

Original Paper

A Brief Analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's Poem *The Raven* from a Psychoanalytic Perspective

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Abstract

Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven*, as a classic poem of American Romanticism, profoundly depicts a man who has lost his spouse engaging in a dialogue with a mysterious raven late at night. The raven's incessantly repeated "Nevermore" deepens the man's despair and loneliness. This paper conducts a brief analysis of it from a psychoanalytic perspective: First, it analyzes the manifestation of the unconscious and repression in the poem; second, it explores the conflict of the narrator's structures of personality, including the conflict between the id and the ego, and the influence and constraints of the superego; then, from the perspective of the death instinct and life impulse, it analyzes how the narrator, driven by the death instinct, continually indulges in the fear of life's impermanence, simultaneously seeking hope under the push of the life impulse to showcase his struggle and pursuit; finally, it summarizes the insights brought by *The Raven*. The author believes that such an interpretation can not only help readers understand the poem's connotation and Poe's creative thoughts more deeply, but also inspire writers to pay more attention to characters' unconscious psychology and psychoanalytic elements, thereby producing literary works of greater depth and artistry.

Keywords

Edgar Allan Poe, *The Raven*, Freud, Psychoanalysis

1. Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe (born on January 19th, 1809, in Boston and died on October 7th, 1849, in Baltimore) owns five members in his family, including his parents, sister, brother, and himself. His parents were initially professional actors. After becoming unacceptable, Poe's father was trapped in heavy drinking and let himself have a bad temper. Because of this, he abandoned his family in 1811 and have them impoverished. Therefore, the burden was naturally borne by his mother. She broke down from constant

overwork and then died a few months later. Young Poe was then sent to his foster parents and began new experiences.

Poe's literary legacy encompasses celebrated contributions to poetry, short fiction, and critical theory in 1800s America. A cornerstone of the Romantic movement, he pioneered Gothic conventions while probing psychological horror and existential mystery. These artistic explorations were inextricably linked to his lived experiences amid an epoch marked by societal fragmentation and economic unsteadiness. He experienced repeated setbacks and suffered many tragedies (besides what was mentioned above), such as the death of both parents in childhood, multiple school dropouts, the death of his foster mother, a break with his adoptive father, the premature death of his wife, conflicts with friends, and career difficulties. Despite these painful experiences, he never abandoned writing and left behind many excellent works. Although these experiences damaged him, they also shaped him, granting him a profound understanding and unique expression of themes such as life and death. Poe's poetry is highly rhythmic, and he often used rhetorical devices such as exaggeration, metaphor, and symbolism to create a mysterious and terrifying atmosphere that leaves readers "deeply immersed." In addition, his narrative style is unique, emphasizing tight plots and unified effects, striving to enhance the overall impact of the work through every detail. Poe's themes are diverse, but the most prominent are explorations of death, horror, and the dark side of the human heart. He often reveals the dark aspects of human consciousness and the subconscious through depictions of characters' inner worlds and mental states. Furthermore, he engaged in profound reflections on human nature, morality, and the essence of the universe. Consequently, his works were not only groundbreaking in his time but also had a far-reaching influence on later literary creation, particularly in the fields of detective fiction, science fiction, and horror fiction. Poe persisted in writing poetry throughout his life, but compared to his numerous and varied short stories and fictions, the amount of his poetic output was relatively less—only fifty-nine published poems. His poetry mostly depicts inner activities, with love, death, and dreams as the three most important themes. Among them, the poem-*The Raven* is his most widely passed around and highly regarded poem (He, 2021).

1.1 The Creative Background and Brief Introduction of Edgar Allan Poe's Poem The Raven

When writing *The Raven*, Edgar Allan Poe's life was unstable. He experienced multiple career changes and suffered from economic difficulties. In 1844, he moved to New York and published *The Balloon-Hoax* in the *New York Sun Newspaper*, which increased his fame. However, his personal life remained challenging, especially as his wife Virginia's health deteriorated, significantly impacting his spirit and creativity.

