Reader Response Analysis of “Annabel Lee” by Edgar Allan Poe

To quote Robert E. Probst, “Meaning lies in that shared ground where the reader and text meet--it isn’t a resident within the text, to be extracted like a nut from its shell. Rather, the meaning is created by readers as they bring the text to bear upon their own experience” (38). This theory of a text’s meaning is reflected when looking at the way critics are split across the board on Edgar Allan Poe’s poem “Annabel Lee.” Critics like Wallace C. Brown are of the opinion “that ‘Annabel Lee’ is not a good poem” and questions whether or not it is “representative of Poe’s best,” (382) even though other critics like Robert Adger Law attribute great qualities to “Annabel Lee,” praising “its bold figures, its rich melody, its emotional strain and climactic structure, and indeed the transformation of the buried nugget into fine gold” (343). The brilliance of reader response theory is that it does not try to find one correct way of reading a text, but rather it allows for different readers--such as me--to interpret a work based on how it affects them personally. While Law may praise “Annabel Lee” and look upon it very fondly, that does not mean that I have to fall in line and agree based on his merit as a literary scholar. I happen to think that Poe’s poem is creepy and unenjoyable.

I question the purpose of the titular character of the poem, as Poe writes about her in a way that makes me believe she only exists for his satisfaction and does not serve any other purpose. Poe even refers to himself and Annabel Lee as children in the poem, a disturbing notion considering the dark theme of death and the extreme way he portrays their love. Because her
existence is solely to be Poe’s lover and due to the fact that both of them are children in a serious relationship, I do not see her death as something that is sad as Poe intends it to be, rather, I see it as a happy and creepy occurrence. “Annabel Lee” is a poem that, to me, is very creepy due to the fact that the titular character serves no other purpose to me than to be Poe’s lover, Poe disturbingly describes both of them as children which makes their love seem bizarre, and her subsequent death ends up being a moment in which I am not sad as I feel I should be, but rather I feel both happy for her because she becomes liberated from Poe and also creeped out with the way Poe responds to it.

Annabel Lee only serves the purpose of being Poe’s lover within this poem, and to me, this makes it very creepy to read. Instead of having the titular character play an autonomous role that allows her to shape her role as a character, all I gain out of her appearance in the text is that she is absolutely nothing other than the subject of Poe’s romantic interest:

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. (2-6)

All Poe has to do here is either explain why he loves Annabel Lee, how their relationship comes to be, or what type of person she is other than just his lover. This story would be justified in its romantic tragedy if some context could be given to Annabel Lee’s character. However, the issue arises due to the fact that Poe spends the entire first stanza claiming that the main character is nobody more than someone who will love him then does not present us with any further information about her. This slightly disturbs me and completely throws me off track of a serious
reading, and in fact, this even gets me to laugh out loud as I evaluate how ridiculously Annabel Lee is portrayed by Poe. Her portrayal heavily diminishes any solid character traits she may otherwise have, and ultimately, she is nothing more than a slave to Poe’s love with an “attitude [that] is so deadly-inearnest that it risks arousing in the reader the opposite response—that of humor” (Brown 382). “Annabel Lee” misses the target of making me look fondly upon the relationship between Poe and the titular character, and instead I feel as if their relationship is some kind of dark joke within the poem which makes me question why Annabel Lee is included in the first place. Poe’s narrow representation of her creeps me out while simultaneously making me laugh at how ridiculous he behaves towards her. While “Annabel Lee” succeeds as a “creation of a haunting melody or overpowering effect in prose” (Block 390) it does so in a way that scares me into believing Annabel Lee is Poe’s love slave rather than overpowering my emotional response to Poe’s loss of a lover.

Poe’s description of him and Annabel Lee as children completely throws me off and makes the intensity of their love look extremely bizarre. I find myself cringing at lines in which Poe emphasizes that they are both children and subsequently proclaiming how fierce their love is:

_She_ was a child and _I_ was a child

But our love it was stronger by far than the love
Of those who were older than we--
Of many far wiser than we--” (7, 27-29).
The fact that both of them are children is disturbing, and coupled with Poe talking about how their love is more prosperous than those older than them makes it even creepier. While Poe may be trying to describe their relationship as one that is pure and innocent, it comes across as controlling and creepy based on how Poe describes the severity of their love as mere children. Not only that, but things get even worse when I consider that the poem presumes that they have a love that will never be separated:

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: (Poe 30-33)

While Poe may be trying to convey the idea here that the two are inseparable, he just comes across as obsessed over Annabel Lee, as he fawns over a childhood love which he is determined will last forever. I realize that Poe’s writing varies greatly from my expectation of it to the point where it “trigger[s] responses, evoke[s] memories, awaken[s] emotions and thoughts that could not have been predicted by the writer” (Probst 38). Poe comes off as if he wants readers to believe in his love with Annabel Lee, to see it as something that transcends even the power of the love of the wise. Yet, all Poe ends up doing here is ruining what is supposed to be a powerful story about never ending love by making the story about two kids who act as if they are adult lovers. I struggle to be affected in any positive way by reading this, rather this reads to me as unaware of its own creepiness instead of being a harmless story of the power of love.

