The Conqueror Worm

POEM TEXT

Lo! 'tis a gala night
Within the lonesome latter years!
An angel throng, bewinged, bedight
In veils, and drowned in tears,
Sit in a theatre, to see
A play of hopes and fears,
While the orchestra breathes fitfully
The music of the spheres.

Mimes, in the form of God on high,
Mutter and mumble low,
And hither and thither fly—
Mere puppets they, who come and go
At bidding of vast formless things
That shift the scenery to and fro,
Flapping from out their Condor wings
Invisible Wo!

That motley drama—oh, be sure
It shall not be forgot!
With its Phantom chased for evermore
By a crowd that seize it not,
Through a circle that ever returneth in
To the self-same spot,
And much of Madness, and more of Sin,
And Horror the soul of the plot.

But see, amid the mimic rout,
A crawling shape intrude!
A blood-red thing that writhes from out
The scenic solitude!
It writhes!—it writhes!—with mortal pangs
The mimes become its food,
And seraphs sob at vermin fangs
In human gore imbued.

Out—out are the lights—out all!
And, over each quivering form,
The curtain, a funeral pall,
Comes down with the rush of a storm,
While the angels, all pallid and wan,
Uprising, unveiling, affirm
That the play is the tragedy, "Man,"
And its hero, the Conqueror Worm.

SUMMARY

Behold, a night of festivity taking place in humanity's last years! A crowd of angels, winged and veiled, shedding many tears, has come to the theater to watch a play about hope and fear. In the background, the orchestra plays uncanny, heavenly music.

Actors (created, like all humanity, in the image of God) make muted sounds and rush back and forth across the stage. They are no more than puppets, running around according to the instructions of enormous, shapeless beings who constantly change the backdrop and send sorrows into the world with flaps of their vulture wings.

This chaotic tale could never be forgotten! In this play, crowds of people chase after a ghost they can't catch, running around in endless circles. All the while, insanity and wickedness are everywhere; horror is the essence of the story.

In the middle of the actors' grotesque party, look! A crawling creature has appeared! It is crimson and wiggles out from behind the scenery! It squirms!—it squirms!—it devours the actors with fearful death pains, and the angels weep as its foul teeth tear into human flesh and blood.

All the lights go off and the curtain, hanging over the shivering bodies like the cloth over a coffin, falls down like a thundershower. Meanwhile, the angels, pale and faint, stand up from their seats, pull off their veils, and agree that the play is the tragedy known as Humanity, and that the protagonist of this play is the devouring worm.

THEMES

THE HORROR AND FUTILITY OF LIFE

"The Conqueror Worm" compares human life to a gruesome theater production watched by an audience of horrified angels. In this metaphorical "play," humans are mere "puppets" who act according to the whims of unseen forces, and their lives are characterized by "Madness," "Sin," and "Horror." They run around in frantic, pointless circles until "The Conqueror Worm" (a symbol of death) arrives and puts an end to their misery. The poem paints human life as tragic and doomed, an endless cycle of pain and suffering that ultimately

leads nowhere.

The poem uses the metaphor of a play to present human life as a "tragedy" in which nothing good ever occurs and no one has any real control over their fate. At this dreadful play, an audience of tearful angels looks on as humans, like "puppets," move here and there at the "bidding of vast formless things" that shake up the "scenery" and set loose more and more "Wo[e]." This suggests humans have no free will and that their suffering is mere entertainment for whatever cruel power pulls the strings. In such a "motley drama" (that is, a chaotic play), "Horror" is "the soul of the plot." In other words, according to the speaker, human life in general is marked by fear, sorrow, and pain.

This endless cycle of "Madness" and "Sin" only ends when death arrives. The fact that all this human suffering culminates in the "Conqueror Worm" devouring everyone on stage suggests that life isn't just terrible—it's also completely *futile*. After all the mess and violence on the "stage" of life, the image of the devouring worm suggests, there's not even any payoff: only oblivion. The image of the worm itself reminds readers that everyone ends up as worm food. Life, in other words, is both brutal and empty, a chaotic mess that ends in meaningless death.

