though Annabel Lee has moved from one world to another—the living to the dead—the bond between her and the speaker can never be broken.

It's an interesting development of the speaker's spiritual worldview. He has already disavowed angels, yet here he expresses an unshakeable belief in the idea of the soul. If heaven can't be relied upon as the place for virtuous souls to go to after death, then it seems they must stay tethered to the earth--just as Annabel Lee has remained connected to the speaker. Just as the speaker seemed in the previous stanza to feel disconnected from Annabel Lee's family, here he makes it clear that religion and spirituality feel similarly hollow to him. He derives no comfort from anything other than Annabel Lee; it seems the only aspect of religion that appeals to him is the idea that her soul might live on. The word "dissever" even sounds violent, suggesting some sort of aggressive struggle between the lovers and the forces of the spiritual realm. Again, love conquers all, but the results aren't as comforting or romantic as the fairy tale opening suggests.

LINES 34-41

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;
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.

The final stanza brings the narrative to a close, developing the speaker's assertion that his soul can never be separated from Annabel Lee's. Here, the pathetic fallacy goes into a kind of overdrive—the moon *always* signifies Annabel Lee, as do the stars. Likewise, by the end of line 37 the speaker has repeated "Of the beautiful Annabel Lee" in three out of the five previous lines. It's almost as if the poem does away with any further attempt to explain or develop the narrative, and is instead swamped by the speaker's all-enveloping feeling for Annabel Lee. This feeling is simultaneously a pure kind of love *and* a fixed state of intense grief. The caesurae in lines 34 and 36 together establish a very similar sentence structure in the two lines, intensifying the hypnotic, even obsessive rhythm developed throughout the poem. The parallelism contributes to this effect too.

Interestingly, both the moon and the stars are part of the same sky that the speaker has previously rejected—that is, up until now the speaker has perceived the heavens with suspicion. In a way, the sky is even Annabel Lee's murderer. So it's quite a remarkable twist that the moon and the stars suddenly have this positive connotation, actively bringing the speaker closer to his lover, or to the memory of her at least. But then again, maybe it *isn't* a positive connotation. Perhaps these images just show the way the speaker is totally unable to separate himself from his grief—it will always define him, and the entire world around him too.

The punctuation in line 39, as the speaker explains how he lies with his beloved in her tomb every night, makes the second "my darling" a possible apostrophe, in which he directly addresses Annabel Lee for a brief moment. That possibility reinforces the speaker's claim that his love for Annabel Lee is eternal--she's still so close by that he can even speak to her. Of course, talking to someone who isn't there might also be a sign that the speaker's love has overwhelmed him enough to make his perceptions of reality faulty.

The ending of the poem is deeply ambiguous. Perhaps the speaker really does lie in Annabel Lee's tomb every night, or maybe he is talking figuratively. That is, it may be that his only thought is of her body lying there, and accordingly he is always mentally there with her. Or, it could also be argued that, as Annabel Lee was everything to the speaker, without her he is actually dead too—in which case being literally entombed would make perfect sense. Indeed, the speaker does describe Annabel Lee as "my life"—and she, of course, is dead. This faint suggestion of the speaker's own death reinforces the extent to which his life depends on Annabel Lee and, at the same time, introduces the possibility that the speaker has himself been a kind of ghost this whole time.

Parallelism appears again in the poem's closing two lines. The repetition of "in her" underscores the image of Annabel Lee being entombed, locked away. Similarly, the repetition of "sea" emphasizes the dream-like setting of the poem, and the mention of the sea's constant sound perhaps highlights the eternal silence of Annabel Lee in death.

SYMBOLS

THE NATURAL WORLD

Nature has multiple symbolic resonances throughout the poem. The whole thing takes place in a "kingdom by the sea," and thus is literally set on the edge of the natural world—beyond this kingdom is a vast and mysterious ocean, beneath which are "demons." Annabel Lee is notably "chilled" and ultimately "killed" by a cold wind that "came out of the cloud by night," suggesting nature as a powerful and malevolent force.

