

Women in Edgar Allan Poe's Novels

© Polina P. Kondrashova, Natalia G. Sivtseva

Irkutsk National Research Technical University, Irkutsk, Russian Federation

Abstract. It is known that many plots of Edgar Allan Poe's novels were inspired by real events of his life. The goal of the given research is to define Edgar Allan Poe's attitude to the death through the novels that were written in the period of time from Edgar Allan Poe and Virginia Clemm's wedding to her illness. In this research such works as three novels *Morella*, *Ligeia*, *Eleonora* and one poem *The Raven* were analyzed in the chronological order to see the changes in the attitude of Edgar Poe to the characters of his works during the progression of tuberculosis of Virginia Clemm Poe. This work will allow readers to see the influence Virginia Clemm had on her husband, his attitude to the world around him and to his writing. At the final stage of the research the authors made a conclusion about Edgar Poe's perception of his wife Virginia, about a number of her traits that were given to the female protagonists of his novels and about Virginia Clemm's illness influence on the writer's attitude to the concepts of death and "life" after death.

Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe, Virginia Clemm Poe, female protagonist, literary analysis, novel

Женщины в произведениях Эдгара Аллана По

© П. П. Кондрашова, Н. Г. Сивцева

Иркутский национальный исследовательский технический университет, г. Иркутск, Российская Федерация

Аннотация. Известно, что многие сюжеты произведений Эдгара Аллана По были навеяны событиями из его жизни. Основная цель этой работы – показать, как менялось отношение писателя к жизни и смерти в период от его свадьбы с Вирджинией Клемм до ухудшения её здоровья вследствие туберкулёза. В работе были рассмотрены такие новеллы как «Морелла», «Лигейя», «Элеонора» и поэма «Ворон» в порядке их написания, что позволяет проследить изменения в отношении Эдгара По к героиням своих произведений на фоне ухудшающегося здоровья жены писателя Вирджинии Клемм По. Данная работа позволит увидеть влияние Вирджинии Клемм на своего супруга, на его отношение к окружающему миру и творчеству. На финальной стадии исследования были сделаны выводы о том, как Эдгар По воспринимал свою жену и наделял присущими ей чертами характера героинь своих произведений, а также о влиянии болезни Вирджинии Клемм на отношение писателя к теме смерти и «жизни» после смерти.

Ключевые слова: Эдгар Аллан По, Вирджиния Клемм По, образ женщины, литературный анализ, новелла

Edgar Allan Poe (Edgar Poe) is one of the most famous American Romanticism representatives (1809-1849). He is widely known for his novels, which combine the atmosphere of horror, devastation and complete despair with admiration of the female beauty, education and their ability to love. These seemingly incompatible things were brought together in Edgar Poe's novels owing to the inspiration he got from his wife, Virginia Clemm Poe, who was an incredibly strong person imprisoned in a frail body. They had a huge difference in their age even by the standards of that time, which became the reason of their marriage condemnation, however, it did not stop them from loving each other. The poor health of Virginia who possessed great inner strength had led to the author's desire to immortalize the pure image of his beloved in his works.

The goal of the given research is to define

the Edgar Allan Poe's attitude to the death through the novels that were written in the period of time from Edgar Allan Poe and Virginia Clemm's wedding to her illness. The novels were analyzed in the chronological order to see the influence of their life events on the fates of the female protagonists who were inspired by Virginia and the male protagonists who represent Edgar Allan Poe himself.

To achieve the goal, the following research tasks have been established. The first step was to analyze the biographies of Edgar Poe [1] and Virginia Clemm [2] mostly paying attention to their relationships and their attitude to each other. The next step was to define the character traits of Virginia that were of particular interest for her husband and the way these traits were shown in the female characters of his novels. The final step was to identify Edgar Poe's conception of the death and its connection with the

progressive illness of Virginia.

In the course of our study the following methods were used: observation of the main features of Edgar Poe's novels, their analysis in order to see the connection with events of his life, and their description. The material of the given research is Edgar Poe's works: *Morella*, *Ligeia*, *Eleonora*, *The Raven*.

