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Lesson Three

FOCUS: Biographical Criticism and the Speaker of a Poem

VOCABULARY WORDS

From “Annabel Lee”:

Lore, n.

1. Teaching; instruction; something taught
2. Knowledge or learning

Ember, n.

A glowing piece of coal, wood, etc., from a fire

Lattice, n.

1. An openwork structure of crossed strips or bars
2. A door, gate, shutter, trellis, etc., formed of such a structure

Obeisance, n.

1. A gesture of respect or reverence, such as a bow or curtsy
2. The attitude shown by this; homage; deference

Seraphim, n.

Any of the highest order of angels, above the cherubim

Examining an author’s life can inform and expand a literary text. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author’s experience. Some poems depend on a reader’s knowledge of biographical facts. However, readers should be careful not to assume that the speaker of a poem is necessarily the poet. When we read a poem, one of our first questions should be: whose “voice” is speaking to us? Sometimes a poet will create a *persona*, a fictitious speaker. This speaker may not always be human. A speaker may be an animal or object, and good poems have been written from perspectives as various as a hawk, a clock, or a cloud.

The frequency with which Poe, in both poems and short stories, presents a despairing man mourning the untimely loss of his beloved, coupled with his assertion in “The Philosophy of Composition” that “the death . . . of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world,” has obvious roots in the illness and death of his wife, Virginia, to whom he was intensely devoted and upon whom he was deeply emotionally dependent. She was ill with tuberculosis—at that time an irrevocable death sentence—for several years before her death in January 1847 at the age of twenty-four. Nonetheless, her death was a shattering event, from which Poe never fully recovered.



Discussion Activities

Virginia’s death was almost certainly the basis for “Ulalume,” written later in 1847. “Annabel Lee,” published after Poe’s death, is one of his most popular poems and commonly assumed also to refer to Virginia (though several of Poe’s childhood sweethearts later claimed to have inspired it). Lead a discussion of the two poems’ treatments of the theme of the death of a beloved. Have students focus on both similarities—the use of repetition for emotional effect, the speaker’s feelings being thwarted by “high-born Kinsmen” in one poem and Psyche in the other—and dissimilarities—the light and airy “kingdom by the sea” vs. the dark and haunted forest; the obsessive vigil at the beloved’s sepulcher vs. the futile effort to forget her loss and avoid her tomb.



Writing Exercise

Despite similarities of subject matter, “Annabel Lee” has always been a much more popular poem than “Ulalume.” Have the students write a one-page essay arguing which of the two poems more effectively deals with the theme of loss of a loved one. Ask them to give the reasons for their choice and to support it with passages from the text.



Homework

Read the poems “To Helen” (p. 341, not the poem of the same title on p. 309) and “Sonnet—To Science” (pp. 337–338). Ask students to research Helen of Troy.