At the same time, however, the speaker's memories of his beloved are spurred by moonbeams and shining stars, and he thinks of her during "the night-tide." These elements of the

natural world are thus associated with the innocence and purity of Annabel Lee herself, and are comforting rather than hostile.

Together, then, nature can be seen as a dualistic force—one that is at times frightening and hostile to human existence, yet which also can be a realm that offers comfort and peace—perhaps even a realm in which the love between these two figures may live on.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "the sea"
- **Line 8:** "the sea"
- **Line 14:** "the sea"
- **Line 15:** "wind blew out of a cloud"
- **Line 20:** "the sea"
- **Line 24:** "the sea"
- **Line 25:** "the wind came out of the cloud by night"
- **Line 31:** "under the sea"
- **Line 34:** "the moon never beams"
- **Line 36:** "the stars never rise"
- **Line 38:** "all the night-tide"
- **Line 40:** "the sea"
- **Line 41:** "the sounding sea"

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is used here and there throughout "Annabel Lee." In general, it adds to the hypnotic, dream-like feel of the poem, helping to blur the lines between reality and fantasy.

In the first stanza, there are a number of words that begin with an /l/ sound. Across lines 2-6, the /l/ joins "lived," "Lee," "love" and "loved" together. This comes when the speaker is telling the reader that Annabel Lee had "no other thought" apart from loving and being loved by him. The use of alliteration links these words together, tying a conceptual knot around the idea of living, the character of Annabel Lee, and love. In other words, the alliteration reflects the speaker's perspective on Annabel Lee and how only love made her life meaningful.

In the fourth stanza, alliteration occurs in the first line (line 21). Here, the /h/ sound is repeated in "half so happy in Heaven." These words have an exasperated and airy kind of sound, as though the angels are huffing with anger and envy.

In the following stanza, /d/ sounds link "demons" with "down" and "dissever." This creates a sense of the depths under these words, where the speaker imagines the demons live.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "L"
- **Line 5:** "l"
- **Line 6:** " l," "l"
- **Line 9:** "l," "l," "l"
- **Line 10:** "L"
- **Line 11:** "l"
- **Line 21:** "h," "h," "H"
- **Line 31:** "d," "d"
- **Line 32:** "d"

PARADOX

Paradox occurs once in "Annabel Lee." It can be found in line 9, the third line of stanza 2.

The speaker is talking about the love between him and Annabel Lee. On the one hand, he is describing the feelings between them as "love." But he is also proving the intensity and strength of those feelings by, paradoxically, comparing saying that there love is more than...love. Furthermore, it's not as if he draws a distinction between their young love, say, and the love between a long-married couple. The comparative love is just a pure expression of love--it is merely the word, with no other detail given. It seems, then, that the word is inadequate to describe the feelings between them; their experience goes beyond what people usually mean when they talk about love.

In addition to enhancing the reader's sense of incredibly intense feelings between him and Annabel Lee, the speaker's use of paradox also hints that he might not be quite capable of making logical statements. It could be that love has overwhelmed him so much that he can't think straight--and perhaps isn't a completely reliable narrator.

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- **Line 9:** "But we loved with a love that was more than love"

REFRAIN

There are two separate refrains running throughout "Annabel Lee," though really they work together to create a hypnotic and unsettling effect.

The first of these refrains is "In a kingdom by the sea." This line, or its close equivalent, is found in line 2, line 8, line 14, line 20, and line 24 (with a suggestion of the line occurring in final couplet too). The other refrain is the use of Annabel Lee's name,

which is frequently linked her beauty. Instances of this refrain occur in line 4, line 10, line 16, line 26, line 33, line 35 and line 37. The overall effect of these two refrains working together is the sense of a fractured state of mind and an inescapable obsession. The speaker constantly returns to these lines as if they exert some unstoppable power over him, insisting that his mind stays fixed on the loss of his beloved. Perhaps this fixation is a happy one, in that it keeps him linked to his love for her, but the relentlessness of the repetition suggests that the speaker's experience may be more like an imprisonment.

The first refrain in particular seems to shed its literal meaning as the poem goes on. That is, the sentence in itself is a very simple piece of information that states the poem's setting. The speaker offers no new information by repeating it so often, and so accordingly it should be interpreted as telling the reader more about the speaker's psychology than the poem's environment.

