The Faith, Innovation, & Mystery of Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849)
Fall 2018 Reading Packet Session 1: Sept. 17, 6:30-8 p.m. repeated Sept. 18, 9:30-11 a.m.

“Even in the grave, all is not lost. “--Poe, The Pit & the Pendulum


Session One Readings

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Session Overview

During this session, we’ll discuss Poe’s achievement, those whom he influenced, and his struggle with the New England literary establishment. We will also consider Poe’s parents, his siblings, his foster parents, and his living in England. We’ll explore the next stage of Poe’s life in our 2nd Poe session. We’ll focus on The Raven and related items.

Upcoming Poe sessions: Session 2: October 22-23, 2018; Session 3: November 19-20, 2018.

Reading 1. Poe’s Achievement and Influence

Poe’s Accomplishments. Many of us read “The Raven” in high school. His short stories--The Tell-Tale Heart, The Fall of the House of Usher, and The Murders in the Rue Morgue—are classics. Poe wrote a number of short stories, poetry, a novel, a treatise on God and scientific theory, and hundreds of controversial essays and book reviews. He was the master of short terror and horror fiction, drawing on the European Gothic tradition of macabre settings, mysterious happenings, and death. His “tales of ratiocination” like Murders in the Rue Morgue are the first modern detective stories, and his “hoaxes” are considered the first science fiction stories. And, as if all that weren’t enough, Poe was America’s first great literary critic and theoretician. Ironically, however, the artists most influenced by Poe during the 19th C. were from France.

New England’s Power Trumps Poe. While Poe was generally popular with the general U.S. reading public, he was dismissed by his contemporary New England intelligentsia. Essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson, the most respected essayist and poet in American during the first half of the 19th C., discounted Poe as the “Jingle Man.” Poe’s work was far different from the New England writers Thoreau and Hawthorne. Even Whitman, whom Emerson initially supported and admired, was an insider. The view of Poe and odd and “out of the mainstream” prevailed until the middle of the 20th C.

In a scathingly civil 1919 essay, esteemed poet and critic T. S. Eliot dismisses not only Poe, but also Hawthorne and Whitman. He described them as “all pathetic creatures.” In a later essay, he remarks that “much of Poe’s writing seems “old-fashioned to the point of absurdity.” In American Renaissance (1941), the classic study of 19th C. American Literature, Harvard professor F. O. Matthiessen banishes Poe to a single footnote, explaining that Poe’s “work relates at very few points to the main assumptions about literature that were held by any of my group [Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman].

Edmund Wilson Champions Poe. The only major critic to speak up in the 1920’s and 30’s about Poe’s genius was admired literary critic and theorist Edmund Wilson.

“At a date when ‘Edgar Poe’ has figured in Europe for the last three-quarters of a century as a writer of the first importance, we in America are still preoccupied—though no longer in moral indignation—with his bad reputation as a citizen….One of the most striking features of all this American criticism of Poe is its tendency to regard him as a freak…we are always being told that Poe has no connection with ‘reality, that he writes exclusively of a ‘dream world’ which has no significance for our own. The error of this second objection becomes apparent when we consider the obvious falsity of the first. So far from having nothing in common with the spirit of the first half of the 19th C., Poe is certainly one of its most typical figures…he is a thorough romanticist.”

Dedicated European Followers of Poe. In stark contrast to his American reception, Poe was completely embraced by many European writers and artists, particularly the French. Scottish author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930) identified Poe’s Murders in the Rue Morgue (1841) and the brilliant, logical character M. Dupin as his inspiration for Sherlock Holmes. French author and essayist Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), who began reading Poe in 1847, made Poe the center of his literary and life philosophy. Jules Verne (1828-1905), who was a great fan of Poe’s writing and
wrote a study of Poe, acknowledged Poe’s imaginary balloon voyage as his inspiration for *Five Weeks in a Balloon* and *Around the World in Eighty Days*. French composers Charles Debussy (1862-1918) was fascinated by *The Fall of the House of Usher* and Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) considered Poe’s “Philosophy of Composition” a superb blueprint for the creation of music.

**Poe: the Negative Legend and the Truth.** For a long time, biographers studied Poe as though he were one of the bizarre characters in his stories. Even today, many see Poe as a fascinatingly morbid, mysterious figure lurking in the shadows of moonlit cemeteries. This is mostly the Poe of a legend created by his contemporary enemy Rufus Griswold, a pompous elitist critic, who taunted Poe during his lifetime and became his biographer after Poe’s death. In the next Poe session, you will learn more about Griswold, his literary power, and his lingering negative influence on Poe’s life and legend.

Poe’s dream of his own literary journal. Poe held the lifelong, ambitious dream of launching his own magazine, the *Stylus*. He never received support. Until his death, he justly believed that the New England establishment had consciously prevented support or funding for the magazine he envisioned.

**The legacy of Poe endures.** Popular author Heather Graham has a weirdly delightful book entitled *Wicked Death* (2017) that features Poe as a ghost determined on correcting the impression that he was drunk the night of his death. If you check novels about Poe as a character, you’ll find around 35+.

**Reading 2. Seven Truths about Poe!**

#1. **The image of Poe as a drug addict and/or alcoholic was created by Poe’s vicious biographer Rufus Griswold, an influential New Englander and an enemy of Poe.** The small dose of an opiate that Poe took once for an illness made him so sick that he swore it off for life. He had a negative reaction to alcohol and was well aware that it took only a little alcohol to make him ill. Additionally, Poe had a strict work ethic that allowed him little time to drink. Griswold destroyed Poe’s reputation while Poe was alive and created a false identity for Poe that has endured.

