

Teaching Edgar Allan Poe's “The Raven”

An Online Professional Development Seminar



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2010-11, 2011-12

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from the National Humanities Center

COMMON CORE GOALS

- Advance the goal of the **Common Core State Standards** in English Language Arts and literacy in history and social studies: “To help ensure that all students are college and career ready in literacy”
- Promote close attentive reading
- Foster deep and thoughtful engagement with high-quality literary and informational texts
- “The Raven” is a Common Core exemplar text.

UNDERSTANDING

Poe's work, often understood to be completely bizarre and exceptional, actually reflects and engages with crucial issues and artistic trends of his time. It tells us something about his culture. His poetry, like that of other poets of his age, was popular entertainment. Beyond that, it drew on the conventions of consolation literature, writing that helped people cope with the death of loved ones, and as such was a product of the culture of mourning that was prominent in the mid-nineteenth century. Artistically, Poe's ideas about what poetry should express, especially well rendered in "The Raven," are very much in line with other nineteenth-century theories of poetry such as those expressed by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

FRAMING QUESTIONS

- How do the formal properties of Poe's poem (rhythm, meter, rhyme, alliteration, assonance, repetition) relate to the poem's meaning? How did readers in his time understand this poem?
- How does "The Raven" participate in 19th-century cultures of mourning?
- What exactly happens in "The Raven," and how does the plot unfold? How do we chart the speaker's transformation over the course of the poem?
- What are Poe's own ideas about poetry, and how did he explain the workings of "The Raven"?



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*Gender and the Poetics of Reception
in Poe's Circle*
2004

SEMINAR STRUCTURE

Part One:

“The Raven” as Media Sensation

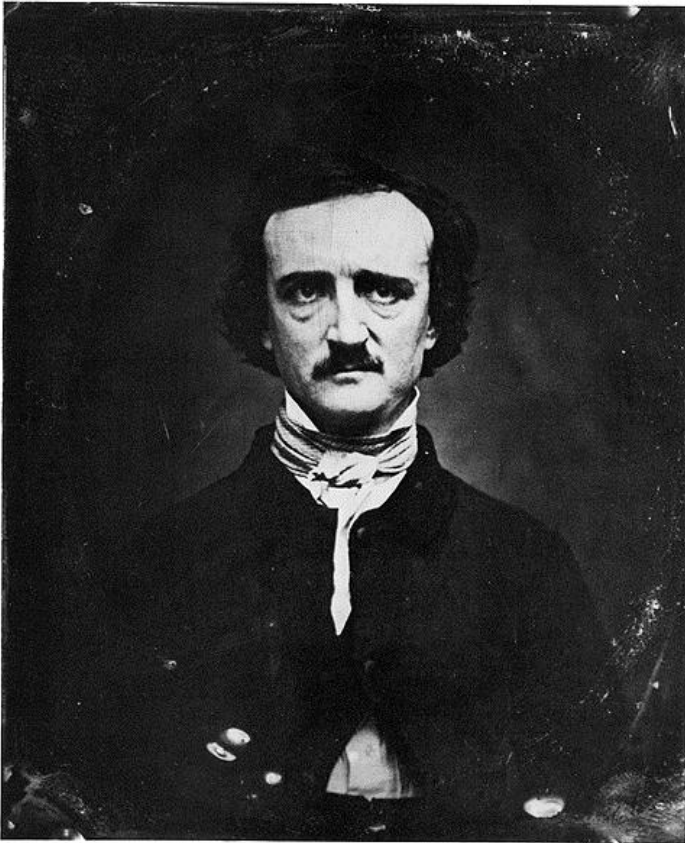
Part Two:

“The Raven” and the Nineteenth-Century Culture of Mourning

Part Three:

Reading “The Raven”

Teaching Poe's "The Raven"



The Ultima Thule Daguerreotype, 1848, taken in Providence 4 days after taking an overdose of laudanum. Poe's fiancée Sarah Helen Whitman gave the image its name.

She said in an 1874 letter to Poe biographer John Henry Ingram:

“Dimly lit, situated against a dark background, Poe here seems to epitomize the image of the tragic romantic poet: solemn, detached, consumed by his own wildly self-destructive nature.”

