

BALÁZS KÁNTÁS

# Fingerprints

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Five Essays on Poetry

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## Optical and Electronic Media Represented in Paul Celan's Poem *Fadensonnen – Threadsuns*

In the present short essay, we make an attempt to re-read one of Paul Celan's well-known poem from the theoretical approach of mediality, concentrating on the possible representations of optical and electronic media within the textual world of the poem. Theoretically, if we speak about media and mediality, *writing*, written and printed texts can be treated as optical media, it is only a question of approach. If we have a glance on some loci, Paul Celan's poetry permit the interpretation according to which written texts may be considered as a kind of primary medium, at least for the poet, and written texts are able to mediate and archive information and meanings which are lost or incompletely mediated in spoken language. In our examination, we make an attempt to use the widest possible definition of medium and mediality, based Marshall McLuhan's well-known statement that practically everything that is suitable for carrying or preserving information can be treated as medium (McLuhan, 1964).

One of the fairly well-known poems by Paul Celan may refer among others to the technicalising culture and optical and electronic media of our present. This poem is called *Fadensonnen – Threadsuns*.

John Felstiner's English translation:

### **THREADSUNS**

*over the grayblack wasteness.*

*A tree-*

*high thought*

*strikes the light-tone: there are*

*still songs to sing beyond*

*humankind.*

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The original German poem:

**FADENSONNEN**

*über der grauschwarzen Ödnis.  
Ein baum-  
hoher Gedanke  
greift sich den Lichtton: es sind  
noch Lieder zu singen jenseits  
der Menschen.*

The above poem, similarly to other minimalist and hermetic poems by Celan, permits several possible interpretations, even if the number of possible readings is not endless. The text consisting of only seven lines turned the attention of literary scholars to itself a number of times during its history of reception. We may presume that the text speaks about not more than the transcendent character of poetry, and the *songs to sing beyond humankind* refer to transcendent meanings that cannot be mediated by everyday language, only by art, namely poetry (Gadamer 1997: 112). In parallel the poem permits an ironic interpretation, according to which nothing more exists *beyond humankind*, reaching the transcendent in any way is impossible, and the poetic speaker is only thinking about it in an ironic manner (Kiss 2003: 175-177), and this way under no circumstances can we take the statement of the last line serious.

The phrase *beyond humankind* and the songs sung there / from there may refer to the transcendent, metaphysical world beyond the visible universe (either the world of platonic ideas or the underworld in the religious sense), but it is also possible that this *beyond* is to be understood in time, in an age from where *humankind* has already disappeared in the physical sense.

Is it possible that Celan's poem does not only refer to mystical, transcendent entities and meanings, but also to the quickly evolving technical media of the poet's own age? It cannot be decided whether this interpretation is legitimate or arbitrary, but if we read Celan's poetry from the direction of me-

diality and *mediatedness*, it can evidently prove an interesting approach.

Examining the opening line of the poem the poetic text makes the reader *see threadsuns* (the sun's radiation through the clouds?) over a certain *grayblack wasteness*. A landscape is presented to the reader; that is, the poetic text is based on the sight, the imaginary sight created by the power of the words before the eyes of the reader. As we read the text further, we may *read a tree-high human thought that strikes the light-tone*, which is an acoustic and optical medium at the same time. Light-tone, as John Felstiner translates it, *Lichtton* in German is not Celan's neologism, but an existing technical term used in film-making; that is, the name of an optical medium.

The technique called *Lichtton*, namely *Lichttonverfahren* in German, translated in English as *sound-on-film* (apart from Felstiner's possible misunderstanding / poetic interpretation of the text) refers to one of the oldest film-making technologies. It implies a class of sound film processes where the sound accompanying picture is physically recorded onto photographic film, usually, but not always, the same strip of film carrying the picture, and this process did not count as a very new technology even in Celan's age, in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As the poem suggests, the human thought is *recorded on film* – mediated by light, an optical medium, and sound, an acoustic medium at the same time. The dual usage of these media may also make us remember the more developed technical media of the present days, for example DVD-player, television or the multi-medial, virtual world of the internet. Is it possible that this *striking* of the *light-tone* is, as a matter of fact, equal to the *songs beyond humankind*? The mystery of the connection between the opening and the closing lines of the poem may be solved by this interpretation.

Medial cultural techniques and the incredibly quick development of electronic technical media in the 20<sup>th</sup> century provided completely new types of experience to people, and in the modern age it also led to the radical change and re-formation

of poetry (Ernő Kulcsár Szabó 2004: 166-178). Mechanical archiving systems and discourse networks were invented, discourses multiplied themselves, and it is not clear at all to whom messages – if we can still speak about messages at all – are addressed in the seemingly chaotic context of human culture that is mediated multiple times. Medial changes also caused changes in the field of literature, and Celan's poem which has been interpreted many times, may be considered as the imprint of these changes.

It is Friedrich Kittler who states that no sense is possible without some kind of physical carrier, medium; that is, our human world and culture are necessarily mediated and medial. However, the notion of noise introduced by Shannon nearly always enters the process of mediation, disturbing factors never can be excluded (Kittler 2005: 455-474). Poetry is maybe one of the clearest manifestations of language, a use of language that in principle should not be disturbed by any noise. The gist of poetry is that it creates its elements as self-referential elements, and it was the well-known model of communication by Jakobson that increased the distance between sign and noise as large as possible. Poetry is a medium, a form of communication that defends itself against disturbing factors called *noises*. If we consider the hermetic poetics of Celan's works and their wish to place themselves out of space and time, out of all networks that can be disturbed by noises, then it can be interpreted as a wish for a kind of immediacy.

Despite all of this, nowadays, numberless kinds of noise shadow the communication in our culture. Today noise can also be technically manipulated, and it is even used to mediate secret, encoded messages, as it can be observed in secret technologies of military communication (Kittler 2005). The relationship between noise and sign has been gradually blurred since it became possible to manipulate their relationship and since the mathematically based communication systems became able to change the nature of noise. It may even lead to the conclusion that it is not certain at all that the addressee of certain messages

can be called *man*. By and large it seems to be compatible with the possible interpretation of Celan's poem according to which the addressee of the songs that are sung *beyond humankind* we necessarily cannot call man / human.

The conquest of the electronic and optical media and the strong tendency of technicalisation in our society make it possible to conclude that we can gain knowledge about our own senses only via media. Art and technical media can serve the goal to deceive human senses. The technical media of our days, similarly to Celan's poetry and the poems cited above, create fictional worlds, illusion. Furthermore, in some cases this illusion may be so perfect that even the definition of *reality* becomes questionable (Kittler 2005: 7-40). These medium are first and foremost optical, and only secondly acoustic, since for the man of the present day the sight, the vision is becoming more and more primary.

Optical and electronic media, compared to the historical past, treat symbolic contents in a completely new manner. While the human body in its own materiality still belongs to the (physical) reality, media are more and more becoming the embodiment of the imaginary, the unreal existence and bring this unreality closer and closer to man. Paul Celan's poem cited above may also turn our attention to this tendency. Perhaps it is worth speaking about technicalisation and the new types of media in a neutral manner, not judging them, but the extreme presence of technology in our society and the possible disappearance of *humankind* as such, the message, the songs *beyond humankind* in a temporal sense may be a fearsome thought. We are not to forget that the poem entitled *Fadensonnen* speaks about a *grayblack wasteness* (a landscape burnt to ashes?), a deserted waste land, in which we may see only a *thought striking the light-tone* – but no human being. Due to the extreme presence of technology in the (material) human culture, certain phenomena can be liberated that cannot be dominated by man anymore. Celan's poem, and the possible negative utopia that it suggests can be read as a warning. According to Georg Simmel,

the tragedy of human culture (mainly in terms of mental values) is in the fact that after a while it may cease itself – man means the greatest danger to oneself, and not some external factor... (Simmel 1999: 75-93).

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# The Motif of Damnation in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven"

## Introduction

The aim of the present essay is first and foremost to examine and explore the motif of damnation in the well-known poem called "The Raven" by the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century American poet Edgar Allan Poe, within the frameworks of an in-depth analysis. The starting point is that the poem can be interpreted as a poem of damnation; that is, damnation is one of the dominant motifs within the poem. I intend to define damnation as a state or situation from which there is seemingly no escape, as a hopeless and possibly final state of mind and soul that may even manifest itself at physical, not only at a psychical level. In the present context, this state of damnation mainly derives from loss. Furthermore, this state defined as damnation can also have different degrees and may be experienced at several different levels. As a first step, I would like to briefly explore the circumstances of the composition and make an attempt to establish connections between the possible biographical circumstances of the author and the writing process of the poem, presenting possible biographical motivations that the author might have had in composing one of the most prominent pieces of his poetic work.

After the short examination of the circumstances of the composition and the possible biographical motivations, I intend to examine the poem and its narrative structure stanza by stanza, and find motifs and references among the lines that may support that damnation is one of the key motifs of the work. In addition, I would like to provide several levels of possible interpretations and reveal what different kinds of damnation may be present in the poem; in other words, to analyse how many ways the narrator telling the narrative poem might be considered to be damned. After revealing several modes and grades of damnation supposedly implied in the poem, I intend to make an

attempt to provide an interpretation that may bring closer the different aspects of damnation in the poem to each other, based on the text itself and on a few biographical data and / or accepted critical approaches.

Finally, after the in-depth analysis and the exploration of the motifs that imply damnation in the poem, I will make an attempt to reach some conclusion, making some concluding remarks on the analysis of the poem.

## Possible Biographical Motivations and Circumstances of the Composition

Before attempting an in-depth analysis of the poem based on the text itself, it might be worth having a few glances at the possible biographical motivations of the author and the circumstances of the composition. The starting point is that the poet's biographical events, at least partly, may have influenced the creation of the poem, and the poetic narrator can be considered partly identical with the author himself. Although it may be considered evident to a certain degree, yet these aspects might have some relevance from the point of view of interpretation.

Poe supposedly wrote "The Raven" in 1844. It was first published on January 29, 1845, in *The New York Evening Mirror*. It became his probably most prominent poetic work already in his life, and it was reprinted and published many times after the date of the first publication. Partly due to "The Raven", Poe became a highly popular author within the contemporary American literary circles. "The Raven" appeared in numerous anthologies, for example, in the anthology entitled *Poets and Poetry in America*, 1847, edited by Rufus Wilmot Griswold.

As it can be read in *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, the poem is now analyzed in middle schools, high schools and universities, almost creating a literary myth around itself. (Kopley 193). It was named "the poem about remembering" by Poe's contemporary William Gilmore Simms, but it is

interesting to examine what role “remembering” could play in the composition of the poem, not strictly separating Poe himself from the poetic narrator of his work.

