The theme of "The death of a beautiful woman" in the works of Edgar Allan Poe and his view of women

Kazuko Kashihara

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The Theme of “The Death of a Beautiful Woman” in the Works of Edgar Allan Poe and His View of Women

Kazuko Kashihara

Edgar Allan Poe is unique among writers in “the American Renaissance.” He was not influenced by the frontier or pioneer spirit which was characteristic of American Romanticism, and he had no direct connection with the transcendentalism led by Emerson and Thoreau. He did not have Puritanism as the background of his literature as Hawthorne and Melville did. Furthermore, during the time when moralistic didacticism was respected in the literary world and when it was a criterion to decide on literary value, he advocated “art for art’s sake” and put it into practice. He set forth his original literary idealism in his criticisms and practiced it in his own works. In this essay, focusing on the theme, “the death of a beautiful woman,” which he declares is the best theme in art, I would like to examine how it is embodied in his works and discuss his view of women in its connection.

Poe experienced the death of women close to him several times through his life. First of all, his mother died of tuberculosis when he was not yet three years old. At the age of fifteen, he deeply saddened by the death of Mrs. Stanard, his friend’s mother, who was very sympathetic and kind to the young orphan Edgar. He lost his foster mother Mrs. Allan too when he was nineteen. And his wife Virginia died of the same disease as his
mother after twelve years of married life. She was then only twenty five. All of these women were beautiful and died young. Therefore, it is no wonder that their deaths greatly influenced Poe's view of life and this became the basis of one of the major themes of his works.

In 1846, Poe published a famous essay, "The Philosophy of Composition." This was written to refute the criticism that his poetry was composed only by imagination, and to prove that his composition was based on minute logical construction by closely analyzing his poem "The Raven." This is not taken literally now and cannot be believed as the full explanation of how he composed the poem. In this essay, it is rather important to know his idea of themes of poetry.

As he states in "The Philosophy of Composition," he believes that "the death . . . of a beautiful woman is . . . the most poetical topic in the world." According to his poetics, "Beauty is the sole legitimate province of the poem. . . . That pleasure which is at once the most intense, the most elevating, and the most pure, is found in the contemplation of the beautiful." And the tone of the highest manifestation of the beauty is one of sadness, and "Melancholy is the most legitimate of all the poetical tones." Next, of all melancholy topics, according to the universal understanding of mankind, the most melancholy one is obviously death. And it is when it most closely allies itself to Beauty that this most melancholy of topics is most poetical. Then "the death . . . of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world." This is his idea of the theme of the poetry. Although "The Philosophy of Composition" is not taken seriously as a description of how he composed "The Raven," it can be considered to tell the truth at least in regard to his poetics.

Under the above theme, Poe wrote several poems and short stories.
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Here let me take up three poems; “The Sleeper,” “The Raven,” and “Annabel Lee,” and three short stories; “Ligeia,” “Berenice,” and “Morella,” to examine how the theme appears in his works. In “The Sleeper,” “my love” Irene is lying upon her bed of death:

All Beauty sleeps!—and lo! where lies
Irene, with her Destinies! (ll. 16–17)²

In the first stanza, Poe describes the natural beauty at midnight with melancholy atmosphere, and pictures the chamber where Irene is lying in the second stanza. In the third stanza, he prays that she may sleep deeply, and in the last stanza her tomb is described dealing with a memory of her childhood. In this poem, the figure of Irene is described only in the passage below:

Strange is thy pallor! strange thy dress!
Strange, above all, thy length of tress,
And this all solemn silentness! (ll. 34–36)

“The Raven” begins with a scene in which a man is reading a book at midnight in bleak December to escape from sorrow for his lost lover, Lenore. Then a raven comes into the room, and he begins to make a jest of the bird. In pauses of doing so, he remembers her visiting the room. Gradually the raven’s reply “Nevermore” becomes meaningful and when he asks if he will clasp Lenore’s soul in Heaven, the raven answers “Nevermore” again and breaks his hope. The passage that describes Lenore is as follows:

From my books surcease of sorrow—sorrow
for the lost Lenore—
For the rare and radiant maiden whom
the angles name Lenore—
Nameless here for evermore. (ll. 10–12)

