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Edgar Allan Poe's Uses of Black Images In "The Raven": Was He Really a Racist?

My inquiry focuses on the ways different scholars tried and are still trying to explain Poe's ideas about poetry in general and his using of black images in "The Raven", his most famous poem, in particular. The first explanation appears in 1846, in Poe's own essay, "Philosophy of Composition". Fifty years later, Sherwin Cody, in his *Four Famous American Writers* approaches the poem in the light of Poe's extremely unhappy life. One hundred fifty years later, at the beginning of the Multiculturalist trend, in 1990, the African-American writer Toni Morrison attempts to position Poe at the very center of what she calls "American Africanism" (qtd. in Kennedy and Weissberg xii). The 1999 International Poe Conference suggests an increased tendency toward analyzing the problem of race in Poe's writing. As Roberto Cagliero says in his review of Lois Vines's "Poe Abroad: Influence, Reputation, Affinities", "One can understand Poe by understanding those who read his texts and how they understood him" (45).

"The most brilliant poetic genius in the whole range of American literature, the most unfortunate and unhappy" (Cody 14), Edgar Allan Poe has always been a very important presence in the American culture, from the time of his own contributions to the popular press and literature of his day down to the present. His poems and stories are full of the fantastic element,

of tension, of powerful contrasts between black and white, between terror and serenity. His main interest being the strong impact on the reader's mind, he defined poetry as "...Think of all that is airy and fairy-like, and then of all that is hideous and unwieldy. Think of the *Tempest* – *The Midsummer Night's Dream* – *Prospero* – *Oberon* – and *Titania!*" ("Letter to B -" 11)

His own theories regarding the process of elaborating a poem are best applied on "The Raven", which was published in New York in the January *Evening Mirror* in 1845 and was an enormous popular and critical success, inviting many reprints and parodies.

As we well know the action from "The Raven" takes place in a "midnight dreary" (1) in, a "bleak December" (7). One of the main protagonists, that is, the student, is filled with sorrow, "fantastic terrors" (14), fear of the darkness outside. There comes the raven, which is seen as "ebony bird" (43), "ghastly grim" (46), "ungainly fowl" (49), "gaunt" (71), "ominous bird" (71), with "fiery eyes" (74), a "wretch" (81), a "prophet" (85) "of evil" (85), a "devil" (85), a "fiend" (97) with "black plume" (99), a "demon" (105) that comes into "this home by horror haunted" (88) to scare "this soul with sorrow laden" (93) and who utters only one mysterious word "nevermore" (48, 54, 60, 66, 72, 78, 84, 90, 96, 102, 108). From the first image to the last we are introduced into a hideous fairy-like atmosphere that aims to produce us pleasure while at the same time playing with our deepest fears and regrets.

As opposed to the Transcendentalists Emerson and Thoreau, who saw art and poetry as only "moral" (Osipova 70), Poe defined the poem as "opposed to a work of science by having, for its immediate object, pleasure, not truth" ("Philosophy of Composition" 11). And the poetry as "music, when combined with a pleasurable idea" ("Philosophy of Composition" 11). As we can see *pleasure* was a key concept for him when creating literature.

Poe argued that “literary art is something that can be studied and learned” (Cody 25), so, one year after “The Raven” was published, he mathematically explained the creation process in “The Philosophy of Composition” published in the *Graham Magazine*. There are several points in the construction of a poem worth mentioning here. First, “the choice of an impression” (“Philosophy of Composition” 15), and the only impression that can produce pleasure upon the reader must be *beauty*. And we can ask ourselves with Lesley Dameron in his interview with Barbara Cantalupo in October 2000, what did Poe understand by *beauty*, since “he wasn’t as interested in philosophy as Emerson” (Dameron 69). Poe’s answer in his “Philosophy of Composition” would be: “Beauty, of whatever kind, in its supreme development, invariably excites the sensitive soul to tears. Melancholy is thus the most legitimate of all the poetical tones” (“Philosophy of Composition” 16) which also answers the second point, i.e., the tone. Also speaking about *beauty*, John E. Reilly, defines Poe and his creation: “A strange, haunted and suffering spirit, the weird victim of both his own genius and a cruel fate, the high priest of pure beauty raging through the crass, ugly, and hostile of 19th century America” (Reilly 84) . A suffering spirit indeed, Poe decided that no subject can be more beautiful than the death of a young woman mourned by her young lover.

