

Interpretations of Life and Death: Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus" and Edgar Allan Poe's "Spirits of the Dead"

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Studij: Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i
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Bachelor's Thesis

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Summary

Two great minds such as Poe and Plath, who lived in different times and under different circumstances, can only be compared through their specific views concerning the things they wrote about the most: life and death. In this paper, a context is provided in order to make the necessary comparisons despite their differences. Sylvia Plath, a twentieth century confessional poetry writer, wrote of death with appreciation and awe, yet with an air of nonchalance. Life and death were a game for Plath. In contrast, Edgar Allan Poe, a nineteenth century romantic writer, finds beauty and meaning in death. To Poe, life and death are a serious topic, and one that he keeps coming back to. Comparing specific poems of theirs, meaning Plath's "Lady Lazarus" and Poe's "Spirits of the Dead" provides insight into how important the topics of life and death were to both writers, yet they often undertook a different approach to their importance. Whereas Poe perceives death as a mysterious and ominous presence, Plath approaches the topic playfully and does not seem to take it seriously. Notably, this is reflected in their deaths; Plath having left the world by her own hands, and Poe dying under mysterious circumstances. Through this all, it can be concluded that life and death were both very influential topics for both authors, despite their different approaches.

Keywords: Sylvia Plath, "Lady Lazarus", Edgar Allan Poe, "Spirits of the Dead", life and death

Introduction

When discussing life and death in literature, it is important to reflect on the reason why certain authors approach the heavy topics the way that they do. It can vary greatly between authors, and rely on a number of factors – age, the period in which they created, their gender, and how they have perceived losses in their own lives. With this in mind, there are both similarities and differences in the way Poe and Plath write about these topics.

The aim of this paper is to analyze how both the authors approach these topics, specifically in two poems: “Lady Lazarus” by Sylvia Plath and “Spirits of the Dead” by Edgar Allan Poe. Both of the poems have death as the central theme, and subsequently provide a great insight into how the authors felt about the topics at the time of writing them. It is important to note that Plath’s poem is made up of twenty-eight tercet stanzas, and it is written in free verse; Poe’s poem, on the other hand, consists of only five stanzas and does not follow a specific rhyme scheme. This means that Plath’s poem is significantly longer, therefore provides more of an insight into her perception of the themes discussed; however, Poe’s poem makes up for the length in an abundance of imagery.

The thesis is separated into seven chapters: “Contextualization” deals with general analysis of the authors and their respective literary styles, “Sylvia Plath on Life and Death” provides an insight into Plath’s own approach to life and death throughout her life, “Dying Is An Art – “Lady Lazarus”” is an analysis of the poem and how it approaches the themes of life and death, “Edgar Allan Poe on Life and Death” is an exploration of Poe’s views on the topics and his personal life, “The Stars Shall Not Look Down – “Spirits of the Dead”” provides an analysis of the poem and its topics, “Poe versus Plath” compares the author’s views on life and death as shown in the two poems analyzed previously, and “Final Comparisons” offers a summary of the comparisons made throughout.

1. Contextualization

To properly analyze how Poe approached the topics of life and death, it is important to note his personal life, the era in which he created, and how it differs from Plath's own experiences.

Edgar Allan Poe created all of his works in the 1800s, having been born in 1809 and dying in 1849. He suffered through some major losses in his life that haunted him until the day he died, as stated: "Without question, Poe had a difficult life and faced many adversities from a young age. It is likely that a number of these challenges impacted the development of his personality and may account for why he drank heavily" (Giammarco 5). It is also noted that Poe suffered from depression, concluding that "we can speculate that it was severe since he reported being "tormented" and "miserable" for much of his life" (Giammarco 5). Lastly, all of these factors heavily show through Poe's work, as it is stated here: "the content of Poe's professional writing was often dark, centered on death, gruesome images, and frequently reflected life events" (Giammarco 5).

