

Revisiting Poe's "The Raven": A Reader's Analytic Guide

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Introduction

We all are—or in previous generations, we all were—familiar with “The Raven.” For many of us, it was the first lengthy poem that we learned and the one that we remembered most lastingly. Typically, in the anthologies in which we first read the poem, there was an accompanying illustration of a room in which an ominous black bird perched. Unfortunately, that illustration—which (or the equivalent of which) our teachers and their teachers (and our parents and their parents) also saw when they read and studied the poem—may have led us all astray in our understanding of the poem. Even though familiarity in this instance did not breed contempt, it bred an unquestioning acquiescence to a comfortable but unexamined reading of the poem.

It is time to approach “The Raven” anew, not as a familiar this time, but rather as a stranger, encountering its words as if for the first time.

Before one looks at those words, however, it would be well to state the formal characteristics of the poem.¹ It consists of eighteen stanzas, each stanza a sestet (six-line unit). The first five lines of each stanza are octameter, while the sixth line is trimeter. The meter is trochaic, with variations throughout, most commonly a final foot amphimacer. The two most frequent metric feet that vary from the trochaic are the amphimacer and the dactyl, both of which may be seen as having a trochaic thrust since their first two syllables are stressed-unstressed. Therefore, the overwhelming pulse or beat of the poem is trochaic. Since the trochee is the reverse of the iamb, whose rhythm is closest to the usual flow of natural conversation, the trochee would be the meter of choice for a poem that is meant, in some sense, to convey an anti-natural, unnatural, or paranatural feeling.

¹ Too often in analyses of poetry, the “business” of poetry is given short shrift.

In addition, a lengthy octameter line invites the kind of internal rhyme that pervades the poem and creates an echo effect that contributes to the circumambient eeriness that the reader (or hearer) feels. In particular, the first and third lines of each stanza have an internal rhyme, but other lines do as well. Part of this cavernous echo-filled emptiness is the frequent repetition of words and the pervasive alliteration.

Finally, the second, fourth, fifth, and sixth lines of each stanza rhyme, and the final word of the fourth and fifth lines of each stanza is the same.

In short, the formal characteristics of the poem are employed to create a verbally paranatural environment filled with rebounding sounds. This suggests that the narrator is fearful and apprehensive, even a bit skittish, perhaps paranoid enough to project his anxiety into and onto the circumambient milieu.

¶1

The narrative is richly allusive (another echo effect) from the very beginning. The unidentified narrator² opens with a variation of the typical fairy tale opening (“once upon a time”): “midnight dreary” replaces “time.” The allusion allows the narrator to establish the tone of a fable, but the variation allows him to give it a more specific focus: midnight is a specific time and dreariness is a specific characterization of that time. In addition, the “once” characterizes the narration as a distant memory, now echoing back to the narrator’s consciousness over an unspecified abyss of time.

The time of night is late. The speaker is awake, but tired and dozing from a day spent studying and thinking. He has been reading volumes of ancient learning. Since he is reading in the deepest dark of night, one knows immediately—even before it is mentioned—that there is a lit lamp in the room.

The speaker tells himself that he hears a tapping that he believes to be a knocking at his door.

¶2

That perceived tapping jars the narrator’s memory, so that he can place the time of night in the time of year at which he recalls it to have occurred. He specifies that what he now recalls occurred in “the bleak December.” The narrator pointedly uses the

² One should never assume that the speaker of a poem is the author.

definite article rather than an indefinite article, i.e., he uses the phrase “the bleak December” rather than “a bleak December.” This makes the article feel like a demonstrative. Such a usage suggests that the remembered December was exceptional in its raw inhospitability as compared to all other milder and friendlier Decembers.

There is a paradoxical character to this act of remembering, as is indicated by the “Ah, distinctly” opening of the stanza. The “Ah” suggests that an effort is required to call this memory back, yet once it is back, the memory is sharp (distinct).

The narrator takes it for granted that the reader will assume that the wintry bleakness requires a fire for warmth, so he omits mentioning the fire in its full unitary blaze. Instead, he speaks directly of the fire in terms of its “dying” partitive embers. He calls the shadow cast by the ebbing fire “its ghost.” Such language of ghostly-tinged, fiery mortality suggests that the speaker’s mind is imbued with thoughts of death that he projects onto his environment. In addition, the death/ghost yoke prepares the reader for the narrator’s making explicit (10-12) that he is in mourning for Lenore.

In addition, he reveals that his reading of “forgotten lore” has not been an activity of disinterested scholarship, but rather it has been a search for comfort and consolation to ease the pain of the loss of the “maiden whom the angels name Lenore.” The way he phrases this indicates that his reading has not achieved its desired end of turning him away from his departed beloved because the last two syllables of the phrase “forgotten lore” (“-en lore”) are an anagram of her name.

