



## POEM ANALYSIS

# “Eldorado” by Edgar Allan Poe

Essay by T Fleischmann

**Author:** Edgar Allan Poe

**Born:** January 19, 1809; Boston, Massachusetts

**Died:** October 7, 1849; Baltimore, Maryland

**Country:** United States

**Culture:** American

### ABSTRACT

This essay provides an explication of the poem “Eldorado” by Edgar Allan Poe. Written at the end of the troubled poet’s life, the ballad “Eldorado” tells the story of a knight searching for the mythical city of gold. Rather than finding that city, however, he dies, departing from the material world and continuing on a quest of the imagination.

### KEYWORDS

- Ballad
- Death
- Imagination
- Lyric
- Repetition

### TYPE OF POEM

Ballad, Lyric

### APPEARS IN

*Complete Stories and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* by Edgar Allan Poe

*Poems of Edgar A. Poe* by Edgar Allan Poe

Recognized as a skilled lyric poet, the inventor of detective fiction, and an innovator in the horror genre, Poe’s stories and poems are set in imaginary landscapes of the macabre, yet infused with rich beauty and romantic

language. Personal and professional success, however, seemed to perennially elude Poe. His father abandoned his family and then his mother died at a young age, leaving the writer to be raised by the Allan family. He attempted a formal education at the University of Virginia and at West Point, but never completed a degree. While he slowly developed his reputation as a critic and a performer of poetry, his personal life fell to shambles. He married his thirteen-year-old cousin only to see her die of tuberculosis, and he struggled for years with alcoholism, drug addiction, and depression. Poe eventually died at the age of forty, drunk and delirious on the streets of Baltimore.

The lyric ballad “Eldorado” was written toward the end of Poe’s life. It is a fitting endnote to his career, telling the story of a knight in search of Eldorado, the legendary city of gold. Rather than finding that city, however, the dying knight is told by a ghostly figure that his search must continue into death, suggesting that the true treasure is of the spirit rather than material gain. The lyric was composed during the California Gold Rush, a time when many people were traveling to the Western United States in search of great wealth. While inspired by this event, the themes of the poem extend far beyond that historical context, as the failed search for happiness in life is a regular topic in literature and art. Characteristic of many of his poems, Poe presents this failed quest with heightened lyricism that emphasizes the mythic qualities of the knight. He is “Gaily bedight, / A gallant knight, / In sunshine and in shadow” (1-3). The poem is a ballad, composed in iambic meter and with a repeating AABCCB rhyme scheme, and in typical Poe fashion the ballad style is further made musical through his use of alliteration

and assonance. These stylistic choices highlight the romantic aspects of the knight as knight errant, so that despite his eventual failure, he still remains a celebrated figure.

Once the "gallant knight" and his quest are established, Poe quickly begins to introduce his eventual failure. He grows "old— / This knight so bold" (7-8). However, the end of the material quest and of his life is not the end of the narrative. Instead, Poe turns to the spiritual world, as the dying knight meets "a pilgrim shadow" (15). This move from the mundane into the fantastic is another hallmark of Poe's writing. Through the perspective crafted in the poem, the arrival of the ghostly figure is not a bad omen but an opportunity for redemption, and the speaker uses the language of the "pilgrim shadow" to cleverly reveal this opportunity. Its presence marks the third repetition of the word "shadow" in the poem, which appears in the center of every stanza. First we are given "in sunshine and in shadow" (3), indicating the world of nature. Poe then describes the knight's physical body, as "o'er his heart a shadow / Fell" (9-10). The shadow in the third stanza links finally links the foreshadowing language to the spiritual realms.

In the final stanza of the poem the action departs from the earthly realm altogether. Consistent with the ballad form and with Poe's most popular themes, this conclusion is both a triumphant and morbid end. The ghost tells the knight where Eldorado can be found, but it is "Down the Valley of the Shadow" (21), a reference to Psalm 23.4 and ultimately death. Death is a new frontier, and the knight is encouraged to "Ride, boldly ride" (22) forward. Poe draws our attention to "shadow" and "Eldorado" in every stanza. In the final stanza, the two terms are brought together. For a writer plagued by addiction and depression, known as a master of the horrific, Poe still presents in "Eldorado" a dark optimism. It is a ballad that acknowledges the failure of life, but finds in this failure an opportunity to celebrate the spiritual and the creative. Just as the knight may eventually complete his quest by leaving the material world behind, one's own sorrows can be tested through writing, transforming the shadows of life into a gleaming city of gold.

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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