In this light, one can also read the poem as a metaphor for the futility and chaos of all human history and a dire warning of apocalypse. The speaker specifies that the metaphorical play is taking place in "the lonesome latter years" of humanity, suggesting that humanity is nearing the end of its existence. In this interpretation, the Worm represents not just death, but the inevitable end of the world itself.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-40

THE INEVITABILITY OF DEATH

"The Conqueror Worm" portrays death as the star of the human "play." It hardly matters what goes on in this terrifying, chaotic world, the poem suggests, because death conquers all in the end.

Death, the poem warns, is always lurking in the background of the human "drama." While human "mimes" run around in frenzied circles, something horrifying "writhes from out / The scenic solitude": a horrific, symbolic "Conqueror Worm" which represents the fact that the worms will eat us all one day. In other words, while people are busy dealing with life's many sufferings, death is all the while on the periphery, biding its time until it sweeps over them and concludes the show.

The fact that the Worm is portrayed as the "hero" of the play makes it clear that death is the ultimate reality, the force that prevails over all mortal "hopes and fears." The speaker depicts this Worm as a hideous and terrifying beast: a "crawling," "blood-red thing" that squirms and sinks its "fangs" into human flesh. As it feeds, the "lights" go out onstage, signifying the death of its victims.

Like every "tragedy," this one has an unhappy ending: no one survives the play, just as no one can escape death. The shaken angels who have been watching these horrors get up and "affirm / That the play is the tragedy, 'Man.'" This grim conclusion implies that human life itself is a terrible tragedy, since it inevitably ends in death. The symbolic "Worm" conquers everyone and everything.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 25-40

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

Lo! 'tis a gala night
Within the lonesome latter years!

"The Conqueror Worm" begins with an anonymous speaker introducing the poem's central extended metaphor:

Lo! 'tis a gala night
Within the lonesome latter years!

Beginning the poem with the word "Lo" (that is, "Behold!") creates a sense of heightened drama right off the bat. The speaker is commanding the reader's attention much as a narrator might at the beginning of a play. And life, this poem says, is nothing *but* a play—a horrible, ugly, nasty, pointless play.

Here at the beginning, though, the play feels rather glamorous. A "gala" is a special event where people get dressed up and enjoy live entertainment. That this particular gala is occurring in "the lonesome latter years" may feel a little mysterious at first, but basically the poem is suggesting that this poem takes place late in the history of humanity. The /l/ alliteration in these opening lines ("Lo," "lonesome latter") adds rhythm and intensity to the speaker's introduction. All told, these first two lines suggest that something grand and dramatic is about to happen.

The poem uses accentual meter, meaning that it doesn't stick to any consistent metrical foot (like the iamb or the trochee). Instead, it just uses a certain number of beats per line. Poe chooses a strange and unpredictable accentual meter here, veering between lines with three stresses and lines with four (though he'll sometimes dip down as low as two). Listen to the first two lines, for instance:

Lo! 'tis a gala night

Within the lonesome latter years!

These lines don't follow a standard pattern of feet, but they do use three beats, then four. The way in which Poe arranges those beats will change across the poem, keeping readers on their toes.

The poem also follows a strict ABABCBCB rhyme scheme. Across the eight lines of the first stanza, then, lines 2, 4, 6, and 8 all rhyme: "years," "tears," "fears," "spheres." This flamboyant, insistent pattern alerts readers that they're in for a wild ride!

LINES 3-8

An angel throng, bewinged, bedight
In veils, and drowned in tears,
Sit in a theatre, to see
A play of hopes and fears,
While the orchestra breathes fitfully
The music of the spheres.

The apocalyptic gala, the speaker goes on, is attended by a crowd of "angels" who are "bewinged, bedight / In veils, and drowned in tears." In other words, these winged creatures are decked out in mourners' veils and already weeping. Talk about drama! The image suggests that whatever the night's entertainment is, it's a real tear-jerker.

Note that lines 3-8 are all one sentence. Instead of straightforwardly saying that the angel throng sits in the theater, the speaker breaks up the subject and verb in order to describe what the angels look like and what emotional state they're in. By slowing down and delaying the arrival of the verb ("Sit"), Poe creates anticipation and suspense, as the reader doesn't really know what's going on until they read lines 5-6:

> Sit in a theatre, to see
> A play of hopes and fears,

Finally, Poe reveals why all these angels are dressed up in "veils" and crying. They're here to see a "play" about the "hopes and fears" of humanity.

