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Unreliable Biographers

Can we rely on written accounts of the life of a famous person? Answers to all but one of the following questions differ in at least two of the sources noted. When you find two contradictory answers, record them in the column of the biography from which you got the answer. Look for a key word or words in each question to help you locate the answer in the text.

Which question do you predict will be answered identically in each biography? Why?

	The Sesquicentennial Site Brief Biography	Poe's Life from The Poe Museum	1900 Biography by S. A. Allibone	1856 Biography by Evert A. Duyckinck
1. In what year was Poe born?				
2. Where was Poe born?				
3. In what year did Poe enroll at the University of Virginia?				
4. Why did Poe leave the University of Virginia?				
5. What did Poe do after leaving the University of Virginia?				
6. Why did Poe have to/want to leave West Point?				
7. In what publication did "The Raven" first appear?				
8. In what year did Poe become an editor at Graham's Magazine?				
9. When did Poe die?				

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Can Poe's Letters Provide Any Answers?

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Questions	Provide a quote as evidence, along with the date of the source letter: July 7, July 19, August 28, Sept. 10, or Sept. 18
1. Was Poe still battling his desire for alcohol in the last year of his life?	
2. Why did Poe get engaged in September 1849? (NOTE: The answer is implied rather than stated.)	
3. To what city was Poe heading when he ended up ill in Baltimore?	
4. Is it possible that Poe had some sort of condition in which he could appear drunk even when he was not?	
5. Did Poe love Elmira, to whom he was engaged? (NOTE: The answer is implied rather than stated.)	

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A Selection from “The Philosophy of Composition” by Edgar Allan Poe: Describing How Poe Wrote the Refrain and Last Verse



. . . Regarding, then, Beauty as my province, my next question referred to the tone of its highest manifestation – and all experience has shown that this tone is one of sadness. Beauty of whatever kind in its supreme development invariably excites the sensitive soul to tears. Melancholy is thus the most legitimate of all the poetical tones.

The length, the province, and the tone, being thus determined, I betook myself to ordinary induction, with the view of obtaining some artistic piquancy which might serve me as a key-note in the construction of the poem – some pivot upon which the whole structure might turn. In carefully thinking over all the usual artistic effects – or more properly points, in the theatrical sense – I did not fail to perceive immediately that no one had been so universally employed as that of the refrain. The universality of its employment sufficed to assure me of its intrinsic value, and spared me the necessity of submitting it to analysis. I considered it, however, with regard to its susceptibility of improvement, and soon saw it to be in a primitive condition. As commonly used, the refrain, or burden, not only is limited to lyric verse, but depends for its impression upon the force of monotone – both in sound and thought. The pleasure is deduced solely from the sense of identity – of repetition. I resolved to diversify, and so heighten the effect, by adhering in general to the monotone of sound, while I continually varied that of thought: that is to say, I determined to produce continuously novel effects, by the variation of the application of the refrain – the refrain itself remaining for the most part, unvaried.

These points being settled, I next bethought me of the nature of my refrain. Since its application was to be repeatedly varied it was clear that the refrain itself must be brief, for there would have been an insurmountable difficulty in frequent variations of application in any sentence of length. In proportion to the brevity of the sentence would, of course, be the facility of the variation. This led me at once to a single word as the best refrain.

The question now arose as to the character of the word. Having made up my mind to a refrain, the division of the poem into stanzas was of course a corollary, the refrain forming the close to each stanza. That such a close, to have force, must be sonorous and susceptible of protracted emphasis, admitted no doubt, and these considerations inevitably led me to the long “o” as the most sonorous vowel in connection with “r” as the most producible consonant.

The sound of the refrain being thus determined, it became necessary to select a word embodying this sound, and at the same time in the fullest possible keeping with that melancholy which I had

pre-determined as the tone of the poem. In such a search it would have been absolutely impossible to overlook the word "Nevermore." In fact it was the very first which presented itself.

The next desideratum was a pretext for the continuous use of the one word "nevermore." In observing the difficulty which I had at once found in inventing a sufficiently plausible reason for its continuous repetition, I did not fail to perceive that this difficulty arose solely from the pre-assumption that the word was to be so continuously or monotonously spoken by a human being – I did not fail to perceive, in short, that the difficulty lay in the reconciliation of this monotony with the exercise of reason on the part of the creature repeating the word. Here, then, immediately arose the idea of a non-reasoning creature capable of speech, and very naturally, a parrot, in the first instance, suggested itself, but was superseded forthwith by a Raven as equally capable of speech, and infinitely more in keeping with the intended tone.

I had now gone so far as the conception of a Raven, the bird of ill-omen, monotonously repeating the one word "Nevermore" at the conclusion of each stanza in a poem of melancholy tone, and in length about one hundred lines. Now, never losing sight of the object – supremeness or perfection at all points, I asked myself – "Of all melancholy topics what, according to the universal understanding of mankind, is the most melancholy?" Death, was the obvious reply. "And when," I said, "is this most melancholy of topics most poetical?" From what I have already explained at some length the answer here also is obvious – "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."

I had now to combine the two ideas of a lover lamenting his deceased mistress and a Raven continuously repeating the word "Nevermore." I had to combine these, bearing in mind my design of varying at every turn the application of the word repeated, but the only intelligible mode of such combination is that of imagining the Raven employing the word in answer to the queries of the lover. And here it was that I saw at once the opportunity afforded for the effect on which I had been depending, that is to say, the effect of the variation of application. I saw that I could make the first query propounded by the lover – the first query to which the Raven should reply "Nevermore" – that I could make this first query a commonplace one, the second less so, the third still less, and so on, until at length the lover, startled from his original nonchalance by the melancholy character of the word itself, by its frequent repetition, and by a consideration of the ominous reputation of the fowl that uttered it, is at length excited to superstition, and wildly propounds queries of a far different character – queries whose solution he has passionately at heart – propounds them half in superstition and half in that species of despair which delights in self-torture -- propounds them not altogether because he believes in the prophetic or demoniac character of the bird (which reason assures him is merely repeating a lesson learned by rote), but because he experiences a frenzied pleasure in so modelling his questions as to receive from the expected "Nevermore" the most delicious because the most intolerable of sorrows. Perceiving the opportunity thus afforded me, or, more strictly, thus forced upon me in the progress of the construction, I first established in my mind the climax or concluding query – that query to which "Nevermore" should be in the last place an answer – that query in reply to which this word "Nevermore" should involve the utmost conceivable amount of sorrow and despair.

Here then the poem may be said to have had its beginning – at the end where all works of art should begin – for it was here at this point of my preconsiderations that I first put pen to paper in the composition of the stanza:

“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.”