



A STUDY OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL INFLUENCES IN
THE WORKS OF E.A. POE AT THE EXAMPLE OF
“THE RAVEN”

Skilled Work in the subject English



by



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Introduction

I always liked Edgar Allan Poe's works. I am fascinated by those horror stories and dark human actions Poe often describes. Soon I also began to read his poems. "The Raven" is the first one I read. Actually just because it is the most famous one but after I read it I understood why it is so famous. This poem impressed me because of its sound and the really strange and creepy action. Who has such an idea of letting a raven appear in a room and just saying one word that always is a perfectly fitting answer? What is going on in such a brain, imagining these horror visions? So I decided to choose the topic:

A study of autobiographical influences in the works of Edgar Allan Poe at the example of "The Raven".

There is that saying that in every myth there is something true. The same is with stories or poems. There always must be a trigger to start the thoughts that later on build a story or some other literary work. This trigger is what I am interested in. But to find this trigger that Edgar Allan Poe made writing "The Raven" can only eventually be found in his life. A biography is the best way to find out something about a specific author. Discovering the life and trying to understand or divine are two different things. Knowing the author's life is great but knowing the poem too is even better to understand the connection between both of them. The next step is the analysis of "The Raven" and to find out what could be meant by the words put together forming a poem.

While searching for all the information I found out that Edgar Allan Poe even wrote an essay about how he wrote "The Raven". This essay is called "The Philosophy of Composition". Having a work of the author himself that is about the work one wants to deal with is a great way finding out more about the work and the author and the connection of them.

With this I try to find out in the following if there are any autobiographical aspects in Edgar Allan Poe's Poem "The Raven"?

1. Biography

Edgar Allan Poe was an American writer, poet and critic. He is famous for his horror and mystery stories and poems and nowadays is often called the “architect of the modern short story”¹ and the father of the modern detective story².

January 19, 1809 Edgar Allan Poe was born in Boston. His parents – Elisabeth Arnold Poe and David Poe, Jr. - were both professional actors. Very early his father left the family. His mother died of tuberculosis when he was only three years old. Separated from his siblings he lived with John and Frances Valentine Allan in Richmond, Virginia. John Allan was a successful tobacco merchant and was able to send Poe to the best boarding schools and later to the University of Virginia. But the relationship between Edgar Allan Poe and John Allan was difficult. While Poe wanted to use his “literary talents”³ John Allan wanted him to become part of the family business. This also might be the reason why Poe had to leave the University of Virginia, in 1826, where he excelled academically after only one year. Allan did not send him enough money and was not willing to pay Poe’s gambling debts⁴. Poe returned to Richmond. Back home he discovered that his fiancée, Elmira Royster, had another man⁵. In 1827 he joined the United States Army and moved to Boston. In this year he also published his first poem collection “Tamerlane, and Other Poems”. He was only eighteen years old. In 1829 his second collection was published⁶. One of these books became any public attention.

When Poe learned that Frances Allan was dying of tuberculosis he returned to Richmond. But too late, she was already dead when he arrived. In the time Poe was in Virginia he and Allan briefly made peace with each other. Allan even helped Poe getting an appointment to the United States Military Academy at West Point. One year later he had to leave because of financial problems⁷.

¹ Poets.org/poetsorg/poet/edgar-allan-poe

² comp. Edgar Allan Poe Biography, biography.com/people/edgar-allan-poe-9443160

³ comp. ibid.

⁴ comp. Poets.org/poetsorg/poet/edgar-allan-poe

⁵ comp. Poemuseum.org/poes-biography

⁶ comp. Edb.

⁷ comp. Poets.org/poetsorg/poet/edgar-allan-poe

After leaving West Point he published his third book. He searched an opportunity to write full-time in New York, Baltimore and Richmond. In Baltimore he lived at his aunt's house. Maria Clemm, his aunt, became something like a new mother for Edgar Allan Poe. Maria Clemm's daughter, Virginia, lived in Poe's new home too⁸. "First Virginia was just carrying letters to Poe's lady loves but soon became the object of his desire. While he was in Baltimore John Allan died 1834, leaving Poe out of his will⁹. Poe was living in poverty and published short stories to earn some money. In 1835 he finally became the editor of the "Southern Literary Messenger" in Richmond. One year later Poe married Virginia. She was nearly fourteen at this time¹⁰.