First of all, in his essay entitled “The Philosophy of Composition,” in which he, in fact, analyses his own poem “The Raven” and discusses the circumstances of the writing and justifies his selection of the topic, Poe openly denies that the poem was mainly inspired by biographical facts and his own memories.

However, considering only the number of the people whom Edgar Allan Poe lost in his life (although I do not get immersed in the biographical events of the author in detail, due the limited extension of the essay, the people whom he lost and the personal tragedies of his life are well-known for biographers and literary historians) before writing his poem called “The Raven”, it may seem evident that these losses could lead the poet to a very depressed and seemingly hopeless state of soul, which could play a serious role in writing a poem about loss and the hopelessness felt for it. The dark atmosphere of the poem is mainly created by the poetic narrator’s loss of his beloved called Lenore, as it is well-known, and this loss of the beloved woman may lead to a mental and psychical state similar to or identical with damnation, damnation that can be defined as a situation that is seemingly final and from which there is no escape.

In “The Philosophy of Composition”, published in the April issue of *Graham’s Magazine*, 1846, as mentioned above, Poe makes an attempt to present the analysis of his own poem “The Raven” and also to describe the circumstances of the composition. The author claims that he considered each aspect of the poem and that he had a completely conscious conception about what to write.

Although in the present essay I do not intend to analyse “The Philosophy of Composition” in detail, I attempt to use it in order to spotlight the supposed circumstances of the composition of the poem and the poetic intention depicted in it. As it can be read in the tenth paragraph of the essay, Poe himself strongly argues that the poem was the result of conscious poetic work and he had an exact concept about what and how to write:

*“The initial consideration was that of extent. If any literary work is too long to be read at one sitting, we must be content to dispense with the immensely important effect derivable from unity of impression – for, if two sittings be required, the affairs of the world interfere, and every thing like totality is at once destroyed. But since, ceteris paribus, no poet can afford to dispense with any thing that may advance his design, it but remains to be seen whether there is, in extent, any advantage to counterbalance the loss of unity which attends it. Here I say no, at once.” (Poe)*

That is, as a matter of fact, Poe himself concentrates on his poetic purposes and his intended literary achievement in a seemingly impersonal voice. In the essay, his style is rather analytic than emotional, he seems to consider himself a craftsman.

Nevertheless, several literary historians and critics doubt that Poe himself thought it completely serious what he wrote down in “The Philosophy of Composition”, and it is widely considered to be a pedantic writing towards the public audience rather than an honest confession about the composition of the poem. For instance, T. S. Eliot himself also dealt with the possible circumstances of the composition and argued that “The Raven” rather seems to be the result of personal motivations than the result of a conscious poetic concept. As he states it:

*“It is difficult for us to read that essay without reflecting that if Poe plotted out his poem with such calculation, he might have taken a little more pains over it: the result hardly does credit to the method.” (Eliot, cited in Hoffman 76)*

In addition, also one of the famous biographers of Poe Joseph Wood Krutch describes the essay as, “a rather highly ingenious exercise in the art of rationalization than literary criticism.” (98) That is, it cannot be neglected that several literary scholars tend to treat the essay as a kind of posterior attempt to rationalize the writing of a poem that was supposedly induced, at least partly, by the author’s real emotions and remembrances. Furthermore,



as written in the literary-historical work entitled *A History of American Literature – from Puritanism to Postmodernism*, it does not seem to be very probable that Poe really wrote “The Raven” so thoughtfully and methodically as he claims in his own essay – the authors rather tend to suppose that the narrator of the essay is one of Poe’s “maniac” narrators that can be observed in several of his short stories; for instance, in “The Fall of the House of Usher”, “The Black Cat”, “The Mask of the Red Death”, etc. (Ruland and Brandbury 651)

The present essay also tends to accept the assumption that biographical motivations played a serious role in the composition of one of Poe’s most significant poems, and he did not write it completely so consciously and analytically, since it strongly seems to be an honest confession about a state of soul in which he possibly really was in the period when he wrote the poem. Biographical events in themselves may seem unimportant from the point of view of analyzing the text itself; however, this aspect will be highlighted again in a further chapter of the present essay, since the supposable poetic self-confessional character of the poem might pave the way for examining “The Raven” as a meta-poetic work that is also meant to express the necessary damnation of poets.

After the attempt to briefly outline the possible biographical motivations of the author, henceforth I intend to explore several levels of damnation in the poem, within the framework of an in-depth analysis.

### Damnation as a General Aspect within “The Raven”

As mentioned above several times, the main aim of the present essay is to interpret the poem called “The Raven” by Edgar Allan Poe as a poem about damnation. I intend to define the concept of damnation as a state of suffering from which there is no escape, or a situation for which there is no solution at all, either in the physical or in the mental and psychical sense of the

word. Several leitmotifs of the poem, such as midnight, winter, solitude, mourn, loss, etc. refer to the fact that the fictitious world created within the literary work and the poetic narrator enclosed in this world are surrounded by, and actually exist in the state of damnation. In the present section I intend to explore some of the motifs that might be interpreted as references to the state of damnation of the poetic speaker, mainly based on the text of the poem itself, illustrating with textual examples, then in the following section I make an attempt to find several different possible levels of damnation within the poem.

It may sound like a commonplace that the poem itself begins with a very dark and ominous overture, as it can be read immediately in the first stanza, and this ominous atmosphere is created by words and phrases such as “midnight dreary”, “weary”, “forgotten lore”, “rapping”, “muttered”. That is, the first stanza is full of words that contribute to the dark atmosphere, and this dark atmosphere is immediately created in the beginning of the poem:

*Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary,  
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore,  
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,  
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.  
‘Tis some visitor,’ I muttered, ‘tapping at my chamber door -  
Only this, and nothing more.’ (1-6)*

As it is interpreted in the same way by several critics and literary historians who have ever dealt with Poe’s “The Raven” (e. g., Artúr Elek, Charles Kopley or Jay B. Hubbel), the narrator of the poem is supposedly a young scholar who has recently lost his beloved, and in order to forget a little about his grief, he tries to be immersed in (possibly scientific) books. It is midnight and December. The whole starting situation seems to be depressed, hopeless and gloomy. As written in the first stanza, the speaker nearly falls asleep. It may even be interpreted that he is near to death; in other words, this half-sleeping state is a

transitory condition between life and death, although physically he is still alive.

Until the Raven itself appears, the situation within the narrator's room is nearly static and unchanged. He only hears knocking on the chamber door and remembers his lost beloved several times, but the atmosphere is not broken. As a matter of fact, in the first six stanzas, the first third of the poem there is not much more than a static poetic meditation and a prelude to the real events of the narration. Closely examining the first six stanzas and their atmosphere, it may be discovered that the speaker tries to escape from his mourning for Lenore and hopes for a guest who will save him from his hopeless solitude behind the knocking on the chamber door, but he is disappointed every time when he attempts to check who is outside, and everything, every single noise makes him remember only his lost Lenore.

As the poetic narrative goes forward, the Raven suddenly appears in the room of the narrator, from outside, and the only one word, the later recurring refrain of the poem is pronounced by it for the first time. All of this is depicted in the seventh stanza that can be interpreted as a turning point within the narration:

*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 the least obeisance made he; not a minute stopped or stayed he;  
But, with mien of lord or lady, perched above my chamber door -  
Perched upon a bust of Pallas just above my chamber door -  
Perched, and sat, and nothing more. (43-48)*

The static and hopeless nature of the situation is seemingly broken up by the appearance of the bird that lands on Pallas's bust. Then, at least for a while, the Raven remains silent, and the poetic narrator seems to feel better, due to the presence of the unexpected and bizarre night visitor.

The key phrase of the poem, the recurring refrain closing down every single stanza from here is pronounced at the end of the eighth stanza:

*Then this ebony bird beguiling my sad fancy into smiling,  
By the grave and stern decorum of the countenance it wore,  
'Though thy crest be shorn and shaven, thou,' I said, 'art sure no craven.  
Ghastly grim and ancient raven wandering from the nightly shore -  
Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night's Plutonian shore!  
Quoth the raven, 'Nevermore.' (50-56)*

The Raven answers to the question about what his name is; that is, he may name himself and does not only repeat the phrase mechanically as the poetic speaker assumes it in the beginning. Even in the beginning, it may have a much deeper relevance within the poem than the persona himself or readers would think it for the first sight.

Whatever the poetic voice asks of the Raven, the answer is always the same: *nevermore*. Certainly, when he starts supposing that the Raven is, in fact, a herald from the afterlife – all the same whether from heaven or hell – and he asks about his lost beloved Lenore, the answer is the same:

*Then, methought, the air grew denser, perfumed from an unseen censer  
Swung by Seraphim whose foot-falls tinkled on the tufted floor.  
'Wretch,' I cried, 'thy God hath lent thee – by these angels he has 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.' (79-84)*

As it can be read in stanza 14, it suddenly runs through the speaker's mind that the bird sitting on the bust of Pallas may not be an ordinary bird, but some supernatural creature that was sent to him to bring news from over there. In the moment when the speaker realises that it is not an ordinary, earthly creature present in his room, at first it is hope that flashes up for a little while within the whole dark and seemingly impenetrably hopeless atmosphere of the poem and within the state of soul of the speaker.

However, when the Raven's answer is *nevermore* to the speaker's question whether or not he will see Lenore one more

time, even if not in this earthly, mortal human life, but in his afterlife, his hopefulness and momentary good mood suddenly turns into fury and deeper despair than before. Nevertheless, once again he repeats the question in stanza 16, trying to control his fury:

*Prophet!* said I, 'thing of evil! – prophet still, if bird or devil!  
By that Heaven that bends above us – by that God we both adore –  
Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn,  
It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels named Lenore –  
Clasp a rare and radiant maiden, whom the angels named Lenore?'  
Quoth the raven, 'Nevermore.' (90-96)

Despite the fact that the Raven answers *nevermore* to any question, the narrator's hopefulness flashes up one more time, and he supposes that perhaps in another life, in a dimension beyond his present human and consequently helpless existence he will perhaps meet his lost beloved. He may know exactly what the next answer of the bird will be, yet he asks the question once again, deceiving himself in a certain way. Stanza 17 might be interpreted as another important turning point within the poetic narration, as a point of no return, where all of the hope flashing up before gets lost in the darkness, and nothing remains within the room and within the soul of the speaker but bitterness, hopelessness, and despair; that is, he finds himself in a form of damnation.

The last stanza in which the poetic narrator states that "... [his] soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor shall be lifted – nevermore!" may be interpreted as the vortex of damnation where the dimension of time that has been present and observable in the former stanzas seems to cease, and some endless, eternal damnation surrounds the speaker, both his physical body and his soul. The room becomes a place where the shadow of the Raven rules; furthermore, it is strengthened by the fact that the speaker condemns himself to damnation, since it is him who pronounces the last *nevermore* within the poem.

