The Raven Study Guide

The Raven by Edgar Allan Poe

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Contents

Introduction

"The .Raven" was first published in the New York *Evening Mirror* on January 29, 1845, and received popular and critical praise. Sources of 'The Raven" have been suggested, such as "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Barnaby Rudge* by Charles Dickens, and two poems, "To Allegra Florence" and "Isadore" by Thomas Holly Chivers. Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, "The Raven" has become one of America's most famous poems, partly as a result, of its easily remembered refrain, "Nevermore." The speaker, a man who pines for his deceased love, Lenore, has been visited by a talking bird who knows only the word, "Nevermore." The narrator feels so grieved over the loss of his love that he allows his imagination to transform the bird into a prophet bringing news that the lovers will "Nevermore" be reunited, not even in heaven. In "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe's own essay about "The Raven," he describes the poem as one that reveals the human penchant for "self-torture" as evidenced by the speaker's tendency to weigh himself down with grief.

In the essay Poe also discusses his method of composing "The Raven." He claims to have given much thought to his selection of the refrain, recognizing in it the "pivot upon which the whole structure might turn." His selection of the word "Nevermore" came after considering his need for a single, easily remembered word that would allow him to vary the meaning of the lines leading up to it. The poem uses this refrain, or variations of it, as the closing word for each stanza. The stanzas become increasingly dramatic as the speaker makes observations or asks questions that reveal his growing tension and diminishing reason. The narrator begins with innocent and amusing remarks that build in a steady crescendo to intense expressions of grief, all of which conclude with "Nevermore" or one of its variants.

Author Biography

Poe was born in Boston in 1809, the son of Elizabeth Arnold Poe and David Poe, both minor professional actors. Both his parents died before he was three years old, and he was subsequently raised in the home of Frances Keeling Valentine Allan and her husband John Allan, a prosperous exporter from Richmond, Virginia. As a youth, Poe attended the finest academies in Richmond, his step-father overseeing his education, and he entered the University of Virginia at Charlottesville in 1825. He distinguished himself academically at the University but was forced to leave due to inadequate financial support from his step-father. Poe returned to Richmond in 1827 but soon left for Boston. There he enlisted in the army and published his first collection of poetry, *Tamerlane, and Other Poems.* Poe was discharged from the army in 1829, the same year he published a second volume of verse. Neither of his first two collections attracted much attention. After briefly attending West Point, Poe went to New York City and soon after to Baltimore. He married his cousin Virginia Clemm in 1836 after receiving an editorship at *The Southern Literary Messenger* in Richmond. Poe thereafter received a degree of recognition, not only for his poetry and fiction, but as an exceptional literary critic. He also occasionally achieved popular success, especially following the publication of his poem 'The Raven."

Poe's wife Virginia died from tuberculosis in 1847. After a period in which he was involved in various romantic affairs, Poe planned to remarry, but in late September, 1849 he arrived in Baltimore for reasons unknown. In early October he was discovered nearly unconscious; he died on October 7, never regaining sufficient consciousness to relate the details of the final days of his life. Since his death Poe' s work has been variously, assessed, with critics disagreeing on its value. Today, however, Poe is acknowledged as a major literary figure, a master of Gothic atmosphere and interior monologue. His poems and stories have influenced the literary schools of Symbolism and Surrealism as well as the popular genres of detective and horror fiction.

Poem Text

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered,
weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of
forgotten lore
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there
came a tapping,
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my
chamber door
"Tis some visiter," I muttered, "tapping at my
chamber door
Only this and nothing more."
Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak
December;
And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost
upon the floor.
Eagerly I wished the morrow;-vainly I had sought
to borrow
From my books surcease of sorrow-sorrow for
the lost Lenore
For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels
name Lenore
Nameless *here* for evermore.
And the silken, sad, uncertain rustling of each
purple curtain
Thrilled me-filled me with fantastic terrors never
felt before;
So that now, to still the beating of my heart, I
stood repeating
"'Tis some visiter entreating entrance at my
chamber door
Some late visiter entreating entrance at my
chamber door;
This it is and nothing more."
Presently my soul grew stronger; hesitating then no
longer,
"Sir," said I, "or Madam, truly your forgiveness I
implore;
But the fact is I was napping, and so gently you
came rapping,
And so faintly you came tapping, tapping at my
chamber door,
That I scarce was sure I heard you"-here I
opened wide the door;

Darkness there and nothing more.
Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there
wondering, fearing,
Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared
to dream before;
But the silence was unbroken, and the stillness
gave no token,
And the only word there spoken was the whispered
word, "Lenore!"
This I whispered, and an echo murmured back the.
word, "Lenore!"
Merely this and nothing more.
Back into the chamber turning, all my soul within
me burning,
Soon again I heard a tapping somewhat louder than
before.
"Surely," said I, "surely that is something at my
window lattice;
Let me see, then, what thereat is and this mystery
explore
Let my heart be still a moment and this mystery
explore;
'Tis the wind and nothing more!"
Open here I flung the shutter, when, with many a .
flirt and flutter,
In there stepped a stately Raven of the saintly days
of yore;
Not the least obeisance made he; not a minute
stopped or stayed he;
But, with mien of lord or lady, perched above my
chamber door
Perched upon a bust of Pallas just above my
chamber door
Perched, and sat, and nothing more.
Then this ebony bird beguiling my sad fancy into
smiling,
By the grave and stem decorum of the countenance
it wore,
"Though thy crest be shorn and shaven, thou," I
said, "art sure no craven,
Ghastly grim and ancient Raven wandering from
the Nightly shore
Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night's
Plutonian shore!"
Quoth the Raven "Nevermore."
Much I marvelled this ungainly fowl to hear

discourse so plainly,
Though its answer little meaning-little relevancy bore;
For we cannot help agreeing that no living human being
Ever yet was blessed with seeing bird above his chamber door
Bird or beast upon the sculptured bust above his chamber door,
With such name as "Nevermore."
But the Raven, sitting lonely on the placid bust, spoke only
That one word, as if his soul in that one word he did outpour.
Nothing farther then he uttered-not a feather then he fluttered
Till I scarcely more than muttered "Other friends have flown before
On the morrow *he* will leave me, as my Hopes have flown before."
Then the bird said "Nevermore."
Startled at the stillness broken by reply so aptly spoken,
"Doubtless," said I, "what it utters is its only stock and store
Caught from some unhappy master whom unmerciful Disaster
Followed fast and followed faster till his songs one burden bore
Till the dirges of his Hope that melancholy burden bore
Of 'Never-nevermore.'"
But the Raven still beguiling my sad fancy into smiling,
Straight I wheeled a cushioned seat in front of bird, and bust and door;
Then, upon the velvet sinking, I betook myself to linking
Fancy unto fancy, thinking what this ominous bird of yore
What this grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird of yore
Meant in croaking "Nevermore."
Thus I sat engaged in guessing, but no syllable expressing
To the fowl whose fiery eyes now burned into my