The third important element in Poe’s literary theory is the need to have a refrain at the end of each stanza and a pretext for the continuous use of this refrain. The originality here was his decision to give up the “preassumption that the word was to be so continuously or monotonously spoken by a *human being* [...]” (“Philosophy of Composition” 18). At first he thought he would have a parrot utter it; but the parrot “was superseded forthwith by a *raven*, as equally capable of speech, and infinitely more in keeping with the intended tone” (“Philosophy of Composition” 18). Later on he defines the raven as “the bird of ill omen – monotonously

repeating the one word ‘nevermore’, at the conclusion of each stanza, in a poem of melancholy tone [...]” (“Philosophy of Composition” 18) .

In an interview with Barbara Cantalupo from April 2002, Daniel Hoffman discusses Poe’s tone in “The Raven”, starting from the following theory:

Rhythm in poetry, if at all effective, is expressive, emotive. Poetic rhythm is the evocation or replication of emotion by motion, the movement of the sounds and syllables of language in a physical representation of the courses of feeling. Poetry historically began in association with ritual, with dance, with song. If such associations now seem vestigial (if at all visible), it is nonetheless true that poetic rhythm, whatever it be [...] should correspond to the flow, the leaps of illumination, the development of the fusion of thought and feeling which is the reason for the existence of the poem. (Hoffman 102)

About “The Raven” in particular he says that:

I had always thought “The Raven” fustian, overblown, vulgar. And then some years ago, Grace Schulman, the poet who was then running the 92nd Street Y Poetry in New York City, asked if I would read Poe’s poems on Hallowe’en. [...] And there I was reading “The Raven”. [...] and suddenly realized the *genre* to which “The Raven” belonged. Not only a narrative ballad – it’s a performance piece. A dramatic monologue. The obsessed craziness of the student is developed as part of his character. The pumping rhythm and incessant interior rhyming are part of that development. These features also serve another function for Poe, putting the rational, critical faculties of the hearer to sleep so that the imagery and the narrative can work upon the imagination of the receptor. (Hoffman 102)

Speaking about the rhythm, an important point in the construction are the queries: from a commonplace query at the beginning

...until at length the lover, startled from his original nonchalance by the melancholy character of the word itself [...] and by the consideration of the ominous reputation of the fowl that uttered it – it is at length excited to superstition, and, wildly propounds queries of a far different character – queries whose solution he has passionately at heart – propounds them half in superstition and half in that species of despair which delights in self-torture – propounds them not altogether because he believes in the prophetic or demoniac character of the bird (which, reason assures him, is merely repeating a lesson learned by rote) but because he experiences a phrenzied pleasure in so modeling his question as to receive from the expected ‘nevermore’ the most delicious, because the most intolerable of sorrow. (“Philosophy of Composition” 22)

So, here we have a direct link made by Poe himself between *pleasure* and *sorrow*, between *delights* and *self-torture*, maybe his own definition for *beauty*.

So far I have spoken about the impression upon the reader, the tone, and the need of a refrain, as the main elements underlined by Poe in his essay of literary theory. Let's now speak about the location and the raven as such, starting with Poe's intentions and through the whole impact this *black* image had upon Poe scholars and painters in the 19th, 20th, and at the beginning of the 21st centuries.

Since beauty and pleasure are his key words as I've noticed earlier in my paper, the best place he could find was the lover's chamber, instead of a forest or the fields. But what do we know about the lover's chamber? In Poe's own terms from his "Philosophy of Composition":

The next point to be considered was the mode of bringing together the lover and the Raven – and the first branch of this consideration was the *locale*. For this the most natural suggestion might seem to be a forest, or the fields – but it has always appeared to me that a close *circumscription of space* is absolutely necessary to the effect of insulated incident: - it has the force of a frame to a picture. It has an indisputable moral power in keeping concentrated the attention, and, of course, must not be confounded with mere unity of place.

