

The Raven and the Peak of Tragedy, by Irwin Porges (excerpt from a critical essay)

This was to be known as "the house where *The Raven* was written." Since the days when he swam in the James River and tramped the nearby woods, he had always loved the countryside. Now, for a while at least, Edgar and Virginia and his aunt were to live in a farmhouse owned by Patrick Brennan. The farm occupied 216 acres adjacent to the Hudson, and high in the garret, where he and his young wife stayed, they could look down at the gleaming river and glimpse the green of the woods and meadows. Here, in his study, the inspiration that had been born when he first encountered poor Barnaby Rudge and his pet raven Grip was slowly taking shape. As he pondered over the poem, many strange images passed through his mind. Somehow, the bust of Pallas which stood on a shelf above the doorway seemed to be interwoven with these images.

The analytical faculty that he displayed in his stories controlled his thoughts. But his mind was a rare combination of theory and order balanced by unrestrained flights into fantasy. In creating his new poem, he would plan--but without rigidity. First must come the *single, unified impression or effect* that he advocated. It could not be *Truth*, "the satisfaction of the intellect," or *Passion*, "the excitement of the heart." These are best attained in prose, not poetry. Without question, *Beauty* is the "atmosphere and essence of the poem."

But a poem must have *tone*. What should be the *tone* of this poem? To Edgar, the answer was instantly apparent. No other tone was possible but that of *sadness*. "Melancholy is ... the most legitimate of all the poetical tones."

What of the structure of the poem? To his mind came a device often used in poetry and song--the *refrain*. Repeated at the end of every **stanza**, the *refrain* is enjoyed by the reader or listener because of its repetition--and the sense of identity that it gives. The *refrain* is bound to make an impression; the audience learns it quickly because of "the force of **monotone**--both in sound and thought." Nevertheless, Edgar shook his head over it. The *refrain* is too simple--too primitive; it must be varied. The idea came to him. Of course! Use the monotone of sound--but vary the thought. And since the thought must be varied in the *refrain*, one further point was obvious: the *refrain* must be a *single word*; this would make it easier to vary the thought.

The analysis went on. He wanted a "non-reasoning" creature to repeat the *refrain* mechanically. The first thought, naturally, was of a parrot. But then *Barnaby Rudge's* croaking raven made a **clamor** in his mind. The black, ugly raven, the bird of **ill-omen**--this creature was far better than a parrot. The word he would repeat at the end of each stanza was "Nevermore!" and in a melancholy poem, what topic is the most melancholy of all? The answer sprang to his lips--*death!* All that remains to be answered is this question: *When is the topic of death most poetical?* Edgar gave the reply that he knew by heart; it came from the agony and fear that had grown inside him from the moment of his first tragedy:

When it most closely allies itself to *Beauty*: the death then of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world, and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a **bereaved** lover.

He pictured the setting, with the Raven entering the room and perching above his chamber door on the bust of Pallas. The lover, seated alone and dreaming of his "lost Lenore," at first asks the "ghastly grim and ancient Raven" a commonplace question: "Tell me what thy lordly name is ..." The Raven answers, "Nevermore!" The lover believes he is merely hearing a bird "repeating a lesson learned by rote."

The plot of the poem became clearer to Edgar. As the Raven continues to answer with the same "Nevermore," the lover is excited by the repetition and the "melancholy character of the word itself," and asks questions of a different nature. Now they are personal, passionate ones of his lost love; and he asks them not because he *believes* the bird is a prophet, but because the *expected* "Nevermore" brings him a "frenzied pleasure," filling him with the "most delicious" and "most intolerable of sorrows."

Through this careful planning, the most important point became apparent to Edgar. The last question asked by the lover, and the Raven's final answer, are the *climax* of the poem. The effect here must be of "the utmost **conceivable** amount of sorrow and despair." To leave the lover in this most complete state of sorrow, it was necessary to think of the *last stanzas first*--to plan them *first*.

"Here then," said Edgar, "the poem may be said to have had its beginning, *at the end* where all works of art should begin. ..."

Stanza by stanza, through the warm summer months and the fall of 1844, Edgar worked on *The Raven*, writing, polishing, and revising. It was to be the most perfectly planned and constructed poem ever created. The perfectionist poet weighed and tested each word, phrase and line, never satisfied--always changing, substituting, re-writing.

At the end of the year, *The Raven* was sold to the *American Whig Review*, but through special permission was first published in the *Evening Mirror* on January 29, 1845. In this issue, and in the *Weekly Mirror* of February 8th, Nathaniel Parker Willis prefaced the poem with a paragraph of praise seldom granted to an author. In referring to "the following remarkable poem by Edgar Poe," he said,

In our opinion, it is the most effective single example of "fugitive poetry" ever published in this country; and unsurpassed in English poetry for subtle conception, masterly ingenuity of versification, and consistent, sustaining of imaginative lift and "pokerishness." It is one of these "dainties bred in a book" which we *feed* on. It will stick to the memory of *everybody* who reads it.

Beneath this paragraph appeared the title, *The Raven*, and the poem followed with its familiar opening stanza:

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 someone gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.
"Tis some visitor," I muttered, "tapping at my chamber door--

Only this, and nothing more."

In the development of Edgar's plan, the student who had been poring over a volume and dreaming of his dead sweetheart watches the Raven flutter in and is amused by its actions and odd appearance. From a first question, which is asked in jest, the poem rises to a climax of self-torture and deep sorrow. The lover is painfully reminded of what he already knows--there is no hope of clasping a "rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore," and he shrieks,

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!

In the end, the Raven's shadow becomes the symbol of the permanency of the lover's sorrow:

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!