This article can be interesting and helpful for those who want to look at the novels by this author on another side: the previous research on this topic mainly concentrated on Edgar Poe's reflections in his works [3, 4], but in this study we tried to show the strong connection between the tragic fate of Virginia Clemm Poe and Edgar Poe's perception of reality described in his novels.

To understand the main idea of Edgar Poe's novels, we should refer to his biography [1,2, 5], especially to the moments of his life that possibly could push him to write some of his most famous novels.

The writer met his first and only wife when he had to leave his home due to some family problems. He asked his aunt Clemm for help, and she was happy to help her nephew. It was the moment when 26-years-old Edgar fell in love with his 13-years-old cousin Virginia. The whole family was against their marriage, only Virginia's mother thought she would never find a better husband for her daughter.

In the middle of 1842, Virginia started suffering from symptoms of tuberculosis. Her health was constantly getting worse, which badly affected Edgar Poe's mental state and caused deep depression. She knew that she was going to die soon, but she wanted to stay with her husband as long as possible. Edgar Poe inspired her not to lose hope and constantly repeated that she was his only inspiration. Virginia Eliza Clemm Poe died in January 1847 after five years of suffering. Her death was a profound blow for her husband.

Morella (published in 1835)

The story in this novel is told in the first person. The author focuses on the education of his wife. He says, "*Morella's erudition was profound. As I hope to live, her talents were of no common order—her powers of mind were gigantic. I felt this, and, in many matters, became her pupil.*" [6]

The author draws all the reader's attention to the intelligence of Morella. The narrator becomes a pupil of his wife, however, without hiding the fact that he was afraid of the mysterious knowledge this woman had.

"But the time has already come when the incomprehensible mystery of my wife began to drive me like an evil spell" [6].

Morella died during the childbirth, but her newborn daughter soon became as intelligent and beautiful as her mother. The father was afraid of their similarity, but when time came to name the girl, he involuntarily spelled *Morella*. Soon his daughter died, and after taking her to the family vault, the narrator "*laughed with a long and bitter laugh*" [6] because he found no traces of the first woman in the channel where he laid the second.

This novel is related to the idea of reincarnation. Morella's soul was so powerful that she did not die at the end, she only found a new "vessel". This woman like women of many other novels by the author appears to be a supernatural being who does not obey the rules of death.

It is also important to pay attention to the author's biography [1, 5]. This novel was written in 1835, it was the year when Edgar Poe married 13-years-old Virginia Clemm. This novel seems to reflect Edgar Poe's fear of losing his wife because of her possible pregnancy, as she was too young and frail to carry a child.

Ligeia (published in 1838)

In this novel, the story is told in the first person the same as in *Morella*. It can be assumed that Edgar Poe means himself using the pronoun.

Just as in *Morella*, the author tells about his beloved – Mrs. Ligeia. No matter how hard he tried, he could not remember when and how he met his beloved. Besides, he did not know Mrs. Ligeia's family. The narrator only knew that her family was very ancient.

"I cannot, for my soul, remember how, when, or even precisely where, I first became acquainted with the lady Ligeia" [7].

As in many of Poe's novels, there are no details that could give the readers a sense of reality of what is going on. The narrator never mentions his origin, and he cannot remember anything from Ligeia's past, which shows her ethereal nature. She loves her husband passionately.

ly, but at the same time she dominates her husband, because she has great intelligence and willpower which her husband lacks.

"I have spoken of the learning of Ligeia: it was immense – such as I have never known in woman" [7].

"I said her knowledge was such as I have never known in woman – but where breathes the man who has traversed, and successfully, all the wide areas of moral, physical, and mathematical science?" [7].

On the one hand, Ligeia can represent Poe's concept of an ideal woman: strong, smart and beautiful. On the other hand, Ligeia could be a symbol of the ideal "me" of Edgar Allan Poe. The novel even includes a poem, that, according to the story, was written by Ligeia; apparently, this is the way the author creates a parallel between himself and this woman.