Having made an attempt to briefly explore the presence of some general aspect of damnation within the stanzas of the narrative poem, henceforth I will turn to the different possible levels of damnation that are behind the general impression made by the atmosphere and imagery of Poe's poetic work.

#### A Possible Approach – The Raven Itself as the Carrier of Damnation

The Raven, the key motif, and effectively the protagonist of the poem may be interpreted as an entity that carries damnation, and brings this damnation into the internal world of the speaker and upon the poetic speaker himself from outside. In this case, it should certainly be presupposed that the poetic narrator is not originally damned, and the internal literary world of the poem is not in the state of damnation from the very beginning.

The present section of the essay attempts to provide one possible interpretation about one certain level of damnation within the poem – damnation that is brought upon the poetic narrator by the Raven itself. In other words, in the present analysis it is supposed that the narrator is not in the state of damnation at the beginning of the narration, but he gradually reaches the state of damnation after the Raven appears in his room and lands on the bust of Pallas Athena, goddess of wisdom in Greek mythology. One possible interpretation of the poem, from the point of view of damnation is that it is not enough that Lenore, the beloved woman has died and the poetic narrator simply mourns her, it is not the only reason in itself for which he is slowly surrounded by the dark and impenetrable atmosphere of damnation.

Literary critic Granger B. Howell also argues that the atmosphere of the poem in itself foreshadows a state that is similar to damnation, or it can even be treated as identical with damnation, damnation in the Christian sense of the word. As Howell writes in his essay entitled "Devil Lore in 'The Raven'":

*It's not simply that she is dead. It is that he has damned himself. It is no mistake that the month is "bleak December" rather than an equally dreary November. The forces of darkness are never more powerful than during the high holy days of the Christian year, and December, with its share of the twelve days of Christmas, ranks foremost. The mention of "each separate dying ember [which] wrought its ghost upon the floor," is reminiscent of Coleridge's "Christabel" in which other embers reflect the presence of evil in much the same way.*

Howell suggests that December and midnight, the time of the narration itself creates an atmosphere that is favourable for the "powers of darkness" in the Christian sense; that is, the environment depicted in the poem surrounding the narrator is a completely suitable place for damnation.

Attempting to find the appropriate passage about Edgar Allan Poe within the book entitled *Az amerikai irodalom története (History of American Literature*, one of the most known comprehensive works about American Literature published in Hungarian), it is observable that the authors make nearly the same suggestion as Howell's: the presence of the Raven gradually brings ultimate despair and darkness into the room and into the mind of the poetic narrator, and the refrain *nevermore* repeated time and again slowly but securely strengthens the sense of damnation, the sense of a state from which seemingly there is no way of escape. It is also argued that the final /r/ phoneme of the refrain (pronounced in the rhotic American accent after the long /o/, while usually unpronounced in Standard Southern British English) also carries some darkness and ominous character within itself, the symbolism of sounds, mainly that of the dark vowels apart from final /r/-s that predominates the poem also contributes to the dark, gothic and apparently hopeless atmosphere that surrounds the whole narration (Országh and Virágos 65-66).

One key argument for the statement that the narrator is not, at least not completely in the state of damnation until the Raven appears in his room may be the fact that in the first six stanzas,

as mentioned above, in the first and apparently static phase of the poetic narration, the narrator is sad and mourns for his lost beloved, but no supernatural force is explicitly present within the room. He can be treated as only an average man, with average pains and sadness. In the present essay it may be accepted that although the atmosphere is ominous and sad from the beginning of the poem, in the first six stanzas only premonitory signs (e. g., the ominous knocking on the door, the howling wind outside, the whole mood generated by "the bleak December", etc.) of damnation are present. As analysed above, the seventh stanza of the poem in which the Raven suddenly flies into the room from outside, is the turning point of the poetic narration where the static state and motionlessness is broken up.

The sudden appearance of the Raven undoubtedly generates tension both in the mind of the poetic speaker and in the course of the narration. The speaker's monotonous mournfulness suddenly turns into curiosity and pale hopefulness. He is curious about the origin of the bird, and when he suddenly realises that the Raven is not an ordinary animal, but it may be in possession some supernatural forces, he wants to believe that there is maybe hope for him to meet his lost beloved one more time, if not in this world, then in some kind of afterlife. But when the Raven's answer is *nevermore* to any question asked of him, the hope that flashed up in the poetic speaker's heart and mind suddenly starts fading away. As it is written in the last stanza of the poem cited above, he realises that the bird has not brought news to him about his lost beloved, even if it is sent and governed by supernatural forces. On the contrary, the Raven was sent as an executor, in order to destroy even the last splinters of hope in the narrator's heart and mind, always and timelessly making him remember that there is no way out of the state of damnation. The narrator must realise that he will never see his lost beloved Lenore again either in his mortal human existence or in his afterlife. It is also suggested that he will not even reach any kind of afterlife, rather he will stay in his room for ever, in eternal grief and despair, in a transitory state between life

and death; in fact, in the state of damnation that falls on him in the form of the Raven's dark wings.

At this level, damnation can be interpreted as a process, or at least the result of a process rather than a static and unchanged state. The persona goes through a process and gradually reaches damnation, due to the appearance and presence of the Raven, and the hopelessness and darkness generated by it. The soul of the speaker may not be lost from the very beginning of the poem, but it gets lost in the dark gyres of loss, hopelessness and unavoidable remembrances. The Raven is supposedly a supernatural entity who comes from outside – from outside, where there is only darkness, night and winter – and breaks in the poetic speaker's room; that is, the Raven penetrates into his internal world, into his ultimate lair where he might have escaped from his own loss, remembrance and dark thoughts resulting from them. But there is no escape – the Raven as the carrier of damnation, coming from outside, finds the narrator even here, in this enclosed environment, and makes him realise that he cannot hide from the pain of loss and cannot deceive himself into hoping that once he will find his lost beloved again, if not here, then in some dreamland, Eden, anywhere else beyond his present human existence. The Raven, as the speaker himself suggests in the last stanza, will stay with him for ever to make him remember his losses and his hopeless situation. His room, where he escaped from the outside world, from damnation, becomes itself the place and prison of damnation.

Examining one of the possible aspects of damnation within the poem, the Raven as the carrier of damnation, in the following section of the essay I will make an attempt to explore another possible level of damnation present within the poem.

#### Damnation as an Original and Unchanged State in the Poem

As outlined in the previous chapter, although the aspect of damnation can be interpreted as a process, not situation or a state originally given, it may also be examined as an original and un-

changed state. Having explored arguments for accepting the suggestion that the poetic narrator of "The Raven" might not be in the state of damnation from the very beginning of the poem, in the present section of the essay I would like to examine another possible level of damnation in the poem from a different perspective, proceeding from the assumption that the speaker is perhaps in the state of damnation from the beginning. Now I make an attempt to examine the poem supposing that the Raven is not the carrier of damnation, but it is only something that makes the poetic narrator realise the truth.

As discussed above, the atmosphere of the "The Raven" is clearly ominous and dark even in the first stanzas when the Raven is not yet present. This atmosphere of melancholy and darkness is created immediately in the very beginning of the poem, and it is sustained all along. The narrator is sitting in his room, mourning for his lost beloved Lenore and meditates about whether or not he will see her once again in some form, when the mysterious knocking from outside suddenly disturbs his meditative state of mind, and he wants to explore who is knocking on his door at any price. In the second stanza it is also mentioned by the narrator that he "eagerly (...) wished the morrow"; in other words, he is waiting for the end of the ominous and dark night that strongly contributes to his sad and hopeless state of soul, apart from the pain of loss that he feels.

When the Raven appears, as discussed above, the poetic speaker wants to believe that the bird may give him some hope and can lead him out of his originally hopeless and dark situation. He may even see some saviour in the bird that has arrived to somehow redeem him from damnation. But when the Raven repeats only *nevermore*, it becomes clear for the speaker that he *is* in a situation from which he can escape no more, and he does not reach damnation gradually, since there is nothing to reach, only damnation exists as an unchanged state from which it is impossible to break out.

John F. Adams also suggests that the Raven is in fact a kind of "private symbol", as he calls it; that is, not a physical entity,

but rather the projection of the grief of the poetic persona, an abstract entity that stands for the feelings and the state of soul of the narrator. (In his essay the author also compares the traditional folkloric and mythological properties and associations as for ravens and the properties and associations that are observable in and generated by E. A. Poe's poem and its title character. The author draws the conclusion that Poe uses the motif of the raven in a very individual way and creates a so-called "private symbol" of it, rather than using it as an allusion to various folkloric and mythological sources in which otherwise controversial connotations are attributed to ravens.) As Adams writes it in his essay entitled "Classical Raven Lore and Poe's Raven":

*In the course of the poem, the Raven develops and modifies this and its other associations, becoming more and more a private symbol, more and more a dream or hallucinatory figure generated by the persona's emotional bankruptcy, increasingly symbolizing private spiritual dryness rather than personal lamentation for a specific loss.*

Adams's argumentation seems to be supportable if I consider the basic atmosphere of the poem and the original state of soul of the poetic narrator that are, in fact, not drastically changed by the appearance of the Raven and the continuous repetition of the phrase *nevermore*. Certainly, the Raven can be interpreted as something that is not completely part of reality, a supposedly supernatural creature that appears in the environment of the poetic narrator in a physical form, but also a kind of mental entity that appears within the mind of the speaker. It is hard to decide whether its presence in the room is physical or symbolic, but the present approach seems to support that it is rather a visionary figure existing within the narrator's mind than a concrete physical entity.

If the Raven is treated as a "private symbol", it is not necessary to interpret it as a mystic herald or a carrier of damnation, not even as an independent and physically existing character of the narrative poem. It can also be only the projection

of the speaker's dark thoughts and unbearable sense of loss. When he talks to the Raven and hears the same answer every time – *nevermore*, the dialogue may not be between him and another living character, but he may only talk to himself, gradually comprehending the fact that his beloved really died and nothing or no-one can resurrect her. Furthermore, considering the fact that the poetic speaker is supposedly a young scholar, a man knowledgeable about (possibly also natural) sciences; that is, supposedly a rational and intellectual person, the Raven may also be interpreted as nothing more than the awakening of his own rational sense of reality that suggests him that no-one may resurrect from death, however he loved Lenore, he inevitably has to resign himself to the fact that she is dead. However, he cannot work up the fact that the beloved woman exists "nevermore" in any form, and even love cannot overwhelm human mortality. In vain does the speaker's mind know that Lenore is dead, his soul is incapable of accepting the cold, rational and, as a matter of fact, paradoxically natural truth. This realisation, this complete and ultimate loss of the last splinters of hope might lead the speaker to a mental state from which there is no way out; that is, into a state of mind and soul that can be treated as equal to damnation. It is not suggested at all that the speaker physically dies, but it is rather suggested that he has to resign himself to the fact that his beloved is dead, and no-one on earth can escape from death. Perhaps he will live for much more time, beyond the scope of the poetic narration and the frameworks of the poem, but since he has lost all of his hope by facing the death of someone whom he loved, the rest of his life will probably be unhappy and desperate. He will have to live in a kind of earthly damnation until his death, without any supernatural force that leads him to damnation, because surprisingly it is him who condemns himself to damnation by his own sadness and ultimate loss of hope.

