The Influence of Edgar Allan Poe on Wallace Stevens's Poetry

Fadia Mereani

Abstract

The hints of American Romanticism in Wallace Stevens's poetry can be traced to Edgar Allan Poe and his poetic vision. To show the extent of Stevens's appreciation of Poe, the first part of the paper will examine some of Stevens's letters sent to a number of his acquaintances to show his exposure to Poe's writings and provide a historical and biographical account of the influence of Edgar Allan Poe on Stevens. The second part of the paper will focus particularly on the poetic ideas, concepts, and characteristics they have shared in their poetry and poetic theories. The last part of the paper will examine how Poe's idea of the death of a beautiful woman, one of the main themes these poets have shared, has been discussed in Stevens's "Sunday Morning."

Middle Tennessee State University

Although Wallace Stevens is a Modernist, his poetry carries some traces of American Romanticism. One of the possible reasons behind these Romantic traces in Stevens's poetry is his admiration and appreciation of Edgar Allan Poe as a writer and a poet. In addition to the Gothic and Romantic traces found in some of Stevens's poems, he shows his admiration of Poe by adopting Poe's understanding of the meanings of poetry and imagination and by using some of the poetic principles and themes of Poe's poetry in his own. To show the extent of Stevens's appreciation of Poe, the first part of this study examines some letters that Stevens sent to a number of his acquaintances to show his exposure to Poe's writings and provide a historical and biographical account of the influence of Edgar Allan Poe on Stevens. The second part of this project focuses particularly on the poetic ideas, concepts, and characteristics the two poets shared in their poetry and poetic theories. The study concludes with an examination of how Stevens discussed Poe's idea of the death of a beautiful woman, one of the main themes these poets have shared, in his "Sunday Morning."

Edgar Allan Poe in Wallace Stevens's Life

Wallace Stevens mentions Poe in four different letters. In the first letter, dated January 17, 1909 and addressed to Elsie Moll, who was later to be his wife, Stevens tells her of an invitation he has received from his friend Lamb to attend a celebration of Poe: "There is a celebration of Poe in the air. He lived at Fordham Heights you know, for a period and the people up there have gone in for a tremendous ceremony of Friday, I believe, of this week. My friend Lamb sent me an engraved invitation as big as a bill-board" ("L 144" 122). Stevens, in these few lines, shows the enthusiasm of a fan eager to see Poe celebrated and honored. J. Donald Blount explains that the reference to Lamb is to Albert R. Lamb who "received the M.D. degree from Columbia's College of Physicians and Surgeons in 1907, after which he served there as an intern and later as a member of the faculty for many years" (89 n. 160). Thus, the invitation from Lamb, as a friend and an academician himself, indicates that they might have discussed Poe before. In other words, it proves that Lamb had previously known of Stevens's interest in Poe and wanted to bring the celebration to his attention.

The same letter also provides another proof of Stevens's enthusiasm and interest in Poe. Like a devoted fan, Stevens interrupted the flow of his letter to Elsie to express his excitement to know that Poe had offered to give a lecture in Reading, Pennsylvania, Stevens's hometown, and that the letter in which he had sent his offer was on sale: "By the way, did I ever tell you that Poe once wrote to somebody in Reading offering to lecture there and that the original letter is on sale at Richmond's now? The committee was unwilling to pay what he asked, so that he never came" (122). The reference to the letter on sale implies that Stevens was following Poe's news everywhere. It might also indicate his desire to collect it for himself. The same kind of lurking desire mixed with great regret could be detected in Stevens's comment on the committee. The fact that Poe had never been able to give the lecture in Reading because of the committee's unwillingness to pay his price seems

to upset Stevens and to arouse his resentment. This tone proves his understanding of Poe's financial difficulties as one of the early American professional authors. The juxtaposition of the reference to the letter on sale, which shows the audience's current appreciation of Poe, coupled with the committee's unwillingness to pay for his lecture when he was alive, denotes Stevens's mild aggravation with an audience who did not appreciate writers in time for the writers to benefit from that appreciation. However, it celebrates the renewed interest in Poe's writing and explains the reasons behind his success. In fact, in the following passage from the same letter, Stevens explains the change in the audience's taste and the shift of interest in Poe's works that led to "the revival of Poe," to use Stevens's words:

