



Ravens, Words, and Deconstruction: A Derridean Analysis of “The Raven” by Edgar Allan Poe

Feathers of Meaning: Derridean Echoes in "The Raven"

Priyanka Dash

Undergraduate Student

KIIT School of Languages & Literature (KSLL)

Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology (Deemed to be University)

Abstract : The poem “The Raven” by Edgar Allan Poe is a puzzling work that deals with the theme of losing a loved one. Since its publication in 1845, critics have been attempting to unravel its mysteries. Poe himself offered his critique of the poem after it was published and provided readers with his intended meaning. The poem "The Raven" can also be analyzed using post-structuralist literary theory, which is based on the idea of deconstruction introduced by Jacques Derrida. This theory suggests that comprehension and explanation are unattainable, as meaning is not a direct representation of objective reality and language is composed of arbitrary signs that exist concerning one another. Derrida also introduces the concept of *différance*, which suggests that meaning is always deferred and unstable. This makes literary texts like "The Raven" open to interpretation, challenging previous readings and introducing new mysteries. To do this, the poem's binary oppositions are identified and the centralization of one side of the opposition is revealed through an exploration of the poem's social, historical, and authorial context, disrupting its traditional meaning.

Keywords - Edgar Allan Poe, The Raven, Poststructuralism, Deconstruction, Binary opposition, Jacques Derrida, Différance

The master of macabre

As one of the most famous American writers and the master of the macabre, Edgar Allan Poe famously transformed the genre of gothic stories with his psychologically deep and insightful tales that the genre had never comprehended before. Edgar Allan Poe is recognized as the originator of modern detective stories and an influential precursor to science fiction. His poem "The Raven" is rich in symbolism, delving into themes such as mortality, hopelessness, and the blurred line between reality and fantasy. The protagonist of the poem is a man grieving for his lost love and battling depression. Although Poe explained how he composed the poem in "The Philosophy of Composition," it remains open to various interpretations and deconstruction.

The purpose of this paper is to offer a concise introduction to Poe and his work "The Raven", followed by an examination of the author's intended meaning and the main binary oppositions presented in the text. The paper will employ deconstruction theory to analyze the subversion of these binary oppositions and opposing

pairs within the poem's context and aims to provide a comprehensive analysis using a combination of literary and critical theory.

This paper takes a Derridean perspective of "différance" to analyze the poem and support its main argument. The analysis is based on Derrida's theory of "deconstruction", which highlights the inherent instability and ambiguity of language and seeks to reveal the underlying assumptions and contradictions within texts. Derrida's view is that language is never a finished or final product, and that the significant meaning of words is constantly changing, rather than being fixed or constant. In this way, the paper aims to use Derrida's ideas to provide a nuanced analysis of the poem.

Deconstruction is a method of analyzing texts that involves examining how they undermine traditional literary conventions and cultural assumptions. It does so by examining the various oppositions and binary pairs present in a text to reveal their instability and impossibility of resolution. Jacques Derrida used deconstruction to critique the predominant philosophical and literary paradigms of his era, which he felt were excessively reliant on binary oppositions and strict categorization systems. Instead, he advocated for a more flexible and dynamic approach to language and meaning that acknowledges the contingent and multifaceted nature of human experience.

The deconstructive approach provides a postmodern and poststructuralist interpretation of the poem, focusing on various binary oppositions such as melancholy versus happiness, fantasy versus reality, and reason versus emotion. This analysis aims to challenge these dichotomies and explore the semantic and conceptual possibilities that *différance* can reveal. The paper addresses the questions, that whether or not can one apply Derrida's *différance* concept to deconstruct the key ideas of the poem and to what extent Derrida's theory of deconstruction reveals the ambiguity and instability of language and meaning in "The Raven", and how does this contribute to our understanding of the poem's themes of death, madness, and the human condition?

At the heart of postmodernism is Derrida's concept of deconstruction, which challenges structuralist linguistics and logocentrism. *Différance*, Derrida's concept, replaces the structuralist idea of difference as the foundation of signification with the concepts of "differ" and "defer". Deconstruction discards the idea of a fixed representational system or a direct connection between words and objects, as a central point is replaced by a boundless signification or free flow of signs. Consequently, language always signifies a lack or a gap in direct representation. According to Marshall, "Language, therefore, will stand for something that is not present; it initiates a slippage from one signifier into another and denies direct correspondence between signifiers and signifieds". (Marshall 1992)

Derrida's view is that the notion of a fixed center in language creates a sense of closure, limits the possibilities of language, and produces binary oppositions. The center, paradoxically, both organizes and restricts language. Derrida advocates for a decentralized language, where a gap or absence is incorporated, and substitutions occur endlessly. Such a language enables "supplementarity" to occur, where signification generates something more, resulting in a surplus or supplement.