Eventually, the narrator begins to understand that Ligeia is not a regular woman, but a human being with extraordinary strength:

"And the will therein lieth, which dieth not. Who knoweth the mysteries of the will, with its vigor? For God is but a great will pervading all things by nature of its intentness. Man doth not yield himself to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will." - Joseph Glanvill [7].

This quote is repeated three times in the story: once at the beginning as an epigraph, once by the narrator and once by Ligeia on her deathbed. The quote proves that death is just the result of a human's life unquestioningly obeying the God, and does not answer the question whether it is possible to overcome death by willpower. Ligeia is the only character out of the three in the novel who has enough power to achieve this goal, and she is the only one of all three who does not obey the idea of death.

It can be noticed that Edgar Poe pays great attention to the intelligence of this character. He describes Ligeia's inner world in details proving his audience that this woman was too perfect for this depraved world. Besides, Edgar Poe sees Virginia as an ideal person gifted with wisdom despite her young age [8].

Eleonora (published in 1842).

This novel was written in 1842, and that was the year when Virginia Poe fell ill with tuberculo-

sis. Edgar Poe was probably devastated with sufferings of his young wife and he tried to make himself feel a little better by writing this novel.

It can be assumed that *Eleonora* is an autobiographical story. The narrator is Edgar Poe himself; he lives with his young cousin (his future wife) and his aunt.

The narrator tells his readers the story of his love again. The name of his darling is Eleonora. Eleonora is the narrator's cousin with whom he grew up in her mother's house. The narrator describes her as a pure, innocent creature who is as beautiful as a seraph.

Describing the world around him and his beloved, the narrator says:

" From the dim regions beyond the mountains at the upper end of our encircled domain, there crept out a narrow and deep river, brighter than all save the eyes of Eleonora" [9].

" Their mark was speckled with the vivid alternate splendor of ebony and silver, and was smoother than all save the cheeks of Eleonora" [9].

" The golden and silver fish haunted the river, out of the bosom of which issued, little by little, a murmur that swelled, at length, into a lulling melody more divine than that of the harp of Aeolus-sweeter than all save the voice of Eleonora" [9].

Eleonora, like Virginia, is the symbol of purity and perfection inspiring both the writer and the protagonist. At the age of 15, the girl fell ill. Most of all, she was afraid that her husband would leave their home and fall in love with another woman. The narrator swore to love her forever, and Eleonora promised him that her spirit would protect him after her death.

Eleonora died and after a while the narrator left his home unable to cope with sad memories. Soon he met Ermengarde – the one who became his new inspiration.

According to the clichés, the main character must answer for the betrayal but Edgar Poe decided to end the story in a different way: at the end of the novel Eleonora's spirit forgave her husband and let him be happy with another woman.

The main character of this story is a fragile girl, but at the same time she has enough inner strength to let her husband find his happiness, however, without her.

The novel itself is the writer's confession to his dying wife. Losing his beloved Virginia was Edgar Poe's greatest fear, but when he realized that Virginia's death was inevitable, he decided to apologize to her for falling in love with another woman someday.

The Raven (published in 1845)

The Raven is a poem which has the same inner theme with Edgar Poe's reviewed novels – sufferings caused by the death of a beloved person.

The narrator is completely broken; he cannot forget his wife Lenore. The name of this woman makes it possible to create a parallel between this poem and the novel *Eleonora*, as these two names sound almost the same. The room of the poem's character is drawn as decorated with dark and mysterious elements. We see the same atmosphere in the novels: the atmosphere of darkness and fear in the poet's soul.

The character is looking for an answer to the question in ancient books, he wonders if it is possible to find a cure for a suffering soul?

«Wretch» I cried, «thy God hath lent thee—by these angels he hath sent thee

Respite—respite and nepenthe from thy memories of Lenore;

Quaff, oh quaff this kind nepenthe and forget this lost Lenore!»

Quoth the Raven «Nevermore» [10].