The second refrain hammers home the speaker's obsession with Annabel Lee. Ironically, too, the number of times she is mentioned seems to intensify the fact that information about her is largely absent from the poem, in that the reader gathers no information about who exactly she was or what she really felt.

Where Refrain appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** " In a kingdom by the sea, "
- **Line 4:** "By the name of Annabel Lee; "
- **Line 8:** " In this kingdom by the sea, "
- **Line 10:** " I and my Annabel Lee— "
- **Line 14:** " In this kingdom by the sea, "
- **Line 16:** " My beautiful Annabel Lee; "
- **Line 20:** " In this kingdom by the sea. "
- **Line 24:** " In this kingdom by the sea) "
- **Line 26:** " Chilling and killing my Annabel Lee."
- **Line 33:** " Of the beautiful Annabel Lee; "
- **Line 35:** " Of the beautiful Annabel Lee; "
- **Line 37:** " Of the beautiful Annabel Lee; "
- **Lines 40-41:** " In her sepulchre there by the sea— / In her tomb by the sounding sea."

PATHETIC FALLACY

The speaker of the poem mentions elements of the weather throughout the poem. These images act as pathetic fallacy that reveals the speaker's inner experience. For example, the wind in the third stanza not only develops the speaker's isolation, but is in fact the accused murderer (or perhaps the murder weapon brandished by the jealous angels). The speaker also makes constant reference to the sea, evoking an unforgiving coastal environment that seems to embody his unshakeable grief.

In the final stanza, this pathetic fallacy goes into overdrive. Here, the moon and stars act as representatives of Annabel Lee. The speaker cannot look on them and just see a moon and stars—he sees only Annabel Lee. His sensory world, then, is entirely governed by Annabel Lee, essentially turning *everything* into a symbol of her.

The poem's closing lines foreground the importance of the sea to the poem's atmosphere. Without ever really telling the reader why, the speaker seems to feel that the coastal environment is integral to the story. It's partly because Annabel Lee's tomb is there, apparently. But the "sounding" of the "sea" also evokes the "sounding" of the speaker's grief—it keeps returning, just like the waves do.

Where Pathetic Fallacy appears in the poem:

- **Lines 14-15:** " In this kingdom by the sea, / A wind blew out of a cloud, chilling "
- **Lines 25-26:** "That the wind came out of the cloud by night, / Chilling and killing my Annabel Lee. "
- **Lines 34-38:** "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; / And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side "
- **Lines 40-41:** " In her sepulchre there by the sea— / In her tomb by the sounding sea."

PARALLELISM

Parallelism occurs throughout "Annabel Lee," and it is part of the poem's hypnotic, roundabout way of expressing itself. The reader gets the sense that the speaker, deliberately or not, isn't expressing themselves in the simple way possible. For example, line 7 could easily have been written: "We were children." The speaker's forceful, repetitive way of expressing himself informs the reader of both his unusually immense love with Annabel Lee and, perhaps, his obsessive state of mind.

In line 7, the parallelism underscores that both the speaker and Annabel Lee were children when they met. Essentially, this forces reader to pay special attention their youth, which might seem less important if expressed in a more familiar way.

Lines 9 and 11 share similar structures. This connection makes love the central focus of the lines and mirrors how important it was to the speaker—and how jealous it allegedly made the angels.

Lines 27, 28 and 29 all share similar grammar. This helps the speaker to establish the comparison between his love and the love of others, and it also helps mark him and Annabel Lee as separate from the rest of their social world.

Lines 34, 36 and 38 are also very similar to each other. Each one begins with a conjunction, before adding an element of nature and then relating it to the speaker's relationship with Annabel Lee. This repeated structure helps paint a picture of the speaker's internal state, demonstrating how he sees his

love and grief reflected equally in every aspect of the world.

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-7:** "I / was a child and / she / was a child, "
- **Line 9:** "But we loved with a love that was more than love— "
- **Line 11:** "With a love that the wingèd seraphs of Heaven "
- **Lines 27-29:** "But our love it was stronger by far than the love / Of those who were older than we— / Of many far wiser than we— "
- **Line 34:** "For the moon never beams, without bringing me dreams "
- **Line 36:** "And the stars never rise, but I feel the bright eyes "
- **Line 38:** "And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side "

SIBILANCE

Sibilance occurs in two key moments during "Annabel Lee."