Poststructuralist criticism departs from the structuralist idea that each text has a central logic that revolves around binary oppositions. Instead, deconstruction in literature, influenced by Derrida's radical critique of traditional representation, rejects the notion of a stable and final interpretation. This critical approach emphasizes the lack of a definite and singular meaning in texts. The poem's use of language is also a central focus of post-structuralist analysis. The poem uses different literary techniques like repeating words, using similar-sounding words, and making words rhyme to create a vivid and expressive description. However, these techniques also make it difficult to understand the poem's meaning as they focus more on the way words sound and their associations rather than conveying straightforward messages.

"The Raven" is a beautiful and haunting poem that has captivated readers for over a century. Its beauty lies in its use of language and the way it creates a vivid and evocative atmosphere of darkness and sorrow.

The poem's use of sound is notable, particularly the repeated use of phrases like "Nevermore" and "Quoth the Raven", which create a musical effect that is both mesmerizing and eerie. The poem's rhythm and melody are also enhanced by the use of alliteration, rhyme, and meter, adding to its overall aesthetic appeal.

The imagery in the poem is also powerful and contributes to its beauty. The dark, Gothic setting, the ominous raven, and the mournful speaker all work together to create a vivid and atmospheric world that draws the reader in. The use of symbolism, such as the raven as a symbol of death and loss, also adds depth and meaning to the poem.

Edgar Allan Poe underwent various personal tragedies throughout his life, such as the passing of his cherished wife Virginia Clemm, who supposedly served as the inspiration for the character of Lenore in the poem. These events, in conjunction with his battles with depression, thoughts of suicide, isolation, and chronic ailments, influenced numerous pieces of his literature. Hence, it can be deduced that several of Poe's works, including "The Raven", contains elements from his life. Besides these personal connections, Poe's writings are renowned for their Romantic sentimentality, incorporating themes of madness, murder, premature burial, and hallucination.

According to AzebChikh, "Whenever we hear the name, Edgar Allan Poe, we remember "The Raven," a poem that became popular due to the musicality of its refrain "Nevermore". Poe is not only a poet but also a short story writer. He is known for his tales of fantasy, terror, horror and ratiocination stories; hence, he is the father of detective stories. Edgar Allan Poe as an American dark Romanticism suffered a lot in his life. His woeful life made his way to writing. He suffered greatly with poverty and death that took all of his family. Thus, death was an essential theme in his works." (AzebChikh 2012)

The interplay between hope and despair

Poe's use of a dark setting in the beginning lines creates a melancholic atmosphere, which is a major motif in his works. Although Poe intended to create the single effect of beauty through melancholy, the meaning of the poem is not fixed or stable. The beginning lines of the first two stanzas: "Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary" and "Ah distinctly I remember, it was in the bleak December" (Poe 1975 pp.943), suggest so. Some may find hope in the narrator's search for a solution to his loss through reading "forgotten lore," while others may see the narrator's subconscious mind represented in the raven. The repeated word "nevermore" makes the meaning of the poem undecidable and open to temporary meanings. The narrator appears to be torn between his desire to forget his pain and his desire to remember the past, which further complicates the interrelated oppositions of hope and despair, and happiness and melancholy that are entwined in the poem. The bird can be interpreted as a manifestation of the speaker's subconscious mind, with the narrator reasoning with himself to escape from the pain of his grief. Some suggest that the raven represents the narrator's subconscious despair. As a result, the poem presents a complex interplay between hope and despair, as well as happiness and melancholy, making it difficult for readers to choose a side. The meaning of the poem is therefore undecidable and subject to temporary interpretations. The narrator expresses conflicting desires, wanting both to forget and to remember his lost love. In the line "Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing, Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before," the narrator is experiencing a mixture of emotions that cannot be easily categorized as either happy or sad. Similarly, in the line "And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting," the repetition of the word "still" creates a sense of monotony and melancholy. Additionally, in the line "And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor shall be lifted-nevermore!" The narrator's despair and sadness are evident, as he realizes that he will never be able to escape his pain. These lines illustrate the complexities and blurred boundaries between melancholy and happiness in the poem.

