The Raven

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF EDGAR ALLAN POE

Poe was orphaned at a young age and grew up fostered by the wealthy Allan family in Virginia. After dropping out of university and the army, he became one of the first writers of the time to make a living from publishing his stories and criticism. Possibly his best-known work, "The Raven," published in 1845, won him considerable fame and success. But he had much financial and mental difficulty throughout his life, particularly after the death of his wife Virginia. Poe's death in 1849 was a much debated tragedy – alcohol, suicide, tuberculosis 3and many other things have been attributed as causes.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Edgar Allan Poe wrote "The Raven" while his wife, Virginia, was ill with tuberculosis, a disease that had already robbed him of three family members.Critics consider the character of Lenore, presumably the narrator's lost beloved, to be a representation of Virginia. Virginia's premature death is also thought to have inspired other works by Poe, including "Annabel Lee" and a poem actually called "Lenore," in which, as in "The Raven," a man copes with the death of a young woman, though "Lenore" ultimately ends on a note of optimism in contrast to the madness and despair of "The Raven."

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"The Raven" is an example of Gothic literature. Originating in 18th century England, the Gothic typically includes elements of the supernatural, horror, doomed romance and melodrama. Like "The Raven," Gothic works like *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë and *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë find their characters in dreary isolation, struggling with intense passions while surrounded by spooky, otherworldly influences that are often connected both with the supernatural and the subconsciousness of the characters.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Raven
- **When Written:** January 29th, 1845
- **Where Written:** Unknown
- **When Published:** January 29th, 1845 in the *New York Evening Mirror*
- **Literary Period:** Romantic, Early Victorians
- **Genre:** Narrative poem
- **Setting:** The narrator's home on a midnight in December
- **Climax:** As the narrator tells us at the conclusion of the poem, the Raven remains in his home, possibly forever.
- **Antagonist:** The Raven
- **Point of View:** The poem is told from the point of view of the narrator.

EXTRA CREDIT

Archrival. Poe and literary critic Rufus Griswold were often in literary conflict. Griswold had the last word, writing an obituary of Poe that portrayed the author as an insane alcoholic.

Harsh critic. Poe had a reputation for condemning other writers in his reviews — notably, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, whom Poe accused of being a plagiarist.

PLOT SUMMARY

The unnamed narrator is alone in his house on a cold December evening, trying to read. As he is about to fall asleep, he hears a quiet knock at his door, but decides to ignore it. He says that he has been reading in the hopes of relieving his sorrow over Lenore, his beloved, who has passed away. Though he tries to convince himself that nothing is there, his curiosity and fear overwhelm him. He eventually opens his door, speaking "Lenore?" into the darkness. When he hears tapping at his window, he opens that, too, and a Raven flies inside his room, landing on a bust of **Pallas**. The narrator jokingly asks the Raven's name, and is surprised to hear it respond "Nevermore." He mutters to himself that the Raven will probably leave him just as his friends and loved ones did, to which the Raven responds once more "Nevermore." The narrator then seats himself directly in front of the bird, trying to understand what it means by "Nevermore."

Suddenly, the narrator perceives that angels sent by God have caused the air to become dense and perfumed. Anxious, he asks the Raven if the angels are a sign that heaven will relieve him of his sorrows, to which the bird says, again, "Nevermore." With the same response, the bird rejects his hope that he might see Lenore again in heaven, as well as his impassioned request for the bird to leave him alone. Finally, the narrator tells us that the Raven has continued to sit atop his chamber door above the bust of Pallas, and that he will live forever in its shadow.

CHARACTERS

The narrator – Poe's unnamed narrator is a scholar who is mourning the death of his beloved, Lenore. He is alone in his

house on a cold December midnight, trying to distract himself from his thoughts of her by reading old books. The narrator is a scholar, learned and reasonable, yet his logic and knowledge do not much help him to recover from the impact of Lenore's death or to escape his desperate hope to see her again. His desperation leads him to emotional extremes, from depression to near euphoria and finally to depression once the Raven pronounces that he and Lenore will be apart forever. It is never made clear whether a supernatural Raven actually visits him and drives him to an ultimate despair, or whether his own obsessive doubts lead him to imagine the Raven, but in either case the Raven overthrows the narrator's rational mind.

