



Non-Dualism: Thanatos and Eros in Edgar Allan Poe's Poetry

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Abstract

The life drive and its seemingly opposite, death drive, are inherent powers in man's mind and psyche since the beginning of life on earth and will last for life. These powers, therefore, draw a great deal of attention in every aspect of life, the social, scientific, philosophical, and literary fields being the most prominent among them. The study is an attempt, through three sections and a conclusion, to elucidate the range of the interrelations between the two powers through several poetic works of the American gothic writer and poet Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849). It is supposed that for him as well, they could be complementary power drives. After critical analyses of extracts of some of his poems, the study concludes some main points, the most prominent of which is that Eros and Thanatos complete each other in many of Poe's poems. The study used some newly disclosed up-to-date sources about the poet's life and works to help in coming up with valuable conclusions that can help researchers who may be interested in writing about this poet's works and poems in the future.

Keywords: instinct, power, Eros, complementary, elucidate, prominent, Poe

1. Introduction

Eros is a non-English and precisely Greek word, and therefore, it necessarily encompasses a story of interest as is usual with the Greek names and stories. It, as Greek mythology tells, "was the Greek god of love, or more

precisely, passionate and physical desire” (qtd in Cartwright). The point of interest in the quote is the word ‘passionate,’ which links the term to just sexual desire. For this reason, it is related to the Latin word ‘Cupid’ and its supposed arrow. Thus, the term could be interpreted in positive as well as negative aspects. Yet the term should not be taken exclusively to be related only to sexual desire as the modern word erotic is usually used to express it, since man’s desires could not be shortened to that of sex; rather, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) developed it to encompass every human passion and desire. So, having sexual love suits the term as well as getting the desired objects and needs like: food, water, shelter, knowledge, etc. In other words, it would be suitable, I believe, to label it as the source of hope and life, especially that Freud gave it the term ‘life instinct’ in his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. The word ‘hope’ itself encompasses in almost every culture and literature, one of the major sources of life; even it is said that life without hope equals death.

This concept and its counterpart, Thanatos was first introduced by the Russian Jewish physician Sabina Spielrein (1885-1924) in her article “Destruction as the Cause of Coming into Being”. In fact, she is regarded as a pioneer of these concepts and especially of the death drive. In this respect, Coline Covington, in an introduction of a book about Spielrein stresses this fact:

“What is remarkable when we begin to look at Spielrein’s writings, many of which remain unpublished in English, is the extent to which she foresaw what we now regard as fundamental psychoanalytical concepts. What she foresaw is particularly remarkable when it comes to the death instinct, which she articulated in writing a decade before Freud’s famous formulation in 1920 in the pages of *Beyond the Pleasure principle*” (Qtd in Spidahl). She further stresses the inevitability of the existence of thanatos along with eros in man’s innermost when she says: “A wish for self-injury, a wish for pain, is, however, thoroughly incomprehensible if we believe merely in the existence of an ego that only desires pleasure” (Ibid). These concepts were reiterated after some years in Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and some critics see Freud’s concepts as adaptations of Spielrein’s since her “initial work on death instinct emerged first in 1910” (Ibid)

From Freud’s different definitions of pleasure in his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, one can conclude death as one of the main targets of life or Eros itself. The idea of getting rid of tension and enthusiasm which form the goals of pleasure, denotes, even implicitly, death or thanatos as Gerber stresses it: “The pleasure principle is then all about keeping the excitation within the individual as low as possible by either ‘scratching the itch’ or trying to channel this irritation to the outside somehow (aggression as a means to resolve sexual frustration, for example)” (4).

Thanatos, on the other hand, as most sources agree upon, is, in a way, the counterpart of Eros. For *The American Heritage College Dictionary*, for instance, it is a “primitive impulse for destruction, decay, and death” (364). It is

also described, again, following Greek mythology, as a peaceful personification of death. According to Freud, it is man's unconscious desire to destroy his opponents and even himself at some times and cases. This inherent desire is as ancient as man's existence on earth and could be traced back to Noa's sons. Cultures and religions also play a great rule in pushing this drive forward. For the ancient people to bury the dead person's belongings, especially jewels, with him/her was clearly a symptom of a belief that one can come back to another life after the existing one; thus, providing a strong purpose for him to seek death. Religion also presents a more believable proof for the after-life and so it is a great support for seeking death and willing to meet it. The terrorist suicidal attacks all over the world in the modern age are clear examples of this state.