Poe once wrote, "The best topic to compose a poem is death; and the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world" (Poe, 1985). This theme is evident in many of his writings. In the poem *The Raven*, which is the focus of this paper, death is revealed through the narrator's deep mourning for his lost partner and his fear of death are the core emotions. Additionally, the "raven" in the poem, which constantly repeats "nevermore," was influenced to some extent by Dickens's *Barnaby Rudge* (Melissa, 2007, p. 48).

As one of Poe's most famous and representative works, *The Raven* was first published in the *Evening Mirror* in 1845. In the same year, the poem was published in England, which helped him win unanimous praise from the public and critics for its unique Gothic style, beautiful rhyme, and profound symbolism (Edgar Allan Poe, 1995). The work consolidated Poe's legacy in U.S. literary historiography and propagated far-reaching influences across later literary production.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning once wrote a letter to Poe saying that my friends, some are attracted by its horror; some are indulged in its musicality. Subsequently, many writers borrowed Poe's techniques for depicting Gothic elements, further enriching the expressive forms of Gothic literature. The symbolic techniques Poe used in *The Raven* inspired later Symbolism literature, leading many writers to pay more attention to the exploration and expression of symbolic meaning. The delicate portrayal of the narrator's complex psychological state and emotional changes in *The Raven* influenced later psychological description and psychoanalytic literature.

2. Overview of Psychoanalytic Theory

Sigmund Freud, the renowned Austrian neurologist and psychologist, co-founded the natural school of psychology; as the founder of psychoanalysis, he developed a set of therapeutic techniques centered primarily on the talking cure. Furthermore, Freud discovered that the unconscious exists. "Through study, he was sure of the components of the mind and gave them corresponding names. Based on this, he found out how they operate. He also charted the sequence of human psychological growth from infancy to adulthood. He confirmed the reasons of most mental illnesses and invented a method for treating them." (Peter, 2006, pp. 1-2)

Emerging principally from Sigmund Freud's foundational work, psychoanalysis encompasses psychological theories and clinical methodologies. Subsequent theorists—including Anna Freud, Erikson, Fromm, and Jung—substantially expanded this paradigm (Yu, 2016). Its core postulate asserts the universal presence of unconscious cognition, affect, drives, and mnemonic traces. By bringing unconscious content into conscious awareness, people can experience catharsis and gain insight into their current psychological state (Freud, 1989, p. 26).

Psychoanalysis remains influential in psychotherapy, certain areas of psychiatry, and even across the humanities. Consequently, it continues to generate widespread and highly controversial debates—regarding its therapeutic efficacy, scientific status, and whether it promotes or hinders the feminist cause, and other aspects (Freud, 2015, p. 3). Nevertheless, due to the universal applicability of this theory, it has been introduced into literature; today, an increasing number of literary works and literary critiques are rooted in this theory.

This section concisely frames Freudian psychoanalytic theory through its cardinal components: "a singular drive, dual instincts, tripartite consciousness tiers, the personality triad ('three selves'), five psychosexual phases, and eight defense mechanisms." Since the "death instinct," the "unconscious," and personality theory are more generally manifested in the poem *The Raven* and are more pertinent to

interpreting *The Raven* from a psychoanalytic perspective, the author will primarily focus on analyzing the poem from the three aspects.

3. The Unconscious and Repression—Psychological Dynamics in *The Raven*

Freud posited that human behavior and personality emerge from the dynamic interplay of conflicting psychodynamic forces across three perceptual strata: the preconscious, conscious, and unconscious. His tripartite psychic model—conscious, preconscious, unconscious—was iconically conceptualized as the “iceberg theory.”—“The top of the iceberg you are able to see above the water represents the conscious mind. The part of the iceberg that sank underwater but is still visible is the preconscious” (Freud, 1949, p. 108).

The unconscious is Freud’s most continuous and notable contribution to Western thought. According to Freud, the unconscious is a force of will which can be capable of experiencing things, influenced by human drives, but operating beneath the level of conscious perception. It is a repository of instinctual desires, needs, and psychic acts. The unconscious typically includes early childhood memories, secret desires, and hidden drives. “Although excised in conscious access, historical memories govern thought patterns and emotional responses via unconscious mechanisms.” (Freud, 2007, p. 97). “However, even though these thoughts, memories, and expectations may be outside our consciousness, they often consistently influence our thinking, behavior, and even the way we act. In some cases, things outside our consciousness can affect behavior negatively and lead to psychological anxiety or mental disorders. Essentially, some wrong statement, for example, slips of the tongue, actually reveal underlying unconscious thoughts or feelings.