In 1837 he left the magazine, according to some reports because of his problems with alcohol¹¹. The next years he sold his stories to magazines, for example Burton's Gentleman's Magazine, Graham's Magazine, The Broadway Journal and Alexanders's Weekly Messenger¹²

1844 he moved to New York City and got attention for his news story in The New York Sun about a "balloon trip across the Atlantic Ocean"¹³. The publication of "The Raven", in 1845, made him a "literary sensation"¹⁴. Now he was famous enough to demand better pay for his work.

"After Virginia's death from tuberculosis in 1847, Poe's lifelong struggle with depression and alcoholism worsened."¹⁵ Until his death two years later, Poe spent his time with travelling and finding backers for his latest proposed magazine project to be called The Stylus¹⁶.

In summer 1849 he returned to Baltimore and reconnected with Emilia Royster. They wanted to marry after Poe's trip to Philadelphia and New York. But on the way to Philadelphia he stopped in Baltimore and disappeared for five days. He was found in the

⁸ comp. Poemuseum.org/poses-biography

⁹ comp. Poets.org/poetsorg/poet/edgar-allan-poe

¹⁰ comp. Edb.

¹¹ comp. Edb.

¹² comp. Edgar Allan Poe Biography, biography.com/people/edgar-allan-poe-9443160

¹³ Poets.org/poetsorg/poet/edgar-allan-poe

¹⁴ ibid.

¹⁵ ibid.

¹⁶ comp. poemuseum.org/poses-biography

bar room of a public house¹⁷. Four days later he died in the Washington College Hospital. “His last words were ‘Lord, help my poor soul’”¹⁸

The cause of his death is unknown. “Some experts believe that alcoholism led to his demise [...] Rabies, epilepsy and carbon monoxide poisoning are just some of the conditions thought to have led to the great writer’s death.”¹⁹

After his death Rufus Griswold damaged Poe’s image calling him a “mentally deranged drunkard and womanizer”²⁰.

2. Analysis of the Raven

2.1 Summary

Edgar Allan Poe’s poem “The Raven” was published in January 1845²¹. It’s about an unnamed narrator who tries to forget his lost love Lenore, influenced by a raven.

The poem begins with a man sitting in a “typically Gothic setting with a lonely apartment, a dying fire, and a ‘bleak December’ night while wearily studying his books in an attempt to distract himself from his troubles”²². He is “nearly napping”²³ when “suddenly there came a tapping”²⁴. The narrator first of all thinks it is just a late visitor. The flattering curtains in his room begin to frighten him. “And the sad uncertain rustling of each purple curtain Thrilled me-filled me with fantastic terrors never felt before”²⁵. Once again, he says that this noise is just a visitor and so he opens the door to excuse his late opening of the

¹⁷ ibid.

¹⁸ Biography.com/people/edgar-allan-poe-9443160

¹⁹ ibid.

²⁰ ibid.

²¹ <https://www.grin.com/document/370458>

²² ibid.

²³ Poe, *Illustrated Tales of Mystery and Imagination; The Raven*, page 21, line 3

²⁴ ibid.

²⁵ ibid. Page 21, line 13-14

door. But behind the door there is “Darkness there, and nothing more.”²⁶ He only hears a word “Lenore”, his lost love he tries to forget. But the name was just an echo because the narrator himself whispered the name.²⁷ Back in his chamber the narrator again hears this “tapping”²⁸. “‘Tis the wind and nothing more’”²⁹ he explains this noise that seems to come from the window.³⁰ The narrator opens the window and “a stately Raven of the saintly days of yore”³¹ comes into the room. The raven directly sits down on “a bust of Pallas”³² above the narrator’s door. The appearance of “this ebony bird”³³ first of all amuses the narrator and asks the raven his name. The raven answers: “Nevermore”³⁴. The narrator thinks that the raven like all his other friends will leave him tomorrow but the raven again says:” Nevermore”³⁵. A bit confused the narrator concludes that the raven only learned this word from his master. Somehow the raven makes the narrator remember Lenore and that she will never sit on the chair he is sitting. “She shall press, ah, nevermore!”³⁶

