

Of Words, Souls, and Ravens

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Introduction

“Of Words, Souls, and Raven” is a creative piece that was submitted for a WRS course. In this particular class, students were given many options for their final assignment, one of which was to compose something about the writing process. In this piece, Amada Yim imagines what it would be like to have a conversation with Edgar Allan Poe about his most famous work “The Raven.”

Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe, literature, poetry, writing process



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² *Writing across the University of Alberta* (WAUA) publishes undergraduate student writing from writing studies courses and courses focused on writing studies practices and scholarship at the University of Alberta. You can find WAUA online at <https://writingacrossuofa.ca/>.

It was a gray and miserable day when I met him, when I got a glimpse into that troubled yet brilliant mind. Most human lives eventually come down to a few words, whether it be an engraving on a headstone, the longing mentions of a loved one, or the fleeting memories of what they once uttered; all these scattered words were inevitably swallowed up by the pitiless waves of time, without leaving a single trace. His words, however, I suspected would last for a long, long time.

It was the year 1849. I materialized in front of a buzzing hospital in New York. Like all hospitals, it was packed with souls: the living, the dead, and the in-between. Shrugging the chill of the underworld off my feathers, I located my quarry in an abandoned hospital room. A man—pale and sickly—lay dead on a bed while a translucent version of him stood by, unmoving and utterly alone.

Experienced as I was, I somehow felt a twinge of pity. I laid a hand on his shoulder. “It’s time to go.”

His head snapped back; his expression was one of terror and confusion, mirroring what he must have felt in his last moments.

“Nevermore.” He muttered.

“In a sense, yes.” I held out a hand. “I’ll be taking you to the afterlife.”

His lips trembled. “But I—I was just beginning to turn my life around! I just got engaged! I can’t go, not yet!”

It was never a choice, but I was not one for violence, so I simply took a step back. “Don’t worry, I won’t force you to do anything. What’s your name?”

He eyed me suspiciously. “Edgar.”

“Nice to meet you, Edgar. Will you take a walk with me? You look like you could use some fresh air.” The recently deceased were often in a state of disorientation and were easy to convince.

The hard lines on his face softened. “I suppose that’ll do me some good.”

As we distanced ourselves from the chaos of the hospital, I couldn’t help but feel curious. I met all sorts of people on the job, but there was a strange spark to this man.

“What did you do for a living?” I asked.

He let out a bitter chuckle. "I pride myself on being a writer and a poet, but what lets me make a living is being an editor. I recently got this job, you see. If it goes well, I can finally turn my life around."

"That's a shame. People used to appreciate art, especially the art of words." I shook my head. "What inspired you to write in the first place?"

"Oh, the usual," he answered dryly. "Orphaned and separated from my siblings at a young age. My foster mother, whom I loved so very much, died early, and my foster father never loved me. It all just went downhill from there. Life is dark and dreary; how can I coincide with that but write about it? But alas, never to suffer would never to have been blessed."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Is that what you write about, the dark and dreary?"

"The grim, the ghastly, the grotesque, you name it." He gestured at the busy streets, full of people working their fingers to the bone just to barely scrape by. "Words have no power to impress the mind without the exquisite horror of their reality. Take my poem 'The Raven,' for example. Is it not common to be consumed by grief over the loss of a loved one? Is it not terrific to watch a man fill himself with doubt, to the point of going insane because of such grief?"

I clacked my beak. "Indeed it is. How did the people react to your poem?"

"Critics hated it, but some loved it, and that's the point!" The question ignited a spark of passion. "You see, it is through the world around us in which we draw inspiration, and that makes our works true and honest. Never mind that critics don't always appreciate such things; literary perfection was not what I was aiming for. When I wrote 'The Raven,' I myself was not much better than its protagonist. I just lost my wife to an incurable illness, and after failing to find the answer at the bottom of a bottle, I wrote this poem."

"I see." I cocked my head. "So 'The Raven' is a lament of your grief? One that came from your heart?"

"To a degree, yes." Edgar waved a dismissing hand. "I believe that when one writes, it shouldn't only come from the heart, but also from the soul. Only with a calm and rational mind can you express true beauty. Many would imagine me composing with explosions of emotions, guided by nothing but ecstatic intuition, but that can't be further from the truth. My heart is where inspiration came from, yes, but if I had just poured all my sadness into this poem without consideration, why, 'The Raven' would have been an incoherent mess! What you read is a product of cautious revisions, an idea that matured after countless edits. An idea is like a marble, and I chiseled at mine until it resembled the shape I wanted, until it was an accurate depiction of the grief and never-ending remembrance that threatened to drown me."