I determined, then, to place the lover in his chamber – in a chamber rendered sacred to him by memories of her who has frequented it. The room is represented as richly furnished – this in mere persuasion of the ideas I have already explained on the subject of *beauty*, as the sole true poetical thesis.

I made the night tempestuous, first to account for the Raven's seeking admission, and secondly, for the effect of contrast with the (physical) serenity within the chamber.

I made the bird alight on the bust of Pallas, also for the effect of contrast between the marble and the plumage – it being understood that the bust was absolutely *suggested* by the bird – the bust of Pallas being chosen, first, as most in keeping with the scholarship of the lover, and, secondly, for the sonorousness of the word, Pallas, itself. (21)

In this fragment from his essay we see that his main interest was, as usually, to create beauty, through colors, through the furniture, through contrast and sound. We have "the frame" ("Philosophy of Composition" 21) of "a picture" ("Philosophy of Composition" 21), a frame

made, throughout the poem, by “silken rustling” (“The Raven” 13), “purple curtain” (“The Raven” 13), “the bust of Pallas” (“The Raven” 41), “a cushion’s velvet violet lining” (“The Raven” 76), and a lamplight (“The Raven” 76). So the colors meant to create beauty are the white and the purple. We know that generally speaking *white* symbolizes *purity, perfection, calm*, as opposed to *black* that means *fear, the unknown, the evil*. *Purple* is one of Poe’s favorite colors that serves to decorate the houses of his *noble, rich* characters, and it is defined in the *Oxford Encyclopedic English Dictionary* as “a color intermediate between red and blue; the dress of an emperor or senior magistrate; the scarlet official dress of a cardinal; a position of rank, authority, privilege” (1174). But this apparently calm and serene atmosphere is accompanied even in the house by such words as “sad” (“The Raven” 13), “bleak” (“The Raven” 7), “dreary” (“The Raven” 1), “terror” (“The Raven” 14), “weak” (“The Raven” 1), “weary” (“The Raven” 1), “dying ember” (“The Raven” 8), “ghost” (“The Raven” 8), and the action takes place at midnight, in a “dreary” midnight, in a “bleak” December. So, in my view, the contrast is not only between the “(physical) serenity” (“Philosophy of Composition” 21) of the house and the tempest outside, but also between the calm in the house and the tormented soul of the student; on the other hand, one might argue, the so-called *serenity* in the house is actually the heavy serenity of death.

Poe’s obsession with death is expressed here through the student that mourns his dead lover, through the suggestive image of “the dying ember” (“The Raven” 8) and it’s “ghost upon the floor” (“The Raven” 8) and, the best suited bird to come and suggest nothing but death, the raven. Had Poe chosen a parrot, like he had intended at the beginning, things would have been really different, since such a beautiful, wonderfully colored speaking bird couldn’t possibly have scared anybody, quite the opposite.

So here we have Poe's favorite combination: the pleasure of pain, the beauty of mourning, that is, as I've said earlier, his own definition of beauty. Unlike the parrot, the raven that comes through the window is seen by the student as every bad thing that *black* can symbolize in the eyes of a mourning person, as I've already mentioned at the beginning of my paper, - black being *the* color of mourning - , all accompanied by the most pessimistic of all words, except *death*, that is, *nevermore*.

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

“Prophet!” said I, “thing of evil! Prophet still if bird or devil!
 By that Heaven that bends above us – by that God we both adore –
 Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn,
 It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore
 Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore.”
 Quoth the Raven, “Nevermore”. (“The Raven” 85-96)

Poe's declared purpose toward the end of the poem regarding the raven also appears in his essay: “The reader begins now to regard the raven as emblematical – but it is not until the very last line of the very last stanza, that the intention of making him emblematical of *mournful and neverending remembrance* is permitted distinctly to be seen.” (“Philosophy of Composition” 25)

This was his intention when he wrote the poem, and most of the Poe scholars still read it this way.