In the second-to-last stanza, the speaker discusses his view of the spiritual realm. He sees angels as morally corrupt creatures from the heavens, and demons as sea-dwellers. The use of sibilance in the words "demons," "sea," "dissever," and "soul" creates a demonic hissing quality and also evokes the sound of water, bringing aural life to the image of the demons under the sea.

In the final stanza, sibilance serves a similar purpose. From 38 to 41, to occurs in the words "so," "side," "sepulchre," "sea," and "sounding sea." The /s/ sounds conjure up the sea, which the speaker has been obsessively reminding the reader is near where Annabel Lee's body lies. Indeed, it's where he lies every night too. The sibilance here, then, represents what he himself hears as he lies there, unable to see beyond his love and grief. The sibilance in these lines *is* the "sounding" of the sea.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 31:** "s," "s"
- **Line 32:** "ss," "s," "s"
- **Line 38:** "s," "s"
- **Line 40:** "s," "s"
- **Line 41:** "s," " s"

CAESURA

Caesurae are employed in lines 13, 15, 21, 23, 34, 36, 38 and 39.

Line 15's caesura disrupts the flow of the poem, and it places special space around the word "chilling." The isolation of the word reinforces its meaning—that is, the caesura makes the word feel colder and more isolated.

Line 23's caesura is particularly important. The speaker makes an exclamation—"Yes!"—which comes after he has told the reader that it was the jealous angels who were responsible for Annabel Lee's death. The exclamation makes the reader wonder about the speaker's state of mind, and whether his account is actually reliable or not.

The caesurae in lines 34, 36 and 38 are all part of the poem's use of parallelism. The commas allow for the structure to repeat, helping the poem build to a climactic expression of the speaker's state of mind.

Finally, the caesurae in line 39 have a unique purpose in that they set off the second "my darling" and suggest that, for this one moment, the speaker may actually be talking directly to Annabel Lee herself. This flash of possible apostrophe reinforces the idea that, to the speaker, Annabel Lee is very much present despite her death.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 13:** ","
- **Line 15:** ","
- **Line 21:** ","
- **Line 23:** "!—"
- **Line 34:** ","
- **Line 36:** ","
- **Line 38:** ","
- **Line 39:** "—," "—"

HYPERBOLE

The poem uses hyperbole in line 5. Here, the speaker claims that Annabel Lee had no other thoughts except for those that involved loving or being loved by him. This, of course, is an exaggeration. People think all the time, and about all kinds of different things—it's part of being a human. The speaker doesn't intend this claim literally, but rather as a way of expressing the all-consuming nature of the love shared between him and Annabel Lee.

Similarly, the entire poem is actually a kind of extended hyperbole. It's a demonstration of the speaker's obsession with Annabel Lee—but it must also be assumed that he has thoughts other than Annabel Lee from time to time. Hyperbole, then, serves to show the intensity of the feelings and passions at play in the poem; they're so strong that they seem to make the rest of the world fade away.

Where Hyperbole appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "And this maiden she lived with no other thought / Than to love and be loved by me. "

ALLUSION

Allusion occurs twice in "Annabel Lee." The first example comes in the first stanza, when the lines make clear allusion to the

fairy tale genre. The speaker sounds omniscient and detached, like someone telling children a story around a fire, but soon proves otherwise. The first line echoes the words "once upon a time," the typical fairy tale beginning, and the second line establishes the common fairy tale setting of a faraway kingdom. Indeed, a maiden being locked away (as Annabel Lee is in her tomb) is in itself clearly fairy tale-esque. This allusion serves to lure the reader into a false sense of security—the rest of the poem makes it clear that this is no children's tale, and no happy ending arrives.