The speaker goes on to say that the "play" is accompanied by the sounds of the "orchestra," which is "breath[ing] fitfully / The music of the spheres." "The music of the spheres" alludes to an ancient concept that suggests the movement of the planets, stars, sun, and so on creates its own "music," sounds that are not audible to the ear, but to the soul. This hints that the "play"—and in fact this whole scenario—is metaphorical rather than literal.

LINES 9-14

Mimes, in the form of God on high,
Mutter and mumble low,
And hither and thither fly—
Mere puppets they, who come and go
At bidding of vast formless things
That shift the scenery to and fro,

After the stanza break, the speaker describes what is happening in this metaphorical play:

> Mimes, in the form of God on high,
> Mutter and mumble low,
> And hither and thither fly—

In other words, actors play the part of human beings (who are traditionally said to be made in God's "form," or image). These actors go back and forth across the stage muttering to themselves. The muted /m/ alliteration of "mimes" and "mutter and mumble" suggests the audience can barely hear what they're saying; their words aren't what's important here.

Notice, too, the use of parallelism, which pairs "mutter and mumble" with "hither and thither." The repetition builds rhythm and also suggests that these "Mimes" are just doing the same things over and over again without any real sense of direction or purpose.

Indeed, the speaker says these actors (and the human beings they represent) are "Mere puppets." They don't actually decide where they're going or what they're doing; instead, they are simply responding to "vast formless things / That shift the scenery to and fro." It isn't clear whether these "vast formless things" are gods or just circumstances that are out of their control, but either way the poem implies that human beings don't get to choose much of what happens to them. Like "puppets" in a show, they seem to exist for the entertainment of the angels in the audience.

LINES 15-20

Flapping from out their Condor wings
Invisible Wo!
That motley drama—oh, be sure
It shall not be forgot!
With its Phantom chased for evermore
By a crowd that seize it not,

The speaker describes the "vast formless things" that control humanity as "Flapping from out their Condor wings / Invisible Wo!" In other words, they're rather like condors, or vultures: carrion birds that feed on death. These "formless" beings, dispensing "Invisible Wo" (that is, invisible *woe*, sorrows) might thus sustain themselves on human flesh. Hardly the creatures you'd want pulling the puppet strings! In this vision, humanity is steered by beings that definitely don't have its best interests in mind.

In the third stanza, the speaker says this "motley drama" (that is, this chaotic play) could never "be forgot": it's a spectacle that leaves a deep impression on those who see it. In part, that's because it represents humanity's desperate, futile search for meaning in a world that offers them none. The actors on stage,

the speaker goes on, eternally chase a "Phantom" that they can never "seize." The word "Phantom" might imply a ghost or specter, but it can also describe a delusion or figment of the imagination. This suggests that humanity is forever pursuing something it can't catch: perhaps a sense of purpose or destiny, perhaps just plain old hope.

The metaphorical human drama this poem depicts so far, in other words, is chaotic, disorderly, meaningless, and downright terrifying. Humanity scampers around futilely under the control of fearsome vulture-like spirits that send them only "Invisible Wo."

Notice the continued use of exclamation points in lines 16 and 18. All that exclaiming contributes to the poem's building intensity: the speaker is like someone telling a ghost story in the dark, playing with volume and delivery in order to frighten their audience all the more. The speaker's melodramatic relish makes this dark tale rather fun to read, even while the poem describes the general fear and misery of humankind.

LINES 21-24

Through a circle that ever returneth in
To the self-same spot,
And much of Madness, and more of Sin,
And Horror the soul of the plot.

The speaker elaborates on humanity's "drama," saying that as people pursue a "Phantom" of meaning, they run in a circle that only ever returns to the "self-same spot" it started at. This suggests that humanity is like a dog chasing its own tail: people are only ever going in "circle[s]" trying to catch up with whatever it is that haunts them. Hissing /s/ alliteration ("circle," "self-same spot") evokes the speaker's disdain for the foolishness of human beings, who never seem to get anywhere new.

