



# The Raven

by Edgar Allan Poe

## Content Synopsis

The publication of “The Raven” in February 1845 brought Poe unprecedented renown both at home and abroad. It is a captivating poem, one that has lived up to its creator’s conception of what a poem should be. According to Poe, a poem’s province is to be beautiful and to have a universal appeal, and this has been the enduring legacy of “The Raven.” Its haunting narrative, its excellent workmanship, and its truthfulness to the human heart and mind have made it one of the best loved poems in the English language. When one year later Poe wrote “The Philosophy of Composition,” he drew heavily on “The Raven” to exemplify the process of literary creation. Critics have hailed the poem as a superb reflection of the inner realities of a tortured mind, of the loneliness and alienation that lie in the deepest recesses of the human psyche. Coming long before Freud’s theories of the unconscious mind made their debut, the poem looked ahead of its time, heralding the modernist approach to art.

As Poe himself explains, the situation depicted in the poem is rather unusual, but it is still within the realm of reality. It focuses on an encounter between a man and a raven, the man expecting an obliging interlocutor in the bird but finding instead a creature who confirms his worst fears. The poem starts with the narrator reflecting on events that take place on a stormy, dreary December night, which he, being an avid reader, begins by poring over a

book on “ancient lore.” He has almost fallen asleep when a gentle tapping on his door suddenly startles him. Not expecting visitors at this hour of the night, he still tells himself that the rapper is no other than a fellow human being coming to pay a social visit. However, more than the “quaint” book he is reading or the stormy night outside has stirred the man’s emotional state on that night. He has spent the whole evening being tortured by his memories of Lenore, his dead beloved, and has waited for the morning to rescue him from his gloomy thoughts. With a mood favoring superstition, he is on edge, terrified by the slightest movement around him, down to the rustling of the purple curtains lining the windows of his room.

Pulling himself together, the man walks to his door, reciting an apology for his delayed response. He finds no one near his door, nothing other than the tempestuous darkness of the night. However, he still lingers by the door “peering” into the gloom, feeling fearful and hopeful at the thought of encountering Lenore. He whispers her name only to hear the night’s echo of his own voice. Back into his chamber, he hears the self-same tapping, only louder this time, at his window. He tries to calm his racing heart by rationalizing the tapping as the work of the wind; but to his utmost puzzlement, the window admits a “stately raven,” who, rather unceremoniously, makes himself at home by perching on a bust of Pallas Athena, the Greek

goddess of wisdom and the arts. It is the perfect perch for a proud bird, which now looks more distinctly black for the whiteness of the bust's marble.

At this stage, the man could not help being amused by the raven's grave, hence comic, behavior. Not expecting an answer, he asks him about the "lordly" name he happened to have on "the Night's Plutonian shore"—the underworld in Greek mythology. The raven says "Nevermore." Although fascinated by the raven's ability to vocalize, the man is reluctant at first to give much weight to his "sad" word; it seems to bear "no relevancy" to him at this stage. The raven, he mutters, will fly away in the morning, just as "other friends" had done before, just like his own hopes. To this, the bird responds by "nevermore." Trying again to rationalize the uncommon occurrences of the night, the man dismisses the gloomy word as the raven's "stock and store," gathered from an "unhappy master," whose unyielding circumstances made him repeat "nevermore." The explanation, however, fails to abate the rising tension in the speaker's mind, and he follows by wheeling his seat closer to the bird to ponder further his humorless word. This physical proximity soon begins to signal the presence of psychological affinities between man and bird marked initially by the man's gradual abandoning of rational analysis of the bird's behavior.

The "grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird of yore" assumes even darker hues as the poem progresses. He is now a creature whose "fiery eyes" have penetrated the speaker's heart, sending him to feel afresh the loss of Lenore—she will "nevermore" press the velvet lining of the seat he now occupies. This remembrance of Lenore brings with it a waft of incense to the speaker's being, sending him to say that this may be the work of angels bringing him, wretched as he is, a respite from his anguish over his beloved's death. Once again, his wish is denied by the raven's answer "nevermore." At this stage, the man's agitated nerves take the poem to higher levels of tension.

