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When grief turns to madness: a short analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven* (1845)

Ana Clara Silva dos Santos

Supervisor

Yuri Jivago Amorim Caribé

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When grief turns to madness: a short analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven* (1845)

Ana Clara Silva dos Santos¹

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to present an analysis of the poem *The Raven* (1845) written by Edgar Allan Poe, focusing on the grief that emerges as a central theme in the poem, portrayed as the catalyst for the narrator's progressive insanity as he tries to deal with the death of his lover. The textual analysis of the poem is based on Ladd and Philipps (2006) to explore elements of American Romanticism, such as the idealization of women and individualization. Weinstock (2017) is also used to investigate elements of Gothic literature, such as psychological conflicts and the supernatural. Six stanzas from *The Raven* (1845) have been selected to support the aforementioned theories and explain the significance of madness in the process of mourning displayed in the narrative. Following this, the figure of the raven represents the tension between reality and imagination. The obsession of the narrator with getting his deceased lover Lenore back leads him to an emotional collapse and loss of his reasoning, which is shown through metaphors, irrational thoughts and symbols. Thus, madness and the fine line between reality and imagination as consequences of mourning may still be relevant issues to be discussed in contemporary literature and society.

Keywords: The Raven; Grief; American Romanticism; Edgar Allan Poe; Gothic literature.

RESUMO

Este artigo tem como objetivo apresentar uma análise do poema *O Corvo* (1845) de Edgar Allan Poe, focando em aspectos que partem do tema *Morte*. O *Luto* surge como um tema central no poema, retratado como o catalisador da insanidade progressiva do narrador. A análise textual deste artigo é baseada nas perspectivas de Ladd e Philipps (2006) para explorar elementos do Romantismo Americano, como a idealização da mulher e a individualização, e de Weinstock (2017) para investigar elementos da literatura gótica, como os conflitos psicológicos e o sobrenatural. Foram selecionadas seis estrofes de *O Corvo* (1845) para sustentar as teorias mencionadas e explicar a relevância da loucura no processo de luto mostrado na narrativa. Seguido disso, a figura do corvo representa a tensão entre realidade e imaginação. A obsessão do narrador em recuperar sua falecida amada Lenore o leva a um colapso emocional e perda da sua razão, o que é mostrado através de metáforas, pensamentos irracionais e símbolos. Dessa forma, pretendemos demonstrar que a loucura e a linha tênue entre a realidade e a imaginação como efeitos do luto ainda podem suscitar boas discussões na literatura e na sociedade contemporâneas.

Palavras-chave: O Corvo; Luto; Romantismo Americano; Edgar Allan Poe; Literatura Gótica.

¹ Ana Clara Silva dos Santos is an undergraduate student completing a degree in English Language Teaching at the Center for Arts and Communication from the Federal University of Pernambuco (Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, UFPE, Brazil), clara.ssantos@ufpe.br. The supervisor of this article was Professor Yuri Jivago Amorim Caribé, Professor of British and American Literature, Department of Languages and Literatures, Center for Arts and Communication from the Federal University of Pernambuco, yuri.caribe@ufpe.br.

1. INTRODUCTION

Charles Baudelaire (2014) affirmed that poetry is an activity that should be focused on emotion, and it should not have as its aim a “direct utility” because it is something valuable for what it is. Poetry, in its essence, communicates something through words, which may be emotions or reflections of the human condition. As a result, literary movements have emerged in response to the cultural context in which they are situated.

American Literature, for instance, was influenced by significant political, economic, and sociocultural occurrences throughout the 19th century. The French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, the Enlightenment, and the discussion on the abolition of slavery were significant events that inspired American writers to find their voice, discovering their essence apart from British and European ideals (Ladd; Philipps, 2006), thus initiating American Romanticism.

As England had great Romantic poets such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) and William Wordsworth (1770-1850), the United States was growing in this movement as well with Walt Whitman (1819-1892) and Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), whose literary works were shaped by their growing interest in the human psychological condition, emotions, escapism and imagination over rationality. Among these writers, Poe stood out for his interest in writing about darker emotional states, especially death.

Death is a recurring theme not only in literature but also in real life, as it reflects situations that most human beings have experienced or will experience in their lifetime. Edgar Allan Poe utilized his writing as a means to externalize his struggles while portraying characteristics of American Romanticism (Ladd; Philipps, 2006), such as the idealization of women, individualism, and an emphasis on emotion, as well as Gothic literature (Weinstock, 2017), including supernatural incidents and psychological issues.

