

Is Edgar Allen Poe's 'The City in the Sea' a poem of 'Value in Literature'?

'Critics have generally stressed the importance of characteristics such as complexity, aesthetic unity, literary language, subject-matter and canonical status' (Montgomery et al, 2000: pg 297-301), in discussing the value of literature. Ergo, in analysing Edgar Allen Poe's, 'The City in the Sea' it is necessary to focus on whether Poe's work exhibits any of the above characteristics associated with literary value. More than to merely identify these qualities, however, it is also important to question whether Poe exhibits any skill or talent in their use and thus whether he does successfully present a poem of literary value.

Edgar Allen Poe's 'The City in the Sea' is a poem written in the 19th century, which depicts an underwater city, ruled by death and devoid of any life or movement, which eventually sinks into hell.

Critic's claim that language in valued texts is 'where authors consciously play with the possibilities of expression in order to produce verbal art' and that 'in short, the author is considered to have taken care in her or his choice' (Montgomery et al, 2000: pg 297-301). However, in Edgar Allen Poe's 'The City in the Sea' one could argue that Poe's use of language is very simple because he was merely concerned with describing a perfect gothic setting by including simple gothic features, and that he has neglected any exploration of language. This claim is plausible as Poe would have placed great importance on achieving a perfect gothic setting for his poem due to his dedication in his work to the gothic movement. Evidence of this can be found within the poem with the clear presence of castle like structures, '*fanés*' and '*Babylon-like walls*' that often appear in gothic texts and are made morbid with the reference to '*graves*' and '*death*'. Therefore, his use of language appears to be very simplistic serving a purely descriptive purpose and thus exhibits weak poetic value.

However, it is clear that Poe has taken care in his choice of language to successfully create a gothic atmosphere within his poem, beyond the simple gothic setting and use of clichéd gothic features. The use of the word '*gaping*', introduced during the description of the city in which Poe speaks of the '*gaping graves*', is an intriguing choice. Whilst Poe could have simply described the graves as being open, the word '*gaping*' implies that the graves are struggling to contain death, suggesting that death is too great to be confined. In addition, the '*gaping*' of the graves could have connotations to a gaping mouth and thus Poe could be personifying death by allowing the reader to imagine death with a great mouth and the expanse to devour the city. This adheres to the concept of death looking '*gigantically*' down, implying death has an overpowering effect on the town over which it rules. In addition, the description of death as having '*reared himself a throne*' further empowers death by personifying it with attributes of a King. This interpretation of Poe's choice of language adds much more than a morbid image to the poem than simply open graves as it explores the power and expanse of death. This is the more likely interpretation, as Poe was personally familiar with the uncontrollable power of death, having been orphaned at a young age and having lost his young wife to tuberculosis. Consequently, it is understandable that Poe wanted to present such an image and message about death within his work. Therefore, Poe's skilful choice of words opens the poem up to much bigger concepts as the reader interprets the many possibilities within the language, thus presenting a piece that exhibits great poetic value.

Furthermore, texts of literary value are expected to explore deeper or moral concerns beyond the surface meaning of the piece, such as 'the nature of evil, (or) the corrupting effect of money' (Montgomery et al, 2000: pg 297-301). This is something Poe evidently achieves within 'The City in the Sea'. Within the poem we find the description of the dead as being '*gaily-jewelled*' with '*each idol's diamond eye*'. One could argue this image of the dead being so '*gaily*' dressed is '*vulgar*' as suggested by Aldous Huxley (Peeples, S, 2007:64.) However, because Poe specifically highlights the wealth of these people, this implies that he has chosen to draw the reader's attention here. The description of '*diamond eye*' implies that the men are blinded by wealth and cannot see past the temptations of precious materials. Therefore, Poe

could have chosen to draw the reader's attention to the wealth within the poem so that he can make a statement about the 'corrupting effect of money' as it easily blinds man. One could argue that Poe is attempting to promote morality in life through this; because once we are dead we cannot change what we have done in life or repent for our sins. Even the wealthy cannot '*tempt the waters from their bed*' showing that despite their wealth, they cannot change their fate. Thus, we should not let money corrupt us as we will have to live with this forever.