Since he expects the response "nevermore," he asks the bird all the questions that have so far unhinged his being, deriving a kind of perverse pleasure from thus tormenting himself. He implores this ominous "prophet," this "thing of evil," who may have been sent by the devil to his "horror-haunted" house, to tell him whether there will ever be a "balm in Gilead" for him. Here he echoes the Bible's Jeremiah, who too in torment poses this rhetorical question. (Gilead, a mountainous area east of Jordan, is well known for the medicinal quality of its plants.) The bird's retort of "nevermore" brings the narrative to its climactic moment in which a frenzied speaker asks the bird if he will ever in the "distant Aidenn" (paradise), embrace his angelic Lenore. The raven says "nevermore."

Satiated with self-torture, the man orders the bird to leave his place, viewing him as the incarnation of his pain. "Take thy beak from out my heart," he bids the bird, and demands that he leave no trace of his black plumage in his chamber. The bird's ready answer to this dismissal is yet again "Nevermore." He remains forever perched on Pallas Athena's bust. By now, however, the narrative's symbolic bent, which links the black bird to the man's sordid mood, has been firmly established. The raven clearly comes across as the speaker's double or alter ego, a projection of the horror-laden contents of his psyche. The two creatures converge in the final lines of the poem as the man's soul takes a permanent abode in the shadow of the bird cast by the lamp on the floor. The bird's sad and lonely word, uttered now by the man himself, concludes the poem and seals the man's unhappy fate.

It is rather ironic that a poem which has widely appealed to children and youths should also embody so much despair. One of the poem's overriding themes is loneliness, felt in the finest fibers of the speaker's soul. The narrative begins with the bereaved lover seeking companionship in an ancient book, alienated as though from both the present and the future. Not having anyone to speak

to, he has developed the habit of speaking to himself and now to the irrational bird. The vents he has to the outside world, his door and window, open to darkness and storm. And instead of a guest, or even the ghost of his lover, he has a raven whose sole word confirms the dreary monotony of his life. He is damned to loneliness in this world and the hereafter; not even death would bring him “nepenthe” or relief. His sense of doom is archetypal, finding, therefore, a subtle echo in the reader’s being, regardless of age or education.

### Historical Context

“The Raven” is simply timeless, not just because it has survived the test of time, but also because of the absence in it of any dates or references to historical events. Set in the antebellum South, the poem makes no allusion to either slaves or masters. Although the speaker seems to lead the leisurely life of aristocrats and lives in a house with lavish furnishings, his situation hardly makes a political statement: the “richly furnished” room where the man is placed has more to do with Poe’s intention to “designate Beauty as the province of the poem” (“Philosophy of Composition”). Besides, it is more pertinent to Poe’s purposes to free the poem from the complications of slavery (which is certainly not beautiful). With no one to wait on him or solicit his comfort, the speaker stands as the archetypal lonely man, removed from all references to time.

### Societal Context

Like history, society has no place in the poem, which practically exists in a social vacuum. With a raven for a guest who outstays his welcome and who links the past with the present, the speaker seems to have no hope of being with fellow human beings. The best he can do is to fill his world with memories of Lenore when he is not struggling with his mental demons. Needless to say, the absence of society, which is artistically deliberate, goes to buttress the theme of alienation in the poem. The man

gradually descends into full-blown psychosis obviously for being alone with his gloomy thoughts, which populate his world with dark creatures like the raven.

With alienation as its focal point, the poem, however, does not fail to reflect the society which produced the writer himself. It voices the melancholia and the fatalism which characterize the literature and culture of the Old South. In an attempt to evaluate Poe, the Southern writer Allan Tate asserts that the “forlorn demon” is “with us like a dejected cousin . . . This is the recognition of a relationship, almost of the blood, which we must in honor acknowledge: what destroyed him is potentially destructive of us (40). Needless to say, the raven himself is a part and parcel of Southern superstition, which associates the black bird with death.

