

Poe's Uses of Racial/Black Images in "The Raven"

The paper tries to explain Poe's reason for using black images in his most famous poem 'The Raven'. The earliest explanation appeared in 1846, in Poe's own essay *Phylosophy of Composition*. Fifty years later, Sherwin Cody in *Four Famous American Writers* approaches the poem analyzing Poe's extremely unhappy life. One hundred fifty years later, at the beginning of the Multiculturalist trend, in 1990, the black writer Toni Morrison attempts to position Poe at the very center of what she calls 'American Africanism'. Ten years after her we can see that she made Gerald Kennedy and Liliane Weissberg write a book called *Romancing the Shadow* in order to test and check her theories regarding racism in Poe, on a wide variety of prose and poetry including "The Raven".

Edgar Allan Poe has always had an influential and pervasive presence in American popular 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!*" (Poe, *Essays and Reviews*, 11)

His most famous poem, "The Raven", 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. For his contemporaries it immediately became the talk of the nation – being copied in almost every newspaper. Poe had written and published many other poems, but none of them had attracted much attention.

As we well know the action from "The Raven" takes place in a "dreary midnight" in, a "bleak" December (Poe, 1). One of the main protagonists, that is, the student, is filled with sorrow, "fantastic terrors" (Poe, 2), fear of the darkness outside.

There comes the raven, which is seen as “ebony bird”, “ghastly grim” “ungainly fowl”, “gaunt”, “ominous bird”, with “fiery eyes”, a “wretch”, a “prophet of evil”, a “devil”, a “fiend” with “black plume”, a “demon” that comes into “this home by horror haunted” to scare “this soul with sorrow laden” (Poe, 3) and who utters only one mysterious word ‘nevermore’.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Poe defined the poem as “opposed to a work of science by having, for its immediate object, pleasure, not truth.” (Poe, ER, 11) And the poetry as “music, when combined with a pleasurable idea.” (Poe, ER, 11) He also argued that literary art is something that can be studied and learned, so, one year after “The Raven” was published, he mathematically explained the creation process in an essay from the *Graham Magazine* called “The Philosophy of Composition”. There are several points in the construction of the imagery that I should mention here. First, “the choice of an impression” (Poe, Philosophy of Composition, 15), (beauty), the tone “all experience has shown that this tone is one of sadness. 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” (Poe, PC, 16); the need to have a refrain at the end of each stanza and a pretext for the continuous use of the refrain: this was the moment when he thought that the difficulty of inventing such reason derived from the “preassumption that the word was to be so continuously or monotonously spoken by a *human being* [...]” (Poe, PC, 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.” (Poe, PC, 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 [...]. (Poe, PC, 18)” Speaking of melancholy, Poe decided the most striking subject he could think of was death, and, death can be beautiful only when it is the death of a beautiful young woman. And who could have been more fitted to mourn such a death than “the lips of a bereaved lover” (Poe, PC, 19)? 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.”

"Prophet!" said I, 'thing of evil!--prophet still, if bird or devil!
By the 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,--

Quoth the Raven, 'Nevermore.'" (Poe, PC, 19)

In order to convey beauty to the poem and “an indisputable moral power in keeping concentrated the attention” (Poe, PC, 21) Poe chose the richly furnished lover’s chamber as the ‘locale’, instead of a forest or the fields, and:

“the thought of introducing him [the bird] through the window was inevitable. The idea of making the lover suppose, in the first instance, that the flapping of the wings of the bird against the shutter,

is a ‘tapping’ at the door, originated in a wish to increase, by prolonging, the reader’s curiosity, and in a desire to admit the incidental effect arising from the lover’s throwing open the door, finding all dark [...]. 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 [...]. About the middle of the poem, also, I have availed myself of the force of contrast, with a view of deepening the ultimate impression. For example, an air of the fantastic – approaching as nearly to the ludicrous as was admissible – is given to the Raven’s entrance. He comes in ‘with many a flirt and flutter’.” (Poe, PC, 22)

Towards the end of the poem the lover speaks of the Raven as:

“Grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird of yore, and feels the ‘fiery eyes’ burning into his ‘bosom’s core’. This revolution of thought, or fancy, on the lover’s part, is intended to induce a similar one on the part of the reader[...].” (Poe, PC, 23)

At the very end of the poem, 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.” (Poe, PC, 25)

Let’s conclude Poe’s own approach by saying that he was fascinated with the idea of suffering, of self-torture, of sorrow and despair, “with the indulgence, to the utmost extreme, of this self-torture.” (Poe, PC, 24)

Fifty years later a reference to this essay is made by Sherwin Cody in his *Four Famous American Writers* (1899). In the chapter called “How the Raven Was Written” Cody summarizes Poe’s own commentaries explaining that “For years people thought that ‘The Philosophy of Composition’ in which he tells in what a cold-blooded way he wrote ‘The Raven’, was a joke; but in later times we have learned to understand what he meant and to know that he was very sensible in his methods of working.”(Cody, 20) Speaking

about the writer's school years in England, Cody proposes that the dark, black, strange, even nightmareish atmosphere might have had a deep influence on the way Poe conceived his later poetry and fiction:

“the schoolroom was long, narrow, and low; it was ceiled with dark oak and had Gothic windows. The desks were black and irregular [...] 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, [...] and they gazed up at the thick walls, deep windows, and doors massive with locks and bars [...]. 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, 25)

In another chapter called “Living by Literature” the sadness and melancholy that we see in “The Raven” for instance is explained by the very nature of the writer himself. 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, 30) One of the magazine editors is quoted as saying “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, 31) The idea of love and the sorrow and despair 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, 35)

Sherwin Cody’s conclusion, from 1899, is like a tribute payed 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, 40)

One hundred years after Sherwin Cody, in her *Playing in the Dark*, black writer Toni Morrison argues that black characters in classic American novels have been as marginalized as their real-life counterparts. Her thesis about ‘American Africanism’, which I will briefly mention, is not based on poetry but in Poe’s *Narrative of Gordon Pym* with which she tries to place Edgar Allan Poe at the very center of such notion. She defines American-Africanism as “meant to teach a black author about white motivation. It should also teach whites about how they have constructed not only black but white identity, and how they have contemplated their own humanity by observing the dehumanization of others.” (Steiner, 1)

Ten years later her book is both tested and admired by some Poe Studies Association members, Gerald Kennedy and Liliane Weissberg, whose main question is “how racist was Poe?” Here I’ll present both their Introduction to *Romancing the Shadow* and a review of their book made by J.V.Ridgely from Columbia University, in the 2002

spring issue of the EAPR. In their “Introduction” to the book, the editors tell us that it is indeed strange to place Poe at the center of any debate about the connection between American literature and race in American culture. They remind us Poe’s anomalous position both in the old and new canons, since he evinced “little sustained interest in the frontier, the natural landscape, the Puritan past, the settlement of the colonies, the Revolution or democracy itself” (Kennedy, Weissberg, 2) , the reason for which he won greater acclaim in Europe. They note that it is indeed difficult to situate his work in the 19th century cultural and political America. They see him as a “shrewd pragmatist” in journalistic matters, who “tended to blink the palpable, social and ideological tensions of a Union that would not long endure half slave and half free. Like many of his time and place, that is, Poe endeavored to ignore the terrible contradiction between slavery and the American credo of equality.” (Kennedy, Weissberg, 4) Later they notice that there are critics who see in Poe’s *A Predicament*, *The man that Was Used Up*, and the *Gold Bug*, “ludicrous caricatures of black servants, Jupiters and Pompeys, while his only novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, portrays murderous black natives and associates the color white with mystical, even sacred, significance – as epytomized by the huge ‘shrouded human figure’ at novel’s end, whose skin is “of the perfect whiteness of the snow.” (Kennedy, Weissberg, 5)

The editors also warn us that “while these chapters engage the issues of race in Poe’s work in different ways, none present easy answers about Poe’s attitudes toward African-Americans” (Kennedy, Weissberg, 5). Besides a multitude of essays regarding Poe’s prose, there is Betsy Erkkila’s “The Poetics of Whiteness: Poe and the Racial Imaginary”, where the editors say she concentrates on Poe’s “The Raven”.

“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, Weissberg, 7)

In his review to *Romancing the Shadow*, Ridgely underlines that “the evidence is hardly black and white. The published evidence [...] is scanty – only brief remarks in scattered reviews.” (Ridgely, 1) The canon is problematical, since of his over sixty tales and two longer narratives only four have black characters. He says that for the editors, “this revisionary perspective initiates a new tactic for considering Poe’s texts by ‘pushing beyond racist caricature to uncover subversive longings figured through the racial other.’” (Ridgely, 1) This way of ‘reading race in Poe’ – his ‘romancing the shadow’ – is the task that these essayists undertake.” (Ridgely, 2) The first example he comments upon is Erkkila, who “finds a ‘poetics of whiteness.’” It seems that in her view “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, 2) After analyzing few more chapters that test Morrison’s opinion – politically (“imperial fantasy”, “average racism”, “depoliticized from the start”), legally (“property and possession”), history (the slave trade), - Ridgely draws his own conclusion regarding Poe and *Romancing the Shadow*:

“So, then, how racist was Poe? As the editors note, the contributors supply a multitude of perspectives, none of which dominates the argument. At the end of their introduction they ask: ‘was Poe an active promoter of racist ideology, or was he rather a product of his time, repeating generally shared views?’ On the burden of evidence presented as responses to their double question, the reader can

justifiably vote NO on the first part and YES on the second. That leaves us with a final but unstated query: Does Poe warrant Morrison's positioning him as central to the concept of American Africanism? For this reviewer, the verdict is: NOT PROVEN.” (Ridgely, 3)

On the burden of evidence presented by the five writers, critics and reviewers analyzed in this paper, my conclusion is that it would be indeed exaggerated to see Poe's work, and, especially, “The Raven” as ideologic. I can only see it as “the almost perfect mirror of the life of the man who wrote it--the most brilliant poetic genius in the whole range of American literature, the most unfortunate and unhappy.” (Cody, 1)