"Annabel Lee" has a different atmosphere from the above two poems. Unlike the above two poems, it treats and emphasizes how "I" and Annabel Lee loved each other, and by emphasizing their strong love, the sorrow for the lost lover stands out prominently. Let me quote the final stanza:

For the moon never beams without bringing me dreams
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
And the stars never rise but I see 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 side of the sea. (ll. 34–41)

Reading these three poems, I have noticed two things. One is that there are no concrete descriptions of the beautiful woman and the other is how "I" loved her is not narrated. I think it is because the figure of a beautiful woman is created ideally and does not stand on the poet's real experience. In other words, Poe creates an ideal image of a woman and makes a poem imagining the loss of the image. Therefore, the women in his poetry are all unsubstantial. Irene in "The Sleeper" is a mere part of the setting. She is lying on the bed. She is put there as the essential beauty in the beautiful chamber in beautiful nature. As she is the symbol of beauty, her figure, style, and character do not matter. Lenore in "The Raven" has no substantial figure, either. The only thing that matters is her loss. From the description of Lenore in the poem, her face, figure,
and character cannot be known. Poe does not give us any concrete information of Lenore. Furthermore, we do not know why and how the man loves her. This is because the only thing the poet wants to describe is the loss of a beautiful woman and the sorrow caused by it. In “Annabel Lee,” unlike the other two poems, some attachment to the heroine can be acknowledged. Probably it is because only this poem was written after his wife Virginia’s death, and it reflects his own sorrow for the death of his wife. But still we have no concrete image of Annabel Lee except for being a beautiful girl with bright eyes.

In this way, although the deaths of the women close to Poe have given some influence to his poetry, as far as the theme of the poetry is concerned, an ideal woman created in his mind is combined with death and its image is made to be the theme. The same theme is applied to his short stories, too. There are some similar stories that treat a man who loses his beautiful wife, namely “Ligeia,” “Berenice,” “Morella,” and “Eleonora.” Among the four “Ligeia” is much superior to the rest in terms of unity of effect or impression which Poe often emphasizes as the most important element in short stories and it is well understood that Poe loved this story best. He has succeeded in completely creating a fearful and mystical world of beauty under the theme of “the death of a beautiful woman” in “Ligeia.”

First, Poe explains at great length how Ligeia is beautiful, how she embodies complete beauty. Next, after he writes how the narrator and she love each other, he describes how sad and painful the loss of Ligeia is. To emphasize the sadness, he introduces another woman named Rowena. Rowena is not described more than “fair-haired and blue-eyed,” while Ligeia’s description goes into minute detail. It is because Rowena is
used only as a tool to introduce Ligeia's spirit. And the room that the narrator prepares to welcome Rowena is full of weird things such as the ceiling of gloomy-looking oak, the bridal couch with a pall-like canopy above, a gigantic sarcophagus from the tombs of the kings over against Luxor and so forth, and more suitable for mourning for Ligeia's death than for welcoming his new bride Rowena. In the dreadfully decorated room like a grave, the narrator is immersed in sorrow for the loss of Ligeia, the supreme beauty. Moreover, by introducing a scene of Ligeia's resuscitation, the author emphasizes the narrator's strong attachment to Ligeia and his sadness for her loss.

Certainly this is a story of beauty. Poe utilizes his favorite theme at the full. But something strange hit me when I read this story. I cannot feel the real existence of beautiful Ligeia at all. Poe says that "the death of a beautiful woman" is the most artistic theme. Then, concretely, what kind of woman does he imagine as an ideal in his mind? Let me examine the description of Ligeia precisely and clarify Poe's ideal figure of a woman. He describes Ligeia as follows:

I examined the contour of the lofty and pale forehead—it was faultless—how cold indeed that word when applied to a majesty so divine!—the skin rivaling the purest ivory, the commanding extent and repose, the gentle prominence of the regions above the temples; and then the raven-black, the glossy, the luxuriant and naturally-curling tresses, setting forth the full force of the Homeric epithet, "hyacinthine!" I looked at the delicate outlines of the nose—and nowhere but in the graceful medallions of the Hebrews had I beheld a similar perfection. . . .