Indeed, the speaker goes on to characterize humanity's entire existence as chock-full of "Madness" and "Sin." If there is any "plot" to this metaphorical "play," the speaker says, it's pure "Horror." Humanity, in other words, is completely wretched, miserable, and powerless. It still isn't clear whether the speaker thinks humans have no free will, or whether they simply *act* as if they don't. Either way, it seems nothing will ever change:

> And much of Madness, and more of Sin,
> And Horror the soul of the plot.

The anaphora on "and" suggests the way that "Madness" and "Sin" just keep on perpetuating themselves, so that humanity is stuck in an endless cycle of "Horror."

Notice, too, the use of /m/ alliteration and sibilance in these lines:

> And much of Madness, and more of Sin,
> And Horror the soul of the plot.

These emphatic, dramatic sounds make this metaphorical "play"—and humanity's existence—sound all the more terrifying.

LINES 25-30

But see, amid the mimic rout,
A crawling shape intrude!
A blood-red thing that writhes from out
The scenic solitude!
It writhes!—it writhes!—with mortal pangs
The mimes become its food,

Yet in the fourth stanza, something actually *does* change. "But see," the speaker tells readers: out of the middle of all this repetitive chaos, "a crawling shape intrude[s]" on the human drama. The speaker describes it as "a blood-red thing," and says that it "writhes from out / The scenic solitude." In other words, while human beings (and humanity in general) are busy chasing their own tails, this monstrosity lurks in the background and finally bursts onto the scene.

Note the speaker's dark glee as they describe this revolting creature:

> But see, amid the mimic rout,
> A crawling shape intrude!
> A blood-red thing that writhes from out
> The scenic solitude!
> It writhes!—It writhes!— [...]

The poet uses four exclamation points in the span of a few lines, reaching a fever pitch of drama. The speaker seems both disgusted and amazed by this inhuman "shape," and it's hard to tell whether they're shouting with horror or excitement—or both. This gives the poem a macabre humor; there's a certain thrill to watching this terrible nightmare unfold.

Notice the use of diacope and epizeuxis in lines 27 and 29, with the repetition of the word "writhes" and the phrase "It writhes!—It writhes!—" This emphatic repetition paints a queasy picture of this creature's squirming motion. This dreadful beast, readers can guess, must be the titular "Conqueror Worm."

At last, all the actors onstage "become its food," suffering "mortal pangs" (that is, the pains of death) as its nasty teeth rip away at them. This worm, readers gather, must be a symbol of Death itself, the thing that makes everyone into worm food sooner or later.

LINES 31-36

And seraphs sob at vermin fangs
In human gore imbued.
Out—out are the lights—out all!
And, over each quivering form,
The curtain, a funeral pall,

Comes down with the rush of a storm,

As the Worm sinks its "vermin fangs" into the bodies of the actors, the speaker says, the angels in the audience weep. They are moved and horrified by this play, but they don't intervene. This suggests that humanity is ultimately on its own. The "Conqueror Worm," a symbol for death, cannot be defeated even by the angels.

After the stanza break, the speaker says that the lights in the theater go dark. The play has ended, and the curtain falls like a "funeral pall" over the bodies of the dying actors, a metaphor that reiterates the idea that the human drama ends only in death.

Diacope on the word "out" suggests how final this ending is:

> Out—out are the lights—out all!

The "lights" are the theater lighting, but they also call to mind the metaphorical "light" of life that goes out when someone dies. When the speaker says that *all* the lights have gone out, they might thus be hinting at a total apocalypse—just the thing you would expect from the "lonesome latter years" of humanity's time on earth. The Worm, then, might represent not just death, but the end of humanity in general.

LINES 37-40

While the angels, all pallid and wan,
Uprising, unveiling, affirm
That the play is the tragedy, "Man,"
And its hero, the Conqueror Worm.

In the last four lines of the poem, the speaker zooms back out from the metaphorical play to the audience of angels who have been watching it.