As for Sylvia Plath, her life is masterfully analyzed by Reilly's observation "Sylvia Plath epitomizes woman subjugated by her society's cultural norms" (Reilley 129). Her work was influenced by her pregnancy, her husband, and lastly – her suicide attempts. She is reported to have attempted to take her own life a handful of times (Cooper 296) from the years 1953 to 1963, and finally succeeded in 1963 at only thirty years old (Feinman). Her mental health, naturally, influenced her work greatly and is one of the more prominent features in most of her works.

There is a comparison to be drawn between these two authors – Poe's works are often narrated by a man who is anxious, paranoid, oversensitive to light, sometimes struggling with alcoholism and usually mourning the death of a woman he loves. Which is to say, most of his protagonists tend to be plagued by the same issues he was, therefore making it obvious that he drew upon his own life experiences in order to make these characters come to life: "Although Poe suffered many tragedies in his lifetime, each event undoubtedly influenced his literary career, evident in the mimicry between his characters and real life" (Giammarco 6).

This approach to writing is also due to Poe having created his work in the period of Romanticism – a period which was characterized by usage of emotions and the inner life of the writer, and even using autobiographical material in writing in order to elevate the literary works. Other characteristics include focus on the individual, the idealization of women, and

celebration of melancholy – these are all characteristics that Poe’s work has, therefore he is a great example of the Romanticism period.

In contrast to Poe and his heavily Romantic style, Plath’s own literary style was confessional poetry – and her work exhibits an abundance of the style’s characteristics. Namely, an important characteristic is direct, colloquial speech rhythms, as well as the use of images that reflect intense psychological experiences which often stem from battles with mental illnesses. Along with those characteristics, Plath’s gender played an important role in the expression of her literary style – since she wrote from the perspective of a woman, it brought new experiences and opened up a path for other female writers to do the same.

Sylvia Plath’s protagonists struggled with maturity, femininity, establishing personal and parental relationships, anger and suicidal thoughts. Similarly to Poe, all of these predicaments were inspired by Plath’s real self and the issues she faced in life.

Two aspects of Sylvia Plath’s poetry have been generally accepted in the analyses of her work: first, that a boundary between herself and what and whom she writes about is nonexistent, and secondly, that she writes about personal experience. (Reilly 129)

Furthermore, despite the above-mentioned similarities in their approach, it is important to note what sets them apart. As was previously mentioned, both authors drew inspiration from their own personal lives, but they had done so in distinctly different ways. Edgar Allan Poe can not be considered a confessional poet, since his work is lacking in the casual, colloquial approach that confessional poets seem to favor. Despite how autobiographical his work is, the style of his writing is distinctly rooted in Romanticism. On the other hand, Sylvia Plath’s work is one that is truly rooted in the confines of confessional poetry – it lacks the glorification and appreciation of nature, the idealization of women, and the deep melancholy that is woven through in works that fall under Romanticism. In conclusion, even though they share similarities – namely, the insertion of autobiographical details – both authors approach is different, and deeply reflective of the literary period they created their works in.

As an important note, one of the greatest differences between the two authors is certainly their gender. This is important to how influential Plath’s poetry was for feminism, and has no doubt inspired generations of female writers in the years since she started writing. Furthermore, her gender had a significant impact on not only the creation of her work, but

also on the perception of it. This is well-documented and explained in Gerisch's work, as stated below:

Plath has become a cult figure for the modern women's movement – the term *Bell Jar* has become a synonym for a specific feeling of alienation among women – and her suicide was interpreted as a tragic consequence of an unsuccessful emancipation attempt within the context of a patriarchal society. However obvious this interpretation may be (e.g., when Plath appears as the suppressed and abandoned victim of an ambitious husband who defined himself at her expense) the result is an overly simple reduction, which gives little credit to such an exciting and complicated personality as Plath's. (Gerisch 736)

It seems that both authors were influenced by not only the time, literary period, and their own life experiences – their view of life and death was certainly significantly influenced by their respective genders and the experiences they had because of it.

2. Edgar Allan Poe on Life and Death

Edgar Allan Poe's life was one plagued by death throughout the entirety of it. Having struggled with losses from very early on in his life – courtesy of his father abandoning him and his mother when Poe was only one year old, and his mother dying the next year – he expressed an urge to become a poet and a writer even in young adulthood.