Furthermore, the effects of death caused by the process of grieving a loved one, which can be identified in the poem, are what this work focuses on. This paper provides a brief analysis of the text, examining criticism to offer a historical overview of Edgar Allan Poe’s life and the main themes present in his writing, as well as in *The Raven* (1845). This analysis holds significance because the psychological toll of loss is a reality faced by most individuals, making it a universal theme that resonates across times and cultures and that may remain meaningful through this current era.

From a methodological perspective, this work takes on a textual analysis that, as observed by Belsey (2013, p. 160), brings on the details of a text to examine the cultural

criticism present in it, including where this text is set historically and culturally, and what effect it provides to the reader. This bibliographical approach is based on the 1845 edition of *The Raven* from the book *The Raven and Other Poems*, written by Edgar Allan Poe and published by Wiley and Putnam. The corpus consists of the first, second, fifth, seventh, fourteenth, and fifteenth stanzas of the poem.

As support for this analysis, scholars such as Ladd and Philipps (2006) and Weinstock (2017) were chosen to discuss characteristics of American Romanticism and Gothic literature, respectively. In addition, Kennedy (2001) was used to give a historical overview of Poe's background, and Camacho Amador and Gimeno Pahissa's view (2021) was also considered in terms of analyzing the implied meanings of the effects of grief in *The Raven* (1845). Within this perspective, this research aims to examine how mourning eventually evolves to madness in the narrative of *The Raven* (1845), considering that the themes of grief and madness are conveyed through metaphors in the poem. In this sense, this study shows how the writer's choices are influenced by the difficulties he faced in his own life.

2. EDGAR ALLAN POE AND *THE RAVEN* (1845)

As stated by Ladd and Philipps (2006), Romanticism started in England with the publication of the book *Lyrical Ballads* by Coleridge and Wordsworth in 1798. American Romanticism was a "reaction against convention" because it was a movement created to break tradition, opposing the monarchy and Europe's ideals. One of the principles of Romanticism was the idealization of the individual, and rationalism was left aside to give space to subjectivity and idealism, as Bode (1995) stated in his book *Highlights of American Literature*.

In alignment with this interpretation, also commonly known as a subgenre of Romanticism, Gothic Literature emerged in the 18th century with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, considered to be the first Gothic novel, exploring the macabre and haunted castles (Weinstock, 2017). Toward the end of the same century, in 1764, Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* introduced strong female protagonists that became a popular characteristic in the genre. In America, Edgar Allan Poe was considered the forerunner of Gothic Literature, writing about murder, madness, and the supernatural. These early contributions, not only in North America but also in England, helped lay the groundwork for the genre to grow throughout the years.

Gothic literature also carries features from American Romanticism; however, it combines medieval settings, such as haunted castles/houses, with horror and mystery narratives that include flawed characters haunted by their suffering. Gothic stories analyze the darker aspects of the human mind, and as they work as some kind of “liberation”, they do not follow the usual moral rules that are determined by society.

As discussed by Camacho Amador and Gimeno Pahissa (2021), the reason why Poe is such a strong reference in the Gothic genre is maybe because he often emphasized the beauty of death in his writing, creating a dark and melancholic atmosphere. Hence, he laid the foundation for other writers who desired to write horror, for example.

Regarding poetry, Dickinson, Whitman, and Poe were references in this period. Their works not only stood out because of their unique writing styles, but also because they explore psychological themes. For example, in Dickinson's poem *Because I Could Not Stop For Death* (2004), Death is personified as a polite gentleman who leads the protagonist through stages of her life until, in the end, she eventually becomes peaceful with the fact that she was dying. Meanwhile, in Whitman's *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd* (2004), the narrative reflects the process of mourning by portraying the cycle of life and death with imagery elements. Both poets used literary devices to enhance human emotion through the concept of death.

Kennedy (2001) points out that before becoming famous for his literary pieces, Poe was an editor for various journals, and he wrote essays on literary criticism, which helped solidify his career as a writer later on. The publication of *The Raven* in 1845 marked a breakthrough in his professional life as the poem brought a degree of recognition he was searching for. However, he became famous in Europe before people in his home country recognized his work. One of the reasons Poe's work came to be known abroad was Charles Baudelaire, who admired him and translated his writings into French. These translations, including *The Raven*, helped Poe to become well-known around the world.

Despite the recognition around the world, the American writer still struggled with personal and financial issues. These hardships were shown in his writing through the engagement with elements that belonged to both Romantic and Gothic literature. Following a guide he developed himself, called *The Philosophy of Composition* (1846), Poe detailed a structure for poems and short stories that would later influence writers around the world. In this present research, I am going to use an edition from 1846.