But let's remain in the 19th century for a while and see what Sherwin Cody has to say in his *Four Famous American Writers* from 1899. He discusses both “The Philosophy of Composition” and “The Raven” from a rather psycho-analytical perspective, making an

interesting connection between Poe's life and work. First, Cody wants us to know the strange effect that the poet's own explanation had upon some readers, due to its cold-blooded tone, in the chapter "How the Raven Was Written":

It is not unusual to think of poetry as the work of inspiration or genius; but how it is written, nobody knows. Poe maintained that literary art is something that can be studied and learned. To illustrate this he told how he wrote "The Raven." Some people considered this a sort of joke; but it was not. When Poe began to write, his work was not at all good; as years went on, he learned by patient practice to write well. It was more than anything else this long course of training that made him so great. (Cody 25)

Second, we are told about the awful school years of Poe in England, and the deep way he might have been influenced by the dark, nightmarish atmosphere from that building, which might remind one about Dickens's works:

In this strange school, Edgar Allan lived and studied for five years. The schoolroom was long, narrow, and low; it was ceiled with dark oak, and had Gothic windows. The desks were black and irregular, covered with the names and initials which the boys had cut with their jackknives. In the corners were what might be called boxes, where sat the masters--one of them Eugene Aram, the criminal made famous in one of Bulwer's romances. Back of the schoolroom, reached by winding, narrow passages, were the bedrooms, one of which Poe occupied. When the boys went out to walk they passed under the giant elms, amid which once lived Shakespeare's friend Essex, and they gazed up at the thick walls, deep windows, and doors massive with locks and bars, behind which the author of Robinson Crusoe wrote some of his famous works. [...] The life produced a deep impression on his mind, and molded it for the strange, weird poetry and fiction which in later years he was to write (Cody 16)

Third, the sadness and melancholy that we see in "The Raven" is explained by the very nature of the writer himself. According to Sherwin Cody, "He was a proud, melancholy young man [...] He had no trade nor practical knowledge of any kind of work, though he was quick and ingenious. He had studied the art of writing, and this alone offer him a means of earning a livelihood." (Cody 18)

And there comes the idea of despair caused by economic troubles, as described by the editor of one newspaper where Poe was working: “It was many years ago that I found Poe in Baltimore in a state of starvation. I gave him clothing, free access to my table, and the use of a horse for exercise whenever he choose; in fact, I brought him up from the very verge of despair.”

(Cody 18)

The idea of love and the sorrow caused by the death of the woman you love is explained by Cody in the chapter called “His child wife” which is about Poe’s wife, Virginia:

I see no one so beautiful as my sweet little wife. [...] This ‘evil’ was the greatest which can befall a man. Six years ago, a wife, whom I loved as no man ever loved before ruptured a blood vessel in singing. Her life was despaired of. I took leave of her for ever, and underwent all the agonies of her death. She recovered partially and I again hoped. At the end of a year the blood vessel broke again. I went to precisely the same scene. – Then again –again, and even once again, at varying intervals. Each time I felt all the agonies of her death – and at each accession of her disorder I loved her more dearly and clung to her life with more desperate pertinacity. (Cody 21)

Let’s conclude Sherwin Cody’s approach with a sort of a tribute paid to the writer he so much admired:

Can anything be more important and interesting than to know how the mind thinks, how it is inspired with terror or love or a sense of beauty? If you know just how the mind of a man works in regard to these things, you can yourself create the conditions which will make others laugh or cry, be filled with horror, or overflow with a sense of divine holiness. Ordinary poets write poems that are pretty and amusing; but it is only a master like Poe who writes to illustrate and explain some great principle. [...] We must make people think and feel as we think and feel. To do that we must understand the principles on which men's minds work, and no poet or writer analyzed and illustrated those principles so clearly as Poe. (Cody 25)

I do agree with Sherwin Cody when he notices that Poe knew exactly how human mind worked and how to induce certain emotion upon the reader, both through the rhythm of his poems and by creating great images, great “frames to a picture” (“Philosophy of Composition” 21) through words. His magnificent way of depicting this *black and ugly devil*, the raven,

inspired the great painter Edouard Manet in his own picture “The Raven”. He seems to have read Poe’s poem precisely the way Poe wanted to be read. According to Burton Pollin in his interview from September 2001:

What could have made Manet do such an extraordinary set of drawings, his lithographs for ‘The Raven’, if it weren’t the way Poe speaks about the Raven and gives him a sort of emotional quality that becomes the symbol of grief that’s overwhelming the poet – Manet tried to convey the feeling of devastation to such a degree that he succeeded beyond belief, beyond the usage of the day. He made the strokes of the pencil for the raven’s wings represent the whole environment of the poet, the overwhelming darkness.....You have the feeling that Poe could convey this with his language in some poems through the imagery, through the particular associations, adjectival, whatever they may be, and that many artists have felt particularly touched by what Poe had written. (Pollin 109)

Such a deep relationship between Edgar Allan Poe and the realm of painting leads us to his other theoretical essay very well applied on “The Raven”, “The Poetic Principle”. Here he states that what the ideal author has to do is see “the reader’s imagination” (“The Poetic Principle” 14) as “the canvas or surface upon which the author creates effects to which the reader responds as the author wills, if the author has managed to achieve what is, in effect, an unwitting suspension of disbelief” (“The Poetic Principle” 14). That is, like John Reilly says in May 2000, “he was not interested in realism, in creating reality, but in stimulating our responses to it.” (Reilly 85)

Speaking about responses, and going through the 20th century to the 21st, I found a very interesting recommendation in an interview taken to Elvira Osipova by Barbara Cantalupo in February 2001. She calls Poe’s literary principles “the aesthetics of *effect*” (Osipova 69), and says that: “Russians started the tradition of regarding Poe as a symbolist figure, a schizophrenic genius with a demonic imagination”(Osipova 69). And later on:

We need to make another breakthrough and look at Poe’s poetry, not as something very much divided from his prose in terms of irony. This may be a bold thing to say because traditionally, and even now, we tend to overlook the ironic meanings of say ‘The Raven’, ‘Ulalume’ or ‘Lenore’. We tend to regard them as just

Romantic but somewhat strange poems. Whereas, if we apply to them ‘the ironic key’, so to say, and trace irony both in tales and some poems, then the image of Poe’s work will gain more consistency. (Osipova 69)

Indeed, I think that one way to analyze “The Raven”, taking into account only the poem as such and the way Poe explains it in his “Philosophy of Composition”, might be as literary subversive language.

His most important decision, to choose the death of a beautiful woman as a subject, can be seen either through the eyes of Sherwin Cody, since the poem was written two years before Virginia’s death, or in connection-contradiction with the eternal myth of the beautiful woman. A very interesting approach in that sense is that of Michael Burdock in his *Usher’s “Forgotten Church?” Edgar Allan Poe and 19th Century Catholicism* and Ruth Clements in his review to Burdock’s book. For Burdock :

A close examination of Poe’s canon reveals numerous references suggesting an awareness of various items considered central to Catholic belief. For example, Poe comments on the Saints, the Vatican, certain popes, and the sacrament of confession. His mention of this and other aspects of Catholicism serve to demonstrate an interest in the Catholic Church. [...] The death of this beautiful woman [Mary] intrigued the Church as much as the general concept fascinated Poe. (Clements 55)

Quite the opposite, for Clements the only thing Poe really believed in was Terror, and he calls him “the original Master of Deconstruction” (Clements 57) who wrote “a catechism of Nothingness – and that Nothingness, St Augustine tells us, is what hell is”(Clements 57). In his view, Poe was naturally attracted by Catholicism only in the sense of tradition, of “lush with beauty and mystery” (Clements 55) but he subverts Catholicism “in the way that Satan uses Scripture” (Clements 57) in order to create nothing but death.

