

A Writer's Model

The Tragic Life of Edgar Allan Poe

Edgar Allan Poe, the author of such grim and frightful tales as “The Cask of Amontillado,” was a great American writer and a desperately unhappy man. In Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance, biographer Kenneth Silverman portrays Poe as a victim of circumstances. This sympathetic biography shows a man struggling unsuccessfully for love and acceptance.

Silverman suggests that Poe was a victim of the tragic events of his early life. Illness, death, abandonment, and separation seemed to plague him. Poe was not quite three years old when his mother, Eliza, died after being ill for several months, “perhaps with some infectious fever” (8). Being abandoned earlier by his father and now orphaned and separated from his brother and sister deprived Poe of a family and an inheritance. Poe was taken in, though never adopted, by John Allan, a harsh, self-made man. Allan’s wife, Fanny, was “often ill and sometime absent” (20). Poe’s new family was not an ideal family for emotional support. As a teenager, Poe became attached to Jane Stanard, the mother of a school friend. She soon died at the age of thirty-one. Approximately five years later, Fanny Allan passed away. According to Silverman, Poe never accepted or recovered from his mother’s death; then, the deaths of Stanard and Allan reopened these old wounds. These deaths left Poe emotionally scarred.

Poe’s self-destructive character was a reaction to the events of his early years. For example, Poe asked for and received John Allan’s help in gaining admission to the U.S. Military Academy. At first he did well at West Point, but after about a year, Poe stopped going to classes and was court-martialed. Silverman believes that Poe’s decline began when he received the “dramatic and upsetting” news that John Allan had remarried. Silverman explains that “John Allan’s marriage meant that others would now receive the attention and comforts he had looked to have himself” (63). Instead of being happy for John Allan when he remarried, Poe felt that the affection that he wanted and the inheritance that he needed from Allan would instead go to Allan’s new wife and possible heirs. Silverman believes that Poe decided to quit West Point in order “to use his own harm to punish John Allan” (65).

In addition, the setting in which Poe lived also tended to make his circumstances miserable. The economy of the times forced John Allan to relocate his business and family several times. When Edgar was six and a

(continued)

INTRODUCTION

Background information

Thesis statement

BODY

Element 1: Events

Evidence

Parenthetical citation

Elaboration

Evidence

Elaboration

Evidence

Biographer’s conclusion

Elaboration

Element 2: Character

Evidence

Biographer’s conclusion

Elaboration

Biographer’s conclusion

Element 3:

Setting

(continued)

Evidence

**Elaboration
Evidence**

Elaboration

CONCLUSION

**Summary of elements
of biography**

**Restatement of
thesis**

half, the family relocated to England for five years. Much of this time Edgar spent in various boarding schools, which left him “away from his caretakers, under new and unfamiliar custodians, in a strange country, angered and frightened”(18). In early 1819, Allan’s business began to fail, so the family returned to the United States, where “unsettled and financially troubled, the Allans made several moves in Richmond as Edgar grew into his teens” (23). The upheavals only worsened the stress in Poe’s life. Later, as Poe began his literary career, he found it hard to make a living. In the early 1800s, the profession of writer was new. Poe had to take jobs writing unimaginative features for magazines—a task he truly hated.

Silverman shows that Poe’s selfish and self-destructive behaviors are understandable. Born in a time when he could not earn a decent living by writing, shuttled around from place to place, scarred by the loss of his mother, and unloved by his foster father, Poe lived a tragic life. Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance makes Poe the hero—and victim—of a life as full of misery as one of the writer’s own tales.