Among Poe's literary pieces, *The Raven* (1845) is one of his most famous works. It successfully shows his power in building musicality, meter, and rhythm in a poem through

figures of speech. In both his short stories and his poetry, Poe portrays themes such as mourning a loved one and a melancholic atmosphere that drives characters to madness. Thus, it makes sense that the narrative of *The Raven* (1845) is rich in Gothic and Romantic elements.

The poem consistently explores the themes of madness and grief through the use of literary devices, especially metaphors, which is a crucial feature in literature because it helps language to be flexible and to adapt to different contexts, as affirmed by Billow (1977). Poe had previously done that in *Ulalume* (Poe, 2000) and *Alone* (Poe, 2000). Therefore, these concepts were identified in *The Raven* (1845), showing that Poe's intention is to lead the reader toward the emotional effect and the underlying themes he seeks to convey through the poem.

In *The Raven* (1845), the entire narrative revolves around the main character's grief and his wish for the return of Lenore, his dead beloved. The poem emphasizes the narrator's feelings to explain the process of his grief, just like in the poems previously mentioned, which aligned with the Romantic tradition of highlighting an individual's emotions.

Camacho Amador and Gimeno Pahissa (2021, p. 1-2) highlighted that the main sources of Poe's creativity stemmed from his personal losses and the women he encountered throughout his lifetime:

Having witnessed it in first person several times, death is by far the subject most often recreated in his writing - and poems -, found in inseparable association with mourning. [...] Such conception was highly influenced by an autobiographical facet that involved women: Poe lost many of the women he dearly loved, to disease. [...] Death and women go hand in hand for this poet, founding the basic structure that allows his creativity.

This passage draws attention to the fact that Poe's view of death is deeply personal, and that's why loss is often discussed in his writing, more specifically, the loss of a beautiful woman. Rather than treating death as something peaceful, Poe's writing exhibits unresolved pain and the inability to move on, which are two central elements presented in *The Raven*.

The American writer's life story, as explained in Kennedy's (2001) study, shows the connection between the author's personal experiences and his composition. In Poe's early life, he faced the loss of his mother and was taken in by a family, the Allans, who never officially adopted him. He also attended the University of Virginia, but had to leave due to financial problems caused by his gambling. Later on, he was dismissed from a job in Richmond because of his drinking. Moreover, poverty, addiction, and alcoholism were common issues he faced during his life, and these are reflected in his works and the characters within his stories.

Death is particularly a concept that he explores with intensity, as it reflects his personal experience with loss and mourning. This influence is evident in *The Raven* (1845), when Poe describes the narrator as deeply affected by his lover's death to the point of imagining there are external signs of her presence or that somehow explain her fate, as will be shown in the analysis of this study.

In Baudelaire's (2014) book *Baudelaire on Poe: Critical Papers*, he explained the reasons why he was so drawn to Poe's works, one of which was that he "experienced a peculiar emotion," and he related to the tragedies that happened in Poe's life. Baudelaire also noted that Poe tended to explore the perversity of human nature, and this side of the American writer that he was able to see was what pulled him into his writing the most.

Speaking of perversity, Poe's short stories, such as *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1990) and *The Black Cat* (1990), deal directly with this concept. In both narratives, the protagonists are driven by an irrational impulse to commit horrible crimes against people or creatures they claim to love. This self-destructive tendency reflects the capacity of a human being to be morally wrong according to society's regulations. Furthermore, these stories share a common aspect that is present in Poe's other works: a character's psychological deterioration caused by madness. The characters, usually the protagonists, are consumed by either paranoia or hallucinations that prevent them from noticing what is reality and what is fantasy.

In this perspective, Eden, Grizzard, and Lewis (2011) argued that characters whose moral shift between good and bad during the story tend to keep readers entertained for longer, because they are complex and unpredictable. Under this same view, Olaru-Posiar's (2022) affirmed that madness has been used as a literary device since ancient times. The author explains how melancholia, anger, and rage were present in classics, such as Homer's *Iliad*, Euripides' *Medea*, and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and have been perpetuated in modern literature. Scholars have pointed out that elements like melancholy and rage were central to these stories and remained significant until contemporary times. In conclusion, Gothic literature addresses the complexities of the human psyche under a morally ambiguous lens that challenges conventional notions of society.