These concepts, and by extension, these ideas whether by Freud himself or any other psychologist, are in reality not beyond dispute and disagreement. There are certain forces and factors that determine their validity or invalidity such as ages, norms, customs, traditions, and a host of other social, political, and religious paths. Death is a void and a reality as well, and so, it is the most frightening threat everybody, believers and unbelievers alike. This state pushes him ahead to try avoiding it as much as possible and in other cases to inflict it upon the opposing party to ensure his Eros. As far as literature is concerned, it is active in the form of loss. It is, in the main, the loss of life instinct that pushes towards this dark destination and drive, as Freud liked to call it. The ending of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet is just an example.

One more relevant thing deserves mentioning in this regard. Freud's life instinct and death drive are related in one way or another to the Chinese yin-yang philosophy. This very old philosophy in the Chinese culture shares a great deal of Freud's two drives. The philosophy in brief is that "the universe is governed by a cosmic duality, sets of two opposing and complementing principles or cosmic energies that can be observed in nature" (Jun). So, the opposing couples of day and night, sun and moon, male and female, hot and cold, ect. form the founding bodies of that philosophy. It is true that mental health is not addressed as an independent body, yet it exists in the heart of the Chinese culture. These concepts are reflected in one way or another not only in different poems of Allan Poe; rather, in events throughout his life career. Poe seems to translate Freud's "the aim of life is death" (Qtd in Gerber), into practice when he addresses his beloved "I would willingly, oh joyfully abandon this world with all my hopes of another" (Qtd in Harrison). His works as well, were, in the main, about death and sadness whereas he was a pleasant person socially, and thus, he combined the two drives in his life and works.

To sum up; Freud's two drives are not- in reality- opponent or opposite to each other, though on the surface they seem so; rather they are complementary and strongly linked. This fact is also stressed in the Chinese Yin-Yang, where they are described as complementary and interactive.

II. Lingerinɡ Death

*While I thought I was learning how to live,
I have been learning how to die.*

Leonardo Da Vinci

Edgar Allan Poe's (1809-1849) life career and its ups and downs may be a great help to understand the reasons behind his death-seeking poems and short stories. The first step of his miserable life started even before his birth when his grandfather decided to disown his father as a protest against marrying an actor. The miseries followed in Boston, where he was born since "two years later, he was an orphan and already an object of charity. Compassionate families of Richmond, where his poor mother had died, adopted Edgar and his baby sister, his elder brother being sent to the grandfather's home in Baltimore (Bates: 180). Furthermore, his adventurous life doubled his sighs and sorrows, especially that he fell in love more than once in strange and unprecedented ways and methods. While growing into an active youth, he fell in platonic love with the mother of one of his own classmates but "after a few months of gracious friendship, the lady died, and night after night, in autumn wind and rain, the boy of fifteen paid lingering visits to her grave" (Ibid: 181). He also wrote an emotional lyric to her memory:

Lo! in yon brilliant window-niche
How statue-like I see thee stand,
The agate lamp within thy hand!
Ah, Psyche, from the regions which
Are Holy-Land!
(Trayler: 961).

Under such sensitive situations and recurrent losses, it is, I believe, of little surprise to find and trace signals of trying to divorce life and long for death. One of the clear references to this hope can be deduced in a well-anthologized poem entitled "For Annie" in which he addresses one of the objects of love whom he adored greatly but could not reach:

Thank Heaven! the crisis --
The danger is past,
And the lingering illness
Is over at last --
And the fever called "Living"
Is conquered at last.
(Ibid: 961).