bosom's core;
This and more I sat divining, with my head at ease reclining
On the cushion's velvet lining that the lamp-light gloated o'er,
But whose velvet-violet lining with the lamp-light gloating o'er,
She shall press, ah, nevermore'
Then, methought, the air grew denser, perfumed from an unseen censer
Swung by seraphim whose foot-falls tinkled on the tufted floor.
"Wretch," I cried, "thy God hath lent thee-by these angels he hath sent thee
Respite-respite and nepenthe from thy memories of Lenore;
Quaff, oh quaff this kind nepenthe and forget this lost Lenore!"
Quoth the Raven "Nevermore,"
"Prophet!" said I, "thing of evil '-prophet still, if bird or devil'
Whether Tempter sent, or whether tempest tossed thee here ashore,
Desolate yet all undaunted, on this desert land enchanted
On this home by Horror haunted-tell me truly, I implore
Is there-is there balm in Gilead'l-tell me-tell me, I implore!"
Quoth the Raven "Nevermore,"
"Prophet!" said I, "thing of evil!-prophet still, if bird or devil!
By that Heaven that bends above us-by that God we both adore
Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn,
It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore
Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore,"
Quoth the Raven "Nevermore,"
"Be that word our sign of parting, bird or fiend!" I shrieked, upstarting
"Get thee back into the tempest and the Night's Plutonian shore!
Leave no black plume as a token of that lie thy

soul hath spoken'
Leave my loneliness unbroken !--quit the bust
above my door!
Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy
form from off my door'"
Quoth the Raven "Nevermore,"
And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, *still* is
sitting
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber
door;
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon's
that is dreaming,
And the lamp-light o'er him streaming throws his
shadow on the floor;
And my soul from out that shadow that lies
floating on the floor
Shall be lifted-nevermore!

Plot Summary

Lines 1-2:

The opening lines identify the speaker as someone who feels tired and weak but is still awake in the middle of a gloomy night. He passes the time by reading a strange book of ancient knowledge. The first line of the poem contains alliteration of *w* in "while," "weak," and "weary" to produce the effect of unsteadiness. This line also sets the poem's rhythmical pattern and provides the first example of the use of internal rhyme in "dreary" and "weary."

Lines 3-6:

The speaker tells of becoming more tired and beginning to doze but being wakened by a sound that he assumes is a quiet knock. Internal rhymes of "napping," "tapping," and "rapping" along with repetition of these last two words, create a musical effect. This effect is also produced by alliteration of *n.* These sound devices and the steady rhythm of these lines are almost hypnotic. The use of "nothing more" is the first example of what will evolve into the refrain "Nevermore." In this first instance, the speaker presents the phrase in a low key, attached to his bland explanation that the tapping sound is "nothing more" than a late visitor knocking at his door.

Lines 7-12:

In this second stanza the narrator tells what he remembers about the setting and action at the time of the Raven's visit. It was December, the first month of winter and a time when the nights are longest, creating a mood of mystery. A fireplace had been lit, but now the fire was going out, and it cast an eerie glow. To set the mood, Poe uses mysterious and depressing words in these descriptions: "bleak," "dying," and "ghost." To escape his heavy mood, the speaker has been reading; he says it was a vain attempt to "borrow / From my books surcease of sorrow," that is, to find something in his books that would take his mind off the sadness he feels about his lost love, Lenore. He reveals that Lenore has died when he says that the angels call her by name. This time the word "evermore" is used in the refrain.

Lines 13-18:

The speaker tells that he was in a state of heightened sensibility because of his mood, the late hour, and the eerie setting. Reading ancient folklore, possibly of a supernatural nature, may also have added to his emotional state. The sound of the curtains as they move strikes his imagination wildly. Poe creates this sound by using onomatopoeia, or words that sound like what they describe ("rustling"), and alliteration, repeating *s* in line 13 and *f* in line 14. The speaker tries to calm down by telling himself twice that the

tapping noise (introduced in stanza one) is only the sound of a visitor knocking on his door and "nothing more." The refrain works here as it did in the first stanza, but now it has been attached to a more emotionally charged situation.

Lines 19-24:

The speaker overcomes his emotional state and rationally calls out to the supposed visitor. But when he opens the door he finds only "darkness there and nothing more." The refrain this time has been employed to create a sense of mystery that follows a moment of rational behavior, overshadowing it.

Lines 25-30:

The lover tells that he stood looking out of his door, transfixed by the "darkness," the "silence," and the "stillness" while his imagination increased. Finally he whispered the name of his deceased lover, "Lenore," and he heard it echoed in the night. An abundance of words that use the sound *d* produces an alliteration that suggests the strong, rhythmical heartbeat of an excited person. The refrain has now been used after a mysterious and also slightly frightening experience, the "nothing more" contradicting the speaker's agitated state.

Lines 31-36:

At this point the speaker has not completely regained his composure, as shown by the image of his "soul... burning." He returns to his room, but the tapping sound resumes, even louder, and the speaker determines this time to investigate the window as its source. The "nothing more" of the refrain again sounds of note of false confidence.

Lines 37-42:

The speaker finally reveals the source of the mysterious tapping noise-a bird. Upon opening the window, the speaker discovers a Raven who flies in and sits on top of the speaker's "bust of Pallas." Alliteration of *fl* creates the sound of wings flapping. The description of the Raven is of first importance in this stanza. The bird is "stately," reminding the speaker of ancient times, perhaps seeming to fly out of the books that the speaker tells of reading in stanza one. The Raven seems very purposeful, flying directly to perch on the high statue without regarding the narrator at all. Symbolism occurs in Poe's choice of "Pallas" as the Raven's perch. "Pallas" represents the Greek Goddess of Wisdom, sometimes known as "Pallas Athene," and so by placing the Raven above this bust Poe creates a situation in which wisdom has been placed underneath the Raven, a bird associated with death.

Lines 43-48:

The bird's dramatic presence strikes the lover so that he begins to forget his sadness. He finds humor in the situation, and in jest, begins to speak out loud, expressing his wonder about the Raven. He compares the bird to a lord whose "crest" (royal emblem) is missing. This comparison allows the reader to visualize the bird' s sleek head and also to associate the bird with a character of dignity. In the suggestion that the bird has come from the "Plutonian shore," Poe calls upon the myth of Pluto, the God of the Underworld, the land of the dead in Greek mythology. The Raven, therefore, may be thought of as a creature from the land of the dead.

In this stanza the refrain reaches its permanent form of "Nevermore," the answer given by the bird when spoken to regardless of what the narrator says. The predictability of this answer allows the reader to note the narrator's course of self-torture with each question that he asks, leading to a more distressing response as the poem progresses.

Lines 49-60:

The speaker tells of his amazement at the bird's appearance, its position on the bust, and its ability to speak. There is no indication that the lover truly believes the suggestions he made concerning the bird's origins (the "Plutonian shore" referred to in line 47); on the contrary, the speaker notes that the bird's reply was irrelevant, meaning it did not make sense. In the closing lines of the tenth stanza (lines 55-60) the speaker again makes an audible comment about the bird, and again the bird replies with the refrain. This time, though, as if the speaker had planned it, he has made a statement to which the response "Nevermore" makes sense. He has predicted the Raven's departure, and the Raven's response indicates that he will never depart.

Lines 61-72:

This time the speaker is "startled" in reaction to the Raven's answer because the speaker thinks it makes sense. Still using his reason rather than his emotions, the speaker rationalizes that the bird knows only this one word and has learned it by living with a person who himself used the word repeatedly in response to his own bad luck. With this explanation, the speaker feels amused, and he settles down on a comfortable chair to contemplate the Raven.