Annabel Lee’s eventual death in the poem does not elicit a sad response from me, but rather it both makes me feel happy for her and yet also continues to creep me out. All of the
creepiness that Annabel Lee has had to endure up to this point from Poe is finally laid to rest when she dies:

A wind blew out of a cloud by night

Chilling my Annabel Lee;

So that her highborn kinsmen came

And bore her away from me,

To shut her up in a sepulchre (Poe 15-19)

She no longer has to deal with Poe, meaning that this bizarre relationship is finally concluding. The end of their relationship brings me joy, it neutralizes the feeling of creepiness that has been scratching at me throughout the poem which has been fueled by Poe’s bizarre descriptions of his romantic relationship with Annabel Lee. I feel a similar way about this relationship as the angels do:

The angels, not half so happy in Heaven,

Went envying her and me:

Yes! That was the reason (as all men know,

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That the wind came out of the cloud, chilling

And killing my Annabel Lee. (Poe 21-23, 25-26)

The angels are described as being the ones who cause Annabel Lee’s death out of spite, and while I am not envious of their relationship, I feel like my expectation of what should happen in this story has been fulfilled by the angels who are responsible for her downfall.

In a desperate final attempt, Poe tries to show us the devastating nature of this loss and how it has impacted him:
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. (38-41)

While it becomes clear that Poe desires us to feel pity for him due to his loss, I do not share this sentiment. The way he continues to push himself onto Annabel Lee even after her death continues the creepy factor. While I do feel happy for Annabel Lee’s freedom, that feeling is only a temporary one and it instantly disappears after realizing that Poe intends on spending his nights nestled next to his dead lover in her tomb. I struggle to see the intent of Poe doing such a thing, as rather than conveying the message that love is eternal, it just makes me question the acceptability of Poe’s intentions with his dead lover, as they are “of much more interest and importance to the reader than anything the writer could have predicted.” (Probst 38) In this case, the interest and importance of Poe’s intentions serve to make me critically evaluate his creepy nature.

It is worth noting that not every text we read has one correct form of evaluation and analysis. With “Annabel Lee,” there are many different interpretations that can be made. If we are to read it in a very innocent way that does not take into account Poe’s sinister undertones of control and obsession, then it may come across as a story that emphasizes the eternity of love. What creeps me out and makes me read it in such an ominous way begins with Poe designating Annabel Lee as merely an object who serves the purpose of loving him, as she is stripped of all autonomy here and turned into a joke of a character. The creepy tone of this poem gets carried even further when Poe describes the two as children in what comes across as a mature relationship. Annabel Lee’s death brings temporary happiness by rendering her free from Poe’s
clutches, yet eventually solidifies this disaster of a poem by further proving that Poe just cannot leave her alone and goes as far as to lay in her tomb night after night.
Works Cited


Edgar Allan Poe And A Summary of Annabel Lee. Annabel Lee is a rhyming poem with a lilting rhythm Poe penned in May 1849, the year he died. It tells of the love between two people, one Annabel Lee and the speaker, who is a male persona possibly based on the poet himself. Different Versions Of Annabel Lee. Edgar Allan Poe sent out several written versions of his poem in the summer of 1849, a few months before his death. Towards the end of this article is a copy of one of these which is now in Columbia University Manuscript Library, New York. The speaker's suggestion is that the reader may know of his Annabel Lee, perhaps a reference to the universality of her appeal, for she is every woman, because beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Read Edgar Allan Poe poem: It was many and many a year ago, In a kingdom by the sea, That a maiden there lived whom you may know. 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 the sepulchre there by the sea, In her tomb by.

Poem: Poe observed, "Annabel Lee" by Edgar Allan Poe. Poem: 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. The example from this Annabel Lee poe is the o d bore hi h has i e ea i gs a d one of them is to talk or act in a way that makes someone lose interest and become tired. Although denotation uses simple style of language, but still, we will not understand the furthermore meaning of the content of the poem without considering every single word because they are related each other. The reason why it is elegy is because it talks about the death of Annabel Lee as the subject of this poem. It also tells us about the despondency between the speaker and his woman.