The Birth of Horror

At what point in your life do you first remember experiencing true fear in your heart, as a result of reading a piece of literature? Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Raven” is the type of poem that can induce this reaction. From beginning to end, the poem takes the reader on a journey of darkness, and grim mystery. The true test for all great writing is: how much emotion does the poetry generate inside of the reader? Fear can be a very powerful emotion, and Poe has an uncanny ability to take the reader on a frightening tour of abstract morbidity. In order to create an epic work of horror, there are three main pillars upon which to build. First, the reader must be able to not only picture himself in the situation, but he must be able to actually FEEL like he is there. Second, the emotions of the situation in the poem must be deeply experienced by the reader. Lastly, the poem must be able to force the reader to question the fact: Does evil actually exist? In the end, all of these factors combined will determine how memorable the poem is. “The Raven” proves to be timeless. It is just as scary to a first time reader today, as it was to a first time reader in 1844.

Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary defines horror as “painful and intense fear, dread, or dismay” (“horror”). I have been fascinated with horror and its spine tingling, hair raising effects since I was a child. Edgar Allen Poe is one of my father’s favorite authors, so “The Raven” was a very common campfire story in my family. The poem is written in a way that is captivating from the very start. In the first stanza: “While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a
tapping/ As of someone gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door (Poe ll 3-4). This sentence immediately sets the mood and gives the reader an opportunity to relate. When you are sleepy and nodding in and out of consciousness, it is very easy to be startled. This is a situation that everyone has experienced at one point or another, the fear that comes from not being fully aware of what is happening. Also, being home, at night, alone, and hearing any kind of noise can start a horrific tornado inside your head, as you go through all of the possible explanations for the sound. The same fear is re-visited later in the poem. “Back into my chamber turning, all my soul within me burning/ Soon I heard again a tapping somewhat louder than before (ll 31-32). At this point, there is no question that something freakish is going on. The first incident could have been written off as a random noise caused by the wind, or the house settling.

However, the first tapping came from the door and now it is coming from the window inside his bedroom. Again, the reader is pulled in to the story with another situation they have, most likely, experienced. This gives another opportunity to recall the fear from personal experience, giving the reader more ability to actually feel the terror being experienced by the narrator. In a book called “The Philosophy of Horror: Or, Paradoxes of the Heart”, written by Noel E. Carrol, the author supports this theory by commenting: “Edgar Allen Poe, and others, including filmmakers, have helped to make us aware that horror images are most effective when minimally specified because the reader is then encouraged to read his own personal experiences of cultural repression into the images… Now we may further hypothesize that works that encourage this type of reading will be more greatly valued because the reader will be enabled to reenact his personal experiences(Carroll p.242).

Furthermore, deep emotional experience should be the goal of any writer. In “The Raven”, Poe takes the reader through a range of emotion that is, primarily, dark, and fear based.
He uses the word “nevermore” as the last word in eleven of the nineteen stanzas of the poem. The definition of nevermore is: never again (“nevermore 2012”). This word can put the reader in a general mood of emotional hopelessness. Meanwhile, Poe uses it to slowly take the poem down a lonely road of infinite melancholy. It is impossible to read the poem and not feel the sadness of the narrator, who is, quite certainly, on the verge of insanity. The object of his sadness is, obviously, a mysterious woman named Lenore. “Respite – respite and nepenthe from thy memories of Lenore.”(ll 82) Nepenthe, is a remarkable word in the poem, because the definition speaks volumes. Nepenthe is defined as: a potion used by the ancients to induce forgetfulness of pain or sorrow(“nepenthe 2012”). This is one of many examples of Poe’s literary brilliance. This quote is mentioned after the narrator suddenly thinks he smells a perfume in the air. He seems to be frightened or, even haunted, by the strangely familiar scent.

To begin with, you feel sympathy for a man who is suffering from the tragic loss of his lover. Contrarily, that sympathy is replaced by an uneasiness about how Lenore might have met her end. Did he kill her? No one knows. Nevertheless, her death, and ghostly presence, haunts him terribly. “The Raven” takes the reader on an emotional rollercoaster, which is what good horror writing is all about.

The actual existence of evil is of paramount importance to haunting literature. Poe accomplishes this in a very abstract manner. He uses the actual raven to represent evil throughout the poem. There are two different instances where this is apparent. The first, and most obvious, comes in the quote: “Prophet!” said I, “thing of evil – prophet still, if bird or devil!(l 91). The narrator, at this point, is convinced that the bird represents some sort of evil. The bird has been sent, by the devil, to communicate something to the narrator. There is quite a bit of mystery surrounding the exact nature of what the raven’s true intentions are, but there is no question that
the raven’s words are bathed in darkness. In the poem’s last stanza, the suspense and horror builds to a final peak. “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! (ll 106-108) This is a very haunting image. Poe ends the poem with an abstract question of sorts. The narrator seems to be coming to terms with his loneliness and despair, leaving the reader with a final question. Is there a heaven?

In conclusion, Poe did a remarkable job inspiring emotion and fear in the reader. The three pillars of good horror writing were all covered with impeccable efficiency. However, the true magic of “The Raven” takes place when the reader has time to let the gravity of the poem sink in. Poe writes in such a way that the reader’s imagination plays a crucial role in how the poem is perceived. These are just a few of the reasons that Poe is considered one of the best writers of all time. In Kevin J. Hayes’ book: “The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allen Poe”, Hayes give us an example of what type of impact Poe has had on society: “In the United States, virtually all students read some Poe during their news-carrier years, and Poe, perhaps more than any other author taught in middle schools and high schools today, functions as a catalyst for teaching students the magic of reading(Hayes p.2). Poe, and the fear that his writing creates, will continue to live in the hearts of his readers… forevermore.
Works Cited