Lines 73-78:

In this, the thirteenth stanza, the speaker and the bird remain silent. A frightening image of the bird presents it with "fiery eyes" that "burned into" the speaker's heart. This description allows the reader to picture the Raven's red _yes and also associate the bird with evil. Poe reveals the narrator's silence in the phrase "no syllable expressing," a phrase that calls to mind the poem and its use of syllables and meter. The speaker's

silence is a brooding time during which his mind wanders away from the Raven and back to the sorrows of lost love. The speaker thinks of Lenore as he sits on a "violet" colored "velvet" chair on which the "lamp-light" flickers. Because Lenore used to sit in that romantic spot, the speaker now begins to think of her again.

Lines 79-84:

Once the thought of Lenore re-enters the speaker's mind, his imagination and emotions again became active. He imagines that he smells the incense of angels. Quite likely, the couch on which he sits has the lingering scent of Lenore's perfume from the times she sat there before her death, but this rational explanation does not occur to the speaker. He prefers to think of the scent as a gift from God, noticing it provides a soothing experience that may help him forget his sadness. He cries out to himself, calling himself "Wretch." By this he means that he has sunk to a wretched state of grief. But now he hopes that with the angels' help-a potion of forgetfulness known as nepenthe-he has a chance to rest from the grief, to forget Lenore. When he suggests this out loud, the Raven who has also almost been forgotten, reasserts his presence with his one word, "Nevermore." In the context of the lover's thoughts, the bird's statement means that the speaker will never have a moment's rest from the sadness he feels over Lenore's death.

Lines 85-90:

In reaction to the Raven's response in the preceding line (line 84) the speaker calls the bird a "Prophet," and because the prophecy foretells of more suffering for the speaker, he calls the bird "evil" and suggests that it may be a "devil." He does not know if the Raven is merely a bird seeking refuge after a "tempest" (storm) or if it is an evil being "sent" by the "Tempter," that is, the devil. The speaker notes that the bird remains "undaunted" even though it is "desolate" and it seems "enchanted" even though it is in this sad house referred to as a "desert land," a "home by Horror haunted." This manner of referring to the bird and the speaker's home reveals that the speaker is becoming more distraught and less reasonable. After making these statements about the Raven, the speaker continues speaking out loud by asking "is there balm in Gilead?" (Gilead was known in Biblical times for its healing plants), meaning will he ever find a remedy for his sorrow. As expected, the Raven answers "Nevermore," and the speaker will be thrown into a deeper frenzy of despair.

Lines 91-96:

Setting himself up for more disappointment, the speaker continues to address the bird. He repeats the first line of the previous stanza, an indication that more of the same type of exchange will continue. This time the speaker asks if he will be reunited with Lenore after he himself dies, in an afterlife he refers to as "the distant Aidenn." In Poe's "The Philosophy of Composition" he identifies the speaker as one who has a penchant for self-torture, and this question with its anticipated answer of "Nevermore" provides proof

of the speaker's character. In addition to the question itself, the speaker's description of himself as a "soul with sorrow laden" and his description of Lenore as a "sainted" and "rare and radiant maiden" reveal how low he places himself and how inaccessible and high he places Lenore in his memories of her.

Lines 97-102:

The speaker has lost his composure, as shown in the use of the word "shrieked." He yells to the Raven that it should leave and that it has spoken a lie. Note that the speaker's command for the Raven to depart-"leave loneliness unbroken"-could be interpreted to mean that he wishes to preserve his miserable state, another indication of his tendency to indulge in grief. The imagery used to describe the Raven continues to suggest its association with evil; the words, "fiend," "tempest," "night's Plutonian shore," "black plume," "lie," and the image of the Raven's "beak" in the narrator's "heart" re veal how scornful the narrator feels toward the bird. The bird does not literally have his beak in the lover's heart, for the Raven still remains on its perch above the door, but its utterance of "Nevermore" has wounded the lover emotionally.

Lines 103-108:

In this last stanza, the speaker describes his present situation. Until now, the poem has been a retelling of events that lead up to this stanza. Now the speaker reveals that the Raven remains in his room and that he, himself, remains despondent. Final associations of the bird with evil occur in the words "demon" and "shadow." The connection between the Raven's "shadow" and the speaker's "soul" in the last line of the poem suggests that the speaker believes himself to be cursed by the bird's presence. The symbolism of the physical location of the Raven, on top of the "pallid bust of Pallas" and above the "chamber door" must be noted. Since the bird has been associated with death and evil in the poem, his location suggests that these forces have overpowered wisdom, as represented by Pallas. The speaker can not escape his condition because his wisdom and its ability to produce rational behavior have been overpowered by his emotional response to Lenore's death. Since the symbolic Raven and bust of Pallas preside over the door, the entrance and exit to the speaker's "chamber" or residence, the speaker has no escape from the situation. One may note that the word "chamber" calls to mind the chambers of the heart, the legendary residence of emotional love. So the speaker, it seems, will never emerge above his de pression over the loss of his love, Lenore; his ability to be reasonable will always be overshadowed by his thoughts of Lenore's death. His "soul" will "nevermore" feel happiness.

Themes

Alienation and Loneliness

Near the end of this poem, when the fear of the poem's speaker has reached a level of near hysteria, he shouts "Leave my loneliness unbroken!" In one sense, this could just be an emotional outburst, like the lines that lead up to it, but the interesting thing about this particular line is that the speaker, in his terror, is for once reflecting upon himself. This, and the line's location at the climax of the poem, indicates to us that "my loneliness" is not just another expression that he shrieks: it is the key, the secret that he has been trying to guard all along. Throughout the poem, we see the speaker being drawn out of his isolation by the raven and the one word that it speaks. Once the bird enters his chambers, nothing really changes in the scene except the speaker's attitude, which grows increasingly nervous. And what is it that he fears? He says he fears that the bird is a messenger from hell and that it knows secrets of the afterlife that it will not give up, but the reader can see that these increasingly wild ideas are the result, not the cause, of his panic. It is just after he says that he wants to retain his loneliness that the pressure that had been mounting is finally relieved. The following stanza is mournful and eerie, but it lacks the fevered pitch that had been growing throughout the poem.

Usually, loneliness is considered such an unpleasant feeling that we could not expect someone to panic over the thought of losing it. In this case, we can assume that the speaker had such great love for Lenore that he prefers loneliness to the pain of being reminded of her. We can see this in the way her memory increases throughout the poem at the same time that the speaker is losing his composure, as if it takes concentration and control to suppress the thought of her. The strongest indication that he would rather be lonely than think of her comes in the second stanza, before the raven has arrived, when the speaker still has control of his thoughts (as best as he ever does): he introduces Lenore as "Nameless *here* for evermore."

Death

This poem is not a meditation on death or a philosophical examination of how death affects the lives of those left behind in this world, but death is a crucial part of its existence. In order to establish the proper extreme of grief in the poem's speaker, he needs to be absolutely drained of any hope of seeing her again. Only death could provide such an absolute. As a plot device, this works fine, because the reader is assured that there is no way they could ever be reunited. The poem's weakness, though, is that the bald fact of death is not used to generate any new understanding. Grief is an honest, basic response to death, but Poe does not take it anywhere. The speaker does not think about his own death or life, nor about what his time with Lenore was like or whether her life was full and significant in the short time she did have: he just grieves and grieves and grieves. The reader would be right to question whether this is a realistic response to death, and whether in real life people do respond to death with

such perpetual and chronic sorrow. It is a characteristic of Romanticism, the literary movement that Poe is associated with, to stretch a human emotion beyond the shape that we are familiar with in real life: beauties are stunning and unforgettable beauties, suffering is agony, and grief is uncontrollable. Death is one of the few things that cannot be fixed or reversed, and the enormity of it is therefore entirely appropriate for the exaggerated emotions in Poe's work.