3.1 Release and Manifestation of the Unconscious

In *The Raven*, the narrator experiences multiple instances of unconscious emotional outbursts and releases, laying bare the thematic emotions and inner world.

Example 1:

- > 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?”

(-Stanza 05, lines 2-3)

The content of your dream is about what you miss day and night. Therefore, the only word “Lenore” he whispered and murmured expresses the narrator’s overwhelming longing for his spouse who has passed away. This unconscious behavior reveals the importance of “Lenore” in his mind.

Example 2:

- > That one word, as if his soul in that one word he did outpour.
- > Nothing further then he uttered—not a feather then he fluttered—
- > Till I scarcely more than muttered Other friends have flown before—
- > On the morrow he will leave me, as my hopes have flown before.

(-Stanza 10, lines 2-5)

Here, it is obvious that the narrator is in a pessimistic and depressed mood. After the raven speaks only one word and then becomes silent, barely moving a feather, the narrator mutters that the raven will also leave him tomorrow just as his friends have done. This unconsciously blurted-out statement clearly conveys his inner loneliness and desolation, as well as his longing for his deceased “Lenore”.

3.2 *The Continuation and Intensification of Repression*

This is mainly reflected in the raven’s constant repetition of “nevermore”. It appears six times: First occurrence in Stanza 8: When the narrator asks the raven’s name, “Nevermore” is the answer. The second occurrence in Stanza 9: “Nevermore” – could this be a name? The narrator asks himself and begins to doubt. Such absurdity forms a layer of mystery, hinting at hidden meanings. The third occurrence in Stanza 10: The narrator mutters to himself, and the raven suddenly says “Nevermore.” The fourth occurrence in Stanza 11 and 12: At that time, the narrator wants to fathom the meaning of “Nevermore,” and feels superstitious the “nevermore” may refer to something. Therefore, the word lingers hauntingly in his mind like a nightmare (further highlighting the terrifying atmosphere). The fifth occurrence in Stanza 13, 14 and 15: His thoughts and focus return to Lenore again. He hopes for nepenthe (a forgetfulness drug) and balm (a sweet-smelling cream that heals wounds or reduces pain) to erase his longing for her, the untimely “Nevermore” appears again to deny the function of the drug and cream. That results in the narrator continuously indulging in the painful and longing condition. Therefore, the narrator completely breaks down and erupts. The sixth occurrence appears in Stanza 16: The narrator uses “sainted”, “rare”, “radiant” and “angel” to defend Lenore and wants to clasp “Lenore” after death. But the raven’s reply remains “Nevermore,” filled with arrogance. The seventh occurrence in Stanza 17: The narrator screams hysterically, ordering the raven to leave his room, but it remains unmoved, leaving only the word “Nevermore.” The last appearance in the last stanza: The raven is still in the room with like demon’s eyes and the atmosphere which it caused confines the narrator himself to a worse condition. From an initial “Nevermore” representing a name, to words filled with mockery, then to a philosophical contemplation, even a cold contempt, and finally an utter helplessness, the multiple repetitions cause the narrator’s emotions to fluctuate intensely. His repressed feelings about losing Lenore and fearing life’s impermanence are soothed only to be reignited and even to be aggravated, intensifying his psychological pain and plunging him into deeper despair and struggle.

4. Conflict in Personality Structure—Psychological Struggle in *The Raven*

According to Freud, the individual psyche consists of three elements: the id, the ego, and the superego. Based on these three elements, human produce complex behavior. Furthermore, each person owns a certain amount of psychic energy that forms the three elements which play distinct roles and operate at diverse levels of the consciousness.

The primary part of personality, as the origin of all psychical energy is the Id. It appears from birth, is completely unconscious, and includes instincts and primitive behaviors. Driven by the principle of

happiness, the id tries to satisfy all the immediate desires, wishes, and new urges. If these needs are not immediately reached, a state of anxiety or tension arises. However, immediate gratification of these needs is not always realistic or even not possible. “If we were controlled completely by the pleasure principle, we might grab things which we want to get but actually sourcing from other people in order to satisfy our cravings without restraint. Such behavior would be not only destructive but also unacceptable for the public” (Carducci, 2009, p. 245).