I have always been struck by Poe’s use of Catholic themes and symbols.[...] Poe was not looking for salvation – at least, not from Christ. That he might be ‘saved’ by the love of a beautiful (and dying) maiden also does not mean that he was in sympathy with Church doctrine concerning the Virgin Mary, except in the sense

of Mary as archetypal woman (which, *qua* archetype can mean almost anything). Burdock writes that ‘the death of this beautiful woman [Mary] intrigued the Church as much as the general concept fascinated Poe.’ That there is an intriguing parallel between the Church’s devotion to Mary and Poe’s obsession with an idealized Girl-Woman is most certainly food for thought; this parallel, however, does not so much evince Poe’s sympathy for ‘some of the doctrines of the American Catholic Church in the 19th century’, as it demonstrates just how profoundly and creatively the Church tapped into an ancient vein of psychological/mythological truths to tell The Greatest Story Ever Told. (Clements 55-6)

Looking at the poem from this perspective, I see Poe as using the most famous myths, such as the love for a beautiful woman, that appears through a whole range of literature since the oldest times, either in prose or poetry, the raven as the bird of *ill omen* that predicts only bad things to happen, and the bust of Pallas, that is, the goddess of wisdom. The problem I see here is the way he uses these myths. All the religious prose and poetry from the Middle Ages who praised Virgin Mary, saw her as the sacred link between us and God, and she was mentioned and celebrated as such. All the medieval or the Renaissance literature that wrote about beautiful women, saw them as either inaccessible, as in the case of Cervantes’s Dulcinea, that is, the beautiful princess dreamed of but never to be seen by the man in love, or as the one who rejects love, but who is present, seen and praised. And she is always alive. And we always know exactly how she looks like, either a dark-haired or a blonde, always very well dressed and with a lot of radiant jewelry. And, maybe the most important thing in such poems or prose, there is an idealized environment, either the pastoral idyllic landscape, where everything is green and full of flowers and a crystal clear water, or the rich interior of a palace. Besides, we know that the one bird that symbolizes love is the white pigeon. And the one goddess that symbolizes beauty, fertility and love is Aphrodite. For Poe, quite on the contrary, the woman is beautiful, but we have no idea how she looks like in “The Raven”. All we know is that she is young and beautiful, and....dead! The house can be seen as “richly furnished” (“Philosophy of Composition” 21) from

the reasons mentioned above, but there are no vivid, merry colors, but *sad* silken, and *dark red* , and *pallid white*. And it's night all over the poem, and winter, and storm. And the bird that comes through the window is not that pigeon, not even the speaking merry colored parrot, but a black raven, black like everything else around it. And we have the bust of Pallas instead of Aphrodite, and even this bust is pallid and serves only to place a black raven on the top. The poem it's not only full of mystery, but full of death! So, yes, I think one might see it as a subversive piece of literature.

Regarding the raven, the originality and, one might argue, the subversion of the standard American literature, is the way he uses him, not only as predicting misfortune by his simple croaking, but as speaking, as replacing the traditional human being. And this was his very intention, besides the need of concordance with the general tone, as he states in the "Philosophy of Composition" (18).

So far I have discussed three important responses to "The Raven": Poe's own analysis, that is, the theoretical approach, Sherwin Cody's psycho-analytical perspective, and the subversive one.

If, traditionally speaking, Poe was very difficult to label, being seen by the most prestigious scholars either as pre-Romantic, or Neoclassical or Classical, and he was considered rather European than American, due to his disregard of American national themes, such as the Frontier, the Puritan past, the natural landscape, the colonies, the Revolution or the democracy, starting with the beginning of the Multiculturalist trend, as represented by Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* (1990), Poe has suddenly been situated "at the center of our literature in its forging of national identity" (qtd in Kennedy and Weissberg, xiii). In her view:

What rose up out of collective needs to allay internal fears and to rationalize external exploitation was an American Africanism – a fabricated brew of

darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire that is uniquely American. [...] In Poe the concept of the American self was...bound to Africanism, and was similarly covert about its dependency. (qtd in Kennedy and Weissberg xiv)