In the second stanza, lines 11 and 12 allude to the ninth Commandment from the Bible: "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife." "Covet" is a very specific verb, and it's highly unusual to find it applied to angels from heaven. Usually, angels are morally virtuous—or presented as such--and wouldn't covet anyone. But the use of the word "covet" suggests that they are jealous, arguably in a sexual way. The allusion here allows the speaker to paint the angels in a surprising light and, by extension, suggests that the strength of his and Annabel Lee's love has created this startling change in their nature.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "It was many and many a year ago, / In a kingdom by the sea, / That a maiden there lived whom you may know / By the name of Annabel Lee; "
- **Lines 11-12:** "With a love that the wingèd seraphs of Heaven / Coveted her and me. "

CONSONANCE

Consonance mainly occurs in the third, fifth, and final stanzas.

The third stanza is full of /l/ sounds, linking "long" with "blew," "cloud," "chilling" and "beautiful Annabel Lee." The first thing to note is that the /l/ sound has already been associated with the speaker's lover—it's a prominent part of the sound of her name. So these /l/ sounds are part of that same echo, which represents the speaker's longing for his lover. Here they also conceptually tie Annabel Lee with the way that she died—a wind that blew from a cloud, chilling and—as is confirmed in the next stanza—killing her.

The fourth stanza is full of /n/ sounds, particularly when the speaker talks about the "angels in Heaven above" and "the demons down under the sea." Both the representatives of moral good and those of evil are enemies in the speaker's eyes, and accordingly they are all linked together by the sound of the lines.

As the poem reaches its peak, the final stanza uses consonance to show an intensification of emotion. The /m/ sounds in line 34 and the /t/ sounds in line 36 both feel like they represent the speaker's mind, as though he is being overcome by his repetitive, intensely emotional thoughts about Annabel Lee.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 13:** " l"
- **Line 15:** "l," "l," "ll"
- **Line 16:** "l," "l L"
- **Line 19:** "l"
- **Line 30:** "n," "n," "n"
- **Line 31:** "N," "n," "n," "n"
- **Line 34:** "m," "m," "m," "m"
- **Line 36:** "t," "t," "t"
- **Line 37:** "t"

DIACOPE

Diacope occurs in lines 1, 6, 7, 9, 27, 32, and 39. Part of the speaker's overall purpose in the poem is to draw a distinction between him and Annabel Lee as a pair and the rest of the world that they inhabited. In other words, it's a kind of "us versus them," and the use of diacope often serves to reinforce this.

In the first line, however, the repetition of "many" serves to draw a distinct line between then—the historical point when the couple were together—and now.

In line 6, the diacope shows the shared experience of the speaker and Annabel Lee. Similarly, line 7, with its repetition of "child," attempts to draw the two even closer together.

Lines 9 and 27 both repeat "love," and this is to emphasize that for the speaker and Annabel Lee, nothing else seemed to matter other than their love.

Likewise, line 32 links the two souls together, claiming an indestructible bond between them. Line 39, however, underscores the speaker's sense of loss by repeating the idea that Annabel Lee is very dear to him.

Where Diacope appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "many and many"
- **Line 6:** "to love and be loved "
- **Lines 7-7:** "child and / she / was a child, "
- **Line 9:** " we loved with a love that was more than love"
- **Line 27:** "our love it was stronger by far than the love "
- **Line 32:** "my soul from the soul "
- **Line 39:** "my darling—my darling—my life and my bride, "

EPIZEUXIS

Epizeuxis occurs once in "Annabel Lee," in line 39, when the speaker repeats "my darling." It's a powerful moment, hammering home the speaker's sense of loss. By repeating his term of affection of Annabel Lee, the speaker both demonstrates the strength of his feeling and highlights her absence.

It's also interesting to consider whether the first "my darling"

means something different from the second. The first is part of the overall information offered by the speaker, describing how he lies down beside her every night. The second one, however, almost sounds like it's directly addressed to Annabel Lee, a moment of intimacy amidst the eery and hypnotic atmosphere of the rest of the poem.