Distinct from the id and be responsible for managing reality is the ego which was from the id. The ego can ensure that the id’s impulses can be expressed in acceptable ways within the real world. It attempts to satisfy the id’s desires in appropriate ways based on the reality principle (Yu, 2016). In some cases, the impulses of the id could be satisfied through deferred gratification—the ego would eventually permit the behavior, but just at the suitable and correct time and place. It operates across the conscious, preconscious, and unconscious mind (Yu, 2016).

The terminal psychic structure assimilating moral standards and ideals internalized through familial and social channels constitutes the superego. The superego starts to operate at five years old and helps us to judge something that we meet. It is thought that this structure comprises two constituents: the ego ideal and conscience. The ego ideal incorporates ethical behavioral codes formulated and propagated predominantly by parental and institutional authorities. Adherence to such codes activates perceptions of esteem, merit, and accomplishment. As for the conscience, it contains information and hidden rules about behaviors typically forbidden by parents and society, which may lead to negative consequences, punishment, or senses of guilt and remorse. In a word, the superego, existing in the conscious, preconscious, and unconscious mind, plays a role in perfect civilized behavior, suppresses all impulses which are difficult to accept, and strives to make the ego take actions according to idealistic standards rather than the reality principle.

4.1 The Struggle between the ID and the Ego

The narrator’s psychological state in the poem is complex and contradictory, reflecting conflicts and struggles within his unconscious. On the one hand, he longs to forget his lost spouse and escape his inner pain:

- > “Respite—respite and nepenthe, from thy memories of Lenore;
- > Quaff, oh quaff this kind nepenthe and forget this lost Lenore!”
- Stanza 14, Lines 4-5

Here, he wants to drink nepenthe (a kind of drug which can help you to forget sadness and troubles suffered) to forget his deceased lover, hoping this will lessen his pain and miss for her.

On the other hand, he cannot relinquish his longing for her or his fear of death. In Stanza 16, the narrator expresses a desire to embrace Lenore’s soul:

- > 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.

From these examples, it is obvious that a person owns the complex emotions within his or her heart when facing a major blow in life. The ego clearly understands the need to detach from the pain—the narrator even tries reading at the beginning. But the id remains immersed in profound longing for Lenore and fear of death.

This struggle causes the narrator to constantly waver and struggle between reality and desire, only intensifying his suffering.

4.2 *The Influence and Constraints of the Superego*

The narrator's longing for Lenore and fear of death are subjected to the superego's moral scrutiny and self-reproach, making him feel guilty and self-blaming. This sense of moral responsibility stems from the superego's internalization of societal moral norms, specifically the responsibility of a husband-loyalty towards his deceased wife and the moral questioning of life's meaning. The superego causes the narrator to feel a moral obligation and responsibility, while missing Lenore, driving him to constantly seek memories and meanings related to Lenore.

In his communication with the raven, the narrator repeatedly asks questions about the future especially referring to life after death, attempting to seek hope and release. However, the raven always answers "Nevermore", which shatters the narrator's hopes while simultaneously triggering the superego's mechanisms of guilt and self-blame. The narrator may deeply feel that his inability to escape his longing for Lenore and fear of death, which is not accepted by the public and even was derided by others. It is obvious that this behaviour violates the moral norms advocated by the superego and the demands of his ideal self, thus generating feelings of guilt and self-reproach.

The superego is also reflected in the narrator's moral scrutiny of reality. Through his dialogue with the raven, he attempts to find solace for Lenore and answers about life's meaning in the real world. However, the raven's answers make him realize that this pursuit is unrealistic in the real world and may even violate the moral norms advocated by the superego. This moral scrutiny of reality plunges the narrator into deeper despair and pain.

Through these aspects, the superego imposes moral constraints on the narrator in *The Raven*, trapping him in a dilemma between pursuing personal desires and adhering to moral norms, thereby exacerbating his psychological conflict and pain.

