The Twisting of the Twisted: *The Simpsons’* Perspective on Poe’s “The Raven”

*The Simpsons* is a popular TV series that is often noted for its satirical treatment of famous literary works. In a segment of the 1990 Halloween episode “Treehouse of Horror,” writer Sam Simon delivers a creative, humorous reworking of Edgar Allan Poe’s classic poem “The Raven.” The primary purpose of *The Simpsons* is to be entertaining, and in this episode, Simon entertains a wide audience by creating humor on multiple levels. On a superficial level, Simon merely uses the plot of “The Raven” as an excuse to make jokes and amusing visual sequences. On a deeper level, however, Simon uses the poem for satirical purposes. Anyone who is familiar with “The Raven” will appreciate the ironic humor that is caused by Simon’s use of Poe’s original text. Simon also implicitly makes fun of poetry analysis, and anyone who has ever had an overzealous English teacher will appreciate this. Finally, Simon uses satire to provide social commentary. Simon twists the work of the master of intellectually twisted tales to make us laugh at our twisted culture.

This episode of the Simpsons consists of Bart, Lisa, (and Maggie) telling each other scary stories in their treehouse on a Halloween night. Simon sets the tone for the story at the beginning of the segment: we see Lisa reading a copy of “The Raven,” and Bart suspiciously notes that it is “a school book.” Lisa replies, “Don’t worry, Bart, you won’t learn anything,” and begins reading the poem. This introduction refers to Bart’s un-erudite attitude, and it tells the audience that this retelling of the Raven will mock both the general public (as represented by Bart) and the often pompous, pseudo-intellectual attitude of poetry analysis in schools.

One of the main ways that this episode of *The Simpsons* differs from Poe’s poem is rooted in the fact that the two narratives are expressed through different media. Poe’s “The Raven” is merely text. All images and voices are left to the imagination of the reader; however, since the poem is read as part of many English classes, there are certain points of emphasis that many people associate with it. Simon is free to interpret the
poem as he wishes, and he often keeps exactly faithful to Poe’s original text, creating a different meaning using only visual effects and varying voices.

At the beginning of the segment, Lisa’s voice melds into the voice of James Earl Jones (the Narrator) as we hear the first lines of “The Raven:” “Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary, Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore—,” and see Homer Simpson seated in an armchair reading a book entitled “Forgotten Lore: Vol. II.” This scene is amusing because Homer is literally pondering a “volume of forgotten lore.” One method, then, that Simon uses to satirize Poe’s work is to interpret the original poem in a ridiculously literal manner. Simon is making fun of the rich, rhythmic language that “The Raven” is famous for. Most readers do not think twice about “little details” in “The Raven” because they get caught up in the “sing-song” meter of the poem, and Simon’s literal interpretation of seemingly insignificant words and phrases forces the audience to hear and think about these words and phrases. Simon is pointing out how funny some of Poe’s supposedly deep, melancholy lines are if they are read independently of the meter.

In other cases, Simon uses visual effects that do not agree with the original text to create irony and physical humor. For example, when the Narrator says, “Then, methought, the air grew denser, perfumed from an unseen censer,” we can see the “unseen censer” hitting Homer’s head, and we hear Homer’s classic line “D’oh!” Here, Simon transforms the poem by allowing us to see an “unseen” object in a scene that is typical of the physical humor that Homer is usually involved in. He again mocks Poe’s diction, this time by using Homer Simpson’s famous physical humor to make a scene in “The Raven” that is supposed to be emotional and poignant seem hilarious. This is one instance of the more general strategy of using the Simpsons characters to represent the characters in “The Raven.”

Simon uses all of the members of the Simpson family during the course of the segment to change the various characters that are in “The Raven.” The association of familiar cartoon characters with “The Raven” satirizes the characters in “The Raven,” and the poem as a whole. By changing the characters from deep and melancholy to goofy and humorous, Simon makes the melancholy and grief present in the poem seem ridiculous. When we hear Homer plaintively expressing his “sorrow for the lost Lenore”
by moaning (in his familiar whining voice), “Oh, Lenore,” we see a painting of Marge Simpson labeled “Lenore.” This portrait is very tall because of Marge’s hair; in fact, it extends into a second framed picture. This reference to Marge’s ridiculously tall hairdo entertains Simpsons fans because of its familiarity. When we see the “unseen censer/swung by seraphim whose foot-falls tinkled on the tufted floor,” the “seraphim” swinging the censer are Maggie and Lisa. This unexpected appearance of the two Simpson daughters is a delightful, hilarious surprise to the audience. Later, we see that the Raven himself bears a striking resemblance to Bart Simpson.

Simon uses Homer to satirize “The Raven” through interlacing his voice with the voice of the Narrator (James Earl Jones). The voice alternates between the rich, expressionate voice of James Earl Jones and the comical, high-pitched voice of Homer Simpson. Often, the two voices will even alternate within a line, for example,

Homer: ’Tis some visitor,
Narrator: I muttered
Homer: tapping at my chamber door – only this and nothing more.