#2. **Poe was a spiritual man, not an atheist.** Much of his work, including *The Raven*, has religious overtones that are usually ignored. Poe was clearly struggling to find the reassurance that would shore up his faith, but he had a strong sense of God. Poe was raised an Episcopalian, had knowledge of the Bible, and explored the relationship of God to the universe in his long prose poem, *Eureka*, written just before his death.

#3. **Poe was an extremely attractive man.** The most famous (and ugly) Poe picture was taken during his illness; the oil rendering I’ve included in this first Poe packet is more like his true appearance. He was considered a dapper and attractive man. The Poe Society of Baltimore provides numerous contemporary accounts by women and men, who comment on Poe’s elegance and handsomeness. One Poe admirer said: “He had gentleman written all over him.”

#4. **Even with his talent, and publications, he remained an impoverished artist.** Although he was famous after the publication of *The Raven*, he made less than $400 for the entire year of its publication. He never owned a house, never felt financially secure, and constantly asked friends for assistance.

#5. **Although he was born in Boston, he was a Southerner through and through.** He grew up in Richmond, attended the University of Virginia, and loved Richmond and Baltimore. We’ll talk more about the impact of the South on his subject matter and writing in our next sessions.

#6. **He was a family man.** Not surprisingly, Poe, who was an orphan, developed a home that welcomed his wife’s mother, Maria Clemm and other relatives.

#7. **The circumstances surrounding Poe’s death remain a mystery.** The doctor admitting the delirious Poe to the hospital later reported that Poe had NOT been drinking alcohol although he smelled as if he had been. He died in Baltimore although he was supposed to have been in Philadelphia five days earlier; Baltimore was not on his agenda. He died in shabby clothes that were not his own outside a rundown bar that was serving as an election polling place. He was discovered by a kind stranger. In our final Poe session, we’ll consider all the speculations about his death. No one knows what actually happened.

**Reading 3. Poe’s Very Early Life (1809-1820)**

**Poe’s Paternal Grandfather.** Poe’s grandfather, David, was a stalwart Irish immigrant, who settled in Philadelphia. A patriot during the American Revolution, he was a quartermaster in the Continental Army. General Poe, as he was called, was so proud and prosperous that, when his son David, our poet’s father, married an actress and became himself an actor, the general disinherit him and turned him adrift.

**Poe’s Parents.** Poe’s mother (1787-182), Elizabeth “Eliza” Hopkins Arnold Poe, was born in London and soon moved to the U.S. with her mother. From the age of 9 until her death at 24, Eliza made her living as an admired actress in theaters from Boston to Charleston. Her first husband died soon after they married. In 1806, she married David Poe,
Poe's Foster Parents

[Portrait right: Portrait of Frances Valentine Allen (1749–1829). Kind and generous Francis cared for Poe's mother during her terminal illness. Frances also arranged homes for the three orphaned Poe children. Much to Frances' sadness, her marriage to John Allan had not yielded children. Years earlier, Frances learned that John had fathered and supported at least one illegitimate child living in Richmond. Although John vigorously objected to “taking in” the 3-year-old Edgar, Frances determined. She prevailed by pointing out her husband’s moral offenses.

He relented. Frances (whom Poe called “Ma” loved her foster son; she oversaw his religious instruction, as well as his baptism and confirmation in the Monument Episcopal Church. Poe was in the army when she died. He immediately wrote John Allan expressing his regret that he had not been with her at her death and exclaiming: “She loved me as her own child”].

[Portrait left: Monument Episcopal Church, Richmond VA where Frances took young Edgar for Baptism and Confirmation. It is now a National Historic Landmark overseen by the National Park Service. The church pew in which Frances and Edgar sat is identified by a plaque.

England and Scotland, 1815–20. In an effort to improve his business prospects after the War of 1812, John moved his family to England. Before taking up residence in London, the family spent several months visiting John’s relatives in Scotland (Irvine and Kilmarnock) and touring Edinburgh. Poe would later recall and use his childhood memories of Scotland and Scottish writers Robert Burns and Sir Walter Scott. Poe was quite taken with both writers. We’ll explore their influence on Poe in our 2nd Poe session.

Reading 4. The Raven: Definitions, Summary, & Commentary

A. The Poem. Definitions for the words in bold highlight follow the poem.

Jr. (1784-1811), a lawyer and an aspiring actor from Baltimore. Despite his family's desire that he continue to follow law, he decided to become an actor. Eliza received consistently high praise for her performances, but David, who did not have Eliza's talent or even temperament, received lukewarm reviews. Even so, the couple performed in the major Eastern U.S. theaters.

Their first child, William Henry Leonard Poe, was born in January 1807. In January 1809, the Poes arrived in New York. David’s reviews were so negative that he gave up his acting, his son, and his pregnant wife. Eliza birthed Edgar, her 2nd child, alone in Boston on January 19, 1809. Eliza also had a 3rd child, Rosalie, in December 1810 by an unknown father, possibly the famed, 19th portrait painter Thomas Sully. Little more is known about David Poe; some sources suggest that he died in Norfolk in 1811.

Eliza, who had a major role in “The Stranger,” travelled to Richmond in fall 1811. But she soon became ill from tuberculosis. She gave her last performance in "The Stranger" on October 11, 1811, and spent her final two months boarding with a family named Usher and attempting to arrange care for her children. She died on December 8, 1811.