Lenore – Critics consider Lenore, the narrator's lost love, to be a representation of Poe's own deceased wife Virginia. While Lenore never actually appears in the poem and nothing is revealed about her other than her status as the narrator's beloved, her presence looms over the text, as the narrator cannot prevent himself grieving her passing and wondering if he might be able to see her again.

The Raven — The Raven is a bird that enters the narrator's house, while the narrator is grieving over his lost love in the middle of the night, and lands upon the narrator's bust of **Pallas**. To everything the narrator says, the Raven responds with just one word: "Nevermore." The bird acts in no other way, neither attacking the narrator nor seeming to wish him harm, but the narrator views it as at best supernatural and at worst demonic. Further, the narrator interprets the Raven's repeated "Nevermore" as a refusal of all his desires to be reunited with Lenore. At the end of the poem, the narrator observes that the Raven is still perched atop the bust of Pallas and will likely remain there forever, and that he will spend the rest of his life living under its evil influence. Whether the Raven is a supernatural being or a product of the narrator's imagination is unclear, and in this way the poem creates a connection, typical of Gothic literature, between the subconscious and the supernatural.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

DEATH AND THE AFTERLIFE

As with many other of Poe's works, "The Raven" explores death. More specifically, this poem explores the effects of death on the living, such as grief, mourning, and memories of the deceased, as well as a question that so often torments those who have lost loved ones to death: whether there is an afterlife in which they will be reunited with the dead.

At the beginning of the poem, the narrator is mourning alone in a dark, cheerless room. He portrays himself as trying to find "surcease of sorrow" by reading his books. One might read this as an effort to distract himself and thereby escape the pain of the death of a loved one. One might also interpret the narrator's reading of books of "forgotten lore" to indicate that he is looking for arcane knowledge about how to reverse death. In either case, his reaction to the death of a loved one is rather typical: to try to escape the pain of it, or to attempt to deny death.

Before the Raven's arrival, the narrator hears a knocking at the door of his room, and after finding no one there calls "Lenore?" into the darkness, as if sensing or hoping she has returned to him. Following the Raven's arrival, he eventually asks the bird if there is "balm in Gilead," implying a hope that he might see Lenore once more in heaven. In either case, the narrator's desperate desire to be reunited with Lenore in some way is obvious.

In "Lenore," another of Poe's poems featuring a deceased woman named Lenore, the narrator, confronted with the loss of his wife, reassures himself with the prospect that he *will* see her again in heaven. In "The Raven," however, the narrator ultimately takes a gloomier view. After the Raven arrives, cutting short the narrator's sense that Lenore might be visiting as a ghost and answering his hopeful questions about Gilead with only the repeated "Nevermore," the narrator resigns himself to believing that he will never encounter Lenore again. Poe leaves unclear whether the Raven is telling the narrator the truth or giving voice to the narrator's own anxieties about having lost Lenore for good. Either way, the poem concludes on the pessimistic note that nothing can exist beyond death, that there is no "balm in Gilead."

MEMORY AND LOSS

Often, memories of the dead are presented as purely positive – as a way for the departed to continue to exist in the hearts and minds of those who remember them, and as a source of comfort for those who are still alive. "The Raven" flips this notion on its head, envisioning memories of a deceased loved one as a sorrowful, inescapable burden.

As the poem begins, the narrator is struggling to put his anguished memories of Lenore aside, and attempts to distract himself by reading. But the insistent rapping at his study door interrupts his efforts, and he opens his study door and seems to sense the presence of Lenore and hear a whisper of her name. That moment of hearing the knock on the door and opening it to an almost-there ghostly presence can be read as supernatural, but it is also a perfect metaphor for obsessive

memories that continue to intrude into one's thoughts and from which one can't escape.