Discussion Question

What are the ideas of the Romantic artist at the time, and how does Poe fit with them?

Teaching Poe's "The Raven"

Context #1: "The Raven" as mass media sensation.

Contemporary reviews emphasize fascination with the poem's sound.

"The Raven" is "one of these 'dainties bred in a book' which we feed on. It will stick to the memory of everybody who reads it. (Editor's note accompanying first publication of "The Raven" in the *Evening Mirror*, January 29, 1845)

"Edgar A. Poe...gives a wild and shivery poem, which he calls the Raven. It is written in a Stanza unknown before to gods, men, and booksellers, but it fills and delights the ear strangely with its wild and clashing music." (Charles Eames, editor of *The New World*, Feb 15 1862)

"Everybody reads the Poem and praises it — justly we think, for it seems to us full of originality and power. ! 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." (Poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning)

Context #1: "The Raven" as mass media sensation.
The poem's sonic properties.

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.
"T is some visiter," I muttered, "tapping at my chamber door –
Only this and nothing more."

(first stanza of "The Raven")

Discussion Questions

- What is it about the sound of "The Raven" that made it a popular sensation?
- Why does it stick in the mind of readers?
- What is creepy, eerie, chilling about the formal elements (rhythm, meter, alliteration, assonance, rhyme, etc)?

Context #1: "The Raven" as mass media sensation.
Parodies and Versions Multiplied Rapidly.

"The Owl: A Capital Parody on Mr. Poe's Raven" by "Sarles."
(17 FEBRUARY. NEW YORK. The Evening Mirror)

But the owl he looked so lonely, saying that word and that only,
That a thimble-full of whiskey I did speedily outpour
In a tea-cup on the table, which, as well as I was able,
I invited him to drink of, saying there was plenty more
But the owl he shook his head, and threw the whiskey on the floor,
Plainly saying, "nevermore!"

Discussion Questions

- What makes "The Raven" so easy to imitate, and how might that be a factor in its popular success?

Context #2: Victorian Culture of Mourning.

What held the rapt attention and answered to the hopes of many Protestants were representations of death that glorified the adventures of the spirit while downplaying what to many was the cruel, unacceptable order of nature: bodily disintegration. The intensity of these wishes indicates the growing importance in the nineteenth century of the feelings of survivors, who could not bear the loss of and separation from an intimate relation....The popularity of "consolation literature," written ... in the middle decades of the nineteenth century and continuing through the postbellum period, is evidence of one form of this cultural shift. Images of the after life offered in this literature, often representing desired reunions between loved ones, also contributed to new sensibilities that accepted termination of affectionate relationships, encouraged emotionally charged memories of the lost individual, and established new modes of interpreting the body. This imaginative universe transformed death into a time of hope and promise rather than gloom and despair. (Laderman, *Sacred Remains*, 60)



The Raven, illustrated by Gustave Dore, 1884

Eagerly I wished the morrow;--vainly I had
sought to borrow
From my books surcease of sorrow—sorrow
for the lost Lenore--

Discussion Question

To what extent does Poe's poem fit this description of "consolation literature," and to what extent does it deviate from it?

Context #2: 19c. Cultures of Mourning: "Morbid Obsessions".

In addition to attitudes toward death that valorized spiritual community and natural symbolism, more diffused, less coherent attitudes existed in mainstream, Protestant culture before the Civil War. On the one hand, the immediate, individualized emotional response to the death and physical remains of a close relation did not always conform to standard, acceptable forms of behavior—the increasingly privatized expressions of grief and sadness allowed individuals an opportunity to improvise, act on spontaneous impulses, and develop unique ways of mourning. On the other hand, traces of sensationalism and imaginative innovation appeared in northern public culture....These attitudes were centered on three powerful characteristics: a refusal to allow the dead to disappear from the living community, a fixation on the body of the deceased, and a demand that the integrity of the corpse be perpetuated in the grave as well as in collective memory (Laderman, *Sacred Remains*, 73)



19th-century post-mortem photograph: woman posed as if she were sleeping.

Discussion Questions

- What innovative, individual modes of mourning does the speaker in "The Raven" develop?
- Is there some way that the speaker continues to fixate on Lenore's body, and not just her spirit? Does the speaker betray forms of "morbid obsession" ?