> … nowadays, when so many people no longer believe in supernatural things, they find a substitute in the stranger and more freakish phenomena of the mind – hallucinations, mysteries and the like. Hence the revival of Poe. – Poe illustrates, too, the effect of stimulus. When I complain of the "bareness" – I have in mind, very often, the effect of order and regularity, the effect of moving in a groove. We all cry for life. It is not to be found in railroading to an office and then railroading back. – I do not say the life we cry for is, as a question of merit, good or bad. – But it is obviously more exciting to be Poe than to be a lesser "esquire." (122-23)

Stevens's desire to "be Poe" reveals more than his mere admiration of his works. Poe provides for Stevens an escape from the boring routine of life. He gives him a glimpse of the inner workings of the mind and an explanation, if impossible and grotesque, of some of the mysteries of life. Being Poe also reveals the secret of a successful writing profession. The secret lies not only in providing the audience the means of escape from their lives but also in always providing them with multi-dimensional perspectives with which they can renew their view of these lives. The psychological and supernatural dimensions of Poe's work, Stevens realizes, add a spirit to the everyday ordinary life. As these dimensions helped Stevens fight "the bareness" of his life and break the monotony that resulted from "order and regularity," they help the audience break loose from the grip of boredom and monotonous ordinariness. The new perspectives on life and its mysteries presented in Poe's works also help the audience see their lives differently. Joan Richardson observes that in "this Sunday letter" Stevens "defined what he felt about the supernatural in accounting for Poe's success" (*Early* 319). This understanding of the mechanics of Poe's success accounts for the influence of Poe's poetic theories on Stevens's works.

The second letter in which Stevens mentions Poe is again addressed to Elsie Moll and dated January 21, 1909, a few days after the first letter. In this letter, the reference to Poe also comes in the context of the influence of reading on Stevens's life and the different perspective it provides. Stevens tells Elsie how his life is altered by the mere act of reading. His affinity for reading was what made him stay up all night to "read Poe and Hawthorne and all the things one ought to read" though he had never done so before ("L 146" 125). Considering Poe in the top of the list of "things one ought to read" shows the extent of Poe's influence on Stevens's reading experience.

The third letter proves that Poe was an integral part of Stevens's reading experience. In this letter, addressed to José Rodrigues Feo and dated May 23, 1947, Stevens criticizes the public opinion that changes constantly. He says, "in the long run, as Poe said in one of his essays which nobody reads, the generous man comes to be regarded as the stingy man; the beautiful woman comes to be regarded as an old witch; the scholar becomes the ignoramus" ("L 606" 558). First, this reference to Poe's essays shows that Stevens read not only Poe's fictional works but also his non-fictional essays, which in turn shows that Stevens was familiar with Poe's poetic theories. Secondly, the reference to Poe in relation to the shifting public opinion explains Stevens's relationship with his audience. In his study *Edgar Allan Poe, Wallace Stevens, and the Poetics of American Privacy*, Louis A. Renza explores how Poe and Stevens guarded their private lives from their audience. He states that both Poe and Stevens shared an understanding of what it means to go private and "internally stage [some of their works] wholly to resist codifying appropriations" (xiii).

The last reference to Poe in the last letter addressed to Barbara Church and dated August 4, 1952, also discusses Stevens's relationship with people. Stevens could not describe how his need and resentment for people coexisted in him at the same time. He believes that Poe, on the other hand, was able to keep that relationship balanced because he "liked to analyze his feelings in crowds," creating in this way a private space in public ("L 839" 759). Renza's study proves, as do the 1947 and 1952 letters, that Poe's influence on Stevens affects both his style of writing and his perception of his role as a writer and as a public figure.

