

On Edgar Allan Poe's "Eldorado"

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Abstract Some critics maintain that Poe's "Eldorado" is the most optimistic poem among his works; others state that it depicts Poe's melancholic outlook on life. Nevertheless, both groups of scholars agree on one point: that "Eldorado" is a metaphor for life and the search for truth of existence. The pessimism of "Eldorado" is an open-ended question. Labeling the poem as pessimistic or optimistic is not a precise answer to the idea expressed in it. In order to answer the question posed, it is relevant to scrutinize the symbolism of the poem from the perspective of Poe's own treatises on poetry and composition.

Keywords: Eldorado, poetic principle, ideal, optimism, pessimism.

Perceiving Edgar Allan Poe's "Eldorado" as pessimistic or optimistic greatly depends on the reader's own interpretation, perception and understanding of the poem itself. If we take into account that the poem is reflective of Poe's own life, as many of his poems, it is logical to consider the poem melancholic. However, if we interpret it according to the ideal faith, then the hopefulness of "Eldorado" becomes more convincing. Overall, the poem is deeply philosophical and has a symbolic implication the foundation of which can be traced to Poe's own philosophy of composition.

Poe's Poetic Principle

The clue to the peculiarities and symbolism of Edgar Allan Poe's poetry can be found in his aesthetic principles. Poe formulated these principles in his non-fiction prose, for the most part in "The Philosophy of Composition" and "The Poetic Principle." In this work, Poe presents his concept of the ideal nature of poetry. While subjects like truth and passion can be the subject of a poem, he maintains that beauty is the "sole legitimate province of the poem...that pleasure which is at once the most intense, the most elevating, and the most pure is...found in the contemplation of the beautiful" (Poe, 2003). Stylistically, Poe asserts that this "contemplation" can best be brought about by a

brief poem, lasting no longer than its intended effect. Meter, rhythm, and rhyme are used to create impressions of beauty and to give the reader aesthetic pleasure. As such, the poet becomes a creator of beauty. Through the composition of poems, then, poets – like Poe – express their conception of beauty. Poe creates a counter world to reality, an ideal world in which he can describe his ideal beauty. In depicting another world, which does not mirror truth, he also portrays his own truth which is symbolic and separated from one's everyday experience; that way Poe creates aesthetic effect. Poe illustrates a concept of a "fantastic literary universe" and "imaginative worlds." As Tony Magistrale points out, Poe's "language revolves around vague and undetermined subjects; surreal vistas are summoned forth through remarkable sound effects and impressive imagery that places the reader in irrational and death-haunted, and dreamlike-realm" (Magistrale, 2001). In such an "imaginative world" Poe's poetry became "an extreme extension of the human imagination rendered into art that exists on its own terms and bears an original form never before appreciated" (Magistrale, 2001).

Poe states that melancholy topics are most poetic because melancholy causes beauty. The construction of the poem should contribute to

manifestation of a melancholy tone. Refrain is one of the artistic effects that help to sustain the effect of the entire poem and heighten the impression of beauty. Repetition of the refrain and monotony are basic elements of the poem that are meant to emphasize the effect. In order to create the innately dynamic poem, the author employs rhythmic and versification variations, schemes of the stanzas, and other stylistic tools. The originality of the use of different words within a poem creates beauty and musicality and also conveys the extra textual meaning of the poem. Overall, Poe emphasizes two concepts in his poetry: first, art as a pursuit of the ideal; second, the inherent connection between beauty and melancholy.

In “Eldorado,” Poe writes of one of the most popularly imagined worlds. Critics of Poe’s poetry consider the poem different from other poems. Here the author does not discuss romantic love or longing for death. “Eldorado” is exceptional in its meaning and composition. Thomas Mabbott calls “Eldorado” “the noblest and most universal in implication” (Mabbott, 1969). While the poem is an exception to Poe’s normal themes, it does remain true to Poe’s belief that beauty may be pursued in poetry. As Laser maintains, this is possible through “the medium of the poet’s special sensitivity, the perception of the beautiful can be stimulated in words if the words are filtered through the ideal, for the brain of the poet envelops his material in the moral sentiments of grace, of color, of motion – of the beautiful, of the mystical, of the august - in short of the ideal” (Laser, 1948).