Supernatural

Literally, the supernatural world is not just the collection of strange things that we usually associate with it. It is a part of the world we live in that goes unrecognized by the five senses and is beyond the natural world that we experience (the prefix "super-" means "beyond"). This sense of the word is particular significant while analyzing this poem because it is based on the mixture of mind, nature, and supernatural. The raven is a dark, scary bird, but it is, after all, a natural object, and its behavior is completely natural: it beats against the shutters, and then, when it enters the room, flies up to perch on the highest object in the room, as birds usually do. The one place where the raven crosses the line between natural and supernatural is in being able to speak a word that a human is able to understand. "Nevermore" is so close to the raven's natural cry, though, and so close to what was in the mind of the poem's speaker just before he heard it, that it seems likely that his mind twisted the bird's natural sound into a word. From this beginning, we can examine all of the supernatural elements in this poem and question whether they are the cause of the speaker's terror or are caused by it, and in each case we find that devils, phantom fragrances, and soul-sucking shadows are only supernatural because he calls them supernatural. The question of the supernatural does not end here, however; this just broadens the scope. Poe clearly intends us to believe that the supernatural is fueled by the mind of the speaker, but that does not necessarily make it unreal. If the speaker's terror is real, does it matter whether the Tempter that caused it takes up physical space or exists only in his mind? To us who live in the real world, it might be a comfort to know that the demons live only in his mind, but in this poem, with its subjective point of view and no evidence except what one man sees, there is no difference between the natural and the supernatural.

Style

The poem is comprised of eighteen stanzas of six lines each, and most frequently employs a meter known as trochaic octameter, which refers to a line containing eight trochees-pairs of stressed and unstressed syllables. The first five lines of each stanza are all in trochaic octameter, with the final unstressed syllable missing in lines two, four, and five of each stanza. The sixth line of each stanza consists of three trochees and an extra final stressed syllable. An example of the fifth and sixth lines from the last stanza shows this pattern:

And my / soul from / out that / shadow / that lies /
floating / on the / floor
Shall be / lifted- / never / more!

Poe achieves variety in this rhythm by adding pauses, and he keeps the sound from becoming monotonous by making much use of consonance and assonance, or repetition of consonant and vowel sounds, respectively. In addition, Poe's use of a regular rhyme scheme in which every stanza uses words that rhyme with "more" to conclude the second, fourth, fifth and sixth lines creates a very strong unifying effect for the poem. In his "The Philosophy of Composition, "Poe states that he consciously chose the *or* sound because of its "sonorous" quality. He also uses internal rhyme in lines one and three, rhyming the fourth and last trochees of the lines, and repeating the rhyme of the third line in the fourth trochee of line four. Thus the final word of every line has either an end rhyme or an internal rhyme.

Historical Context

It is always profitable to read about Poe's life while reading his works because a clear line can be drawn from the events in his life, through his particular phobias and obsessions, and straight to the disturbing, supernatural poems and tales that he wrote. Some of the facts of his life are obscure to us today because the man he chose to be his literary executor and biographer, Rufus Griswold, is known to have hated Poe, and he made up malicious facts in his "official" biography after he died. We do know that Poe's parents were actors; his mother was quite famous and his father a law student who joined the acting troupe when he married her. Poe was born in 1809 when they were playing the Boston Theatre. Some sources say that his parents had two more children and some say that his father deserted the family a year after Edgar's birth, but it is agreed that by the time he was three, his father had left and his mother, coughing up blood, died before the child's eyes. He was taken in by a wealthy couple in Virginia, John and Frances Allan, who raised him like a son. In 1824 he and Mr. Allan had a falling out: some sources portray Mr. Allan as stingy and others accept him as being rightly fed up with the huge amounts of money Poe had wasted drinking and gambling while away at the University of Virginia. Poe went away to the army, disowned and written out of Allan's will, and soon after his discharge, Mrs. Allan died of consumption, the same disease that had killed his natural mother. He had been rejected by both of his fathers, and both of his mothers had died the same way.

Living in Baltimore with his blood relatives, the Poem, he fell in love with his first cousin, Virginia Clemm. He was twenty-six, and she was at least a decade younger. He began a series of jobs and literary attempts, travelling from city to city with his bride and aunt/mother-in-law. In Richmond he edited the *Southern Literary Messenger* for two years, but was fired for excessive drunkenness; in New York in 1837 and Philadelphia in 1838 he sold some fiction to make ends meet. In 1839 he coedited *Burton's Gentlemen's Magazine,* was fired for drinking, then was hired for *Graham's* by the same publisher who had just fired him. In 1842 Virginia suffered a burst blood vessel in her throat, and was incapacitated for five years before she died. Although it was not the same disease that had killed his mother and stepmother, the similarity was still there. Poe continued to get and lose jobs. In 1845, publication of "The Raven" in *The American Review* made him an instant sensation, and, with his profits from speaking engagements and his next book, he was able to buy the magazine that he worked for, *The Broadway Journal.* True to Poe's luck, it went bankrupt the next year. Virginia's death was two years after "The Raven" was published, but that didn't stop some critics from guessing that she was the model for Lenore. After she died, Poe quit drinking but continued moving from place to place, possibly affected by a brain lesion. He became paranoid and worried that assassins were following him. On Election Day, October 3rd, 1849, he was found in a gutter in Baltimore, muttering deliriously. Different accounts say that he was drunk, on drugs, or had suffered a stroke. One of the most charming versions of his death comes from the *American Catholic Quarterly Review* of October 1891 : "[S]ome political agents who were on the lookout for voters perceived him, and in a spirit of thorough ruffianism seized and drugged the unfortunate poet. They then made

him record his vote in several different polling booths, treating him with such violence that he died from its effects..."

Critical Overview

'The Raven" met with high critical acclaim upon its first appearance and subsequent publications during Poe's life. Between 1845 and 1849 several critics called it the best American poem ever written. One overwhelmingly positive commentary by John Moncure Daniel appeared in an 1849 *Richmond Examiner* article a month before Poe's death. Daniel praises the poem's "strange, beautiful and fantastic imagery, "its "grave and supernatural tone," and its "musicality" with the verses "winding convoluted about like the mazes of some complicated overture by Beethoven"; he calls it a "superior ... work of *pure art."*

For all hIS genius, Poe made a major error In naming Rufus Wilmot Griswold as the executor of his literary estate. In his biographical analyses of Poe's work, Griswold created the image of the author as a victim of opium and alcohol abuse and of extreme personal sorrow. A onetime friend of Poe, Griswold published reviews-sometimes under a pseudonym-after the poet's death when he could not defend himself. Certainly this presentation of Poe captured the interest of a public thirsty for sensationalism, but it tainted his character and made him more interesting to the public as a tragic figure than as a writer. Of "The Raven," Griswold wrote in 1849, almost immediately after Poe's death, that it is "a reflection and an echo of his own history. He was that bird's 'unhappy master whom unmerciful Disaster / Followed fast and followed faster till his songs one burden bore- / Till the dirges of his Hope that melancholy burden bore / Of Never-never more'."

Griswold's statement led, over the years, to the misconception that the poem tells ofPoe's own sorrows, of his own grief at the loss of his young wife, Virginia Clemm Poe. Virginia, however, died in 1847, two years after the first publication of "The Raven."

