

Explicating Poe's Raven From a Psycho-Linguistic Perspective

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Abstract

This article aims at explicating Poe's Raven using a psycho-linguistic perspective. This study is a serious attempt to delve into the psyche of Poe as an extremely important 19th century American poet, who may rightfully be considered as "America's Shakespeare". The critical analysis of this poem relies primarily on an approach that combines psychology and linguistics in the explication process. It takes in consideration the psychological and emotional state of Poe as well as the linguistic style employed in the poem. The study shows how the reader's reception and response to the poem could easily change after considering the psycho-linguistic factors present in the poem. Specifically, the Raven appears to symbolize loneliness, sadness, and the feeling of going insane coupled with a sense of uncertainty even about one's own self. This is clearly illustrated by the ability to hear sounds and experience smells without being able to deal with one's own thoughts, which inevitably amounts to nothing less than self-torture. Poe's own personal state of mind and psychological conditions seem to have helped him in composing this poem. Upon first reading of the poem, the reader may initially feel a sense of fear. However, the reader could upon subsequent readings arrive at a better understanding of the semantic connotations of the poem. A close and careful psycho-linguistic explication of *The Raven* helps the reader explore the deep and figurative layers of meaning contained within the lines of verse. The more we understand Poe's psyche; the better interpretation we will have of the poem itself. This could result in a substantial change on the part of the reader regarding his or her own feelings about the poem. Subsequently, feelings of loneliness and fear could easily turn into feelings of enjoyment of the poem and all that it represents. This clearly shows that the application of the

psychological approach of literary criticism along with the linguistic discourse analysis help the reader delve into the denotative and figurative meanings and subsequently appreciate the poem and accept it at its own merits. It is certainly hoped that this study will make a substantial contribution to the already existing body of literature attempting to figure out the numerous layers of meaning embedded within the lines of this monumental poem.

Key words: Poe; Raven; Psycho-linguistics; Discourse; Critical

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INTRODUCTION

It may be fair to suggest that Edgar Allan Poe very well deserves to be paid even more attention in the field of literary criticism than is currently the case. This claim can be substantiated by the incredible contribution made by Poe to 19th century American literature. The significant impact of Poe's literary works in various genres made him well-qualified to be called "America's Shakespeare" as claimed by Poe's museum located in Richmond, Virginia. It suggests that "Edgar Allan Poe created or mastered the short story, detective fiction, science fiction, lyric poetry and the horror story. His dark genius has invited children and adults to read and love literature for over 150 years" (2013, para.1). This genius is undoubtedly clear in Poe's poetic masterpiece "The Raven" which is unquestionably Poe's most famous poem. After its publication, it became so well known that its refrain "nevermore" became a catchphrase repeated by people on the street.

The *Raven* remains Poe's best-known and probably most widely taught or recited poem today. This is partly

because in his *Philosophy of Composition* (1846), Poe describes what he claims was the method by which he composed the poem. Whether or not that description is an accurate account of how the work was composed, it is surely a description of how Poe wished the poem to be read. Thus, Poe himself was the first, and is perhaps still the best, critic and interpreter of his own poem. However, this does not by any mean suggest that no further attempts should be made to explicate and interpret this monumental poetic work to uncover the multiple layers of meaning hidden within its lines of verse.

Based on Poe's own declaration as clearly stated in his *Philosophy of Composition*, he wished to create an effect of beauty associated with melancholy in the poem. Furthermore, he decided that the refrain "nevermore," uttered to a young man whose mistress has recently died, was perfectly calculated to achieve that effect. According to Poe himself, the basic situation, the central character, and the plot were all created as a pretext or excuse for setting up the "nevermore" refrain, to be repeated with a variation in meaning and impact each time (Kellman, 2006).

The poem features a mysterious bird that speaks but one word, in ominous tones, to a grief-stricken young man mourning the death of his young lady love. "The Raven" captured international attention for Poe upon its publication in *The Raven and Other Poems* in 1845 and became one of the most famous American poems ever composed. Many readers know the novels of Dickens, but few may know that he and Poe were personally acquainted. Edgar Allan Poe was an admirer of Dickens's works since—strongly recommending—Dickens's works to American readers in a June 1836 review from the *Southern Literary Messenger* (p.427). Moreover, in an 1839 issue of *Burton's Magazine*, Poe wrote, "Charles Dickens is no ordinary man, and his writings must unquestionably live" (p.330).

