

# POETICALLY SPEAKING

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## Annabel Lee

### An Analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's Poem

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#### Poe and 'Annabel Lee'

October 9, 1849 a poem was published in the New York Daily Tribune. It would be the last poem of a poet I consider the greatest American romance poet to ever live. Many of his poems were of ladies he flirted with. He was an admirer of lyrical poetry, not so much of narrative poetry. Like me, his favorite poets no doubt were the great English romance poets, Byron, Tennyson, and Shelley. Lord Tennyson himself said of Poe that he, 'was the most original genius that America has produced'. T. S. Eliot once wrote, 'Only after you find that a poem by Poe goes on throbbing in your head do you begin to suspect that perhaps you will never forget it.' One interesting note about Poe's last Poem is that Poe took certain steps to make sure that this poem would be published; perhaps this was due to him knowing he had just created one of the worlds greatest love poems, his masterpiece and wanted to make sure that the world saw such beauty. Sadly, he never lived to see his poem published for he would die under very mysterious circumstances just two days before its publication. Oddly, one manuscript has a slightly different last line. Perhaps the poem we read today is not the one he intended; though in close inspection the more melodious word 'sounding' instead of the phrase 'side of the' sounds better to my own poetic ear, and is the one used today.

Along the South Carolina shores there is a local legend. One that tells the tale of a woman named Annabel Lee. It is said she met a sailor there, yet her father did not approve of their pairing and forbid them from seeing one another. It is said that the pair met in secret at a graveyard, yet the sailor would soon sail on from that town of Charleston. Yet away at sea he heard the tragic news of his darling Annabel Lee, that she had caught scarlet fever and had died. He wished to attend her funeral, yet her father would not allow him to do so. So, it is said that he not knowing the place she was buried, instead visited the cemetery where they would often meet; and there in vigil thought of the girl he had lost. Though no one knows for certain, locals in Charleston believe almost for certain that Poe was inspired by this legend, especially since he was for a short period of time stationed there In 1827 while serving in the army.

Perhaps Poe was inspired by this tale; yet as with many poets like myself, Poe no doubt placed a little of his own life story into his poetry as well. There are clues in this poem that indeed this is true; parts of Poe's life are reflected very much so in this poem I will analyze his last, and greatest masterpiece, 'Annabel Lee'.

I will explain all the themes of each stanza and go into the many technical details, yet first I must tell everyone what I find so beautiful about this poem, namely, its melodic tone, almost as if it were a song. It is perhaps the most lyrical poem that I have ever read. Poe's skill at internal rhyming is absolutely breathtaking. Also the use of the same words as end rhymes is not typical of most poems and creates a truly hypnotic effect, and has an overall unifying effect as well. What I also find very striking about this poem, though not technically a ballad, it is referred to as a ballad. And I totally agree, it reminds me so much of an English ballad in form. This is true because of his use of tetrameter and trimeter; the 4/3 pattern is unique to the English Ballad. He also uses alliteration with the use of the letter 'L'. This is a letter he often uses for names through his works. Also of note is his repeated use of phrases and words, which adds to the mournful effect of this very emotive poem.

## Meter

**Anapestic tetrameter:** Poe wrote his last poem almost entirely in anapestic tetrameter except for the b-rime lines, which are written in anapestic trimeter. Though mostly anapestic, this poem does have a few iambic feet as well, perhaps to add a pleasant-sounding variation or, more than likely, because iambic meter is the way English tends to be spoken naturally. Hence maintaining a pure anapestic rhythm is nearly impossible even for the best of poets. Poe, like me, loved using anapests. Below is an example of Poe's extensive use of anapests (line 34) in this very melodic poem, followed by a brief outline of the number of feet per line in each stanza, and finally, a careful scansion of each and every line of Poe's poem:

| for the **MOON**/never **BEAMS**,/ with-out **BRING**/ing me **DREAMS**

## Feet

- **Stanza One:** 4-3-4-3-4-3
- **Stanza Two:** 4-3-4-3-4-3
- **Stanza Three:** 4-3-4-3-4-3-4-3
- **Stanza Four:** 4-3-4-3-4-4
- **Stanza Five:** 4-3-3-4-3-4-3
- **Stanza Six:** 4-3-4-3-4-4-3-3