After revealing two possible levels of damnation in the poem, in the next section of the essay I attempt to explore another, and maybe interesting possible level of damnation.

## Meta-poetry in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" – the Necessary Damnation of Poets

In the present section of the essay, I make an attempt to provide one more and perhaps a little unusual interpretation of the poem, from the point of view of damnation. Several literary historians and critics who have ever written about E. A. Poe in some form agree that he was undoubtedly one of the most prominent and original figures in the history of American Literature, or at least during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is often argued that his poetic magnitude and poetic sense of the world that manifests itself in nearly all of his writings cannot be neglected within the analysis of his obviously most known poem of high aesthetic value.

As Hungarian literary critic Artúr Elek wrote in 1910, it is never to be neglected that Poe was *a poet* in every single piece of his works; therefore, his obsessive engagement to aestheticism and beauty cannot be ignored, no matter which piece of his literary lifework is being analysed. (67) (Although Elek's critical approach may seem old-fashioned today, comparing them to contemporary trends of literary criticism, it may be worth examining the same text from even highly different perspectives of different eras of literary history in order to explore as much possibilities of interpretation as possible.)

If the assumption is accepted that Poe was a *poet* in each of his works, and his being a poet is inseparable from the atmosphere and possible interpretations of any of his poems (or even his prose works), then it is possible to examine and interpret "The Raven" and see the presence of damnation within it with a completely different eye.

As mentioned above several times, the poetic narrator is often interpreted as a young scholar; in any case, an intellectual who mourns her lost love Lenore. But would it not be possible to interpret the figure of the narrator as a poet, a man of letters who attempts to be immersed in literature in order to forget about his memories and pain for a while? If it is supposed that the poetic narrator is, at least partly, identical with Poe himself,

and as discussed above, biographical motivations may also have inspired the composition of the poem, (although Poe himself argues in "The Philosophy of Composition" that he had nearly no autobiographical inspiration and his only aim with the poem was to write a beautiful piece of poetry of deep content), it becomes more and more acceptable that "The Raven" can also be interpreted as a meta-poetic work, a certain kind of poetic self-confession, a confession about a poet's sufferings resulting in the composition of an aesthetically valuable poem.

The opening situation of the poem is unchanged, even if it is accepted that the poetic narrator is rather a poet than a natural scientist. But it may also be audaciously supposed that he is writing a poem about the loss of his beloved Lenore when he suddenly hears something from outside that disturbs his melancholic and meditative state of mind. Going further, it also appears to be imaginable that the poetic narrator is writing his poem called "The Raven", a poem in which the bird is a symbol of his personal pain and the loss of his beloved. Then suddenly the poem comes to life and becomes reality, at least for the poet himself, within his own room, and finally the Raven, the embodiment of his grief and unforgettable memories comes to life and appears in front of him – it can even be claimed it is the text itself that comes to life via its own poetic power. If I consider this possibility of interpretation, then the statement that a (poetic) text comes to life and becomes independent of its creator at one level, but at another level it may become one with its creator, is not so far from the widely accepted postmodernist trends of literary criticism according to which the text lives its own life, introduced and accepted by the Deconstructionists and others. The persona / poet may face his own poetic visions, and through the presence of the Raven, which, in fact, may exist only in the poet's fantasies and in the physical reality at the same time, he becomes one with his poetry. It might be a possible approach that a perfect poem can be born only at the price of the deepest emotional shock that a human being can go through: the loss of someone, the loss of a beloved beautiful woman. A poet has

to experience emotional and physical extremities of the highest degree in order to become capable of creating a perfect piece of literature, perfect in every sense, in order to be able to write a valuable poem similar to “The Raven” by Edgar Allan Poe. In other words, it is necessary for the poet to experience and survive an extreme situation, a nearly unbearable state of soul and mind, a state close to damnation in order to gain the capability of achieving aesthetic perfection. In this sense, damnation can also be treated as a psychological state, bringing the concepts of madness and damnation very close to each other. Considering the fact that the key motif of several of Poe’s short stories is madness, it may not sound so weird if madness and damnation are treated as similar to each other, or even accept the hypothesis that madness can be treated as a certain type of damnation.

In “The Raven”, the poetic narrator lost his beloved, and this loss is very hard to get through. This loss is what leads to a mental and emotional state that is close or identical with damnation. The narrator has to face solitude, hopelessness and probably everlasting grief. His room is a place for sufferings, and facing the creature of his own poetic imagination, the Raven that is meant to express all of his sorrow, pain and dark emotions, he undoubtedly experiences damnation within his own poetic mind. He hears the cruel refrain *nevermore* pronounced again and again, pushing him deeper and deeper into his own grief and pain, but from inside, not from outside. The room, as an enclosed environment, may also mean much more than only the poet’s room in the simple physical sense. This room can also stand for his mind and soul within which the interaction between him and the Raven – that is identical with his own sorrow and remembrances which he is seemingly unable to get rid of – occurs. As a result of this interaction, the poetic narrator reaches a state of soul that is very similar to damnation and from which seemingly, as stressed above several times, there is no way out. However, experiencing a state similar to damnation, in parallel with unbearable emotional pain and the darkest sorrow that a man can live through, he also gains the capability

to write perfect poems, to see human existence from a higher perspective and produce pieces of literature that are everlasting and have some superior message to the all-time reader; pieces of literature that can cause aesthetical pleasure and make people think about their own existence at the same time.

In the last stanza, the poetic narrator condemns himself to damnation explicitly, and although the rest of his life after the loss of his beloved may be sad and nearly completely hopeless, having gone through a serious trauma and experienced damnation, now he possesses the capability of creating everlasting pieces of poetry, and for a poet it is maybe much more important than living a normal and happy life in the everyday sense. At least partly considering his biographical data and possible motivations discussed in the beginning of the present essay, even if this it seems to contradict postmodernist critical approaches according to which the biography of the author does not matter in the interpretation of a text, the author himself may have been completely aware of the fact that it is nearly necessary for a poet to experience extremities of life and states close to damnation in order to be capable of writing something that is more valuable and beautiful than any average piece of literature in the world, since the honest suffering of an artist may add something more to the value of the given work of art. In this sense, the meta-poetic character of “The Raven” and the concept of necessary poetic damnation can be connected with the 19<sup>th</sup> century French literary tradition called the *poète maudit* (accursed poet), also considering the fact that Poe was nearly the contemporary of Charles Baudelaire, one of the French poets traditionally named *Les Poètes Maudites* and had a serious influence on several French symbolist poets. French Literary historian Pascal Brisette even states that Poe himself was one of the authors called by this name, despite the fact that he was American, just like John Keats, whose life and poetry also show features referring to damnation and cursedness (Brisette 36).

This way, the meta-poetic interpretation of “The Raven” and the introduction of the concept of *necessary poetic damna-*



tion within the poem, for the sake of creating everlasting poetry, may seem to be a supportable approach that brings closer older traditional and postmodernist readings to each other, among the several other possible approaches and interpretations of this well-known poem written by one of the prominent canonised American poets of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### Concluding Remarks

Literary historian Charles Feidelson Jr. claims that E. A. Poe was a poet who apparently seriously believed in the “physical power of words” (37). Making an attempt to examine probably one of his most prominent poetic works entitled “The Raven”, this statement may be seen justified. The complexity, the multi-layered character of the poem obviously proves to both literary critics and readers that the author might have been one of the prominent and most original poets within the history of American Literature.

In the present essay, I examined and explored the aspects of damnation within the poem. Examining only a few possible levels of interpretation from the point of view of damnation, it became clear that several possible ways of interpretation may prove to be acceptable, several ways that can even be seen as controversial approaches, yet somehow they complete each other, and together they constitute a whole. Damnation can be a process initiated by or a state carried by the Raven. Simultaneously, it can be seen as a state that is unchanged from the beginning, and the bird only makes the narrator realise that he has been in the state of damnation for long. Furthermore, beyond the loss of the beloved women, being a poet identical with being in the state of a kind of damnation also arises as a possible manner of interpreting “The Raven” by Edgar Allan Poe. Different types of damnations are revolving within the same kaleidoscope, different levels of interpretation appear to be valid for the same poem, and these different approach-

es may present a complete picture about the poem as a whole. Damnation, state or process, poetic or just simply mental and emotional, is the very state within which the narrator of Poe’s “The Raven” suffers, and the Raven itself is the physical embodiment, the incarnation of this damnation within the poem. By reading “The Raven”, Edgar Allan Poe invites the reader to a journey, a journey to a world where damnation rules – but even if this poetic world of Poe is ruled by damnation, it is not to be forgotten that it is *poetic*. And this poetic quality is what gives a wonderful character to the gloomy and melancholic atmosphere created in “The Raven” by Poe, and via this poetic quality, the author becomes capable of making the reader experience different aspects and levels of damnation; but at the same time, he also saves the reader from this damnation, via “the physical power of words”, as quoted above from literary historian Charles Feidelson Jr.

Certainly, the present essay, due to its extension, is not able to explore and discuss all possible dimensions of damnation within the poem. However, examining a possible leitmotif of it and offering a few possible approaches and levels of interpretation from a certain perspective, it may have highlighted a few main aspects of the complex and multi-layered character of “The Raven”, which makes it a nearly legendary poem even at an international level and has been arresting the attention of several literary scholars and readers time and again in the past 160 years.

### EDGAR ALLAN POE: *The Raven*

*Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary,  
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore,  
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,  
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.  
’Tis some visitor,’ I muttered, ‘tapping at my chamber door -  
Only this, and nothing more.’*

Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December,  
And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor.  
Eagerly I wished the morrow; – vainly I had sought to borrow  
From my books surcease of sorrow – sorrow for the lost Lenore –  
For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore –  
Nameless here for evermore.

And the silken sad uncertain rustling of each purple curtain  
Thrilled me – filled me with fantastic terrors never felt before;  
So that now, to still the beating of my heart, I stood repeating  
‘Tis some visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door –  
Some late visitor entreating entrance at my chamber door; –  
This it is, and nothing more.’