Three years later, during Dickens's 1842 tour of the United States, he met Poe in Philadelphia. Though we do not know exactly what was said during their conversation, we can assume Dickens agreed to help Poe find publishers for his work in England. There is no evidence Dickens told Poe about the death of his pet Raven Grip, but, by the time of their meeting, Poe had already read Dickens's novel *Barnaby Rudge*, which features a talking raven.

Today, three letters from Dickens to Poe survive as evidence of the meeting of Poe and Dickens (Poe Museum, 2012, para.2).

Some literary critics pointed to the fact that in his review of Dicken's *Barnaby Rudge* (Poe, 1841) said: "The Raven in this novel, too, intensely amusing as it is, might have been made, more than we now see it, a portion of the conception of the fantastic Barnaby. Its croakings might have been prophetically heard in the course of the drama" (p.290). So, it seems clear that Poe was influenced by Dickens and the idea of using the Raven in his poem.

1. PURPOSE

The purpose of this paper is to delve into Poe's Raven from a Psycho-Linguistic perspective. This paper will provide the reader with a critical literary analysis with special attention paid to psychological as well as linguistic issues that may be interpreted from the poem.

2. TEXT

The Raven

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 visitor," 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 named 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 visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door,
Some late visitor 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 mortals 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 thence 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 ebon bird beguiling all my fancy into smiling
By the grave and stern 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 marveled 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 further 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 all my 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'.

This 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?—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 in parting, bird or fiend," I shrieked, up-
starting:
"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 lamplight 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'!

3. VITAL INFORMATION

Since the primary goal of this paper is to explicate The Raven applying a psycho-linguistic approach, knowledge about Poe's personal life becomes extremely significant as illustrated below:

Poet and writer of tales, was born in Boston, Massachusetts, where his parents, who were both actors, were temporarily living. He was left as an orphan in early childhood in destitute circumstances, but was adopted by Mr. Allan of Richmond, Virginia, who treated him with great indulgence. In 1815, he accompanied them to England, where they remained for five years, and where he received a good education, which was continued upon their return to America at the University of Virginia. He distinguished himself as a student, but got deeply into debt with gaming, which led to his removal. In 1829, he proposed to enter the army, and was placed at the Military Academy at West Point. There, however, he grossly neglected his duties, and fell into the habits of intemperance which proved the ruin of his life, and was dismissed in 1831. He then returned to the house of his benefactor, but his conduct was so objectionable as to lead to a rupture. In 1834, Mr. Allan died without making any provision for Poe, and the latter, being now thrown on his own resources, took to literature as a profession, and became a contributor to various periodicals. In 1836, he entered into a marriage with his cousin Virginia Clemm, a very young girl, who continued devotedly attached to him notwithstanding his many aberrations, until her death in 1847. In 1845, his famous poem, *The Raven*, came out. The death of his wife gave a severe shock to his constitution, and a violent drinking bout on a visit to Baltimore led to his death from brain fever in the hospital there (Cousin, 2009, p.5).

The personal data regarding Poe's life and all that he endured during his short-lived life plays a crucial role in our attempt to understand and appreciate his poetry including *The Raven*, the subject of this article.

4. EXPLICATION

For the reader to be able to delve into the psyche of Poe in an attempt to understand how that impacts the interpretation of the poem, it is tremendously important to explicate the sequence of events contained within the poem. We can ascertain that:

The Raven, as a poem, represents two primary components namely: The narrator, a young man whose grief over the loss of his love, "Lenore," is palpable from the poem's opening lines, and the raven, whose sudden and foreboding presence evokes a succession of emotions from the narrator, from curiosity and mild amusement at the bird's first laconic responses to anger and despair at the realization that his beloved Lenore is now lost forever. Each stanza ends with a rhythmic refrain of "nothing more"—a benign assessment by the narrator that there are reasonable explanations for the strange occurrences of the evening—and progresses to the repetitious and increasingly ominous response of 'Nevermore!' from the otherwise silent bird. The intensity of emotion rises with each refrain, culminating in the narrator's own tortured admission that "nevermore" can he be free of the shadow of grief and sorrow brought by the night's unwelcome visitor. The physical setting of the poem—a dark, December night in a library-like room—as well as repeated references to classical statuary, velvet cushions, rustling draperies, and the rapid beating of one's heart in response to fear of the unknown, are all familiar motifs in Poe's fiction and poetry, as is the archetype of the "anonymous young man" mourning the death of a beautiful young woman (Jackson, 2013, para.2).

