The Raven: Macabre Masterpiece or Autobiographical Artistry?

“Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary” (Poe 81): a dark, lonely night, a tired, forlorn narrator. The first lines of The Raven set the scene for a dark, twisted tale of revenge, of guilt, and of terror. Edgar Allan Poe, perhaps best known for this poem, weaves a story of a raven appearing above the door of a terrified man; the raven, perhaps symbolic of madness, guilt, or even foreshadowing the man’s own death, utters only the phrase “nevermore,” yet speaks volumes. The question many have asked when enjoying and evaluating The Raven has been of the purpose for which it was written. Did Poe create such a macabre story to reflect upon his own experiences? Did the genius poet pay homage to real-life events or to his own regret, shame, or anger? This poem, with all its dark imagery, clearly had to come from a very personal and twisted place within, for the only way to create true art is to imprint a piece of yourself in the medium with which you bring it into being.

Edgar Allan Poe was born Edgar Poe on the 19th of January, 1809, in Boston, Massachusetts. He was the son of an actress, though sadly, he never knew his mother, as she died when he was two years old. Having also been abandoned by his father the year after he was born, Edgar was informally adopted (or rather fostered) by the Allans, a family of merchants from Virginia, upon his mother’s death. Already, one can surmise that Poe’s childhood was off to a very saddening start. Orphaned young, he enlisted in the military and served for a few years, and at the age of 20, he was informed of his foster mother’s death. After being discharged for lying
about his age and real name, he and his foster father quarreled over money until the family disowned him, whereupon Poe moved in with his aunt, cousin Virginia, and brother Henry. In 1831, when Poe was 22, his brother passed away. All the while trying to get himself published and make a name as an author, he wrote more and more in efforts to sustain an income on writing alone. In 1835, Poe secretly married his first cousin, Virginia Clemm, him being twice her age at 26 years old; on the marriage certificate, it stated that Virginia was 21, when in reality, she was 13. The years following proved to be more fruitful for Poe as he made a name as a literary critic, while at the same time getting works of his own published in various magazines and newspapers around Philadelphia. However, Poe’s grief would soon return, because in 1847, Virginia passed away at the age of 25 from tuberculosis.

A biographical study of Edgar Allan Poe makes it obvious that the numerous deaths and grief he faced throughout his life were definitely influential in his writing process. Poe’s life consisted of loss after loss, and he coped with the losses with drink and with drugs, more than likely laudanum (Wagenknecht 131). One interpretation of The Raven is that it could be a hallucination on the part of the speaker. The lines, “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” “ (Poe 150-53) are very indicative of this. No human has ever seen a bird like that above their chamber door because it doesn’t happen in reality; it would take some sort of drunken state or hallucination to make such a thing appear. Poe could have merely been creating a similar situation for his narrator in this scenario, therefore linking readers to his own experiences by giving them a description of the visions he has seen while under the influence.
Another inspiration for Poe when writing *The Raven* was probably the anger and guilt he felt throughout his lifetime. His biological mother, foster mother, and wife all passed away, and Poe felt the losses deeply. He was prone to “fits of erratic behavior and excessive drinking” (Bloom 121) and was known for being a bit of a recluse. The sadness of losing his mother before he knew her, the guilt of not making it home in time to see his foster mother before she passed (Wagenknecht 76), and the sheer depression he felt after Virginia died must have contributed to his composition of this great work of art. The “Lenore” that he mentions over and over throughout the poem is probably an amalgam of these three women. The “sorrow for the lost Lenore” (Poe 110) is his sorrow for the women he lost. Those surrounded by death and misfortune often blame themselves for the woeful circumstances pervading them; Edgar Allan Poe more than likely blamed himself on some level for the tragic events over which he had no control.

Though Poe did have a respectable amount of fame at the height of his career, he was severely underappreciated in his time. At the start of his career, he “gained a reputation as a learned but harsh critic” (Bloom 12), and continued to try to get published as much as possible to get his work seen by the masses. He later became a high-paid editor at *Graham’s Magazine* in Philadelphia, but quit because Virginia’s health was deteriorating, causing him to rely on alcohol. Though he met mainstream success when he published *The Raven*, Poe was never able to function normally in public situations again as a result of his alcoholism. The last stanza of *The Raven* is perhaps the most personal, I feel, because it contains the lines, “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!” (Poe 1106-108). I feel that this is very indicative of his attitude towards life and his view of his success. Even though he reached
mainstream success for awhile, the undertones of misery and grief still prevailed for him; the lamplight represents opportunity and positivity, the shadow represents his depression, guilt, anger, and fear. His soul that lies within the shadow is his realization that no matter what amounts of recognition or happiness he receives, he’ll still carry a very heavy burden of sorrow with him forever.

Anyone who has read anything by Edgar Allan Poe can say with full confidence that his works are not “feel-good” literature. Undertones of sadness, anger, guilt, fear, oppression, and revenge are ever-present throughout his repertoire as an author and poet. Perhaps Poe channeled all of the dark and macabre feeling he had as a result of the misfortune he faced. Nothing in his works jump out more as autobiographical than *The Raven*; there are multiple interpretations of the poem that can be made. The multiple deaths of family members and the grief sustained after each were reflected in the poem, as well as the guilt he wrongfully may have felt as a result of their passing. Poe could have been illustrating the hell he goes through while hallucinating or in a drunken stupor. Or, additionally, Poe could be trying to convey a sense of hopelessness for the condition he was in at the time by formulating a situation in which there is no happy ending. Either way one decides to interpret the masterpiece, *The Raven* is a work of art that is singular, beautiful, and haunting; characteristic of the troubled yet ingenious man who wrote it.
Works Cited