Presently my soul grew stronger; hesitating then no longer,  
‘Sir,’ said I, ‘or Madam, truly your forgiveness I implore;  
But the fact is I was napping, and so gently you came rapping,  
And so faintly you came tapping, tapping at my chamber door,  
That I scarce was sure I heard you’ – here I opened wide the door; –  
Darkness there, and nothing more.

Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing,  
Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before;  
But the silence was unbroken, and the darkness gave no token,  
And the only word there spoken was the whispered word, ‘Lenore!’  
This I whispered, and an echo murmured back the word, ‘Lenore!’  
Merely this and nothing more.

Back into the chamber turning, all my soul within me burning,  
Soon again I heard a tapping somewhat louder than before.  
‘Surely,’ said I, ‘surely that is something at my window lattice;  
Let me see then, what thereat is, and this mystery explore –  
Let my heart be still a moment and this mystery explore; –  
‘Tis the wind and nothing more!’

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 the least obeisance made he; not a minute stopped or stayed he;  
But, with mien of lord or lady, perched above my chamber door –  
Perched upon a bust of Pallas just above my chamber door –  
Perched, and sat, and nothing more.

Then this ebony bird beguiling my sad fancy into smiling,  
By the grave and stern decorum of the countenance it wore,  
‘Though thy crest be shorn and shaven, thou,’ I said, ‘art sure no craven.  
Ghastly grim and ancient raven wandering from the nightly shore –  
Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night’s Plutonian shore!’  
Quoth the raven, ‘Nevermore.’

Much I marvelled this ungainly fowl to hear discourse so plainly,  
Though its answer little meaning – little relevancy bore;  
For we cannot help agreeing that no living human being  
Ever yet was blessed with seeing bird above his chamber door –  
Bird or beast above the sculptured bust above his chamber door,  
With such name as ‘Nevermore.’

But the raven, sitting lonely on the placid bust, spoke only,  
That one word, as if his soul in that one word he did outpour.  
Nothing further then he uttered – not a feather then he fluttered –  
Till I scarcely more than muttered ‘Other friends have flown before –  
On the morrow he will leave me, as my hopes have flown before.’  
Then the bird said, ‘Nevermore.’

Startled at the stillness broken by reply so aptly spoken,  
‘Doubtless,’ said I, ‘what it utters is its only stock and store,  
Caught from some unhappy master whom unmerciful disaster  
Followed fast and followed faster till his songs one burden bore –  
Till the dirges of his hope that melancholy burden bore  
Of “Never-nevermore.”’

*But the raven still beguiling all my sad soul into smiling,  
Straight I wheeled a cushioned seat in front of bird and bust and door;  
Then, upon the velvet sinking, I betook myself to linking  
Fancy unto fancy, thinking what this ominous bird of yore -  
What this grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird of yore  
Meant in croaking 'Nevermore.'*

*This I sat engaged in guessing, but no syllable expressing  
To the fowl whose fiery eyes now burned into my bosom's core;  
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!*

*Then, methought, the air grew denser, perfumed from an unseen censer  
Swung by Seraphim whose foot-falls tinkled on the tufted floor.  
'Wretch,' I cried, 'thy God hath lent thee - by these angels he has 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.'*

*'Prophet!' said I, 'thing of evil! - prophet still, if bird or devil! -  
Whether tempter sent, or whether tempest tossed thee here ashore,  
Desolate yet all undaunted, on this desert land enchanted -  
On this home by horror haunted - tell me truly, I implore -  
Is there - is there balm in Gilead? - tell me - tell me, I implore!  
Quoth the raven, 'Nevermore.'*

*'Prophet!' said I, 'thing of evil! - prophet still, if bird or devil!  
By that Heaven that bends above us - by that God we both adore -  
Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn,  
It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore -  
Clasp a rare and radiant maiden, whom the angels name Lenore?  
Quoth the raven, 'Nevermore.'*

*'Be that word our sign of parting, bird or fiend!' I shrieked upstarting -  
'Get thee back into the tempest and the Night's Plutonian shore!  
Leave no black plume as a token of that lie thy soul hath spoken!  
Leave my loneliness unbroken! - quit the bust above my door!  
Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my door!  
Quoth the raven, 'Nevermore.'*

*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!*

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## Creation, Imagination and Metapoetry in "Kubla Khan"

An Essay on the Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Paradigmatic Poem

### Introduction

*Kubla Khan* is one of the best-known works by the famous romantic English poet Samuel Taylor. Many interpretations of the poem are possible, different critics have represented completely different opinions about the message of the work in the past more than 200 years. The aim of the present essay is to approach the poem from one of the numerous points of view, within the frameworks of an in-depth analysis

One of the possible interpretations is *meta-poetry*; that is, poetry written about poetry itself. But before we attempt to explore in detail what motifs seem to support that that the poem is a kind of meta-poetic self-confession, it is worth having a glance at the circumstances under which the work was written, and what comments the author himself later added to it. Henceforth we attempt to summarize what biographical motivations played what roles in the creation of the poem, before we start the in-depth analysis and the exploration of the motifs referring to the meta-poetic character of the work.

### Possible Biographical Motivations

Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote his poem called *Kubla Khan* in the autumn of 1797, allegedly in a farmhouse near Exmoor, but since it was published only in 1816, it seems to be probable that the author revised it several times before the publication. Coleridge himself claimed that the poem was inspired by and opium-induced dream, as it is implicitly referred to in the secondary title of the poem: *A Vision in a Dream*. Furthermore, it is

also supposed that the imagery of the poem is partly inspired by Marco Polo's reports about his journey to China and the description of the area called "Shangdu" (which is identical with the poem's spot called Xanadu), where Mongolian ruler Kubla Khan really used to have a palace in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The description by Marco Polo was included in Samuel Purchas's book entitled *Pilgrimage* (Vol. XI, 231).

As Samuel Coleridge himself writes in his note to the poem:

*"In the summer of the year 1797, the Author, then in ill health, had retired to a lonely farm-house between Porlock and Linton, on the Exmoor confines of Somerset and Devonshire. In consequence of a slight indisposition, an anodyne had been prescribed, from the effects of which he fell asleep in his chair at the moment that he was reading the following sentence, or words of the same substance, in Purchas's Pilgrimage..."*

Since the poet himself commented on the composition of the work, it is really probable that he wrote, or at least started to write it under the influence of drugs, or the vision described in the poem was originally really caused by intoxication.

True, Coleridge commented on his own poem after it had been published, he himself gave no explicit interpretation about the message of the work. That is why the poem is debated by many critics, whether it is just a kind of visionary poetry without any kind of previously planned message, just in order to cause aesthetic pleasure to the reader, or although the author himself left no kind of explicit interpretation, there was an underlying conception behind the creation of the mysterious lines, and there is really a kind of very well-developed message under the surface.

From here, as mentioned above, after having a glance at the circumstances under which the work was supposedly composed, we will make an attempt to interpret the poem as a kind of meta-poetry, a poetic interpretation of poetry, art, and the assignment of the poet himself.

## A Possible Interpretation of "Kubla Khan"

The poem is divided into three paragraphs by the author. It starts with the description of a wonderful palace built by Mongolian and Chinese ruler Kubla Khan in Xanadu, a really existing geographical area situated in China. However strange it sounds, a loose historical background is observable behind the dream-like vision set into poetry, since the Khan was a real historical personality, and the palace described in the overture of the poem really existed in some form. Outside the visionary palace a holy river, the Alph is flowing into the dark, "sunless sea", as Coleridge writes. Then the poem continues with the description of the "fertile grounds" near the palace, and it also turns out that the building is surrounded by ancient forests and hills. To sum it up, the first paragraph describes a historical, but at the same time seemingly supernatural and mythical, majestic world, dominated by Kubla Khan and his "pleasure dome". This world seems to be a static picture where everything is unchanged, like a timeless, painting-life place, where the dimension of time does not exist, or at least it cannot be observed, a kind of empire of eternity. It must be mentioned that in the first paragraph the poetic speaker describes the sight as a spectator from outside, he is not an active character, is not present in the world where the dream-like settings exist.

However, in the second paragraph of the poem a drastic, dramatic change of view can be observed:

*"But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted  
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!  
A savage place! as holy and enchanted  
As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted  
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!..."*

That is, a little further from the fairy-tale like, majestic and idyllic palace of the Khan the speaker describes a hell-like, mysterious and ominous environment, "a savage place", which is be-

yond the boundaries of the area that is dominated by Kubla and his “pleasure dome”. Pagan-like, supernatural forces appear in the poem, breaking out from the depth, disturbing the idyll of the world outlined in the first paragraph. A source of a fountain is described that feeds a river that floods through trees and rocks, and this river finally inundates Kubla’s gardens. As the last lines of the second paragraph describe:

*“And ‘mid this tumult Kubla heard from far  
Ancestral voices prophesying war!”*

That is, as the water inundates Kubla Khan’s wonderful domain, the ruler hears voices, “ancestral voices”, supposedly the voice of the spirits of his ancestors, who remind him that the flood is just a kind of prognostication, and he will soon have to face war against something or someone. Summarising it, the second paragraph is a kind of contrast to the first, in which the destruction, the annihilation of the idyllic and seemingly perfect land described by the first paragraph is outlined. However perfect and visionary the domain of Kubla Khan was, it was destroyed by a flood, probably motivated by mysterious, supernatural forces that might have been envious of the Khan’s power, as he was a mortal human, despite what he had possessed and what he had achieved, he could not reach as much power as certain supernatural forces, maybe gods who punished him for having wanted too much.

In the third, last paragraph of the poem the speaker continues to describe what happened after the palace was destructed by the flood, he claims that:

*“The shadow of the dome of pleasure  
Floated midway on the waves;  
Where was heard the mingled measure  
From the fountain and the caves.  
It was a miracle of rare device,  
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!”*

That is, the shadow of the dome was reflected by the water, and in vain it got destroyed, some kind of wonderful sight emerged from the water, and in some form the palace (and possibly the ruler himself) re-created itself (and himself) in another dimension of existence.

Finally, suddenly the poetic speaker shifts into first person singular, starts to narrate in a much more personal voice, appears as not a simple narrator, but as a kind of character of the poem. As Coleridge writes: “In a vision once I saw...”, that is, the speaker acknowledges in a way that all that he described in the first two paragraphs was a kind of poetic vision, as was the “Abyssinian maid” playing a dulcimer mentioned in the further lines of the poem. The speaker claims that if he had the capability to recall the music played by the mysterious maid, than he would be able to reconstruct Kubla Khan’s visionary palace from mere music, and he would be able to become as enormous and powerful as Kubla Khan himself. The very last lines of the poem:

*“And all should cry, Beware! Beware!  
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
Weave a circle round him thrice,  
And close your eyes with holy dread,  
For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
And drunk the milk of Paradise.”*

That is, it is described how powerful and fearful the poetic speaker himself would become if he were able to reconstruct the palace and gain the power of Kubla Khan. A possible interpretation is that he could even become one with Kubla Khan in some kind of supernatural, timeless dimension, he himself could become the mythical ruler.

