

# Fantastic Conflict in “The Raven”

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Edgar Allen Poe is famous for eerie literary works preoccupied with terror and littered with mystery. “The Raven,” arguably his most famous text, is no exception. The Gothic and Fantastic elements that permeate the poem are most evident in the second, thirteenth, fourteenth, and eighteenth stanzas. These passages are the most explicit in terms of the division between the real and unreal. These two concepts are juxtaposed in a concrete way through the narrator (real) and the raven (unreal). The raven serves as the representation of the unreal because it is nothing more than an anthropomorphized version of the narrator’s subconscious despair. In this way, the poem consists of a pseudo-dialogue between the narrator and his own psychological echo. Every time he addresses the empty night, the raven reciprocates by reminding him of his pain using a single word that is the embodiment of the narrator’s despair and anguish. This repetition of “nevermore” posits the raven as a figment of the narrator’s imagination, thus resolving the mystery between reality and fantasy.

To understand the nature of the relationship between the narrator and the raven, it is helpful to examine Tzvetan Todorov’s concept of the Fantastic. First and foremost, for a work to be considered “fantastic,” there must be a hesitation on the part of the reader in distinguishing reality from unreality. Furthermore, a character in the text must share this uncertainty. Most would agree that a talking raven achieves this on both ends. Eventually, a decision must be made between the two, while still accepting the strangeness as literal rather than metaphorical or allegorical. When this choice occurs, the idea of the fantastic breaks down into one of two subcategories. If the events in the work are deemed strange, yet explicable in the natural world, the fantastic becomes the uncanny. If the events are supernatural and inexplicable, the fantastic becomes the marvelous. To simplify, the uncanny is real but unfamiliar; the marvelous is impossible. By replacing reality and unreality with uncanny and marvelous respectively, it is easier for the reader to discern between the two and obtain a more complete understanding of “The Raven.”

In order for conflict between the uncanny and marvelous to exist, the reader must first be able to share in a character’s hesitant thoughts and ambiguous frame of mind. The narrator’s purposeful detachment from reality makes him an unreliable source of information, thus causing hesitation on the part of the reader regarding what is real. In the second stanza, Poe writes, “Eagerly I wished the morrow;- vainly I had sought to borrow / From my books surcease of sorrow- sorrow for the lost Lenore-...” (lines 2-3). This is an early warning sign that the narrator is losing – or possibly relinquishing – his grasp on reality. In order to quell the very real pain of his loss, he attempts a mental escape into the very unreal world of books. This expatriation from his own sense of rationality creates a rift in the narrator’s consciousness that will only increase as the poem continues.

When the raven enters, the uncanny and marvelous reach maximum conflict capacity. To determine how the fantastic will break down – and thus resolve the conflict between reality and unreality – the raven must be assigned a certain role. He is either a mystical talking bird in a *marvelous* literary world, or he is a psychotic manifestation of the narrator’s subconscious desire to be reunited with his lost lover in an *uncanny* literary world. Based on the narrator’s tenuous grip on reality, the latter seems to be more plausible. The pivotal moment of decision occurs in the

thirteenth stanza, after the raven has answered every question or assertion posed by the narrator with “nevermore.” As he is contemplating why the bird continues to reply as such, he says, “This and more I sat divining, with my head at ease reclining / On the cushion’s velvet lining that the lamp-light gloated o’er, / But whose velvet violet lining with the lamp-light gloating o’er, / *She* shall press, ah, nevermore...” (lines 2-5). By answering his own question in the very same fashion as the raven, he creates a mirror between the two. Because each “nevermore” draws an anxious response from the narrator, it is easy to see that the word has been constantly planted in the reader’s head in order to draw attention to the narrator’s suffering. This repetition conveys the narrator’s obsession with the raven and reflects his repressed grief over the loss of Lenore. The habitual association of a single word with anguish and despondency creates a conspicuous connection between the raven and the narrator, revealing each character as a fractured part of a single psyche.

Further evidence of the narrator’s neuroticism and mental split is given as he suddenly smells incense and begins to praise God for granting him relief: “‘Wretch,’ I cried, ‘thy God hath lent thee- by these angels he hath sent thee / Respite- respite and nepenthe, from thy memories of Lenore! / Quaff, oh quaff this kind nepenthe and forget this lost Lenore!’ / Quoth the Raven, ‘Nevermore...’” (lines 3-6). This immediate, unprompted switch from depression to joy, then back to angst in the next stanza reinforces the idea that this man is not mentally stable and is absolutely ruled by a despair so intense that it has developed a mind of its own.

The final stanza of the poem marks the strongest confirmation that the raven exists only in the narrator’s mind. Poe writes, “And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, *still* is sitting...And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor / Shall be lifted- nevermore!” (lines 1&5-6). The poem starts just as the narrator is beginning to fall asleep. Considering the events that unfold, it could be argued that he *did* fall asleep and the entire poem should be read as a dream sequence. By this token the work would fall into the category of marvelous, based on the fact that the occurrences are more readily categorized as inexplicable in a dream world. However, in these lines the narrator points out that the bird has been there for some time, thus nixing the idea that the whole poem has been a dream. The way he refers to the raven’s shadow in the final line seems to reinforce the idea that he is incapable of clawing his way out of the all-consuming despair that has plagued him from the beginning.

In Poe’s “The Raven,” the repeated use of the word “nevermore” provides a key for deciphering the true meaning of the relationship between the narrator and the raven. It is important to see the word in the overall context of the narrator’s desperate, paranoid, and delusional psyche. Keeping this in mind while using Todorov’s fantastic as a reference point for the conflict between the uncanny and marvelous, it becomes clear that the raven is an uncanny manifestation of the narrator’s subconscious, thus resolving the conflict between reality and unreality.





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