With the arrival of the Raven, the narrator's desire to escape from his sorrowful, overwhelming memories comes to seem even more unattainable. Because the narrator's other friends and hopes "have flown before," he at first reasonably expects that the Raven will do the same. But the bird remains a constant presence, becoming itself like memories of Lenore, ever-present and inescapable, and its cry of "Nevermore" enforces in the speaker a belief that he lacks the power to escape his memories.

In what may be read as another supernatural moment or as a manifestation of a final, desperate hope for relief, the narrator then perceives that the air grows dense, perfumed, and inhabited by "seraphim," or angels. The narrator cries and cries, "Wretch, 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." In Homer's *Odyssey*, "nepenthe" is a drug that erases memories, and so in this moment the narrator is hoping that even if he cannot help himself escape his memories, that some sort of divine intervention will intercede on his behalf. The Raven, of course, answers only "Nevermore," and in so doing quashes the narrator's hope for escape from the torment of remembering his dead love. Memories of loss and sadness, the poem implies, can never be escaped, they flutter always in the brain, like a bird that will not leave a room.

THE SUPERNATURAL AND THE SUBCONSCIOUS

"The Raven" is an example of Gothic literature, a genre that originated in 18th century England. Hallmarks of Gothic works include horror, death, the supernatural, and occasionally romance. Their characters are often highly emotional and secluded from society, living in dark, gloomy, medieval-like homes surrounded by wild natural landscapes. ("Gothic" refers to the architectural style of the residences in which these novels are set.) "The Raven" contains many elements that point to the narrative's Gothic nature: a lonely character in a state of deep emotion, the cold and dark of a midnight in December. The Raven itself, a seemingly demonic, talking bird that arrives at midnight, is the poem's most prominent example of the supernatural.

Gothic works — *Frankenstein*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Wuthering Heights*, to name a few — tend to make ambiguous whether the supernatural events they describe are actually happening, or if these events are a product of their characters' subconscious. "The Raven," by leaving unresolved the question of whether the Raven is the genuine presence of a supernatural force or a figment of the tortured narrator's imagination, fits squarely into this tradition.

At the start of the poem, the narrator is reading his books in a failed attempt to distract himself from his grief at the death of his beloved Lenore, and is drowsing off. He then describes himself as having been roused by a mysterious tapping at his door and senses the presence of his dead love Lenore, followed by the arrival of the Raven through the window. Perhaps the Raven truly *has* arrived, but the narrator's exhaustion leaves open the possibility that he has actually fallen more deeply asleep, and that the knock he hears signals the beginning of his entrance into a dream state. The Raven and its repeated message of "nevermore" may be a supernatural visitation, or an expression of the narrator's loss and doubts, a nightmare from which the narrator can never fully awaken.

Ultimately, the poem does not take sides on whether its events should be interpreted as either entirely supernatural or entirely a result of the subconscious. In fact, the way it straddles and ties together the subconscious and supernatural helps to give the poem much of its power, depicting someone forced to confront the uncertainty, unknowability, and despair of losing a loved one, and having to face the profound and unanswerable question of death.

RATIONALITY AND IRRATIONALITY

In an essay titled "The Philosophy of Composition," in which Poe explained his writing of "The Raven," he describes the narrator as a scholar, a learned person devoted to rational investigation. It is therefore natural for the speaker to attempt to escape his obsessive memories of his wife by reading "ancient lore," and when he senses Lenore's presence he comforts himself with the words "Nothing more" to assure himself that a ghost has not actually paid him a visit. Even after he meets the Raven, he supposes that its first replies of "Nevermore" are only "stock and store," that the bird is only parroting a phrase it has heard before from a previous unhappy owner.

