

## English.

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### THE RAVEN.

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#### PART I—STANZAS 1-6.

##### *The occupant of the room.*

Time, place, season, and surroundings.

Physical and mental condition.

Mental occupation.

The tapping: its first explanation, a visitor; second, the supernatural; third, the wind.

#### PART II—STANZAS 7-12.

##### *The Raven.*

Its nature and appearance.

The impression created.

Effect of its first answer.

Effect of the word acted on by the stillness.

Explanation of the word.

Further explanation sought.

#### PART III—STANZAS 13-18.

##### *"Nevermore" first associated with Lenore.*

The link—the chair.

His first interpretation—he shall nevermore be tortured by his memories of Lenore.

If he is not to forget, is there to be healing for his heart's wounds?

If there is not to be healing, is there to be reunion after death?

He would be as he was before its coming.

What the raven typifies.

"The Raven" is a poem that for its careful composition, its musical sound-effects, its peculiar metre and versification, its weird character, and its bold and lofty climax, easily asserts its right to a place in the first rank of English verse. In the order of its composition, too, it is striking and exceptional; for it was with the concluding climax it began, and afterwards the various details leading up to it were elaborated.

In the notes to the High School Reader an excellent sketch is given of the lines upon which, if we are to believe Poe himself in his "Philosophy of Composition," the poem was composed.

He began, we are told, with the stanza commencing:

"Prophet," said I, "thing of evil! prophet still, if bird or devil!"

And you will observe carefully in the poem how he leads up to this point of intense climax and thence advances to the conclusion.

At the outset notice the threefold division of the poem, each division consisting of six stanzas, and bringing to a conclusion a distinct topic.

In the first your attention is drawn to the lover and the circumstances affecting him. His surroundings are most dispiriting.

It is dreary midnight—the hour when man is at his weakest, when his secret soul is shaken most with fears, when

"The graveyard in the human heart  
Gives up its dead."

The season is bleak December, most depressing of all months, when the low heavens seem to mourn the death of summer, and often, further south, the cold, driving, sleety rain beats incessantly upon the roof and drips, drips, drips from the leafless trees upon the dead, sodden leaves beneath.

Outside was a wall of darkness, so dense as to be almost palpable—darkness and tempest. Within, the fire was dying down upon the hearth, and the last embers flaring up cast on the floor fantastic shadows that wavered backward and forward, nodded, beckoned, and vanished. And away out yonder, under the blackness, the rain, perchance, was sinking deeper and deeper into the cold clay that was the only shelter of his loved one from the storm, and above, the chill, shrill wind was moaning that loved one's dirge.

The occupant of the room is in perfect harmony with his surroundings. We see him to be not one like

"That tower of strength  
Which stood four-cornered to the winds of heaven";

not one of those strong sons of earth "who fall to rise, sleep to wake, are baffled to fight better"; but he is rather the direct antithesis—"a man reserved, isolated, dreamy, of high-strung nerves and fantastic moods, with senses excessively acute, and a mind easily accessible to motives of dread." He does not weigh and reason; he is raised to a height at one moment, to be dashed into an abyss the next; he is quick to catch the slightest trace of association and follow it to the most unreasonable conclusions. He is now physically prostrated; worn out with unavailing grief and his futile efforts to free himself from it; and his pale scholarly face is deeply worn with wave-marks of care.

His physical weakness is but the reflection of his mental condition. At every moment there is before his sight the face of his peerless love, his love among the angels—his love lost forever. In loneliness he broods over his loss and seeks relief, not in healthy intercourse with his fellow-beings, nor in active physical pursuit; but he sits apart in that chamber which she whom he is striving to banish from his thoughts had so often brightened with her presence. There where her absence constantly makes him feel

"A loss in all familiar things"

he drives himself, through hours that seem unending, to pore over old and curious books that only feed the malaria of his mind.

At length, worn with grief to the exhaustion point, he almost finds relief in forgetfulness. His breathing grows more regular, his head nods; but just at the moment his nerves are relaxed, he is awakened with a start by a rapping, which, in his confusion, he supposes to have been at his chamber door.

Enough to startle a strong man, in his physical and mental condition it almost unnerves him. He tries to reassure himself by the sound of his voice. He repeats again and again that it is only a late visitor; but his mind and his lips are at variance. He moves towards the door. He starts nervously; he has only touched a curtain, but its rustle has blanched his cheek. Strange and terrible fears dart through his frame, and in his ears he can hear the throbbing of his heart.

He stands hesitating, keeping up his mechanical repetition, but at length he recovers somewhat from the alarm of his sudden awakening; his courage returns and his hesitation leaves him. Fear had benumbed him into silence or meaningless repetition. Now the relapse from it unloosens his tongue with a tendency to talkativeness; and he makes an apology, void of offence to either sex, at his visitor on the other side of the door, then hastily throws it open.