The boundary separating the realm of fantasy and the world of reality appears hazy

The boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, and some argue that language constructs all realities. However, this construct also means that any reality is imaginary. There are contradictions in the text, as seen in the poem, where the narrator tries to remain realistic but may also be hallucinating. Repetition is used in the poem, which can mean resistance to forgetfulness or a defence mechanism. Derrida's

"iterability" concept suggests that every iteration is an alteration or modification of the same. Therefore, the meaning of "Nevermore" is unstable and uncertain. If the raven is real, the ending is sad, but if it is imaginary, the ending is unknown. Thus, stable meaning cannot be fixed. The original passage did not mention any specific lines from the poem that suggest the deconstruction between fantasy and reality, but one possible line that could be interpreted in this way is "And the silken, sad, uncertain rustling of each purple curtain" (line 13), which blurs the line between reality (the rustling of curtains) and fantasy (the personification of the curtains as "sad" and "uncertain" and their material described as "silken" and "purple").

The paradox of emotion and reason

Poe's "The Philosophy of Composition" features an attempt to decipher the cryptic term "nevermore" through the use of reason. However, his efforts lead him down an increasingly emotional path as he becomes less rational the more he thinks, as seen in line sixty-six. This transformation is mirrored in the statue of Pallas, which changes from a serene bust to a pallid one. The contrast between reason and emotion is linked to the dichotomy of light and darkness, which can be associated with either. The flickering lamp can represent the final glimmer of hope for the narrator, which could either be the enlightenment of rationality rescuing him from the gloom of his feelings or the radiance of his emotions, sparked by his beautiful and charming lady, safeguarding him from the depths of rationality.

In contrast, Derrida criticizes the Western idea that reason is the key to understanding everything. Derrida challenges the notion that reason or "logos" precedes language, arguing instead that language constructs our understanding of reason. He suggests that we may have first written things down without necessarily having a rational basis for them, and that reason was then developed based on these writings. In this sense, irrational emotions could be seen as the foundation of human experience. Derrida posits that humans, unlike animals, are conscious of their instincts and therefore have the ability to reason about them. The contrast between humans and animals is exemplified by the relationship between the narrator and the raven. However, Derrida's view does not give primacy to emotion as the central signified; rather, it suggests that language and our understanding of reason are inextricably linked.

The narrator is depicted as being caught between two worlds: the rational, daytime world of reality and the irrational, nighttime world of dreams and madness. Similarly, the raven itself represents a kind of duality, embodying both wisdom and foolishness, life and death.

Another important opposition in the poem is between language and silence. The raven's repeated cry of "Nevermore" serves to disrupt the narrator's attempts to impose meaning and order onto the chaotic world around him, suggesting that language may ultimately be inadequate in the face of existential questions and uncertainties.

Through a post-structuralist analysis, one can see that this binary opposition is not fixed, but rather constantly shifting and unstable. The meaning of the poem is not contained in any single element but rather emerges from the interplay between these different elements. This means that any interpretation of the poem is necessarily incomplete and open to challenge and revision.

A deconstructive analysis of "The Raven" also considers the historical and cultural context in which it was written. Poe was living in a time of great social and political upheaval, and his work often reflects this sense of uncertainty and anxiety. By subverting traditional literary conventions and exploring themes of madness, death, and the limits of language, Poe may have been commenting on the larger cultural anxieties of his time.

Derrida's theory of deconstruction provides a unique lens through which to view the themes of "The Raven", and sheds new light on the poem's exploration of death, madness, and the human condition. The poem's focus on death is not merely a reflection of Poe's fascination with mortality but is instead a commentary on the human condition itself. Deconstruction reveals how the binary oppositions between life and death are not fixed, but instead constantly shifting and unstable. In this way, the poem can be seen as a meditation

on the transience of human life and the inevitability of death. The poem's exploration of madness is not simply an illustration of the narrator's descent into insanity, but rather a commentary on the instability of reason and language. Through deconstruction, one can see how the binary oppositions between reason and madness/emotion are not as clear-cut as they may seem, and how language can be a source of confusion and misinterpretation.