The Orphaned Edgar and His Siblings. After their mother’s death, William was sent to his grandfather Poe, whose heart has softened. William would grow up to become a poet before his untimely death from tuberculosis. Rosalie was adopted by the Mackenzie, who ran a Richmond school. Rosalie would grow up to teach penmanship in a Richmond girls’ school. Edgar became the foster child the wealthy and kind Frances Allan despite strong protests from her husband John. He would grow up to become one of the most surprising and innovative writers in American literature. Although Poe was never adopted, he was given "Allan" as his middle name during his Baptism at the Monument Episcopal Church, Richmond.

[Picture below: Portrait of John Allan, Poe’s foster father.] John Alan (1774-1834), emigrated from Scotland to the U.S. (settling in Richmond, Virginia) in 1795. In 1804, he became a naturalized citizen, soon married Frances, and established himself as a successful merchant. He was strong-willed, often gloomy, and demanding. He and his foster son had little affection for one another. At first, John took an interest in Poe’s “formation.” He was determined that Poe would become a businessman and an upstanding Virginia gentleman. Poe, on the other hand, of becoming like his hero British poet Lord Byron (1788-1824). When John taught his foster son to keep a ledger, Poe scribbled verses on the ledger sheets. John was frustrated with what seemed Poe’s carelessness and lack of business sense. Unfortunately, Poe did not fit the mold that Allan prized. and what little patience Allan had for the adolescent Poe vanished entirely as Poe grew older.
1. 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."

2. 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.

3. 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.

4. 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.

5. Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing,
   Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal 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.

6. Back into the chamber turning, all my soul within me burning,
   Soon again I heard a tapping somewhat 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—
   'Tis the wind and nothing more!"

7. 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, and sat, and nothing more.

8. 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 thy lordly name is on the Night's Plutonian shore!"
   Quoth the Raven "Nevermore."

9. Much I marveled 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,

[Note: The illustration below is by French artist Gustave Dore (1823-1883).]
With such name as "Nevermore."

10. But the Raven, sitting lonely on the placid bust, spoke only
That one word, as if his 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."

11. 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'."

12. But the Raven still beguiling all my fancy 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."

13. 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!

14. 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 me oris of Lenore;
Quaff, oh quaff this kind nepenthe and forget this lost Lenore!"
Quoth the Raven "Nevermore."

15. "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."

16. "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."

17. "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!—quilt the bust above my door!
Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my door!"
Quoth the Raven "Nevermore."

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

A. Definitions of Unusual Words-Phrases. Here is information on words-phrases which may be unfamiliar to you. The definitions are in the order they appear in the poem. I’ve also provided the in which they appear.

Poem’s Title: Raven: Ravens are among the birds that ancient Jews considered unclean. “And these are they which ye shall have in abomination among the fowls; they shall not be eaten, they are an abomination: Every raven after his kind.” (Leviticus 11:13, 15; see also Deuteronomy 14:12, 14). On the other hand, Noah sends out a raven to see if dry land is near (Genesis 8:7). In 1 Kings 17:2-6, the ravens follow God’s instructions and keep Eliza alive by bringing him bread and meat each morning and evening. In Greek mythology, ravens are associated with Apollo, the god of prophecy and served as his messengers in the mortal world. For more on the Raven, see the next reading: Raven Lore.

Stanza 7 (2 definitions). Obeisance: Treating someone with honor or respect. The Narrator sees the raven appears as haughty. (2) Bust of Pallas: The ancient Greeks worshipped the virgin deity Pallas Athene as the goddess of wisdom, fertility, the useful arts, and prudent warfare. At birth, the warrior Pallas Athene springs fully formed and armed. She represents the antithesis to the Raven. Pallas is a deity of wisdom, life, understanding, and action; the one-word-speaking Raven is from a dark place of continual loss and anguish.

Stanza 8 (3 definitions). (1) Craven: cowardly. The Raven appears in Stanza 7. At first, the Narrator smiles, not viewing the bird’s appearance as an omen. He does identify the bird as a brave wanderer from the edge of the underworld (Plutonian shore). He asks the Raven its “lordly name,” and the Raven responds, “Nevermore.” Soon, the Narrator begins to see “Nevermore” not as a name, but a prediction and message. In the final stanza, the Narrator himself repeats the Raven’s one-word message. (2) Plutonian: Pluto is the Roman god of the underworld with the river Styx (the watery boundary between Earth and the underworld) at its edge. (3) Quoth the Raven. The use of “quoth” (the Middle English word for “said”) adds to the odd and ancient atmosphere of this strange encounter.

Stanza 14 (3 definitions). (1) Perfumed by an unseen censer--Swung by seraphim. Only Isaiah 6:1-4 mentions Seraphim: “...seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.’ At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.” In his delirium, the Narrator imagines that holy angels of the highest celestial order are bathing him in sacred cleansing ritual that will bring blessed release from his yearning for Lenore. (2) Quaff is a 16th C. verb for “drink,” related to drinking alcohol. (3) In Homer’s Odyssey, Nepenthe is a potion (drug) that banishes grief by helping one become forgetful. However, the Raven’s response of “Nevermore” underscores the Narrator’s anguish and prepares him to believe that he will never be able to forget the loss of Lenore.

Stanza 15 (2 definitions). (1) Is there no balm in Gilead? (Jeremiah 8:22). A source of myrrh, the Balm of Gilead is among the herbs used for the Holy Oil used to anoint the Tabernacle. Named after an area near the River Jordan, the Balm was believed to be a healing ointment. Legend holds that the Balm of Gilead was the first plant that the Ethiopian Queen of Sheba brought to Israel.