Edgar Allan Poe intertwined Gothic and American Romanticism through his works, which often carried crafted descriptions of violence, self-destruction, and insanity (Weinstock, 2017). In *The Raven* (1845), for instance, Poe makes the narrator seem insane when he repeatedly questions the raven on why it keeps repeating "nevermore", thinking the raven is mocking him about the fact that he will never see his lover again. By the end of the poem, his mental state is extremely fragile, causing the reader to wonder if he can distinguish between

fantasy and reality, shedding light on the consequences of grief and the fragility of the human mind upon facing the loss of someone.

Weinstock (2017, p. 184), in the book *The Cambridge Companion to American Gothic*, defined madness as one of the key components in gothic poetry, because the purpose was to be unsettling, to take the reader out of their comfort zone. Poe follows this perspective, using madness as a powerful tool that grows from mourning in works like *Annabel Lee* (2005) and *The Raven* (1845), where the narrator is so overwhelmed by the loss that there is a disconnection between his mind and reality.

Within this frame of reference, the analysis of this article is conducted by examining how the literary motifs of mourning and madness are presented in *The Raven's* stanzas through metaphors. Finally, this research shows that these elements reflect characteristics of both American Romanticism and Gothic literature, as well as it seeks to discuss how Poe manifested the issues he suffered in his life through his writing.

3. WHEN GRIEF TURNS TO MADNESS

Even before the 18th century, death was already a theme explored by writers around the world across various periods and debated in distinct forms. Not only in literature, but also in music, painting, and art as a whole, as stated by Ladd and Philipps (2006). Loss, one of the aspects related to the theme of death, is a current issue that can be found in most of Poe's works, as discussed by Camacho Amador and Gimeno Pahissa (2021). In Poe's *The Raven*, it is established through the atmosphere of the room, the melancholy of the narrative, and, most importantly, the struggles of the characters.

In the context of *The Raven* (1845), it is possible to notice the emphasis on the individual's feelings through the description of the narrator's personal experience. Notably, mourning is the main catalyst for the protagonist's actions, driving him to become confused, angry, and paranoid during the timeline (a single night) in which the story happens. The narrative is centered around a nameless man who is isolated in a chamber, grieving the death of his lover. Until a raven enters the room, causing the protagonist to repeatedly question its presence, judging it as some kind of punishment.

The first stanza of the poem presents the main character and Poe's rich use of alliteration, which is a literary device that can be frequently seen in his poems:

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore—
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.

“ ’Tis some visitor,” I muttered, “tapping at my chamber door—
Only this and nothing more” (Poe, 1845, p. 1).

The use of alliteration in this stanza, along with the creation of rhymes, contributes to building two important features in a poem, according to *The Philosophy of Composition* (1846): rhythm and musicality. Firstly, we are able to convey the narrator’s emotional state: he is exhausted. Secondly, we see the suspense building as something *taps* and *raps* against his door. The alliteration enhances this feeling of mystery.

So far, the previous stanza has introduced both the main character, who is narrating the story, and the mysterious visitor, who is *tapping* and *rapping* against the chamber door. In the second stanza, Poe continues to use alliteration, now combining it with metaphor to present the third character: Lenore, the dead lover.

Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December,
And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor.
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—
Nameless here for evermore (Poe, 1845, p. 1).

In Billow’s (1977) view, metaphors are flexible. They suggest a meaning that is not explicit in the text. In agreement with this, right at the beginning of the second stanza, the verse “each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor” can be an example of metaphoric language. The term “ember” refers to fire. The verse describes that the fire is extinguishing little by little, and that is why it forms shadows, to which the term “ghost” refers, on the floor of the chamber.

As American Romanticism was characterized by the idealization of the individual, *The Philosophy of Composition* (1846) introduces the idea that, for a poem to be successful, there must be the idealization of the perfect female. Such a thing is reflected in the poem when the narrator claims that Lenore was a “rare and radiant maiden whom the angels named Lenore”. She is compared to a divine creature, making her unique and thus “rare”, almost an unattainable being.

Poe builds an eerie atmosphere from the beginning of the poem. Firstly, through the description of the setting and the time when the story occurs. He uses terms such as “weary”, “dying ember”, “sorrow”, and “ghost” to create the mood of the environment, as well as “it was in bleak December” and “midnight dreary” to refer to the idea that the narrative happens at night. Secondly, the beginning of the second stanza, particularly, invites reflection on the author’s choice of December and not any other month for this poem. Since *The Raven* (1845) is centered

around someone's death, December becomes rather significant, given it is the last month of the year, which, by extension, represents the end of a cycle. In this context, December possibly marks Lenore's death and is used as a metaphor for the end of the cycle that was her life.