As the curtain lowers, the angels stand up; they are "all pallid and wan"—or pale and queasy from watching the relentless suffering and carnage of mortal life and death. The speaker says the angels:

> Uprising, unveiling, affirm
> That the play is the tragedy "Man,"

In other words, as they take their veils off, the shaken angels agree that the production they just saw was a "tragedy." In theater, a tragedy is a play in which terrible things happen and the ending is decidedly unhappy. In other words, human existence is pretty awful: life is marked by constant pain and suffering, and it inevitably ends in death.

A tragedy is also often specifically a tale about the downfall of a particular character. In this case, that character is "Man"—humanity itself.

Finally, the angels agree that the "hero" of this tragedy is "The Conqueror Worm"—that is, death. The plot of the human drama, in other words, is one in which death wins out in the end, the star of the show.

Regardless of their individual or collective struggles, this macabre, gleeful poem declares, human beings and humanity at large is doomed. Life is nothing but meaningless, painful folly, and it ends in universal gruesome demise. Perhaps, though, the speaker's sheer relish of this hyperbolic idea suggests that, at the very least, we all might get a grim laugh out of our predicament.

SYMBOLS

THE WORM

The titular "Conqueror Worm" that devours everyone at the end of the poem symbolizes death—as well as an end to the endless cycle of "Madness" and "Sin" that human beings inflict on one another.

The Worm appears on the periphery of the stage where humanity plays out its futile drama, sinking its "vermin fangs" into human flesh and ending the metaphorical play. In other words, the Worm represents death, which likewise puts an end to all human "hopes and fears."

At the end of the poem, the angels deem this Worm the "hero" of the "tragedy" of humanity. This suggests that death doesn't just triumph over one or a few humans, but over humanity as a whole. As such, the Worm may also symbolize apocalypse: the end of human life altogether. The poem seems to imply that while humans are busy running around in futile circles, the end of the world is approaching—an end that might be a direct *result* of humanity's helpless inability to change course.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 25-32:** "But see, amid the mimic rout, / A crawling shape intrude! / A blood-red thing that writhes from out / The scenic solitude! / It writhes!—it writhes!—with mortal pangs / The mimes become its food, / And seraphs sob at vermin fangs / In human gore imbued."
- **Lines 39-40:** "That the play is the tragedy, "Man," / And its hero, the Conqueror Worm."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

An abundance of alliteration lends the poem rhythm and musicality, making it feel more intensely dramatic. Take a look at the first four lines, for instance, where /l/ and /be/ alliteration start the poem off with a flourish:

Lo! 'tis a gala night
Within the lonesome latter years!
An angel throng, bewinged, bedight
In veils, and drowned in tears,

These intense sounds are fitting for a poem that presents all of human history as a gruesome tragedy put on for angels at some heavenly "gala"!

In lines 9-12, /m/ alliteration evokes the muffled sounds of unspeaking actors moving back and forth across the stage:

Mimes, in the form of God on high,
Mutter and mumble low,

Those muted sounds (supported by the /m/ consonance in "mimes" and "mumble") evoke the muffled quiet onstage, helping the reader share the suspense the angels must be feeling while watching this "play."

Whispery /s/ alliteration and more general sibilance in lines 19-22, meanwhile, emphasize humanity's utter lack of progress. The speaker says that ultimately humans always end up returning "To the self-same spot." Here, the hiss of the /s/ sounds evokes the speaker's scorn for human beings, who never seem to learn from their mistakes.

These are only a few examples of the copious alliteration throughout the poem. Everywhere alliteration appears, it contributes to the speaker's melodramatic, hyperbolic tone, making this tale of universal woe and despair feel that much more theatrical.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "Lo"
- **Line 2:** "lonesome," "latter"
- **Line 3:** "bewinged," "bedight"
- **Line 5:** "Sit," "see"
- **Line 6:** "fears"
- **Line 7:** "fitfully"
- **Line 9:** "Mimes"
- **Line 10:** "Mutter," "mumble"
- **Line 12:** "Mere"
- **Line 13:** "formless"
- **Line 14:** "fro"
- **Line 15:** "Flapping," "from," "wings"
- **Line 16:** "Wo"
- **Line 17:** "sure"
- **Line 18:** "shall"
- **Line 19:** "Phantom"
- **Line 20:** "seize"
- **Line 21:** "circle"
- **Line 22:** "self," "same," "spot"
- **Line 23:** "much," "Madness," "more," "Sin"
- **Line 24:** "soul"
- **Line 25:** "see"
- **Line 27:** "red," "writhes"
- **Line 28:** "scenic," "solitude"
- **Line 29:** "mortal"
- **Line 30:** "mimes," "food"
- **Line 31:** "seraphs," "sob," "fangs"
- **Line 34:** "form"
- **Line 35:** "curtain," "funeral"
- **Line 36:** "Comes"
- **Line 38:** "Uprising," "unveiling," "affirm"