The obviously painful death of Poe's wife impacted him tremendously in terms of his psyche and actual daily life. This is clearly present in his poem reflected primarily by the language and images he successfully employed.

5. THEMES AND DICTION

Upon a close critical reading of *The Raven*, the reader can identify several themes embedded within the lines of verse, including the tragic death of his wife, a beautiful woman at a young age, and the grief of the bereft young man whose affection for his lost love transcends the physical boundaries of death and life. The motif of the "devil-beast" as the harbinger of misery and sorrow, found here in the form of the raven, is another theme common to the creative works of Poe. In "The Raven," the ebony bird stands as the embodiment of grief caused by loneliness and separation, referencing not only Poe's fascination with the imagery of young lovers separated from one another by death, but also the pain he experienced at a very young age with the untimely death of his mother. Yet, another theme—one's helplessness upon being visited by a ghostly presence—pervades "The Raven." Later critics, including Betsy Erkkila (2001), have also examined motifs in the poem—especially the virginal, alabaster-

skinned woman idealized in death and the sinister black creature who appears in the dark of night—from the perspective of race and class issues in the United States during the generations preceding the Civil War.

It is probably safe to claim here that the inclusion of these primary themes in this popular poem coupled with the feelings of sadness and sorrow are what dictated and controlled the linguistic style and diction used in the poem to achieve the most effective impact on the mind and heart of the reader.

6. THE RAVEN IN CRITICISM

Although "The Raven" has become one of the best known, most read, and most frequently parodied poems of American literature, it has not enjoyed uniformly generous critical acclaim throughout its history. Upon its publication, the poem generated excitement among readers on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean for its dramatic imagery, emotional intensity, and metrical cadences. Contemporary literary critics (Andres & Benešová, 2012), (Barbarese, 2004), and (Giammarco, 2013) for example, focused attention instead on technical concerns of verse, such as parallelism, internal rhyme, and what were termed inconsistencies or absurdities in Poe's imagery, including his reference to angelic creatures whose "foot-falls tinkled on the tufted floor." Critics of his day also speculated somewhat unkindly on the inspiration and genesis of the poem, focusing their attention on the works of others from whom Poe was accused of lifting ideas and images—most notably the Charles Dickens novel *Barnaby Rudge*, which featured a talking raven. Poe's subsequent attempt to explain the origin and creation of the poem, as recorded in his essay, *The Philosophy of Composition* (1846), is also a favorite subject of critical attention, both in his days and in the generations to come.

"The Raven" continues to be examined by scholars and literary theorists. Many seek to add nuances of interpretation to an already sizable body of analysis and critical commentary. Others study "The Raven" to discern its influence on subsequent literary movements and theories, including Surrealism and rationalism, as well as its impact on literary culture throughout the world. Regardless of the literary merits or faults ascribed to the poem or to the poet himself, "The Raven" is generally accepted as one of Poe's most characteristic works in theme, tone, and execution, and Poe is highly regarded for his inspired, original imagination and deft command of language. (Sisler, 2004, para.5)

7. A PSYCHO-LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

It is quite normal for readers of *The Raven* to derive different meanings from the poem. This usually depends on the person's own ability to analyze and appreciate poetry. An in-depth reading and analysis of the poem inevitably takes the reader beyond the surface meaning to Poe's inner self, which is crucial to the understanding of the poem.