Furthermore, that the angels name her Lenore suggests both her heavenly (angelic) beauty and her having died (being in conversation with the angels).³

¶3

The narrator now recalls the sound of the movement of the window curtains. The quadruple sibilance of “silken, sad, ununcertain ruustling” makes the reader too hear the “rustling.” That sound frightens the narrator by suggesting, presumably, a ghostly (“fantastic”) presence in his chamber. Therefore, he begins talking to himself in order to quiet his fears, telling himself that the presence that he senses is actually a corporeal “visitor” who is the source of the perceived knocking on his door.

³ One might observe parenthetically that the name “Lenore” is a variant form of “Eleanor,” which in turn is a variant form of “Helen.”

¶4

This leads him to approach the door and talk to the presumed visitor standing and knocking on the other side. He apologizes for the sleepiness that delayed his coming to the door to admit the visitor.

Then he opens the door to admit the visitor. However, no one is there, only “Darkness there and nothing more.”

¶5

The narrator looks out into the darkness, and the repetition of the word “darkness” echoes the last line of the fourth stanza and closely interlinks the fourth and fifth stanzas (an interlinking that is strengthened when the five “d” sounds of the last two lines of stanza four are echoed in the nine “d” sounds of the first two lines of stanza five).

The narrator is perplexed (“wondering...Doubting”). He is filled with terror (“fearing”). He imagines inhuman/non-human visions, presumably paranoid suspicions that the darkness contains an invisible and unspeaking ghostly presence. In short, when he opens the door, he finds a pervasively silent darkness.

However, the “unbroken” silence is broken by a “whispered word,” the name “Lenore.” The way that this is mentioned initially—with the passive voice—makes one think for a moment that the source of the spoken word/name is outside the door. It is not until the next line that the import of its being interrogative is manifested. The narrator reveals that he is the one who whispered the word. Its interrogative tone indicates that he is speaking to the being whom he assumes to have knocked at his door, saying in effect, “Is it you, Lenore?” The only response is the echo of his own voice repeating the single word/name.

Since the narrator’s speech so far has had a series of echo-like effects, initially one takes the echo, of which he speaks, to be a genuine echo. However, if one thinks about the physical surroundings and the word’s being merely whispered, one realizes that an actual echo is unlikely. Therefore, one is driven to conclude that the echo is not an actual natural echo, but rather it must be “nothing more” than a phantasmagoric echo in the narrator’s mind.

¶6

The narrator turns back into his chamber, his soul afire, presumably both with ardor for Lenore and with fear at the prospect of her ghost's possible manifestation.

He tries to calm himself by formulating for himself a naturalistic explanation of what he has experienced: what he has heard is a trick of the wind gusting against his shutter to cause an apparent knocking and an illusion of a spoken word. This solves the mystery.

Or does it?

¶7

He opens the window shutter to eliminate the whistling of the wind caused by the shutter's being slightly ajar. When he does, into his chamber comes a comical raven, acting like a snobbish aristocrat. Displaying a laughable aloofness, the bird perches on a bust of Athena ("Pallas") that must sit on a shelf above his chamber door.

The comedy is heightened by the strong contrast between the whiteness of a bust and the blackness of a raven. In addition, the playful pun of "Pallas" and "palace" suggests that the raven has taken the narrator's chamber to be its own royal residence.

Athena, whose commonest epithet is "Pallas," was the ancient Greek goddess of wisdom, and her presence in the chamber makes her seem to be the patroness of the "forgotten lore" over which the narrator has been poring. Furthermore, one could suggest that the raven, which has long been a symbol of secret knowledge, is laughably arrogating godhood to itself.

¶8

The narrator smiles at the comical arrogance of the bird. Then he too becomes part of the unfolding comedy by actually speaking to the bird as if it is not a beast, but a creature that has—to invoke Hamlet—"discourse of reason." Even the phrase "Ghastly grim"—which will echo later—must be heard as said with a smile of mock formality, as is further suggested by the softening effect of the adjective "ancient."

This time the comedy is heightened by the pompous language that the narrator uses to address the bird, asking it what its name is. The raven's answer is the single word "Nevermore," which is introduced here in its entirety and which now becomes the final word of all subsequent stanzas.

Of course, the final syllable of the last line of every stanza is “more.” This is an evocation of the cry of the raven since the “o” sound in “more” is identical to the “aw” sound in “caw.”

So, the raven declares its name to be “Nevermore.”

¶9

The comedy continues. The raven is a clumsy talking bird. It is an “ungainly fowl.” In addition, it has the odd name “Nevermore.”

