

The Raven as a Symbol in Poetry

Please note: it is possible to write an entire book or a number of them, on the symbolism of the raven. I will focus on only a few significant aspects of the raven as a symbol. A number of poems furnish the examples of how the raven is used in literature, but given limited time, I have refrained from an analysis of the poems as prosody.

Introduction

‘The boding raven on her cottage sat,
And with hoarse croakings warned us of our fate.’
(Gay, Pastorals – The Dirge, quoted in Brewer, 1985, p 927)

His voice is unpleasant – a rasping, croaking sound – which is unusual for a bird and does not endear it to humanity.

Throughout history it has come to symbolize different things to different peoples and their literatures.

The Raven is not a loved bird, its presence is seen as an omen of dire events - note how it was used on the cover of the paperback horror book ‘Damien: Omen II’ (Howard, 1990).

No one is happy to see a raven, but it plays its part in our world of symbolism and mythology.

The raven is often mistaken for a crow, to which it is phylogenetically related. But the raven is a larger bird and considered far more intelligent. In fact, it is considered one of the most intelligent of birds (Black, 2008), which has lent it the mystique of wisdom and malicious predation.

While the raven is a large bird, it is not the largest or most powerful; it knows its true place in the bird, and therefore animal, hierarchy. Thus, it has learned patience, to be watchful and thoughtful, and to gather knowledge from the land, so as to benefit itself in the battle for life.

Knowing things and trickery are the two sides of this bird-symbol’s nature.

The Raven can whisper its tidings to the powerful (Odin) and play tricks on lesser beings like you and me. It does not bring death, but knows it is coming, harvesting the details and perhaps enjoying a little carrion along the way. It harvests the details of events, like a squirrel does its meal for winter, but it doles out knowledge only to those it respects or fears – the powerful or initiates, such as Druid lords. It reserves its mocking sound for the rest of us.

I have never met anyone who was pleased to see a raven or its lesser cousin, the crow. Some have foolishly tried to drive a raven away with a well thrown stone, only to hear that mocking, knowing, cry, as it flies out of range.

Symbolic meanings

The symbolic meaning of the raven is by and large a mixture of natural and conventional symbol, depending on the culture which has adopted it. There are numerous conventional symbolisms of the raven. It is also treated ambivalently in its representations, and this is to some extent, due to the natural characteristics of the bird.

Edgar Allan Poe has used it in a literary setting in his famous poem 'The Raven' (Poe, 1970 edition), and this qualifies as a 'created' symbol, the nature of the bird and cultural ideas have tended to dictate how the raven is perceived and used.

Doomsayer

Omens of death featuring the raven:

- A raven croaking between ten o'clock and midnight.
- A raven croaking over a house.

(The little giant encyclopedia of superstitions, 1999).

The raven is an omnivorous bird, and is particularly drawn to carrion. Battlefields and cataclysms being favourite haunts of ravens, they have come to be associated with death – doomsayers, harbingers, sheer foreboding, mark this use of the raven-symbol. As with the lion symbolising courage, the raven symbolises the grim fate of death. Arabic cultures refer to the raven as the 'Abu Aajir', the father of omens (Black, 2008). Jewish-Christian culture considered the raven as unclean, because of its association with dead things, yet its intelligence was not doubted, shown by the capacity for deceit, as ascribed to it in folk tales.

The black colouration has an association with evil, and it is claimed in folk mythology that the devil and witches can take the shape of a raven (Karki, 2008). In that respect, the raven symbol can be compared to the black cat.

Because of the raven's association with Odin (or Alfader – All-father), the raven was also adopted as a symbol by the Danes and used as an emblem on their war-flags or standards (Brewer, 1985)

'About mid-day a solid mass of the enemy were seen approaching, and the banners with the Black Raven on a blood-red field showed that it contained leaders of importance, and was, in fact, the main body of the Danes.' Henty, Gutenberg eText).

This symbol possessed special powers, so that if it hung its wings, the battle would be lost; if the raven (the way the flag or standard was billowing, one imagines) stood erect, victory would come. In this use, the symbol represents intimations of fate.

Knowledge gatherer and bringer of light

In this manifestation, the raven is not simply bad, although its role is still ambivalent.

In Norse mythology, the raven is seen as a scout or bringer of knowledge. Two ravens, named Hugin and Munnin symbolising mind or thought, and memory, sit upon Odin's shoulders, telling him of the ways of things and acting as his messengers (Brewer, 1985, and other sources).

In the Christian religion, ravens are symbols of deeper meaning, suggestive of a critical role in carrying out God's plan. For instance, ravens brought bread to a starving Elijah in the desert (Holy Bible, 1 Kings 17:6), they appear in artwork featuring St Oswald (holding in his hand a raven with a ring in its mouth) and St Benedict has a raven at his feet and even St Paul (the hermit) was given a loaf of bread by a raven (Brewer, 1985). However, the ravens are capricious birds, not always to be trusted – as Noah discovered when he released one to discover if the floods had subsided, only to find it did not bother to return.

I think these symbolisms are related to the intelligence of the raven as a bird and are to be compared to other similar symbols such as the owl.