Put another way, the speaker attempts to respond to and understand the Raven (and the world) in a rational manner. But the poem shows how the speaker's rationality can't cope with the profound irrationality of the Raven and its responses, and even shows how the speaker's despair at the death of Lenore, and his desperate attempts to understand the Raven rationally, leads him to a frantic *irrationality* of his own. Although the Raven exerts no tangible power over the speaker, and in fact seems not even to notice the narrator's pained reactions to its constant message, the narrator nevertheless sees the bird as an ill omen of tragedy that means him harm. The speaker's obsession with his beloved's death is such that he immediately associates the bird's arrival with his memories of Lenore, in his despair making this connection without concrete evidence.

Further, it's important to note that the Raven is gifted with *speech*, not *conversation*: no matter what the speaker says, whether to himself or directly to the bird, the Raven responds,

mechanically, with "Nevermore." The Raven never addresses the subject of Lenore directly; it is the narrator who chooses to interpret its remarks in the context of his lost love. Considering that Poe envisioned the narrator as a scholar, it is possible to understand the narrator's reading of the Raven's remarks as similar to how he might approach his books in that he performs a sort of literary analysis of the Raven and its comments, viewing them as the denial of all his desires and hopes. The narrator, whose despair over death leads him to need to understand whether he might ever again hope to see Lenore, *interprets* that the Raven is responding to him and is bringing him a message, but it is not at all clear that is the case. He attempts, over and over, to rationally make sense of a response that makes no sense – and, as the cliché goes, continuing to do the same thing with the hope of a different result is the definition of insanity.

Through the poem, the Raven perches above a bust, or statue, of **Pallas** — a reference to Pallas Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom. This placement of the "nevermore"-spouting bird on top of the goddess of wisdom, suggests the victory of the irrational over the narrator's ability to think clearly and rationally. At the conclusion of the poem, the narrator describes seeing the Raven still sitting upon the bust of Pallas, "never flitting." The image places irrationality above rationality, forever. One can therefore read "the Raven" as suggesting that the bird makes its eternal nest solely in the narrator's frantic mind. His irrational tendencies in the face of his lost Lenore, bordering on madness, make his rational approach moot, suggesting that the aftermath of an event as traumatizing as the death of one's beloved cannot be overcome with measured, sensible thinking.

ANCIENT INFLUENCES

Throughout the poem, Poe makes repeated references to classical mythology and the Bible — "ancient lore" such as what the narrator might have been studying at the beginning of the text. "**Pallas**," the bust on which the Raven perches, is a reference to "Pallas Athena," the Greek goddess of wisdom. Like Pallas Athena, the Raven hails from "the saintly days of yore." The bird's choice of landing place illustrates its relationship to ancient, divine, omniscient authority, solidifying a connection that the speaker makes explicit when he dubs the bird a "Prophet." Further, "Nepenthe" is described in Homer's *Odyssey* as a drug that erases memories, while the "**Plutonian shores**" are a reference to the god Pluto, the Roman equivalent of Hades in Greek mythology, who reigns over the underworld. The mention of "Gilead" refers to the Old Testament line in Jeremiah 8:22: "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?" and "Aidenn" refers to the Garden of Eden.

While these references help to establish the narrator as a scholar, they also allow Poe to anchor his poem to the classic literature of antiquity, lending "The Raven" the authoritative weight of Western literature's foundational texts. These references also suggest that what the narrator experiences is universal and timeless across all humanity, from the present back to the founding texts of Western literature. At the same time, the narrator's continued references to ancient literature suggest that — just as he is unable to divert his attention from his past with Lenore —he is mired in the past at large. His impulse to view his experiences in the context of these works is echoed by his impulse to view the Raven and its antics in the context of Lenore. The past becomes the lens through which he perceives the present.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

PALLAS

"Pallas" refers to Pallas Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom. The bust of Pallas in the narrator's chamber represents his interest in learning and scholarship, and also can be taken as representing rationality in general and his own rational, sane mind in particular. The Raven, by landing on the bust when it flies into the room, signifies a threat to the narrator's reason and the ability of rationality to analyze and understand the reasons (if any) behind the Raven's coming and its message. That the Raven stays on top of the bust of Pallas at the end of the poem, never flitting, suggests the dominance of irrationality and fear over reason in general, and, more particularly, that irrationality has taken up a permanent home in the narrator's formerly rational mind.

