Edgar Allan Poe “The Raven” Notes

I. The inspiration of the poem

A. Poe was amused by making up information for interviews, so the inspiration for the poem is

not certain (NPR.org).

1. Once he said he wrote in a feverish passion over a couple of days when his wife

became ill.

2. Later he said it lain on his desk for ten years.

3. In “The Philosophy of Composition” Poe said it was a methodical process and that he

wrote the end of it first.

a. “I asked myself- ‘Of all melancholy topics, what…is the most melancholy?’ Death- was the obvious reply. ‘And when,’ I said, ‘is this most melancholy of topics most poetical?’…’When it most closely allies itself to Beauty: the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world—and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover.”

B. In Charles Dickens’ 1841 novel, *Barnaby Rudge,* a historical novel about anti-Catholic riots in

London 1780, Barnaby, a mentally retarded character accused of participating in the riots, has a pet Raven named Grip who can speak. In the fifth chapter, Grip taps at the shutter (similar to Poe’s poem). Grip was modeled after an actual talking Raven owned by Dickens. *Remember from your timeline that Poe met Dickens around this time.*

II. Publication- “The Raven” was published January 29, 1845 in *The New York Mirror*. It earned Poe $15.

III. Literary Questions:

A. What is the setting of the poem?

1. The chamber of a house at midnight in December on a dreary day. Poe uses chamber instead of bedroom due to the more mysterious connotation.

B. Who is the persona? What do we know about him? Is he a reliable narrator?

1. First Person Narrator

2. A man who has lost his beloved, a woman named Lenore

3. He may not be a reliable narrator. His grief may have caused him to lose his sanity.

The actions in the poem could be only from his mind. Poe often used unreliable

narrators.

C. What is the theme?

1. The death of a beautiful woman, as lamented by her bereaved lover.

D. What words indicate tone?

1. weary, dreary, bleak, dying, sorrow, sad, darkness, stillness, mystery, ebony, grave,

stern, lonely, grim, ghastly, gaunt

E. Identify Poe’s use of end rhyme and internal rhyme:

1. Rhyme scheme: ABCBBB Example: lore, door, door, more

2. Internal rhyme: While I nodded, nearly **napping**, suddenly there came a **tapping**,

F. Identify a line with alliteration

1. “*w*eak and *w*eary”; “*en*treating *en*trance”; “*ra*re and *ra*diant”;”*dr*eaming *dr*eams no

mortal ever *d*ared to *dr*eam”; “the *s*ilken *s*ad un*c*ertain ru*s*tling”

G. What is the sound pattern?

1. ONCE uPON a MIDnight DREARy, WHILE I PONdered WEAK and WEARy,

2. Stressed syllable followed by unstressed syllable, with a total of sixteen syllables

H. Critique the writing style

1. Walt Whitman in his critique of Poe said that “The Raven” is too sing-song and too

highly emotional.

2. The poem is still criticized today for its sing-song childlike characteristics. It is often

the source of parody.

3. Many others feel that it is a meticulously crafted work of genius.

4. It is one of the most popular poems in American Literature.

I. Summarize the narrative in this narrative poem

1. It is midnight on a cold evening in December. In a dark and shadowy bedroom, wood burns in the fireplace as a man laments the death of Lenore, a woman he deeply loved. To occupy his mind, he reads a book of ancient stories. But a tapping noise disturbs him. When he opens the door to the bedroom, he sees nothing, only darkness. When the tapping persists, he opens the shutter of the window and a raven flies into the room and lands above the door on a bust of Athena (Pallas). It says “Nevermore” to all his thoughts and longings. The raven, a symbol of death, tells the man he will never again see his beloved, never again hold her—even in heaven.

J. What does the raven symbolize?

1. A raven, which can be up to two feet long, is a type of crow. Ravens eat small animals, carrion, fruit, and seeds. They often appear in legend and literature as sinister omens. They often symbolize death.