

BALÁZS KÁNTÁS

**The “Nevermore” of Eternal Solitude  
Symbol(s) of Damnation in Edgar Allan Poe’s paradigmatic poem  
“The Raven”**

***Introduction***

The aim of the present thesis 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; i. e., 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 analysed 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 entitled "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 psychological 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 thesis 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 thesis, 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 entitled “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 inquires 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 thesis 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 thesis 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 thesis 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 unchanged 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.

Critic John F. Adams also suggests that the Raven is in fact a kind of “private symbol”, as he calls it; i. e., 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 thesis 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 thesis, 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 entitled "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 thesis, 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 damnation* 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 thesis, 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 approaches 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 thesis, 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.

## **WORKS CITED**

ADAMS, John F. "Classical Raven Lore and Poe's Raven". *Poe Studies*. Vol. V, no.

2. 1972. 10 Nov. 2008 <Eapoe.org, 2000. URL:  
[www.eapoe.org/pstudies/ps1970/26/11/05.>](http://www.eapoe.org/pstudies/ps1970/26/11/05.>)

BERCOVITCH, Sacvan. *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, New York: Cambridge UP, 2001. Vol. 2. 651.

BRISSETTE, Pascal. *La Malédiction Littéraire*. Montréal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2005. 36.

ELEK, Artúr. *Edgar Allan Poe – Két tanulmány (Edgar Allan Poe – Two Studies)*. Budapest: Nyugat, 1910. 67.

Feidelson, Charles Jr. *Symbolism and American Literature*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983. 37.

HOWELL, Granger Byrd. "Devil Lore in "The Raven"". *Poe Studies*. Vol. V, no. 2. 1972. 13 Nov. 2008 < [www.eapoe.org/pstudies/ps1970/26/11/05.>](http://www.eapoe.org/pstudies/ps1970/26/11/05.>)

HUBBEL, Jay B. "Poe." *Eight American Authors*. Ed. Floyd Stovall. New York: Norton & Company INC, 1963. 1-46

KOPLEY, Richard, and Hayes, Kevin J. "Two Verse Masterworks: The Raven and Ulalume". *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*. Ed. Kevin J. Hayes. New York: Cambridge UP, 2002. 191-204.

ORSZÁGH, László and Zsolt Virágos. *Az amerikai irodalom története (History of American Literature)*. Budapest: Eötvös József Könyvkiadó, 1997. 65-66.

POE, Edgar Allan. "The Philosophy of Composition" *Graham Magazine* (April 1846) Rpt. in *Heath Anthology of American Literature*. 4th ed. 2 vols. Ed. Paul Lauter et al. Boston: Houghton, 2002. 1417-27.

POE, Edgar Allan. "The Raven" *Spirits of the Dead: Tales and Poems*. London: Penguin Book Ltd, 1997. 15-19.

RULAND, Richard, and Malcolm Brandbury. *A History of American Literature – From Puritanism to Postmodernism*. New York: Penguin Books, 1991-92. 651.