

Annabel Lee

By all accounts, Poe's marriage was serene. But his wife-cousin bore the lung disease that had killed his mother when he was two. By the spring of 1846 her condition was dangerous. A neighbor at that time happened to see Poe in a cherry tree, tossing the fruit down to Virginia. She was laughing as she caught them in her lap. All at once blood came from her lips. Poe leapt down and carried her into the house.

In January 1847 Virginia Clemm Poe died of tuberculosis. Like Poe's mother, she was twenty-four. They had been married over ten years. She was buried near their home in Fordham. A friend reported "Many times...was he found at the dead hour of a winter night, sitting beside her tomb almost frozen in the snow..." *Annabel Lee* was finished by mid-1849. Poe's own death at forty followed within the year.

The poem is a unique challenge. Critics will not need their spectacles to find its faults of taste. But any who are not moved by it might as well give up reading poetry, or at least romantic poetry. It invites us to re-examine our prejudices against sentimentality. It puts us through the wringer, like it or not. Mawkish and melodramatic, towering and harrowing, it will not leave us in peace.

Each of us recognizes the kingdom by the sea, where the angels cannot be trusted. We knew it before we knew any other world, the world of first helplessness, first beauty, a homeland older than memory. We cannot return without pain. And each of us recalls something of ourselves in the haunted innocent who the gods, out of mercy, had made mad.

Gordon Getty