

## EDGAR ALLAN POE'S "THE RAVEN"

"The Raven" is undoubtedly Edgar A. Poe's single most popular poem. In its strict form it demonstrates very strongly Poe's belief in the primacy of structure. So the most obvious way to approach this poem is to examine its architecture - its form.

### Formal Aspects:

#### 1. Language Structure

Let us consider the first paragraph:

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."

We find each line except the last composed of a pair of four-footed iambic units that almost represent lines of their own. By always coupling two of these units, the last line with only half that length gains a heavier emphasis.

The rhyme pattern starts with a stand-alone inner rhyme in the first line (*dreary* - *weary*). The second line then follows without an inner rhyme, ending always on "...ore" (*lore*) which will match the last three lines. The third line repeats the pattern of the first, however with another rhyme (*napping* - *tapping*). The fourth line then takes up the "-ore" end rhyme of the second (*door*), in addition to supplying one more half-line of the previous inner rhyme (*rapping*) - thus effectively linking both rhyme patterns. The fifth line then very closely imitates the

content of the fourth, almost merely repeating it - always ending with the same “-ore” word, creating some kind of fake rhyme by repetition. This gives special emphasis announcing the end of the paragraph and draws the attention to the last line: The half-length ending line adds still more weight by its briefness and its final statement of the “-ore” end rhyme (*more*).

So there are two lines (1&3) that possess an independent inner rhyme and four lines (2,4,5&6) following the “nevermore” sound. This makes the end rhyme on “...ore” dominant throughout the entire poem, giving the work a rather dark basic tone. The predominance of one single sound gives the poem a high degree of acoustic recognition just by the music it creates. Even a non-english-speaking listener would be able to appreciate the regularity of the flowing rhymes. And still, apart from the intended close similarity of lines four and five, one would not notice any blunt repetitions in order to achieve this constant melody.

In addition to this general outer structure which is rigidly sustained throughout the poem, there are many individual examples of alliteration. Take for instance “**D**oubting, **d**reaming **d**reams no mortal ever **d**ared to **d**ream before” (line 2, par. 5): Examples like this abound throughout in the poem, making its overall sound still more musical. Some of these alliterations also help enforcing the inner rhymes in lines one and three, rounding off the rhyme structure: “Open here I **f**lung the shutter, when, with many a **f**lirt and **f**lutter,” (line 1, par. 7)

After examining the repetition of consonants, the next logical focus should then be on repeating vowels: assonance. Again, we find many examples: The most obvious ones provide extra emphasis on the “-ore” sounds, amplifying the gloomy atmosphere of the poem. Consider for example “as my **h**opes have **f**lown before.” (line 5, par. 10) or “**O**n this **h**ome by **h**orror **h**unted -” (line 4, par. 15). Other displays of assonance can be found in passages like “Clasp a **r**are and **r**adiant **m**aiden whom the **a**ngels name Lenore.” (line 5, par. 16) which provides quite the opposite kind of vowels - open and brighter-sounding. This makes the description of the narrator’s beloved one a bright and penetrating single ray of light - the only aspect of the poem that points *away* from the darkness. All this, assonance as well as alliteration, adds effectively to the conjuring up of an atmosphere of gloom, making the reader feel the oppressive darkness in the small chamber lit by one single light - which later is even blocked by the raven perching in front of it.

All these formal aspects of meter, rhyme, assonance and alliteration have so far helped to explain the musical impact the mere sound of the poem has on the reader.

This suggests that a work like this would best be recited to a listening audience or at least be read aloud - just like music.

## **2. Content Structure**

The narrator of the poem can easily be identified as a man mourning the loss of his beloved one (par. 2). The perspective is first person singular, whereas the narrating tense is the past. Only in the last paragraph we find the tense switched to the present, even to progressive. So we see the events we have learned about through the poem still having an effect on the present - we even see their projection into the future: "Shall be lifted - nevermore!" (Closing line). By this shift of time-perspective in the last stanza, we find ourselves suddenly brought very close to the narrator's fate. Whereas a report in the past tense 1st person usually gives us some comfort as to the security of the narrator (because s/he must obviously have survived the story in order to be able to tell us about it later), the end of "The Raven" takes us uncomfortably near: This is no longer a story heard from a safe distance; we end up sitting in the same chamber staring at the very raven blocking the light. Whereas we would have expected the narration to end in the same past where it began, its consequences are surprisingly far-reaching, still extending into the future. So the poem comes up with a surprise in the end, involving the reader far more than we prepared ourselves for at the beginning.