For eyes we have no models in the remotely antique. It might have been, too, that in these eyes of my beloved lay the secret to
which Lord Verulam alludes. They were, I must believe, far larger than the ordinary eyes of our own race.

These are about Ligeia’s appearance. Although it is described minutely in detail, it seems that the author delineates a doll or a statue rather than a living woman. And then the explanations about her character and learning follow. Her characteristic feature is described as “gigantic volition” and “stern passion” and as for her learning, the hero says, “it was immense,” and “where breathes the man who has traversed, and successfully, all the wide areas of moral, physical, and mathematical science?” (p. 315)

Thus, the author has created Ligeia as a lady who is beautiful like a Greek statue and has a strong will and passion in her mind and almighty learning in her brain.

The descriptions of other heroines in Poe’s stories give us further information. In “Berenice” we find the following passage:

—she, agile, graceful, and overflowing with energy; . . . Oh, gorgeous yet fantastic beauty! Oh sylph amid the shrubberies of Arnheim! Oh Naiad among its fountains! (p. 210)

And in “Morella,” we can only find the fragmentary expression about her figure such as “her wan fingers, . . . the low tone of her musical language, . . . the lustre of her melancholy eyes.” (p. 231) Rather, there are many lines about her learning. The explanation of her learning begins with the passage below:

Morella’s erudition was profound. As I hope to live, her talents were of no common order — her powers of mind were gigantic. (p. 229)
And a long explanation of how she is absorbed in profound study follows the above passage. In this way, either Berenice or Morella is not so concretely described as even Ligeia; Berenice is compared to fairies, and Morella is pictured as a symbol of profound learning. In other words, beautiful heroines in his short stories are nothing but unsubstantial figures as well as those in his poetry.

This is the image of a woman in Poe's works. Then, what is the love between such a woman and the hero of the work? By searching for it, Poe's feeling toward women, his view of women may be found. Let me quote from "Ligeia" again:

That she loved me I should not have doubted; and I might have been easily aware that, in a bosom such as hers, love would have reigned no ordinary passion. But in death only, was I fully impressed with the strength of her affection. For long hours, detaining my hand, would she pour out before me the overflowing of a heart whose more than passionate devotion amounted to idolatry. (p. 317)

Thus, how deeply Ligeia loved "me" is explained. But when I consider what kind of man the hero is, I find that he has such little learning that he cannot study without Ligeia's help and that he is morally corrupted as he takes the second wife although he cannot forget Ligeia and not only never loves her but loathes her with hatred. It is hard to imagine that a perfect woman like Ligeia loves such a man, and there is no description of how they love each other, namely on what point Ligeia is attracted by "me". To sum up, Ligeia is not a living woman with real human characteristics but a symbol of beauty as an object to contemplate, and an ideal and unsubstantial existence the loss of which cannot be compensated by others.
This point is reinforced by a passage in “Berenice”:

I had seen her—not as the living and breathing Berenice, but as the Berenice of a dream; not as a being of the earth, earthy, but as the abstraction of such a being; not as a thing to admire, but to analyze; not as an object of love, but as the theme of the most abstruse although desultory speculation. (p. 214)

This demonstrates that Poe's ideal woman is a symbol of beauty and unsubstantial existence imagined in his mind. However, considering that his purpose is to construct a complete world of beauty by using a beautiful woman as a symbol of beauty and a hero's sadness caused by her loss, we find that, for Poe, it does not matter whether a heroine has her real existence or not. The theme of “the death of a beautiful woman” is completely ideal.

Since Poe conceives of a woman only as an idea, it is impossible to talk about love concretely. As the death of a beautiful woman is a created idea in his works, so the love between Ligeia and “me” cannot be an ordinary love, but rather it is praise for Ligeia, an ideal image of a woman that Poe has created as a symbol of beauty. Therefore, their relation as lovers cannot be described, and Ligeia who guides “me” in learning is an object of adoration rather than that of loving.