However, one could also argue Poe is attempting to undervalue any moral behaviour in life. All of the dead are together; '*the good and the bad and the worst and the best*', with no separation between those who were moral in life, and those who were not. This implies that there is no point in acting morally if, once we die, we are valued on the same level as those who were immoral. This presents a very pessimistic view of human nature typical of Poe's attitude as he was strongly against the belief in the natural morality of man, as discussed in Transcendentalism. It is, therefore, more likely that Poe was attempting to make a statement about the natural immorality of man. This can be seen in the aforementioned diamond eye example, but is also seen earlier in the poem. The reference to '*no rays from the holy heaven come down*' implies that the city is not touched by the riotous light of heaven which is often used to symbolise clarity, truth and intellect. This suggests that the dead lack any clarity or truth as they are blinded by their immorality. Therefore, Poe appears to have been building this message of the lack of morality of man throughout the poem and in doing so the sentiment grows and the message become much more powerful. Therefore, Poe successfully presents an underlying message within his text about the morality of man and money, exhibiting literary value in his ability to explore universal questions within his work.

Complexity through the 'interweaving of elements of language, structure, (and) plot' (Montgomery et al, 2000: pg 297-301) is also something believed to be greatly important within a piece of literary value. However, one could argue that because of the irregular structure of the piece, Poe's focus was the message concerning moral value and consequently he failed to achieve any complexity constituting aesthetic unity within the structure of his poem. However, despite this it is apparent that Poe has succeeded in 'interweaving' elements within his piece, increasing the poetic value through a complex structure creating aesthetic unity. This can be seen through the use of sibilance in the second stanza within the line '*lurid Sea/StreamS up turretS Silently*'. The repeated 'S' creates an almost 'shhh' sound which allows the aforementioned gothic setting to achieve a much eerier quality through the subtle silence created within this line. Thus, Poe has used his carefully crafted description of the city, but enhanced it by interweaving poetic techniques such as sibilance. Similarly, the use of imagery within the line '*redder glow*' has connotations with blood and by extension the red fires of hell. This adds to the religious input introduced to the poem in the first stanza, '*holy heaven*' and thus allows the reader to consider, not simply the questions raised about the morals of man, but the religious implication of these morals, or lack thereof. In doing this, Poe has incorporated the practical skills of poetry such as sibilance and imagery, to enhance the atmosphere and moral questions the poem raises. Thus, he interweaves both the practical and thought provoking side of poetry seamlessly, constituting aesthetic unity and poetry value.

It is likely Poe used such a complex structure of interweaving elements to increase the poetic value of his work because he was often met with criticism that 'in sum, what Poe lacked above all was a sense of his reader' (Owen Dudley Edward, (Jackson, K. (2012)). This implies that his poetry was simply an expression of his own values for his own enjoyment with no attempt to influence or cater to the enjoyment of the reader. However, this is something one could argue Poe addresses well in this poem by reinforcing moral messages for the reader and allowing them to discover the complexity hidden within the work. In this way, Poe's poem is a much more interesting read and caters to the needs of the reader. Therefore, Poe's work does present great skill within its complexity and consequently exhibits poetic value.

To conclude, Poe's work 'The City in the Sea' does exhibit strong characteristics associated with poetic value. Although throughout his life, Poe's poetry was met with mixed criticisms, it seems impossible to claim that Poe is devoid of any talent. His work expresses the pain and joy of his eventful life and this is something that can be felt even today. During his life, Poe may have been considered a poet of questionable value, but it is ludicrous to deny the poet the credit his work so deserves through its language, complexity and ability to question the morals of man.

Word count: 1615

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