Modem critics focus more on the poem's construction than did Griswold. Poet W. H. Auden, for instance, observes in his 1950 work *Forewords and Afterwords* that while the form of "The Raven" is excellent, it does not necessarily complement Poe's subject; he concludes that the poem is "faulty" because "the thematic interest and the prosodic interest, both of which are considerable, do not combine and are even often at odds." Floyd Stovall, in *Edgar Poe the Poet,* states that "The Raven" reveals a tragic "certainty as the poem progresses [to reveal] that there is no life after death." He values the poem for its poetic technique but does not see in it an ability to deeply move the reader: "Its composition was the performance of a virtuoso," he states; "its appeal is therefore more to the intellect than to the feelings." The irony here is that in "The Philosophy of Composition" Poe states that the aim of a poem is the "elevation of *soul* not of intellect."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

B. J. Bolden is an Assistant Professor of English at Chicago State University, Chicago, IL. She is *the managing editor of* Warp land: A Journal of Black Literature and ideas *at Chicago State University and the author of* Urban Rage in Bronzeville: Social Commentary in the Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks, 1945-1960. *In the following essay, Bolden analyzes how "The Raven" showcases Poe's talent "as both storyteller and poet."*

Edgar Allen Poe was virtually ignored by his contemporaries until the publication of "The Raven" in 1845. The poem enjoyed the status of being an overnight sensation for its popular appeal, while simultaneously stirring the simmering caldron of critical controversy. Interestingly, Poe's early reputation in America rested on his bitingly aggressive and self-serving critical reviews and his gruesome fictional tales, while his reputation abroad was built almost entirely on his poetry. Although "The Raven" won Poe instant celebrity status from a broad audience, many of Poe's critical peers did not judge the poem solely on its textual merits. Instead they elected to assess "The Raven" on the basis of Poe's reputation for public drunkenness and literary feuds, in addition to his contrived craftsmanship and the thematic and structural resemblances in the poem to earlier works, like Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," Charles Dickens's "Barnaby Rudge," and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner."

"The Raven" combines Poe's literary talents as both storyteller and poet. The narrator of the poem is a young male student who is grieving over the death of his beloved Lenore but who wrestles with the thought of divesting himself of her pre2ious memory, even at the expense of his own sanity. Thus, immediately, sadness and sorrow emerge as the ruling motifs of the chilling and chaotic tale, fashioned into a lOS-line, IS-verse poem. The poem is comprised of a two-part structure. In the first half of the poem, stanzas one through nine, the *young* lover wrestles with his anguish by immersing himself in studious pursuits. But by stanza ten, and throughout the remainder of the poem, he yields to the emotional trauma of his loss and slips into the abyss of madness.

The poem opens with an overwhelming sense of melancholy as the morose young man and first person narrator is poised at the threshold of memory. As he sits before a fireplace of "dying ember[s] on "a midnight dreary" in "bleak December," the *young* man's ambivalence fills the air with the tension of past and present. In a half stupor, napping and dreaming, he pores "Over many a quaint and 2urious volume of forgotten lore," while longing for his lost and beloved companion Lenore.

The landscape of the tale quickly broadens with fear and uncertainty as the young man's sad reverie is abruptly interrupted by what he believes to be someone insistently tapping at his chamber joor. Though he assumes "Tis some visitor" at the joor, he is thrilled at the thought that his beloved Lenore might have returned to him. The sound of "the silken, sad, uncertain rustling of each purple 2urtain," amplifies his anticipation as

he decides to _xplore the mysterious tapping, but to no avail. No one is at the door. Momentarily he settles himself by claiming" 'Tis the wind and nothing more!"

However, fueled by desperation, he continues to explore the mysterious sound. He flings open the window shutter to find a magnificent bird of ill-omen, "a stately raven of the saintly days of yore" who, uncharacteristically, steps into his room and with an air of condescension, symbolically perches lip high on a bust of Pallas Athena, the goddess of wisdom. Lured by the serious demeanor of the mysterious ebony bird, the young man decides to play along with what he deems to be the raven's mischievous tactics and asks his "lordly name." Unpre pared for an articulate response, the young man is stunned when the raven responds: "Nevermore." A dramatic turn occurs at this point as the raven, rather than the young man, assumes a command position.

Though logic tells the young man that the raven's "Nevermore" is merely a rote response, he is beyond reason. Having experienced a turbulent shift in his emotions, from dreamy melancholy to irrational hope, by the second half of the poem, the young man is precariously perched on the brink of insanity. As though the raven can divine the source of the young man's grief over the lost Lenore and the desperate hope that he will once again "clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore-," the raven continues to utter only the solitary word "Nevermore." The young man's spirit sags over the finality of Lenore's death, yet he proceeds to indulge in sweet torture by his rhetorical interrogation of the stoic raven, as if his desperate questioning keeps her precious memories alive.

Ironically the raven continues to hold a position of prominence over the young man. It is empowered physically by the lofty perch it assumes on the bust above the young man's head and psychologically by the power of its senseless response, which sends the emotionally worn, weak, and weary young man from a delicate state of sanity, spinning toward the realms of madness. Because he needs to cling to the memories of his lost Lenore, the young man experiences inner turmoil as he tries to face the thought of life without her. Finally, he chooses the torture of past memories over the pain of present emptiness.

Edgar Allen Poe succeeded in his goal of writing a poetic tale that would win popular approval from a broad audience and critical acclaim from his literary peers. Not only is his theme of love and loss emotionally engaging in the empathy it elicits from readers, it also produces a chilling fascination in the self-knowledge the young man gains as he enters a world reordered by the profound terror of his mind. Though Poe was not original in his theme, he was quite unique in the way he structured the poem and cunning in the way he calculated its effects. His distinction is that he achieved stunning originality by fashioning rhyme, meter, and rhythm into a unique stanzaic combination and poetic structure. Although several of his critics accused him of plagiarism, Poe actually used the traditional tenets of prosody, the same theory and principles of versification that define rhythm, meter, and stanza, and rhyme of poets like Barrett Browning, Dickens, and Coleridge. William Butler Yeats was a poet and literary peer who denounced Poe's achievement and wrote: "Analyse 'The Raven' and you find that its subject is a commonplace and its execution a rhythmical trick. Its rhythm never lives

for a moment, never once moves with an emotional life. The whole thing seems to me insincere and vulgar." And T. S. Eliot commented in a November 1948 lecture: "An irresponsibility towards the meaning of words is not infrequent with Poe Several words in the poem seem to be inserted either merely to fill out the line to the required measure or for the sake of rhyme." But more favorable critical assessments of "The Raven" have continued to lift to poem beyond the grasp of critical strangulation. In his 1992 work, biographer Jeffrey Meyers recalled the sensation the poem created in 1848: "Surpassing the popularity of any previous American poem, 'The Raven' was reprinted throughout the country and inspired a great number of imitations and parodies."

In "The Raven," Poe displays technical craftsmanship as he creates a contrived ambiguity amid highly visible rhetorical strategies, such as alliteration, playful internal rhyme, varied meter, and inconsistent medial caesuras. Given the probing quality of Poe's mind and his penchant for analytical assessments of literature, he needed to explain his own poetic vision and prosodic methodology. In his 1846 essay "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe eagerly discusses the origins of "The Raven" and readily acknowledges that the poem was a contrived experiment. His goal was to achieve "novel effects," and he succeeded in that goal.

