

Annotated Poe

Content Overview – How Did He Do That?

HOW DID HE DO THAT?

Students will click on highlighted words or phrases below to find out more about that item.

Highlighted phrase: **The Raven**

The title can offer a unique insight into the meaning and themes of a poem. Foregrounding one idea, element, or symbol over others can imply its importance to the author and his message. For example, why is this poem called "The Raven" and not "The Disturbed Man" or "Ne vermore?"

The black Raven has long been connected with death, sometimes even being called "the messenger of death." How does this connection prepare you for the themes and ideas that might be presented in the poem?

Highlighted phrase: **Once upon a midnight dreary,** while I pondered, weak and weary,

The phrase "Once upon a time..." is traditionally used to start a fairytale. In "The Raven," Poe chooses to give us that "time" – a dark, dreary, even ominous midnight. What kind of general atmosphere does Poe imply with this first phrase?

The atmosphere or overall mood of a poem is called its *tone*. Lots of things contribute to the tone of a poem: the rhythm of the language, the choice of words, the subject matter, even the author's background. In other words, tone is the sum of all the elements in a poem that make you feel or interpret it in a certain way.

While you're reading "The Raven" you will probably get a sense of its dark tone. See if you can identify some of the literary elements, like **rhyme scheme**, that Poe is using to make you feel that way.

Highlighted phrase: While I nodded, nearly napping, **suddenly there came a tapping,**
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door

As you read these lines, can you imagine what the tapping and rapping on the narrator's chamber door might sound like?

When an author uses a word like tapping or rapping that imitates what something might sound like, it is called *onomatopoeia* (pronounced ahn-uh-mah-tuh-PEE-uh). Onomatopoeias help bring a poem to life by letting you use all your senses, including hearing, when you read and imagine what's happening.

Highlighted phrase: **Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December;**
And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor.

The *setting*, or location of the action, is often used by a poet to reveal the emotional state of the characters involved in a story or poem. By using phrases like "bleak December" and "dying ember," Poe can simultaneously describe the scene and imply what the narrator is thinking and feeling. Based on this, how do you think the narrator feels prior to the Raven's arrival?

Highlighted phrase: **For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore --**

In this line, Poe uses a poetic technique called *assonance*. Assonance creates a pattern of sound by using the vowel-sounds of a series of words. For example, the repetition of the long A sound in "radiant," "maiden," "angels," and "name" are an example of assonance. "Rare" is not in this pattern, because it has a short A sound.

Like any sound device, assonance is used to convey and reinforce some meaning or to link ideas in the poem. How do the long A sounds in this example reinforce how the narrator feels about Lenore?

Highlighted phrase:

When a writer describes an animal, object, or idea using human characteristics or emotions, it is called *personification*. Writers use personification to give something greater emotional appeal and significance by making it seem more human. In this line, for example, the curtain's rustling is described as "sad" and "uncertain."

Why might Poe have attributed these feelings to the way a curtain rustled? How does this use of personification fit in with the other emotions the narrator is going through at this point?

Highlighted phrase: And the silken, sad, uncertain rustling of each purple curtain

Poe uses lots of dashes in "The Raven." A dash can be used to show a sudden change, to mark an interruption, or to amplify some description. In this example, we see a combination of the three. The first dash, between "you" and "here" lets us see the narrator opening the door mid-sentence – an interruption. The second dash, between "door" and "Darkness" amplifies the ominous difference between the narrator's lighthearted speech and the looming darkness – both a sudden change and an amplified description.

Look for other examples of the dash in the poem. What kind of emotions do the dashes help reveal? Imagine you were doing a dramatic reading of "The Raven." How would the dashes affect the way you read the poem?

Highlighted phrase: Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before;

When an author repeats the same beginning consonant sounds in a series of neighboring words, such as the *D*-sound in *doubting*, *dreaming*, *dreams*, and *dared*, it is called *alliteration*. Alliteration is often used to emphasize a theme or idea common to the similar-sounding words. What do the words linked by alliteration in this line tell us about what is going on in the narrator's mind?

Highlighted phrase: And the only word there spoken was the whispered word, "Lenore?"
This I whispered, and an echo murmured back the word, "Lenore!" --

As you've probably noticed, the 4th and 5th lines of each stanza in "The Raven" are very similar. Why did Poe do this? Did he just run out of good material?

When an author reuses a word, phrase, or line in a poem, it is called *repetition*. Repetition is an essential tool for most poets. Why? Because repetition helps unify the writing: a repeated pattern causes us to expect the *next* word or phrase in the pattern, and our ideas and imaginations are drawn along with these expectations. For example, in the two lines highlighted here the words "whispered," "word," and the final rhyme "Lenore" are repeated. The repetition focuses our attention on the most important or emotional words (the eerie whispering of the name Lenore), but also causes us to examine how the pattern has changed between the lines (the first Lenore is spoken by the narrator, but the second is "an echo murmured back" from the darkness).