Poe's Influence on Stevens's Poetic Principles

Several critics have made the connection between Poe's writings in general and poetical theory, in particular, and Stevens's writings. First, in respect to his concept of imagination, Stevens shares Poe's definition of imagination and the capabilities of the imaginative power. Elizabeth Phillips describes Wallace Stevens as "another celebrant of the freedom of the imagination" (6). Both Poe and Stevens, Phillips explains, admit the role of imagination in poetry and consider it the main component of the poetic creation (6). However, Phillips also illustrates how both Poe and Stevens understand the limitation of imagination in its dependence on the reality of things and on a variation of the world as people know it. Phillips states that Stevens "agreed with Poe that the imagination depends on what exists, and is free only to work collaterally with elements of the known world" (6). In her article, "The Black Bird of Edgar Allan Poe and Wallace Stevens' Thirteen Blackbirds," Paulina Ambrozy shows the similarities and differences between Stevens's and Poe's concepts of imagination. She explains that although both poets place a great emphasis on the imagination to understand and give meaning to the world, they approach the relationship between "the real and the imagined world" differently (280). Ambrozy states that whereas Poe focuses on the imagined world as the ultimate source of meaning, Stevens still relies on the real world to give him multiple perspectives for his poetry (280).

In addition to the distinction between the real and imagined world, Poe and Stevens make a distinction between the surface and deep meanings of a poem. Joan

Richardson explains that Stevens's distinction between a poem's surface and deep meanings is "the single most important stylistic feature of Stevens's life and work" (*Early* 66). Richardson bases Stevens's distinction on what she describes as "the American dissociation of sensibility" found in early American literature and in "the nineteenth-century works of Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne" (*Early* 66). The dissociation of sensibility used by Stevens and Poe allows them to hide their ideas, thoughts, and feelings under the surface of the poem. Richardson also points out that the reason some American writers have resorted to the dissociation of sensibility is their belief that "actions resulting from true thoughts and feelings were punished by the spiritual rhetoric of an overbearing sense of sin and guilt" (*Early* 66). Hiding thoughts and feelings beneath the surface of a poem saves the poets from that sense of sin and guilt. It also enables them to hide their private lives in the layers of meanings of a poem.

Another characteristic Stevens shared with Poe is his understanding of the purity of poetry. Poe's influence on French Symbolism is extended to Stevens's perception of poetry as a pure art that uses symbolism and illusion as artistic means of expression that keep poetry pure. In other words, illusions and symbols are purely used for art's sake and are not didactic in nature. Milton J. Bates makes that connection between Poe and the French Symbolists on one hand and Poe and Stevens on the other when he describes "Stevens's supreme fiction… as a form of willful illusion… [that] belongs to a tradition of literary illusions that includes some of Poe's poems, Huysmans' *À Rebours*, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *Axël*, Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott,' and Mallarmé's prose poem **'Le Nénuphar blanc'**" (201). Edward Ragg also makes a similar connection between Stevens and the French Symbolists in their reading of Poe's "Poetic Principle." He states that Stevens follows "the French Symbolist reading of Poe's 'The Poetic Principle'" in respect to what makes poetry "pure" (52). Ragg explains that the purity of poetry in Poe's "Poetic Principle" is derived from a focus on the musicality of words rather than on their semantic or pragmatic meanings or on their relationships to the real. Thus, poetry becomes "pure" when the poet focuses on the creation of sounds that superficially lack semantic meaning to create the effect of musicality and make poetry "autonomous" and "abstract" (52). Ragg's emphasis on the abstractedness of poetry for both Poe and Stevens is an emphasis on their "aversion to the notion of poetry possessing a didactic role" (52).

The musicality of poetry is, in fact, one of the main characteristics that Stevens shares with Poe. Joan Richardson also notices that Poe's influence on Stevens's writings manifests itself in his concern with "the sound of words" (*Later* 181). Richardson points out that Stevens's understanding of the significance of the sound of words in poetry might be based on Poe's *Eureka,* "a text that he did not name but that he also seemed to recall" (*Later* 181). The connection Richardson makes between Poe's *Eureka* and Stevens's theory of the sound of words is based on Poe's depiction of "Pascal's thought experiment of conjuring the movement of one stone on the sea floor that affects the universe with the waves it generates was translated into the effect that every word uttered has the power of transforming the shape of all things" (*Later* 181). Thus, the careful attention to the sound of words in poetry

has the inherent power to transform life and meaning. However, Richardson believes that, unlike Mallarmé and the French Symbolists in their understanding of Poe's musicality, an understanding that connects this musicality to the aesthetics of the art-for-art's-sake theory, Stevens's understanding of the poetic musicality comes from his desire "to reproduce as closely as he could the way he heard, the way he felt, moving about in constant physical disequilibrium" (*Early* 501). Stevens's understanding of musicality aspires to raise the standards of art and to give poetry and poets a high and transcendent position in life.

