

The Raven

-Edgar Allan Poe

The Raven is a narrative poem that is often noted for its musicality, stylized language, and supernatural atmosphere. It tells of a talking raven's mysterious visit to a distraught lover, who is lamenting the loss of his love, Lenore, tracing the man's slow fall into madness. Sitting on a bust of Pallas, the raven seems to further instigate his distress with its constant repetition of the word "Nevermore".

The raven is meant to symbolize the mournful and never-ending remembrance of Lenore. It serves as a fragment of the narrator's soul and represents his subconscious that instinctively understands his need to mourn. The ebony bird actively stimulates his thoughts of Lenore and eventually makes him realize that he will never meet his Lenore, not even in paradise. Hence, it also seems to be an aesthetic representation of his fears.

'The Raven' introduces the menacing black bird as a symbol of tragedy and life's losses. The dark mood of the poem is set by placing the narrator in a gloomy & lonely chamber in the bleak and cold month of December with dying amber in the fireplace turning in to ashes.

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore.

To distract himself from the painful memories of Lenore, the narrator seeks refuge in a book of ancient stories but suddenly hears a tapping on his chamber door.

'Some late visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door;
This it is, and nothing more.'

Opening the door after a short while, he finds none but darkness. He stood there for a long time dreaming of his beloved and called out her name only to hear the echo back. Later however, when he hears a louder knock on the window, he opens the window shutter and discovers a black raven bird which flies into his room, fluttering its wings with the air of a Lord, and perches on the statue of bust of Pallas, the goddess of wisdom, kept above his chamber door.

'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.'

Amused by the Raven's shaven crest & its comically serious disposition, the narrator demanded to know its name. Its answer- "Nevermore" surprised him but shortly led him into sad contemplation that the raven will soon fly out of his life, just as his hope & his other friends have flown before. As if answering, the raven responds again with an unexpected relevance-"Nevermore". To this, the narrator reasoned that the bird might have learned the word that seemed to synchronize with his situation, from some 'unhappy master' and that; it was the only phrase it knew.

This I sat engaged in guessing, but no syllable expressing
To the fowl whose fiery eyes now burned into my bosom's core.

Even so, the narrator, pulled his chair directly in front of the raven, determined to learn more about the stern, awkward & ugly looking bird and its monotonous phrase-‘Nevermore’. He sits and speculates on his thoughts, not speaking them aloud to the bird whose eyes seemed to probe deep into his heart while his mind wanders back to his lost Lenore. He suddenly felt as if the air had grown dense, fragrant from an ‘unseen sensor’ in the presence of the angels whose gentle footfall tinkled on the 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!

Confused by the association of the angels with the bird, thinking that they were sent from the heaven to administer to him Nepenthe and cause him to drift into oblivion, forgetting his Lenore. Taking offense to the assumed attempt made by the Gods to make him forget his Lenore, he addresses the bird a prophet of ill omen, unsure-

‘Whether tempter sent, or whether tempest tossed thee here ashore’

He then asked the raven, whether there is a balm or an ointment in heaven that could soothe or ease his pain, but the raven came up with the same answer-‘nevermore’.

He again makes another desperate query, asking whether he will ever be reunited with his Lenore or ‘Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom angels name Lenore’ in distant paradise or in ‘Aidenn’. When the raven replies with its typical ‘Nevermore’, he shrieks and furiously commands the black bird to move to the God of the underworld or the ‘Night’s Plutonian shore’, without leaving behind a single black feather. However, even after having deeply disappointed the narrator’s soul, bird doesn’t move at all and continues to sit on the pale bust above his door, with the look of the devil while the light of the lamp falling on it threw a shadow on the floor.

“And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor
Shall be lifted-nevermore!”

In the end, a sudden realization dons upon him that his soul is trapped beneath the Raven’s shadow and that his pain, suffering & agony shall never be cured.

The main theme of the poem is one of undying devotion and love of the narrator towards his deceased beloved Lenore. The poem begins with him "weak and weary," followed by being regretful and grief-stricken, before passing into frenzy and, finally, madness. The narrator experiences a perverse conflict between desire to forget and desire to remember at the same time, also seeming to get some pleasure from focusing on the loss. The narrator assumes that the word "Nevermore" is the raven's ‘only stock and store’, and, yet, he continues to ask it questions, knowing what the answer will be. His questions, then, are purposely self-deprecating and further incite his feelings of loss. In due course, he seems to realize the sad and sinister meaning of the phrase that the prophet of evil was trying to drive home-the bitter truth that he would never be able to meet his beloved Lenore anymore. On the other hand, Poe leaves it unclear if the bird, which seems to be a double of the narrator’s sub-conscious mind, actually knows what it is saying or whether it really intends to cause a reaction in the poem's narrator.