This poem is about Poe's mind breaking down after losing his mother and on the verge of losing his love. *The Raven* isn't just one thing; it is a combination of several subjects in Poe's mind. It may very well be that "Nevermore" is Poe's mind trying to deal with mortality as a whole not just himself or his loved ones, that he will never see them again. Poe's is at the least slightly depressed and unsure of his reality in this poem, and lets make it clear that anything you write has your traits and shows if only a fraction of your mind state and personality. The similar sounds throughout this poem may not just be because it is a poem but rather for the intensity it provides and adding to the thrill of the poem, giving us ups and downs in both emotions and sense of time. (ChaCha, 2011, para.1)

The Raven, back then was a mythical creature, the bust of Pallas is very important. It is known as the Goddess of Wisdom. But when the Raven spoke "Nevermore", the narrator knew the Raven isn't speaking from wisdom. This poem is difficult and requires one to know the biographical and historical background of Poe and his period respectively. I believe that this poem by Edgar Allan Poe is a definite expression of his mind going while trying to deal with the death of his mom, and his wife's death to come. The Raven seems to be a potential covering for death, because it knocks on his door and he allows it in, symbolizing he is allowing it to enter his life. When he is talking to it he is trying to come to terms with death. By the end of the poem, it seems that even though Poe cannot escape from it and that it will always haunt him forever.

As many people have referenced, the actual Raven is a reference to death and almost a grim reaper. Many cultures believe that having a black bird in your house is an omen of death, and since this is a British tradition and Poe did receive a part of his education in England, he would most likely have known this reference. Poe was fascinated by death, since he lost some many loved ones, particularly women, when he was young. Not only does Poe make a point of saying that the Raven instantly perched on the bust, but he also mentions he never moves from it, obviously this is significant. Poe will never get over Lenore's death and that will never be reunited with her again hangs over him and oppresses him all of his life.

This poem is truly timeless and beautiful; Poe is alone in his chamber door's wallowing in the agony of the death of his loved one Lenore. He is going through old books perhaps photos mourning the death of his love. For Poe, Lenore is nothing short of an angel the Heavens created-a unique, perfect beautiful being. He really appreciated her existence.

CONCLUSION

Poe was an intellectual poet. He was a man of great imagination and was not afraid to express his dark thoughts. This made him an influential writer during the Gothic period (Harrington, 2003). He survived and still does in the minds and hearts of his admirers and fellow

writers. The poem is based on a feeling we all have when we lose something or someone that means a lot to us, and the Raven represents the harsh reality of what we can never recreate...that our beloved it's "Nevermore". This is a great emotionally moving poem which makes the reader feel freaky, scary, and weird. The various sections of the poem represent different levels of feelings and actions in the psychology of the poet including napping, thinking of Lenore, and disturbed because this Raven is "haunting" him. Through repetition of "Nevermore", the poet experiences an internal psychological conflict and begins to question himself. The part of the poem that seems to be most striking in this regard is:

/Deep into the 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 echo
murmured back the word, "Lenore!"/.

This part is so strong and charged with deep emotions and feelings. The element of darkness and stillness and the sense of thinking you are alone were you are not seem to represent the most common feeling in the entire poem. The word "Nevermore" does not seem to have a precise meaning in the poem which in turn drives the poet insane. He asks the Raven many questions, but the only answer he receives is the meaningless word "nevermore". The Raven appears to symbolize loneliness, sadness, and the feeling of going insane coupled with a sense of uncertainty even about one's own self. This is clearly illustrated by the ability to hear sounds and experience smells without being able to deal with your own thoughts, which inevitably amounts to nothing less than self-torture. Poe's own personal state of mind and psychological conditions seem to have helped him in composing this poem. Upon first reading of the poem, the reader may initially feel a sense of fear. However, the reader could upon subsequent readings arrive at a better understanding of the semantic connotations of the poem. A close and careful psycho-linguistic explication of *The Raven* helps the reader explore the deep and figurative layers of meaning contained within the lines of verse. The more we understand Poe's psyche; the better interpretation we will have of the poem itself. This could result in a substantial change on the part of the reader regarding his or her own feelings about the poem. Subsequently, feelings of loneliness and fear could easily turn into feelings of enjoyment of the poem and all that it represents. This clearly shows that the application of the psychological approach of literary criticism along with the linguistic analysis help the reader delve into the denotative and figurative meanings and subsequently appreciate the poem and accept it at its own merits.

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