The abrupt beginning of the poem signifies a number of worthy notes about the speaker's psychological state of mind and this speaker is, beyond any doubt, Poe himself. According to one critic, the woman was called Mrs. Charles B. Richmond and Poe met her when he went to Lowell on July 10 of the year 1848 to present a lecture. He called her Annie, and she liked that nomenclature; she even formally changed her name to Annie after the death of her husband. Then, a

platonic love relationship developed between them to which her husband, while he was still living, did not object. Other critics, depending upon the newest historical book about Poe's life, stress that the woman's real name was Nancy, but she changed it to Annie (See Oliver: 458, Chris Camire).

The first surprising point in the poem's debut is by no means the fact that Poe reverses the direction between life and death. Danger and fever which should normally accompany death are attributed to life, and so logic tells us, the opposite of such feeling about life would come - he hoped - at his death. The dying speaker is quite relieved that he got rid of the miseries and his voyage reached its secure port.

The stream of consciousness goes on to stress his previous feeling:

And I rest so composedly,
Now, in my bed,
That any beholder
Might fancy me dead –
(Ibid).

The extract can well confuse the readers and critics; is the speaker really dead or alive? If dead, why should people just 'fancy' him so? How can a dead person speak and write? If living, why he feels 'composed' now and not earlier? Isn't it a matter of longing for death that refers to the strength of his death drive? The fact is that his words here are hypothetical and he imagines himself dead. But it is sure that the speaker (Poe himself) was closing death while writing the poem. In one of his renowned letters to Annie, Poe provides the clue:

I would willingly — oh joyfully abandon this world with all my hopes of another. . . . But oh, my darling, my Annie, my own sweet sister Annie, my pure beautiful angel — wife of my soul — to be mine hereafter & forever in the Heavens. . . . Finally I procured two ounces of laudnum & without returning to my Hotel, took the cars back to Boston. . . . Having written this letter, I swallowed about half the laudnum & hurried to the Post-Office — intending not to take the rest until I saw you. . . . A friend was at hand, who aided & (if it can be called saving) saved me (Oliver: 230).

Taking laudanum was not for any purpose than committing suicide which is, psychologically speaking, a strong intention for embracing death as the last sentence of the quote stresses. In later lines of the poem, he imagines himself already dead and at the cliff of his calmness and satisfaction: "I have drank of a water / That quenches all thirst" (Traylor: 962). This water, some critics believe, could refer to love that can quench every thirst. In this, I think, they heavily depend upon the theme of the poem which is in fact an apostrophe addressed to the beloved woman; yet the fact does not seem to accustom to such a conclusion. The following lines could prove it: "Of a water that flows / With a lullaby sound / From a spring but a very few / Feet under ground" (Ibid). The symbolic water from which he drank is never on the ground but a few feet under it. This water could well remind us of Jesus Christ's reply to the Samaritan woman who

rejected his demand for a drink: "But whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a fount of water springing up to eternal life." (John 4:14). So, Poe's water leads him where the eternal life is, and this could have been the major factor behind his strong death drive as Freud called it.

The speaker further stresses his favoring death upon the miserable life he passed: "My tantalized spirit / here blandly reposes / forgetting, or never / regretting its roses" (Bates: 962). The classical allusion is telling. He wants to hint at the fact that he was living under nice fruit trees but he could not reach their fruit; and he was in the middle of a pool of water without being able to touch it and satisfy his thirst. This is the reason- I think- that he, earlier in the poem, wished for and imagined drinking from water that satisfies him forever and 'quenches all thirst'. This fact-once more- refutes what some critics said about the water being love and that love quenches his thirst and hopes. Moreover, the 'roses' he never forgets help our interpretation ahead, since- normally speaking- a rose is the symbol of beauty and love that are the symptoms of life not death.

Later in the same poem, Poe favors death upon his sick and fevered life: "For now, while so quietly / Lying, it fancies / a holier odour" (Ibid). These lines give the impression that the speaker has successfully passed the 'fever' and now he is on the safe side. In this respect, Edie Montgomery-Pool notes that "the poem takes a turn in the middle of the piece. It goes from using many negative words to describe life, to using positive and beautiful words to describe the state of the narrator after death, words like "roses," "quietly," "holier," "happily," and "beauty." (5). Indeed, almost every word in the lines that describe death connotes positivity and affirmation contrary to those that talk about life. The words' danger', 'fever', 'sadly', 'shorn', 'moaning', 'groaning' are just examples in case.

