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### Life through Bells

How can a poem that mentions bells 62 times NOT be about bells? Is this some kind sick joke that I'm not in on? Perhaps. Or maybe Edgar Allen Poe had a deeper meaning when he wrote the poem "The Bells." For my critical thinking essay, I decided to tackle one of Poe's longer works that on paper looks like nothing more than an ode to bells. Oh, how wrong I was. Poe conveys heavy symbolism and metaphors in this poem, as he uses the bells to represent different stages in one's life. In the next couple of pages, I will dig deeper into what Poe really was trying to say in "The Bells," and how he said it.

Before I look too deep into the poem, I believe it's important to take a look at the poet to get some preemptive insight. The author of "The Bells" is the world renowned poet, Edgar Allen Poe. The first thing that comes to mind when thinking of Poe is his dark style of poetry. Some of his most famous works such as "The Tell Tale Heart" and "The Raven," are dark masterpieces that paved the way for future horror writers. With this knowledge, I suspected that "The Bells" would be somewhat of a dark piece. That's why the first and second stanza's caught me off guard, although the conclusion would put my guess in the right.

The first stanza of "The Bells" paints a happy and joyous picture in your mind. Yes, believe it or not, Edgar Allen Poe creates quite the bright atmosphere. In this first stanza (as well as the ones that

follow) Poe uses a bell to convey the main theme. The bell mentioned in the first verse is a Silver bell. When the speaker states, "Hear the sledges with the bells-/ Silver Bells!"(1-2), we can infer that this is occurring during winter as sledges are British for sleighs, and Silver bells are a symbol around Christmas time. Poe displays the cheerful feel further in when the speaker comments on "What a world of merriment their melodies foretells" (3), when talking about the sound Silver bells make. He also adds to the atmosphere by describing the night sky as the heavens "twinkle with a crystalline delight" (8). The stanza then concludes with the music coming "From the bells, bells, bells, bells/ bells, bells, bells-"(12-13). Here Poe uses repetition to create onomatopoeia, as the bells ring over and over again. Now you're probably asking yourself, this all has to do with bells, right? Wrong. Poe foreshadows the aging process that will become more evident as the poem progresses. The key line that corresponds with the subject of aging is the mention of the bells "keeping time, time, time / in a sort of runic (mystical) rhyme" (9-10). This line could be interpreted in a number of ways, but it would make sense if the sounding of bells marked the passing of time. The first stanza is the shortest of the four and rhymes in a very choppy manner. It adds very little to my aging argument, but things will become to look clearer as the poem progresses.

It is in the second stanza that the broader picture begins to form. This verse is all about wedding bells or Golden bells. In a similar fashion of the first stanza, Poe repeats the third line loosely when stating "What a world of happiness their harmony foretells" (17), in reference to the Golden Bells. The second stanza is similar to the first in many ways. It keeps the cheerful and happy atmosphere going, but it has a more mature tone. No longer are the bells "tinkling" as in the first stanza, now the bells are "ringing" and seem "mellow." Another point that should be noted in this verse is when it's taking place. Most weddings are in the spring or summer and the mention of the "balmy air of night" gives us the impression that this is in the springtime. From winter to spring the seasons progress, as does that of man. One grows out of their childhood into a more mature lifestyle that this second stanza represents.

The third stanza of "The Bells" takes a 180 degree turn from the poem's beginning. It is now more than ever that you see the more familiar side of Poe. Now the bells, Brazen Bells (which can either mean they're made of Brass or they're bold), are now sounding the alarm for a fire. As in the first and second stanza, Poe yet again repeats the third line with a different emotion when he exclaims "what a tale of terror, now, their turbulency tells!" (38). The sounds of the bells aren't beautiful anymore as they "shriek...clash...roar..." and "scream." It seems that in the third stanza the bells are used more as a foreshadowing tool than anything else, as the bells ring in "mad expostulation" (protest) to the "deaf and frantic" (indifferent) fire. This can easily be interpreted as the fear of death as one grows older. As one would want nothing more than to live longer, yet the death (fire) can not be avoided. Another section that foreshadow is when the danger "ebbs," or declines, yet hearing the sound of the bells causes the danger to "sink and swell." This would be someone realizing that they aren't quite done yet, but deep down inside they know it's inevitable. This stanza of the poem is about as heavy as it gets when talking about metaphors and foreshadowing.

The final stanza of "The Bells" is easily the most dark and most descriptive of all the verses. The Bells mentioned in this stanza, are Iron bells. Poe keeps the third line formula going with "What a world of solemn thought their monody (monotone sound) compels" (72). Poe mentions numerous times throughout the fourth stanza how the bells have lost all song and are now monotone. The only words he uses to describe the monotone bells are "moans" and "sobbing." In the 79th and 80th line Poe mentions the "people" who "dwell in the steeple." These people would represent mourners at a funeral, in a church. In lines 88 and 89, it is revealed that the one who tolls the bells is the King of the Ghouls. He "dances" and "yells" and "his merry bosom swells" at the ringing of the bells. All these signs and symbols point to death, the ending of the life cycle. Poe goes full circle, all the way back to the first stanza, repeating the line of how the bells "keep time" in a "runic rhyme." This time though the bells aren't marking the youth of one, but the eternal demise into death. He finishes off the poem with yet another

repetition of the word bells, this time repeating it for an amazing 12 times. This creates, like the ones preceding it, onomatopoeia.