When the raven says that the narrator will forget Lenore nevermore, the narrator calls the raven an evil prophet. When the narrator asks if he will see Lenore in heaven again, the raven, like always, answers:” Nevermore!”³⁷ Hurt by this answer the narrator tries the raven to leave his room. “Quoth the raven: `Nevermore! `”³⁸ And the raven stays on the “bust of Pallas”³⁹ and the narrator’s “soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor Shall be lifted- nevermore!”⁴⁰

²⁶ *ibid.* Page 22, line 6

²⁷ *comp. Edb.* Page 22, lines 7-12

²⁸ *ibid.* Page 22, line 14

²⁹ *ibid.* Page 22, line 18

³⁰ *comp. Edb.* Page 22, line 15

³¹ *ibid.* Page 22, line 20

³² *ibid.* Page 22, line 23

³³ *ibid.* Page 25, line 1

³⁴ *ibid.* Page 25, line 6

³⁵ *ibid.* Page 25, line 24

³⁶ *ibid.* Page 26, line 12

³⁷ *ibid.* Page 29, line 6

³⁸ *ibid.* Page 29, line 12

³⁹ *ibid.* Page 29, line 14

⁴⁰ *ibid.* Page 29, line 18

2.2 Interpretation

The poem has got 108 verses divided into eighteen stanzas.” The meter of the poem is mostly trochaic octameter, with eight stressed-unstressed two-syllable feet per lines. Combined with the predominating ABCBBB end rhyme scheme and the frequent use of internal rhyme, the trochaic octameter and the refrain of "nothing more" and "nevermore" give the poem a musical lilt when read aloud.”⁴¹

The atmosphere of the poem is really lonely and melancholic. This is underlined through many O-sounds like Lenore or nevermore which creates a sad and dark feeling while reading. “Finally, the repetition of “nevermore” at the end of stanzas 8 to 18 underlines the dark, morbid character of the poem. (Poe 58 – 61)”⁴²

Aside from that, the setting of the poem reflects the emotional state of mind of the central character, and permits conclusions to Moldenhauer’s statement:

‘The protagonist, who is also typically the narrator of the piece, is driven by inner compulsions or beset by horrific external forces, or both; he seems to assert no control over his acts, and moves inexorably toward destruction.’ (Moldenhauer 830f.)⁴³

The poem is full of symbols. Most obvious is the raven. “It would make little sense to use a human, since the human could reason to answer the questions (Poe, 1850).”⁴⁴ The raven often symbolises an ill-omen or death. Often this is connected to the raven’s black feathers. As a proof for an ill-omen symbolised by the raven, the protagonist calls the raven in the poem a “prophet”⁴⁵. But the raven in the poem also creates the picture “of a noble man, probably a king walking to his throne.”⁴⁶ This underlines the importance of the raven in the poem and the power of the raven. He sits down on the bust of Pallas above the door makes the raven look even more powerful. First of all because he is positioned higher than the narrator which lets the raven seem to be omniscient. Additional to that he sits on a bust of

⁴¹ <http://www.gradesaver.com/poses-poetry/study-guide/summary-the-raven>

⁴² <https://www.grin.com/document/370458>

⁴³ *ibid.*

⁴⁴ <http://www.poedecoder.com/essays/raven/>

⁴⁵ Poe, *Illustrated Tales of Mystery and Imagination; The Raven*, page 26, line 19

⁴⁶ <https://www.grin.com/document/370458>

Pallas who is in the Geek Mythology Athena the goddess of wisdom. It could be interpreted that the raven is wise and due to that also omniscient.