Another significant symbol is the mention of the "bust of Pallas" when the raven lands on top of it. "Pallas" might allude to Athena, the goddess of wisdom and warfare (Camacho Amador, Gimeno Pahissa, 2021, p. 25). The fact that the bird perches on top of the bust suggests that it holds a knowledge that the narrator lacks, possibly about the fate of Lenore, which is something the protagonist convinces himself of throughout the poem, as is shown in the following stanza:

Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing,
Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortals ever dared to dream before;
But the 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 (Poe, 1845, p. 1).

According to Sulaiman (2019), the main character is filled with so much grief that he ends up almost desiring the raven to be a kind of visitation from his dead lover, as if the bird is personifying Lenore.

During the third stanza, as well as the rest of the poem, the protagonist's critical mental state becomes evident. The act of "wondering, fearing, doubting, dreaming dreams no mortals ever dared to dream before", for instance, maybe means that he was having thoughts and dreams that were irrational, and he was self-aware of that. The repetition of "Lenore" in a whisper by the narrator, followed by an echo that perhaps responds back to him, demonstrates how his grief distorts his perception of reality, pushing him further into a state of madness.

Poe is also a master at prosody, meaning that he commonly uses rhymes to build the desired emotional effect in the reader with his writing (Weinstock, 2017, p. 187). When Poe discusses Death, he uses all of the elements in the story to his advantage. Taking *The Raven* (1845) into account, Poe uses the setting to expose the narrator's struggle to deal with his emotional turmoil caused by the death of a loved one, as shown in the stanza below:

Open here I flung the shutter, when, with many a flirt and flutter,
In there stepped a stately Raven of the saintly days of yore.
Not the least obeisance made he; not a minute stopped or stayed he,
But, with mien of lord or lady, perched above my chamber door—
Perched upon a bust of Pallas just above my chamber door—
Perched, and sat, and nothing more (Poe, 1845, p. 2).

In light of Billow's (2007, p. 89) study, "Words, as well as perceptions, feelings, ideas, and the like, may become part of a matrix of culturally shared associations". In other words, he explains how certain words or experiences carry a common association in many cultures and these shared meanings may influence how we interpret language, such as when the entrance of the raven into the room enhances the mystery within the narrative, provoking, especially since the animal is considered to be an omen of death because ravens are birds that feed on the dead.

The animal was previously "knocking" on the door in order to be let in, so insistently that the protagonist, despite not wanting to, opened it to see what was bothering him. In the first place, the chamber is described as dark and silent, with flames that create shadowy figures that resemble ghosts. Not only that, but the isolation of the room helps in blurring reality and imagination as the story progresses.

Poe's works often describe an aspect, mostly in a character, that forces the protagonist to face conflicts they have been putting aside. In *Ulalume* (1990), for example, the repression of grief causes the main character to do things that he is not aware of the intention at first, but toward the end of the poem, he is overcome with the understanding of his actions and has to face his unresolved sorrow by the death of his lover. Accordingly, this can be observed by the entrance of the raven in the chamber in *The Raven* (1845). Prior to this appearance, the protagonist was not agitated, but as soon as the bird arrived, the narrator was gripped by unease with the fact that the animal had invaded his room and, consequently, placed itself on the bust of Pallas, as it is described in the seventh excerpt. From that moment on, the narrator is apprehensive and constantly questioning the raven's intentions to the point that he becomes restless.

Additionally, contradiction is also a common concept in Edgar Allan Poe's works. We are able to see that in *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1990), when the protagonist claims he loves the old man and that he treated him so well the week before he planned on murdering him. Likewise, the raven is described with the adjective "stately"² in *The Raven* (1845), which refers to something that has an "appearance that causes admiration" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025). So, a contradiction can be observed in how the narrator sees the animal. He not only sees the raven as something evil but also as a creature he is enchanted by at first glance.

These contradictory attitudes demonstrate the complexity of the characters created by Poe. Following this point of view, a study made by Eden, Grizzard, and Lewis (2011)

² According to Cambridge Dictionary, stately means "formal, slow, and having a style and appearance that causes admiration". Available at: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/pt/dicionario/ingles-portugues/stately>.

investigated the appeal of characters that are not clean-cut in a narrative, what we call “morally gray characters”, who shift their positive and negative traits according to the occurrences in the plot. Ambiguous characters are not a hundred percent good or bad, but they are flawed and commit mistakes. One can even say they are more humanized than the black and white characters. Further, this instability between affection and violence or admiration and fear attracts readers to dive deeper into the story, because, at some point, they may relate themselves to the characters in parts.