In the process, the id drives the narrator to crave reunion with Lenore, seeking emotional solace and satisfaction, but the superego inhibits this impulse, making him feel guilty and self-blaming. The ego, meanwhile, acts as a mediator between the superego and the id, attempting to balance the narrator's inner conflict. In the poem, the ego manifests as the narrator trying to alleviate his inner pain and conflict through reading books and conversing with the raven. However, this mediation is unsuccessful because the raven's answers continually trigger the id's impulses and the superego's moral constraints, making it difficult for the ego to find an equilibrium. The ego endures tremendous pressure during this mediation process, being able to satisfy the id's desires while also adhering to the superego's moral demands. This pressure causes the narrator to feel anxious and helpless, trapping him in a dilemma between pursuing

personal desires and following moral norms. For example, during the dialogue with the raven, the narrator persistently asks about the future, trying to find hope and relief, but the raven's answers dash his hopes again and again, further intensifying the ego's predicament in mediation.

Through the interaction of the superego, id, and ego, *The Raven* profoundly reveals the narrator's psychological conflicts and pain concerning themes of life, death, and emotion, depicting his complex inner struggle as he navigates between pursuing personal desires and adhering to moral norms.

5. Death Instinct and Life Impulse—The Vital Tension in *The Raven*

Freud's theory of the death instinct points out that Death Instinct is a kind of state which is inherent, inclined towards destruction and a return to an inanimate. It manifests as aggression, self-destructive impulses, and a longing for death. The death instinct can be directed inward or outward. When directed inward, it can lead to self-punishment and suicidal behavior; when directed outward, it manifests as aggression and destructive behavior towards others.

These two instincts interact within the individual's inner psychic activity, influencing behavior and emotions.

5.1 *Manifestation and Influence of the Death Instinct*

Clearly, the narrator in the poem exhibits the inward-directed impulse: he always indulged himself in self-torment. The narrator's suffering is largely self-inflicted. Although the raven provides only the single-word answer—"Nevermore," it is the narrator himself who chooses the questions and mentally links "Nevermore" to his grief over Lenore's death, thereby continually intensifying his own pain. The death instinct within the narrator drives him to persistently indulge in the loss of Lenore and the fear of life's impermanence.

5.2 *The Struggle and Search of the Life Impulse*

Despite being filled with the death instinct, the narrator still attempts to seek hope through dialogue with the raven:

- > 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.

He hopes the raven will tell him if, in the distant Eden, he can embrace the sainted maiden called Lenore. This expresses his hope for the future and his yearning for a possible reunion; this strong life impulse sustains his soul and makes him want to alive.

Yet, in reality, he knows his Lenore is gone but still struggles with fancy desperately. This conflict between emotion and reason embodies the opposition between the life impulse and the death instinct, showcasing the narrator's struggle and pursuit within the tension of life.

6. Insights from Interpreting *The Raven* through a Psychoanalytic Perspective

6.1 Understanding Edgar Allan Poe's Creative Thought

Interpreted through a psychoanalytic view, one can discover the more nuanced inner world of the poet Edgar Allan Poe. By expressing the narrator's profound longing for Lenore and his constant questioning of life's meaning, the poem reflects the progression of the narrator's emotions. This progression allows readers to experience the poet's exploration of life's value. Within the poem, despite life being filled with loss and pain, the narrator's love for Lenore and his pursuit of life's meaning remain unchanged, revealing the value of beautiful emotions in life. This exploration of life's meaning endows the poem with deeper philosophical connotations.

6.2 Inspiration for Later Literary Creation

Applying psychoanalytic theory to literary works can encourage writers to pay more attention to characters' unconscious psychology, conflicts in personality structure, the death instinct and life impulse, and other psychoanalytic elements. This allows for a more detailed portrayal of the protagonist's psychology and image, making it easier for readers to empathize and become immersed.

6.3 Inspiration for Readers

Viewing the theme of this work from a psychoanalytic perspective, readers should place greater emphasis on the meaning of life, not dwell on the past, but look forward, seeking a better tomorrow and future. Indulging in a painful and tormenting past not only harms one's own spirit and psychology but is also something the deceased would not wish to see!

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