©www.literarycognizance.com

ISSN- 2395-7522 (Online), Imp. Fact.6.21 (IIJF)
Literary Cognizance:An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed
e - Journal of English Language, Literature & Criticism
Vol. – VI, Issue-1, June 2025

47

POE'S DEAD WOMEN: FINDING THE PRESENT-ABSENCE OF THE 'LOST LENORE' IN *THE RAVEN*

Yashica
Postgraduate Student, University of Delhi, Delhi, India

Abstract

Edgar Allan Poe is a celebrated American poet whose gothic literary contributions have been studied by scholars for almost two decades. His poems and stories seek to highlight the struggles of the human psyche in stark contrast with reality. The terror contained in his works, however, has often been criticised to have a patriarchal, even misogynistic, objective, attributed to his treatment of the female body. A large part of his oeuvre contains references to female characters subjected to early, mysterious deaths. The aim of this paper is to analyse Poe's representation of gender with reference to his most popular poem "The Raven". While this poem has been widely analysed by scholars, not much critical attention has been given to the absent figure of Lenore in the body of the poem. This paper argues that Lenore, the lost beloved of the speaker, drives the action of the poem while remaining physically absent. Her haunting of the narrative through this apparent-absence is intriguing since critics have often accused Poe of creating passive female characters who are subjected to male action. The aim of this paper is, therefore, to explore Poe's treatment of gender through "The Raven" to establish his position in nineteenth-century American patriarchal culture.

Keywords

Gender, Nineteenth-Century, Absence, Patriarchy, Women, etc.

Full Article

> May I thank you as another reader would - thank you for this vivid writing, this power which is felt? Your 'Raven' has produced a sensation - a "fit horror" - here in England. Some of my friends are taken by the fear of it, & some by the music - I hear of persons haunted by the "nevermore" (Barrett).

Edgar Allan Poe achieved newer heights of fame following the publication of "The Raven" in 1845. Delivering public lectures, publishing reviews in literary journals, and holding recitation performances, Poe soon became recognised as a national American writer. In fact, even today's popular culture recognises the fame of "The Raven", from the 2012 film *The Raven* to the 1998 song *My Lost Lenore*. *The Raven*, then, is a seminal part of Poe's oeuvre.

It is the highly emotive quality of Poe's works that attracted his American audience, with a significant part of it comprising female readership. Calling Poe's "inconsolable mourning" as a "powerful draw for female sympathy", Eliza Richards considers "the themes of solitary suffering in Poe's poetry (as) signs of cultural engagement" (Richards, 31) and thereby, attributes his success to his ability to subsume and regurgitate a feminine experience.

Since the epitome of Poe's fame lies within *The Raven* and his female audience, one's critical eye turns to the female presence in the poem. In other words, in a poem so embedded in

ISSN- 2395-7522 (Online), Imp. Fact.6.21 (IIJF)
Literary Cognizance:An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed
e - Journal of English Language, Literature & Criticism
Vol. – VI, Issue-1, June 2025

the 'feminine' emotion of loss and bereavement (Richards, 30), one must ask the question 'where is the womanly presence of Lenore?'

While critics appear divided on Poe's loyalty to contemporary gender norms, there is a definite consensus on the specialized trope of the "dead woman" in many of his works. Elisabete Lopes regards this particular trope as a pattern that appears in many of Poe's works wherein the female characters haunt the stories "with respect to strange diseases, doubtful deaths and subsequent resurrections", calling it the "female uncanny" (Lopes, 40). It is this supposed typification that accuses Poe of creating uni-dimensional female characters who exist as mere objects. Poe's female characters, therefore, have haunted scholars with their ambiguous yet simple position, much like the ominous bird "perched upon a bust of Pallas just above" the speaker's chamber door (*The Raven*).

The resolution lies not in a definite dichotomy of 'misogynist-feminist' Poe: postmodern feminist theories of gender performativity and social constructs are far away from Poe's lifetime. His female characters overlap with first-wave feminism and in order to explore the significance of Lenore in "The Raven", it is imperative to discuss the gender constructions of the nineteenth century.