The purple imagination of the speaker leads him even further; the positive and hope-bringing words and expressions illuminate the path for the readers of the poem and prove his willingness and enthusiasm for a world that -he hopes- could rescue him from the bitter state of mind and body he has been in so far:

And so it lies happily,
Bathing in many
A dream of the truth
And the beauty of Annie --
Drowned in a bath
Of the tresses of Annie.
(Bates: 963).

The pronoun 'it' in the first line sheds light on an important ambiguity encompassing parts of the poem especially that critics fell into discussion and contradiction about whether or not the speaker is actually dead. Stéphane Mallarmé for instance referred to him as "one who has been so ill that he has

fancied himself in the first moments of death but has been revived by the presence and affection of Annie” (qtd in Oliver: 454). Yet it is his soul, the pronoun illustrates, that ‘lies happily’, a state of mind he was bereaved of while living, and therefore, he feels quite calm and at rest there. In his “Spirits of the Dead” Poe stresses this belief even more starkly:

Thy soul shall find itself alone

.....
Be silent in that solitude,
Which is not loneliness—for then
The spirits of the dead who stood
In life before thee are again
In death around thee—

(<https://poetrypoetics.pressbooks.com>)

There is no need to fear or horror-Poe seems to address every reader- of being alone there for in that same solitude man can find and come across the souls that he lived with earlier. This seemingly simple expression encompasses, in fact, a great philosophy about man’s existence upon the earth and his fate after he passes the border of death. This philosophy is clearly what we see in the divine religions that stress what Poe says, here, in simple words. It also proves that Poe believed in the after-life, at least in this poem, though there are hardly any clear references to it in his biography.

In another part of the lyric, the speaker refers to hope amid this dark picture of death and annihilation:

The night, though clear, shall frown,
And the stars shall not look down
From their high thrones in the Heaven
With light like hope to mortals given

.....
As a burning and a fever.

(<https://poetrypoetics.pressbooks.com>)

Through an apostrophe, the speaker addresses somebody (or may be every dying person) and cautions against any expectation of light and lunar brightness since the other world does not contain bright elements we enjoy here. He uses a simile to compare that light to the hope that many people live upon in this world. It is only hope that helps people be patient against woes and sorrows since they have a glimpse of hope that one day such miseries come to an end and the desires and wishes are met. It is for these very reasons that hope in itself is tough to preserve and live with. It is merely a kind of ‘burning’ and ‘fever’.

Generally speaking, it seems that Poe had built his death instinct upon- to use Freud’s expression- aggression; yet his aggression is directed, unlike many other writers, at himself through self- criticism and finally through an unsuccessful suicide attempt.

III. Poe’s Eros

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It is never an easy duty to start writing about the life instinct or Eros alone and independent of its sibling instinct, Thanatos; since, in reality, they are hardly two separate forces and can not work independent of each other. This is- as mentioned earlier- true for their Chinese counterparts, Yin and Yang. Most critics, therefore, stress this fact whenever they study these forces in any piece of literature. Barbara Galle, for instance writes in her paper, “Sylvia Plath- a Woman between Eros and Thanatos: “The two instincts are strongly interrelated and they are only rarely encountered in their pure form. Usually they are merged into a whole, where one of them prevails while the other serves it” (<https://revije.ff.uni-lj.si>).

The above facts and notes can well be noticed in the poetic works of Edgar Allan Poe where, within some specific poems, they can obviously be felt and seen. Earlier to this, one has to look at his biography to be able to know why such trends exist in his poetry at all. In his famous letter to Annie that survived (it is said that Annie burnt the original copies of most of the letters she received from him), an intense life drive and hope for it is seen: “Annie — you do believe it, & will always believe it — So long as I think that you know I love you, as no man ever loved woman — so long as I think you comprehend in some measure, the fervor with which I adore you, so long, no worldly trouble can ever render me absolutely wretched” (Oliver: 230).