“Poe may also be referring to Norse mythology, where the god Odin had two ravens named Hugin and Munin, which respectively meant "thought" and "memory." The narrator is a student and thus follows Hugin, but Munin continually interrupts his thoughts and in this case takes a physical form by landing on the bust of Pallas.”⁴⁷

Another symbol that might not be that obvious is the mentioning of “December” and “midnight”.

Both midnight and December, symbolize an end of something, and also the anticipation of something new, a change, to happen. The midnight in December, might very well be New Year's eve, a date most of us connect with change. This also seems to be what Viktor Rydberg believes when he is translating "The Raven" to Swedish, since he uses the phrase "årets sista natt var inne, " ("The last night of the year had arrived"). Kenneth Silverman connected the use of December with the death of Edgar's mother (Silverman, 1992:241), who died in that month.⁴⁸

Next to the symbolic meaning of the raven it also plays a significant role for the behaviour of the narrator. All those questions from the protagonist and answered from the raven with “Nevermore” provoke the protagonist. This leads to a change in the thoughts of the narrator. While he at the beginning of the poem always thinks that the noise is natural and also that the raven always says this word because it is the only one he knows, the narrator later on is afraid of the raven and sees in him an evil power full of knowledge. “The repetition of the word “nevermore” turns the narrator from mournful, edgy into a depressed, hopeless man.”⁴⁹ “For the poem's speaker, the Raven has moved beyond mournful, never-ending remembrance to an embodiment of evil.”⁵⁰

Next to symbols Poe also uses ancient and poetic language in the poem that fits perfectly

⁴⁷ <http://www.gradesaver.com/poses-poetry/study-guide/summary-the-raven>

⁴⁸ <http://www.poedecoder.com/essays/raven/>

⁴⁹ <https://www.grin.com/document/370458>

⁵⁰ <https://study.com/academy/lesson/edgar-allen-poes-the-raven-summary-and-analysis.html>

into it because the protagonist is reading books of “forgotten lore”⁵¹. For example he mentions “Seraphim whose footfalls tinkled on the tufted floor.”⁵² A seraphim is one of the six-winged angels standing in the presence of God.⁵³ “‘Nepenthe,’ from the same verse, is a potion, used by ancients to induce forgetfulness of pain or sorrow.”⁵⁴ “‘Plutonian,’ characteristic of Pluto, the god of the underworld in Roman mythology.”⁵⁵

3. The Philosophy of Composition

Edgar Allan Poe wrote an essay about his work “The Raven”, titled “The Philosophy of Composition”. In this essay he explains his writing method and how intentional each part of the writing process must be. This is what Poe called “the unity of effect”.⁵⁶

In his essay he outlines that every single detail in his poem is well chosen. Even the length of the poem. Poe writes that a literary work is to be read in one sitting. This length he defines with 100 lines. Also “The Raven” fits into this. It has 108 lines.⁵⁷ He also thought a lot about the topic of the poem. It should appeal to critics and commoners. The topic had to be relatable for both. Poe concludes that beauty is necessary part in a good poem.

Regarding, then, Beauty as my province, my next question referred to the *tone* of its highest manifestation — and all experience has shown that this tone is one of *sadness*. Beauty of whatever kind, in its supreme development, invariably excites the sensitive soul to tears. Melancholy is thus the most legitimate of all the poetical tones. able for both.⁵⁸

The final combination of melancholy and beauty in the poem is the death of a beautiful woman.

⁵¹ Poe, Illustrated Tales of Mystery and Imagination; The Raven, page 21, line 2

⁵² *ibid.* Page 26, line 14

⁵³ *comp.* <http://www.poedecoder.com/essays/raven/>

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶ <https://study.com/academy/lesson/edgar-allen-poses-the-raven-summary-and-analysis.html>

⁵⁷ *comp.* <https://www.eapoe.org/works/essays/philcomp.htm>

⁵⁸ <https://www.eapoe.org/works/essays/philcomp.htm>

Poe decided to put a refrain into the poem. The refrain should outline the theatrics. According to the whole length, the refrain has to be short and monotonous to build up slowly the intention after it.⁵⁹ Because of the `o-sound` in connection with the `r` Poe decided to use `Nevermore` as the refrain.

