The Raven by Edgar Allan Poe

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The poem “The Raven” is written by an American writer, Edgar Allan Poe(Poe, 1845). In the poem, the poet details the event of one winter night. He heard a knock on his door when he was wearily skimming through an old book by the fire. The narrator is reluctant to answer the door as it is late at night, and he is depressed because of the recent death of his beloved, Lenore. He told himself that it was just a late visitor to whom he could attend the next day, but the rustling of the purple curtains in his room frightened him, so he stood up to see who was at the door.

Before opening the door, he said out loud to the visitor that he was sorry to answer the door late because he was napping and did not hear the knock at first. However, when he opened the door, he saw no one except darkness. He stood at the door for a long time and whispered, “Lenore,” thinking that it was Lenore who knocked at the door, but he heard nothing except the echo of his own words. He returned to his room heavy-heartedly. Subsequently, he had hardly entered his room when he heard even louder tapping on his door again. He was sure that the sound came from the window; therefore, he opened the curtains. A raven stepped in without any hesitation and perched on the door of his room. The raven’s grave appearance amused the poet, and the narrator asked its name, to which it replied, “Nevermore.” The narrator was not expecting it to reply, which shocked him; however, he did not understand the response. At first, he thought that “Nevermore” was the name of the raven, but later, he figured out that it was the only word that it could speak. The poet asked it several other questions, but he did not find any other answer except “Nevermore.”

Bored with the conversation, he left the raven perched on the door, thinking out loud that it would fly away by morning, to which the raven replied again, “Nevermore.” The word was so aptly spoken by the raven that it startled him. Consequently, he pondered upon the word and assumed that the raven must have learned the word from some ill-fated owner who would have repeated this word to curse his ill fate. The thought of the misfortunate owner amused the narrator, and he sat in front of the raven, smiling to ponder the other possible meanings of the word. The thoughts led him to think about his dear departed Lenore, and he asked the raven if he would be able to see her again. The raven responded, “Nevermore.” The raven’s reply and the thought of never seeing Lenore again infuriated the poet. He asked the raven to fly back from where it had come and leave him alone, but it refused to go back into the night, saying, “Nevermore.”

Themes and Tone

“The Raven” is one of the most famous poems written by Poe. The poem is famous for its dramatic, macabre, melancholic, and melodic qualities. The poet mostly uses trochaic octameter, which has four pairs of stressed and unstressed syllables in each line. When the poem is read aloud, the refrain

of “Nevermore” and “Nothing More,” combined with several internal rhymes, gives the poem a musical cadence. There is a predominating “O” sound in the poem with the frequent use of words like “Nevermore” and “Lenore,” which enforce the lonely and melancholic tone of the poem and establish the overall macabre atmosphere. Finally, the refrain of “Nevermore” gives cohesion to the poem and contributes to the unity of effect, where, according to Poe, every word and phrase adds to the overall meaning of any piece of literature(Poe, 1846). The refrain, rhyme, and rhythm contribute to making the poem hypnotic, musical, and captivating. (Poetry Foundation, n.d.)

The themes of grief and despair after losing a beloved one are predominant in the poem. The death of the poet’s beloved is a common motif that runs throughout the poem. The narrator’s beloved, Lenore, died at a young age when she was at the height of her beauty, leaving him to mourn. The first line of the poem suggests the condition of the poet after the death of Lenore: “…I pondered, weak and weary.” He has been awake till late at night, grieving the loss of his beloved. He is so preoccupied with the thought of Lenore that he calls her name in the darkness when he finds no one at the door, hoping that it was she who had knocked at the door. The echo of the word “Lenore” comes back to him, suggesting the void that his beloved has left in the narrator’s heart. The poet is consumed by his grief and sadness because of his lost love. He is engrossed in his eccentric psychological obsession with his beloved. The ambiance of the poem also betrays that it is the house of a bereft lover. He reads old books to keep himself from thinking about Lenore.

The talking raven takes his mind off his beloved for a while, but after a while, her thoughts occupy his mind again, and he asks about her. The narrator appears to be psychic as he feels that the raven is mocking him for the loss of his beloved. The raven stares at the place where Lenore used to sit and cries, “Nevermore,” which makes the poet think that he is an angel who is here to make him forget Lenore. He smells Nepenthe, a mythical beverage that comforts a grieving person by erasing his memory. The speaker tells himself to drink (quaff) the potion so that he may forget Lenore and get relief from the sorrow. When he is about to drink nepenthe, the raven interrupts him, saying, “Nevermore,” which suggests that his sorrow is so deep that it cannot be cured by drinking nepenthe.

The raven’s reply infuriates the speaker, and he calls the bird a “thing of evil.” The reply makes the narrator lose all hope of meeting Lenore again, and he asks the bird in a childish way, “Is there balm in Gilead?” Gilead is a Biblical reference, and the speaker means to ask if he will ever have peace and be able to forget Lenore in his life. The bird says, “Nevermore” again, and the speaker is taken aback. He asks the bird again if there is any chance he will meet and embrace Lenore “within the distant Aidenn?” The bird answers yet again, “Nevermore.” The raven’s replies make the speaker even more frustrated, and he wishes that it would fly away back into the night from where it had come.