In the first and third lines of each stanza, Poe often employs internal rhyme, like the "parting," "upstarting," "token," "spoken," "flitting," "sitting," "seeming," and "dreaming" in the final two stanzas of the poem, and he often inserts a break in the line (a caesura), to gain diversity of rhythmical effect and connect what could be two separate lines. End rhyme is also a consistent feature in the poem and is visible in lines two and four, like "shore," "door," and "floor" above. In his end rhyme, Poe captures the rhythmic quality and richness of "the long "0" and rolling "R" that contribute to the hypnotic effects of the refrain "Nevermore," which is subtly varied in each verse. As a complement to these strategies, Poe intensifies the novel effects of language by employing rhetorical strategies like the repetition of initial consonants and similar vowel sounds in the alliteration of "weak and weary" in stanza one and the "flirt and flutter" of stanza seven. The repetition of polyptoton, or words in close proximity that stem from the same root, is evident in "dreaming dreams ... dream" of stanza five and 'Tempter... tempest" of stanza fifteen.

In addition to the rhetorical strategies evident in "The Raven," and to his goals related to tone, symbol, beauty, and suspense, Poe had specific intentions regarding the metrical structure or prosody of the poem. In "The Philosophy of Composition," he defines his calculated approach for ingenious versification:

Of course, I pretend to no originality in either the rhythm or metre of the "Raven." The former is trochaic-the latter is octameter acatalectic, alternating with heptameter catalectic repeated in the refrain of the fifth verse, and terminating with tetrameter catalectic. Less pedantically the feet employed throughout (trochees) consist of a long syllable followed by a short: the first line of the stanza consists of eight of these feet-the second of seven and a half (in effect two-thirds)-the third of eight-the fourth of seven and a half---the fifth the same-the sixth three and a half.

Simply put, the sing-song, rocking horse rhythms produced by the trochaic meter can be seen in the opening line where each of the eight feet (octameter) contains an accented and an unaccented syllable: "Once up / on a / midnight! dreary, / while 1/ pondered / weak and / weary."

It is clear that Poe accomplished both his dramatic and metrical goals in composing a highly original stanzaic arrangement in "The Raven." Counter to the charges of triviality leveled at him by his contemporaries, Poe emerged as the strongest single poetic influence born out of pre-Civil War America. He not only addressed the central question of nineteenth-century romantic symbolism, that of reality over illusion or the power of the imagination, he transported Romantic symbolism to new heights. The reality of Edgar Allan Poe as poet is that the critical recognition of the poem's technical merits has increased over time, and the poem has outlived its most harsh critics.

Source: B. J. Bolden, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

Dana Gioia is a poet and critic. His books include The Gods of Winter, 1991, *and* Can Poetry Matter? *Gioia notes that "The Raven, " at one time deemed "the most popular lyric poem in the work," has nonetheless been repeatedly maligned by leading critics. In the following essay, Gioia attempts to explain the poem's universal and timeless appeal.*

From the moment of its first publication in the New York *Evening Mirror* on January 29, 1845, "The Raven" has been a famous poem. It caused an immediate national sensation and was widely reprinted, discussed, parodied, and performedcatapulting its penurious and dejected thirty-sixyear-old author into celebrity. The poem was soon translated into many European languages, most notably by the French Symbolist poet Stephane Mallarme, who insisted on using prose because French could not recreate the original's verbal magic. By 1885 one American critic could plausibly call Poe' s work "the most popular lyric poem in the world." Even today, 'The Raven" still remains one of the few poems millions of Americans can quote from memory. Despite the poem's enduring fame and extraordinary influence, however, leading critics have rarely found much to say in its favor. They have objected to its gothic atmosphere, ornate musicality, horror-tale narrative, and even its meter. And yet, a century and a half after its first appearance, the poem survives with its popularity undiminished.

What is the secret of 'The Raven's" uniquely powerful appeal? The question may be unanswerable in any final sense, but we can begin to understand the poem's strange authority by isolating at least four key elements: its compelling narrative structure, darkly evocative atmosphere, hypnotic verbal music, and archetypal symbolism. Although none of these elements was original to "The Raven," their masterful combination created a strikingly original and singularly arresting poem.

The key to understanding "The Raven" is to read it as a narrative poem. It is a narrative of haunting lyricality, to be sure, but its central impulse is to tell a memorable story. The hypnotic swing of the trochaic meter, the insistent chime of the internal rhymes, and its unforgettable refrain of "Nevermore" provide each stanza with a song-like intensity, but the poem's structure remains undeviatingly narrative. Stanza by stanza, "The Raven" moves sequentially through the situation it describes. Any reader familiar with short stories like "The Tell-Tale Heart" or "The Fall of the House of Usher" will recognize Poe's innovative narrative method. By imbuing a simple, linear story with brooding atmosphere of intricately arranged details, Poe perfected a style that allowed every moment to reinforce the tale's ultimate effect.

The time and setting of "The Raven" are as much a part of the story as the actions that take place. (In Poe's work the physical setting often re flects the inner personality or emotion of the central character.) The poem begins at midnight in December-the last moment of a spent day in the final month of the year. Internally and externally, it is a time of death and decay. Even the "dying" fireplace embers reflect the moribund atmosphere. The setting is contained and claustrophobic-a single room. The narrator himself mirrors the time and locale. "Weak and weary," he seems trapped in his richly

furnished prison. He hopes for the morning-the return of light and life-but tonight all he can do is brood on his dead love, "the lost Lenore," and feel the tangible horror of his current situation.

The story that now unfolds is simple, terrifying, and tragic. The narrator hears a mysterious tapping at his chamber door. He thinks at first it is a late night visitor, but opening the door, he finds only "Darkness there, and nothing more." (This initial glimpse into black nothingness will prove prophetic of his ultimate fate.) Half afraid, half wishful, the speaker whispers the name of his dead lover. Irrationally he hopes the visitor is her ghost. There comes no reply, however, except the echo of his own voice. Soon the tapping resumes-now at his window. Opening the shutter, he finds a Raven. (Poe capitalizes the bird to suggest it is no ordinary raven.) The bird flutters in and immediately perches on the bust of Pallas Athena, the classical goddess of wisdom.

By now Poe has already established the basic symbolic framework of the poem, which-characteristically for him-is both structurally simple and elaborately detailed. "The Raven" divides its characters and imagery into two conflicting worlds of light and darkness. Virtually every detail in the poem reflects one world or the other. Lenore, who is repeatedly described as "radiant" epitomizes the world of light-along with angels she has now joined. Other images of light include the white bust of Pallas and the lamplight that illumines the speaker's chamber, his haven from the outer darkness. The Raven, however, represents the seemingly larger and more powerful forces of darkness on this black December midnight. His shadow, the final image of the poem, demonstrates his power to darken the weak and dying light of the speaker's refuge. The ebony bird's ironic perch on the bust of Pallas also underscores the inability of reason and learning (further symbolized by the narrator's unconsoling books) to combat the powers of blackness and despair. The contrasting worlds of light and darkness gradually acquire additional symbolic resonances: they also represent life and death-the speaker's vain hope of an afterlife with Lenore and the terrifying vision of eternal nothingness.