The oddness of the raven’s name—spoken from its perch on the bust of Athena—is reminiscent of an analogously odd literary name. That other name is a ploy that Odysseus prudently adopts when he encounters the Cyclops Polyphemus, a being as ungainly because of his size and lack of mental acuity as the raven is because of its species-contrariness. When Polyphemus asks Odysseus what his name is, Odysseus replies, “No one” (Homer, *Odyssey* 9. 364-367; cf. 407-408).

This literary echo suggests the following correlation:

Narrator : Cyclops :: Raven : Odysseus

This correlation will echo to far different effect in the seventeenth stanza.

For now, the narrator’s feeling toward the bird is characterized by humorous warmth, and the bird’s presence is seen as a blessing. In other words, the narrator feels friendliness toward the bird. He does not use the word “friend” here, but one can project it back from its contrastive use in the next stanza (“Other friends,” 58).

¶10

Now, at precisely the halfway point of the narration, a shift occurs. The singleness of the bird’s utterance and its solitary presence on the bust combine to turn the narrator’s thoughts to his own singleness and solitude.

As the narrator gazes at the bird, the bird sits absolutely still, as immobile as the sculpture upon which it perches. Not only is the bird motionless, but also—after declaring its name—it has remained mute.

Now, the speaker—implicitly having enfolded the raven into the circle of his friends, past and present—grumbles complainingly (and barely audibly) that as other of his friends have abandoned him (“flown”⁴), so too will his new avian friend. Not only is the raven a friend, but also it is the living incarnation of hope (as the narrator regards all friends to be). Therefore, just as the abandonment by friends has led him to abandon hope before, so too will the departure of his new friend lead him to abandon hope. Of course, the ultimate loss of a friend (and the hope represented by that friend) was the loss of his beloved Lenore.

Now he hears the raven say, “Nevermore.”

¶11

Unaccountably, the speaker takes the perceived utterance of the raven to be a “reply” to his grumbled remark, as though his remark implicitly contained the question, “Will you, friend raven, abandon me too?” In other words, the speaker takes the raven’s utterance, the repeated “Nevermore,” as a naturalistically fitting (apt) answer to that question.

The speaker is amazed at hearing the ambient silence penetrated by this pertinent remark, a remark that seems to offer consolation and assurance as an antidote to the speaker’s skepticism about the constancy of friends and hope. However, the speaker’s skepticism immediately reasserts itself in the form of a conjecture that the bird’s reply is merely a parrot-like repetition of what it has heard from its previous owner (“master”). He envisions that owner as a hapless victim of a series of disasters that engendered in him a despair that vanquished repeatedly his every attempt to cling to hope and caused him to beg for the mercy of having disaster beset him “nevermore.”

Will this vision lead the speaker, the bird’s new master/friend, to realize that his characterization of the previous master is a projection of himself onto the other and that he too will “nevermore” be able to shed the despair that he feels at the loss of Lenore, a culminating loss in the series of losses of friends that he has presented his life to be?

⁴ The use of the avian verb strengthens the connection between the bird and his human friends.

¶12

Not yet, because the resurgent comic appeal of the bird as he gazes at it on its perch makes him smile for a moment. But only for a moment, the last moment of ease that he will experience in this narrative.

As he sinks back onto the velvet chair, his imagination (“fancy”) begins to run rampant, reminding him that traditionally (“of yore”) the raven is a bird of ill omen (“ominous”). Consequently, the narrator now echoes a trio of the bird’s earlier comic epithets [“grim” and “Ghastly” (46) and “ungainly” (49)], yokes that trio to the new epithet “ominous” and the quintet-completing “gaunt” [cf. “crest...shorn and shaven” (46)] to produce a description of the bird that replaces its comic preening with an aura of menace. The raven is now a “grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird.” The threat is heightened by the aggressive accumulation of hard “g” sounds.

This menacing messenger now no longer speaks or replies. Instead, it croaks. The juxtaposition of a raven and “croaking” echoes the remark of Lady Macbeth (*Macbeth* I. v. 43-44):

The Rauen himselfe is hoarse,
That croakes the fatall entrance of *Duncan*.

Just as this is a prelude to Lady Macbeth’s summoning the spirits of darkness, night, and Hell, so too here it is a prelude to the speaker’s falling into an abyss of despairing darkness, night, and Hell.

¶13

The transformation of the bird from comic to menacing fills the speaker with perplexity accompanied by muteness with respect to the bird.

Now the raven’s presence becomes concentrated in its “fiery eyes” that pierce (burn) into the speaker’s “bosom’s core,” i.e., into his heart (cf. 101). The pain of his burning heart as he leans his head against the velvet cushion upon which Lenore was wont to lean her head activates the pain of grief for the beloved who will lean on that cushion “nevermore.”