Source: Irwin Porges, "'The Raven' and the Peak of Tragedy." In *Edgar Allan Poe*, pp. 156-59. Philadelphia, Pa.: Chilton Books, 1963.

Source Database: Literature Resource Center

Edgar Allan Poe – a biography (excerpt)

The poem [The Raven] was widely reprinted in America and in Europe, where it caught the attention of Elizabeth Barrett. It is simultaneously an eerie and a comic psychological study of **perversity**. On a stormy December night, a student reads curious volumes of ancient lore in an effort to forget his lost love, Lenore. A raven taps at his window, and for a wild moment (as in "Ligeia") he thinks it might be the ghost of his lady returned. Amused at himself and at the **ungainly** appearance of the raven, he lets the bird in; it perches **ludicrously** on the head of his bust of Pallas Athena, goddess of wisdom. Discovering that the bird has a one-word vocabulary, "Nevermore," he bemusedly puts to it questions capable of being answered by that word--until he asks (for whatever perverse reason) the ultimate question. Will he ever see his lost love Lenore in heaven? At the foreknown answer of "Nevermore," he shrieks his **anguish** at the bird--yet sets up a still deeper twisting of pain. In response to his injunction to the raven to depart and "Take thy beak from out my heart," the anticipated reply comes: "Nevermore." The student concludes (perhaps with satisfaction) that the shadow cast by this bird on his soul "shall be lifted--nevermore."

The poem is dramatically **conceived**. Poe carefully balances an atmosphere of the supernatural with the presentation of abnormal psychology, just as in the short stories, and the poem is to a degree a departure from his rigid distinction between poetry and fiction. The next year in "The Philosophy of Composition" (*Graham's*, April 1846), a half-serious, half tongue-in-cheek explanation of how he wrote "The Raven" step by step, Poe characterizes the student as one "impelled ... by the human thirst for self-torture." He asks the bird questions he anticipates the answer to, so as to "bring him ... the most of a luxury of sorrow." Other elements of the "philosophy" of composition are articulated in the essay that relate directly to the short story.

The essay begins by asserting that

... every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated in its denouement before any thing be attempted with the pen. It is only with the *denouement* constantly in view that we can give a plot its **indispensable** air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention.

The denouement is tied to an "effect":

Keeping originality *always* in view ... I say to myself, in the first place, 'Of the innumerable effects, or impressions, of which the heart, the intellect, or (more generally) the soul is

susceptible, what one shall I, on the present occasion, select?' Having chosen a **novel**, first, and secondly a vivid effect, I consider whether it can best be wrought by incident or tone--whether by ordinary incidents and peculiar tone, or the converse, or by peculiarity both of incident and tone--afterward looking about me (or rather within) for such combinations of event, or tone, as shall best aid me in the construction of the effect.

Effect is then a consequence of combinations of "tone" and "incident." The combinations specified are especially revealing: ordinary events plus peculiar tone; peculiar events plus ordinary tone; and peculiar events plus peculiar tone. These constitute a program for the heightened, romantic tale; the combination Poe omits is ordinary events plus ordinary tone, a formula for later nineteenth-century realism. Despite such heightening, however, "every thing is within the limits of the accountable--of the real." The storyteller's task is to bring the lover and the raven together in some reasonable way that yet creates intensity. This is done by choosing a locale that provides "close circumscription of space" and by emphasizing "the force of contrast, with a view of deepening the ultimate impression." An "air," a suggestion, of "the fantastic--approaching as nearly to the ludicrous as was admissible--is given to the Raven's entrance." This intensified, predesigned effect, Poe writes, is carefully calculated for "universal" appeal. The **aesthetic** effects of poetry, not prose, enable the soul to attain its most intense and pure elevation. For in poetry the adjuncts of repetition--of rhythm, measure, sound--help to create an hypnotic tone. Of the poetic devices, the most universal is the use of a refrain; Poe's is to be one of variable applicability that will bear repetition and deepen the effect. The very sounds of the word "Nevermore" are appropriate to the creation of a dominant tone of melancholy--the universal sense of loss of the ideal. Of all earthly subjects, he asks, what is the most melancholy? The death of a beautiful woman--the **calculated subject** of his poem. In it the raven comes to symbolize mournful and never-ending remembrance. Poe implies that at last someone has done an "*original thing*" in poetry.

About this Essay: G. R. Thompson, Purdue University

Source: *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 3: Antebellum Writers in New York and the South*. A Brucoli Clark Layman Book. Edited by Joel Myerson, University of South Carolina. The Gale Group, 1979. pp. 249-297.

Source Database: Dictionary of Literary Biography

TEXT-DEPENDENT QUESTIONS FOR *THE RAVEN AND THE PEAK OF TRAGEDY*, BY IRWIN PORGES

- 1) Throughout the text, the author uses italics for at least three different purposes. Why? Explain using evidence from the text.
- 2) What does the author describe as the most important structural component of *The Raven*? According to the text, why is that component important?
- 3) What does the reader learn about Poe in his reply regarding “the topic of death most poetical?”
- 4) What does the following line mean: “In the end, the Raven’s shadow becomes the symbol of the permanency of the lover’s sorrow”? Explain using evidence from the text, including evidence from the last three lines of the poem.

Text-dependent Questions for *Edgar Allan Poe – a biography* (excerpt)

1) Why did the author choose the excerpts that are indented on page one? Use evidence from the text to explain.

2) How does Poe explain that denouement is “tied to an effect?”

Writing PerformanceTask

Using evidence from *both* nonfiction texts, explain Poe’s philosophy regarding planning for writing *The Raven*.