He was soon faced with the death of a mother yet again, when his foster mother Frances died of illness in 1829. These experiences would end up influencing his work greatly. The decision to switch from writing poetry into writing prose allowed him to make more money, as he was one of the first people in America who solely wrote as means to make a living.

After losing his job due to his alcohol dependency, he obtained the means to marry his cousin Virginia when he was twenty-six, and she was thirteen years old. This would later also be important for his writing – as Virginia fell ill in 1842, Poe's mental health steadily declined and he began drinking more under the stress.

His poem "The Raven" made Poe a household name when it became a popular sensation. This had the potential to lead to a successful life and writing career, but the circumstances of life caught up with Poe shortly after. Poe's wife met her demise in 1847, becoming another in a series of women dying in Edgar Allan Poe's life, which will, as Weekes notes, ultimately lead to his tendency to connect the women in his work to the women he lost throughout his life (Weekes 149).

From the information shown above, a clear link can be made between personal experiences and Poe's work. Namely, "The Raven" – other than being one of his most successful works – showcases his grievance and loss perfectly.

The balance of probabilities is that although Edgar needed women – Virginia in particular – and constantly sought their company, it was not for the desires of the flesh that he needed them: they were surrogates for the lost mothers and sister of his life and for the lost goddess of his imagination. (Sinclair)

As seen from the quote, his penchant for writing about deaths of beautiful women seems to stem from his early childhood – the loss of his biological mother, then his foster mother, and finally his wife.

His alcohol dependency, then, also shows through in some of his work. A good example of that is “The Black Cat,” a short story in which the narrator is a man troubled by alcoholism who is forced to pay for his sins. It seems that Poe was harrowed and burdened by loss, guilt, and haunted by a deep sadness. Plagued by isolation, it is only natural that this is all reflected in his work throughout the years.

It is also notable that the circumstances of Poe’s death were as mysterious as his works. In 1849, Poe was found on the streets of Baltimore, delirious and in great distress – he died shortly after, though his death certificate has been lost (Bramsäck 40). This only further adds to how important the topics of life and death are in understanding Poe – because, much like Plath, his death reflected his mental state, though he lived to be forty years old.

A comparison between Plath and Poe can be drawn, due to both of their untimely deaths having happened under unnatural circumstances; Plath having committed suicide, and Poe – if witness accounts are to be believed – meeting his demise due to his alcoholism.

3. The Stars Shall Not Look Down – “Spirits of the Dead”

In the beginning of the poem “Spirits of the Dead” Poe writes: “Thy soul shall find itself alone / 'Mid dark thoughts of the gray tombstone—” (1-2). He is, in this, describing how the reader stands in a cemetery. This immediately creates a feeling of solitude, but interestingly, it does not evoke a feeling of loneliness. Rather, as the poem goes on, the solitude builds more a sense of calm than of distress: “Not one, of all the crowd, to pry / Into thine hour of secrecy” (3-4). All four of the lines come together to form what might be called a prophecy or a prediction – Poe is informing the reader of their future. He is not being literal in this prophecy – what it means is that one day, the reader will be faced with death all around them, and he is giving instructions on how to handle and approach such a subject. However, rather than making it ominous, the premonition is expressed in a way that brings comfort; knowing there is a quiet place free of stares and a place where you can truly be alone.

Further into the poem, Poe presents the reader with some instructions, writing

Be silent in that solitude,
Which is not loneliness—for then
The spirits of the dead who stood
In life before thee are again (5-8)

which provides further insight into his perception of death. He reaffirms that while there is solitude in the dark of the cemetery, it is not considered loneliness – due to the existence of other spirits, who will surround the reader. This might be comforting to Poe because of his life experiences and all of the people he lost throughout them, so he expresses to the reader that they, too, can be reunited with those they love. He ends this verse with the plea to “be still” (10) due to the will of the spirits overshadowing the reader.