Hope for life and motivation forward appear also in a number of his poems. The first one that deserves mentioning, here, could be “To Helen,” written in 1831 (he wrote another poem with the same title later but with different content) where a bright future shines from its first lines:

Helen, thy beauty is to me
Like those Nicéan barks of yore,
That gently, o’er a perfumed sea,
The weary, way-worn wanderer bore
To his own native shore.

(Trayler: 987).

The extended classical allusion draws great attention. The addressee of the title and the poem, critics agree, is Jane Stanard, the mother of one of his classmates. Though his love to her was just a platonic one and beyond sexual desires, yet she seems, his biographers stress, to have filled the emotional gap he felt due to losing his mother very early and brought him back the desire and enthusiasm for the life which he had just started. It is for this reason that he describes her most beautifully and charmingly he could. The name 'Helen' most probably is a reference to the Roman Helen of Troy, the beautiful girl who was the cause of the famous war of Troy. Helen's beauty, Poe explains through a simple simile, was a comforting power to him just like the ship of Nike, the Greek god of victory. With her love and care at hand, Poe's ship is moving calmly, gently, and victorious homeward. Once more, Poe calls for another Greek allusion for support: 'The weary, way-worn wanderer' most probably refers to Odysseus, the strong king of Ithaca who was the protagonist of Homer's epic, *Odyssey*. Though he was hesitant in going to the war in Troy, he became its legendary champion, and after twenty years of that great expedition, the weary hero returned to his homeland. Poe likens himself to the Greek king, most probably due to the analogy between their states of mind and body. The weary Poe, who was at a loss because of losing his parents at the very first years of his age and wandering in the world for compensation, found warm comfort and psychological relief with the motherly caring woman. So, he felt himself at home after the lengthy roaming everywhere for some time. The ecstasy and full-length enthusiasm continue:

On desperate seas long wont to roam,
Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face,
Thy Naiad airs have brought me home
To the glory that was Greece,
And the grandeur that was Rome.

(Ibid).

Still, the stream of consciousness goes on with Greek mythology as a fountain and spring for the poet's serene imagination. He stresses the fact that he was at a loss, roaming the seas hopelessly. Helen's black hair is compared to hyacinth (a divine hero and the lover of Apollo in Greek mythology), and her face- for Poe- is a classic one. Naiad as well is chosen cleverly from the Greek mythology (a female spirit or nymph that presided over fountains, wells, springs, streams, brooks, and other kinds of fresh water) (<https://www.britannica.com>). So, Helen's 'hyacinth hair' and 'Naiad airs' brought the speaker back from his roaming and loss to the 'glory' of the Greeks and the magnificence of the Romans. The speaker, now, seems to be at the top of his enthusiasm and hope for the future, thanks to the unprecedented love he feels towards his Helen.

Poe's optimistic poems were not confined only to the realm of love and infatuation; rather, life in general and even religion inspired a strong hope in him for a better future. In one of his very short poems, a religiously committed Poe is seen. "Hymn" which was written in 1835 and in the beginning titled "Catholic Hymn," shows one of the bright sides in his literary products, which are overshadowed mainly by grim and gothic scenes. He directly addresses Mary:

At morn – at noon – at twilight dim –
Maria! thou hast heard my hymn!
In joy and woe – in good and ill –
Mother of God, be with me still!

(Trayler: 919).

The problem of Poe's being an atheist or not is so controversial that a close scrutiny is needed. Fortunately, one of his relatives came up with a new book about him where the writer focuses mainly upon Poe's religious situation. Though several critics assumed Poe as an atheist and severely criticized him for it; yet Harry Lee (Hal) in Poe's new book *Edgar Allan Poe: An Illustrated Companion to His Tell-Tale Stories* includes valuable and new knowledge in this respect. "The popular picture of Edgar Allan Poe as brooding and depressed," Hal, the Charles Colson Professor of Faith and Culture at Union University, writes, "was created by one of his literary enemies, Rufus Griswold, after Poe's death" (qtd in Jackson). Describing Poe's commitment to religion as it is explained in the book, Hal states: "It's a story of Poe's spiritual experience and how he came to believe in the God who created the universe, and how he came to go forward at a revival meeting five weeks before he died,". He further confirms: "The book discusses all of his stories in light of the spiritual questions he was asking." (Ibid)