# Scansion of Poe's Meter in Annabel Lee

## 1st Stanza

it was **MAN**/y and **MAN**/y a **YEAR**/ a-**GO**,  
in a **KING**/dom **BY**/ the **SEA**,  
that a **MAI**/den there **LIVED**/ whom **YOU**/ may **KNOW**  
by the **NAME**/ of **AN**/na-bel **LEE**;  
and this **MAI**/den she **LIVED**/ with **NO**/ oth-er **THOUGHT**  
than to **LOVE**/ and be **LOVED**/ by **ME**.

Line 1: (tetrameter) 3 anapests, 1 iamb

Line 2: (trimeter) 1 anapest, 2 iambs

Line 3: (tetrameter) 2 anapests, 2 iambs

Line 4: (trimeter) 1 anapest, 1 iamb, 1 anapest

Line 5: (tetrameter) 2 anapests, 1 iamb, 1 anapest

Line 6: (trimeter) 2 anapests, 1 iamb

## 2nd Stanza

**I**/ was a **CHILD**/ and **SHE** /was a **CHILD**,  
in this **KING**/dom **BY**/ the **SEA**,  
but we **LOVED**/ with a **LOVE** /that was **MORE**/ than **LOVE**—  
**I**/ and my **AN**/na-bel **LEE**—  
with a **LOVE**/ that the **WING**/èd ser-**APHS**/ of **HEAV**-en  
**COV**/et-ed **HER**/ and **ME**.

7: (tetrameter) 1 headless iamb, 1 anapest, 1 iamb, 1 anapest

8: (trimeter) 1 anapest, 2 iambs

9: (tetrameter) 3 anapests, 1 iamb

10: (trimeter) 1 headless iamb, 2 anapests

11: (tetrameter) 3 anapests, 1 amphibrach

12: (trimeter) 1 headless iamb, 1 anapest, 1 iamb

## 3rd Stanza

and **THIS** /was the **REAS**/on that, **LONG**/ a-**GO**,  
in this **KING**/dom **BY**/ the **SEA**,  
a **WIND**/ **BLEW OUT** <sup>1</sup> /of a **CLOUD**/ by **NIGHT**  
**CHILL**/ing my **AN**/na-bel **LEE**;  
**SO**/ that her **HIGH**/born **KINS**/man **CAME**  
and **BORE**/ her a-**WAY**/ from **ME**,  
to **SHUT**/ her **UP**/ in a **SEP**/ul-**CHRE**  
in this **KING**/dom **BY**/ the **SEA**.

- 13: (tetrameter) 1 iamb, 2 anapests, 1 iamb  
14: (trimeter) 1 anapest, 2 iambs  
15: (tetrameter) 1 iamb, 1 spondee, 1 anapest, 1 iamb  
16: (trimeter) 1 headless iamb, 2 anapests  
17: (tetrameter) 1 headless iamb, 1 anapest, 2 iambs  
18: (trimeter) 1 iamb, 1 anapest, 1 iamb  
19: (tetrameter) 2 iambs, 1 anapest, 1 iamb  
20: (trimeter) 1 anapest, 2 iambs

## 4th Stanza

the **ANG**/els, not **HALF**/ so **HAP**-py/ in **HEAV**-en,  
went **EN**/vy-ing **HER**/ and **ME**:—  
yes!—**THAT** /was the **REA**/son (as **ALL**/ men **KNOW**,  
in this **KING**/dom **BY**/ the **SEA**)  
that the **WIND**/ **CAME OUT** <sup>2</sup> /of a **CLOUD**/ by **NIGHT**,  
**CHILL**/ing and **KILL**/ing my **AN**/na-bel **LEE**.