This is connected to the different representations of madness in literature. Olaru-Posiar (2022, p. 1-2) explains that:

Another form of madness already described in Antiquity is sickly melancholy. It contains the possibility of self-generation, already suggested by Aristotle (b. 384 BC - d. 7 March 322 BC) and Cicero (b. 106 BC - d. 43 BC). [...] Characteristic of melancholics are unusual lability and eccentricity. [...] In contrast to melancholia is mania or anger and rage which, unlike melancholia, is characterised by more intense brutality, anger and rage (Olaru-Posiar, 2022, p. 1-2).

Madness is a motif that exists in many forms in literature. As explained by the author in the quote above, madness can be shown either through melancholy or through intense anger. In disagreement with this concept, regarding the kind of narrative that *The Raven* (1845) brings, the type of madness that is displayed is rooted in the narrator’s sadness. Although the character is more melancholic than angry or vengeful, he still acts in favor of rage near the end of the narrative. Still, according to Olaru-Posiar (2022, p. 5), “madness characterises the very conception of the world that seems to have no rational meaning”. Using *The Raven* (1845) as a reference, it is possible to observe how the protagonist loses touch with reality often, abandoning rationality completely, as he does in the fourteenth stanza of the poem:

Then, methought, the air grew denser, perfumed from an unseen censer
Swung by Seraphim whose foot-falls tinkled on the tufted floor.
“Wretch,” I cried, “thy God hath lent thee—by these angels he hath sent thee
Respite—respite and nepenthe from thy memories of Lenore!
Quaff, oh quaff this kind nepenthe and forget this lost Lenore!”
Quoth the Raven, “Nevermore” (Poe, 1845, p. 3).

When he describes that “the air grew denser, perfumed from an unseen censer” he evokes the sense of touch and smell, also known as tactile and auditory imagery. For the narrator, the air becomes thicker and it is filled with a sweet smell, similar to the kind of smell

that is present inside a censer³. As mentioned before, the poem refers to the Bible, in this excerpt, for instance, when the protagonist compares the shift in the air as if angels had arrived into the room - *Seraphim* refers to a type of celestial being that is associated with God in the Bible (Henry, 2011).

The use of biblical symbology likely justifies the fact that the protagonist wants to desperately meet with his lover, and since she has passed, he invokes God as a divine resource that could help him reach her, since he cannot do that in this physical reality.

The plea to God highlights the protagonist's desperation to escape his current suffering, which becomes even more evident as the narrative progresses. The repetition of the word "nevermore" by the raven, for instance, causes the narrator to jump from melancholy to a form of anger that makes him scream and cry out for the bird for relief from his pain, which is when he mentions the term "nepenthe", requesting it. *Nepenthe* is traced back to Ancient Greece. It was a substance mentioned in Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*, which people used in order to forget about their suffering (Arata, 2004). Moreover, the protagonist in *The Raven* (1845) is not only succumbing to his imagination by talking to a bird, but he *desires* to not be in touch with reality since he requests God to send him a substance that causes memory loss, which is the drug "nepenthe" mentioned in the poem, so he can forget about his "lost Lenore".

The narrator is desperate to know about the fate of Lenore and, as a consequence, his interaction with the raven grows into a heated one-sided questioning. He is delirious, demanding answers from the bird, which only repeats the word "nevermore". Throughout the repetition of the word, the character begins concluding himself, and he starts begging the raven to let him be reunited with his lost lover:

"Prophet!" said I, "thing of evil!—prophet still, if bird or devil!—
Whether Tempter sent, or whether tempest tossed thee here ashore,
Desolate, yet all undaunted, on this desert land enchanted—
On this home by Horror haunted—tell me truly, I implore—
Is there—is there balm in Gilead?—tell me—tell me, I implore!"
Quoth the Raven, "Nevermore" (Poe, 1845, p. 3).

In the fifteenth stanza shown above, the narrator is consumed by despair to get answers from the raven, whom he believes is some kind of prophetic figure that went to visit him. When he pleads, he again invokes biblical references, such as "balm in Gilead". Gilead is a region mentioned in the Bible where people used to seek healing (Parke, 2022). *The Raven*'s protagonist, in this context, is searching to heal himself from the pain of grief, which

³ According to the Cambridge Dictionary, censer means "a container for incense". Available at: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/censer>.

is something that he is shown to be unable to deal with and, because of that, each time the raven repeats “nevermore”, his hope diminishes and his reasoning is overcome by his grief, so much that the final stanzas expose the emotional collapse of his sanity.

