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REVISITING THE PAST: TRAUMA AND MEMORY IN
EDGAR ALLAN POE'S "THE RAVEN" AND "ANNABEL LEE"

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I intend to focus on the themes of trauma and memory in Edgar Allan Poe's well-known poems "The Raven" and "Annabel Lee." Furthermore, it is the application of trauma theory that probes into the way Poe's characters are haunted by their traumatic losses and end up in a futile persistence of the past. In "The Raven," the narrator's fleeting conversations with the raven that recurs symbolizes the obsessive and revolving nature of traumatic memories where the refrain "Nevermore" always recurrently intensifies his agony because of the lost Lenore. Likewise, in "Annabel Lee" there is a narrator describing how he idealized his former love Annabel Lee after her untimely death. The nostalgic tone and romanticized moments of memories demonstrate the long-term effect of trauma in the form of an obsessive bond with memories of the dead. This paper argues that as we observe Poe's depiction of the relentless nature of the memories and idealization of the past, the same can be applied to the fact of trauma which lasts as time continues to move on and the past continues to come in the present. By the scrutiny of such themes paper explores Poe's study of grief, loss and human mind in a deeper way.

Keywords: Trauma, Memory, Death, Raven, and Poe.

Introduction

Traumatic studies, an interdisciplinary field that deals with psychological, cultural and social features of trauma, has been growing in popularity and getting a lot of academic attention. As Cathy Carruth argues, trauma is not only an individual psychological experience but also a narrative interruption that damages collective consciousness and identity (4). This area frequently involves a reflection of traumatic events in literature and media, with recognition that "trauma is generally meeting an event which is both unexpected and horrendous, in such a way that cannot be placed within the framework of prior knowledge" (Caruth 6). Trauma studies recognize the importance of recognizing trauma's impact over time on persons and communities. Trauma, as described by

Dominick LaCapra, is in such register that it "haunts or gets grip to a subject, continuously reminding of a necessity to work through" (90). Therefore, this continuous deconstructing and reconstructing methods are inevitable to handle and lessen the persistent impact of trauma.

The memory in literature, has been a tool of great importance for the understanding of individual and collective identities and more so, the complicated relationship between the past and the present. Through the lengthy work, Proust attempts to show how involuntary memory is triggered by our senses and leads to a deeper insight into our identity (Proust 50). This thought is reinforced by Maurice Halbwachs when he says that memory is always social and is determined by the recollection of the medium we are immersed in (Halbwachs 38). Literary narratives regularly portray how an individual may have both the longing and the torment because of the person's experience. In *Beloved* as Toni Morrison remarks "the past was an always present part of the life of an individual," provide why memory is closely related and rooted in personal and communal histories (Morrison 35). This kind of portrayal of memory, through literary art, highlights the connection between memory and continuity in human life.

Edgar Allan Poe, who has been widely known for his dark and gothic verbal imagery, frequently dealt with trauma and psychological duress in his poetry. He investigates the deepest holes of human mind, revealing the deepest suffering and psychological trouble of his characters. Poe shows in the poems like "The Raven" the narrator who is buried in the loss of his beloved woman Lenore also for whom the only way out is madness. The repetition of "nevermore" alludes to the fact that his grief will just go on and will remain part of this trauma. Likewise, in "Annabel Lee," Poe narrates the story of love and loss, with the speaker suffering the death of his adored Annabel Lee before her time. The poem illustrates the powerful memory of the loss and the long-lasting pain created by the death. The love of Annabel lives through the narrator life though she has died. The topic of the present paper is the treatment of trauma and memory in "Annabel Lee" and "The Raven" by Edgar Allan Poe, describing the manner in which they are ingeniously interwoven in the texture of his poetry.

Trauma in "The Raven"

The theory of trauma explains the principle of repetition, which is pronounced in Poe's "The Raven" by means of a refrain "Nevermore," which, though being a poetic instrument, is also like a psychological trigger. These pervasive repetitions reflect the very essence of PTSD which is a cyclic traumatic memory state that brings along flashbacks, recurring thoughts or nightmares. By saying "Nevermore", the raven plays a sharp part that keeps interfering with the narrator's thoughts, in the same way that one repeatedly recalls painful memories. Poe illustrates this through the stanza, "And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting / On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door; / And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon's that is dreaming, / And the lamp-light o'er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor; / And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor / Shall be lifted—nevermore!" Here, the repetition of the raven's perch and its shadow ominously cast upon the floor, serves as a metaphor for the inescapability and the haunting persistence of memory associated with trauma. The image of the shadow on the floor, a visual symbol of the cry, is concurrent to the psychological shade that Lenore's memory casts on the narrator's life. And hence, the poem's refrain, "Nevermore," provides a deeper symbolic meaning than its literal significance which is, the constancy of traumatic memory and its haunting effect on the mind.