- 21: (tetrameter) 1 iamb, 1 anapest, 2 amphibrachs  
22: (trimeter) 1 iamb, 1 anapest, 1 iamb  
23: (tetrameter) 1 iamb, 2 anapests, 1 iamb  
24: (trimeter) 1 anapest, 2 iambs  
25: (tetrameter) 1 anapest, 1 spondee, 1 anapest, 1 iamb  
26: (tetrameter) 1 headless iamb, 3 anapests

## 5th Stanza

but our **LOVE**/ it was **STRONG**/er by **FAR**/ than the **LOVE**  
of **THOSE**/ who were **OLD**/er than **WE**—  
Of **MAN**/y far **WIS**/er than **WE**—  
and **NEITH**/er the **ANG**/els in **HEAV**/en a-**BOVE**,  
nor the **DE**/mons down **UND**/er the **SEA**,  
can **EV**/er dis-**SEV**/er my **SOUL** /from the **SOUL**  
of the **BEAU**/ti-ful **AN**/na-bel **LEE**:—

- 27: (tetrameter) 4 anapests  
28: (trimeter) 1 iamb, 2 anapests  
29: (trimeter) 1 iamb, 2 anapests  
30: (tetrameter) 4 anapest  
31: (trimeter) 3 anapests  
32: (tetrameter) 1 iamb, 3 anapests  
33: (trimeter) 3 anapests

## 6th Stanza

for the **MOON**/ nev-er **BEAMS** /with-out **BRING**/ing me **DREAMS**  
of the **BEAU**/ti-ful **AN**/na-bel **LEE**;  
and the **STARS**/ nev-er **RISE**/ but I **SEE**/ the bright **EYES**  
of the **BEAU**/ti-ful **AN**/na-bel **LEE**;  
and so, **ALL**/ the night-**TIDE**/ I lie **DOWN**/ by the **SIDE**  
of my **DAR**/ling—my **DAR**/ling—my **LIFE**/ and my **BRIDE**,  
in her **SEP**/ul-chre **THERE**/ by the **SEA**—  
in her **TOMB**/ by the **SIDE**/ of the **SEA**.

- 34: (tetrameter) 4 anapests
- 35: (trimeter) 3 anapests
- 36: (tetrameter) 4 anapests
- 37: (trimeter) 3 anapest
- 38: (tetrameter) 4 anapests
- 39: (tetrameter) 4 anapests
- 40: (trimeter) 3 anapests
- 41: (trimeter) 3 anapests

Unlike the varied meter throughout the previous stanzas, Poe chose to end his poem with an anapest in every foot of his last stanza, for a total of 28. To me, it creates a lasting melodious, yet solemn impression, almost like one last orison over the speaker's object of praise, his dead, and seemingly, long lost love.

## Form

**2 Sestets and an octet, followed by 1 sestet, 1 septet, and a final octave**

**6-6-8 6-7-8**

The poem seems to be divided into two distinct parts with the final stanza of each part being an octave, the first octave containing the volta, the last octave containing the conclusion, and in this case, quite stunning imagery. To me, it seems as though Poe is vaguely imitating the form of the Petrarchan sonnet by including a mid-poem volta within an octave.

## Rime Scheme

**ababxb xbcdbd abxbxbx dbabxb cbbcxb xbxbeebb**

Poe uses much rime repetition, both Internal and terminal, including 7 identity rimes listed below:

a-rimes: **ago, know**

b-rimes: **Lee, me, sea, we**

d-rimes: **Heaven**

## Poe's End Rimes in Detail

### 1st Sestet:

ababxb

(ago, sea, know, Lee, thought, me)

### 2nd Sestet:

xbcbdb

(child, sea, love, Lee, Heaven, me)

### 1st Octave:

abxbxbx

(ago, sea, chilling, Lee, came)

### 3rd Sestet:

dbabxb

(Heaven, me, know, sea, night, Lee)

### Septet:

cbbcbxb

(love, we, we, above, sea, soul, Lee)

### 2nd Octave:

xbxbeebe

(dreams, Lee, eyes, Lee, side, bride, sea, sea)

## Composition

**1st Stanza:** 'Fairy Tale' This poem begins exactly as one would begin a classic fairy tale. Yet here the minor details later one become crucial for the big picture later on, the ever after.