The movement of "The Raven's" plot reinforces the poem's essentially symbolic nature, and all of Poe' s idiosyncratic linguistic genius endows the story with supernatural significance. The narrative situation is, of course, not implausible in strictly naturalistic terms. The speaker may simply have encountered an escaped pet whose previous owner had taught the bird to repeat the word "nevermore." Poe's language, however, gradually convinces us that a purely rational explanation will not suffice, however neatly it fits the external facts. The conflicting worlds of light and darkness suggest their transcendent counterparts-heaven and hell. In contrast to the heavenly and angelic Lenore, the Raven is repeatedly and explicitly characterized in demonic terms. This imperious and implacable visitor has come from the land of death, "the Night's Plutonian shore." He seems-at least to the agitated narrator-a devil sent to claim the speaker for the underworld. The speaker's dawning awareness of his hellish doom is reflected in the poem's changing refrain, which begins as "nothing more" and "evermore," but darkens once the bird speaks his prophetic "nevermore." By the poem's last line, the narrator has accepted the bird's dire prophecy. Echoing his shadowy tormentor, he declares his soul "Shall be lifted-nevermore!"

Indeed, the conclusion of "The Raven" stands as one of the most harrowing moments in American poetry-a vision of psychological, emotional, and spiritual paralysis and despair. The gothic decor and high rhetoric do not disguise the emotional authenticity of the final tableau. As Baudelaire, Verlaine, Mallarme, and the other Symbolists understood, "The Raven" is the signature work of *un poete maudit,* "a cursed poet." They honored Poe as a brilliant artist who was destroyed by his very gifts of heightened perception. Like its author, the poem's protagonist is an aesthete and intellectual whose mental gifts provide no protection against tragedy. The depth of his love for the lost Lenore only makes his suffering more intense and enduring.

"The Raven" has a singular claim in nineteenth-century American literary history. Poe left a detailed (if also often unconvincing) account of the poem's genesis. Elated by its trans-Atlantic acclaim, Poe published "The Philosophy of Composition" in April of 1846, which purports to "explain step by step" the process by which he wrote "The Raven." Inspiration or chance, Poe claimed, played no part in the poem's composition. "The Raven" emerged from a deliberate and conscious process that progressed "with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem." Hardly anyone has taken Poe's rational view of poetic composition at face value, but psychological critics have justifiably viewed its arguments as a classic case of compensation. An obsessive and emotionally wounded poet, Poe preferred to present himself as controlled, deliberate, and logical. Even if we accept the basic premise of Poe's claim that he created the poem systematically from abstract goals, we are entitled to comment that only an author full of raging emotions would insist on the necessity for such complete artistic control.

"The Raven" is not a tragedy in the conventional sense, but the drama of the poem possesses a genuinely tragic element. The speaker does not turn away from the horrifying void. He tries to act reasonably in a situation where reason provides no defense. Even if the protagonist does not rise fully to the heroic demands of tragedy by struggling against his fate, neither does he try to escape it. He steadfastly faces his tormentor, a demonic emblem (to quote Poe's own italicized description from "The Philosophy of Composition") of *"Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance."* Trapped and doomed, the protagonist nonetheless articulates what it is like to endure the limits of psychological suffering. Whether Poe himself fully shared those agonies we cannot say, but however rational the composition of "The Raven" truly was, the wellsprings of human pain and loss feeding it were vastly deep and authentic. As Walt Whitman wrote of his own work, "Who touches this touches a man." Few poems have touched so many readers so deeply as "The Raven."

Source: Dana Gioia, in an essay for *Poetry for Students,* Gale, 1997.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Smith credits the popularity of what he terms a bad poem to its universal message concerning the alienation of the individual in American society.

"The Raven," unequivocally the most famous of Poe's small body of poetry, may be among our most famous *bad* poems. Americans are fond of saying we do not read and do not care for poetry. It may be so. Yet Americans commonly recognize Poe's bird as subject of a poem by a weird guy who drank himself to death. Written and published in 1845, in print steadily for 148 years, the stanzas of "The Raven" are sonic flashcards. We may not know Whitman, Dickinson, Frost, or Eliot. But we do know Poe. We know 'The Raven."

A poem that might have been designed by Benjamin Franklin, "The Raven" purports to be explained by Poe's "Philosophy of Composition." Poe wrote his essay for crowds smitten by his bird. Interestingly, he does not justify poetry with morality, as Emerson and Whitman would. He pretends to expose the poet's trade. Some recent criticism has seen "The Raven" as a parody of Romantic poems of personal discovery. Perhaps, What Poe leaves unsaid peels, layer by layer, toward two questions answerable only by speculation. The first asks why "The Raven" has for fifteen generations commanded the imaginations of people who have often enough known it to be a bad poem. The second question asks if Poe is a Southern writer. They are related questions.

That "The Raven" is a bad poem is unacceptable to many readers, and Poe people are not swayed much by rational argument. Were they, the plot alone would convict Poe. A man sits late in a storm; he laments a lost lady love; a bird not ordinarily abroad at night, and especially not in severe weather, seeks entrance to the human dwelling; admitted, the bird betrays no fright, no panic, its attitude entirely focused on its host-an invited guest; the bird, then, enters into a ventriloquial dialectic with the host and is domesticated to become an inner voice; we might say it is the voice of the *inner ground* as opposed to *underground,* which word means much to the American spirit with its reasons to run, to hide, to contain itself. Action then ceases.

Poe knew this one-man backlot production for the smoker it was. His embrace of gothic machinery includes a terrified, obsessed man, an inhospitable, allegorical midnight in December, a "gifted" animal, extreme emotional states, heavy breathing of both cadence and melodramatic signifers *(grim, gaunt),* the supernatural presence of inexplicables (perfume, Pallas, bird), all to portray a psychic battle in the mind. Poe assembles a version of saloon theater for the mind's ear. But his poem's form emerges from the unbuckled ways of the ode, the loosened metrics of which Poe knew in the work of Keats, Shelley, Coleridge, and Wordsworth. Poe's editorial slush pile was full of their imitators. Odes attracted people because, as Gilbert Highet has said, they "soar and dive and veer as the wind catches their wing." The capacity for passion, personal experience, ambitious public utterance, and a celebrative finish defines the ode. The boosterism, self-infatuation, and lyceum podiums of nineteenth-century America made Poe and the ode a natural match....

Poe was attracted to the ode because, as English Romantics had used it, a classical rigor was maintained while a daring shift had begun which would result in lyric, singular, interior expression....

That the language strategies Poe employs, largely yoked under the braided tropes of reiteration and interrogation, are distantly related to the Pindaric tradition of triadic movement which desires aesthetic completion as well as to the Horatian tradition of monody seems obvious enough....

Poe wanted a rhythmic trance he felt was conducive to an impression of beauty but wanted the trance to dispossess the reader from tranquil stability. He relies on the catalectic, or broken pattern, a missing syllable that "bumps" our progression. Poe exploits a ballad half-line, with its comfortable lyric expectations, its mnemonic power, and its narrative momentum to tell a virtually plotless story, a story entirely interior and psychological. He has telescoped the ballad line into the ode's stanzaic regularity, controlling tropes, public address, and mixed dictions to accomplish what appears a personal complaint, not the ode's meditational tone for imponderables such as art, beauty, life, and death. The tale served by his machinery is the dispossessing myth of lost love, which Poe routinely furnishes with classical allusions to establish eternal resonance.