The above information considered, it is hardly strange to see the wild and alcoholic poet who sees his own life as a mixture of happy and miserable moments and times; takes refuge in religion as a savior, especially in his last poems. It further enhances the supposition that he originally was a believer, but his religious beliefs were not reflected in his earlier poems. His petition for support is- in fact- an attempt for life and continuation. He hopes, with the help of 'Mother of God' to win over the complications he faced in the past and may face in the future and lead his way towards a brighter life.

When the Hours flew brightly by,
And not a cloud obscured the sky,
My soul, lest it should truant be,
Thy grace did guide to thine and thee

(Trayler: 919).

One more accusation against Poe's religious belief is noteworthy. A stark anti-religious quote is attributed to him that he-allegedly- told one biographer called Alexander Joyce: "All Religion, My Friend, Is Simply Evolved out of Chicanery, Fear, Greed, Imagination and Poetry" (<https://quoteinvestigator.com>).

Yet most critics refute Joyce's claim and accuse him of inaccuracy, especially that he also claimed that Poe's "The Raven" is taken from a poem entitled "The Parrot". It was disclosed later that this poem did not exist at all!

The present evidence is even more obvious. The poet, who- allegedly- said that religion is no more than a trick, directs all his attention and hope to where God is. Since there is 'not a cloud obscured the sky' any more in his life, his soul guides him to the only source of hope, to 'thine and thee'. Would it be logical for such a person to regard religion as 'Simply Evolved out of Chicanery, Fear, Greed, Imagination and Poetry'?

The poem concludes with an even more obvious note and proof about its writer's real conviction:

Now, when storms of Fate o'ercast
Darkly my Present and my Past,
Let my future radiant shine
With sweet hopes of thee and thine.

(Trayler: 919).

The poem was published in 1845 in Broadway Journal, but, according to Thom Nickels in his *Literary Philadelphia: A History of Poetry & Prose in the City of Brotherly love*, it was initially composed in 1833; and so, he composed it while he was just twenty-four years of age. This can be considered an answer to attacks launched at Poe as far as his religious belief is concerned. He is, clearly, not happy with his past and even present, but he is full of hope for his future to be better and to 'radiant shine' with Mary.

Even if Poe was wild and carefree earlier, the poem shows that he regretted his own earlier negligence and wildness and come to the conclusion that hope for a better, hopeful, and more secure life could come through religion and commitment to Almighty God.

It is interesting to note that even amid the most horrible psychological situations, the poet did not fall prey to complete despair; rather at least a flower bloomed from within the ruins. In "For Annie" for instance, which is analyzed earlier in this paper, a mere memory turns into a strong light of hope and positivity:

But my heart it is brighter
Than all of the many
Stars in the sky,
For it sparkles with Annie --
It glows with the light
Of the love of my Annie --

(Ibid: 963).

Although he had already lost the woman he loved most and was in a critical health situation, this part of the poem (published posthumously in 1849) provides the impression that the speaker is glittering with hope and life. His Annie's

memory suffices for a heart to be ' brighter than all of the many stars in the sky' and to glitter with 'light'.

Conclusions

This humble work came up with some interesting conclusions that could be worthy for note and observation, significantly that Edgar Allan Poe fell under close scrutiny and detailed studies for his gothic short stories more than his poems. The poems under investigation show that life experience taught him the two drives' instincts correctly even before their names for anyone knew them. The poet combines, artistically, the two poles of Eros and Thanatos in some of his poems in a way that proves that Freud's Eros and Thanatos, in reality, complete each other and they are beyond separation and this state can be seen in every poem studied in the paper. Furthermore, the paper concludes that- despite personal attacks and hatred at him- Poe was a strong believer in religion and God, and this belief revived in him his lost desire and hope for a better life.

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