## Concluding Remarks – Meta-poetry in the Poem

The poetic speaker himself could become much more than he is in mortal, human reality, and if we attempt to interpret the poem as a kind of meta-poetry, a work about the creative power of poets, we might even risk the statement that Samuel Taylor Coleridge (and all other great poets in his world view) are all Kubla Khans, who have the power to create and dominate within the world of imagination. Since the poem itself is a mixture of dream and vision, as the author himself claimed, everything is possible in the world described in it. Although Kubla Khan is the powerful ruler of a seemingly perfect and dream-like world, he has to face the destruction of his domain, but somehow all of it resurrects in a new form. Poets, who are all creators and rulers of their own imaginary worlds, may have to face the destruction of what is important to them. But on the other hand, if they are real artist, they have the power to re-create their own worlds, their own works of art, even if they are destroyed time by time. But no matter how many times one's imaginary world is destroyed, the eternal power of art is somehow outside the dimension of time, and poets must be able to possess this kind of power. The destruction of Kubla Khan's palace and the flood can also be interpreted as the destructive power of time that shows no mercy towards anything mortal. But since the Khan / the poet (?) is a man of exceptional artistic abilities, he has the power and the courage to fight against time and resurrect from total destruction and finally reach a kind of eternity via his creative power and works of art.

Since the search for eternity and the cult of geniuses were amongst the key characteristics of the period of the Romantics, Coleridge's poem may be read as a kind of *romantic guideline* for poets, a meta-poetic work that reminds artists that eternity can be reached if they are really talented enough and brave enough to fight against the destructive power of time and human mortality, not merely as a vision-dream-like poem that perhaps causes aesthetical pleasure to the all-time reader, but its real message is hard or even impossible to decode.

## SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE: *Kubla Khan*

*Or, a vision in a dream. A Fragment.*

*In Xanadu did Kubla Khan*

*A stately pleasure-dome decree:*

*Where Alph, the sacred river, ran*

*Through caverns measureless to man*

*Down to a sunless sea.*

*So twice five miles of fertile ground*

*With walls and towers were girdled round;*

*And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,*

*Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;*

*And here were forests ancient as the hills,*

*Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.*

*But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted*

*Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!*

*A savage place! as holy and enchanted*

*As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted*

*By woman wailing for her demon-lover!*

*And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,*

*As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,*

*A mighty fountain momentarily was forced:*

*Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst*

*Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,*

*Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:*

*And mid these dancing rocks at once and ever*

*It flung up momentarily the sacred river.*

*Five miles meandering with a mazy motion*

*Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,*

*Then reached the caverns measureless to man,*

*And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean;*

*And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far*

*Ancestral voices prophesying war!*

*The shadow of the dome of pleasure  
Floated midway on the waves;  
Where was heard the mingled measure  
From the fountain and the caves.  
It was a miracle of rare device,  
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!*

*A damsel with a dulcimer  
In a vision once I saw:  
It was an Abyssinian maid  
And on her dulcimer she played,  
Singing of Mount Abora.  
Could I revive within me  
Her symphony and song,  
To such a deep delight 'twould win me,  
That with music loud and long,  
I would build that dome in air,  
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!  
And all who heard should see them there,  
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!  
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
Weave a circle round him thrice,  
And close your eyes with holy dread  
For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
And drunk the milk of Paradise.*

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# The Motif of Death in William Butler Yeats's Poetry after 1920

## Introduction

William Butler Yeats the well-known Irish poet wrote more and more about death (not only about the possibility of his own personal death) in the late period of his life, after 1920.

The motif of human mortality appears in many poems from the late period of his poetry. The aim of the present essay is to select and analyse a few pieces from among his most important works, supporting the statement that death, passing of life and destruction together with it became a key motif in his late poems. But before we start the in-depth analysis of separate poems by the author, it is worth having a glance at the general tendencies and changes that are characteristic of Yeats's poetry, mainly after 1920.

## General Changes in the Poetic Style of W. B. Yeats's Late Poems

Yeats is considered to be one of the most significant poets writing in English by many literary critics. In the beginning of his poetic career he wrote his poems mainly in classical verse forms. He is considered to be one of the latest romantic and one of the first modernist authors at the same time. His earlier poems are "conventionally poetic", as it can easily be proven by examining his first volumes. His early poetry is considered late-romantic in many senses, since it is largely based on Irish folklore and Celtic Myths. Nevertheless, in his three volumes titled *In the Seven Woods*, *The Green Helmet* and *Responsibilities* that are from the middle period of his poetic lifework he uses a more direct approach to his themes and writes in a much more personal voice. The experience of getting old is a determining motif in the last twenty years of his poetry; for example,

in his poem called *The Circus Animals' Desertion*, he describes what inspired his late works:

*"Now that my ladders gone  
I must lie down where all the ladders start  
In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart"*

In his works after 1920 Yeats deals much more with contemporary problems than topics deriving from myths and folklore, and he mentions his son and his daughters in his late poems more and more frequently.

Some literary critics also state that the author spanned the transition from the 19th century into the 20th century and he created a kind of bridge between romanticism and modernism. All in all, nearly all of literary critics agree that Yeats's poetic world view derived from a wide range of sources, just to mention a few from among them, Hinduism, Christianity, Voodooism, Romanticism and Modernism, many social and political trends, etc. Such a mixture of ideas served as the basis of his late poetry as well. W. H. Auden criticized his late works as the "deplorable spectacle of a grown man occupied with the mumbo-jumbo of magic and the nonsense of India". Yeats did not trust in human intellectuality anymore in his last twenty years, he rather turned to a kind of mysticism and conceived his otherwise very straightforward and deep thoughts in visions, imaginary worlds and timeless pictures. His volume published in 1925, titled simply 'A Vision' illustrates his delusion of cold intellectuality in a very spectacular way. A kind of dramatic transformation can be observed in the change of his style. His last poetry volumes (*The Tower* – 1928; *The Winding Stairs* – 1929; and *New Poems* – 1938) contained some of the most significant images of the twentieth-century poetry, and his *Last Poems* are considered the best pieces of his lifework.

Although the signs of anti-democracy and the sympathy with Fascism and other political extremities are observable in some of Yeats's late works, his last lines undeniably visualize

the rise of Christianity and the coming of a better world after the total destruction of the frail and delusory mortal human world.

As for the motif of death in his poetry, from his late period maybe two poems deserve special attention: *Sailing to Byzantium*, as a vision of his personal death, and *The Second Coming* as a kind of vision about the decline and the collective death of the European civilisation. Henceforth we will make an attempt to discuss the two poems mentioned above in detail, focusing on the motif of death and destruction as the key motifs of Yeats's poetry after 1920.

#### Sailing to Byzantium – Yeat's Vision of Death and Afterlife

*Sailing to Byzantium* is one of W. B. Yeats's best-known poems, first published in 1928, in the poetry volume titled *The Tower*. The poem consists of four stanzas, each one is made up of eight ten-syllable lines. It is the description of the poetic speaker's imaginary journey to Byzantium, the capital of the ancient South-Roman Empire, a kind of homeland of eternity in the poem. It is a kind of vision about what can happen to an elderly artist after his death, whether or not he can achieve the dream of probably all artists in the world, eternity. Many critics parallel this one of Yeats's poems and John Keats's classical romantic poem called *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, since both of them are based on the contrast of human mortality and eternity that may be reached by becoming one with art.

The first stanza of the poem is an introduction in which the poetic speaker describes the mortal world and his former life which he is soon to leave for the sake of another, probably much better and higher form of existence. The speaker describes his mortal life as a land that he does not like and has no more place within it., "That is no country for old men...", writes Yeats immediately in the first line, as a kind of delusion of the whole mortal existence.

*"In one another's arms, birds in the trees  
- Those dying generations – at their song,  
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,  
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long  
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies."*

Yeats depicts his whole existence as a kind of seemingly happy, but superficial and declining world in which the circulation of life and death is permanent, but everything must die and nearly nothing represents an eternal value; besides, the "monuments of unaging intellect" are not respected at all, they are "neglected" in the "sensual music"; that is, it is much easier for everyone to think of momentary joys and enjoy life as long as possible instead of thinking about what is valuable and what is not, what is worth dealing with and what is not. Physical joys are much more important than intellectual values, and the poet is disappointed at this kind of world view in his old age. It is also possible that Yeats described not only the human existence in general, but the situation of his own Ireland and his own age. As it can be read in *Encyclopedia Britannica*:

*"[The poem] is grounded in literal meaning as well, for in 1924 the ailing Yeats left Ireland, 'no country for old men,' to view Byzantine mosaics in Italy"*

The second stanza of the poem describes the aged man as "a paltry thing, a tattered coat upon a stick"; that is, as a pitiful and helpless creature who has no more power and is subjected to the ignorant and unfair world. According to the poetic speaker, the only chance of an old man to rise up from his pitiful situation is to create artefacts and trying to redeem himself with the power of poetry from his mortality. But in order to be able to do so, an old man has to "learn" a kind of magical song from the monuments mentioned in the first stanza. That is why the elderly poet confesses that, as he writes at the end of the stanza:

*“And therefore I have sailed the seas and come  
to the holy city of Byzantium.”*

That is, the elderly poet finally arrives at Byzantium, the holy place where it becomes possible to get rid of his tired, mortal human body and liberate his soul, and finally become one with his own art, gaining a kind of eternity and immortality. Concerning Byzantium, Encyclopedia Britannica writes:

*“For Yeats, ancient Byzantium was the purest embodiment of transfiguration into the timelessness of art” (Britannica). While Byzantium has historically been known to be the art and cultural successor of Rome, the speaker also refers to this place as a “holy city”.*

The third stanza describes the poetic speaker’s vision after he finally arrived at Byzantium. He asks “the sages”, the wise men of Byzantium to come down to him from God’s “holy fire” and become the “singing masters of his soul”, and he begs to them to liberate his soul from his dying body at the same time. The “holy fire” represents the supernatural and timeless character of Byzantium, the power through which one can liberate himself from his or her mortal constraints and enter into a higher form of existence. It can be seen as a metaphor similar to the Purgatory in the Holy Bible, in which the soul is cleansed, in this case not unconditionally from its sins, but from everything that bound it to its former world, making it capable of reaching eternity. The motif of the fire can also be treated as a similar motif to the fire of the Phoenix, a mythical bird that is consumed by fires time and again, but always resurrects from its own ashes. The poetic speaker also wants to be annihilated on the one hand, but on the other hand he wants to gain the capability of resurrection in another dimension of existence. He is “fastened to a dying animal”, his own mortal and tired human body, and he evidently has to break out of it if he really wants to belong to the supernatural existence, the eternity of Byzantium. Encyclopedia Britannica writes:

*“The old man of ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ imagined the city’s power as being able to ‘gather him into the artifice of eternity’ – representative of or embodying all knowledge, linked like a perfect machine at the centre of time.”*

The fourth stanza is a kind of continuation of the poetic speaker’s prayer for being granted the capability of reaching a higher form of existence. He expresses his desire that once he was finally transformed by the “holy fire”, he would never like to return into any kind of “natural form”, but would rather become a kind of mechanic golden bird that is able to entertain “the drowsy Emperor” (of Byzantium) “keeping him awake”, singing about “what is past, passing or to come”. That is, he wants to become something that is able to sing the song of time itself, some kind of embodiment of eternity against human mortality, even if it is something lifeless, something mechanical, as if he wanted to somehow unite the features of organic, biological (and necessarily mortal) life with the features of timelessness, eternity and majesty, but if it is not possible to achieve in a form similar to organic life, then let it be mechanic and inorganic. The motifs of “hammered gold” and the “Grecian goldsmiths” strongly resemble to the imagery of Keats’s Ode on a Grecian Urn, as mentioned above. The ancient land of Greece and Byzantium appears in both poem as some kind of embodiment of a higher form of life, existence and culture that survive human mortality, but only artists can reach this kind of existence via their works of art, which is in Yeats’s case is mainly poetry, whereas in Keats’s case all manifestations of art are covered. Furthermore, in the last stanza Yeats identifies himself as a kind of seer who can see the events of the past, sees through the events of the present and is also capable of predicting the events of the future; but since he is in possession of the state of eternity, time is already only a relative category for him.

To sum it up, Sailing to Byzantium is one of the most significant pieces of William Butler Yeats’s poetry after 1920. It is one of the key poems as for the motif of death in his poetic

work from the examined period. Although the poetic speaker, as an elderly man, predicts his death in a certain way, it is not simply the prediction of physical death, but the vision of an artist about what is possible after death and how it is possible to escape from death and complete destruction. In the poem Yeats does not see his personal death in the future as something that must be feared of, but as a kind of possibility to leave a frail and valueless world at which the elderly poet is already disappointed in order to enter a new reality dominated by perfection and eternity, where only the chosen ones, that is, only artists can reach after their death, becoming one with their works of art. As an artist, Yeats optimistically thinks that his death will not be the death of a simple mortal human, but he will finally become one of the chosen ones who can experience a higher form of existence beyond the mortal human world and finally enter the gates of Byzantium, the holy city where artists can unite with their art, as a kind of reward for their lifelong work in the mortal earth.

Having attempted to make an analysis of the presence of the poet's personal death in Yeats's poetry via examining *Sailing to Byzantium*, henceforth we will make an attempt to discover the motif of collective death in his lifework, via the analyses of his poem *The Second Coming*.

### The Second Coming – The Vision of Collective Death

The *Second Coming* was first published in November 1920, in *The Dial*, and afterwards in Yeats's poetic volume entitled *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921). Strong religious symbolism is used in the poem in order to pinpoint the decline of the European culture and visualise the prediction of the collective death of the western culture or the whole humanity. It is based on a belief that civilisation is nearing to a turning point around the second millennium, the second coming of Jesus Christ, according to the Holy Bible.

The poem was supposedly written as a kind of aftermath of the First World War, and also strongly inspired by the French and German revolutions, and the Russian Revolution of 1917.

*“Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world...”*

The poem, as we can see, starts with an in-medias-res-like overture, a vision-like description of what is in process at the (timeless) moments of the poetic narration. The first passage of the poem is not else but a series of chaotic, ominous pictures, according to which nothing is the same as used to be, something has drastically changed and the world is breaking into pieces, is sinking into anarchy. It is to be mentioned that Yeats uses the word “gyre” in the first line of the poem, a word that is also used in *Sailing to Byzantium* and several of Yeats's poems. According to Yeats's own explanation, by “gyre” he means two conical spirals, one of them situated within the other. The term is to express Yeats's theory of history, which is present in his 1925 poetic value titled *A Vision*.

In the beginning of the second passage the speaker of the poem stops and establishes the following:

*“Surely some revelation is at hand;  
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.  
The Second Coming!”*

Yeats speaks about some revelation that turns out to be the *Second Coming*. Then the series of chaotic and ominous scenes is continuing, a sphinx or sphinx-like beast is outlined within the lines of the poem:

*“...somewhere in the sands of the desert  
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,*

*A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it  
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds..."*

As Yeats himself claimed it, the notion of such a beast had long captivated his mind even before he wrote *The Second Coming*, around 1904, but later he finally wrote it down in his poem. Literary critic Yvor Winters writes about the poem:

*"...we must face the fact that Yeats' attitude toward the beast is different from ours: we may find the beast terrifying, but Yeats finds him satisfying – he is Yeats' judgment upon all that we regard as civilized. Yeats approves of this kind of brutality."*

That is, the beast described in the poem can be interpreted as a kind of executioner of human civilization who comes to punish instead of Jesus Christ, and the Second Coming, as the title says, is his arrival to earth. A creature that will cause the total destruction of humanity, but in order that a higher form of existence can evolve after everything frail and mortal has perished.

Yeats himself writes in his notes to the poem:

*"The end of an age, which always receives the revelation of the character of the next age, is represented by the coming of one gyre to its place of greatest expansion and of the other to that of its greatest contraction. At the present moment the life gyre is sweeping outward, unlike that before the birth of Christ which was narrowing, and has almost reached its greatest expansion."*

The poem is closed down with a question:

*"And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"*

That is, maybe even the poetic speaker himself does not really know what is coming and what will really happen, but evidently

something that must happen out of human will. All in all, it is evidently a kind of vision of complete destruction and collective death, but similar to *Sailing to Byzantium*, a kind of optimistic end is possible even after collective death. If everything mortal is destroyed, perhaps a new world can evolve after the old one is finally judged, punished and annihilated. Annihilation is the precondition of a new beginning, and just like in the case of his own death, he also hopes for a better and higher form of existence after the collective death of the whole humanity.

Interestingly, an article was published in the near past, in *New York Times* that paralleled the imagery of the poem and the permanent wars in the Middle East. That is, it is possible that the prediction of Yeats from 1920 seems to become reality in some way, at least partly, if it is interpreted as the prediction of a destructing war that once will break out in the Middle East; namely in the ancient land of the Holy Bible where Jesus Christ was once born.

## Concluding Remarks

Although many of the motifs of death appear in several poems of William Butler Yeats after 1920, in the last period of his oeuvre, *Sailing to Byzantium* and *The Second Coming* are amongst the best known and the most salient poems in which death and destruction appear as key motifs. As the poet started growing old, death and passing became more and more important topics for him in his poetry. But he did not treat death – at least not in all of his poems – as simply the end of life, but as a necessary prerequisite to a new beginning, the gate to a new existence that might be much higher and much better than the mortal, human existence in which all of us have to live and the constraints of which all of us have to face every day. As a poet, he believed in the idea that man can break out of the constraints of human existence – body, mortality, old age, frailty, weakness, the barriers of time and place, etc. – and gain the capability of entering a new, supernatural world

via the power of art. As a matter of fact, Yeats is not at all the first poet who writes down his thoughts about how one can reach immortality through arts, but as one of the most significant poets of the twentieth centuries, he writes about it in a very original and eloquent manner, setting an example to other poets and artists about the power of arts and talent that can even overcome death and passing, if one strongly believes in it.

It is also worth mentioning that although the strong artistic self-awareness is apparent in several of Yeats's poems written before his death, as in the two works discussed above, he did not call himself in each of his works a prophet or artist. In his last poems written not long before his death he does not deal with afterlife so much, but as an old man, reconciles himself to the fact that he must die, just like others.

As he writes in one of his short, haiku-like final poems that was allegedly written down as his own prospective epitaph:

“Cast a cold eye  
on life, on death.  
Horseman, pass by!”

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## Reading “Birthday Letters”

A Personal Essay on Intertextual and Personal Relations Depicted in Ted Hughes's Poem “Wuthering Heights”

The poem called *Wuthering Heights* by English Ted Hughes was published in the volume *Birthday Letters* in 1998. The last poetry volume of the author is a kind of correspondence to his dead wife, American poet Sylvia Plath, who committed suicide in 1963. *Wuthering Heights* is one of the 88 poems addressing, in fact, Sylvia Plath's spirit after her death. That is why it may not be so hazardous in the case of such a personal and biographically motivated collection of poems to state that the poetic speaker of the texts is not fictional, but *he* is in essence identical to Ted Hughes, the author's biographical self.

*Wuthering Heights* by Ted Hughes shows many characteristics of intertextuality, because it is also partly based on the novel by Emily Brontë; furthermore, Sylvia Plath herself also wrote a poem under the same title, and Hughes's final volume of poetry is also partly treated by literary critics as the mixture of the two author's poetry, an explicit personal and poetic dialogue between them and their literary works, since *Wuthering Heights* is not the only poem within the volume that has the same title as one of Sylvia Plath's poems.

The poem opens with a simple statement: “*Walter was guide*.”, then it turns out very early to the reader that the poem is, in fact, a kind of narrative text, recording an event from the common life of Hughes and Plath, narrating it from the point of view of Hughes. As the text goes on, it becomes clear that the poetic speaker is remembering his and his wife's journey to the Yorkshire moors, the land where Emily Brontë's romantic novel takes place and where Brontë herself grows up. The setting is the ruin of a house, probable the ruin of *the* house that is documented as *Wuthering Heights* in Brontë's novel. The event narrated in the poem probably took place in reality and it is not only the product of Hughes's poetic imagination, that is why it can

be stated that the writing of the poem (as the majority of the poems included in *Birthday Letters*) had strong biographical motivations. Hughes's speaker speaks to *Sylvia Plath directly*, that is why the poem shows similarities to a letter, a monologue, or to a conversation of which only one party can be read / heard by the reader. The speaker compares the addressee to novelist Emily Brontë herself and meditates on what her life was like in the moor before she died and what motivations she may have had to write her immortal novel *Wuthering Heights*. He supposes that Plath, as a female author and fellow poet, had the same ambitions and the same feelings as Brontë had had once, when they visited the scene of the novel. "*Weren't you twice as ambitious as Emily?*", asks Hughes's speaker from his dead wife.

