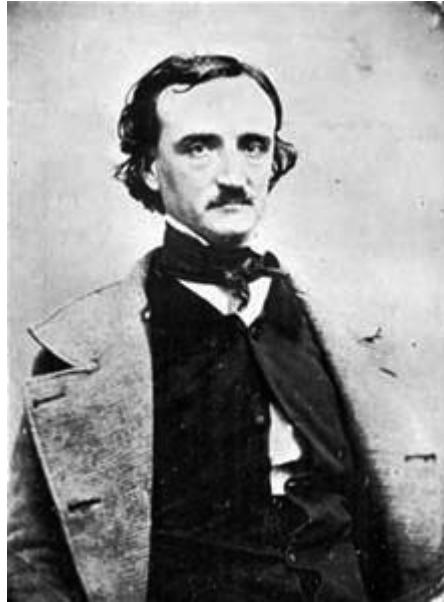


ANALYSIS

“Ulalume” (1847)



Edgar Allan Poe

(1809-1849)

“These lines protest too much (and with what a variety of voices!) that they are poetical, and, protesting, are therefore vulgar. To start with, the walloping dactylic meter is all too musical. Poetry ought to be musical, but musical with tact, subtly and variously. Meters whose rhythms, as in this case, are strong, insistent and practically invariable offer the poet a kind of short cut to musicality. They provide him (my subject calls for a mixture of metaphors) with a ready-made, reach-me-down music. He does not have to create a music appropriately modulated to his meaning; all he has to do is shovel the meaning into the moving stream of the meter and allow the current to carry it along on waves that, like those of the best hairdressers, are guaranteed permanent.”

Aldous Huxley
Vulgarity in Literature
(Chatto and Windus 1930) 28

“‘Ulalume’ is an interesting experiment in diction but only as an experiment, for the poem is about something which never quite gets said because the sense is sacrificed to the vowel sounds. It is an accident if the sound of a place name corresponds to the emotion the place evokes, and the accidental is a comic quality. Edward Lear, the only poet, apparently, to be directly influenced by Poe, succeeds with such names as ‘The Hills of the Chankly Bore’ because he is frankly writing ‘nonsense’ poetry, but ‘Ulalume’ has a serious subject and the comic is out of place. ‘The Bells,’ though much less interesting a conception than ‘Ulalume,’ is more successful because the subject is nothing but an excuse for onomatopoeic effects.”

W. H. Auden, ed.
Introduction
Edgar Allan Poe: Selected Prose and Poetry
(Holt 1950) x

“The first nine stanzas build up admirably the tale of a growing uneasiness, on the part of the narrator. Then comes a stanza which, so far as a large number of readers are concerned, hovers so close to the ridiculous as to spoil the effect. Perhaps Poe added the final stanza, as he said he did the final stanzas of ‘The Raven,’ to avoid repelling ‘the artistical eye’ with ‘a certain hardness and nakedness.’ Whatever his reason for writing the last stanza, many will feel that his impulse to drop it was sounder than his final impulse.”

Walter Blair
The Literature of the United States I, 6th edition
(Scott, Foresman 1953-66)

“This was composed at the suggestion of Professor G. P. Bronson, an elocutionist who wanted ‘a poem suitable for recitation about the length and somewhat of the character of Collins’ ‘Ode to Passions.’ There is a distinct plot...founded on a then current ghost story. On Halloween, when the dead have power, the speaker and his soul walk in the ‘misty-mid-region of Weir’ (a painter of the Hudson River school), ‘by the dark tarn of Auber’ (the composer of the ballet *The Lake of the Fairies*). It is the land of imagination. They follow ‘Astarte’s be-diamonded crescent,’ the planet Venus, but are stopped by the door of the forgotten tomb of the narrator’s beloved. Hope is vain of replacing her with a new love. Poe discussed the poem with Mrs. Helen Whitman and with Bronson’s daughter, but refused to explain it to others... It has had great influence on symbolist poetry in France and England, as well as here.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

“‘Ulalume’ raises some questions about suggestiveness and atmosphere in poetry. Poe is sometimes praised because of an ability to create a mood. All poetry, indeed, has this quality. But why do admirers of Edgar Allan Poe usually connect these things especially with him? Perhaps the best way to approach this particular matter will be to try to analyze the poem as a whole.

What is it about? The element of incident may be summarized as follows: A man, engaged in conversation with Psyche, his soul, walks through a mysterious landscape. He and his soul are so preoccupied that they do not notice the setting nor do they even know what month of the year it is, even though, as it is pointed out, they have been here before and this night marks a mysterious and important anniversary. Then a light appears, which the man takes to be Astarte, and not Diana, that is, love and not chastity. Psyche is terrified by this and wishes to flee, but the man overcomes her scruples and persuades her to follow the light.