The Trickster and cosmic messenger

To many North American native peoples, the raven is a creature of mystery and of the void because of its black colouration. It is a messenger, whereby the shamans are able to project their magic across great distances. It is also a shape-shifter (a common theme in such culture's magic) and cosmic traveller, bringing back prophetic messages which only the gifted few can interpret (naturally, the shamans or medicine-men).

Because it is a clever bird, and often to be seen around people, scavenging food and mocking humans with its dry, cackling cry, it has been thought to be a trickster - much like the coyote or the Norse God of mischief, Loki.

This one example will serve to illustrate the 'trickster' aspect of the raven-symbol: the storytellers of the native tribes of Puget Sound consider the raven to be a creator of the world, and a seeker after light, in pursuit of which, any tricks will do; he travels to another world, changes his form and steals the day, returning to our world with the light. In this and countless other stories from these cultures, the intelligence of the raven means it will use trickery to get its way, be it for humanity's good or not (Dooley, 1991; also Oosten and Laugrand).

Examples of how the Raven-symbol has been used

Please note, four examples are given instead of the minimum three.

The Raven, by Edgar Allan Poe.

This a narrative poem, first published in 1845 and uses the raven as a created symbol to underscore and inflate the poet's misery at the loss of his love, Lenore. She will not return and they will not be reunited. The raven, sitting on a bust of Pallas ('pallid Pallas' - alliteration), repeats over and over the word 'nevermore', helping to plunge the poet into complete madness, as he invites the repetition of 'nevermore' with his questions.

We are not sure that the bust of Pallas is Pallas Athena, but we presume it is. Athena is seen as being the wise guardian of the Hellenes, thus the raven's choice of perch is itself suggestive of a 'wisdom-lore' and communication with another world.

Poe must have realized that such an intelligent, but annoying, bird made a good object for symbolism of a particular kind – underscoring the pitiless nature of fate. The doubt

we have as to whether the raven is sentient or is merely reciting sounds it has heard, completes the sense of futility.

The use of this symbol is not inconsistent with the raven being seen in conventional symbology (see above discussions) as a traveller to, and messenger from, another world, as Poe well knew:

‘Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night's Plutonian shore!
Quoth the Raven, "Nevermore."’ (Poe, 1970).

Nonetheless, Poe has adapted the conventional and the natural, to create a unique symbol for his poem – a tormentor of his psyche.

The Ravens of Erebor

Tolkien was fond of using birds in his stories, and in the *Hobbit* he recounts the tale of the Ravens of Erebor, in the Third Age of the Sun. The Ravens were seen as strong and long lived and they represented the elemental forces of natural wisdom. Because of their skill with the tongues of humans and Dwarves, they were natural messengers, and Rauc, King of the Ravens, helped the Dwarves, bringing them news and aid: ‘There used to be great friendship between them and the people of Thror; and they often brought us secret news, and were rewarded with such bright things as they coveted to hide in their dwellings’ (Tolkien, p269).

In this example, the raven fulfils a traditional symbolic role, derived from Saxon folk wisdom as well as Norse mythology. Just as the eagle represented noble courage, the raven represents wisdom and acts as a messenger – the ravens always seem to know what is going on. Not also the onomatopoeic use of the raven bird names: ‘Roca’ and ‘Carc’, as used in *The Hobbit*, to enhance this part of the story.

The Raven – or a Christmas tale, told by a school-boy to his little brothers and sisters, by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1798).

This poem tells the story of a raven, who flies far and gathers much knowledge.

‘He belonged, they did say, to the witch Melancholy!
Blacker was he than blackest jet’ (Coleridge).

On his return to his favourite tree he sets up house with a female raven but one day a woodsman chops the tree down killing the raven’s wife and chicks; the wood is used as timbers for the building of a ship. When the ship is launched it sinks in an uncanny storm and the raven is avenged. As the raven flies back to land, he meets death and thanks him for the storm and the satisfaction of revenge.

Besides being a kind of morality tale in verse, the poem uses the aspects of the raven-symbol having to do with its gathering of knowledge and its links with the supernatural world which underpins our own:

‘And Death riding home on a cloud he did meet,
And he thank'd him again and again for this treat:
They had taken his all, and REVENGE IT WAS SWEET!’ (Coleridge, 1798).

The Raven Days, by Stephen Lanier (1868)

‘O, Raven Days, dark Raven Days of sorrow’ (Lanier, 1868). This makes use of the raven-symbol in its traditional form as a sign of doom and death, as it is found wherever disasters strike. The narrator looks to this bird, pleading for some sign (for it is a bird with supernatural connections) that better days will come - but they will not:

‘Ye float in dusky files, forever croaking—

Ye chill our manhood with your dreary shade.’ (Lanier, 1868). In the last stanza, it is clear the pleading will not be answered in these ‘raven days’.

Conclusion

In all these cases, the raven is used as a symbol of archetypal forces – be they signs of doom or knowledge gathered from sojourning into other planes of existence. The innate strangeness of a black bird, large in size, with a distinctive and unpleasant mocking sound, which is also highly intelligent, lends itself to literary purposes and enhances many tales.

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