Meaning of the poem

The poem informs Poe’s fear of oblivion and death, which is also a major topic of most of his literary works. Poe, in the given poem, refers to a tormented person who has recently lost his love, Lenore.

Poe makes the premature death of the young woman aesthetic with his poetry, and the protagonist is unable to break himself free from her memories. Disheartened, he asks the raven if there is spiritual salvation and if he will meet Lenore in the afterlife. The raven's one-word responses confirm his worst fears by rejecting his pleas. The poem is one of his bleakest literary works because it gives a conclusive negative answer that there is no hope and no life after the life of this world.

In reality, the speaker wants to forget his beloved. At the beginning of the poem, he reads books to get his mind off thoughts of his beloved. He wants to remain in the delusion that he will be able to forget his departed beloved and will be relieved from the pain, but the bird tells him the truth, which he does not want to believe. When the bird tells him that he will not meet her in the heavens, nor will he be able to forget her, he tells the bird to take out his beak from his heart and leave his house. However, the bird does not leave the house and remains with him to constantly remind him that he is never going to meet his beloved again. The bird is also a symbol of the grief that has tainted his heart and imprisoned his soul forever.

The poet's choice of a raven is suitable for the role it plays in the poem. The raven is the bearer of the bad news. The black feathers of a raven have conventionally been considered a supernatural sign of an ill omen. The repeated word "Nevermore" by the raven gives the poet a sense of foreboding. The poet refers to the raven as a prophet, a thing of evil, and a devil because he has deciphered the meaning of the raven's answer. The raven casts a dominant shadow over the narrator's chamber and over the whole poem, which totally frightens the already depressed narrator. The image of the raven gradually becomes bleaker as the poem progresses, as much as the bird is presented as a sleeping demon with fiery eyes. Poe presents the bird as a pure satanic evil.

Imagery and Figures of Speech

Poe uses a number of figures of speech in order to expand on the theme of sorrow. He presents the theme in a way that helps the readers to understand the meaning of the poem. The poet uses numerous literary devices such as alliteration, symbolism, imagery, metaphors, and similes. The most prominent literary device in "The Raven" is alliteration. Alliteration means the recurrence of the same sound in the verse. The use of alliteration speeds up the pace of the poem as if hastening to the conclusion; for example, in the line, "And the silken, sad, uncertain," the "s" sound recurs thrice to make the verse sound musical to the ears when read out loud. Moreover, to give a musical effect to the poem, the poet uses a refrain. A refrain is a phrase or a whole verse that is repeated in several places throughout a poem. The refrains, "Nothing more" and "Nevermore," appear several times in the poem, uttered by the raven and, sometimes, by the poet himself. The repetition of this word shows the sadness of the speaker.

Another prominent figure of speech in the poem is symbolism. The use of images, characters, or objects in literary work in such a way that they represent or express some other emotions, ideas, and states of mind is called symbolism. Firstly, the largest symbol in the poem is that of the raven. In

literary works, the raven is usually a representation of sadness and death. Secondly, the speaker's beloved, Lenore, is the symbol of an unattainable desire that is lost due to some unavoidable circumstances. The narrator's heart aches at the thought of his unfulfilled wish. Thirdly, the poet uses "night's Plutonian shore" as a symbol of death. Pluto is the name of the Greek god of the underworld, also known as Hades. He is also the god of death. When the god of death is combined with "Night," it suggests an even greater meaning because the night is also used as the symbol of death in literature. Moreover, the "Shore" represents the river of woe, Acheron, the largest river in the kingdom of Hades. Therefore, the "night's Plutonian shore" symbolizes grief and death.

Poe also personifies the raven by calling him a prophet and a devil. Personification is a literary device in which a non-human entity is attributed human characteristics. The poet assumes that the bird has a "lordly name" because of the way he walks in his room, unhesitant and unafraid. Furthermore, the poem uses extensive similes. A simile is a figure of speech which involves the comparison of two things of a different kind. For example, the simile in the line, "And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon's that is dreaming," helps the reader understand the evilness that the bird represents. Additionally, the poet uses metaphor as well. A metaphor is a figure of speech involving the application of a word to an object that is not literally possible. Poe uses metaphor in the line, "To the fowl whose fiery eyes now burned into my bosom's core." In these lines, the poet speaks figuratively, meaning that the raven was staring at him.

Conclusion

"The Raven" is one of the best literary works of Edgar Allan Poe, in which he presents a weary person who has recently lost his beloved. The raven visits his home to make him understand that she is gone for good and he will not be able to see her again in this life or the life after this. Poe makes careful use of rhythm, tone, and figures of speech to make the theme even more powerful.

References

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