## **Reader Response:**

If we then consider the structure of the action and the development of the narrator, we see him first sitting alone in his chamber, trying to overcome his grief for Lenore, obviously his lover/mistress/spouse, whatever. He is so consumed with his own thoughts that it takes him a while to locate the source of the knocking, namely the raven. After the first surprise (for the situation is obviously rather uncommon), he is amused by this strange bird and, more talking to himself than the intruder, jokingly asks the raven for its name. Much to his further surprise, the bird's answer is a croaked "Nevermore". Realizing of course that some birds do have the capacity to articulate or imitate small parts of human speech, the narrator wonders why a raven should have been trained to utter that particular word, making "Nevermore" its very name. He then falls back into his own thoughts and, muttering to himself, supposes that the raven will probably take off to elsewhere

soon. Not having thought of the bird's obvious answer, he is surprised how aptly the reply "Nevermore" fits his previous statement.

He comforts himself rationally that this word is probably the only utterance the raven is capable of and drifts off to his own thoughts of loss and grievance again. However, he discovers how the bird's presence unsettles him and violates his privacy. He therefore tries to chase it away with loud accusations, telling it to leave him alone to forget about his lost Lenore. By this time, the reader is used enough to the response to be able to predict the raven's "Nevermore". The narrator then falls into taking the ever-unchanging answer seriously because it fits the questions so precisely. We have at least *some* reason to believe that the raven's answer is not completely unintelligible because we see it keeping its promise of leaving the chamber "nevermore". The narrator is then lost to the mercilessly unswaying denial the bird keeps uttering. He falls into begging the strange prophetic bird for relief from his mourning for Lenore and is - of course - rejected. The narrator cannot help but persevere and ask if he will ever be able to meet his beloved one again in Heaven ("Aidenn", line 3, par. 16 = Eden, Paradise) - the answer is plain to us. The last thing to do is then to attempt once more to remove the hideous prophet from his chamber which also cannot work, the raven persistently refusing to move.

The last stanza then - maybe surprisingly - convinces us that the raven's threat *never* to leave the chamber was indeed serious. For readers who found the narrator a rather nervous and superstitious man, this might come as a bit of a shock - we see that the bird does indeed pursue a purpose rather than just accidentally uttering the only word in its store. A second reading of the poem will leave us less willing to consider the narrator's questions to the raven as irrational and short-sighted (because we always know the reply and could form opposite questions, so that the answer would better fit our expectations). We see the nature of the raven still mystic and are confused as to how it came to be. Maybe, after all, it *is* the narrator's personal nemesis, his private torturer.

### **Further Aspects:**

If we expand this purely subjective interpretation by means of expanding our perspective and examine the narrator from the outside (Psycho-Analytic Approach), we might suggest that the person telling us this story has suffered

severe psychological damage from the loss of a loved one. We could argue that the narrator was under the impression of paranoid fantasies, trying to give the perished person the importance she deserved.

In fact, we find this theme in several of Edgar A. Poe's stories (Intertextual Approach) - compare for instance "The Tell-Tale Heart" or "The Fall Of The House Of Usher". The protagonists (again, 1st person) of these narrations suffer from some over-acuteness of their senses which renders them very susceptible and vulnerable to their own perceptions. Judging from the outside, one could argue that these schizophrenic minds invent huge fictional worlds - excuses for their inability to handle reality.

If we then further expand this line of thought, we could draw connections to the author himself (Biographical Approach) who was acknowledgedly a man of rather frail physical constitution having some problems with personal relationships - especially to women - and alcohol. From this perspective, we can argue that Poe wrote a lot of his fiction and poetry to cope with his personal defects, as he seems to enter the stage of his fiction himself, even narrating from the 'first person singular' viewpoint.

If we, however, attempt to apply a cast of characters taken from Poe's real life (Historical Approach [Classical]), the seeming reference of "Lenore" to his cousin and wife Virginia (whose death greatly affected Poe and deteriorated his actual physical health) fumbles miserably because she did not die until three years *after* the "The Raven" had been published.

Considering the poem in the light of how it might have been understood by Poe's contemporaries (New Historicism), we can almost certainly say that the atmosphere conjured up in "The Raven" seems slightly obsolete for the 1840ies. This would have given the poem a touch of antique, a reminder of earlier centuries. In fact, the setting and action almost reminds us somewhat of the middle ages: a single gloomy chamber furnished with a few books and a single lamp, heated by an open fire. Apart from the bust above the door, it almost looks like a monk's small private writing and living cell. This impression of medieval influence is confirmed by the raven's mystic appearance and behavior, adding to an atmosphere of a magical world.

To conclude, I would like to point out that in my opinion (and as can be seen from the length of the explications) the formal approach is the first and most

important for this work. Naturally, this does not mean that it suffices to provide a comprehending picture of the poem, but it gives us a first insight into how the rhythm and melody of “The Raven” draw us deep into this slightly strange and magical world. As I have pointed out before, its music might be this poem’s single most outstanding feature - so the first step should provide a look at how this melody is created.