

Poe: gothic genius or  
raven lunatic?



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His name is the subject of countless English teacher puns. His face can be seen on everything from nerdy coffee mugs to hipster tote bags. His work is on every list of great American poetry, not to mention countless summer reading lists. But does anyone truly know the real Edgar Allan Poe?

For a man whose stories are shrouded in mystery and deception, perhaps the greatest story of mystery and deception is his own life. The first biography written about him was written posthumously by his arch nemesis, so it was full of error and slander (“Poe’s Life” 1). Not to mention Poe was a rather private man, so the real Poe is difficult to discern from the drunken wretch he is made out to be. He certainly has his fans as well as his critics, and for good reason. His works are hailed as the prime examples of gothic literature in a day where literacy was first becoming available to the masses. Poe’s central themes of loss, especially young death caused by disease, were all too relatable. Though the modern premature mortality rate has vastly decreased, the theme of death has not vanished from literature, and as a result, the profound motifs of loss and despair are as relevant to the twenty-first century reader as they were when Poe was alive. In his writing, Poe utilizes vivid imagery, incorporates multifaceted symbolism, and plays upon his audience’s emotions to best convey his own twisted sense of reality.

Poe’s dark and often perverse tales are credited to have influenced writers such as H. P. Lovecraft and Ambrose Bierce, “who belong to a distinct tradition of horror literature initiated by Poe” (Poet Details 1), as well as psychological thriller film director Alfred Hitchcock, who attributed his love of horror to growing up reading Poe (Bits and Pieces 1). Not surprisingly, the root of the dark, fixated obsession the world has on Poe’s writing is in his

remarkable talent for manipulating language. In one of his most famous short stories, “ The Fall of the House of Usher,” Poe weaves a tapestry of melancholy revolving around the narrator’s old friend, a sorrowful man who has recently lost his twin sister and is himself dying of a disease that can be described only as psychosomatic. The story is introduced by John P. Roberts, the editor of a collection of Poe stories called together Eight Tales of Terror and author of the following analysis: “ We may choose from a list of Poe’s atmosphere words: gloom, melancholy, decay, dreariness, dilapidation... “ instability,” “ terror,” “ hysteria”... the (very) house is full of sinister pulsations” (Roberts, 90). The rest of the story continues in this fashion. The narrator goes on to describe the decaying household, which is nearly personified as an outward embodiment of the waning spirit of Roderick Usher. “ Poe’s language keeps us from seeing his characters and situations as related to real life,” Roberts explains in the introduction to his Poe compilation. “ The characters are like figures moving across a carefully prepared stage; often they are less important than the painted backdrop- a Fiberglas curtain that makes everything soft and dreamlike. This is as if should be. If the audience... gets close enough to suspect that Ligeia or Madeline Usher might have to get breakfast or sew on a button or meet someone at the station, Poe’s spell is broken and the tale becomes farce comedy... for Poe, distance is preserved by language” (Roberts x). This all to say that Poe’s seemingly enchanting gloom stems directly from the words themselves. They are remarkably eldritch, and they paint a scene of deep sorrow and tumultuous emotional turmoil. Poe, though known more for his short stories than his poetry, is believed to have more than mastered the latter. “ The laws of effect, mood, tone, music, (and) length of poems

reached their culmination... (in) “ Annabel Lee,” wherein, by means of repetition, each stanza coiled back on and absorbed its predecessor before it could move on again” (Davidson 98). The catchy, sorrowful, sweet rhythm of Poe’s work is truly a feat deserving of the highest esteem, as it allows the reader to truly revel in the imagery he or she might otherwise glaze over. “ In her sepulchre by the sea/ in her tomb by the sounding sea,” he writes, writing to memorialize the youthful “ Annabel Lee,” taken too soon by “ a wind (that) blew out of a cloud by night” (Poe, Poetry Foundation). For example, he deliberately chooses the term “ sepulcher,” which gives substance to the cryptic, dusty, even dreary tone Poe is aiming for. The word “ sepulcher” is darker, drearier, and creepier than perhaps “ resting place” or “ burial.” The tragic loss displayed in “ Annabel Lee” is immortalized in such a manner that plays upon emotionally-charged words.

One of Edgar Allan Poe’s favorite methods of displaying his intellect is to lace his work with classic allegory and symbolism that only those of equal education would pick up on. The symbols are often dark, and fitting for such a macabre writer. One such example is in his arguably most famous piece, “ The Raven.” Poe’s masterpiece of poetry chronicles the bitterly sorrowful plight of the narrator, who is mourning the loss of his lover “ whom the angels call Lenore” (Poetry Foundation 11). The exquisite dulcinea to whom he writes is often believed to be his wife, Virginia, who died of tuberculosis after only four years of marriage (Swan 2). Of course, the poem is riddled with symbolism, from the “ bleak December” (Poetry Foundation 7) to the “ stately Raven of the saintly days of yore” (40) that perched atop the “ bust of Pallas just above my chamber door” (43). Poe ingeniously weaves the