EXTENDED METAPHOR

The poem is one long extended metaphor in which human life is compared to a terrible play.

The poem sets up the metaphor in the first stanza, with the speaker saying that "angel[s]" have gathered inside a "theatre, to see / A play of hopes and fears." This suggests that human existence is mere entertainment for the angels. It might also imply that the fate of humanity has already been decided; like a "play" that's been scripted and rehearsed, this production has no room for improvisation.

The speaker goes on to present human beings as "mimes, in the form of God on high." But while they might look and sound like their creator, the speaker says, people are "mere puppets," acting according to the whims of "vast formless things" that "shift the scenery to and fro." The metaphor again suggests that human beings have no real free will, and are simply at the mercy of mysterious forces who send more and more difficulties their way.

In the third stanza, the speaker says that this "motley drama" goes on and on, with human beings always returning "to the self-same spot." In other words, humanity never really changes. Human history is full of "Madness" and "Sin," and so the play's "plot" is one of endless "Horror."

In the fourth stanza, however, the speaker turns their attention to "a crawling shape" that "writhes from out / The scenic solitude." While human beings run back and forth without ever really getting anywhere new, this monstrous "Worm" bursts onto the stage and sinks its "fangs" into one actor after the other, bringing all that circular action to a nasty and sudden end. This suggests that no matter how human beings struggle and suffer, their end will always be the same: no one can outrun death, and humanity is doomed.

As the play concludes and the stage lights go dark, the angels rise, pale and queasy from what they've seen. They all agree that the "tragedy" they just watched can be titled "Man"—thus reinforcing the idea that the whole poem is a metaphor for human existence. They then deem the ravenous "Worm" the "hero" of the play, suggesting that death will always triumph

over life in the end.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-40

REPETITION

Various kinds of repetition create rhythm and emphasis throughout the poem.

Take a look at the parallelism in lines 10-11, for instance:

> Mutter and mumble low,
> And hither and thither fly—

The similar sentence structure here creates momentum—and suggests that the actors are just muttering and wandering, with no real direction or sense of purpose. The speaker uses a similar trick in lines 12 and 14 with the phrases "come and go," and "to and fro."

The speaker also uses anaphora in lines 23-24:

> And much of Madness, and more of Sin,
> And Horror the soul of the plot.

Here, anaphora and polysyndeton (the repetition of the conjunction "and") create a relentless rhythm that makes it feel as if the poem is rising towards an emotional climax. Notice that the two clauses in line 23 ("And much of Madness, and more of Sin") are grammatically parallel, while the longer clause in line 24 ("And Horror the soul of the plot") is not. The change draws extra attention to line 24, stressing the idea that "Horror" sits at the center of human existence.

Diacope and epizeuxis lend emphasis and melodrama to lines 27-29:

> A blood-red thing that writhes from out
> The scenic solitude!
> It writhes!—It writhes!—with mortal pangs

"Writhes" is a visceral word, evoking not just the twisting motion of the Worm itself, but the way "mortal" bodies squirm in pain as the Worm bites into their flesh. The repetition stops readers in their tracks, forcing them to linger on this terrible moment.

Poe uses epizeuxis and diacope to similar effect in line 33:

> Out—out are the lights—out all!

The repetition emphasizes the utter darkness that falls as the Worm completes its grisly task.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "and"
- **Line 11:** "and"
- **Line 12:** "and"
- **Line 14:** "and"
- **Line 23:** "And," "and"
- **Line 24:** "And"
- **Line 26:** "A"
- **Line 27:** "A," "writhes"
- **Line 29:** "It writhes!—it writhes!—"
- **Line 33:** "Out—out," "out"

IMAGERY

The poem uses vivid and visceral imagery to evoke the "Horror" of life and the dreadfulness of death.