There are over four lines of apology, but one word is sufficient to convey the shock of his discovery—"darkness." Then in his mind ensues a climax of sensations—wonder, fear, doubt, dreams. First he peers into the darkness in wonder—wonder what can have caused the rapping; the wonder unsatisfied grows into vague, chilling fear; the fear, unchecked by reason, rises into doubt—doubt of the relation between the living and the dead; the doubts entertained swell into those awful dreams—dreams that would annihilate space and link two worlds—dreams that would scale heaven and set him face to face with his angel love.

Then through the darkness is sent a whisper—that whisper, one word—that word, a name—that name, a question—"Lenore"! His physical eye strives to pierce the black depths around him, half expecting to see start from them something loved yet terrible. His mental eye seeks to penetrate the thick night of darkness that shuts out the mortal from the eternal world, and his ear is strained to catch the sound of an answering voice from the departed spirit. But to his eye comes nothing but blackness, and to his ear, borne back upon the wailing wind, comes only the empty echo of his own whisper. Thereupon he turns back into the room, with the pallor on his face of one who, while in the body, has dared to hope to hold converse with the dead.

Presently the voice is repeated; more reassuring now, for it sounds louder. But this time he is less confident of his ears. He says not, "'Tis some visitor," but "Surely, surely that is something at my window-lattice." As before, he tries to talk up his courage, and asserts the cause with much more confidence than conviction. He has satisfied himself it is no visitor, so his mind seeks another solution; and, being at the window, he associates it with the wind.

This brings us to the end of the first part. It will be seen that the whole has been so contrived as to produce a highly suspensive effect. The incident of the tapping is referred to in the first stanza, again in the third, the fourth, and the sixth; but still the explanation is delayed; only at each delay the interest is raised and the apprehension increased. It will be felt also that the irregular metre, the peculiar combination of lines, the novel rhyme and mid-rhyme, are in perfect keeping with the weird character of the poem. Other striking features are the handling of the refrain, the recurrence of the same vocal sounds, the same order of syllabic structure, and the new presentations of one idea. These were the outcome of Poe's intense love of music; and it was by these means he appropriated its effects until his verse stood on the borderland between poetry and music.

Here begins the second part. At once we perceive a sharp contrast. Instantly the painful tension is relieved. It is mirth struck sharp on despair; the fearful dreams give way to smiling. The cause of this revolution is nothing else than the entrance of a sorry, tame raven whom the storm has driven to take shelter, and whose eye the light shining from the lattice-window has attracted.

Part of this sudden revulsion of feeling is due to the natural rebound from intense dread. But the raven, as pictured at its entrance, is a grotesque enough thing to produce the result alone.

Get a clear conception of the bird once for all, for to you it is throughout nothing but a poor, bedraggled raven, mournfully croaking its one hopeless word—"nevermore." But not so to the lover. At each moment it is a new creation. To his distempered imagination, sitting ever in the echoes of his grief, the bird's chance word aptly spoken and its ominous character, chiming in with the trend of his own thoughts, cause it to present itself in a variety of aspects of ever-increasing intensity.

It enters the room with its feathers tossed and bedraggled by the storm. It tidies up a bit as it proceeds. It flutters, and bustles, and shakes itself; it flirts its wings, I fancy, with some of that comical movement that to the humorous eye of Mark Twain suggested that its cousin, the blue-jay, was winking with its tail. Then when it has completed its impromptu toilet, from the length of which the suspicion is strong that it must have been a male bird, there ensues no awkward pause, no waiting for an invitation to make itself at home. With a charming disregard of the sacred rights of property it enters on possession, and gravely and complacently perches, like a great black head-dress, on the bust of Pallas of the Grecians, Pallas, the Goddess of Learning! Dagon of old was upward man and downward fish; the raven is a harlequin with the dignity of a Chesterfield; a clown with the gravity of a philosopher.

This ludicrous appearance, this royalty in rags, has an instant effect on the occupant of the room. The spectre of his dread quits his heart; his sadness turns to smiles. He addresses the bird in raillery, showers epithets upon it, humorously assures it it is no coward, and asks what his visitor's lordly name may be.

To his surprise there comes a distinct reply—"Nevermore." But the surprise is simply due to hearing it speak so distinctly; he feels no relation between the answer and the question. Here begins anew the climax of those moments when he sought to penetrate the darkness—wonder, fear, doubt, dreams.

The word so earnestly spoken begins to work its spell—the word, the unnaturalness, the silence, the loneliness, and the persistent trend of his own mind. The syllables uttered, there is not a sound or a movement to arrest the downward inflection of his thoughts. So long is it continued that, at last, he mutters to himself, so low as not to break the stillness:

"Other friends have flown before:  
On the morrow he will leave me."

The words addressed to himself are answered by the raven. Before, he was filled with wonder at the distinctness of the reply; now, he is startled at its relevancy. He tries to satisfy himself with his own explanation that the bird has caught the hopeless word from the repetition of some unfortunate master. He still smiles at the bird, but now for the first time he calls it "ominous." He professed to accept the explanation of its reply just given; nevertheless, he sets himself to "linking fancy