The lines “The night, tho’ clear, shall frown— / And the stars shall look not down / From their high thrones in the heaven” (11-13) seems to illustrate some kind of disapproval from the stars above towards mortals, as he goes on to say

With light like Hope to mortals given—
But their red orbs, without beam,
To thy weariness shall seem

As a burning and a fever

Which would cling to thee for ever (14-18)

which implies that Poe, himself, is disapproving of the way humanity perceives death. Namely, he does not approve of romanticization of death. Poe sees death as a serious subject, but one that is completely natural and inevitable. This is further evidenced by the next stanza, in which Poe talks about the departure of a soul from the body:

Now are thoughts thou shalt not banish,

Now are visions ne'er to vanish;

From thy spirit shall they pass

No more—like dew-drop from the grass (19-22)

Once again, he sees death as a calm process, and relates it to nature. Here he is comparing dying to dew disappearing from grass. From all of these lines, it is clear that Poe regards death with great respect, approaching it with a serious tone but not willing to be scared of it.

Further on, there is the connection of death with religion. The next lines reference the darkness found in both life and death

The breeze—the breath of God—is still—

And the mist upon the hill,

Shadowy—shadowy—yet unbroken,

Is a symbol and a token— (23-26)

but Poe is insistent that there is beauty in the darkness, once again relating it to nature with referring to it as a mist upon the hill.

The poem has an open ending, declaring death “A mystery of mysteries!” (28) that hangs upon the trees. This shows that, although he is aware that there is some mystery surrounding death, Poe is not afraid of it – since the poem ends with an exclamation mark, it could be interpreted as delight or wonder.

4. Sylvia Plath on Life and Death

As has been previously discussed, the topic of life and death is one that stretches all throughout Plath's work and career as a writer. It is especially interesting to explore when confronted with the information that her untimely death was a suicide. There is a point to be made for how much "life" experience a person who only reached the age of thirty can have, but she did not waste the years she spent alive.

Plath graduated with a Bachelor of Arts *summa cum laude* (Kirk 85), having done her master thesis on Dostoyevsky. Prior to that, she had already been treated with electroconvulsive therapy and had attempted suicide at age twenty-one (Steinberg 107). Eventually, she married poet Ted Hughes and they had a daughter together – they later on had a son as well, but she had experienced a miscarriage between those two successful pregnancies (Kirk 85). After Hughes had an affair, they separated and she took the two children with her. It was in 1963 when she was found with her head in the oven, the rooms between her and her sleeping children sealed with tape, towels and cloths (Prioleau, Stevenson 296).

Although she had been writing poetry since she was a child, her posthumously published collection *Ariel* is credited with being her claim to fame. This collection also contains the poem "Lady Lazarus", which will be further discussed later on. A close friend of Plath's wrote of her work, saying: "Her poems are full of references and images that seem impenetrable at this distance, but which could mostly be explained in footnotes by a scholar with full access to the details of her life" (Alvarez 214). This means that she interpolated her personal life into her work, even the mundane things in her everyday life.

Another friend of Plath's, Anne Sexton, spoke of Plath's attitude towards her suicide attempts, saying that "she told the story of her first suicide in sweet and loving detail" and that the two friends often discussed both of their first suicide attempts. From this, Plath's approach to death seems to be extremely nonchalant and carefree – something to discuss with her friend in casual conversation, even seemingly speaking nicely about it and remembering it fondly.

As noted by Gerisch, for Sylvia Plath, death was "the liberating aim in life" (759), paradoxically as it may sound. Having struggled throughout most of her life, it appears that she sought out some sort of salvation in dying that she could not find while alive. This sentiment is even further confirmed by Sylvia Plath herself: "And if you have no past or

future which, after all, is all that the present is made of, why then you may as well dispose of the empty shell of present and commit suicide” (Plath 18). This quote perfectly shows her nonchalance towards death; as something that one might as well do, if they find themselves too lost or unhappy. This is, unsurprisingly, echoed in her poetry; as she is a confessional poet, elements of autobiography are present in most of her works. Her approach to death, specifically, is quite unique and is found all throughout her works.