¶14

The weight of his grief evokes an olfactory and auditory experience in which the air in his chamber feels heavy with the smell of imagined incense and the jingling sound of the imagined angels bearing the imagined censer from which the imagined fumes of the imagined incense rise and oppress the speaker's consciousness, making him feel wretched. Hence, he addresses himself as "wretch" and tries to convince himself that the imagined experience is a heaven-sent equivalent of sorrow-relieving nepenthe that will enable him to free himself from his memories of Lenore and to ease his soul.

Will it work? "Quoth the Raven "Nevermore.""

¶¶15-16

The speaker's next utterance is a diptych of stanzas in which he teeters between heaven and hell until he grasps desperately for a paradise that the raven declares to be closed to him. The pairing of the stanzas is signaled by their having an identical first line, suggesting that the narrator is exploring two consequences of the dilemma that he faces.

That dilemma revolves around the nature of the bird, what kind of messenger it is. He fervently wonders whether it is a beneficent messenger ("Prophet") or a malevolent messenger ("thing of evil"). However, he concludes that whatever it is, its function may be the same, that even if the bird is a malevolent messenger, it may yet bear a beneficent message. The paradox of the bird's function involves its being preternaturally able, whatever the source, to bring him good news, news of Lenore.

His statements here echo both *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*. His wondering whether the ghostly/ghastly raven is an emissary of God or an emissary of Satan ("Tempter sent") echoes Hamlet's wondering whether his father's ghost is "a spirit of health or goblin damn'd" (I. iv. 40). In addition, he echoes Ferdinand's consternation when he hears Ariel's song after finding himself—as the speaker feels himself—"tempest tossed...ashore, / Desolate yet all undaunted, on this desert land enchanted."⁵

⁵ The raven's intractability allies it with Caliban when one recalls the "dewe [that his] mother brush'd / With Rauens feather from unwholesome Fen" (I. ii. 380-381).

In his desolation, in a chamber that has become surrounded by a vast and implacable desert in his mind, a chamber that is infested with the horror of the loss of Lenore, the speaker cries out to know whether there is for him any healing consolation (“balm of Gilead”: see Jeremiah 8: 22; cf. Genesis 37: 25). He perceives the “Nevermore” as a negative reply, as a prophecy that he never will find on earth the consolation that he seeks.

Therefore, he addresses the bird again, now invoking “Heaven” and “God.” This leads him to cry out to know whether at least in the edenic afterlife (“Aidenn”⁶), he will be reunited with his lost Lenore. Again he hears the denial of even this possibility in the bird’s monolithically insistent “Nevermore.”

The perception that there is no consolation on earth or in heaven is the last straw, driving him over the abyss into total despair.

¶17

Therefore, the speaker lashes out at the bird and orders it to leave him to his lonely despair and to take its lies about the lack of consolation with it back to the Hell whence it came (“Night’s Plutonian shore”: cf. 47).

Then, in a macabre reenactment of Odysseus’s blinding of Polyphemus (cf. ¶¶ 8-9) by plunging a sharpened timber into the Cyclops’s eye, the speaker presents the raven (Odysseus) as having plunged its beak (sharpened timber) into his (Cyclops’s) eye (heart).⁷ The speaker, then, suggests that he is blinded with rage.

Will the bird leave? “Quoth the Raven “Nevermore.””

¶18

Hence, the immobile bird is said to remain seated on the bust of Pallas above the door of the chamber. However, it seems to have become mute, as its not closing the narrative with its characteristic utterance suggests.

Again, as in ¶ 13 (the only other “nevermore” stanza in which that word is spoken by the narrator), the raven’s presence becomes concentrated in its demonic,

⁶ Putting “Eden” in its Arabic form echoes the “desert land” of the preceding stanza.

⁷ Since the raven has been described as inexorably roosting above the door, and the narrator as being seated on a chair, the statement cannot be taken literally. In addition, cf. ¶ 13. 74).

phantasmagoric eyes. However, those eyes are now housed in what has become in effect a sculpture atop a sculpture.

The only apparently genuine presence of the bird is a “shadow that lies floating on the floor.” Of course, that shadow would be indistinguishable from the shadow of the Pallas Athena sculpture. This indistinguishability makes one wonder whether indeed there is actually a raven atop that sculpture, whether indeed there ever has been an actual raven.

The speaker declares that the shadow on the floor is the repository of his own soul, a soul that has projected itself into that shadow. One would not go awry in asserting that the raven itself is as much a fancied projection of that soul’s thoughts.

In other words, the entire narrative can be understood coherently only as a delusion. This means that the narrator’s description of his encounter with the putative bird is actually, for the reader, a portrait of the descent into insanity of a mind come unhinged from the desolation and despair occasioned by the loss of a beloved. This has been implicit from the beginning of this fantastic dramatic monologue that takes place, not in a physical chamber, but in the chamber of the narrator’s mind.

Finally, one is led to see that the punning hidden title of “The Raven” is “The Ravin’.”