allusion to the Greek goddess of intellect and strategy, Pallas (better known as Athena) into “The Raven,” which is a testament to the narrator’s own intellect. Since a statue is a statement of status and pride, it symbolizes the narrator’s great pride in his own intellect. However, the bird, a raven (an omen of death and tragedy) flits into his home and casually perches atop this bust as if it were nothing of value, which demonstrates how the narrator’s prided intellect is useless and perhaps even laughable beside the powers of fate and of death (Davidson 87). Other pieces of symbolism fill the poem: the chamber in which it happens can be perceived as an embodiment of the narrator’s loneliness, the rich furnishings reminders of his lost Lenore. The storm raging outside can represent how the speaker is in the eye of the storm—calm in his own sadness, but surrounded by emotional turmoil that threatens to enter at any moment (16). Then, of course, there is the healing salve the speaker requests of the bird when he asks, “Is there—is there balm in Gilead?—tell me—tell me, I implore!” (88). The “balm” he speaks of is believed to reference Balsam, a thick, viscous sap from some shrubs native to the Biblical tribes of Gad, Reuben, and Manasseh (grouped to make “Gilead”). It had often been used to numb and seal open wounds, though modern studies show that the fluid can cause other unforeseen health issues when ingested (Moreau 2013). Even just this is too perfect: the man’s pain is so raw from the loss of “Lenore” that he would all but beg a strange bird to tell him whether there was such an unguent that could ease his pain, and of course, his answer is, as expected, “Nevermore.”

The public reaction to Poe’s “The Raven” was varied. Some reveled in its masterpiece. In a letter, Elizabeth Bennett Browning told Poe, “Your ‘Raven’

has produced a sensation, a ‘fit horror,’ here in England. Some of my friends are taken by the fear of it and some by the music. I hear of persons haunted by the ‘Nevermore,’ and one acquaintance of mine who has the misfortune of possessing a ‘bust of Pallas’ never can bear to look at it in the twilight” (Browning 1). Others were less than impressed. Some found his work too dark, including the editors of *The Richmond Compiler*, who, in the February edition in 1836, responds to Poe’s “The Duc de L’Omlette” by wondering why Poe insisted on “descending into the dark, mysterious, and unutterable creatures of licentious fancy” and dabbling in “German enchantment and supernatural imagery” (Bits and Pieces II 1997). Jill Lepore, an editor for *The New Yorker* with a PhD in American Studies from Yale, also ridiculed his work, stating, “Most of Poe’s stories have this campy, floozy “Boo!” business at the end. Poe knew these were cheap tricks... (and) they weren’t to everyone’s taste” (18). Lepore goes on to accuse Poe of writing not to satiate the world’s need for literature, but to put food on the table. She even cites a letter Poe sends to his publishers and the rather miserable post-script of “p. s. I am poor” to illustrate his desperation (21).

The argument is often held over whether Poe was truly a lover of poetry and literature, crafting art that is the lovechild of bitter despair and beautiful tragedy, or simply a desperate man driven by hunger alone. Either way, his dark purpose was fulfilled: his writing did keep him alive, and it did greatly impact the world of literature. As stated by George Lippard in the November 1997 edition of *Citizen Soldier* newspaper, “Delighting in the wild and visionary, (Poe’s) mind penetrates the innermost recesses of the human soul, creating vast and magnificent dreams, eloquent fantasies, and terrible

mysteries. Again, he indulges in a felicitous vein... that copies no writer in the language" (Bits and Pieces II). Evidently, Poe's work evokes emotions in his readers. He is like a puppeteer, whose puppets are his readers, the strings his words. One such case is in his short story, "The Cask of Amontillado." This tale records the anger and bitterness of one nobleman, Montresor, towards another named Fortunato. Montresor never explains what his "thousand injuries of Fortunato" actually are, but the emotion he feels is raw and true. The petty revenge story where Montresor lures Fortunado into the catacombs of the city with the promise of fine wines (as suggests the title of "Amontillado," a dry sherry) satiates a sadistic or even child-like urge to "get even." Readers can relate to Montresor's vengeful spite, but also with Fortunato's agony. After all, even the smallest of children play the "he started it!" card when the grown-ups intervene, because it is human nature to want revenge. It gives its audience a vicarious edge of satisfaction, even despite the moral soundness that admits Montresor's crime is vile and heinous. While it does not render it justified, it does allow for a sense of sympathy (Roberts, 1). This sympathy is the dangerous, appalling, yet extremely filling sentiment created by Poe's handiwork. The reader is left wondering, then, whether Montresor was truly a villain, or if since Fortunato's plight is so satisfying, he is to be commended. His twisted sense of justice is the very sense that gained Poe his world renown. This motif echoes not only in what Poe wrote, but of what he expected of other writers. "Whereas earlier critics predominantly concerned themselves with moral or ideological generalities, Poe focused his criticism on the specifics of style and construction that contributed to a work's effectiveness or failure" (Poet Details 1). Poe didn't care what a man preached as much as how well

he preached it, which demonstrates his concern about the piece's emotional appeal.

Edgar Allan Poe weaves tapestries of language, allegory, and emotional appeal into his work that is so famous for twisting their audiences' perception of reality. He hand-selects words that pierce the minds and souls of his readers. Not everyone loved the crepuscular horror of his murky literature, but nevertheless, he will forever be remembered as the pioneer and reigning king of literary horror. His name is both praised and degraded for his masterpieces of gothic literature, and even those who do not subscribe to his widespread admiration cannot deny the genius that is woven into every word. Will he ever renounce his title as King of Literary Horror? Quoth the poet, " Nevermore."