The Balm of Gilead is a powerful image in the Book of Jeremiah in which God foretells the Babylonian conquest. God calls Jeremiah to proclaim His vengeance on the backsliders, the disobedient people of Judah and Israel. They have worshipped false gods instead of the One God. Nothing will save them; they will be destroyed. Upon receiving God’s dire message, Jeremiah cries out: “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there my physician there?” The joining of “balm” and “physician” establishes the obvious metaphor that the kings and people are dying from the sin of disobedience toward to the one God. So, too, the narrator is caught in severe melancholy that impairs the Narrator’s ability to function.

Since Poe was raised in Virginia, it is possible that he knew some version of the African American spiritual “There is a Balm of Gilead.” The first written record of the spiritual’s existence is 1854; however, slavery began in Virginia in the 1600’s. By the 1700’s, many slaves were introduced to the Bible, and the utterance by Jeremiah became their song of quiet resistance to their mortal slave life as they looked toward some form of salvation. The Narrator, who is becoming enslaved by his delusions, is crying out for reprieve and release from his grief.

Stanza 18 (the last stanza) Definition. Aidenn: Ancient Arabic word for “Eden” & “Paradise.”

B2. Summary. On the darkest night of the year (the Winter Solstice), a lonely scholar is reading “quaint and curious volumes of forgotten lore” in an attempt to distract himself from his grief over the loss of his beloved Lenore. Even though a windy storm is raging outside, the Narrator and his study appear calm. As the poem progresses, however, the Narrator experiences a growing internal tempest.

Suddenly, he hears a tapping “on his chamber door.” He considers who might be outside and prays that it is Lenore, who has miraculously returned. Whispering her name, he hears an echo [that] murmurs back the word ‘Lenore’!"
The Narrator becomes increasingly uneasy about the rattling and tapping. In Stanza 7 (more than half-way through the poem), he opens the shutter and in "steps" a "stately Raven." The fact that the Raven lands and stays standing on the top of the bust of Pallas bust is a subtle sign that for this Scholar-Narrator, the world has been turned upside down. Perched above Pallas, the Raven--a harbinger of death and irrationality--is more powerful than Pallas, who represents wisdom, life and fertility. Unaware of what is coming, the Narrator begins to talk with the Raven, joking about the Raven's association with the underworld.

At first the Narrator is amused by the Raven. He asks the Raven its name, and, surprisingly it croaks "Nevermore." The Narrator conjectures that some "unhappy master" had used the word so often that the Raven "parrots" it, but knows no other words.

[Note: Just like a parrot, Ravens can be taught human language. Time permitting, we'll watch a short U-tube segment in which a Raven speaks.]

He pulls up a "cushioned chair," sits, and faces the bird, Pallas, and the door. The Narrator does not fear the Raven; in fact, he (ironically) hopes that the bird will not depart as have his friends and hopes. Seemingly in reassurance, the Raven answers, "Nevermore."

As the poem progresses, The Narrator asks the Raven more complicated questions to which the bird would be unable to respond even if he had a more complete human vocabulary. "Is there balm in Gilead?" - "Nevermore." Can Lenore be found in paradise? - "Nevermore." "Take thy form from off my door!" - "Nevermore."

Poe’s introduction of the Jeremiah quotation foreshadows the Narrator’s descent into complete despair and madness. By Stanza 17, he is deranged, denouncing the bird as a "fiend" and shrieking at the bird to "remove the beak from out my heart" and depart. But there appears to be no salvation for him. him; he is doomed to watch and by watched by the Raven while his "soul" lies “floating like a shadow on the floor” lost in the moorings of faith and nevermore to be raised in hope.

B3. Commentary. (1) The Poem as a Failed Faith Exploration. Many who read "The Raven" for its atmosphere and tone don’t explore the spiritual dimensions of the poem. However, the crucible of the poem is the Narrator’s intense desire to believe that his dead beloved Lenore continues to exist in heaven. As a result, Poe infuses the poem with a direct quote from Jeremiah (Holy Jewish scripture) and references to Christian beliefs. Is there a heaven where one becomes united with the beloved other? Or is death the end?

Poe’s Narrator, of course, wants confirmation that Lenore continues to exist in heaven. Instead of seeking reassurance from the dark Raven, the Narrator should be attentive to his God, should act on his faith, and should become cleansed in heart and soul. He needs to read Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound" (Isaiah 61:1).

Take a look at Stanzas 15 and 16 in which the Narrator is begging the Raven for some sign of reassurance that his beloved is with the angels in Eden. Stanza 15 opens with a direct quote from Jeremiah: "Is there no balm in Gilead? In Stanza 16, the Narrator’s plea to the Raven includes the phrase: "By that Heaven that bends above us—by that God we both adore—" Subliminally prompted by the Raven’s consistent utterance of "Nevermore," the Narrator sinks into grief, despair and madness. As the poem concludes, he is devastated, believing that there is no heaven and no hope. He will remain forever sitting in his study, his “soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor—Shall be lifted—nevermore!"

On the other hand, the Raven never changes. The bird continues to sit on the bust of Pallas and utters "Nevermore" in response to the Narrator’s questions. The poem represents the Narrator’s loss of faith from one who once believed and his descent from rationality to irrationality.

(2) The Poem as a meditation on death: a Memento Mori, a reminder that each of us and those we love will die. Many of the traditions surrounding death of a loved one focus on remembering that person. The implication is that if you remember someone’s name (and deeds), that person never dies. Poe explains that the Raven "" symbolizes Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance.