In spite of its simplistic structure the poem is full of allusions to the Bible and myths that help the author create an effect of mystery. Although, the poem is very short, it encompasses the myth of the whole life of the poetic hero as he searches for Eldorado. “Eldorado” has its origins in a ruler believed to exist in the sixteenth century in modern Colombia who was covered with gold and thus became “El Dorado”- the gilded one. It was believed that the place where he lived was full of gold and jewels, of splendor and wealth. The place was the destination of many explorers and travelers. In Poe’s times, “El Dorado” had come to denote a place where gold or good fortune could be found. Indeed, El Dorado is also mentioned by John Milton in *Paradise Lost* and by Voltaire in *Candide*. Poe alluded to this myth in two other poems “Dream

Land” and “Letter to B – .” When the California Gold Rush started in 1848, El Dorado - the symbol of material wealth and the golden country of the sixteenth century, came to refer to California. The creation of the poem was influenced by this event. However, the poem reveals more than a mistrust of the California Gold Rush. “Eldorado” expresses Poe’s philosophical ideas, his own viewpoint on life and his belief in idealism. With the poem, he demonstrates that the ideal might not be reached in this world, but it is still worth searching for.

The subject of the poem is a knight who is “gallant” and who is searching for Eldorado throughout his life. His quest is for his ideal, Eldorado, and when he grows old, the knight finally comes across a “pilgrim shadow” who answers his question: “Where can it [Eldorado] be...?” (Poe, 1943). The answer to the question already hints at Eldorado’s inaccessibility.

“Over the Mountains

Of the Moon,

Down the Valley of the Shadow,

Ride, boldly ride,”

The shade replied, -

“If you seek for Eldorado!”

“Eldorado” thus becomes the story of the disappointment and death people will encounter along the way. Figuratively, gold denotes the quest for the ideal. Can the ideal be reached or not? Is it worthwhile to continue looking for truth? Or does truth finally appear as the eternal truth expressed in Ecclesiastes 1:2: “Vanity of vanities; all is vanity”? (King James Bible 1769/2017). At first glance, the poem only seems to be light-hearted as the hero continues on his quest blithely “singing a song.” A careful reader will see that the song is not cheerful at all; from the second stanza on the poem becomes more pessimistic, predicting the defeat of the hero. As an “imagined world”, both of the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, Eldorado becomes a search for the ideal which may not be achieved in this life. Eldorado, then, becomes associated with failure and even death. Despite the idealism of the poem, it is also tempered by reality. Poe wrote the poem when he was ill and he died soon after. It is noteworthy that the author, in the twilight of his life, started to question whether he had succeeded in reaching the ideal he was pursuing his whole life. Sanderlin

points out that if “Eldorado” is interpreted in terms of Poe’s ideal – his desire to be a great and widely-acclaimed poet – “it is not astonishing that the tone of this late poem should be as ambiguous, pessimistic, and uncertain as his own feelings must have been in this, the twilight of his life” (Sanderlin, 1956).

The Ambiguity of “Eldorado”

The meaning of “Eldorado” is complex and ambiguous just as it is rooted in both fact and fiction. This was not unintended. As Poe writes in “The Philosophy of Composition,” in poetry “two things are invariably required – first, some amount of complexity, or more properly adaptation; and, secondly, some amount of suggestiveness – some undercurrent, however, indefinite of meaning. It is this latter, in special, which imparts to a work of art so much of that *richness*...which we are too fond of confounding with the *ideal*” (Poe, 2003). Ambiguity and suggestiveness are demonstrated in the poem by structural peculiarities and characteristics. The author employs a pattern with the words “shadow” and “Eldorado” as a refrain. “Shadow” also has some additional function and its meaning changes in every stanza. Its shifting use in each stanza produces emotional excitement as the reader encounters an old word in new settings. The use of “shadow” and “Eldorado” as refrains is integral to achieving the planned effect of the poem, one of mystery and complexity that arouses emotions and produces an unexpected combination of ideas. The refrains rhyme and at the same time contrast through every stanza. “Shadow” and “Eldorado” constitute “a kind of duet in which each voice qualifies the other, while the combination of the two embodies the theme” (Caputi, 1953).