In the beginning, the speaker describes the audience of "angel[s]" as "bewinged" and "bedight" (or adorned) "in veils, and drowned in tears." This dramatic description sets the stage for the poem's tone: strangely luxurious, macabre, and over the top, as one would expect a proper "Horror" story to be.

The speaker also sets the tone by describing "the orchestra" as "breath[ing] fitfully / The music of the spheres." The personification of the "orchestra" makes it sound like it's practically on its deathbed, wheezing out eerie, erratic melodies.

Once the metaphorical "play" begins, the speaker describes the actors as "Mimes" who "Mutter and mumble low, / And hither and thither fly." From the angels' perspective, then, humans don't make much sense: their words are muted and their movements are aimless.

The speaker goes on to explain that this is because humans aren't really making decisions of their own. They're simply acting in accordance with invisible powers who "Flap" sorrows at them like some sort of "Condor" (or vulture). Since vultures are known for scavenging dead things, the imagery suggests that whatever is in charge of human destiny thrives on their suffering.

When the titular "Worm" arrives, the speaker's horror feels almost gleeful:

> But see, amid the mimic rout,
> A crawling shape intrude!
> A blood-red thing that writhes from out
> The scenic solitude!

There's no doubt that this "blood-red thing" is awful to behold. The speaker will soon picture its "vermin fangs" sinking deep into "human gore"—blood and guts. Still, the poet's enthusiastic use of exclamation points and vivid detail in this scene make the poem's tale of universal meaningless suffering feel downright

fun to read: Poe revels in the horror here.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 3-4:** "An angel throng, bewinged, bedight / In veils, and drowned in tears,"
- **Lines 7-8:** "While the orchestra breathes fitfully / The music of the spheres."
- **Lines 9-11:** "Mimes, in the form of God on high, / Mutter and mumble low, / And hither and thither fly—"
- **Lines 15-16:** "Flapping from out their Condor wings / Invisible Wo!"
- **Lines 25-32:** "But see, amid the mimic rout, / A crawling shape intrude! / A blood-red thing that writhes from out / The scenic solitude! / It writhes!—it writhes!—with mortal pangs / The mimes become its food, / And seraphs sob at vermin fangs / In human gore imbued."
- **Lines 33-37:** "Out—out are the lights—out all! / And, over each quivering form, / The curtain, a funeral pall, / Comes down with the rush of a storm, / While the angels, all pallid and wan,"

ALLUSION

Lines 7-8 allude to a philosophical concept known as *music universalis*: that is, universal music, also known as the music of the spheres or the harmony of the spheres:

> While the orchestra breathes fitfully
> The music of the spheres.

The theory of universal music dates back to ancient Greece, and was later described in greater detail by the 16th-century astronomer Johannes Kepler. Basically, the theory suggests that the movements of the sun, the moon, the planets, and so on created a kind of music that wasn't audible to the *ear*, but to the *soul*.

The poem's allusion to this concept reinforces the poem's extended metaphor, as the "orchestra" playing this music isn't a literal one. Rather, it's a reminder that earth and everything that happens there is small compared to the vast cosmos which surrounds it. Poe here suggests that part of the horror of life is its tiny meaninglessness, not just its active pain! The eerie music of the indifferent universe plays on even as human beings live out their pointless lives and gruesome deaths.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 7-8:** "While the orchestra breathes fitfully / The music of the spheres."

VOCABULARY

Lo (Line 1) - An exclamation that means the speaker is drawing the reader's attention to something astonishing—rather like "Look!" or "Behold!"

Gala (Line 1) - Used as an adjective, "gala" means "festive" or "splendid."

Throng (Line 3) - A crowd.

Bewinged (Line 3) - Having wings.

Bedight (Line 3) - Adorned.

Fitfully (Line 7) - Erratically, uneasily.

Mimes (Line 9) - Actors who use exaggerated facial expressions and movements (and often do not speak at all).