As discussed by Weinstock (2017), madness is a key component in gothic poetry because it helps in building the uncanny feeling of the narrative. As the story began at a rather calm pace, where the protagonist was alone in his chamber before he was disturbed, the arrival of the raven marks a turning point. Suspense and horror intensify his grief, showing the audience that he accepts any type of sign - or creates them in his head - for the possibility that he is able to find Lenore. The narrator's grief leads him to interpret the presence of the raven and the bird's repetition of “nevermore” as a supernatural sign of either good or evil. What is interesting here is that he does not seem to care whether he is dealing with something divine or evil, as he makes it clear in the quote “Prophet!” said I, “thing of evil!—prophet still, if bird or devil!” (Poe, 1845, p. 3), his only concern is that he finds answers regarding Lenore.

This stanza, along with the others previously analysed, shows how Poe uses symbols to express the narrator's pain. By examining these excerpts, it becomes clear that the poem's structure intensifies as grief eventually turns into madness, highlighting something crucial throughout the entire poem: his desperation to believe in any source, regardless of where it comes from, to find either hope or closure.

4. CONCLUSION

Edgar Allan Poe is a cornerstone of American Romanticism and its subgenre, Gothic Literature. He played a major role in the rise of Dark Romanticism on an international scale (Ahmed, 2018), influencing writers from the same period.

The six selected and discussed stanzas revealed how the motifs of mourning and madness are displayed in *The Raven* (1845). Through the use of literary devices such as metaphor, Poe is able to create the rhythm and musicality of the poem, as he also brings on references from mythology, religion, and classical literature to enrich the symbology of the narrative. The elements from American Romanticism, such as emphasis on emotion and idealization of women, and Gothic literature, such as the obsession and the supernatural, contribute to reflect the narrator's psychological state, reinforcing how his grief is the main source for the distortion of his reality that ultimately leads him to lose hope and reach insanity.

It was through his works that he communicated with his readers of the 19th century, and, to this day, it is possible to notice the importance that he has in horror as a literary genre. In this sense, *The Raven* (1845) remains relevant because the main theme, grief, knowing that it affects all individuals at some point in their lives, and, in modern times, it is still a topic that poets reflect on in their writing.

For example, the contemporary Vietnamese American writer, Ocean Vuong, wrote the book *Time Is A Mother* (2022), a poetry collection that describes the effects of losing a loved one and how it deeply changes one's identity. According to a recent study about Vuong by Valentyna's (2025), which can be extended to other poets as well, the reason why this kind of emotional vulnerability resonates with readers is that it allows them to identify with the characters and their struggles, which are extremely human.

To sum up, what is discussed in this article may contribute to the literary studies field by motivating more discussions about the effects of mourning on human psychology that are portrayed in literary texts. By investigating how grief turns into madness in *The Raven* (1845) through Gothic and Romantic elements, this study raises the spotlight on how literature mirrors human experience, which may be the main reason why readers connect to literary characters and why we may be able to consider the poem, as well as the theme, to be timeless.

As a possibility, future research could be useful to investigate the different ways horror literature and media portray emotional trauma, especially the technique of blurring the lines between reality and imagination that is already present in *The Raven*'s narrative and in other works written by Edgar Allan Poe. The interplay between reality and fantasy is something that persisted across both classical and contemporary literature, as well as in other media forms, which is why it may be something interesting to explore.

With the growth of technology in the contemporary era, for instance, novels, poems, and short stories have been adapted to new forms of media, which attract many more young readers. *The Raven*'s adaptations, such as movies and TV shows on streaming platforms, contribute to expanding its relevance while creating new meanings for the poem. For example, in *The Simpsons*' 1995 episode "Treehouse of Horror", the narrative is reimaged to be a haunted setting that pulls them into different horror stories, blending humor with the original work's dark atmosphere. Christopher Lee's recitation of *The Raven* also became popular due to the actor's firm and deep voice, with some Internet users claiming the performance as 'perfect' and saying that 'Christopher Lee is the only person able to narrate the poem with such emotion' in the YouTube comment section.

These new interpretations of *The Raven* (1845) contemplate the contemporaneity of Poe's tales and poems. He was responsible for creating stories and complex characters that break away from the morally correct norms of society to step into the sinister universe of the Gothic, challenging readers to relate to morally gray characters at some point.

