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A Dream Within A Dream: Edgar Allan Poe (1809 -1849)



The boundaries which divide Life from Death are at best shadowy and vague. Who shall say where the one ends, and where the other begins?

The above words are taken from Edgar Allan Poe's disturbing short story entitled *The Premature Burial*, a first person narrative of a man who had been buried alive, and this blurring of the boundaries between life and death and reality and dream lie at the heart of his poetry.

Death was a very early presence in Poe's life. His parents were poverty stricken actors in Boston, and Edgar was the second of three children. He was just one year old when his father abandoned his mother and he died shortly after. His mother died when he was two. He was then taken to live with a wealthy Scottish merchant called John Allan who lived in Virginia. Although Edgar was never formally adopted, he was given the middle name of Allan. There was still more upheaval in his early life when his new family took him on a terrifying voyage across the Atlantic when he was just six years old. He at first stayed with John Allan's sister in the small seaside town of Irvine in Ayrshire, in south-west Scotland. This was the county in which Robert Burns was born and lived in most of his life.

Edgar attended Kirkgatehead School which was next door to the

Parish church and its surrounding graveyard. The headmaster had a rather unusual method of teaching his pupils to read and write: he had them copy the epitaphs on the gravestones. There is a sense in which Poe's poems and stories are extended epitaphs. One of the epitaphs which Edgar might well have read and copied is the following engraved on the headstone of a ship's captain:

Pray, gentle reader, drop a tear at his untimely fate; you like him may dread no fear, and dangers you await. He that gave can take away that life that was his own, either on the briny sea or lands in frozen zone.

With his recent dangerous voyage and the frequent tales

he heard of shipwrecks around the Scottish coast, those words must have reinforced his sense of vulnerability. It's revealing that shipwreck is at the centre of his only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* in which the survivors draw straws to see which one of them should be killed and eaten. By all accounts, tales of grave robbing, ghouls and cannibalism were rife in early 19th century Ayrshire.

All those early experiences and upheavals would have affected any child but he was no ordinary child as he describes in a poem written when he was twenty, shortly after the death of his foster mother, Frances Allan.

Alone

*From childhood's hour I have not been
As others were; I have not seen
As others saw; I could not bring
My passions from a common spring.
From the same source I have not taken
My sorrow; I could not awaken
My heart to joy at the same tone;
And all I loved, I loved alone.
Then- in my childhood, in the dawn
Of a most stormy life- was drawn
From every depth of good and ill
The mystery which binds me still:
From the torrent, or the fountain,
From the red cliff of the mountain,
From the sun that round me rolled
In its autumn tint of gold,
From the lightning in the sky
As it passed me flying by,
From the thunder and the storm,
And the cloud that took the form
(When the rest of Heaven was blue)
Of a demon in my view.*

Gazing out from the Ayrshire coast, Edgar's eyes must often have been fixed on the rocky island of Ailsa Graig shrouded in veils of mist and so many of Poe's writings take place in some mysterious, craggy, mist-filled region of the mind. In his poem, *The Valley Of Unrest*, we find the following lines:

*Now each visitor shall confess
The sad valley's restlessness.
Nothing there is motionless-
Nothing save the airs that brood
Over the magic solitude.
Ah, by no wind are stirred those
trees
That palpitate like the chill seas
Around the misty Hebrides!*

It's not known if Poe actually visited the Hebrides when he lived in Scotland or if those islands were something he had just read and dreamed about. The poet was always a *visitor* and never felt at home. Poe's world is curiously insubstantial, as if he cannot distinguish between waking and dreaming.

Although Poe only spent some two years in Ayrshire, his time there left an indelible mark on his life and writing. His subsequent life was as strange and tragic as his writing. After returning to the USA, he entered the university in Virginia but due to lack of funds, he took to gambling and his debts grew out of control. With his father's influence, he gained an appointment in the US Military Academy at West Point but he was expelled after a year due to negligence of his duties. He later married his cousin who was just thirteen but she died at the age of twenty-four and he never fully recovered from this loss and spent most of the rest of his life in poverty and ill-health. His death was as mysterious as his poems and stories. No one knows whether he died from alcoholism, rabies, epilepsy or carbon monoxide poisoning. His last

words were reported to be *Lord, help my poor soul.*

Although the subject matter of Poe's poetry is so often about terror, loss and death, he is one of the most mellifluous poets in the English language. He

wrote: *I would define, in brief the poetry of words as the rhythmical creation of Beauty.* The last verse of **Annabel Lee** is a good example of how grief is transformed into soothing verbal music.

A Dream Within A Dream

*Take this kiss upon the brow!
And, in parting from you now,
Thus much let me avow-
You are not wrong, who deem
That my days have been a dream;
Yet if hope has flown away
In a night, or in a day,
In a vision, or in none,
Is it therefore the less gone?
All that we see or seem
Is but a dream within a dream.*

*I stand amid the roar
Of a surf-tormented shore,
And I hold within my hand
Grains of the golden sand-
How few! yet how they creep
Through my fingers to the deep,
While I weep- while I weep!
O God! can I not grasp
Them with a tighter clasp?
O God! can I not save
One from the pitiless wave?
Is all that we see or seem
But a dream within a dream?.*



IRVINE CHURCHYARD

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 the sounding sea.