Poe's life was quintessentially Byronic (Richards, 31). Gambling addictions and poverty aside, he witnessed many losses in his life, with his mother dying of tuberculosis before he turned three and his adoptive mother dying after he turned twenty. He and his wife, Virginia, suffered from tuberculosis in 1842 with her dying because of pulmonary consumption in 1847, after the publication of *The Raven*. This caused him great grief. A lady by the name of 'Mrs. Shew' helped him regain his health and he dedicated the poem *The Beloved Physician* to her. Apart from tragedy, Poe was involved in many romantic affairs as well. He is known to have been intimate with Sarah Elmira Royster and the poetess Sarah Helman Whitman. He also maintained professional relations with many women writers, including Anne C. Lynch and Frances Sargent Osgood (Kennedy, 19-54). In fact, Margaret Fuller, complimenting his writing, says that, "several of his stories make us wish he would enter the higher walk of the metaphysical novel and, taking a mind of the self-possessed and deeply marked sort that suits him, give us a deeper and longer acquaintance with its life and the springs of its life than is possible in the compass of these tales" (Fuller, 145).

However, did he think similarly of his women colleagues? Richards argues that Poe often sought to upstage his fellow women poetesses (Richards, 26) and urges one to look at *Lady Geraldine's Courtship* by Elizabeth Barrett Browning as the original and a more feminine source of *The Raven* (49). Richards intention is not, however, to accuse Poe of plagiarism – since Poe clarified that his concern lies not in originality, a fact further proved by him dedicating the poem to Barrett Browning (Kopley and Hayes, 192) – but to explore the masculine-feminine difference of the two poems. However, one must first consider Poe's literary critiques before hastening to accuse his actions as simply misogynistic. As Richards herself states in her essay "Women's Place in Poe Studies", dismissal of Poe's critique of women writers is unfair since it negates his professional expertise and reduces it to assumed-misogyny (Richards, 13). In fact, Poe once complimented the poetess Maria Gowen Brooks, saying that "if the greatest poems have not been written by women, it is because, as yet, the greatest poems have not been written at all" (*Essays and Reviews*, 1114). As a literary critic, Poe neither held back his negative criticisms nor did he needlessly patronise his female colleagues. Scholars often misrepresent Poe's critique of women writers, attributing it to either his romantic tendencies or marking it up to simple misogyny. However, as Leland S. Person states, "Poe knew and respected women writers, and his many personal and professional relationships with women certainly provided him with models on which he could have based complex female characters" (Person, 133).

ISSN- 2395-7522 (Online), Imp. Fact.6.21 (IIJF)
Literary Cognizance:An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed
e - Journal of English Language, Literature & Criticism
Vol. – VI, Issue-1, June 2025

Surrounded by women, in both personal and professional capacity, he was sensitive to the female experience and resisted patriarchal conditioning of nineteenth-century ideas of 'True Womanhood' (Person, 134). Person mentions how Poe "clearly understood misogyny" (Person, 137) and was uncomfortable with contemporary gender roles, including those of masculinity (Person, 152). Gender, therefore, is vividly visible in Poe's works. The premature burials of some of his women characters, in stories like "Berenice" and "Ligeia", have often led scholars to believe his women characters as hollow. This, however, is refuted by the existence of Poe's other female characters who subvert the nineteenth-century "angel of the house" narrative that established women as the caretakers of domesticity (Person, 134).

Calling his women characters "merely as a means to a (male) end", Karen Weekes argues that in Poe's narratives, the "woman must die in order to enlarge the experience of the narrator, her viewer" (Weekes, 148). As per her, this is Poe's attempt to establish a 'feminine ideal' in order to narrate the masculine story. Kevin Reynaud as well comments on Poe's fixation of the female body that undermines her mental capacity (Reynaud, 9). While such critics are not entirely wrong when it comes to the limitations of Poe's women characters, one must not forget to look beyond narrative superficiality: although Poe's narrators focus on their bodies, what happens to their stories afterwards? Person argues that Poe "clearly parodies the objectifying power of the male gaze" (Person, 141). This is Poe's way of representing the dire consequences of this male gaze, something that renders women as one-dimensional beings, present to serve the males' purpose.