5. Dying is An Art – “Lady Lazarus”

Plath writes, “I have done it again. / One year in every ten / I manage it——” (1-3) in the opening lines of her poem “Lady Lazarus” – this can only be assumed to reference her suicide attempts, as she goes on to say later in the poem “And I a smiling woman. / I am only thirty. / And like the cat I have nine times to die” (19-21). This shows some irony at work – she is smiling, she is young, and she mocks her own life in saying she is like a cat. It is almost like her whole life she has been testing it, to see when the final attempt will catch – to find out when the last of her nine lives will run out.

Further on, she references what was seemingly her first brush with death – “The first time it happened I was ten. / It was an accident” (35-36) – and then goes on to say her next attempt was not only intentional, but it was supposed to be the final one: “The second time I meant / To last it out and not come back at all” (37-38). This, again, shows a kind of perversion in the way she speaks about dying – with a certain nonchalance, and yet, hauntingly, with a sense of resignation and predetermination. As if Plath is standing there and saying that she was born only to die –

Dying

Is an art, like everything else.

I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.

I do it so it feels real.

I guess you could say I’ve a call (43 – 48)

She sees her death the same way she sees art – something she is good at, even though it hurts. She, concerningly, believes she has a certain “talent for dying”, which explains why she kept trying her hand at doing it.

In “Lady Lazarus” Plath also seems to express some contempt for coming back to her life, writing:

It’s the theatrical

Comeback in broad day

To the same place, the same face, the same brute

Amused shout:

‘A miracle!’

That knocks me out (51-56)

– this is the point in which the underlying story of the poem really starts to take shape.

The poem can be interpreted as a struggle for control over one’s own art. For Lady Lazarus, dominion over her art (death) is prevented by her torturer, Herr Doktor. This powerful character is a Nazi doctor who brings the speaker back to life from her suicides, performing experiments that echo actual atrocities of the Jewish Holocaust (Collins 156).

The reference to Lazarus is a religious one, as it echoes coming back from the dead – only, instead of being grateful, it is a form of punishment and a source of contempt from Lady Lazarus that she feels towards Herr Doktor. There is a struggle for power between them – as Lady Lazarus desperately attempts to die, her tormentor brings her back to life every single time.

The reasons for why he does so are further revealed in the poem, “For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge” (58) implying that she is perhaps displayed in front of a crowd of some sort – and thus, the assumption that Herr Doktor is displaying her like an attraction, collecting money for people who even want to look at her. Going back to a previous place in the poem with the newfound knowledge of her torment, a sense of perversion arises when realizing her words

The peanut-crunching crowd

Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand and foot—

The big strip tease.

Gentlemen, ladies

These are my hands

My knees (26-32)

refer not only to her being displayed in front of a crowd, but also the concerning fact that she refers to it as a strip tease. It evokes unpleasant sexual imagery, especially when she implies this is all happening against her will.

However, the poem ends almost optimistically in contrast to the concerning imagery the rest of the poem utilizes. The poem ends with a warning, when Lady Lazarus says

Beware.

Out of the ash

I rise with my red hair

And I eat men like air (81-85)

Despite the prevailing male dominance up until the very end, Plath is sure to remind the reader that Lady Lazarus is not just a helpless woman, despite her hardships and her struggle for power. It appears that she manages to take control of her enemy in the end, however there is a point to be made on how this is not spoken to Herr Doktor directly – as Dahlke states in her article:

In the face of her enemy's power, she becomes incapable of confrontation. The men she promises to eat are abstract people, not the specific man. Had the threat been personalized by using the simple "you" or repeating "brute" or "enemy" she could have redeemed herself, but she chooses not to personalize her warning. This weakens her threat, and again she resigns her power. The poem ends on terms of defeat. (Dahlke 2002)

While it is an interesting analysis, it could be argued both ways – her warning can be even more powerful by not referring to a singular person, and it can be interpreted as her preemptively warning *other* men alongside her tormentor.