### Religious Context

The speaker is obviously a man who has been brought up on Biblical stories and on Christianity’s orthodox doctrines of heaven and hell. Furthermore, his readings in classical mythology have acquainted with ancient beliefs, to which he repeatedly alludes in the poem. But with all his religious schooling, the speaker is hardly at peace with either himself or with the larger forces of his universe. He is hopeless right from the beginning, unable to deal with his anguish over the loss of Lenore. Even when he momentarily thinks that God may still extend his mercy to him in a draft of “nepenthe,” the bird’s rejoinder “nevermore” puts an end to all his wishful dreams. Images of hell rather than heaven dominate his thinking and radiate throughout his tale. For instance, he is ready to view the raven as a native of the “Night’s Plutonian shore,” the underworld in Classical mythology, as soon as he lays his eyes on him, even before the bird has uttered his lonely word. This vision of the bird can only be confirmed in the rest of the poem, and the speaker can only lose all prospects of redemption, grace, and salvation. As in the case of

the Biblical Jeremiah, there is no “balm in Gilead” for him. He is damned in this world and the one to come, and certainly has no hope of being with the “saintly” Lenore. For now, however, his “horror haunted” home can host only demonic creatures like the raven.

Instead of faith, the poem resonates with superstitions and primitive fears. The speaker is driven to “fantastic terrors” by the tapping on his door and the rustling of his curtains. It is his jagged nerves that give form to the “ominous” black bird, who continues to croak “nevermore.”

### Scientific & Technological Context

Composed during times when science was forging ahead with new discoveries and when life is rapidly yielding to the mechanization of labor, “The Raven” notably shuns all reminders of either science or technology. The poem’s gothic atmosphere, its use of archaic words (“quoth,” “hath,” “thy,” “thou,” “betook, etc.”), its sentimental personae (poring over a volume of “forgotten lore”), its distinct aura of superstition, and its uncanny world of death and demons take it back to an earlier, slow-paced, and antiquated existence. Although Poe was quite modernistic in his theories about literature and in his secular approach to art, he was wary of science and tended to side with the Romantic poets, such as Wordsworth and Keats, in viewing science as destroying life’s beauty. This is the theme of his “Sonnet—To Science,” in which he speaks of the age’s scientific spirit as antagonistic to poetic imagination and life’s magical qualities: “Why prey’st thou thus upon the poet’s heart, / Vulture! whose wings are dull realities!”

In *The Philosophy of Composition*, Poe speaks of the mathematical precision of “The Raven” and the “mechanical approach” he followed while writing it. However, apart from its flawless metrical design, the poem is spawned by deeply felt, tumultuous feelings. It is charged with a forceful current of primeval fears, especially of death and annihilation.

### Biographical Context

Those who are familiar with Poe’s life rarely fail to see the link between his personal experience and his literary work. Indeed, it has been a commonplace among Poe’s critics and biographers to stress the effect of the author’s childhood and upbringing on his fiction and poems. In one of his poems, “Alone,” Poe himself credits the sorrow, which overwhelmed his adult life to childhood incidents. The writer’s unlucky childhood, which starts with the poverty of his biological parents, the absconding of his alcoholic father when he was an infant, and the death of his mother when he was barely two years old, were quite likely to leave some indelible scars on his psyche. The story that Poe remained with his mother’s corpse for a whole night in December 1811 has often been cited as a childhood trauma which may have contributed to the emotional collapse and suffocating melancholia which he was to suffer from later in life. It is on a stormy December night that the raven, a symbol of death, enters the speaker’s life, never to leave it again.

Poe’s disturbed adulthood, his alcohol abuse and manic depression, could also have been fed by his relationship with his foster parents, a prosperous Richmond couple who took him in after the death of his mother. Biographical records stress that although the couple took good care of Poe’s financial needs and provided him with excellent schooling, they somehow failed to understand or minister to his emotional needs. His foster mother, Fanny Allan, was a hypochondriac who found it difficult to satisfy the young Poe’s starvation for love; his foster father, John Allan, was unable to bond with the teenage Poe, who had been steadily growing up into a solitary and unapproachable youth. He found him sullen and ungrateful, especially during his short career at the University of Virginia, where Poe, who suffered from low self-esteem, was apparently spending beyond his means and ended up in debt. Their relationship never really recovered after an

intense argument the two of them had, which led to Poe's disownment and disinheritance by his father.