“Shadow” is a key word in “Eldorado,” having the same position in each stanza but different implications. In the first stanza, it has its usual meaning of shade as opposed to light. In the following stanza, it assumes a metaphorical meaning, as the shadow becomes a burden and weight on the knight’s soul, exhausting him both physically and spiritually. In the third stanza, however, the shadow is personified as a “pilgrim shadow” that can be interpreted to be a wandering soul. As Stephen Sanderlin remarks, “the somber aspects of the word grow even deeper; indeed, the ‘pilgrim shadow’ seems to be the Angel of Death himself” (Sanderlin, 1956). The meaning of

“shadow” in the fourth stanza becomes concrete. The phrase “Down the Valley of the Shadow,” is an allusion to “the valley of the shadow of death” in Psalm 23:4 (King James Bible, 1769/2017). The phrase can be associated with the symbol of approaching death. In conclusion, the recurrent use of “shadow” with different connotations creates an impression of darkness and death in the poem. Eldorado, it seems, is found not in life, but in death.

Poe employs another allusion in this stanza: “Over the Mountains/Of the Moon.” Ptolemy and other geographers mentioned the mountains in Central Africa, the Mountains of the Moon, but considered them fantastic, as no one had seen them until they were finally discovered in 1888. When Poe wrote this poem in 1849, they were still considered mythical. By alluding to a land that does not exist, in combination with the “Valley of the Shadow,” Poe indicates doubt over whether the knight will succeed in his journey, because even the existence of the region to which he is riding is in question. Sanderlin suggests that Poe’s use of adjectives like “gallant” and “bold,” and his use of the vague word “shadow” as well as allusions to a non-existent place with Biblical overtones create a certain ironic effect (Sanderlin, 1956). Using the word “if” in the last stanza implies that the knight can continue to search even after death but the ideal will not be achieved. The poem becomes an allegory of the human being who never gets tired of the quest for happiness even as he or she becomes disillusioned. Again, if we look at the poem as an expression of Poe’s own viewpoint on his literary career, we see the pessimism expressed in the poem. Eric W. Carlson claims that the word “shade” in the final stanza affirms the importance and necessity of the stamina and faith in the eternal quest – it is a life-long struggle “to realize the ideal in the face of seemingly impossible obstacles (‘Mountains of the Moon’) and deadly perils (‘Valley of the Shadow’)” (Carlson, 1961).

Carlson gives a completely different interpretation of the poem and of the last stanza. He claims that “Eldorado” is optimistic and it implies the author’s lifelong attachment and faithfulness to an “absolute” ideal. Carlson points out that “Mountains of the Moon” suggest the height of ambition which is necessary for the ideal, whereas “Valley of the Shadow” refers to the threat of death, not as an inevitable death awaiting the knight. In his

view, “Valley of the Shadow” is the risk inseparable from the aim for the sublime. Carlson believes that even the word “if,” which is interpreted by Sanderlin as ironic, means that the “pilgrim shadow” might have “some doubt as to the strength and genuineness of the knight’s aspiration, as if he were thinking ‘if you really and truly mean to pursue the ideal to the very end’ – but not as to the nature and value of the quest itself.” The last stanza, as Carlson interprets it, implies the sense of ideal faith and purity and finality of the ideal of the poetic hero. “It does so with the full solemnity of a vow renewed, a solemnity that leaves no room for uncertainty and pessimism” (Carlson, 1961).

Conclusion

The reader of the poem “Eldorado” becomes active and is not a passive receiver of the plot conveyed by the poem. The reader starts thinking and contemplating: does the author of the poem leave us with hope or is there no chance to reach the ideal? The allegory and symbolism of Poe’s “Eldorado” make it possible to give various interpretations to the poem. The counter world to the mimetic, imitative depiction of life, subjective perception of reality and ambiguity of Poe’s “Eldorado” and his works in general, pave the way to modern literary thinking.

As to the rhythm of the poem, it is simple. The rhythmical structure of “Eldorado” is of the ballads, but the rhyme scheme is more complex than in ballads. With careful combination of tone and sound, Poe creates “music.” Music, the effect of confusion, ambiguity, simplicity of the language, tone, and structure of the poem are pivotal characteristic features of “Eldorado.”

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