

The Solitude of Poe's "The Raven"

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On July 2, 1844 Edgar Allan Poe wrote a letter to James R. Lowell. In this letter, he states, "You speak of 'an estimate of my life'—, from what I have already said, you will see that I have none to give. I have been too deeply conscious of the mutability and evanescence of temporal things... My life has been *whim*—impulse—passion—a longing for solitude—a scorn of all things present, in an earnest desire for the future" (Poe 1: 257). Here, Poe states that he has been too conscious of the uncertainty of this life and the tendency of secular things to vanish, and therefore, he longs for a life of impulse, passion, and more importantly, solitude. By reading Poe's "The Raven," however, one can find that if one lives in solitude, he or she will *become* solitude, as seen in the progression of the speaker's imagination becoming reality.

Edward H. Davidson says in "Poe: A Critical Study" that the "The subject of 'The Raven' was a difficult one, namely, the mind's loss of any hold on reality or the steps toward imaginative madness" (93). The mind's loss of reality can be attributed to the solitude in which the speaker has put himself. The opening lines of the poem reflect the dreariness of his situation, and for the first few stanzas of the poem, the speaker does know imagination from reality. The speaker states, "Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary, / Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore" (1-2). The reader knows that the speaker is alone and is "weak and weary," brooding over books of lore. The "lore" is not explicitly stated, but the reader assumes from the tone of the speaker thus far that these books are of myths, tales, or superstitions. The speaker is "nearly napping," possibly in a dream-like state, when "there came a tapping, / As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door" (3-4). The speaker, completely alone and miserable, believes that he hears someone knocking at his chamber door,

and he believes it is a visitor as he says, "'Tis some visitor,' I muttered, 'tapping at my chamber door-- / Only this and nothing more'" (5-6). He "mutters," implying that he does not want a visitor; he wants to be completely alone in his misery.

In the second stanza, we learn that the speaker desires the future as Poe does. The speaker states, "Eagerly I wished the morrow;--vainly I had sought to borrow / From my books surcease of sorrow—sorrow for the lost Lenore-- / For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore" (8-10). The speaker desires the coming of tomorrow, and he is vainly trying to cease his sorrow by using the books he is reading as a distraction. He also gives us the reason for such sorrow as he tells us he is grief-stricken over his lost Lenore. He then utters, "Nameless *here* for evermore" (10). The italicized "here" lets us know that Lenore is dead. She is no longer *here* on earth, but the speaker may feel that Lenore is *somewhere*. Poe stated in a letter to a Dr. Chivers, "Death is the painful metamorphosis. The worm becomes the butterfly—but the butterfly is still material—of a matter, however, which cannot be recognized by our rudimental organs" (1: 260). Poe is stating that death is not the end, but that when one dies, he/she becomes something else (in matter). Therefore, although Lenore may not be there with the speaker, she is present somewhere. The desire for the future is also perplexing in that in his solitude, he wants the coming of the next day. However, it is possible that he feels this way because he believes he will see Lenore.

The loss of reality, and the imagination becoming reality, progresses more as the poem moves to the third stanza. In his isolation, the speaker is thrilled by the slightest instances of sound and movement. The speaker states, "And the silken, sad, uncertain rustling of each purple curtain, / Thrilled me—filled me with fantastic terrors never felt before" (11-12). The speaker is progressing from a state of simple sadness and melancholy to a state of excitement over his

loneliness. As he is thinking about his beloved Lenore, his mindset becomes more intense as his imagination begins to take control of everything around him. As Edward H. Davidson states, “For somehow, in Poe’s art, the imagination tended to lose itself in the process of going out or making the material world to conform to the imaginative premise. The material world was too often unyielding; instead of the mind’s willing a comprehension, the mind lost itself and became the object” (55). The speaker’s mind in “The Raven” begins to lose itself—and soon we will find that the Raven becomes the object of the mind and eventually the mind itself.

The speaker then goes on to state, “Presently my soul grew stronger; hesitating then no longer. . .” (21). The speaker implores his visitor to make him/herself known to him, but when the speaker opens the door, he finds “darkness there and nothing more” (25). The realization that no one is at his door frightens him. He states, “Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing, / Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before” (26-27). The intensity of the moment grows as the speaker becomes totally aware that he is alone and is “dreaming dreams” that no mortal has dared to dream up until this point. Then one can assume that the next two lines are a dream, as the speaker says,

But this silence was unbroken, and the stillness gave no token,

And the only word there spoken was the whispered word, “Lenore?”

This I whispered, and an echo murmured back the word “Lenore!”

Merely this, and nothing more. (28-30)

In his solitude, the speaker believes that his visitor is his beloved Lenore, and as he whispers this, he hears someone echo her name, and “merely this, and nothing more.” The silence is very important here, as we know that the silence is “unbroken.” There is “stillness” like nothing is in the room with the speaker. How, then, can he hear someone, or something, echo his word back

to him? Also, it is worthy to note that “while he vows in the second stanza that Lenore will remain ‘nameless *here* forevermore,’ he cannot resist naming her: ‘Lenore’ signifies the absence which afflicts him” (Kennedy 68). Up to this point, the reader believes that this echoing is only in his imagination, and the speaker recognizes this assumption to be true in the next stanza as he states, “’Tis the wind, and nothing more” (30).