For the first time in the literary history of the United States, what has always been attributed to the writer's desire to create *beauty*, *pleasure* and *effect* through contrast, through black and white, is now reread by minority scholars as an expression of *white supremacy*, versus *black inferiority* in terms of politics. At first, Toni Morrison only referred to those tales that featured black slaves, exposing the racist way in which they had been depicted. In this fourth important reaction to Poe's literature, Toni Morrison found a lot of followers who attempt to recreate the entire historical and political/ideological environment from antebellum America in order to establish the true place Poe deserves there. The reactions of classic researchers to this new approach ranges from considering his political views as quite irrelevant in judging his creation, as it is the case with Lesley Dameron, "All I do know is that Poe was reared in the South, and so was I, and I'm not sure that attitudes changed a great deal on these matters (racism) until the 20th century. Personally, I feel that the topic is somewhat irrelevant to the study of Poe's works" (Dameron 69), to critics like Gerald Kennedy, for whom history matters rather from an economic point of view: antebellum America was characterized by "great expansion in the American periodical trade" (qtd in Jong 77) which caused the capitalist market to affect "public attitudes and policy on such issues as national expansion, urbanization, and slavery, factors that would have influenced Poe's personal values as well as prospects as a magazinist and aspiring editor" (Jong 77). Terence Whalen's thesis from "Average Racism: Poe, Slavery and the Wages of Literary Nationalism" contradicts those minority critics or, whoever tries to prove Poe's deliberate racism, making him not a promoter of slavery but rather a natural product of that literary market, a writer struggling to survive and being forced by the environment to "have it both ways" (Whalen 32). Another advocate of this theory is Roger Asselineau who sees in Poe's

“duplicitous” (Asselineau 95) nature both the “dark abyss” (Asselineau 95) of the “neurotic obsession” (Asselineau 95) and the fact that he was “obliged to think of the market-place” (Asselineau 95), noting that he may have written “his stories only to please the public and follow current fashion” (Asselineau 95). The context is important for other Poe scholars, too. For Robert Beuka in his article “The Jacksonian Man of Parts: Dismemberment, Manhood and Race in ‘The Man That was Used Up’”:

Poe offers an image that serves as a scathing critique of the ideologies of manhood and citizenship that held sway in the Jacksonian era. With his depiction of Smith, Poe offers a revisionary look at the figure of the American, imagining a body – and, by extension, a body politic – whose illusion of wholeness or unity is both compromised and tenuously held together by contemporary race politics. (Beuka 30)

For Daniel Hoffman, the economic problem is important more like in the case of Sherwin Cody:

We have to know, as best as we can, the cultural climate in which the author lived and worked. For instance, what was it like to be a journalist in the 1830s and 40s? What were the conditions of the authorship? What were the economics of living by the pen? And there’s the political background. Where was Poe in the class system, and how does that affect his work? I’d say that like Twain, Hawthorne and Melville, he’s a fallen American aristocrat. This sense of having fallen from eminence, a reversal of upward social mobility, conditions the imagination. (Hoffman 109)

In the case of Burton Pollin:

Poe lived in a society that was dominated by racists as a Southerner. These were the people he had to respect, had to kowtow to in regard to the readership of the *Southern Literary Messenger* along with its proprietor White who was afraid of antagonizing anyone of wealthy background. Given that limitation, did he, in fact, embrace racism to the degree that some rabid racists would? (Pollin 102)

Well, it seems that for some critics such as Betsy Erkkila in her essay “The Poetics of Whiteness: Poe and the Racial Imaginary” from *Romancing the Shadow: Poe and Race*, Poe did embrace such deliberate racist attitudes! According to the editors:

In a subtle reading that relates the poem's imagery to the racial discourse of the era, she tries to demonstrate that even a poem as popular as 'The Raven' is far from innocent in regard to racial prejudice and anxiety." [She] "sees Poe supporting dominant Southern views on slavery as he pictures a universe colored in black and white. (Kennedy and Weissberg xvii)

According to J. V. Ridgely in his review to this book:

Thus, Erkkila, surveying Poe's verse, finds a "poetic of whiteness". His attack on didacticism "was not only a defense of pure poetry and the sanctity of art: it was also a defense of whiteness, slavery, and a whole way of Southern life against the increasing threat of Northern and particularly black defilement". (Ridgely 70)

Well, if black must, by all means, and in any of Poe's works, reflect the writer's deliberate racism and the expression of *white* supremacy in terms of politics, as this new trend seeks to prove, I conclude by remarking once again in how different ways different generations can read a master like Poe, and especially a masterpiece like "The Raven" and by asking: had Poe chosen a parrot instead of the raven, in the poem I've talked about, would this have possibly meant *post-colonialism* avant-la-lettre, due to the wonderful combination of colors that characterize such a bird?

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