THE RAVEN

Ravens are commonly viewed as symbols for evil, death, and supernatural forces. The narrator comes to see the Raven, which visits when the narrator is in deepest mourning over the death of his beloved Lenore, in exactly these terms: as a kind of supernatural emissary that has come to crush his hopes of ever being reunited with Lenore in heaven. The narrator sees the Raven not just as symbolizing death, but as symbolizing a specific kind of death: a death without heaven, a death that is simply the end.

All of that said, what the Raven symbolizes *in the poem* is not exactly the same as what it symbolizes *to the narrator*. First, a reading of the poem in which the narrator actually falls asleep and then dreams the rest of the events shifts the meaning of the Raven from a supernatural messenger about death to an embodiment of the grief-stricken narrator's own doubts and fears about what happens after death. Further, regardless of

whether the narrator is awake or asleep, it is possible to interpret the Raven as symbolizing not a meaningless death but rather irrationality and unknowability. After all, the Raven never actually says anything other than "nevermore," and it never says that word except in response to a question from the narrator. The Raven's "nevermore" never quite makes actual sense, but the narrator interprets it to be a message of death without an afterlife. In this view, the Raven symbolizes the unknowable mystery that the narrator (and human beings more generally) frantically try to use their reason to understand because the unknowable (like what happens after death) is scary. But reason fails, just as the narrator does, in figuring out the unknowable. The Raven perching forevermore on the bust of Pallas Athena, goddess of wisdom and reason, indicates the triumph of the irrational and unknowable over any rational attempt to figure it out.

"NIGHT'S PLUTONIAN SHORE"

"Plutonian" is a reference to Pluto, the Roman god of the underworld. The narrator, upon first encountering the Raven, is amused by its stately comportment, and jokingly accuses it of having emerged from the "Night's Plutonian shore"— the border between the worlds of the living and the dead. At the close of the poem, the narrator, no longer amused and convinced that the bird means him ill, repeats the phrase with conviction, suggesting that the Raven is a messenger of death, but not a death in which souls travel up to a heavenly paradise where they are reunited with the other departed, but instead a death of blackness and despair.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Signet Classics edition of *The Complete Poetry of Edgar Allan Poe* published in 2008.

The Raven Quotes

Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore…

Related Characters: The narrator (speaker), Lenore

Related Themes:

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator is studying "quaint," "curious" and "forgotten" books in an effort to forget his misery over losing Lenore. Given that the narrator is a man of letters, that he would turn to old books for relief from his emotions might not come as a surprise. But the poem's supernatural elements leave open the possibility that these books may be more than they seem. Though it's never mentioned explicitly, the narrator might be searching their pages for some way to circumvent the finality of death and bring his beloved back to life. Despite the learned narrator's rational bent, losing Lenore may have prompted him to explore magical means for dealing with grief. Either way, his tendency to delve into ancient literature in the face of his grief shows how focused he is on the past, whether in his scholarship or in his memories of his beloved.

And the only word there spoken was the whispered word, "Lenore?"
This I whispered, and an echo murmured back the word, "Lenore!"

Related Characters: The narrator (speaker), Lenore

Related Themes:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

As the narrator stands searching for the cause of the knock on his door, he whispers "Lenore" into the darkness, and receives only an echo back in return. Knowing full well that Lenore has passed away, he nevertheless allows himself to imagine that, should he speak her name, through some miracle he might receive a response. In saying "Lenore" out loud, the narrator continues to erode his earlier commitment to thinking rationally about the knocks at his door. The response he does receive is technically that of his own voice, sent back to him by natural means. Though this brief experiment to check if Lenore is actually there has failed, the brief exchange is not enough to quell his curiosity, as he returns to his chamber with his soul "burning."

Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night's Plutonian shore!

Related Characters: The narrator (speaker), The Raven

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator is amused upon first encountering the Raven, and speaks to it candidly before he realizes it has the ability to respond. He treats it like a distinguished guest, and asks it for its name on the "Night's Plutonian shore" — Plutonian refers to Pluto, the Roman god of the underworld—jokingly accusing the bird of having emerged from hell or the world of the dead. Amusement fuels this question, but the narrator's subsequent interactions with the Raven stem from anxiety and desperation. By the close of the poem, the narrator shouts at the bird to return to the "Night's Plutonian shore," having realized that his nightmarish jest has actually come to pass.

"Doubtless," said I, "what it utters is its only stock and store"…

Related Characters: The narrator (speaker), The Raven

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

While interacting with the Raven for the first time, the narrator does a fair bit of muttering to himself as though the bird cannot hear. When, to his surprise, he hears the bird replying "Nevermore" to his side comments, he tries to interpret the anomaly with reason. Here, he presumes that "Nevermore" is something the bird might have picked up from an especially pessimistic former master, and not, as he comes to assume later, a fatalistic pronouncement signaling the end of his hopes and dreams to be reunited with his dearest Lenore. This exchange is the last of the narrator's efforts to exercise reason in his dealings with the bird; in all subsequent interactions, he perceives the bird's comments as legitimate responses to his frantic questions, rather than stray, accidental utterances picked up from previous travels.

Then, upon the velvet sinking, I betook myself to linking
Fancy unto fancy…

Related Characters: The narrator (speaker), The Raven

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator sits down in a velvet chair and resolves to study the bird and explain to himself its mysterious ability to speak, and the meaning of its repeated word. The etymology of "fancy" is linked to the word "fantasy," and means both "a mental image" and "to believe without being absolutely sure or certain," to fantasize. Poe's use of "fancy" helps to blur the line between what is reality and what is the product of the narrator's imagination, implying that what the narrator is seeing in the Raven might be entirely a result of his subconscious playing tricks on him while he grieves for Lenore.

Then, methought, the air grew denser, perfumed from an unseen censer
Swung by Seraphim whose foot-falls tinkled on the tufted floor…

Related Characters: The narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

Suddenly, the narrator observes that the air has grown heavy, and smells perfume emanating from an invisible source. He describes the presence of seraphim, or angels, whom, he cries out, have been sent by God to help him overcome the burden of his grief. By prefacing this observation with "methought," Poe emphasizes that the change in the environment is taking place in the narrator's perceptions, but not necessarily in real life as well; they are, perhaps, a symptom of madness. In this moment, the narrator reaches a state of near-euphoria, having nearly convinced himself that the angels will grant him some relief from misery.

"Quaff, oh quaff this kind nepenthe and forget this lost Lenore!"

Related Characters: The narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

In Homer's Odyssey, "nepenthe" is a drug that erases memories. The narrator, citing Homer, evokes the opening scene in which he is poring over "forgotten" lore, potentially in search of some ancient cure for his devastation. While here he desires to simply ingest something and wipe Lenore from his memory, this wish is at odds with his other desire to see Lenore again, whether in some supernatural form on earth or in the afterlife. Ultimately, the narrator can neither forget Lenore nor accept that he and she will never cross paths again.

"Is there—is there balm in Gilead?"

Related Themes:

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

The "balm in Gilead" is a reference to the Bible, in which the prophet Jeremiah asks "Is there no balm in Gilead?" (Jeremiah 8:22), with "Gilead" here (in some interpretations) being a stand-in for heaven. As there seems to be no hope of seeing Lenore again on earth, the narrator, in his desperation, asks the Raven if heaven might allow him to see Lenore once more. Like in the previous stanza, this balm might be in the form of forgetting, but just as probable is that the narrator hopes to see Lenore once more after he himself has entered the afterlife. But to this, too, the Raven says only "Nevermore." The bird's response doesn't make perfect grammatical sense after the narrator's question, but the narrator is nevertheless unnerved when he hears it again.