Where Epizeuxis appears in the poem:

- **Line 39:** "my darling—my darling"

ANTIMETABOLE

Antimetabole occurs once in "Annabel Lee," in line 6. Here, "love" is an active verb in the first instance and a passive verb in the second. The first "love" denotes Annabel Lee's love for the speaker, while the second represents her state of *being loved* by the speaker. Putting these two uses of the word side by side creates the sense of a solid bond between the two loves, almost like a closed circuit that isn't open to any other external influence. It shows the speaker's belief that their lives were utterly defined by their love, and that little else mattered. Indeed, one of those verbs is still in motion: Annabel Lee is still loved by the speaker. By contrast, the antimetabole also helps to highlight that Annabel Lee is no longer around to return the speaker's love.

Where Antimetabole appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "Than to love and be loved by me. "

ANAPHORA

Anaphora occurs in lines 28 and 29, 36 and 38, and 40 and 41. It generally helps develop the poem's hypnotic and unsettling atmosphere, as though the speaker's thoughts keep circling back on themselves, perhaps against his will. In lines 28 and 29, it heightens the sense of comparison between the love of the speaker and Annabel Lee with that of "older" and "wiser" people—in the speaker's opinion, these people can never understand the love that he and Annabel Lee experience.

In lines 36 and 38, the anaphora helps build the poem to its climax, as the speaker's insistence that he is still with Annabel Lee intensifies.

In the poem's closing two lines, the speaker repeats "in her" at the beginning of each phrase. This underscores the sense that Annabel Lee is locked away, not just in her tomb, but in death itself.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 28:** " Of"
- **Line 29:** " Of"
- **Line 36:** "And"
- **Line 38:** "And"
- **Line 40:** "In," " her "
- **Lines 41-41:** " / her"
- **Line 41:** " In "

APOSTROPHE

It's not certain that apostrophe occurs at all in "Annabel Lee," but there is a case to be made that the second "my darling" in line 39 is the speaker's direct address to Annabel Lee. He has just used "my darling" as part of a full sentence, and suddenly he repeats it. The dashes indicate a change of thought. Accordingly, it's possible that he is overcome by the emotions of love and grief associated with Annabel Lee—perhaps even associated with the specific phrase, "my darling"—and here addresses her directly. If so, this serves to underscore her absence. Though the whole poem is about Annabel Lee, and the speaker still feels her presence, this sudden and unanswered appeal to her is made powerful by its lack of reply. Furthermore, speaking to someone who isn't there subtly suggests that the speaker may be mentally unstable, an idea that casts a degree of doubt on all of his claims throughout the poem.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Line 39:** "my darling"

VOCABULARY

Maiden (Line 3, Line 5) - A maiden is a young woman, but the word can also refer to her state of maidenhood—that is, being a virgin.

Wingéd seraphs (Line 11) - These are angels.

Coveted (Line 12) - To covet something is to desire it strongly. Here, it also calls to mind the ninth Commandment from the Bible: "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife."

Highborn kinsmen (Line 17) - This is slightly ambiguous. It could mean family members of Annabel Lee, who are of high social class. Or it could be a reference to the angels: "highborn" because they come from heaven, and "kinsmen" because Annabel Lee is herself angelic.

Bore (Line 18) - Bore in this instance just means "took" or "carried."

Sepulchre (Line 19) - A small room or tomb in which a dead person is laid to rest.

Envying (Line 22) - This means the angels were actively jealous of the speaker and Annabel Lee.

Dissever (Line 32) - This means to divide or separate.

Beams (Line 34) - Beams means "shine," but it also has a suggestion of smiling (as in the face of the moon).

Night-tide (Line 38) - This means the night-time, and it also plays on the mentions of the sea.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

Edgar Allan Poe referred to this poem as a ballad, though it does not fit any of the strict definitions of that mode. It does *feel* ballad-like, though. That's because it generally unfolds through a pattern that alternates between longer lines and shorter lines, which is a typical feature of ballads. Just as importantly, it's also the content itself that gives this poem a ballad-like feel. Ballads are predominantly narrative, in that they tell a story. "Annabel Lee" tells the story of her death, and how that has come to affect the speaker's life. Furthermore, traditional ballads were often about doomed love affairs and/or murders—exactly what the reader sees in "Annabel Lee."