Our affection for Poe's bird must be, in some measure, due to his adaptations, clunky and juryrigged as they appear. Poe thought his work daring, and it is, in the presentation of the nightmare of absent consolation, or belonging-to. "The Raven" reverberates not with the usual flight-to-vision, return-enlightened celebration, but with the pyschic thrill of confronting despair, isolation, and the utter futility of lovely words. The nightmare vision made the poem an allegory of the darkest self in terror....

Poe finds himself alone in the time and season of human intercourse at its lowest ebb; a time, indeed, when we remind ourselves that we had better change our ways, or else-as Dickens' Scrooge learns. A knock at his door should bring Poe a human visitor, if any, an emissary from the community; yet there is darkness, and then the Raven, the predator. And a predator who seems to know Poe is doomed to an absence of civil intercourse, a silence, and words which echo without effect. Poe understands and declares that even the bird will leave him, as all others have done, as hope has done. With this, Poe's poem has arrived at nightmare, the living isolation from fellowship that popular horror movies have turned into the ghoulish marches of the living dead. If Poe's bird seems deadly, the incantatory rhythms which evoked the birdspell are the forbidding stanzas which clank forth and enchant us as if the bird were enacting some chthonic ritual. The bird, in fact, makes no move after arrival. It does not threaten, seems entirely content, is a creature not unfamiliar to odes. Yet how different from, say, a nightingale so sweetly caged by a form which for Poe permits the witness to come close to his creature and yet keep safe, a glimpsed but not engaged threat. Still, having summoned the raven, Poe cannot so easily deny or repress it: he tells us the bird sits in the forever of that last stanza, a curse neither expiated nor escaped....

This is a basic country-western song and it sells more than we may want to think about. Yet few country-western songs last in admiration or consciousness as "The Raven" does. Poe's addition of the nearly voiceless but intimidating bird employs Gothic machinery to touch unresolved fears of what's under the bed or behind the door. But Poe's bird has the power of knowledge-it knows *us* and this makes the world a more slippery place than we had thought. It exposes our inside. That is a problem for Poe, and for all of us, because he knows that the inside without connection to an outside is an emptiness, a desert. No self can supply love's support, community sustenance, or the hope we once drew from an outside system. Poe's terrible fable sticks with us because no matter what our intellects concei ve, our hearts believe we are alien, each of us, and there is a god-bird that knows it, too....

Poe loved women who died, often violently, diseased. His mother went first; he was two and an orphan. He was taken in and raised as ward of John Allan and his wife Frances, a sickly woman who would die on him, but first there would be Jane Stanard, on whom he had a fourteen-year-old's crush. She was thirty-one when she died insane. Poe suffered the death of three women before he finished being a moody teenaged boy....

Poe felt he had second-class treatment from his foster family. He felt himself orphaned. At eighteen he went to the University of Virginia, where he was undercapitalized and made to feel his inferior circumstance. He was pushed outside that society, too. Returned to Richmond, he found himself an outsider, and he embarked on one of his secret journeys. Wandering, turning up, writing, editing, trying to establish a domestic community, then wandering off-this was the pattern of Poe's life. In every relationship and in every circumstance, he was the outsider, the orphan....

He was an artist, a truth-teller-nothing is more obsessive in his tales than that need. His truth was a nightmare.

If we read "The Raven," despite its absence of specific local details, as an "awareness" of the life of America in 1845, we see that Poe has conjectured the nightmare of the individual cut off from history, abandoned by family, place, and community love....

This story is still the nightmare. Having seen it, Poe celebrates the sensibility or imagination that suffers and knows simultaneously, ultimately the figure of the artist. This figure will sit in the lost garden, knowing its lostness, without explanation, but aware that the change is hopeless and continuous. This poem will, in its late variations, become our outlaw song of the renegade, the cowboy in black, the rebel without a cause. 'The Raven" is the drama of nightmare awakening in the American poetic consciousness where there is no history which is not dispossession, little reality to the American promise, and nothing of consequence to place trust in except the song, the ode of celebration "The Raven" is the croaking and anguished nightmare ode of allegiance, and we have been finding ourselves in it ever since Poe began hearing "Nevermore."

Source: Dave Smith, "Edgar Allan Poe and the Nightmare Ode," in *Southern Humanities Review,* Vol. 29, No. I, Winter, 1995, pp. 4-10.

Adaptations

An audio cassette titled "The Poetry of Edgar Allan Poe" was released in 1996 by Dove Audio.

"The Poetry of Edgar Allan Poe" is available from Audiobooks on both an audio cassette and compact disc.

Topics for Further Study

Write a short story in which a person who is under some emotional stress-grief, depression, heartache, etc.-cannot get rid of a bird or animal. How does this bird or animal come to be identified with the person's problem?

Do you think this bird really said "Nevermore," or was it the speaker's imagination?

Compare and Contrast

1845: Henry David Thoreau took up residence at Walden Pond outside of Concord, Massachusetts. Thoreau's book about the experience has become a classic of American literature, urging people to look at nature to understand the universe.

Today: Most of what students know about the American philosophical movement known as "Transcendentalism" comes from reading Thoreau's *Walden.*

1845: Margaret Fuller published *Women in the Nineteenth Century.* A former editor of the *Dial,* Fuller urged women to be more independent: "That her hand may be given with dignity, she must be able to stand alone."

1920: After more than 50 years of struggle, women won the right to vote with the passage of the 19th amendment.

1982: The Equal Rights Amendment, which passed the Senate ten years earlier, failed to be ratified by enough states to make it law. The Amendment would have prevented the restriction of any citizen's rights on account of their gender.

Today: Women's average salaries are significantly smaller than men's.

1845: The telegraph was first put into use between Washington and Baltimore. Once its success was established, the problem was financing the system of wires that could transport messages.

1876: Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone.

1895: Gugliemo Marconi invented the "wireless telegraph," which led to the radio.

1924: The first iconoscope was developed, using principles that were developed into the television.

Today: A growing number of U.S. households transmit ideas through the Internet.

What Do I Read Next?

The most complete and authoritative collection of Poe's works is the one put out by the Library of America. Their *Edgar Allan Poe: Poetry and Tales* was published in 1984.

Because Poe's life was so fascinating and so telling about his work, students often are interested in reading more about him. The 1992 biography *Edgar Allan Poe: His Life and Legacy* by Jeffrey Myers tells as much as anybody knows about Poe today.

Shirley Jackson is an American author best known for her short story "The Lottery," but many critics believe that her best work was *The Haunting,* a novel that, like this poem, explores the line between the imagination and the supernatural.

Further Study

"Edgar Allan Poe," in *American Catholic Quarterly Review,*

Vol. 16, No. 64, October 1891, pp. 818-33.

The version of Poe's life that is related in this source appears to be tainted by the misinformation that was spread by Poe's biographer Rufus Griswold. It is es pecially unusual that this source portrays Poe's stepfather, John Allan, as a patient, suffering benefactor, although most other sources paint Allan as a grim tyrant.

Suchard, Alan, *American Poetry: The Puritans Through*

Walt Whitman, Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988.

Suchard devotes an entire chapter of his book to Poe, giving an in-depth analysis of the man and comparing his style to other poets of the time.

Waggoner, Hyatt H., *American Poetry: From The Puritans to the Present,* revised edition, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984.

Applying the standards of what a poem can teach its readers, Waggoner determines that Poe was a "minor poet." With that established, he goes on to examine a small handful of poems by Poe that he thinks will be effective throughout time. "The Raven" is not one of them.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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