The Death of a Beautiful Woman on a "Sunday Morning"

In "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe presents "the death… of a beautiful woman" as "the most poetical topic in the world" (756). Stevens also frequently uses the theme of death in his poems. Richardson points out that "it was the most constant theme of the poems he had written" in his early life and would continue to captivate him in his later works (*Early* 490). However, Richardson also points out that Stevens's treatment of death reveals a personality and a character that differ from Poe's (*Early* 490). Poe's treatment of death might suggest "a perverse predilection, the sign of morbid personality," while Stevens "was not being defensive or disingenuous when he expressed that he was concerned with death as an object of thought" (*Early* 490). Stevens's treatment of death goes far beyond the effect of death on human relationships to discussing death as a contrast and sometimes as an answer to human life.

One of the poems in which Stevens discusses the theme of death is "Sunday Morning." Stevens introduces the theme of the death of a beautiful woman to question the meaning of death as a major component of the religious and social systems that constrain the female figure presented at the beginning of the poem. Poe employs the theme of the death of a beautiful woman in "The Raven," for instance, to show the deep love and grief the speaker of the poem feels because of the loss of his beloved. However, Stevens introduces it in "Sunday Morning" to make a more solid argument about the importance of the death of a beautiful woman when the speaker of the poem suggests it to the beautiful woman as an answer to the ontological and theological questions that she has been reflecting upon at the beginning of the poem. In this way, Stevens makes the beautiful woman in the poem the very embodiment of the theme Stevens shares with Poe.

"Sunday Morning" is a meditative poem contemplating the meaning of life against the backdrop of dominant social and religious systems. The poem can be divided into two major sections: the reflective part that poses the questions about life and religion and the transformative part that attempts to answer the questions of the first part. The speaker of the poem is a woman who is still sitting in her "sunny chair" on a Sunday morning (2). Instead of going to the church, she sits there overcome by questions about her beliefs in life and about the death of Jesus in the crucifixion (9-15). Some kind of epiphany dawns on her in the second section when her thoughts and speculations are transformed to a different world by the answer "Death is the mother of beauty" (63). In this other world, all

the religious boundaries of her current world are broken and all the worries and fears of change are dismissed.

In the first four stanzas of "Sunday Morning," the woman seems to be happy and content in her own world of beauty enjoying the luscious pleasures of life. However, her thoughts and speculations about her religious beliefs have turned these pleasures of life, "the pungent oranges and bright, green wings," into "things in some procession of the dead" (9-10). The death of Jesus, a symbol of ultimate beauty and power, has turned everything beautiful into everything that is lifeless. This juxtaposition of the death of the permanent symbol of divinity and beauty has made her question her mortality and the temporariness of the pleasure she is enjoying. Her quest in life and her pilgrimage "to silent Palestine, / Dominion of the blood and sepulchre," she realizes, is a journey to her own grave and not only to the grave of Jesus (14-15). In these questions that darkened her day, the woman speculates the very nature of life and death.

In "The Raven," Poe makes the raven a sign of death. When the speaker first hears the sound of the tapping of the raven at his door, he dismisses it as "nothing more" than a mere visitor (5-6). The raven replies in answer for all of the speaker's questions about the death of his beloved "Nevermore" (48). Stevens also introduces birds as signs of desolation and death in the fourth stanza of "Sunday Morning." The birds in this stanza "are gone, and their warm fields / Return no more;" they tell the woman that the idea of paradise or heaven is not the answer to her questions about her life and death (49-50). Paradise with all of the signs of life it suggests, including the birds, would not provide the woman with the answer to her questions about death.