Poe creates women and initially urges the reader to view them as mere bodies before taking away the patriarchal assumption of soft, gentle women: the body-defined, pure, brainless women come back to haunt the narrator(s) and the readers in order to jolt them awake to the reality of womanhood. The gaze that idealized women is soon confronted with the patriarchal reality in which the death of the woman is "a logical outcome of woman's separation and idealization" (Kennedy, 138). The narrators (and the contemporary readers) cannot cope with a woman who is not an ideal 'angel of the house' and therefore, the woman struggles and ultimately dies.

While premature-burials and unnamed diseases are common in many of Poe's stories, how common is this trope in his poetry? Dead women haunt the memories of the speaker in "Lenore" and "Ulalume" among others. There is certainly a recurrence of physical descriptions in these poems: In "Lenore", the beloved woman is described through "the life upon her yellow hair" and an emphasis on her dead "eyes" ("Lenore"). In "Ulalume", as well, there is a repeated focus on the "bright" and "luminous eyes" of the female figure ("Ulalume"). The poet emphasizes the beauty of the female body and critics often cite these physical descriptions as superficial. However, Poe never saw Beauty as a mere physical trait. Elaborating on his meaning of Beauty, he writes in his essay:

> That pleasure which is at once the most intense, the most elevating, and the most pure is, I believe, found in the contemplation of the beautiful. When, indeed, men speak of Beauty, they mean, precisely, not a quality, as is supposed, but an effect—they refer, in short, just to that intense and pure elevation of soul—not of intellect, or of heart—upon which I have commented, and which is experienced in consequence of contemplating the "beautiful" (Poe, *POC*, 433).

Beauty for Poe is not superficial. While it emanates from the corporeal presence of a body, it goes beyond being a physical quality and depends more on the response of the beholder of said beauty. Poe's women characters are not simply objectified but idealized. This realisation lessens our view of the superficiality and sexism of Poe's famous statement from the same essay, "the

©www.literarycognizance.com

ISSN- 2395-7522 (Online), Imp. Fact.6.21 (IIJF)
Literary Cognizance:An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed
e - Journal of English Language, Literature & Criticism
Vol. – VI, Issue-1, June 2025

death then of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world" (Poe, *POC*, 436), which has been cited by many as his blatant disregard of the female character. This does not completely redeem him since there is still much gender-essentialisation. However, now, his meaning shifts from victimization of women to the sorrow that losses incur on a soul in love. Beauty for him lies in sadness (Poe, *POC*, 434) and for Poe, a man who spent his life among talented and caring women, what can be sadder than losing a woman?

Poe is not merely imitating nineteenth-century gender ideas of limiting the woman to her body and turning it into a negative space of distraction from knowledge or pure violence (Reynaud, 9). He is, in fact, parodying contemporary ideals of womanhood by transforming the "domestic "angel" into an uncomplaining victim and then, finally, into a corpse. The Angel in the House becomes the Dead Wife in the Basement" (Person, 134). Therefore, while we can't call Poe a 'feminist' in the postmodern implication of this term, as Joan Dayan enquires in the title of her essay, we can certainly consider Poe as a writer who dared to haunt his contemporary readership with the stories of lost women.

This "Mournful and never ending Remembrance" (Poe, *POC*, 442) is a major theme of *The Raven* by Poe. Frequently translated and widely illustrated (Kopley and Hayes, 196), "The Raven" has been appreciated by readers for almost two centuries now. Mentioning its literary success, P. Pendleton Cooke says that, ""The Raven" is a singularly beautiful poem. Many readers who prefer sunshine to the weird lights with which Mr. Poe fills his sky, may be dull to its beauty, but it is nonetheless a great triumph of imagination and art" (Cooke, 36). Foregrounding the tone of bereavement and horror, the poem narrates the story of a man who has lost his beloved and is approached by an ominous raven on a dark and lonely night. While initially fanciful about the bird's imitation of human speech, the man soon grows desperate in seeking an answer about his lost beloved, while in his rationality, he is aware of the futility of this action. It is the combination of the superstitious horror of the setting and the desperation of a mourning lover that invokes the true feelings of terror in the poem. While the latter has been the root of discourse of much review among critics, it is the former which is important in the current argument.