James Earl Jones is an extremely good orator, and so his voice is well suited to reading a classic poem like “The Raven”. Homer Simpson is a bumbling, lazy cartoon character. The contrasting of voices helps to emphasize that a classic poem about grief is being transformed into a cartoon sitcom by transforming the protagonist from a grieving man into a bumbling cartoon character.

The speaker in “The Raven” is assumed to be a sophisticated, lonely man, stricken with grief over the loss of the woman he loves. Simon uses the ironic difference in character between him and Homer to create humor. For example, at the beginning of the poem, when there is a “rapping at my chamber door,” Homer wakes up with a start, screams, and hides behind his chair. Here, Simon extends Poe’s poem by adding an action that the viewer would expect from the creators of the Simpsons, but would not expect from Edgar Allan Poe. This combination of expected and unexpected helps to create an element of suspense, as the viewer eagerly waits to see how Poe’s poem will be “twisted” next. Since Edgar Allan Poe is known for writing dark, “twisted” tales, it is interesting that Simon satirizes his poem by introducing “twists.” Simon mocks the suspenseful elements of “The Raven” by creating new elements of suspense in this episode through the addition of humorous visual sequences.
Bart Simpson’s disrespectful, smart-mouth attitude is very popular with Simpson’s fans. In *The Simpsons*, this attitude often creates antagonism between Bart and Homer. The unification of the sarcastic, disrespectful Bart with the Raven (who is the antagonist in the poem) creates a hilarious antagonist for Homer. Using Bart as the Raven changes the repetition of the line “Nevermore,” from melancholy and ominous to annoying and mocking. The first time that the Raven speaks, we hear,

**Narrator:** Quoth the Raven,
**Bart/Raven:** Eat my shorts!

This interjection by the “real” Bart, who is listening to Lisa read, it is funny because instead of the “Nevermore” that we are all expecting (up to this point, Simon has been very faithful to Poe’s text), we suddenly hear Bart’s shocking “trademark” line, “Eat my shorts,” a line which symbolizes the irreverence and sarcasm with which Bart, and *The Simpsons* in general, are associated. The aggravation that Homer feels towards Bart when Bart is flippant and says such things as “Eat my shorts” mimics the aggravation and annoyance that the speaker in “The Raven” feels towards the Raven for saying “Nevermore.”

A very direct method that Simon uses to satirize “The Raven” and comment on society in general is to interject commentary about the poem from Bart, who is sitting in the treehouse listening to Lisa read. For example, at the beginning, after the line, “’Tis some visitor’, I muttered, ‘tapping at my chamber door – only this and nothing more,’” Bart interjects sarcastically, “Are we scared yet?” and Lisa defensively says, “Bart, he’s establishing mood.” This scene makes fun of the poetry analysis that many viewers remember from their high school English classes. Simon is parodying parts of our educational system, and the often arrogant, pseudointellectual attitude that the stereotypical poetry analyst has. This serves to mock people in our society who consider themselves to be “cultured.” Interestingly, this mocks parts of his audience and, in a way, his own cartoon, since some “culture” is necessary to understand much of the satire present in this episode. Simon doesn’t take Poe or himself seriously; unlike the original poem, this cartoon makes fun of itself.

Later in the poem, when Homer opens his chamber door and sees nothing outside, we have another mocking sequence,

**Bart:** You know what would have been scarier than nothing?
Lisa: What?
Bart: ANYTHING!

The entire premise of this episode of *The Simpsons* was for Bart and Lisa to tell each other scary stories, and these lines “dare” to make fun of Edgar Allan Poe’s classic poem. This could also be a mocking reference to the fact that Poe was a cocaine addict, and that “nothing”-ness could have been very frightening when he was in a “drugged out” state because of hallucinations and other effects of the drugs. Bart’s interjections also help to prevent the reader from taking the cartoon seriously; they make fun of the cartoon itself, Poe’s poem, and the “classic works of literature” in general. This mocking attitude comes to a culmination at the end of the segment, when Bart complains,

Bart: Lisa, that wasn’t scary. Not even for a poem.
Lisa: Well, it was written in 1845. Maybe people were easier to scare back then.
Bart: Oh, yeah. Like when you look at *Friday the Thirteenth, Part I*. Pretty tame by today's standards.

This final dialogue is even more mocking than the previous ones, it actually makes fun of our society for being “desensitized.”

This addition of social commentary is a very interesting way that Simon uses Poe’s poem. Simon comments on how desensitized our society has become, and on how most people do not appreciate literary subtlety. There is a particular irony in the fact that this message is put forth in an episode of *The Simpsons*. Although *The Simpsons* appeals to many people because of its “highbrow,” satirical humor, its mass popularity is due to its crude humor and shock value. Simon is satirizing the fact that our society needs to be constantly overstimulated to be entertained. He makes fun of the fact that most people are unwilling or unable to appreciate subtle humor, and that it is necessary to use crudeness to entertain people.