The alter ego of Sylvia Plath described and spoken to in the poem seems to be a young, energetic and ambitious woman author who is meditating at the birthplace of her literary predecessor (?) and, at the same time, at the scene of her world-renowned novel. The scene of the poem is a group of ruins, "*among the burned out, worn-out remains of failed efforts and failed hopes*". These lines probably refer to Emily Brontë's tragic personal faith, since she died at young age and became an appreciated, canonised author only after her death. According to Hughes, his wife probably did not want to have the same destiny as Emily Brontë, on the contrary, she wanted to become and appreciated woman author in her life. (Examining the biographical data of Plath, it seems to be completely true, she always wanted to spasmodically become a professional writer.) "*The future had invested in you*", claims Hughes's speaker in the text, acknowledging that he himself knew that time that his wife was a really talented poet, just like he himself, and had the chance to become one of the greatest poets writing in English language in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He also remembers how quickly Plath became inspired and with what a heave she wrote her poems. Comparing to Emily Brontë, Sylvia is described in the poem as a strong, decisive, ambitious representative of the literature of the present, whereas Brontë appears as a ghost-like, bitter, shadowy figure represent-

ing the past. The poem narrates that Plath had a great chance to achieve what Brontë had never managed to achieve in her life as a woman author, under the social circumstances and oppression over women intellectuals in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Not only two biographical people, two woman authors are contrasted by Hughes's poetic speaker, but also two ages, the literatures and the circumstances of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the present and past.

The environment described in the poem, the whole gloomy landscape of the Yorkshire moors, the wild and romantic scene of the dramatic novel *Wuthering Heights* gives a very dark and ominous atmosphere to the whole poem. Intertextuality also shows very spectacular and demonstrative power inside the poem, recalling and borrowing the atmosphere and impressiveness of Emily Brontë's novel (and as mentioned above, also intertextually referring to Sylvia Plath's poem having the same title, and having a similarly strong, obscure and dark atmosphere.)

Towards the end of the poem Hughes / the poetic speaker even explicitly refers to Emily Brontë's spirit, supposing that she was envious of Plath's poetic ambitions there, that time: "*What would stern / Dour Emily have made of your frisky glances / And your huge hope? (...) And maybe a ghost, trying to hear your words, / Peered from the broken mullions / And was stilled. (...)*". That is, Hughes's speaker meditates in the poem what Brontë's ghost (who was evidently *there* might have thought about Plath and her ambitions as the poet of the future and aliveness. Similarly to the novel *Wuthering Heights*, Hughes consciously presents a ghost in his remembrance / meditation-like poem in order to create the same gothic, oppressive, dark atmosphere for the reader – seemingly nothing happens on the surface, but it maybe stated that in the deep structure of the poem ominous powers are hiding and waiting for the emergence.

There may be another possible interpretation of the poem that is far beyond the supposition that it is a mere remembrance, a letter- and / or dramatic monologue-like poem written by Hughes to his dead wife, just for the sake of remembrance

or dialogue with Plath. It must be mentioned that it is very characteristic of the poems published in the volume *Birthday Letters* that they are very suggestive, ponderous works of art with strong subjectivity of the speaker within them, opening several possible layers of interpretation, apart from mere biographical facts or events recorded within them. It is common knowledge that the marriage of the two poets ended tragically, and – mainly due to the nervous disease of Sylvia Plath – they lived a scandalous, dissonant and extremely passionate life, and Plath had several attempted suicides before her final one causing her death. Hughes may have selected the title for his poem in order to deliberately refer to the contradictions and passionate character of his and Plath's marriage before Sylvia's death, because *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë is also a story about a contradictory, extremely passionate love that has a very tragic ending. It might not be a very exaggerated assumption to suppose that Ted Hughes deliberately wanted to parallelise his and Sylvia Plath's contradictory, passionate and tragic love relationship with the romantic relationship of Heathcliff and Catherine Earnshaw narrated in Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* – expressing that he and Sylvia had their own "private *Wuthering Heights*", and their personal, emotional life was very similar with the strong, extreme emotions resulting in bitterness and tragedies. As it is well-known, in the novel Catherine Earnshaw also dies, and Heathcliff becomes an extremely bitter and vengeful, nearly demonic man, taking a lifelong revenge on the whole Earnshaw family for the loss of his love. It is an interesting biographical fact that although Hughes himself married again some years later following the tragedy, he could certainly never work up the death of Plath. Reading his oeuvre, The traces of guilty conscience and sense of responsibility are also observable in his poetry written after Plath's death – the letter-like poems published in *Birthday Letters*, a few months before Hughes death, can be considered as the peak of Hughes's confessional poetry about his relationship with Plath and its contradictions, these 88 poems including *Wuthering Heights*, the poem analysed in

the present essay, are the most explicit and confessional pieces of Hughes's poetry, exploring his own personal attitude towards Plath's suicide. Therefore, it can also be stated that the poetry and the private life of two individuals are mixed within the poetic world created by *Birthday Letters*, the poem called *Wuthering Heights* among them. Perhaps due to the strongly personal tone of the poems, as mentioned above, it is also hard to decide on whether the poem analysed is to be considered as a *letter*; that is, a mainly written piece of text, or rather a sort of poetic / dramatic *monologue* addressing (the ghost of?) Sylvia Plath; that is, a piece of text that can also be a manifestation of *spoken poetry* of full value that does not only exist in a written form, and is not only to be *read*.

*Wuthering Heights* might be considered as one of the most impressive pieces within the volume *Birthday Letters*. It refers to two other pieces of literature with the means of intertextuality; offering several possible layers of interpretations, as mentioned above, far beyond the biographical background of the author, despite the fact it is definitely a personal, confession-like work of poetry in which the poetic speaker and the biographical self of the author can be considered to be nearly identical. The poem ends up with a gloomy, multi-layered and obscure closure, raising a sense of *unfinishedness* in the reader's mind, probably consciously increasing the suggestive aesthetic power of the text. The unfinished character of the text also gives several possibilities of interpretation of different depths, making the reader be involved in the world of the poems, completing the details that are only implicitly referred to inside it.

Within the frameworks of the present essay, certainly, we do not have the chance to discuss Ted Hughes's poetic lifework in detail, but focusing on the poem called *Wuthering Heights* we may have managed to get an overview about the probably most prominent piece of Hughes's lifework, his final poetry volume entitled *Birthday Letters*. Furthermore, we may also see how a love with a tragic ending can produce wonderful pieces of poetry, and how a personal tragedy like the love of Hughes and



Plath, the two maybe greatest English-speaking poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century could serve as a background to great and valuable poetry volume, constituting a part of world literature. Moreover, parallelising the real events of Hughes and Plath's biography and the story narrated in Emily Brontë's novel, it may also become clear that literature is not always so far from life – as it is often said by people of letters, it is not always literature that imitates reality, but on the contrary – reality may also imitate literature, and although such cases can be very tragic, at least it may become clear that literature is not, should not be something completely abstract and unintelligible. On the contrary, literature is about, is based on our everyday human life, serving as an inherent constituent part of our own reality.

#### TED HUGHES: *Wuthering Heights*

*Walter was guide. His mother's cousin  
 Inherited some Brontë soup dishes.  
 He felt sorry for them. Writers  
 Were pathetic people. Hiding from it  
 And making it up. But your transatlantic elation  
 Elated him. He effervesced  
 Like his rhubarb wine a bit too long:  
 A vintage of legends and gossip  
 About those poor lasses. Then,  
 After the Rectory, after the chaise longue  
 Where Emily died, and the midget hand-made books,  
 The elvish lacework, the dwarfish fairy-work shoes,  
 It was the track from Stanbury. That climb  
 A mile beyond expectation, into  
 Emily's private Eden. The moor  
 Lifted and opened its dark flower  
 For you too. That was satisfactory.  
 Wilder, maybe, than ever Emily ever knew it.  
 With wet feet and nothing on her head*

*She trudged that climbing side towards friends –  
 Probably. Dark redoubt  
 On the skyline above. It was all  
 Novel and exhilarating to you.  
 The book becoming a map. “Wuthering Heights”.  
 Withering into perspective. We got there  
 And it was all gaze. The open moor,  
 Gamma rays and decomposing starlight  
 Had repossessed it  
 With a kind of blackening smoulder. The centuries  
 Of door-bolted comfort finally amounted  
 To a forsaken quarry. The roofs'  
 Deadfall slabs were flaking, but mostly in place,  
 Beams and purlins softening. So hard  
 To imagine the life that had lit  
 Such a sodden, raw-stone cramp of refuge.  
 The floors were a rubble of stone and sheep droppings,  
 Doorframes, windowframes –  
 Gone to make picnickers' fires or evaporated.  
 Only the stonework – black. The sky – blue.  
 And the moor-wind flickering.  
 (indentation) The incomings,  
 The outgoings – how would you take up now  
 The clench of that struggle? The leakage  
 Of earnings off a few sickly bullocks  
 And a scatter of crazed sheep. Being cornered  
 Kept folk here. Was that crumble of wall  
 Remembering a try at a garden? Two trees  
 Planted for company, for a child to play under,  
 And to have something to stare at. Sycamores –  
 The girth and spread of valley twenty-year-olds,  
 They were probably ninety.  
 (indentation) You breathed it all in  
 With jealous, emulous sniffings. Weren't you  
 Twice as ambitious as Emily? Odd  
 To watch you, such a brisk pedant*

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*Of your globe-circling aspirations,  
Among those burned-out, worn-out remains  
Of failed efforts, failed hopes –  
Iron beliefs, iron necessities,  
Iron bondage, already  
Crumbling back to the wild stone.  
(indentation) You perched  
In one of the two trees  
Just where the snapshot shows you.  
Doing as Emily never did. You  
Had all the liberties, having life.  
The future had invested in you –  
As you might say of a jewel  
So brilliantly faceted, refracting  
Every tint, where Emily had stared  
Like a dying prisoner.  
And a poem unfurled from you  
Like a loose frond of hair from your nape  
To be clipped and kept in a book. What would stern  
Dour Emily have made of your frisky glances  
And your huge hope? Your huge  
Mortgage of hope. The moor-wind  
Came with its empty eyes to look at you,  
And the clouds gazed sidelong, going elsewhere,  
The heath-grass, fidgeting in its fever,  
Took idiot notice of you. And the stone,  
Reaching to touch your hand, found you real  
And warm, and lucent, like that earlier one.  
And maybe a ghost, trying to hear your words,  
Peered from the broken mullions  
And was stilled. Or was suddenly aflame  
With the scorch of doubled envy. Only  
Gradually quenched in understanding.*

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A Cédrus Művészeti Alapítvány  
megbízásából kiadja  
a Napkút Kiadó Kft.  
1043 Budapest, Tavasz u. 4.

Telefon: (1) 225-3474  
Mobil: (70) 617-8231  
E-mail: [napkut@gmail.hu](mailto:napkut@gmail.hu)  
Honlap: [www.napkut.hu](http://www.napkut.hu)

Felelős kiadó  
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Szondi Bence

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