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ATTACHMENT 1

The Raven (full poem)

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
 Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore—
 While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
 As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.
 “ ’Tis some visitor,” I muttered, “tapping at my chamber door—
 Only this and nothing more.”

Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December,
 And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor.
 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—
 Nameless here for evermore.

And the silken sad uncertain rustling of each purple curtain
 Thrilled me—filled me with fantastic terrors never felt before;
 So that now, to still the beating of my heart, I stood repeating
 “ ’Tis some visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door—
 Some late visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door;
 This it is and nothing more.”

Presently my soul grew stronger; hesitating then no longer,
 “Sir,” said I, “or Madam, truly your forgiveness I implore;
 But the fact is I was napping, and so gently you came rapping,
 And so faintly you came tapping, tapping at my chamber door,
 That I scarce was sure I heard you”—here I opened wide the door—
 Darkness there and nothing more.

Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing,
 Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortals ever dared to dream before;
 But the 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.

Back into the chamber turning, all my soul within me burning,
 Soon again I heard a tapping something louder than before.
 “Surely,” said I, “surely that is something at my window lattice;
 Let me see, then, what thereat is and this mystery explore—
 Let my heart be still a moment and this mystery explore;
 —’Tis the wind and nothing more.

Open here I flung the shutter, when, with many a flirt and flutter,
 In there stepped a stately Raven of the saintly days of yore.
 Not the least obeisance made he; not a minute stopped or stayed he,
 But, with mien of lord or lady, perched above my chamber door—
 Perched upon a bust of Pallas just above my chamber door—
 Perched, and sat, and nothing more.

Then the ebony bird beguiling my sad fancy into smiling,
 By the grave and stern decorum of the countenance it wore,
 “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!”
 Quoth the Raven, “Nevermore.”

Much I marvelled this ungainly fowl to hear discourse so plainly,
 Though its answer little meaning—little relevancy bore;
 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 name as “Nevermore.”

But the Raven, sitting lonely on that placid bust, spoke only
 That one word, as if its soul in that one word he did outpour
 Nothing farther then he uttered; not a feather then he fluttered—
 Till I scarcely more than muttered: “Other friends have flown before—
 On the morrow he will leave me, as my Hopes have flown before.”
 Then the bird said “Nevermore.”

Startled at the stillness broken by reply so aptly spoken,
 “Doubtless,” said I, “what it utters is its only stock and store,
 Caught from some unhappy master whom unmerciful Disaster
 Followed fast and followed faster till his songs one burden bore—
 Till the dirges of his Hope that melancholy burden bore
 Of “Never—nevermore.”

But the Raven still beguiling all my sad soul into smiling,
 Straight I wheeled a cushioned seat in front of bird and bust and door;
 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.”

This I sat engaged in guessing, but no syllable expressing
 To the fowl whose fiery eyes now burned into my bosom’s core;
 This and more I sat divining, with my head at ease reclining
 On the cushion’s velvet lining that the lamp-light gloated o’er,
 But whose velvet violet lining with the lamp-light gloating o’er
 She shall press, ah, nevermore!

Then, methought, the air grew denser, perfumed from an unseen censer
 Swung by Seraphim whose foot-falls tinkled on the tufted floor.
 “Wretch,” I cried, “thy God hath lent thee—by these angels he hath sent thee
 Respite—respite and nepenthe from thy memories of Lenore!
 Quaff, oh quaff this kind nepenthe and forget this lost Lenore!”
 Quoth the Raven, “Nevermore.”

“Prophet!” said I, “thing of evil!—prophet still, if bird or devil!—
 Whether Tempter sent, or whether tempest tossed thee here ashore,
 Desolate, yet all undaunted, on this desert land enchanted—
 On this home by Horror haunted—tell me truly, I implore—
 Is there—is there balm in Gilead?—tell me—tell me, I implore!”
 Quoth the Raven, “Nevermore.”

“Prophet!” said I, “thing of evil!—prophet still, if bird or devil!
 By that Heaven that bends above us—by that God we both adore—
 Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn,
 It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore—
 Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore.”
 Quoth the Raven, “Nevermore.”

“Be that our sign of parting, bird or fiend!” I shrieked, upstarting—
 “Get thee back into the tempest and the Night’s Plutonian shore!
 Leave no black plume as a token of that lie thy soul has spoken!
 Leave my loneliness unbroken!—quit the bust above my door!
 Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my door!”
 Quoth the Raven, “Nevermore.”

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
 And the lamp-light o’er him streaming throws his shadows on the floor;
 And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor
 Shall be lifted—nevermore!