The stanzas range between six and eight lines, and each one develops the story further. The first establishes the setting; the second introduces the envious angels; the third recounts how they killed Annabel Lee and describes her entombment; the fourth *confirms* the angels' responsibility in Annabel Lee's death; the fifth establishes the speaker's claim that their love is unbreakable; and the sixth concludes the poem, with the speaker lying down next to Annabel Lee in her tomb.

The poem's refusal to settle into a regular ballad structure, which would usually consist of quatrains, is part of the poem's atmosphere. Just as the meter hints at regularity but never quite gets there, the form approximates a regular structure but falls deliberately short; the stanzas don't follow a predictable structure or number of lines. This has an unnerving effect on the reader's experience of the poem, highlighting both the intensity of the speaker's grief and the possibility that his perception of reality is fractured. The incompletion of the poem's form also embodies the way in which Annabel Lee's life was cut short in youth.

METER

Edgar Allan Poe plays with the reader's expectations in "Annabel Lee" through variation of the poem's meter. A high percentage of the poem's metrical feet employ anapests, which have a dramatic and propulsive sound—but if overdone can start to sound comic. Accordingly, Poe mixes these anapests up with iambs. For example:

It was man- | y and man- |y a year | ago

This is a line of tetrameter that goes anapest-anapest-anapest-iamb. It accelerates dramatically through the anapest, but is then disrupted by the final iamb. To see the difference in effect, here is a line with largely the same informative content that sticks to the anapestic foot:

It was man-|-y and man-|-y a year | in the past

If "Annabel Lee" was like the above line throughout, the rhythm would take on a comedic regularity that wouldn't fit with the subject matter. Instead, the frequent switches between iambs and anapests create tension and represent the speaker's inability to move beyond the death of Annabel Lee. There is also something quite hypnotic about this push and pull between iambs and anapests, as though the lines are like the waves coming in and out of the "sounding" sea nearby, where Annabel Lee is entombed.

Even though the feet still vary, the last two stanzas have a quicker flow than what has come before. Arguably, this is because the poem is reaching its climax, as the speaker loses himself in thoughts about his love with Annabel Lee—and their eternal future together. Not all of the lines in these stanzas start with two unstressed syllables, but the three-syllable sound of the anapest is prominent throughout these stanzas. This line, for example, is purely anapestic:

But our love | it was strong- |er by far | than the love

Whereas this line gets rid of one of the first syllables (technically called catalexis):

Can ev- | er dissev- |er my soul | from the soul

So even if the first foot isn't an anapest, the fact that the variation happens at the start of the line makes it very easy for the speed of the three-syllabled anapests to keep their pace. As the speaker delves deeper into his thoughts—and becomes overcome with emotion—the meter makes it sound as if he is speeding away from the reader, perhaps suggesting that the reader is as incapable of understanding the nature of this love as all the other people mentioned earlier.

RHYME SCHEME

"Annabel Lee" is an unusual poem in that it has a combination of regular and irregular rhyme schemes. The regularity comes from the shorter lines: line 2, 4, 6, 8 and so on. All of these rhyme, and though there are numerous lines involved, the words that provide the rhymes are very limited: "sea," "Lee," "me" and "we." Other lines sometimes rhyme, but with no overall pattern. The first two stanzas demonstrate this tension between pattern and non-pattern:

ABABCB / DBEBFB

The repeated rhymes have a powerful effect. Using such a small set of words, they reflect the speaker's troubled and fixated

mind—every other line (at least) returns him to thoughts of the sea, Annabel Lee, himself, or them as a couple. No other rhyme scheme is allowed to establish itself, because his mind is too singularly fixed on his relationship with Annabel Lee. These rhymes, of course, are based on the name of his lover, again reinforcing the idea that he can never let her go—that their souls are, in his view at least, forever bound together. These rhymes are part of the hypnotic effect that the poem builds over the course of its forty-one lines.

The poem makes use of some internal rhymes, too. "Chilling" and "killing" in line 26 link the wind from the cloud with the effect it had on Annabel Lee. Lines 34, 36 and 38 rhyme "beams/dreams ... rise/eyes ... tide/side," respectively. This internal rhyme helps build the poem to its climax, and also demonstrates the way in which the speaker senses Annabel Lee in everything—whether it's the moon, the stars, or the sea.