They stumble upon a tomb, which, Psyche tells the man, is the tomb of his lost love, Ulalume. Then the man remembers that, precisely a year before, he had brought the body to the tomb. This discovery being made, both the man and Psyche simultaneously say that the sight of Astarte’s crescent has been conjured up, perhaps, by the merciful ghouls to prevent them from stumbling on the tomb. But they had failed to heed the warning. This is, apparently, an allegorical way of saying that love (or the semblance of love, for the crescent is defined as ‘the specter of a planet’) only leads him to the door of the tomb where Ulalume is buried. But all of this leaves a great many questions, even questions that should have factual answers, without answer. For instance, what significance, if any, is possessed by the following lines:

It was hard by the dim lake of Auber,
In the misty mid region of Weir:
It was down by the dank tarn of Auber,
In the ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir.

The poet returns to similar descriptions during the course of the poem and evidently attaches considerable importance to them. He is trying to give an unreal, mysterious atmosphere to the poem. These places have no historical or geographical existence; the reference to them is supposed to tease the reader with mysterious implications in the same way as do the later references to Mount Yaanek and ‘the stars of the Lion.’ The details of the first description are directed to the same end: ‘the ghoul-haunted woodland.’ It is the kind of suggestiveness used in romantic ghost stories, a kind of atmosphere that we can accept only if

we do not inspect its occasion too closely--for dank tarns and ghoulish woodlands are stage-sets, we might say, that are merely good for frightening children. We accept them only if we happen to be willing to forego our maturity and make a temporary concession. The process whereby the poet has created his atmosphere is too transparent, too obvious; we feel that we humor him by accepting it.

One might justify the general atmosphere of the poem, perhaps, by saying that the whole poem is unrealistic, is a kind of fable (though this justification would not necessarily excuse the poet for the particular manner by which the atmosphere is given, the stale devices of mystification). But even in such a poem as this the reader can expect that the parts all contribute something directly to the poem, that they be consistent among themselves, and that the devices of mystification bear some relation to the business of the poem and do more than indicate a love of mystification merely for its own sake.

What, then, about the ghouls that haunt the woodland of Weir? A ghoulish, according to the dictionary, is a 'demon who robs graves and feeds on corpses.' But these are pitiful ghouls that summon up ghosts of planets from 'the Hell of the planetary souls,' in order to save the man from finding the tomb. The situation might be something like this: The poet could not let the planet of Astarte appear as a fact in itself; it was a ghost of a planet. He felt that he had to account for its presence. Arbitrarily he chose ghouls to serve this purpose. He had used the word *ghoul-haunted* earlier in the poem and so he had some preparation for the reference; ghouls may provoke in the reader a kind of shudder of supernatural mystery and horror. But the reader feels that this has little or no real reference to the meaning of the poem. It may be said to contribute to the atmosphere of the poem, but otherwise it does not connect with the meaning of the poem; it simply does not pull its weight in the boat...

It is no surprise, after studying 'Ulalume' in this respect, to discover that Poe could make the following remark about poetry in general: 'Poetry, above all things, is a beautiful painting whose tints, to minute inspection, are confusion worse confounded, but start boldly out to the cursory glance of the connoisseur.' That is, Poe expected poetry to stand little analysis, and to affect only the person who gave it a 'cursory glance,' a superficial reading. It is no wonder, then, that much of Poe's work is very vague and confused, for he said that poetry has for its 'object and *indefinite* instead of a *definite* pleasure.' But really good poetry will stand a great deal of close inspection, even poetry that is simple and unambitious. We feel that the parts all contribute definitely to the total meaning of the poem.

We may apply the same line of reasoning to another feature of 'Ulalume,' the rhythm. In this connection we may quote again from Poe: '...presenting perceptible images with definite, poetry with *indefinite* sensations, to which music is an *essential*, since the comprehension of sweet sound is our most indefinite conception.' Poe, then, holds that the function of the rhythms of poetry is to lull the reader; to increase the indefiniteness of the impression; to prevent him, in fact, from having the impulse to analyze the poem closely; to contribute to the general atmosphere; to have a hypnotic effect on the reader. One may notice that in 'Ulalume,' by consequence, there is an emphatic beat of rhythm that becomes monotonous, that there is a lack of variation in the rhythmic effects of the poem.... The much too musical meter is...like a rich chasuble, so stiff with gold and gems that it stands unsupported, a carapace of jeweled sound, into which the sense, like some snotty little seminarist, irrelevantly creeps and is lost."

Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren
Understanding Poetry
(Holt 1938-61) 228-33)

Michael Hollister (2015)