The unexpected presence of the raven in narrator's room functions as a metaphor for the invasion of past experiences into present awareness, which is the core idea in the field of trauma studies. Just when the narrator was enjoying their solitude, this intruder comes to pay an unwanted visit which embodies the way the memories of trauma escape you and come forcefully into your present life, often without any warning, and disturb your mental peace. The stanza, "Open here I flung the shutter, when, with many a flirt and flutter, / In there stepped a stately Raven of the saintly days of yore; / Not a

slight obeisance he made, not a minute he stopped or stayed, / But, gracing the bust of Pallas just above my chamber door; / Gracing the bust, and stayed, and nothing more. The use of "Nevermore" by the raven leaves a bitter replication that does not fail to shatter the narrator's aspirations and thoughts, but assures the finality of the loss. That being said, this habit does not only refer to the raven's literal presence but, rather, this also encompasses the tendency of such memories to reoccur, creating enduring pain in the present. The bird's recurring refrain, "Nevermore," performs not as a simple denial but as a reminder that each time it is uttered, the author relives the trauma of losing Lenore, making it seem not like only something in the past, but something in the here and the now. This picture fits well with the psychological perspective that traumatic memories being not static; they are dynamic and intrusive, they tend to debilitate your present sense of reality and emotional states.

The transformation of the everyday into the eerie is a convincing manifestation of how trauma brings distortions to perception and reality. This notion is an irreplaceable foundation of trauma studies, and it comes to life in the novel as the narrator's long-familiar room transforms into a world of spectral horror. The only known setting becomes a landscape of the inhabitants' minds, and the author brilliantly uses the supernatural factor of the raven, whose presence is both inexplicable and eerie at the same time. In Poe's words, "And the silken, sad, uncertain rustling of each purple curtain / Thrilled me – filled me with fantastic terrors never felt before." The mention of a common and usual room element like curtain, the rustling of which become grisly and terrifying, exemplify the vague uncanny feeling in the presence of Raven. The familiar and safe components of the narrator's condition become the sources of terror, much like how trauma oftentimes reorients our view of the ordinary, making them feel weird and threatening. In addition, the raven with its own legend and associations with prophecies and death, makes the sense of the unknown stronger. It speaks a lone word, which is "Nevermore," the word that definitely does not fit within the context of a normal human home. The bird's communication in a single word shows the breach of something uncanny that turns the narrator's familiar territory into a haunted zone that is caused by loss and the unexplainable.

Memory in "Annabel Lee"

In Edgar Allan Poe's "Annabel Lee," the persistent memory and idealization of the past serve as a poignant exploration of trauma and its psychological effects. The narrator's deep-seated fixation on his childhood love, Annabel Lee, and the life they shared before her untimely death are vividly conveyed through the rhythmic and nostalgic lines of the poem. This idealization is not merely a romantic reminiscence but a traumatic response to the devastating loss he endures. Poe writes, "But we loved with a love that was more than love – / I and my Annabel Lee – / With a love that the winged seraphs of Heaven / Coveted her and me." These lines underscore the intensity and purity of their bond, which the narrator elevates above ordinary human experience to something even divine beings envied. This idealization reflects his psychological need to preserve the perfection of their love, uncorrupted by the reality of death and loss. Moreover, the narrator reveals, "And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side / Of my darling – my darling – my life and my bride, / In her sepulchre there by the sea – / In her tomb by the sounding sea." The act of lying beside her sepulchre each night is a stark manifestation of his inability to let go, indicating a fixation.