Surely Poe also thought about the raven playing a big role in the poem. First of all, Poe excluded a human saying the refrain. Secondly, he thought of a parrot but resolved to use a raven instead because of its symbol of ill-omen.⁶⁰

He writes that he always begins his poems at the climax and then works forward to the beginning. “Here then the poem may be said to have its beginning — at the end, where all works of art should begin”⁶¹.

The reader begins now to regard the Raven as emblematical — but it is not until the very last line of the very last stanza, that the intention of making him emblematical of *Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance* is permitted distinctly to be seen.⁶²

Poe completes what he wanted to receive with his refrain. Just at the very end the reader is able to understand the whole meaning of the refrain.

Conclusion

As a conclusion one can say that Edgar Allan Poe definitely thought a lot about “The Raven” and followed a concrete plan one special aim. The aim to get attention and also money. Nearly every single word in his poem has its own relevance. Poe himself wrote that writing is a “mathematical problem”⁶³. This actually shows that he didn’t include any personal experiences in the poem. That there is one way and one scheme which one has to follow to receive the aim of a good literary work. But by following one scheme there is no personal input or any feelings of the author included. It’s a bit strange because literature often deals with or includes heavy feelings. Also “The Raven”. Very obvious is that “The

⁵⁹ comp. <https://www.eapoe.org/works/essays/philcomp.htm>

⁶⁰ comp. <https://www.eapoe.org/works/essays/philcomp.htm>

⁶¹ <https://www.eapoe.org/works/essays/philcomp.htm>

⁶² <https://www.eapoe.org/works/essays/philcomp.htm>

⁶³ <https://www.eapoe.org/works/essays/philcomp.htm>

Raven” is written really melancholic because of the loss of the narrator. Poe writes in “The Philosophy of Composition” that the topic everyone can identify with is beauty and in contrast to that sadness.⁶⁴ He presents it as if it would be the same for all people, that they all see the counterpart of beauty, which is itself connected with positive feelings, is sadness and melancholy, so the negative part of every positive feeling.

Interesting is that Poe himself was depressive and maybe that is why his stories and poems are so pessimistic. Poe also had some affairs⁶⁵ which could be the relation to his first universal topic of “The Raven”, beauty. Combing these two topics could also be autobiographic because the women he loved, his mother and his first fiancée left him. “Kenneth Silverman connected the use of December with the death of Edgar’s mother (Silverman, 1992:241), who died in that month.”⁶⁶ Even if that is not a total proof it is at least a possibility of adding autobiographical parts into the poem. Poe could not have received much love at all. With the background of his family situation it is reasonable that Poe closely relates love with loss. Something positive with something negative. While taking this as true Poe has subliminal chosen the topics beauty and sadness. Even when he presents his work as a “mathematical problem” this does not mean he did not include any autobiographical aspects. Possible that he tried to handle his feelings through writing and did not even recognise it or did not want to see or tell it.

The development of the narrator in “The Raven” also could be at least partly autobiographic. He turns from realistic to irrational thoughts and actions by calling the raven a prophet of the evil. Connected to Poe’s alcohol problem, which became worse after the death of his wife but also was present before, this vanishing border of reality could be explained. The narrator in the poem tries to forget a loved person also Poe tried to forget loved persons he loved e.g. his mother. None of this is really proven but also has not been disproven.

⁶⁴ comp. <https://www.eapoe.org/works/essays/philcomp.htm>

⁶⁵ <http://www.historyandwomen.com/2013/10/edgar-allan-poes-women.html>

⁶⁶ <http://www.poedecoder.com/essays/raven/>

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Statement

Ich erkläre, dass ich die vorliegende Facharbeit ohne fremde Hilfe angefertigt und nur die im Literaturverzeichnis aufgeführten Hilfsmittel und Quellen benutzt habe. Die den benutzten Werken wörtlich oder inhaltlich entnommenen Stellen sind als solche gekennzeichnet.

Wesel, den 23.02.2018