Deconstruction allows us to see how the poem's themes and the human condition are all interconnected, and how they are all rooted in the fundamental ambiguity and instability of language and meaning. Derrida's theory of deconstruction offers a more nuanced and complex understanding of these themes and reveals the full depth and richness of Poe's Gothic masterpiece.

The paper aimed to conduct a deconstructive analysis of "The Raven" by Poe, to challenge established notions such as happiness vs. melancholy, reality vs. fantasy, and reason vs. emotion. This paper employs the notion of Derrida's idea of *différance* to identify and subvert the primary binary oppositions within the poem. By doing so, they illustrated that these opposing terms can coincide and be substituted for one another, resulting in an inability to establish an absolute meaning. Consequently, recurrent themes such as darkness/light cannot be restricted to a set center or significance. The article argues that the interpretation of the poem is continuously postponed and remains unsteady, yet it persists and progresses without any ultimate settlement or ending.

References

1. Adams, John F. "Classical Raven Lore and Poe's Raven". *Poe Studies*. vol. 5, no. 2, 1972, pp. 56-75.
2. AzebChikh, Nahla. *The Attitude towards the Death of a Beloved in Edgar Allan Poe's Poems, The Raven, Lenore, Ulalume, and Annabel Lee*. Dissertation, The University of Mohamed Khider, 2012.
3. Culler, Jonathan. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. Cornell University Press, 1982.
4. Derrida, Jacques. "Différance". *Literary Theories: A Reader and Guide*, edited by Julian Wolfreys, New York University Press, 1970, pp. 191-213.
5. Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass, University of Chicago Press, 1978.
6. Derrida, Jacques. *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass, Chicago University Press, 1982.
7. Feidelson, Charles Jr. *Symbolism and American Literature*. The University of Chicago Press, 1983.
8. Foster, Hal, editor. *Postmodern Culture*. Pluto Press, 1990.
9. Howell, Granger Byrd. "Devil Lore in 'The Raven'". *Poe Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1972, pp. 33-52.
10. Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. Routledge, 1988.
11. Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. Routledge, 1989.
12. Huysen, Andreas. *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass, Culture and Postmodernism*. Macmillan, 1988.
13. Adams, John F. "Classical Raven Lore and Poe's Raven." *Poe Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1972, pp. 56-75.
14. AzebChikh, Nahla. "The Attitude towards the Death of a Beloved in Edgar Allan Poe's Poems, The Raven, Lenore, Ulalume, and Annabel Lee." Dissertation, The University of Mohamed Khider, 2012.
15. Culler, Jonathan. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. Cornell University Press, 1982.
16. Derrida, Jacques. "Différance." *Literary Theories: A Reader and Guide*, edited by Julian Wolfreys, New York University Press, 1970.
17. Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass, University of Chicago Press, 1978.
18. Derrida, Jacques. *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass, University of Chicago Press, 1982.
19. Feidelson, Charles Jr. *Symbolism and American Literature*. The University of Chicago Press, 1983.
20. Foster, Hal, editor. *Postmodern Culture*. Pluto Press, 1990.
21. Howell, Granger Byrd. "Devil Lore in 'The Raven'." *Poe Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1972, pp. 33-52.
22. Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. Routledge, 1988.
23. Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. Routledge, 1989.
24. Huysen, Andreas. *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass, Culture and Postmodernism*. Macmillan, 1988.

25. Jung, Kyle. "Fantastic Conflict in "The Raven"." *Artifacts Journal*, 2012, <https://artifactsjournal.missouri.edu/2012/07/fantastic-conflict-in-the-raven>.
26. Kopley, Richard. "Two Verse Masterworks: The Raven and Ulalume." *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, edited by Kevin J. Hayes, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 132-149.
27. Marshall, Brenda K. *Teaching the Postmodern Fiction and Theory*. Routledge, 1992.
28. Miller, J. Hillis. "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure." *Georgia Review*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1976, pp. 30-48.
29. Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Raven." *Edgar Allan Poe Complete Tales and Poems*, Random House, 1975, pp. 387-393.
30. Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Raven*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013.
31. Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Philosophy of Composition (1850)*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017.
32. Racevskis, Kalis. *Postmodernism and the Search for Enlightenment*. Virginia University Press, 1993.
33. Silverman, Hugh J., editor. *Postmodernism – Philosophy and Arts*. Routledge, 1990.
34. Stern, Philip Van Doren. *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*. Penguin Press, 1977.
35. Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*. Routledge.