Reading “The Raven”

Teaching Poe's "The Raven"



Open here I flung the shutter, when, with many a flirt and flutter,
In there stepped a stately Raven of the saintly days of yore;
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 --
Perched upon a bust of Pallas just above my chamber door --
Perched, and sat, and nothing more.



Discussion Questions

What is the speaker's attitude toward the raven when he first flies through the window? How does his attitude change the longer he talks to the bird?



This I sat engaged in guessing, but no syllable expressing
To the fowl whose fiery eyes now burned into my bosom's core;
This and more I sat divining, with my head at ease reclining
On the cushion's velvet lining that the lamp-light gloated o'er,
But whose velvet-violet lining with the lamp-light gloating o'er,
She shall press, ah, nevermore!

Discussion Questions

How has the speaker's mood changed, several stanzas later? To what do you attribute this change?

The climax of "The Raven" is repetitive: two stanzas strongly echo one another:

"Prophet!" said I, "thing of evil! -- prophet still, if bird or devil! --
Whether Tempter sent, or whether tempest tossed thee here ashore,
Desolate yet all undaunted, on this desert land enchanted --
On this home by Horror haunted -- tell me truly, I implore --
Is there -- is there balm in Gilead? -- tell me -- tell me, I implore!"
Quoth the Raven "Nevermore."

"Prophet!" said I, "thing of evil! -- prophet still, if bird or devil!
By that Heaven that bends above us -- by that God we both adore --
Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn,
It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore --
Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore."
Quoth the Raven "Nevermore."

Discussion Questions

- Why does the speaker become increasingly repetitive?
- Why does he become increasingly agitated?
- If he knows the bird only knows how to say "nevermore," why does he keep asking it questions?

Poe's explanation of the lover's transformation during the course of the poem in "The Philosophy of Composition":

"the lover, startled from his original nonchalance by the melancholy character of the word itself, by its frequent repetition, and by a consideration of the ominous reputation of the fowl that uttered it, is at length excited to superstition, and wildly propounds queries of a far different character--queries whose solution he has passionately at heart--propounds them half in superstition and half in that species of despair which delights in self-torture--propounds them not altogether because he believes in the prophetic or demoniac character of the bird (which reason assures him is merely repeating a lesson learned by rote), but because he experiences a frenzied pleasure in so modeling his questions as to receive from the expected "Nevermore" the most delicious because the most intolerable of sorrows."

Discussion Question

- What are the signs of the speaker's "self-torture" in the poem?



Poe also says in "The Philosophy of Composition" that "the death of a beautiful woman is the most poetical topic in the world" :

I asked myself--"Of all melancholy topics what, according to the universal understanding of mankind, is the most melancholy?" Death, was the obvious reply. "And when," I said, "is this most melancholy of topics most poetical?" From what I have already explained at some length the answer here also is obvious--"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."

Discussion Questions

- Poe wasn't alone in thinking this, it is clear from the many, many poems about beautiful dead women written in his time. Why might this be a cultural obsession?
- In what way is "The Raven" about poetic beauty?

We have still a thirst unquenchable, to allay which he has not shown us the crystal springs. This thirst belongs to the immortality of Man. It is at once a consequence and an indication of his perennial existence. It is the desire of the moth for the star. It is no mere appreciation of the Beauty before us, but a wild effort to reach the Beauty above. Inspired by an ecstatic prescience of the glories beyond the grave, we struggle by multiform combinations among the things and thoughts of Time to attain a portion of that Loveliness whose very elements perhaps appertain to eternity alone. And thus when by Poetry, or when by Music, the most entrancing of the poetic moods, we find ourselves melted into tears, we weep then, not as the Abbate Gravina* supposes, through excess of pleasure, but through a certain petulant, impatient sorrow at our inability to grasp now, wholly, here on earth, at once and for ever, those divine and rapturous joys of which through' the poem, or through the music, we attain to but brief and indeterminate glimpses.

*Refers to the poetic theory of the Italian critic Gian Vincenzo Gravina, who held that poetry should draw the mind into state of exaltation akin to madness.

Discussion Question

What is Poe's definition of Beauty here, and how does it help explain the focus in "The Raven" and his other poems on the death of beautiful women, as told by bereaved lovers?

Final slide.

Thank you