Now when looking back on "The Bells" it is easy to see how important symbolism and word choice effects your perception. If you were to read each stanza as an individual poem, you would get nothing from them other than the sounds of bells and the emotions they evoke. Yet when you put them together you get sort of a four piece puzzle, each adding on to the next and building to the end. One can go back and label each stanza with one or two words to emphasize the aging process. The first stanza represents youth: merry, happy, energetic, and innocent to the surrounding world. He cares very little for the future, thinking more for the moment. The second stanza represents adulthood. One goes out and gets married, still happy and optimistic, only lightly dwelling on the future. The third stanza represents old age. The fear of death begins to creep up on you, which is represented by fire in the poem. Even when the fear begins to die down, you know in the back of your head death is inevitable. The final stanza represents the final stage of life, death. Dreary, dark, and sad, as the people mourn your death and the ghouls take your soul. Throughout the poem Poe uses a few different elements of craft, in big ways. He uses symbolism and implied metaphors heavily throughout. The fire and the bells are the two glaring examples used in the poem. Also Poe uses great diction in each stanza. Without great word choice the metaphors that Poe hid throughout, would be extremely hard to find and interpret. Finally, Poe uses onomatopoeia almost non stop in "The Bells." The repetition of the word bells over and over, just pounds the sound of ringing bells into your head.

In conclusion, what looks like a lot of bells on paper is actually much much more. When you look deeper into Poe's "The Bells," you might just see your life passing you by. Hopefully, you're still in the second stanza.

Work Cited

Poe, Edgar Allen. "The Bells." 20 November 2007 <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-bells/>

## Appendix

## The Bells

By Edgar Allen Poe

- 1 Hear the sledges with the bells--
- 2 Silver bells--
- 3 What a world of merriment their melody foretells!
- 4 How they tinkle, tinkle, tinkle,
- 5 In the icy air of night!
- 6 While the stars that oversprinkle
- 7 All the heavens, seem to twinkle
- 8 With a crystalline delight;
- 9 Keeping time, time, time,
- 10 In a sort of Runic rhyme,
- 11 To the tintinnabulation that so musically wells
- 12 From the bells, bells, bells, bells,
- 13 Bells, bells, bells,--
- 14 From the jingling and the tinkling of the bells.
  
- 15 Hear the mellow wedding-bells,
- 16 Golden bells!
- 17 What a world of happiness their harmony foretells!
- 18 Through the balmy air of night
- 19 How they ring out their delight
- 20 From the molten-golden notes!
- 21 And all in tune,
- 22 What a liquid ditty floats
- 23 To the turtle-dove that listens, while she gloats
- 24 On the moon!
- 25 Oh, from out the sounding cells,
- 26 What a gust of euphony voluminously wells!
- 27 How it swells!
- 28 How it dwells
- 29 On the Future! how it tells
- 30 Of rapture that impels
- 31 To the swinging and the ringing
- 32 Of the bells, bells, bells--
- 33 Of the bells, bells, bells, bells,
- 34 Bells, bells, bells--
- 35 To the rhyming and the chiming of the bells!
  
- 36 Hear the loud alarum bells--
- 37 Brazen bells!
- 38 What a tale of terror, now, their turbulency tells!
- 39 In the startled ear of night
- 40 How they scream out their affright!
- 41 Too much horrified to speak,
- 42 They can only shriek, shriek,
- 43 Out of tune,
- 44 In a clamorous appealing to the mercy of the fire,

45 In a mad expostulation with the deaf and frantic fire  
46 Leaping higher, higher, higher  
47 With a desperate desire,  
48 And a resolute endeavor,  
49 Now--now to sit or never,  
50 By the side of the pale-faced moon.  
51 Oh, the bells, bells, bells!  
52 What a tale their terror tells  
53 Of despair!  
54 How they clang, and clash, and roar!  
55 What a horror they outpour  
56 On the bosom of the palpitating air!  
57 Yet the ear, it fully knows,  
58 By the twanging  
59 And the clanging,  
60 How the danger ebbs and flows;  
61 Yet the ear distinctly tells,  
62 In the jangling  
63 And the wrangling,  
64 How the danger sinks and swells,  
65 By the sinking of the swelling in the anger of the bells--  
66 Of the bells--  
67 Of the bells, bells, bells, bells,  
68 Bells, bells, bells,--  
69 In the clamor and the clangor of the bells!

70 Hear the tolling of the bells--  
71 Iron bells!  
72 What a world of solemn thought their monody compels!  
73 In a silence of the night  
74 How we shiver with affright  
75 At the melancholy menace of their tone!  
76 For every sound that floats  
77 From the rust within their throats,  
78 Is a groan:  
79 And the people--ah, the people--  
80 They that dwell up in the steeple,  
81 All alone,  
82 And who, tolling, tolling, tolling,  
83 In that muffled monotone,  
84 Feel a glory in so rolling  
85 On the human heart a stone--  
86 They are neither man nor woman--  
87 They are neither brute nor human--  
88 They are Ghouls!  
89 And their king it is who tolls;  
90 And he rolls, rolls, rolls, rolls,  
91 A paeon from the bells!  
92 And his merry bosom swells  
93 With the paeon of the bells!  
94 And he dances and he yells;  
95 Keeping time, time, time  
96 In a sort of Runic rhyme,  
97 To the paeon of the bells--

98 Of the bells;  
99 Keeping time, time, time,  
100 In a sort of Runic rhyme,  
101 To the throbbing of the bells--  
102 Of the bells, bells, bells,  
103 To the sobbing of the bells;  
104 Keeping time, time, time,  
105 As he knells, knells, knells,  
106 In a happy Runic rhyme,  
107 To the rolling of the bells,--  
108 Of the bells, bells, bells--  
109 To the tolling of the bells,  
110 Of the bells, bells, bells, bells,  
111 Bells, bells, bells,--  
112 To the moaning and the groaning of the bells.