Stevens introduces the theme of the death of a beautiful woman exactly in the stanza that marks the middle of the poem as the answer to her questions. The poem consists of 120 lines, and the speaker suggests death in the stanza that marks the middle of the poem:

> She says, "But in contentment I still feel
> The need of some imperishable bliss."
> Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,
> Alone, shall come fulfillment to our dreams
> And our desires… (61-65)

Unlike Poe's narrator, who sees that "nevermore" is the answer to all questions about death, Stevens makes death itself a sign of birth and the creation of life and beauty. Death is a mother, a begetter of the beauty in the world. It is the embodiment of the beautiful woman because it is "the mother of beauty." Stevens strips the idea of death of all religious connotations associated with it because of the death of Jesus. Death, juxtaposed with the begetter of life, reminds the woman and the reader that life in its fluctuating state is to be worshipped and appreciated. Death is the mother of beauty because death is also the teacher that forces the woman to open her eyes. It dissipates the darkness that fell on her mind at the beginning of the poem and replaces it with the kind of friendly darkness "the pigeons" sink into "on extended wings" (118-20). Embracing the beauty of death as the ultimate answer of life would help the woman see life for what it really is, a place of worship.

Although the death of the beautiful woman is treated differently in "Sunday Morning," Poe's influence is still present in the poem. The difference in the treatment might be the result of Stevens being a modernist poet. In other words, Stevens is showing his concern with the questions of the religious and social dilemmas of his age. However, the presence of the theme of the death of a beautiful woman suggests that Stevens has retained some of the Romantic elements and subject matter of Poe's poetry. Although this discussion of "Sunday Morning" is mainly thematic in nature, it would be worthwhile to study the stylistic techniques Stevens might have shared with Poe in the poem. And although this study is focused on "Sunday Morning" as an example of the poems in which Poe's influence on Stevens can be detected, there is reason to believe that further examination of other poems by Stevens would reveal the extent of Poe's influence on his poetic vision.

Works Cited

Ambroży, Paulina. "The Black Bird of Edgar Allan Poe and Wallace Stevens' Thirteen Blackbirds." *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia: An International Review of English Studies (SAP)*. 39 (2003): 279-87. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 10 February 2012.

Bates, Milton J. *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985. Print.

Blount, J. Donald, Ed. *The Contemplated Spouse: The Letters of Wallace Stevens to Elsie*. Columbia: U of South Carolina, 2006. Print.

Phillips, Elizabeth. *Edgar Allan Poe: An American Imagination*. Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1979. Print.

Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Philosophy of Composition." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature.* Ed. Nina Baym. Shorter 5th Ed.752-60. Print.

---. "The Raven." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature.* Ed. Nina Baym. Shorter 5th Ed.701-4. Print.

Ragg, Edward. *Wallace Stevens and the Aesthetics of Abstraction.* Cambridge, N.Y.: Cambridge UP, 2010. Print.

Renza, Louis A. *Edgar Allan Poe, Wallace Stevens, and the Poetics of American Privacy*. Baton Rouge : Louisiana State University Press, 2002. Print.

Richardson, Joan. *Wallace Stevens: The Early Years 1879 – 1923*. New York: Beech Tree Books, 1986. Print.

---. *Wallace Stevens: The Later Years 1923 – 1955*. New York: Beech Tree Books, 1986. Print.

Stevens, Wallace. "Letter 144." *Letters of Wallace Stevens*. Ed. Holly Stevens. New York: Alfred A. Knope, 1966. 121-23. Print.

---. "Letter 146." *Letters of Wallace Stevens*. Ed. Holly Stevens. New York: Alfred A. Knope, 1966. 125-26. Print.

---. "Letter 606." *Letters of Wallace Stevens*. Ed. Holly Stevens. New York: Alfred A. Knope, 1966. 557-58. Print.

---. "Letter 839" *Letters of Wallace Stevens*. Ed. Holly Stevens. New York: Alfred A. Knope, 1966. 758-59. Print.

---. "Sunday Morning." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature.* Ed. Nina Baym. Shorter 5th Ed.1892-94. Print.