And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, *still* is sitting
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door…

Related Characters: The Raven, The narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has screamed at the bird to leave, but to no avail: the Raven sits and sits upon the bust of Pallas, continuing to haunt the narrator. In lingering on the bust, the Raven indicates the triumph of dark supernatural forces over those of cool, calm, and collected rationality. As the poem is told as a recollection, the last scene continues until the present day, meaning that the Raven "still is sitting" then, now, and potentially forever. Like the narrator's memories of Lenore, the Raven refuses to leave the plagued narrator's mind, causing him misery until the bitter end.

And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor
Shall be lifted—nevermore!

Related Characters: The narrator (speaker), The Raven

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

With the Raven and thoughts of Lenore looming over him for time immemorial, the narrator imagines that his soul will never be lifted, that he will never be cheerful, again. The narrator describes his soul as emerging from the shadow of the bird, as though the two entities had been made one by his inability to escape from the bird's nefarious influence. Tightening the relationship between man and bird is the fact that "Nevermore," the Raven's refrain, has now made its way into the narrator's vocabulary. Having internalized the Raven's refusal of all his hopes, the narrator now inflicts the word on himself, closing the poem on an appropriately dark and pessimistic note.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE RAVEN

On a cold night, at midnight, the narrator is sitting by himself, "weak and weary," reading an old book full of "forgotten lore" and nodding off. When he is suddenly awakened by something knocking at his door, he assures himself that it's "nothing more" than a visitor.

The cold night, book of "forgotten lore," and sudden knock establish the gothic mood and at the same time mark the narrator as a scholar. That the narrator drowses off before the knock makes it unclear if he's awake or dreaming through the rest of the poem, whether what happens is supernatural or subconscious. Note also how he at first explains the knock rationally, using "nothing more" to assure himself the knocking has a rational origin, though the fact that he has to assure himself at all indicates his uncertainty. Both his rationality and doubt are on display.

The narrator then explains that he remembers that all this happened back in December. As the fire slowly dies, each dying ember like a "ghost," he wishes for the night to pass so that he might escape from his sorrow over Lenore, his dead beloved. To distract himself from thinking about her, he says, he has been reading, but without success.

The framing of the poem as a memory emphasizes how the events of the poem continue to haunt him. Here the poem also introduces the fact that the narrator is grief-stricken over his dead love Lenore, and is trying to escape that grief by reading. The fire, too, is dying. The poem vividly establishes its concerns with death and memory, and casts memory (both of his dead love, and of the raven) not as something desired but as a burden the narrator wishes he could escape, but can't.

When the curtains rustle, the narrator is suddenly frightened. Once again he tells himself that it's merely a visitor, and "nothing more."Finding some measure of courage, he calls out to whoever is knocking at the door of the room, and apologizes that he was taking so long to come to the door because he was napping.

As his fear increases, the narrator again asserts his rationality, using "nothing more" to deny the knocking could be supernatural and then acting "normal" by calling out and apologizing. But all of this effort to assure himself that there are rational answers to the knock show how, lost in grief, his rationality is already under siege. Meanwhile, the mention of napping again raises the possibility, without giving an answer one way or another, that the narrator is actually dreaming all this.

The narrator opens the door, only to find that nobody is there. He stands at the entrance to his room, staring into the darkness, equally hopeful and fearful, "dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before." He whispers "Lenore" into the darkness and hears in response only an echo – Lenore! – and "nothing more."