Poverty and debt remained Poe's constant companions until his death, embittering his life, and making him feel guilty about his responsibilities towards his own family. Poe sold "The Raven" for only \$15, and his other manuscripts did not fare much better in comparison. His work as an editor, reviewer, and critic was never adequately paid despite his competence and successful efforts to increase the readership of the journals he edited and contributed to. Naturally, Poe's drinking and gambling habits aggravated his financial situation and often threatened his work stability. However, the luxury and social status, which Poe had coveted all his adult life, were transferred to his protagonists, aristocratic men like the poetic persona in "The Raven." And yet the loneliness, the psychotic disorders, and the self-torment which Poe suffered from until his death were also handed down in sizeable portions to these protagonists. Beyond the exterior details of his lifestyle, the man in "The Raven" is a projection of Poe himself: his fears, his sense of alienation, and his despair. The "demon" in the speaker's mind is found elsewhere in Poe's writings; in "Alone," for instance, another Poe-like speaker portrays his depressed spirits as "a demon in my view."

The sorrow, which the man in "The Raven" undergoes following the death of his beloved Lenore, also has its parallel in Poe's personal life, namely his grief over the loss of his young wife, Virginia, who, like his mother, died of consumption, or what is now known as tuberculosis. Indeed,

Virginia was going through the terminal stages of her illness when Poe was writing "The Raven." On the other hand, the speaker's hopelessness regarding a union with Lenore in another world could be related to a sense of guilt Poe himself felt regarding his marriage at the age of twenty-six to his first cousin, Virginia Clemm, who was barely thirteen. Incest, in fact, is a theme that runs through many of Poe's fictional works (notably "The Fall of the House of Usher"), but this poem's conception of the "pure" and "saintly" Lenore may have to do with Poe's desire to free his marriage from notions of sin and defilement.

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### Discussion Questions

1. In the “Philosophy of Composition,” Poe explains that the raven can be seen as a projection of the speaker’s psyche. In what way(s) is this depicted?
2. Does the poem’s speaker reflect his creator? If you agree, focus on three points in which distance is almost non-existent between the two.
3. In structuring “The Raven,” Poe claims to have started it at its climactic moment. Which part of the poem is this? If not sure about your answer, you can go to Poe’s illustration of this issue in “The Philosophy of Composition.”
4. As a poet and artist, Poe found in the scientific bent of his age a spoiler of life’s magical qualities. However, the poet’s religious sentiments, including his conception of heaven and hell, could be described as being somewhat in line with 19th century skepticism, which was directly influenced by scientific discoveries. Do you agree? Why? Why not?
5. While he greatly cherishes the memory of Lenore, the speaker also finds it a source of extreme anguish. Can you identify this duality in his view of Lenore? Which of the two voices predominates, love or anger?
6. Poe’s tendency to use archaic expressions has to do with his intention to augment the gothic atmosphere of “The Raven.” Identify Poe’s archaism and discuss its function in the poem.
7. Poe frequently alludes to Greek and Roman mythology in the poem. What function(s) do these serve? Explain with references to the poem.
8. The poem also alludes to the Bible. Discuss Poe’s use of biblical allusions.
9. According to Poe, the events in the poem are mostly within the realm of reality. Do you agree? Why? Why not?
10. When do events turn to be purely symbolic? Can these parts be explained as manifestations of subconscious reality?
11. Despite its somber tones, “The Raven” has some comic moments. Which situations make us smile? Why?

### Essay Ideas

1. According to Poe, the poem must aim to be beautiful. Write an essay discussing the aesthetic qualities of “The Raven.”
2. The raven can be seen as a cluster of symbols. Discuss the symbolism invested in the poem’s black bird.
3. Write a character sketch of Poe’s persona in “The Raven.”
4. Themes of alienation, depression, and death predominate in this poem. Discuss one or more of these themes, focusing the various elements that make them prominent
5. Write an essay discussing the gothic elements employed in “The Raven.”

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