Reynaud mentions how this poem "looks at the effects of a woman's death on the mind and mood of a lover left behind" (Reynaud, 63). Certainly, then, it is this absence of a woman that establishes the mournful mood of the poem. Does that make the action of the poem dependent on this absent woman? Without the "lost Lenore", would the speaker care for the repeated words of the "ominous" raven (*The Raven*)? If yes, does this take the whole argument back to Poe using female characters as *tabula rasa* (Weekes 151) for his narrators' stories? It is now understood that Poe artfully positions his women characters to reveal the patriarchal treatment of femininity by his contemporary society.

Lenore's death becomes the major catalyst of the poem's plot. If Poe's women are divided into passive femininity (as represented by women in *Annabel Lee*, *The Oval Portrait*, etc.) and vengeful monsters (as represented by women in *Ligeia*, *Berenice*, etc.), Lenore's silent absence places her in the former category, since her only descriptors are "lost", "rare", and "radiant" (*The Raven*). It is, however, Catherine A. Runcie who equates Lenore to a strong force of passion. Runcie goes to the extent of combining Lenore with the raven, arguing that this Lenore/raven figure restirs passion into the speaker's heart, ultimately becoming his tutor by guiding his thoughts and actions. Passion, as per Runcie, "has no future, only a past" and so, the Lenore/raven/tutor figure shatters the speaker by reminding him that "he will never love again – Lenore/Passion has no afterlife" (Poe, *PPLP*, 11). The *Nevermore* refrain of the poem haunts the speaker as Lenore, lost to him, haunts him with her absence.

Lenore is, therefore, not as passive as one would think: her absence is so strongly present that instead of being the quintessential Poesque woman (Martens, 19) who is puppet-ed by the

ISSN- 2395-7522 (Online), Imp. Fact.6.21 (IIJF)
Literary Cognizance:An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed
e - Journal of English Language, Literature & Criticism
Vol. – VI, Issue-1, June 2025

narrative requirement, Lenore becomes the ultimate puppeteer. Her absence dictates the action of the speaker as well as the meaning of the meaningless repetition by the raven. It is also worth noting that Lenore's character is the only one named in the entire poem. Dill and Weinstein see death as "an agent that infuses the subject with both power and powerlessness" (xiii). This paradox of power and powerlessness is inherent in Lenore's death: without her absence, would the ominous raven hold any significance? Powerlessness of Lenore's forced-absence is made ambiguous with the power that this same absence holds; the former feeds into the latter. Almost a cyclical relationship begins between these two forces: Lenore's physical absence demands the textual inquiry of the same, which informs the reader of her still-present, all-encompassing presence in the larger narrative.

Poe wrote and published "The Raven" towards the last few years of his life. By this time, he had witnessed several hardships, experienced genuine female affection as well as losses, and had interacted with several intellectual-enriched women writers. This poem, which refers to the mind-shattering effects of losing one's beloved, helped Poe reach fantastic heights of literary fame. The loss of a woman, the "most poetic topic of the world" (Poe, *POC*, 436), granted him a new life; in other words, the "lost Lenore" guided Poe despite the diminutiveness of space she had in his poem.

Poe's works revolve around women because his life was full of them too, both personally and professionally. He wrote about dead women because of the loss he incurred by the many deaths of the women he loved in his real life –some taken by disease while others lost to neglect. He witnessed the effects of the nineteenth-century patriarchal glorification and simultaneous abandonment of the female body. Poe does not merely write about dead women; he writes about *women who died* and women who *were killed* by his contemporary patriarchal society.

