



## POEM ANALYSIS

# “Annabel Lee” by Edgar Allan Poe

Essay by Cynthia A. Bily

**Author:** Edgar Allan Poe

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

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

**Country:** United States

**Culture:** American

### ABSTRACT

“Annabel Lee” is a narrative poem intended to be recited or sung. The poem is written in the first person, spoken by a man who was once the lover of “the beautiful Annabel Lee.” The story, as it unfolds through six stanzas of six to eight lines each, is a simple one.

### KEYWORDS

- Angels
- Cemeteries
- Death or dying
- Jealousy, envy, or resentment
- Joy or sorrow
- Love or romance
- Sea or seafaring life
- Waves

### TYPE OF POEM

Narrative Poem

### APPEARS IN

*The Works of the Late Edgar Allan Poe* by Edgar Allan Poe

“Annabel Lee” is in some ways a simple ballad—that is, a narrative poem intended to be recited or sung. The first four lines of the six-line first stanza are written in the traditional ballad stanza form. The rhyme scheme is *abab*, the first and third lines have four metrical feet,

and the second and fourth lines have three feet. The language, too, is conventional for a ballad. The poem begins: “It was many and many a year ago,/ In a kingdom by the sea.” This is the language of fairy tales, of beautiful princesses and their admirers, of great deeds and tragic consequences.

The poem is written in the first person, spoken by a man who was once the lover of “the beautiful Annabel Lee.” The story, as it unfolds through six stanzas of six to eight lines each, is a simple one.

When the speaker and Annabel Lee were young (“I was a child and she was a child”), they loved each other passionately “in a kingdom by the sea.” There is some evidence that the couple were actually married; at one point the speaker refers to Annabel Lee as his “bride.” So great was their love that even the angels, who were “not half so happy in heaven,” were envious of it. In their jealousy, the angels sent a chilling wind and killed Annabel Lee.

There are hints that it was not only the angels who disapproved of this courtship. The narrator reveals resentment of Annabel Lee’s “highborn kinsmen” who take her away after death. He also takes pains to point out that those who were “older” and “far wiser” than the young couple did not understand the strength of their love. The clear implication is that the speaker was not the social equal of Annabel Lee and that the families did not bless their union.

It seems that the speaker’s primary reason for telling his story is not to reminisce and enjoy again for a moment the pleasures of that great love. Instead, his purpose is to accuse those who tried to separate him from his Annabel Lee and to tell them defiantly that their machinations did not work. Although her death occurred

"many and many a year ago," their love has not ended. The narrator is still devoted to her, still dreams of her, still feels that their souls are united. He has remained true to her; in fact, he has literally never left her side. He says in the poem's last lines that he spends every night lying next to her in her sepulchre by the sea.

The entire story is told in the words of Annabel Lee's lover, with no omniscient narrator to offer guidance. The reader must decide, then, how to interpret that story. Edgar Allan Poe may have intended this as a romantic tale of young lovers who could not be parted even in death. Perhaps, however, "Annabel Lee" is the demented reflection of a madman.

If "Annabel Lee" has become one of Poe's most popular poems, its popularity is probably attributable to its haunting rhythm, its lulling repetition. Like many of Poe's poems—and this is no slight to them—the sound is more significant than the thematic content. The story takes place "in a kingdom by the sea," and Poe takes great pains to capture the sound of the sea in his poem. A wavelike cadence is suggested by the rhymes on the three-foot lines; all the shorter lines in the poem end with the same e sound.

The echoing of "sea," "Lee," and "me" throughout the poem is hypnotic. Like the sound of waves in the background, the reader gradually stops being aware of the repetitive sound but is stirred by it on a subconscious level. Internal rhyme also contributes to this wavelike rhythm. In phrases such as "can never dis-sever" and "chilling and killing," the stressed syllables seem to receive a bit of additional stress because of the rhyme, and the effect is of regular, lulling pulses.

The poet uses the power of his rhythm to particular effect in stanza 5, where he breaks out of the established pattern of alternating three-and four-foot lines. In this stanza, he adds an extra three-foot line: "Of those who were older than we— / Of many far wiser than we—." The unexpected change in rhythm jars the reader out of a lulled, dreamlike state for a moment, so that the irony of these two lines is not missed.

The hypnotic rhythm operates on another level through the repetition of entire words and phrases. Variations of "in a kingdom by the sea" occur five times in this forty-one-line poem, and the name "Annabel

Lee" occurs seven times. Key words appear a surprising number of times in such a short poem; for example, "love" occurs six times in the first two stanzas.

Within individual lines, the repetition is even more striking. Lines such as "But we loved with a love that was more than love" are almost numbing; the reader is not expected to pause over such a line and analyze its logical sense, but simply to experience the accumulation of "love" after "love" and derive meaning (perhaps "sensation" would be more accurate) that way.

The dreamlike feeling of this poem is further enhanced by the poet's use of consonants that do not jar or explode, but rather glide smoothly. The poem is full of m, n, l, and s sounds, with very few harsh consonants. The only stressed word beginning with t, for example (excluding words beginning with th), is the dramatic "tomb" in the last line. The sound of the poem, then, is quiet, rhythmic, hypnotic. It is this haunting sound, not the story itself, that causes most readers to remember "Annabel Lee."

The central question to be faced in interpreting "Annabel Lee" is what the reader is to think of the speaker's enduring love for Annabel Lee. Is he the model of a devoted lover, or is he mentally unbalanced? Based only on the words on the page, it is possible to make a good case for either view, but within the context of Poe's entire body of work, it would seem likely that the reader is dealing with the chilling story of a madman.

As already noted, the poem begins in the traditional form of a ballad. The speaker is calm, his language is straightforward, and his poetic form is tightly controlled. As the first stanza moves into its fifth line, however, the control begins to slip.

Instead of adhering to his ballad stanza form, the poet tacks on two more lines. The content of those lines is surprising, especially on a second reading of the poem. One might expect the speaker to announce his love for the maiden early in the poem as he sets the scene and introduces characters; instead, this speaker tells the reader—rather insistently—that "this maiden she lived with no other thought/ Than to love and be loved by me."

The exaggeration of "no other thought" could be taken merely as conventional rhetoric if the speaker

were talking about his own feelings, but to declare that another person adored oneself so fiercely sounds wishful, even desperately so. The paranoia in the second through fifth stanzas is clear. The speaker feels that angels, demons, and kinsmen are all deliberately attempting to keep him from his love. The angels kill her out of malice, and "all men" know it. When Annabel Lee's "highborn kinsmen" come to entomb her dead body—a natural thing to do—all he can see is that they are taking her "away from me."

All this could perhaps be attributed to normal grief at the death of a loved one, were the death a recent one, the wounds fresh. Annabel Lee, however, died "many and many a year ago." One might wonder whether the speaker should be getting over the loss. Again, this instability on the part of the speaker is noticeable only on a second reading. Nothing he says in the first five stanzas is wrong enough to prepare the reader for the gruesome revelation in the sixth: that he in fact spends his nights lying beside Annabel Lee's dead body. Years after her death, she is still his "darling," his "life."

### FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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