Although the narrator began the poem trying to forget Lenore, in a moment of irrational hope he allows himself to wonder ifshe could possibly have returned from the dead. Suddenly it's clear that narrator, while fearful, also wantsthe supernatural: *he can't escape the memories of his lost love, and desperately wants her to return, even if it's as a ghost. But now the "nothing more" is turned against him to dash those hopes: earlier he used the phrase to assert rationality, but now that he is hopeful of his lost love's supernatural return, the real world asserts* itself *and he is forced to realize the name is just an echo and "nothing more."*

Suddenly, the narrator hears a knocking at his window, and he opens it. The Raven flies in, perching atop a bust of **Pallas** above the door. At first, the narrator finds the bird's "grave and stern decorum" amusing, and asks it for its name. To his bemusement, the bird responds "Nevermore." The narrator remarks to himself that what the Raven says must be "stock and store," words picked up by copying those from a previous master. But, unable to contain his curiosity, he grabs a velvet chair and sits directly in front of the bird, trying to understand what this "ominous bird of yore" means by "Nevermore." All the while, heimagines that Lenore might be near.

Pallas Athena is the Greco-Roman goddess of wisdom and learning. The bird's landing place on the statue thereforeimplies a kind of opposition to such rationality. Note how at first the narrator finds the bird merely amusing, and he quickly develops a rational answer to how the bird learned the word "Nevermore." But curiosity – the desire to learn more, to venture into the unknown – drives him to want to understand the bird. And his sense of Lenore's presence implies that his curiosity is driven by a not-all-that rational sense that the bird might be able to give him news of his lost love. Also note how similar the bird's "nevermore" is to the narrator's earlier "nothing more," except that he used "nothing more" to assert rationality, while the bird's "nevermore" will do exactly the opposite.

The narrator then perceives that the air has become "denser, perfumed from an unseen censer," and says it must indicate the presence of "Seraphim," or angels, sent from God to help him recover from his grief over losing Lenore. He wonders if he might be able to "quaff this kind nepenthe" — to forget about her entirely. The Raven, however, answers "Nevermore."

Earlier the narrator hoped to be reunited with Lenore by supernatural means. Now suddenly he senses another possibility, that he might be saved from his painful memories by supernatural means: the "nepenthe," a mythological potion of forgetfulness. But whereas earlier the narrator explained the Raven's words as rote learning from a former master, now in his growing mania, he takes the Ravenseriously and is crushed when it answers his pleas with "Nevermore."

Growing more anxious, the narrator asks the Raven if there is "balm in Gilead" —if heaven will give him some hope of seeing Lenore again. The bird, as usual, responds "Nevermore." The narrator asks again if he and Lenore might meet once more "within the distant Aidenn," or Eden, but again the bird responds "Nevermore" in response. Now furious and heartbroken, the narrator screams at the bird to return to "the **Night's Plutonian shore**!" and never return. But the bird does not depart.

The narrator's relentless questions, despite the fact that the bird always answers the same way, show how the narrator's rationality has not just failed in helping him understand the bird, but pushed him to despair and near-madness. First, in his fervor to understand the bird's meaning, he has lost sight of the fact that the bird might not have any meaning at all – that its words might be nonsense. Once he gives that up, his mind slips into a kind of interpretive frenzy, finding meaning in everything, and seeing the Raven's "nevermore" as denying all his hopes of reuniting with Lenore. He's fallen down a kind of rabbit hole, in which he tries to figure out the unknowable – the raven, death – and with each failure only tries harder until he erupts in fury and despair.

As the poem ends, the narrator is overcome by despair, while the Raven "never flitting, still is sitting" on the bust of **Pallas**. The narrator concludes by saying he continues to live in the bird's inescapable shadow.

The Raven's refusal to leave parallels the narrator's memories of Lenore, which likewise never dissipate, suggesting that death and grieving for the dead are inescapable. Further, the Raven sitting, forever, on the bust of Pallas suggests that the narrator's ability to reason has been permanently diminished and overwhelmed by the unknowable. Ultimately, it doesn't matter whether the Raven is a supernatural visitor, a product of the narrator's dream, or a random bird that learned one word. In each case, it is the narrator's own doubts in the face of loss, memory, and the unknown that have driven away his rational peace forevermore.

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