SPEAKER

The speaker in "Annabel Lee" is often taken to by Edgar Allan Poe himself, but there's no definitive evidence in the poem to confirm this. However, his wife, Virginia, had died not long before its composition, and she was considerably younger than him. So there are parallels, at least, if not certainty.

What is beyond doubt is that the speaker is someone who is grieving. His entire being seems to have been defined by his relationship with Annabel Lee, even though it was "many and many a year ago." He has an idealistic view of their love, believing that it was "more than love," and believes that their souls are eternally linked. On the other hand, he is certainly grieving too. The way the poem keeps circling back to Annabel Lee's name shows that she is a very real absence from his life, even if he does sleep next to her body every night. But, of course, it's not clear how reliable the narrator's account actually is. Poe was fond of using unreliable narrators, and there is definitely a sense that the poem is narrated by someone whose mind is troubled. Accordingly, it's hard to take the poem at face value as the objective narrative of what happened to Annabel Lee—it is colored by the speaker's intense emotions regarding her life and death.

SETTING

"Annabel Lee" has a fantastical, fairy tale-like setting. Like a fairy tale, this story happened "many and many a year ago"—"once upon a time," in other words. The faraway kingdom and the young maiden under mortal threat are also common in fairy tale stories. But this suggestion of fantasy creates a false sense of security, because the poem quickly becomes about the narrator's own thoughts about Annabel Lee and the love he shared with her. Furthermore, there's no neat, happy ending—the poem leaves the speaker in his grief, with no possibility of escape.

On the surface, then, the poem is set in this mysterious coastal kingdom. It's a bleak, unforgiving place, where the clouds blow chilly and there is little other visual detail apart from the moon, the stars, and the sea. Here, even the angels are morally compromised, and the stark hopelessness of the setting matches the speaker's mood. Digging a bit deeper, though, the poem is also set within the mind of its narrator, which is tormented by both his love for Annabel Lee and the agony of her death. The constant return to Annabel Lee's name shows that the speaker's mind is stuck on its thoughts of her—and through the poem, the reader briefly inhabits this troubled, fractured psyche.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Edgar Allan Poe is considered a major figure in the American Romantic movement, which celebrated the overwhelming beauty of nature, the power of the individual, and the glory of the past. Where earlier Enlightenment-era writers like Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift aspired to elegant phrasings and satirical wit, the Romantics preferred to write passionate verse that valued the mysteries and terrors of the imagination over crisp rationality.

Like "Annabel Lee," Poe's "Eulalie" and "Ulalume" focus on the death of a beautiful young woman. Poe called this "the most poetical topic in the world."

Poe's literary output was by no means limited to poetry, of course, and many of his short stories are considered classics. He helped to establish the Gothic genre in American literature and also explored detective fiction and sci-fi. Poe's continuing influence over literature can hardly be overstated. In particular, his work greatly influenced the French Symbolist poets. Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* was also in part inspired by "Annabel Lee."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Poe was orphaned at a young age and grew up fostered by a wealthy family in Virginia. After dropping out of university and the army, he became one of the first writers of the time to make a living from publishing his stories and criticism. Though his 1845 publication of "The Raven" won him considerable fame, Poe grappled with financial and mental difficulties throughout his life.

Many believe "Annabel Lee" is based on Poe's real-life wife (and cousin) Virginia Clemm. Clemm died of tuberculosis at age 24, and her death appears to have significantly affected her husband; dying women appear in many of Poe's subsequent works.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Poe's Letters — A collection of Poe's correspondence. (https://www.eapoe.org/works/letters/index.htm)
- Joan Baez — A musical setting of the poem by 60s legend Joan Baez. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AIGj3CZ3uPQ)
- Radio Documentary — A BBC documentary looking at Poe's life and work. (https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b008ncs4)
- More poems and biography — Poetry Foundation resources on Poe. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/edgar-allan-poe)
- A Reading — The poem read by Garrison Keillor. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cdEmLYx8Fjo)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EDGAR ALLAN POE POEMS

- A Dream Within a Dream
- Alone
- To Helen

HOW TO CITE

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