I nodded in agreement. “A reasonable method. As I understand, writing, or any form of art, is a two-way transaction. Clearly, you considered the reader when you wrote, as if you were intentionally revealing a part of yourself through this statue of yours. What were you hoping to achieve—and receive in return—if not the critic’s recognition and the fame that comes with it?”

“Great question. I aimed to elevate the reader’s soul, and through that I am fulfilled. I believe this to be the purpose of all arts.”

“Elevation of the soul?” I asked inquisitively. “How was it achieved in ‘The Raven?’”

Edgar’s smile brightened. “To give the readers a chance to contemplate the Beautiful, of course. The excitement of the heart or the satisfaction of the intellect is merely the effect of such experience. With that in mind, Beauty became my province, and when that’s decided, melancholy was naturally the tone. I made sure that every word in this poem added to the atmosphere of sadness, and every stanza was composed with the essence of melancholy. If I manage to excite the sensitive souls to tears, then I have shown them true Beauty.”

“When you put it like that, I think all the exemplary works of art I have seen have evoked such an effect. I must say I’m curious about your process. Please, enlighten me if you would be so kind.”

“With pleasure! ‘Nevermore’ was what I first came up with when I thought of sadness and despair. Then, I tried to come up with a vessel that may deliver it to its best effect, and that’s when I thought of ravens. Creatures of darkness and ill omens, a bird that can speak but not comprehend human language. The raven only knows one word—no offense to you, of course; it was the protagonist’s imagination and sorrow-laden soul that drove him to madness. Isn’t that exquisite? On top of that, the protagonist is grieving over the loss of a beautiful woman, which I believe is something that most can understand. With such, I hoped to satisfy both the critics and the masses; but alas, life rarely turns out the way you hope for.”

“I see,” I slowly nodded and took a moment to find ‘The Raven’ amongst the waves of time. I closed my eyes and let it sink in. “That is indeed an excellent composition, Edgar. This tingle at the tips of my feathers—is that what Beauty is? I’m sure those who appreciate your poem were changed, in one way or another, after reading it.”

A smile appeared on his pale lips. “You have no idea how much joy that brings me. You see, writing is what I live and breathe for, ever since I was a child, and as you can see—” He gestured at his tattered, oversized clothes. “It hasn’t really done me well. My life has been full of difficulties, but poetry has always been the one thing that gave me hope. My body may have been starving, but as long as I could write, my soul was full.”

“I’m glad to hear that, Edgar. Most souls I collect have lived their lives starving without realizing it.”

Hearing this, Edgar’s steps faltered, and he turned to me with wide eyes. “This is it, isn’t it? I will never write again. I tried to hold on, but life slipped through my grasp like the golden sand.” He sat down on a nearby bench, deflated. “All that’s left of me will be my work. How preposterous! At the end of the day, despite all my grand ideals, what is ‘The Raven’ but a bunch of words? Nevermore, ha! Nevermore indeed will be Edgar the poet!”

“It’s alright, Edgar.” I sat down as well and put my hand gently on his shoulder. “What you’ve done is enough. What you wrote is enough. Those who have seen true Beauty through your works? They will remember you. Nevermore will be your body, but there will always be a part of your soul here, in the words you left behind, and I have witnessed enough history to believe in the power of words.”

“I—perhaps you’re right.” He sighed and looked towards the setting sun. “Maybe it’s not so bad that this dream is coming to an end. I apologize for my behaviour; it’s most unbecoming.” He looked back at me, orange light gleaming in his eyes. “If you can, please tell me this: will people still be reading ‘The Raven’ two hundred years later? Will it make a difference?”

I concentrated and looked into the future, where I saw him in books, articles, classrooms, and many more. “Yes, Edgar. ‘The Raven’ will continue to change and inspire people for many generations to come.”

The smile returned to his ghostly features. “Then I am content. Thank you for being patient with me.” He held out a hand. “I’m ready.”

I took his hand and nodded. “It was a pleasure knowing you, Edgar Allan Poe.”

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