A more subtle way that Simon mocks society is to omit portions of Poe’s original poem so that the plot of the cartoon moves quickly enough to be viable in primetime American television. For example, a large section of the poem that deals with the speaker pondering his loss of Lenore and the role of the Raven is omitted. In the cartoon, we have:

Homer: Quaff, oh quaff this kind nepenthe, and forget this lost Lenore!
Narrator: Quoth the Raven
Bart/Raven: Nevermore
Homer: D’oh!
Homer: Be that word our sign of parting, bird or fiend!...
Over 5 stanzas are replaced with the word “D’oh!” The stanzas that Simon omits are not really important to the plot of the cartoon. Homer is not a very “deep” person, and the word “D’oh” coming from him very adequately expresses the sorrow and anger that the speaker in the poem develops towards the Raven in the omitted stanzas. However, by reducing those stanzas to the word “D’oh,” Simon is implicitly saying that his cartoon would not be entertaining to most of his audience if he did not simplify it and shorten it so that it would not be longer than an average viewer’s attention span. This serves to underscore his mocking attitude towards a desensitized society that does not appreciate subtlety.

A final strategy that Simon uses to transform “The Raven” is to mutate the ending of the poem to make it comical instead of haunting and sorrowful. Simon has the section,

Homer: Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my door!  
Narrator: Quoth the Raven  
Bart/Raven: Nevermore.

repeated twice. (This line is not repeated in the original text.) The second time, Homer speaks angrily, and when the Raven says “Nevermore,” he begins an angry chase sequence that is totally Simon’s creation. The sequence begins with,

Homer: Why you little…!  
Bart/Raven: Uh-oh!

and then the Raven flies about the room, trying to avoid the wrath of Homer. This line refers back to the conflict between Bart, the disrespectful son, and Homer, the fed-up father. The sequence itself transforms Poe’s poem by containing a series of references to Poe and to “The Raven” that occur in unexpected ways. Specifically, when Homer throws a vase at the Raven, and the vase ends up hitting Homer’s head, a bunch of little Ravens dance about Homer chanting “Nevermore” in the same way the cartoon characters usually “see stars.” Homer tears apart his study trying to capture the Raven, and in the process, the Raven drops a group of Poe books (*The Tell Tale Heart*, *The Pit and the Pendulum*, *The Purloined Letter*) on Homer’s head. The sheer goofiness of this section satirizes the serious, melancholy tone of Poe’s writing.

In this episode of *The Simpsons*, Simon creates a fresh, new story by injecting the irreverent, funny attitude of *The Simpsons* into the melancholy poem “The Raven.” Simon uses his creation to satirize Poe’s poem and “cultured” society and to comment on how our society needs overstimulation with crude humor and shocking scenes to be
entertained. Sam Simon uses a cartoon that appeals to the general public and “people of culture” alike to make fun of both groups of people. Simon presents his transformation of “The Raven” both to entertain us and to make us think, and he succeeds at both.

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Works Cited:


Reflection on How I Transformed My Text:

When I sat down to write the first draft of my essay, I was thinking of the assignment in terms of a very objective analysis of the differences between Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Raven” and The Simpsons episode Treehouse of Horror. Through the suggestions that I received in class and from friends, I was able to transform this essay into an analysis of The Simpsons that conveys why I think the differences between the two works exist. My agenda changed, and to make this clear, I had to completely rework my first paragraph and change my title. I needed to slightly alter many of the passages in my text to reflect these changes. Finally, I added sections that put forth my opinion of why Simon made certain changes to “The Raven.”

One of the most noticeable changes in my essay is the first paragraph, and especially the thesis. In my first and second drafts, my thesis was: ‘Most of the episode is Poe’s original poem; however, by omitting some sections and emphasizing others, Simon transforms Poe’s poem into a humorous, irreverent cartoon.’ In my final draft, that sentence has been cut, and my thesis is: “Simon twists the work of the master of intellectually twisted tales to make us laugh at our twisted culture.” My first draft merely showed how Simon transformed Poe’s poem. It does not attempt to tell why Simon made any changes, and it only states that humor was created, without attempting to analyze the motive behind the humor. In my second draft, I added a paragraph to the end of the essay that briefly touches on why I think Simon “created humor.” For my final draft, this paragraph was moved to the beginning of my essay, and combined with my first paragraph to form a new introduction. Thus, I wrote a totally new thesis to reflect the new agenda of my essay.

Since my agenda changed from showing what the differences were to showing why Simon was satirizing Poe, I needed to alter the focus of various passages in my first and second drafts, and add sections that explained why Simon transformed “The Raven.” For example, my fourth paragraph initially just talked about how alternating Homer’s voice with James Earl Jones’ was funny. In my final draft, I expand this paragraph to
explain why I think that the voices are alternated, and I comment about how I think Simon is mocking the meter of “The Raven.”

In my first draft, I was trying to show factual differences between an episode of *The Simpsons* and “The Raven.” When I wrote my second draft, most of the changes I made were minor, but in response to the suggestions I received from my classmates, I added a paragraph at the end that briefly states why I think Simon satirized Poe’s poem. This paragraph ended up becoming the focus of my final draft. In my final draft, I used the factual information that I had analyzed in my first draft to support my arguments about why Simon transformed Poe’s poem. Thus, although I used much of the text from my first draft in my final draft, the focus of final draft is very different from the focus of the first draft of my essay.