Because he believes that what he hears is only the wind, the speaker throws open the shutters and sees the raven. According to Christian tradition, a raven is a symbol of unrest, and in other symbology it is commonly known as a symbol of death, mourning, or sin. The raven could then be described as the symbol of Lenore, as she is possibly in “unrest” as the speaker believes she is in another material state (as Poe would have it). However, one could also see a raven as a symbol of solitude: “The raven is a symbol of solitude and an attribute of several saints whom ravens fed in the wilderness, including St. Anthony Abbot, St. Paul the Hermit, and St. Benedict. The raven has [also] long been a symbol of divine providence” (“Raven”). As one Poe critic puts it, “Already the bird’s presence becomes the sign of an irrevocable absence; it embodies the idea of despair and its perching on the bust of Pallas transparently allegorizes the obsessive nature of dejection, in which loss itself becomes a fetish” (Kennedy 69). The speaker says to the bird, “‘Though thy crest be shorn and shaven, thou,’ I said, ‘art sure no craven, / Ghastly grim and ancient Raven wandering from the Nightly shore--/ Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night’s Plutonian shore” (40). The speaker notes that the bird is not “craven,” or cowardly, and he describes it as ghastly, grim, and a lord of the underworld (as seen through the words “Plutonian shore”). However, the raven becomes his fixation, and from here the raven becomes his mind’s object. The bird answers his question by answering “Nevermore” (40). The

raven, as we know, cannot truly speak and has become now a figment of the speaker's imagination, yet the speaker does not realize it.

Although he calls the bird "ghastly," the speaker does at first feel "blessed" that he is seeing the raven. He says, "For we cannot help agreeing that no living human being / Ever yet was blessed with seeing bird above his chamber door--/ Bird or beast upon the sculptured bust above his chamber door, with such a name as 'Nevermore'" (43-45). The speaker knows that the bird should not speak, but he recognizes, in his own mind, that the bird does in fact call itself "Nevermore" when questioned about its name. The "nevermore," though, is attributed to Lenore—she is to be, never more. The raven continues to sit on the bust of Pallas (the goddess of wisdom), and the speaker begins to question him, but the bird only replies with the same word, "Nevermore." The word play on "nevermore" and "Lenore" is quite obvious, not only because it rhymes but also because she is the cause of so much suffering.

The raven becomes the epitome of the speaker's solitude and no longer simply about Lenore—the speaker states, "But the Raven, sitting lonely on the placid bust, spoke only / That one word, as if his soul in that one word he did out-pour" (50-51). The raven is lonely as well, regardless of the fact that it is sitting there with the speaker. The raven can only mutter the word "nevermore," making the speaker believe that the raven will leave him as everything else has: "'On the morrow *he* will leave me, as my Hopes have flown before.' Then the bird said 'Nevermore'" (55). The raven will never leave the speaker, and this is the turning point in the poem. The progression of imagination turning into reality is becoming more real, if you will, because up until this point the progression has lead the speaker to believe a bird is speaking to him. Now, though, the raven points out that it will never leave the speaker, and this "startled" the speaker (51). The raven is now a part of the speaker and will never leave him.

The speaker says, “Then, upon the velvet sinking, I betook myself to linking / Fancy unto fancy, thinking what this ominous bird of yore--/ What this grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird of yore Meant in croaking “Nevermore” (63-65). The speaker is so stunned by the repetition of “nevermore” that he begins to ponder the reason for the bird’s words. He still believes that it has something to do with Lenore, as he says, “*She* shall press, ah, nevermore!” (65). This thought drives the speaker mad, so he says to the raven ““Quaff, oh quaff this kind nepenthe and forget this lost Lenore!’ Quoth the Raven ‘Nevermore’” (70). The raven cannot forget Lenore, however, because the speaker will not forget Lenore. He proves it by asking the raven multiple questions that show his (and ultimately the raven’s) never-ending remembrance of Lenore—although the speaker longs for peace, he hopes that he will see her again, but yet the raven replies “Nevermore.”

The speaker then begs the raven to leave him. He says, “Leave no black plume as a token of that lie thy soul hath spoken! / Leave my loneliness unbroken!—quit the bust above my door” (83-84)! The speaker no longer feels “blessed” about having this bird with him, and he wants him to leave because the raven will not say that he will see his beloved Lenore again. The speaker says to the raven, ““Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my door!’” and of course the raven replies “Nevermore” (85). The raven is now a part of the speaker forever.

The last stanza of the poem reveals that the speaker himself will *become* the raven, as he has chosen a life of solitude. The speaker says, “And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, *still* is sitting / On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door / And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon’s that is dreaming” (90-93). The speaker, in the beginning of the poem, was dozing over books of lore. The raven is sitting (forever) on Pallas, the goddess of wisdom,

and wisdom comes from a multitude of things, especially reading. The raven also seems to be in a “dream” state, just as the speaker was before he heard the raven tapping at his window. The speaker concludes by saying, “And the lamp-light o’er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor; / And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor Shall be lifted—nevermore!” (95). Davidson notes, “We can see the split in Poe’s imaginative world: there were elements of reality, and there were faculties of the mind or imagination...the imagination is lost in the shadow that lies upon the floor, while the inanimate objects, bird and bust, stare out in triumphant rigidity” (92). However, these lines prove that the speaker becomes the raven—he becomes the solitude he desires. The lamp light streams the shadow of the raven on the floor, but the speaker says that *his* own soul comes *out* of that shadow that lies upon the floor, meaning that the speaker’s soul comes from the raven’s shadow—they are one. The speaker’s soul can nevermore be lifted, meaning he will live alone, in solitude, forever.

The mind of the speaker in Poe’s “The Raven” progresses from a simple state of solitude, to a dreamlike imaginative state, in which he believes that he hears someone knocking at his door, to believing that a raven is talking to him, and finally, to his mind becoming the raven, as he is to live in eternal solitude. As Poe would have it, the speaker has no estimate of life as he will live in loneliness, desiring the day when he will see his beloved, but that day will never come. “The Raven” teaches us that to desire such loneliness is essentially to become loneliness as the speaker of the poem becomes the object of his mind, which is the raven, a symbol of solitude.

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