As you read the poem, look for other places where Poe uses repetition to emphasize certain emotions and ideas. You might want to focus on the repeated **rhyme scheme**, or the use of "nevermore" at the end of each stanza. Consider how the repetition of the word or phrase you're looking at adds to the tone of the poem as a whole.

Highlighted phrase: "Surely," said I, "surely that is something at my window lattice;

The point of view from which a poem or story is told is called its *perspective*. In this poem, the story is told from a *first-person perspective*: the narrator recounts his own experiences on that fateful night with the Raven. A first-person perspective allows you to see inside the narrator's mind and learn what he's thinking and feeling, as well as what he's doing.

A change in perspective can radically change the meaning and feelings a poem or story conveys. Imagine, for example, if "The Raven" was told from the perspective of the bird, or from a stranger passing by who saw the whole scene. How might the tale be different if told from their point of view, instead of the narrator's?

Highlighted phrase: 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 --

Imagine that you got into an argument with the school bully and were sent to the principal's office. If the principal asked *your* friends about the bully's actions and personality, they would probably be more sympathetic to your side and harsher on him. But if he asked the bully's friends to describe the bully's character, they would probably paint him in a much better light.

The same idea is used in a poem or story. The way a character is introduced and subsequently described to the reader is called *characterization*. Characterization can happen a number of ways – we can learn about a character from the character him or herself, we can learn about a character from his or her actions, or we can learn about a character from what another character tells us about them. In other words, characterization is both what we know about a character and how we found out what we know. And like the bully above, it is just as important to notice *who* is doing the characterization as what is being said.

As you're reading, think about how the Raven is being characterized. Whose perspective we are getting the information from? What words and descriptors are being used to describe (or are associated with) the Raven as the poem goes on? Remember that characterization is constantly changing as we learn more about a character from different sources over time.

Highlighted phrase: Then this ebony bird beguiling my sad fancy into smiling,

Earlier, we discussed *tone* as it related to the poem as a whole. Usually, when we refer to the tone of a poem we are talking about its overall mood, especially towards the end of the work. However, the tone of a poem can change over time.

"The Raven" is a fantastic example of a slow change in tone over time. In this stanza, before the Raven speaks, the narrator is more surprised and amused than anything else. His speech might even be considered sarcastic. And he certainly doesn't seem deathly afraid of the bird like he does later in the poem – at first, he even smiles at the Raven! So while the general tone of the poem as a whole is dark and haunting, the tone of this stanza is more amused and surprised.

Contrast this stanza with the following sections of the poem. How does the tone change over time? Notice how the word choices, **rhyme scheme**, and repetition work to heighten this change.

Highlighted phrase: With such name as "Nevermore."

In a lecture in Boston, Poe explained that he had decided that the two most effective letters in the English language were *o* and *r*. This inspired the expression "nevermore," as well as the many other long "*or*" sounds in the poem.

What do you think Poe meant by "effective?" Remember that for authors, the *effect* of a work is the mood, feeling, or idea he or she wants the reader to experience when reading the story. What kind of effect do you think "The Raven" is supposed to have? How do the long *o* and *r* sounds used throughout the poem support and expand this effect?

Highlighted phrase: But the Raven, sitting lonely on the placid bust, spoke only

That one word, as if his soul in that one word he did outpour.

Nothing further then he uttered -- not a feather then he fluttered --

Till I scarcely more than muttered "Other friends have flown before --

On the morrow *he* will leave me, as my hopes have flown before."

Then the bird said "Nevermore."

"The Raven" is an amazingly rhythmic poem – for over 150 years, people have taken great joy just from hearing it read aloud.

But what makes it sound so good? Click here to take a closer look at the **rhyme scheme** in "The Raven.", or patterns of sound consistent throughout the entire work.

After you've learned about the poem's **rhyme scheme**, click the *Where is he coming from?* tab to learn more about how Poe might have come up with this unique **rhyme scheme**.

Highlighted phrase: "Doubtless," said I, "what it utters is its only stock and store
Caught from some unhappy master whom unmerciful Disaster
Followed fast and followed faster till his songs one burden bore --
Till the dirges of his Hope that melancholy burden bore
Of 'Never -- nevermore!'"

Who is the narrator talking to here? The Raven? Lenore? Himself? You?

When a character speaks aloud to himself or herself in a story, play, or poem, it is called a *soliloquy* (pronounced so-LIL-ah-kwee). Usually, the person speaking is completely alone (or at least they think they are) – think of the soliloquy on the balcony in *Romeo and Juliet*. Listening to a soliloquy is like hearing the speaker think out loud.