In "Annabel Lee," the narrator's idealization of his love for Annabel Lee exemplifies the psychological impact of trauma, where the past is preserved in an almost sanctified manner to cope with the present pain. The poem's nostalgic tone and repeated emphasis on the timelessness of their love suggest a deep-seated need to maintain the purity and perfection of their relationship, which the narrator clings to as a way of managing his profound grief. Poe writes, "It was many and many a year ago, / In a kingdom by the sea, / That a maiden there lived whom you may know / By the name of Annabel Lee; / And this maiden she lived with no other thought / Than to love and be loved by me." These opening lines establish a romanticized memory of an idyllic past, setting the stage for the narrator's fixation on a time when his love with Annabel Lee was undisturbed by tragedy. The

repetition of the phrase "in a kingdom by the sea" throughout the poem further emphasizes this idealized, almost fairy-tale-like quality of their love, suggesting that the narrator has enshrined this period in his memory as a perfect, unblemished era. The lines, "For the moon never beams, without bringing me dreams / Of the beautiful Annabel Lee; / And the stars never rise, but I feel the bright eyes / Of the beautiful Annabel Lee," highlight how the narrator's memories of Annabel Lee pervade his daily life, demonstrating how trauma can cause past experiences to intrude upon the present. His dreams and his perceptions of the moon and stars are all imbued with the memory of Annabel Lee, indicating that he is unable to escape the hold that these memories have over him.

The trauma of Annabel Lee's death profoundly disrupts the narrator's sense of normalcy and transforms his perception of the world around him. This transformation is evident in the way he describes his surroundings and his interactions with the memory of his lost love. Poe writes, "And neither the angels in Heaven above, / Nor the demons down under the sea, / Can ever dissever my soul from the soul / Of the beautiful Annabel Lee." These lines highlight the narrator's conviction that no force, celestial or infernal, can separate him from Annabel Lee. This unwavering bond, forged in trauma, skews his reality, merging the spiritual and the earthly in a manner that reflects his inner turmoil. The narrator's insistence that their love was so powerful it elicited the jealousy of angels – "The angels, not half so happy in Heaven, / Went envying her and me" – suggests a psychological defense mechanism against the trauma of her death. By attributing her death to supernatural causes, he creates a narrative that helps him cope with the randomness and cruelty of loss. This reconfiguration of his reality indicates a profound psychological disturbance where the boundaries between reality and fantasy blur, a common response in those dealing with severe trauma.

The impact of trauma is poignantly illustrated through the narrator's obsessive recollection and idealization of his lost love. The poem opens with the lines, "It was many and many a year ago, / In a kingdom by the sea, / That a maiden there lived whom you may know / By the name of Annabel Lee" (Poe 1-4). These lines set the tone for a nostalgic remembrance of a perfect past, suggesting that the narrator's fixation on Annabel Lee is a way of coping with his grief. The narrator's declaration that "neither the angels in Heaven above / Nor the demons down under the sea / Can ever dissever my soul from the soul / Of the beautiful Annabel Lee" further emphasizes his inability to move on from this traumatic event, as he frames their love as eternal and unbreakable (Poe 30-33). This idealization is a hallmark of trauma, where the individual clings to a romanticized version of the past to manage the pain of loss. Moreover, the recurring imagery of celestial bodies – "For the moon never beams, without bringing me dreams / Of the beautiful Annabel Lee; / And the stars never rise, but I feel the bright eyes / Of the beautiful Annabel Lee" – highlights how the narrator's memories of Annabel Lee permeate his present reality, indicating the pervasive and intrusive nature of traumatic memories (Poe 34-37). Through these vivid descriptions, Poe illustrates how trauma can dominate one's emotional landscape, transforming ordinary experiences into perpetual reminders of loss.

Coda

A closer look at Poe's "The Raven" and "Annabel Lee" via the trauma theory shows that Poe has a remarkable ability to represent how the harmful events affect the human mind deeply and for a long time. Both poems highlight the fact that the lives of the main characters are faced with the prospect of unfinished pains and memories of no longer loved ones. "Nevermore" repetitive refrain in "The Raven" means the cyclical character of recollections of traumas, and Annabel Lee, the narrator, when he is obsessed with a past he falsely idealizes. It is through these aspects that the impossibility of escaping trauma is brought to light as well as its potential of distorting the reality and making one continually miserable. Through an analysis of the central ideas of trauma and memory this work has demonstrated that Poe uses of grief and loss is not only about sadness, but a refined and subtle portrayal of how trauma can reshape the perception of reality and self. At last, Poe's work remains a lasting message about human emotions' complexity, memory's power, and the journey of uniting with the past.

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