It was many and many a year ago,  
In a kingdom by the sea,  
That a maiden there lived whom you may know  
By the name of Annabel Lee;  
And this maiden she lived with no other thought  
Than to love and be loved by me.

**2nd Stanza:** 'Seraphs' Love, love, love. This stanza is all about love and how that the angels are jealous of this love. He repeats stanza 1 lines for hypnotic effect.

I was a child and *she* was a child,  
In this kingdom by the sea,  
But we loved with a love that was more than love—  
I and my Annabel Lee—  
With a love that the wingèd seraphs of Heaven  
Coveted her and me.

**3rd Stanza:** ‘Volta of Tragedy’ Tragedy, loss, hint of forbidden love, etc. This the most crucial stanza, where the main theme and twist of the whole poem is revealed. Like line nine in a Shakespearean sonnet, it is the Volta of the entire poem.

And this was the reason that, long ago,  
In this kingdom by the sea,  
A wind blew out of a cloud by night  
Chilling my Annabel Lee;  
So that her high-born kinsman came  
And bore her away from me,  
To shut her up in a sepulchre  
In this kingdom by the sea.

**4th Stanza:** ‘Seraphs II’ Adds a bit more descriptive information of Volta, and repeats stanza 2's theme.

The angels, not half so happy in Heaven,  
Went envying her and me:—  
Yes!—that was the reason (as all men know,  
In this kingdom by the sea)  
That the wind came out of a cloud by night,  
Chilling and killing my Annabel Lee.

**5th Stanza:** ‘The Eternal’ Speaks of the eternalness of love. Nothing can separate us from true love, not even death.

But our love it was stronger by far than the love  
Of those who were older than we—  
Of many far wiser than we—  
And neither the angels in Heaven above,  
Nor the demons down under the sea,  
Can ever dissever my soul from the soul  
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee:—

**6th Stanza:** ‘Dreams’ Otherworldliness looms ever so heavily in the conclusion. It is not a happy fairytale ending. The last line tells of seeing her in dreams, of her eyes, and of lying next to her. The final line ends with the sound of waves crashing.

For the moon never beams without bringing me dreams  
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;  
And the stars never rise but I see the bright eyes  
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;  
And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side

Of my darling—my darling—my life and my bride,  
In her sepulchre there by the sea—  
In her tomb by the side of the sea.

## Final Thoughts

Here are a few tips on writing a complex lyrical piece like Poe's:

- *Find inspiration for your poetry through real-life events*, even from your own life experience. Sometimes reality can be far more interesting to write about than fiction. However, don't be afraid to add a fantasy element to such stories, as poetry like this lends itself well to fantastical imagery.
- *Use alliteration techniques*, such as what Poe did in this poem, using the L sound more than any other throughout the entire poem.
- *Use repetition*. Poe used the phrase 'my darling' over and over again. Retelling helps to highlight an idea, create a very melodious feeling, and make your lines more memorable.
- *Experiment with anapestic feet*: Using two light stresses followed by hard stress creates a more melodic, waltz-like rhythm, ideal for lyrical verse. Poe was known to use a combination both iambic and anapestic feet in his poetry.

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1. Though some may read these feet on lines 15 and 25 as iambs, I highly disagree: since the words 'blew' and 'came' create a far too harsh sound to be considered a soft stress, and it comes at a specific moment in the story, the very death of Annabel Lee. Hence I labeled this foot a Spondee, even though 'blew' is somewhat a softer stress than 'out.' Spondees are rarely used in such melodically flowing poetry unless something of great import is trying to be conveyed by the poet. Spondees have a tendency to slow down a section of poetry for a dramatic and natural pause. Trochees have a similar effect as a spondee and it is interesting to note that the beginning of the next lines, 16 and 26 starts with the trochaic word chilling, thus enhancing further the stark feeling of great loss. ↩

2. Mentioned in note 1 above. ↩