In ancient Greece through the 19th C., the arts (particularly, poetry and painting) were used to remind people that life is short and fragile, time is fleeting, vanities are useless, and death is inevitable. One of the most famous 18th C. poems was a Memento Mori written by English poet and classist Thomas Gray (1716-1771): “Elegy in a Country Churchyard” (1751). With the invention of the daguerreotype, post-mortem portraiture became a common practice. When a family member or loved passed away, the photographer was called to make a keepsake for the family. In fact, a bereft Poe, who had no picture of his wife Virginia, commissioned an artist to paint a just such a portrait immediately after her death.
Reading 5. Raven Lore

Differences between a Raven and a Crow. Ravens are larger, the size of a Red-tailed Hawk. They travel in pairs while tail, it opens like a fan. Ravens, however, have longer middle feathers in their tails so their tail appears wedge-shaped when open. Crows give a cawing sound; ravens, a croaking sound.

Raven in Legend. The raven is the world’s most intelligent and playful bird. It is a bird of paradox: sometimes seen a prankster, a symbol of magic and mystery, and as an intelligent harbinger flexibility and destiny. The old collective noun for a group of ravens is an “unkindness.” An old Scottish name for the raven is corbie which is thought to have been derived from the Latin corvus (“raven”). This large crow appears again and again in Celtic lore.

References in Sacred Scripture. According 1 Kings 17:2-6. God sent ravens to feed Elijah in the wilderness. According to Job 38: 40-41, God feeds the ravens and their young. This belief is shared by Hindus. Similarly, Psalm 147:9 says that God gives the young ravens food when they call. Gen. 8:7 states that the first bird Noah sent out from the ark was a white raven which kept flying back and forth until the water dried up from the earth. Today this has evolved into a dove with an olive branch.

In Greek and Roman mythology, the raven used to be white, but was punished for telling tales. The raven saw a princess being unfaithful to Apollo. When the raven told Apollo, Apollo was so angry that he turned the raven black. In Welsh folklore, Bran the Blessed is a kind of primordial deity and guardian of Britain whose totem is a raven. Bran ordered for his own head to be cut off, after which it could still speak words of prophecy. Eventually it was said to have been buried beneath Tower Hill, at the Tower of London. The presence of ravens at the Tower is an echo of this legend and the prophecy says that if the ravens ever leave the tower, Britain will fall. As a result, the ravens’ wings are clipped, just in case. In Cornwall Celtic lore, the legendary King Arthur didn’t really die, but was magically transformed into a raven. Odin, the chief Norse god, was accompanied by a pair of ravens, Hugin (Thought) and Munin (Memory), who would fly far and wide to bring news to Odin. One of Odin’s names, means the ‘Raven God.”

[August 30, 2018 Cartoon courtesy of Lary Youngsteudt.]

Internet Sources: SilverPettcoatReview; Wikipedia; TreesforLife.org; thoughtco.com; avenoir.com

Reading 6. Paul Gaugin (1848-1903), Painting: Nevermore (1897)

Paul Gauguin Comments on “Nevermore.” The Raven “is a bird of the devil who watches. I wanted to make a simple nude suggest a certain barbaric splendor of times gone by. The whole painting is bathed in colors that are deliberately somber and sad. Neither silk nor velvet, neither batiste nor gold creates this splendor, but simply paint enhanced through the artist’s skill. No tricks. Imagination alone has by its fancy enriched this dwelling.” Link to the painting: http://www.gauguin.org/nevermore.jsp

The Painting. According to an art reviewer, Gauguin’s intent with Nevermore is to lead the viewer away from the world of reality. He is coaxing the viewer into giving way to the artwork’s sensuality in the same way one does listening to music. He wanted to portray the Tahiti and women as he saw them, possessing something mysterious and penetrating. The work is emblematic of a final chapter in his Tahitian life.

Behind the painting. Prior to his first Tahiti departure, Gauguin was honored with a farewell dinner. During the dinner, Poe’s poem The Raven’ was recited. At times, Gauguin tried to dismiss any comparisons drawn between his painting and the Poe poem, but the raven appearing in the picture and the word “Nevermore” inscribed in the top left of the picture are hard to ignore. The main subject of the picture is the reclining form of a fully nude Tahitian woman, possibly inspired by Gauguin’s native wife.
Gaugin Biography. Gauguin was born in Paris to highly literate, upper-middle-class parents; Gauguin’s mother was Peruvian; his father a radical French journalist. In 1849, his father's political activities forced the family to flee to Lima, Peru. His father died on the journey, but his family remained in Peru for 4 years, returning to Paris where Gauguin attended a boarding school. At age 17, he joined the French merchant navy, traveling around the world for 6 years.

After his mother’s death in 1867, he settled with his wealthy guardian, who nourished Gauguin’s interest in art. Gauguin began impressionist paintings, became an amateur painter, and formed a close friendship with painter Pissarro. After the financial crash of 1882, he ceased being a stockbroker.

Adventurer. In 1887, Gauguin decided to leave France and set sail to Panama with a painter friend. Gauguin worked as a laborer on the Panama Canal, but was fired after two weeks. He soon left Panama for Martinique, where he strengthened his development as an artist. Gauguin returned to France. In 1888, he went to South France where he stayed with Dutch painter Van Gogh in Arles. The two artists learned a great deal from each other, but they were also at odds, culminating in an altercation in which van Gogh cut off his ear.