References

- Barrett, Elizabeth Barrett. "Letter to E. A. Poe." *Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore*, Apr. 1846, https://www.eapoe.org/misc/letters/t4604000.htm. Accessed 11 June 2025.
- Cooke, P. Pendleton. "Edgar A. Poe." *Southern Literary Messenger*, vol. 14, no. 1, Jan. 1848.
- Dayan, Joan. "Poe's Women: A Feminist Poe?" *Poe Studies / Dark Romanticism*, vol. 26, no. 1/2, 1993, pp. 1–12.
- Dill, Elizabeth, and Sheri Weinstein, editors. "Introduction." *Death Becomes Her: Cultural Narratives of Femininity and Death in Nineteenth-Century America*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009, pp. xi–xix.
- Fuller, Margaret. "Margaret Fuller 'Poe's Tales' (1845)." *Bloom's Classical Critical Views: Edgar Allan Poe*, edited by Harold Bloom, Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2008, pp. 144–45.
- Kennedy, J. Gerald. "Edgar Allan Poe, 1809–1849: A Brief Biography." *A Historical Guide to Edgar Allan Poe*, edited by J. Gerald Kennedy, Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 19–59.
- Kopley, Richard, and Kevin J. Hayes. "Two Verse Masterworks: 'The Raven' and 'Ulalume.'" *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, edited by Kevin J. Hayes, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 191–204.
- Lopes, Elisabete. "Unburying the Wife: A Reflection Upon the Female Uncanny in Poe's 'Ligeia.'" *The Edgar Allan Poe Review*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2010, pp. 40–50.
- Martens, Elien. *The Representation of Women in the Works of Edgar Allan Poe*. 2013. Ghent University, Master's thesis. Ghent University Library, https://libstore.ugent.be/fulltxt/RUG01/002/060/296/RUG01-002060296_2013_0001_AC.pdf. Accessed 11 June 2025.
- Person, Leland S. "Poe and Nineteenth-Century Gender Constructions." *A Historical Guide to Edgar Allan Poe*, edited by J. Gerald Kennedy, Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 129–65.

ISSN- 2395-7522 (Online), Imp. Fact.6.21 (IIJF)
Literary Cognizance:An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed
e - Journal of English Language, Literature & Criticism
Vol. – VI, Issue-1, June 2025

- Poe, Edgar Allan. "January 3, 1846." *Edgar Allan Poe: Essays and Reviews*, edited by Thomas Ollive Mabbott, The Library of America, 1978, pp. 1055–1222.
- —. "Lenore." *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings*, Penguin Classics, 2003, pp. 26–27.
- —. "The Philosophy of Composition." *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings*, Penguin Classics, 2003, pp. 430–42.
- —. "The Raven." *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings*, Penguin Classics, 2003, pp. 29–33.
- —. "Ulalume." *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings*, Penguin Classics, 2003, pp. 34–36.
- —. "Psychic Pattern in the Later Poems." *American Literature*, vol. XX, pp. [Insert full page range]. [Author Unknown].
- Reynaud, Kevin. "The Loss of the Ideal Woman in Edgar Allan Poe's Poetry." *DUMAS*, Grenoble Alpes University - UFR of Foreign Languages, 2013, https://dumas.ccsd.cnrs.fr/dumas-00936674. Accessed 11 June 2025.
- Richards, Eliza. *Gender and the Poetics of Reception in Poe's Circle*. Boston University, 2010.
- —. "Women's Place in Poe Studies." *Poe Studies / Dark Romanticism*, vol. 33, no. 1/2, 2000, pp. 10–14.
- Weekes, Karen. "Poe's Feminine Ideal." *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, edited by Kevin J. Hayes, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 148–62.

This is an Open Access e-Journal Published Under A Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

Article Received: 13/06/2025
Article Accepted: 26/06/2025
Published Online: 27/06/2025

To Cite the Article: Yashica. "Poe's Dead Women: Finding the Present-Absence of the "lost Lenore" in *The Raven.*" Literary Cognizance: An International Refereed/Peer Reviewed e-Journal of English Language, Literature and Criticism, Vol. - VI, Issue-1, June, 2025, 302-307. www.literarycognizance.com