What does this soliloquy let you know about the narrator's state of mind at this point? Does what he's saying make sense? How is he emotionally? Compare the narrator's state of mind in this soliloquy to one closer to the end of the poem

Highlighted phrase: What this grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt and ominous bird of yore

When an author repeats the same initial sounds in a series of neighboring words, such as the G-sound in "grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt," it is called alliteration. Alliteration is often used to emphasize a theme or idea common to the similar-sounding words. What aspect of the narrator's thoughts on the Raven is Poe highlighting with this alliteration?

Highlighted phrase: On the cushion's velvet lining that the lamp-light gloated o'er,

How do poets make decisions about what words they use in a poem? While we can't know exactly what was going through Poe's head when he wrote specific words, we can begin come up with a list of things all poets think about when they write.

Lets use the word "gloated" as an example. Imagine that Poe had written "On the cushion's velvet lining that the lamp-light _____ o'er" and didn't know what word to fill in the blank. What might he have to think about? First, because of its place in the line and the poem's meter, we know the word should be two syllables and has to be a verb. Second, the word has to fit into the context of the poem – that is, the word should help support the ideas and themes. Third, because the poem is told from a first-person perspective, the word needs to be in sync with what the narrator is going through at this moment.

These are just a few considerations all writers go through. On a sheet of paper, see if you can come up with other things Poe might have thought of before choosing "gloated." After you've made your list, try to think of 5 other words that he could have used instead. Use your imagination – remember, poetry is as much about personal expression as it is creating social meanings. You might even decide you like one of the words you came up with even better than the one Poe chose!

Highlighted phrase: Then, methought, the air grew denser, perfumed from an unseen censer
Swung by Seraphim whose foot-falls tinkled on the tufted floor.

When you read these lines, can you picture how the room might look from the narrator's perspective? Can you imagine what might be running through his mind? Can you see the air thickening, and smell the perfume from the censer? Can you hear the tinkling steps of the Seraphim?

The words and phrases that paint a vivid picture in your mind and evoke your senses *and* emotions are called *imagery*. Poets like Poe strive to create imagery in their work – they want you to touch and see, laugh and fear just like their characters.

If you're having trouble with imagery, try pretending the poem is a movie script. Be the director, and in your mind place the characters, design the scenery, and act out the dialogue and movements. Remember: poets write a poem because they *want* you to experience it as far as your imagination can take you.

Highlighted phrase: Is there -- is there balm in Gilead? -- tell me -- tell me, I implore!"

What is the narrator asking for here? Is he suddenly struck with an urge to get his hands on an ancient healing potion? Or is he using the idea of a legendary healing potion to stand for something else?

Sometimes authors use *symbolism* to make a poem more meaningful. A symbol is something that stands for, or represents, a larger idea – like a flag standing for the idea of a country, or sunshine standing for happiness. Symbols can also have different *connotations*, or implied meanings, depending on the situation they are used in. For example, the word "flush" has a much different meaning if you are talking about the way a person's face looks when it's hot than if you're talking about a toilet!

So what do you think the "balm in Gilead" symbolizes for the narrator? Look for other uses of symbolism, and try to identify the symbol and its connotations for the Raven, the narrator, and you, the reader.

Highlighted phrase: "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."

When a character speaks aloud to himself or herself in a story, play, or poem, it is called a *soliloquy* (pronounced so-LIL-ah-kwee). Usually, the person speaking is completely alone (or at least they think they are) – think of the soliloquy on the balcony in *Romeo and Juliet*. A soliloquy lets the audience hear directly what the speaker is thinking.

Compare this to a soliloquy earlier in the poem. How has the narrator's tone changed? Is he still talking only to himself? Imagine you are a psychologist and you are trying to use the text of these two soliloquies to analyze your patient, the narrator. What would you say about his state of mind? Has it changed between the first and the second statement? If so, how?

Highlighted phrase: **Take thy beak from out my heart,** and take thy form from off my door!"

Poe's note on this phrase from *The Philosophy of Composition*:

"It will be observed that the words, 'from out my heart,' involve the first metaphorical expression in the poem. They, with the answer, 'Nevermore,' dispose the mind to seek a moral in all that has been previously narrated. 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..."

Highlighted phrase: **And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting**

On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;

When an author places two or more words or ideas side by side it is called *juxtaposition*. Here, the image of a black, stoic bird is juxtaposed with the white statue of Pallas on which it perches. How do these two elements work together to create a sense of tension?

Some critics have suggested that a third element, the chamber door, is also an important juxtaposed image in these lines. Using what you know about what the Raven and statue symbolize, why might Poe have them eternally looming over the narrator's door?