Although the late 1880s had been highly productive for Gauguin, he remained deeply depressed and in 1891 he separated from his wife and left France for Tahiti. He briefly stayed in the capital before relocating to a remoter part of the island. His first stay in Tahiti resulted in a vast artistic activity and a different style. He took every opportunity to study Tahitian old culture and tried to resurrect it in his paintings.

Gauguin remained in Tahiti until 1893, when poor health and lack of funds forced his return to Paris. He remained in Paris until 1895, when he again settled in Tahiti. In 1903, Gauguin attempted to expose the incompetence of the French officials an area of the island. He was unsuccessful, was fined by the local magistrate, and was sentenced to 3 months in jail. He did not live to serve that sentence. His health began to deteriorate alarmingly. H turned to morphine, and found himself almost totally unable to paint. He died on the morning of May 8, 1903 at his two-story thatched home and was buried the next day in the local Catholic Cemetery.

Internet sources for Gaugin and Nevermore: Encyclopedia Britannica; National Gallery of Art; Biography.com; paulgaugin.org.

Reading 7. “Memento Mori”: Examples and Discussion
“My handiwork in which I glory” (Is. 60:21)—From me, Baruch Azi son of Jacob Ring.

Christian and Folk Traditions. Episcopal and Roman Catholic churches honor the dead on All Saints’ Day and All Souls’ Day. Perhaps, the best known and most vivid example is the Mexican holiday Dios de Muertos or Day of the Dead (October 31–November 2) when people honor their ancestors and invite the spirits of those who have died back in their homes. It is celebrated throughout Mexico and by people of Mexican ancestry living in the U.S. The Disney film Coco, a box office smash and the recipient of the 2018 Oscar for Best Animated Feature, is based entirely on Dios de Muertos.

Jewish Faith and Traditions. In a 2017 essay, Julia Hernandez Nierenberg, a Mexican American Jewish woman, comments on the connection between Sukkot and the Day of the Dead: “Both Sukkot and Day of the Dead have an emphasis on remembering those who came before us. Before college, I was unfamiliar with Sukkot. I had never built a sukkah or heard the term ushpizin, meaning “guests,” figures from the past that we invite to join us in the sukkah. I began to understand that Sukkot is a time for honoring nature, harvest, and those who came before us.” In addition, the Eastern European Jewish tradition of paper cutting includes memorial plaques commemorating ancestor’s names and their dates of birth and deaths.

The Ring Memorial Tablet. Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, who arrived in great numbers in the late 19th century, brought with them the art of paper-cutting. On the left is a 1904 paper-cut masterpiece created by Lithuanian-born U.S. immigrant Baruch Zvi Ring (1872-1927, Ringiansky). The Ring Memorial Tablet is on cut-out ceremonial parchment paper and is comprised of ink, pencil, paint, and watercolor. Due to the principle of horror vacuii (the fear of blank spaces or emptiness), the tablet is almost completely covered by text, a
principle evident in Eastern European folk art. Ring’s tablet combines two types of religious documents: the Ceremonial List of the Deceased Names and the Omer Calendar. Using PowerPoint, we’ll look at a larger version of the tablet during our first Poe session.

**List of Deceased Names.** The tablet’s major task is to list the names of the deceased members of the congregation whose memory is honored by studying a portion of the Mishnah (the oral law) on the anniversary of death. These names are inscribed on the right, left- and bottom outside borders. The top of the border has Hebrew words.

**The Omer Calendar.** At the time of the Temple in Jerusalem, an required, ancient Hebrew measure (omer) of barley was brought to the Temple as an offering. That occurred daily during the 7 weeks between the 2nd day of Passover and the beginning of Shavuot (the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai). For more information on (1) Sukkot, See: https://toriavey.com/what-is-sukkot/ for (2) Shavuot see

The two outer circles of the center field are the calendar. The first holds the blessing said nightly at the counting and the formula for the first night; the outer band of rounds contains formulas for the remaining nights. Each day of Omer is numbered as well: the 49 days beginning with the 2nd day of Passover and ending with the first day of Shavuot/ In the diamonds attached to the 2 lower rounds of the tablet, Ring quotes Isaiah and signs his masterpiece: “My handiwork in which I glory (Is. 60:21) From me, Baruch Azi son of Jacob Ring.”


**Related Sources:** Chabad.org (Shavuot); thejewishmuseum.org/collection (Barack Zvi Ring); reformjudaism.org/jewish-holidays/Shavuot; and links cited in the explanatory text; myjewishlearning.com (Mishnah).

**Reading 8. Poe, “Philosophy of Composition” (Graham’s Magazine, 1846)**

**Overview.** In 1836, Poe wrote a statement of his critical philosophy. He insists that poets can be the best critics of poetry and that American authors suffer from the preference given by their countrymen to books imported from “London, Paris, or Genoa.” He also insists that “a poem [has] for its immediate object, pleasure, not truth,” Poe rejects the idea that literature should be instructive and morally uplifting, a belief held by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and other New England poets. Says Poe, “He who pleases is of more importance to his fellow-men than he who instructs.”

Throughout his short writing career, Poe was developing his ideas about literature. For him, realistic works and didactic works created to illustrate a moral lesson were the lowest forms of literary art. The highest form of literary art, says Poe, is the aesthetic creation of beauty. In his magazine reviews of other writers, Poe vigorously assesses their performance against his beliefs.

In 1846 (the year after he published “The Raven” to great popular acclaims), Poe wrote what is now considered the first American theory of imaginative writing. In expressing his philosophy of the creative act, Poe joins a long tradition beginning in ancient Greece with Aristotle’s Poetics. On the eve of the 19th C., English Romantic poets William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge published Lyrical Ballads (1798), a poetry collection intended to transform the poetic method and to reach a new audience.

