Edgar Allan Poe - The Raven

Assignment 13, Suspense Unit
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Edgar Allan Poe was born in Boston, Massachusetts, Jan. 19, 1809, and died Oct. 7, 1849 in Baltimore, Maryland. His parents both died in 1811 before he was 3 years old. He was raised and named by John Allan, a prosperous merchant in Richmond, Virginia. In 1826 Poe entered the University of Virginia but within a year he ran up large gambling debts that Allan refused to pay. Allan prevented his return to the university and broke off Poe's engagement to Sarah Elmira Royster, Poe's university sweetheart. Poe joined the army after this but was court-martialed for neglect of duty.

He took up residence with his widowed aunt, Maria Clemm, and her daughter, Virginia, and turned to fiction as a way to support himself. He married Virginia, who at the time was not yet 14 years old. By this time, he had already written and printed (at his own expense) his first book of verses written in the manner of Byron. He wrote other volumes, each at his own expense or at the expense of friends. He became a highly respected and controversial editor and critic. He praised young Dickens and a few other unknown contemporaries but devoted most of his attention to devastating reviews of popular contemporary authors. His contributions undoubtedly increased the magazine's circulation, but they offended its owner, who also took exception to Poe's drinking, a vice Poe became addicted to when he failed to make a living by writing.

This was to be the paradoxical pattern for Poe's career: success as an artist and editor but failure to satisfy his employers and to secure a livelihood. He did succeed, however, in formulating influential literary theories and in demonstrating mastery of the forms he favored - highly musical poems and short prose narratives. Poe's source of happiness was writing poetry, but he also raised the short-story to an art form and wrote the first detective story in 1841. His dark, imaginative, gothic mysteries and tales heavily influenced the modern thriller. The theme of 'loss' which pervades much of Poe's work can be linked to events of personal tragedy in his life.
In 1847 he lost his wife. Virginia's death was a heavy blow, but Poe continued to write and lecture. In the summer of 1849 he revisited Richmond, lectured, and was accepted anew by the fiancée he had lost in 1826. After his return north that fall he was found unconscious on a Baltimore street. In a brief obituary the Baltimore Clipper reported that Poe had died of "congestion of the brain."

The Raven dates from 1844, and presents us with an odd prophecy of a man who has 'lost' his love; 'the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels named Lenore'. Far from being a tale of 'horror', a view reinforced by various cinematic representations of the work of Poe, it is a poem of haunting lyric beauty; a poetic portrait of a man in the depths of despair. The Raven appears as a metaphor of memory, a constant reminder to the narrator of his loss, and of the impossibility of her return.

Modified from Robert Regan, http://bau2.uibk.ac.at/sg/poe/Bio.html
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 someone 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 forevermore.

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 the 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 this 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 the 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 his soul in that one word he did outpour.
Nothing further 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."

Thus 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 lamplight gloated o'er,
But whose velvet violet lining with the lamplight gloating o'er

She shall press, ah, nevermore!

Then, methought, the air grew denser, perfumed from an unseen censer
Swung by seraphim whose footfalls 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, O 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 Aiden,
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 word 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 hath 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 lamplight 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!
The End of the Raven

By Edgar Allan Poe's Cat

On a night quite unenchanting,
when the rain was downward slanting,
I awakened to the ranting of the man I catch mice for.
Tipsy and a bit unshaven, in a tone I found quite craven,
Poe was talking to a Raven perched
above the chamber door.
'Raven's very tasty,' thought I,
as I tiptoed o'er the floor;
'There is nothing I like more.'

Soft upon the rug I treaded,
calm and careful as I headed
Towards his roost atop that dreaded
bust of Pallas I deplore.
While the bard and birdie chattered,
I made sure that nothing clattered,
Creaked, or snapped, or fell, or shattered,
as I crossed the corridor;
For his house is crammed with trinkets,
curios and weird decor -
Bric-a-brac and junk galore.

Still the Raven never fluttered,
standing stock-still as he uttered,
In a voice that shrieked and sputtered,
his two cents' worth -
'Nevermore.'

While this dirge the birdbrain kept up,
oh, so silently I crept up,
Then I crouched and quickly leapt up,
pouncing on the feathered bore. 
Soon he was a heap of plumage, 
and a little blood and gore -
Only this and not much more.

'Oooo!,' my pickled poet cried out, 
'Pussycat, it's time I dried out!
Never sat I in my hideout talking to a bird before;
How I've wallowed in self-pity, 
while my gallant, valiant kitty
Put an end to that [darned] ditty'
- then I heard him start to snore.
Back atop the door I clambered, 
eyed that statue I abhor,

Jumped - and smashed it on the floor. 
There it was - it was nomore.

No one disturbs Poe's mystery visitor

The annual winter ritual requires the stealth of a cat burglar, an iron will and the tacit complicity of an entire city.

In the middle of a January night, for the last 53 years, a man cloaked in black has crept into a deserted graveyard in a gritty section of downtown Baltimore and raised a birthday toast to Edgar Allan Poe.

Like a character from one of Poe's dark tales, the man then vanishes, leaving behind a half-empty bottle of cognac, three roses and an occasional note, but not a clue as to who he is.

It's a quiet show of respect, as charming as it is mysterious, which might explain why no one has ever exposed the anonymous visitor. Unlike other traditions, there are no reporters, photographers or TV crews, and no throngs of well-wishers as the man makes his pilgrimage in the wee hours of January 19.

"No one wants to ruin such a beautiful, graceful tradition," says Jeff Jerome, director of the Poe House and Museum. "People realize that it is something unique and special."

Every year on Poe's birthday, which began at midnight Saturday, Jerome and a small group of Poe enthusiasts spend the night tucked away inside nearby Westminster Hall, a former Presbyterian church, rapt with excitement, waiting for the visitor.

After the man's toast, which usually happens sometime between midnight and 6 a.m., the group hurries down to examine Poe's grave and discuss the visit: Was it Martel cognac again? Were the roses red? Was there a cryptic note? Was it even the same visitor as last year?

No one, not even Jerome, who has watched the ritual since 1976, knows the identity of the so-called "Poe Toaster."
Quick Write

Now that is a great lead into a suspense vignette. I'm sure the students would love to continue the story. And it ties in nicely with The Raven and the other history about Poe.

Also see http://www.teachersfirst.com/share/raven/start-fl.html and http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1983/3/83.03.06.x.html

Simpson’s Take: Best of the Simpson’s Volume 4: Tree House of Horror, Halloween Special 1, The Raven (1990, the second Simpson season).
  Script: http://www.snpp.com/episodes/7F04.html
  YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/embed/bLiXjaPqSyY
  Vimeo: https://vimeo.com/29733360