This is Poe's view of women that is found in his works and such a view to treat a woman as an idea is found in his actual life too. In reading his biography, I have noticed that he also has no other view of a real woman than that which is found in his works. What I feel the most strange in his biography is the marriage to Virginia of thirteen years old and his romances with several women just after Virginia's death. Poe had been ac-
quainted with Virginia since she was about eight years old. It is said that he had helped her study, teaching arithmetic and so on. In 1835, he got married to Virginia whose age was only thirteen. It is doubtful whether an adult man of twenty six can really love a girl of thirteen as a female. However, Poe says that he loves her "passionately devotedly" in one of his letters, and confesses his deep love in the letter to Virginia herself as follows:

In my last great disappointment, I should have lost my courage but for you—my little darling wife you are my greatest and only stimulus now, to battle with this uncongenial, unsatisfactory and ungrateful life—I shall be with you tomorrow P. M.4

And Poe's attitude toward Virginia seems to have been very affectionate. It is testified by George R. Graham who was the owner of Graham's Magazine which Poe worked for:

His love for his wife was a sort of rapturous worship of the spirit of beauty which he felt was fading before his eyes. I have seen him hovering around her when she was ill, with all the fond fear and tender anxiety of a mother causing in him a shudder, a heart-chill that was visible.5

Surely Poe loved his wife. But is it really a love a man usually feels for a woman?

Virginia was a very beautiful woman as far as we see in the picture. Though she was sickly and said to have a little mental weakness, it was not an obstacle to his love for her. This is because Poe loved Virginia just as a sister, or in other words, his love was Platonic. In fact he usually called her "Sis." As his love was Platonic love even to his dearest wife,
it cannot be said that it was not to other women. Poe had no more than an ideal view of women and Platonic love to them in his own life as well as in his works.

Considering his love in such a way, I have found that his romances with several women after Virginia's death are not strange. Although Poe loved Virginia so passionately, just after her death, he fell in love with several women such as Marie Louise Show, Sarah Helen Whitman, Frances S. Osgood, Annie Richmond and so on. Among Poe's letters in the autumn of 1848, long love letters to Mrs. Whitman, a widow, and passionate letters to Annie Richmond, a married woman living with her husband, are found alternately. Although it seems strange that he had passionate love with several women at a time, and that just after his wife's death, it can be understood if we consider that he took these women as an idea.

And it is judged from his letters that Poe's love to these women was Platonic, like his love to Virginia. Let me quote from his letter to Mrs. Whitman:

Do you not feel in your inmost heart of hearts that the "soul-love" of which the world speaks so often and so idly is, in this instance at least, but the veriest, the most absolute of realities? Do you not—I ask it of your reason, darling, not less than of your heart—do you not perceive that it is my diviner nature—my spiritual being—which burns and pants to commingle with your own?

In the letters to Annie Richmond too, the expressions of "my darling sister", "sweet sister Annie" are found here and there, and he says, "I could bear that you should imagine every other evil except that one—that my soul had been untrue to yours." It seems that it is nothing but being untrue to
say such a thing to Annie at the same time as confessing passionate love to Mrs. Whitman, but it is also acceptable when I think his love was purely Platonic.

Poe projected an image of a woman created in his mind over the real living women like Mrs. Whitman and Annie Richmond and loved the image in them. Although he proposed to Mrs. Whitman and fixed the date for their wedding, he seemed to hesitate to marry. Just before the scheduled day for the marriage, he said to one of his acquaintances as follows: “I am not going to Providence to be married, I am going to deliver a lecture on poetry.” and “That marriage may never take place.” And Poe visited Mrs. Whitman breaking his promise of abstinence from drink that was a condition to their marriage and the marriage was broken off. Arthur Hobson Quinn attributes Poe’s hesitancy to the marriage to a money problem. I think there is one more reason for it, that is his anxiety about the marriage life. Unlike Virginia, Mrs. Whitman was a healthly mature woman and the marriage to her meant the end of his Platonic love. If he was married to her, he would have to stop loving an image of an ideal woman thrown over her and instead love her really and sexually as a living woman. From the anxiety about it, he drank and broke off the marriage with Mrs. Whitman.