In the revolutionary Preface, Wordsworth states that “poetry should be written in the language” of the “common man” and should be accessible to everyone regardless of class or status. Wordsworth then identifies the source of poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings…recollected in tranquility.” Thus, for Wordsworth, a poem originates when some experience triggers a transcendent, moment that overwhelms the senses. Eventually when the emotions have calmed, the poet rests quietly and creates words to mirror some essence of the sublime moment for the reader. Almost 50 years after Wordsworth’s definition, Poe offers his “Philosophy of Composition.” Today, the essays by Wordsworth and Poe are honored as major poetic manifestos. The two authors share the call for poetry that responds to an expanded reading public. The imaginative works of both reflect the spirit of Romanticism. However, Poe rejects the major Wordsworth premise: the role of inspiration and spontaneity as the well-spring for the creative work. The highest form of literary art, says Poe, is the aesthetic creation of beauty. However, Poe did not always follow his own rules. Some scholars have even speculated that Poe’s “Philosophy of Composition” is satirical, completely overstating the making of a creative work.

1. **Forget Spontaneity. Poe’s Method and Unity of Effect.** Poe dismisses the idea of artistic intuition and spontaneity; instead, he argues that writing must be methodical and analytical. For Poe, the seminal act of creation is to determine what novel and exciting “effect” he wishes to create. Having established the effect, the author must
establish the *denouement*: the final part of the creative work in which the strands of the plot are drawn together and matters are explained or resolved. Then, the writer must work back to the motivation or causes that lead to that effect (impression on the reader). Then and only then does the writer determine what combination of incidents and tone will best aid him in the construction of that effect. Only in this way can the writer give the plot an indispensable air of consequence by making both the incidents and the tone contribute to the overall intention.

2. **Length.** Poe declares that if the work is too long, the effect will be lessened and the reader’s impressions will not be unified. As a result, Poe insists that the work must be so short that it can be read at a single sitting. As a guide, he suggests a poem no longer than 100 lines. He points out that a long poem is a contradiction in terms. Thus, if one must create a long poem, it should actually be a succession of brief poems. He also considers the short story superior to the novel since it is shorter in length.

3. **Other Matters.** Tone, theme, characters, conflict, and plot must be generated from the intended effect. As for subject matter, Poe believes that “the death ...of a beautiful women is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world, and...is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover.” Biographers and critics have often suggested that Poe’s obsession with this theme stems from the repeated loss of women throughout his life (his mother, his foster mother and, later, his young wife).

4. **The Raven as an Example.** Poe uses “The Raven” to illustrate his proposed method. First, he decided to compose “a poem that should suit...the popular and the critical taste” He then established every aspect of the poem to enhance the poem’s effect. For example, he used a tempestuous evening so the bird would need to seek shelter. A pale bust of Pallas contrasts with the Raven’s dark plume.

5. **Charles Baudelaire (left) and Maurice Ravel (Right).** European authors Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) and Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) greatly admired Poe’s poetry and short stories and praised the viability and power of the *Philosophy of Composition* and its Companion Poem *The Raven*. Parisian Baudelaire (1821-1867) was a poet, translator, and literary and art critic whose most important work is *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857; *The Flowers of Evil*) considered by many as the most important and influential European poetry collection published in the 19th century Swiss-Basque musician Ravel (1821-1867) proclaimed “my teacher in composition is Edgar Allan Poe because of his wonderful poem 'The Raven.’” Pointing out that Ravel’s popular *Boléro* has “defied traditional methods of musical analysis,” scholar John Lanford demonstrates Ravel followed Poe’s aesthetic of design when he composed the *Boléro*.

**Reading. Final Line of Annabel Lee:** Curtis (1824-1892), *O Listen to the Sounding Sea*

**George William Curtis** (1824-1892): **Possible source for the final 2 words in Annabel Lee.** Although Curtis wrote other poems, his most famous one is the short 8-line poem below. It’s entirely possible that Poe knew the Curtis poem; it’s also possible that Curtis knew Poe’s poem. Curtis was from New England and was a close associate of 19th C. American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson. As a young man and an idealist, he was part of the Brook Farm communal living experiment that also included Nathaniel Hawthorne. Curtis, an editor and writer, became a national leader. He was instrumental in achieving civil rights reform, active in the fight for African American equality and was an outspoken advocate for women’s rights. [To save space, I’ve used dashes to separate the 4 lines in each stanza.]

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O listen to the sounding sea
That beats on the remorseless shore,
O listen! for that sound will be
When our wild hearts shall beat no more.

O listen well and listen long!
For sitting folded close to me,
You could not hear a sweeter song,
Than that hoarse murmur of the sea.
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Philosophy of Composition

Internet Sources: ENotes; Wikipedia, SuperSummary; Encyclopedia Britannica; Shawn Rider (Wordsworth and Coleridge); Boston Public Research Library. Michael Lanford, Cambridge Quarterly Abstract, Summer 2-11 (jstor.org);

Reading. Poe, Annabelle Lee (1949)
[Left: Poe’s hand-written manuscript. It has 3 changes from the published poem below.]

1. It was many and many a year ago,
   In a kingdom by the sea,
   That a maiden there lived whom you may know
   By the name of Annabel Lee;
   And this maiden she lived with no other thought
   Than to love and be loved by me.

2. I was a child and she was a child,
   In this kingdom by the sea,
   But we loved with a love that was more than love—
   I and my Annabel Lee—
   With a love that the wingèd seraphs of Heaven
   Coveted her and me.