The poem was written three years after *Eleonora* and was related to the same topic – the impossibility of forgetting the love of his life. In both works Edgar Poe reflects the state of his soul – *Eleonora* shows the author's hope for

finding happiness with another woman in the future, but *The Raven* makes obvious the fact that Virginia was the only one that became the writer's reason for living and his inspiration.

Edgar Allan Poe's novels contain many secrets and usually pose more questions than answers, however, the one thing that is absolutely obvious is that Edgar Allan Poe regarded women not like weak creatures, as many men of that era did, but like strong and powerful members of the society with a great potential. The female protagonists of the researched novels have tragic fates, which can be possibly associated with Virginia Clemm Poe's poor health that was constantly getting worse and worse. Being both a poet and a person able to feel any changes in anyone's behavior, Edgar Poe understood that his wife would not stay in this world for a long time, and he wanted to stay close to her even after her death by giving some of her features to women in his novels. His female characters are usually ill and have serious problems with their health. Nevertheless, they stay strong and determined until the moment of death, like Virginia who was creative and full of energy during all her life. However, we cannot describe the male characters and Edgar Poe himself in the same way: they seem to be more depressed by the illness of their beloveds than the women who were going to die soon. Edgar Allan Poe could not accept that he would lose his wife, and we can understand it reading the last sentences of his novels, where the women appear as spirits that did not die but gained eternal freedom.

СПИСОК ИСТОЧНИКОВ

1. Ахмедова У. Эдгар По – мастер новеллы. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://mdeksperiment.org/post/20180409-edgar-po-master-novelly> (02.05.2022).
2. Virginia Eliza Clemm Poe (Biography) // The Famous People. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://www.thefamouspeople.com/profiles/virginia-eliza-clemm-poe-33684.php> (11.05.2022).
3. Weber C. New language analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's writing shows just how hard success can be. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://qz.com/work/1808046/new-research-on-edgar-allan-poes-writing-shows-just-how-hard-success-can-be/> (12.05.2022).
4. Шамина В. Б., Груздева Е. А. Edgar Allan Poe: Students' Study Guide in Analytical Reading. Казань: КГУ, 2014. 72 с. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/197369209.pdf> (10.05.2022).
5. Edgar Allan Poe's Women // History and Women. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://www.historyandwomen.com/2013/10/edgar-allan-poes-women.html> (10.05.2022).
6. Edgar Allan Poe. Morella. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://www.eapoe.org/works/tales/mrllah.htm> (11.05.2022).
7. Edgar Allan Poe. Ligeia. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://poestories.com/read/ligeia> (11.05.2022).
8. Geolike.ru. Положение американской женщины XIX в. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <http://geolike.ru/page/gl6857.htm> (02.05.2022).
9. Edgar Allan Poe. Eleonora. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://poestories.com/read/eleonora> (11.05.2022).
10. Edgar Allan Poe. The Raven. [Электронный ресурс]. URL: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48860/the-raven> (11.05.2022).

Информация об авторах / Information about the Authors

Полина Павловна Кондрашова,
студентка группы ЖКБ-21-1,
Байкальский институт БРИКС,
Иркутский национальный исследовательский
технический университет,
664074, г. Иркутск, ул. Лермонтова, 83,
Российская Федерация,
kondrashova-polina@lenta.ru

Polina P. Kondrashova,
Student,
Baikal Institute of BRICS,
Irkutsk National Research Technical University,
83 Lermontov St., Irkutsk 664074,
Russian Federation,
kondrashova-polina@lenta.ru

Наталья Геннадьевна Сивцева,
доцент,
Департамент гуманитарных наук,
Байкальский институт БРИКС,
Иркутский национальный исследовательский
технический университет,
664074, г. Иркутск, ул. Лермонтова, 83,
Российская Федерация,
s_nataly77@mail.ru

Natalia G. Sivtseva,
Associate Professor,
Department of Humanitarian Sciences,
Baikal Institute of BRICS,
Irkutsk National Research Technical University,
83 Lermontov St., Irkutsk 664074,
Russian Federation,
s_nataly77@mail.ru