6. Poe versus Plath

After the analysis of both of the authors' poems, a strong case can be made out to compare their respective approach to life and death through the poems chosen. Starting with similarities – both authors seem to carry a respect for death, however, they express it in different ways. While Poe sees death as a mystery, he connects it to nature in his poem, expressing a distaste for romanticization and preferring to perceive it as an entirely natural and inevitable process.

Plath, on the other hand, while having a respect for death, approaches the topic more playfully. Unlike Poe, who seems to have come to terms with death being out of his hands, Plath assures the reader that dying is an art. She prides herself on her skills in the art of dying, and even jokes that she has nine lives such as a cat. This difference in approach can easily be assigned to the fact that Plath has attempted suicide multiple times, whereas Poe did not (at least to public knowledge).

Furthermore, Poe approaches death in a way that connects it to nature. He writes about death as inevitable, but simple, and compares a human life ending to dew dying on grass. Plath, as previously mentioned, sees death as something malleable and personal – it appears that she sees death not as just a natural process, but as something potentially human-made and something even desirable.

Poe, in his poem, approaches softly and calmly the idea of going to the graveyard to visit loved ones who died, and being brought comfort by being surrounded by them even after their death. He is pleased, because this means he is not lonely even though he has been left alone. This can be interpreted as his perception of “coming back to life” in the sense that a person is not forgotten after their death, and is still appreciated and sought after even after they are long gone.

In contrast, Plath absolutely despises the idea of being brought back to life – though hers is more in a literal sense – as she expresses in her poem, bemoaning her tormentor as she attempts to die and he brings her back every time. Comparatively, then, it is clear that their approach is different here; while Poe sees the opportunity to “come back to life” as peaceful and something to be desired, Plath wants nothing more than to stop having to interact with people after dying. Even further, she expresses clear distaste over being displayed for viewing; once again, almost directly contrasting the pleasant tone of Poe's poem. Where he is

overjoyed to be standing with the spirits of the dead at night, marveling at the thought; she is brought back to life again and again, having to face the living, when all she wants to do is be peaceful in her death.

To conclude, Poe and Plath utilized the ideas of life and death quite differently in their writing, but both chose it as central themes for their work. Additionally, although they both took a different approach, both authors seemed to carry a respect for death; albeit Plath respected it as a sort of craving and an urge, and Poe respected it as a natural, inevitable process.

7. Final Comparisons

With all of the previous chapters in mind, a final summarization can be made. Although Edgar Allan Poe and Sylvia Plath lived in different centuries, an undeniable connection can be found throughout their work due to the topics they chose to write about, although their approach varied.

It should be noted that both artists have a significant amount of works published, so it is therefore impossible to assign concrete similarities or differences across the span of their entire careers. However, concerning “Spirits of the Dead” and “Lady Lazarus,” both poems focus on the same topics in significantly different ways, therefore making the two poems perfect examples of their different approach.

Poe is reassuring, calm, and even marvels at death in the poem “Spirits of the Dead” – providing the reader with the sense that what he is writing about is important, and he respects it on a metaphysical level, as if he is aware that death is merely a necessary part of the mortal journey. It seems that Poe has great respect for both life and death, choosing to intertwine them and thin the veil of the two worlds together as he writes of spirits communicating with the living.

Plath, in “Lady Lazarus,” is sarcastic, mocking, tormented by life even as she tries to escape – nowhere to be found is the pleasant connection between life and death such as the one in Poe’s poem – for her, death is unachievable, and life is unescapable. She seems to lose her will for even dying, as she knows that she will only be brought back in the end. Nonetheless, for Plath, death is not metaphysical or natural – it is a fate that she desperately wants to experience, and yet is held back by her tormentor.

In conclusion, both artists’ personal experiences in their lives have significantly impacted their view on life and death and carefully curated the way each author would write about the topics. Their work is reflective of the time period, literary period, their gender, their age, and their personal losses and successes. Through insertion of autobiographical elements into their work – as both artists were prone to do – it is easier to understand their approach to the topics of life and death, when provided with information of their personal lives.

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