3. And this was the reason that, long ago,
   In this kingdom by the sea,
   A wind blew out of a cloud, chilling
   My beautiful Annabel Lee;
   So that her highborn kinsmen came
   And bore her away from me,
   To shut her up in a sepulcher
   In this kingdom by the sea.

4. The angels, not half so happy in Heaven,
   Went envying her and me—
   Yes!—that was the reason (as all men know,
   In this kingdom by the sea)
   That the wind came out of the cloud by night,
   Chilling and killing my Annabel Lee.

5. But our love it was stronger by far than the love
   Of those who were older than we—
   Of many far wiser than we—
   And neither the angels in Heaven above
   Nor the demons down under the sea
   Can ever dissever my soul from the soul
   Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;

6. For the moon never beams, without bringing me dreams
   Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
   And the stars never rise, but I feel the bright eyes
   Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
   And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side
   Of my darling—my darling—my life and my bride,
   In her sepulcher there by the sea—
   In her tomb by the sounding sea.

Anabel Lee
By Edgar A. Poe

It was many and many a year ago,
In a kingdom by the sea,
That a maiden there lived whom you may know
By the name of Annabel Lee;
And this maiden she lived with no other thought
Than to love and be loved by me.

She was a child when I was a child,
In this kingdom by the sea,
But we loved with a love that was more than love—
I and my Annabel Lee—
With a love that the wingèd seraphs of Heaven
Coveted her and me.

And this was the reason that, long ago,
In this kingdom by the sea,
A wind blew out of a cloud, by night,
Chilling my Annabel Lee;
So that her highborn kinsmen came
And bore her away from me,
To shut her up in a sepulcher
In this kingdom by the sea.

The Angels, not half so happy in Heaven,
Went envying her and me—
Yes!—that was the reason (as all men know,
In this kingdom by the sea)
That the wind came out of the cloud by night,
Chilling and killing my Annabel Lee.

But our love it was stronger by far than the love
Of those who were older than we—
Of many far wiser than we—
And neither the angels in Heaven above
Nor the demons down under the sea
Can ever dissever my soul from the soul
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;

For the moon never beams, without bringing me dreams
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
And the stars never rise, but I feel the bright eyes
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side
Of my darling—my darling—my life and my bride,
In her sepulcher there by the sea—
In her tomb by the sounding sea.
Annabelle Lee Comment. With its lilting rhythm, Annabelle Lee has is among the most favorite Poe poems. Like “The Raven,” “Annabelle Lee” is a man’s expression of eternal love for his beloved. “The Raven” ends in despair and darkness as the Narrator loses his faith and hope of seeing Lenore in heaven. We leave him sitting in his chair staring at the Raven, who is sitting on top of the bust of Pallas. However, in “Annabelle Lee,” the lover knows that his soul and Annabelle Lee's soul are forever found together. Content, he lies down to sleep beside his beloved’s seaside sepulcher. The lying down literally reconnects him to his beloved and may signal his death.

The ending of the poem has a Gothic twist since it appears that the narrator will literally sleep next to his beloved bride in her tomb. However bizarre that may seem, I interpret the poem as an innocent romantic dream that sets two lover aside from all others and alone with one another.

Annabelle Lee and Virginia Clemm. This poem has clear links to Poe’s life. Poe’s distant cousin Virginia Clemm was 13 when she married 27-year-old Poe. Their 11-year marriage was a happy one although, apparently, their relationship was more like brother and sister than husband and wife. Virginia was the bright spot and anchor in Poe’s life.

Poe’s Agony. When Virginia, whose health had always been fragile, fell ill from tuberculosis, Poe was despairing. In a letter to a close friend, Poe shared the agony of his wife’s sickness and his powerlessness to help her: “Each time I felt all the agonies of her death….I loved her more dearly & clung to her life with more desperate pertinacity. But I am constitutionally sensitive — nervous in a very unusual degree. I became insane, with long intervals of horrible sanity.”

Virginia’s Death. Virginia died from tuberculosis in 1847, Poe became despondent, and his health began failing. 2 years the suffering, Poe wrote “Annabelle 2 days before he died; the poem was published as part of his obituary.

Pure Love. This poem is both a tribute to the rare and sweet emotion of pure love and also an indictment of those who intrude in the lives of the lovers. The angels so desire Annabelle Lee that they send a chilling wind to make her ill. Her aristocratic relatives (kinsmen) arrive and physically separate the young lovers. Poe presents the two lovers as innocent children. Poe is often described as an American Romantic because he shares the late 18th and early 19th C. English idea that a child arrives in blessed purity and innocence that becomes damaged and, even lost, in adulthood. These famous lines by English poet William Wordsworth in his “Ode on Intimations of Immortality” (1797) make just that point: “...trailing clouds of glory do we come --From God, who is our home:--Heaven lies about us in our infancy! --Shades of the prison-house begin to close--Upon the growing Boy...”

Annabelle Lee is first called a “maiden” and, in the final stanza, “a bride.” Whether they are married or not, they are one another’s soul mate. In stanza 5, Poe’s narrator declares that he and his beloved have such a strong and pure love that no supernatural beings (angels or demons) or wealthy relatives can separate the lovers’ “souls.”

Death does not win in this poem; the winner is the Immortality of the Lovers’ joined Souls. The narrator’s connection to his beloved cannot be broken. The purity of their love cannot be tarnished. He and she will be forever connected sleeping beside one another in the tomb, listening to the murmurs of “the sounding sea.”