Thus, Poe, who created an ideal woman in his works and made her death a thème, took a woman only as an idea also in his real life. He could love women in the actual world only Platonically, which is proved by various episodes. Then what caused him to have such a view of women? His experiences of the death of women close to him may have some relation to the reason. Marie Bonaparte explains from psychoanalytical point of view that his fear of sexual love was caused by his fixation
to the mother. She asserts that his only true love was that for his mother and that all other lovers were merely a search for the lost mother. The sexual love with one's mother is, of course, inhibited by taboos, and this is a cause of his being afraid of sexual love. His love for Virginia, a child-wife was no problem because it was not sexual. However, with the other mature women, he had a problem because to love them meant to be untrue to his sole real lover, his mother, and he felt guilty.

This well explains his fear of sexual love, which caused his view of women that he could think of a woman only as an idea. Moreover, Bonaparte's analysis that the mother was the only woman that Poe truly loved provokes us to think that the heroines in his short stories have an image of a mother. Every heroine of the three short stories "Morella," "Berenice," and "Ligeia" grows weak from illness and dies at last just as his own mother died of tuberculosis. Morella and Ligeia are gigantic existences who lead a hero like a mother. Especially in "Ligeia," the relation between Ligeia and "I" quite resembles a mother-child relationship. Ligeia is gigantic in every point, which is shown by the following passages:

An intensity in thought, action, or speech, was possibly, in her, a result, or at least an index, of that gigantic volition which, during our long intercourse, failed to give other and more immediate evidence of its existence. (p. 315)

I said her knowledge was such as I have never known in woman—but where breathes the man who has traversed, and successfully, all the wide areas of moral, physical, and mathematical science? I saw not then what I now clearly perceive, that the acquisitions of Ligeia were gigantic, were astounding. (pp.
As the term "gigantic" is repeatedly used, Ligeia is described as an extremely great person for the hero. And he follows her like a child which is shown in the passages below:

I was sufficiently aware of her infinite supremacy to resign myself, with a child-like confidence, to her guidance through the chaotic world of metaphysical investigation at which I was most busily occupied the earlier years of our marriage. (p. 316, italics mine)

Without Ligeia I was but as a child groping benighted. Her presence, her readings alone, rendered vividly luminous the many mysteries of the transcendentalism in which we were immersed. (p. 316, italics mine)

In this way, Legeia and "I" are given an image of a mother and child. Furthermore, it is often pointed out that Ligeia's appearance bears a resemblance to Poe's mother, Elizabeth. Indeed Ligeia's "raven-black, naturally-curling" hair and very large eyes are seen in Elizabeth's portrait. The description "In stature she was tall, somewhat slender, and, in her latter days, even emaciated." (p. 311) reminds us of an image of his own mother. When she died, Edgar was only three years old. Although Elizabeth is said to have been not so tall, she must have seemed to be tall for a child of three. And she must have been emaciated because of her disease as in the description. It is very meaningful that Poe's favorite tale has the most motherlike heroine. It reinforces Bonaparte's interpretation that Poe's most beloved woman was his mother.

Thus, Poe's fear of sexual love is caused by his love to his own mother,
which made him love women only Platonically all through his life. After Virginia's death, he died not being remarried to anyone. Even if he had married anyone, the marriage would have collapsed. For, the intellectual women that Poe loved would have noticed that he loved not themselves but his image of an ideal woman projected on themselves, and they would not have been satisfied with his Platonic love only.

The theme "the death of a beautiful woman" is a product of Poe's unusual idea of love. He threw his image of an ideal woman over real women and loved the image in them. Therefore his love was ideal and it was the adoration of the women as a symbol of beauty. Conversely speaking, it is because he grasped a woman only as an idea that the women created by him in the works were all unsubstantial beings. In his works, however, unsubstantial figures of beautiful women are not impediments to the effect. Poe puts the most stress on unity of effect or impression in writing poetry and tales, as he repeatedly states in various essays. The most important thing for the works under the theme of "the death of a beautiful woman" is not concreteness of description of a woman but the idea of supreme beauty and melancholy caused by its loss. To achieve this goal, he creates an ideal woman with all his power. His heroine must personify the beauty and be the supreme beauty. In this sense, there is no need for him to give concreteness to his heroines and plausibility to the love between a heroine and a hero. Finally he succeeds in creating a world of mysterious beauty in his works. Therefore, it can be said that his idea of women is advantageous to attain his goal in his writing.
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Notes


7. Ibid., p. 388.

8. Ibid., p. 401.