Hither and thither (Line 11) - Here and there.

Mere (Line 12) - No more than.

At bidding (Line 13) - At the beck and call of; controlled by.

To and fro (Line 14) - Back and forth.

Condor (Line 15) - A large vulture.

Wo (Line 16) - Another spelling of "Woe," meaning "sorrow."

Motley (Line 17) - Made up of odd or mismatched parts; chaotic.

Returneth (Line 21) - Returns.

Self-same (Line 22) - The exact same.

Amid the mimic rout (Line 25) - In the middle of the mimes' partying.

Scenic (Line 28) - To do with the play's scenery, or backdrops.

Seraphs (Line 31) - Angels.

Vermin fangs in human gore imbued (Lines 31-32) - Disgusting, parasitic teeth soaked in human blood.

A funeral pall (Line 35) - The cloth that covers a coffin at a funeral.

Pallid and wan (Line 37) - Pale and colorless, as if ill.

Affirm (Line 38) - Acknowledge or agree.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Conqueror Worm" is built from five octaves (or eight-line stanzas). It doesn't use a conventional form (like the sonnet or the villanelle), but it still feels controlled due to its use of accentual meter and a strict rhyme scheme.

Alternating between longer and shorter lines, the poem takes on an undulating shape that echoes the "writh[ing]" of the titular "Worm." The back-and-forth motion of the lines also

hints at the way humanity seems incapable of changing its ways, always returning "to the self-same spot."

METER

The poem is written in accentual meter, meaning that although lines don't use consistent feet, they use fairly regular numbers of stresses. In this poem, Poe mostly uses a mixture of lines with three stresses and lines with four. Take the first four lines, for example:

> Lo! 'tis a gala night
> Within the lonesome latter years!
> An angel throng, bewinged, bedight
> In veils, and drowned in tears

The mixture of three-stress lines and four-stress lines here feels destabilizing and sinister. There's no steady meter to sink into here, only a lurching and unpredictable pattern.

Later on, however, Poe settles into a more regular rhythm. Look what happens in lines 17-20:

> That motley drama—oh, be sure
> It shall not be forgot!
> With its Phantom chased for evermore
> By a crowd that seize it not,

Here, there's a predictable alternation between lines with four stresses and lines with three. That consistent pattern only stays put in the third and fourth stanzas, however. Elsewhere, Poe breaks the pattern with lines as short as the two-stress "Invisible Wo!" in line 16, making sure no reader gets too comfortable with this poem's scenes of horror.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem follows this strict rhyme scheme:

ABABCBCB

This steady pattern, with its insistent B rhymes, creates a heightened sense of drama—appropriate for a poem depicting life as a horrific play witnessed by a crowd of despairing angels!

Most of the poem's end rhymes are exact: "high" and "fly," "things" and "wings," and so on. But there are a few slant rhymes as well. Perhaps most dramatic are the slant rhymes at the end of the poem, which match "form" and "storm" with "affirm" and "Worm," disrupting the rhyme scheme just as the Conqueror Worm disrupts the terrible play.

SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem is omniscient and anonymous. They don't reveal anything about themselves, but rather describe the "play" and its audience of angels in a way that implies the whole poem is a metaphor for the chaotic history and dismal fate of humanity more generally.

Unlike the angels, who are "drowned in tears" and pale with horror, the speaker seems to almost take delight in describing this "motley drama." (For instance, the frequent use of exclamation points makes the speaker's tone feel pretty enthusiastic at times.) This ghoulish speaker sees human existence as a lost cause—a "tragedy" one perhaps shouldn't get too invested in since it will inevitably end in death.

SETTING

The poem's setting is entirely metaphorical. The speaker describes a "gala night" (or a special event) during the "lonesome latter years" of humanity—an image that might suggest the end of the world itself. At this event, a crowd of angels gather to watch a theatrical production.

In stanzas 2-4, the speaker describes the play itself: "Mimes" (or silent actors) representing humanity move around onstage like "puppets," an image that suggests humans don't have any real control over what happens to them. They simply respond to the unseen powers that constantly change the "scenery" and release sorrows from beneath their "Condor" (or vulture) "wings." Vultures are commonly associated with death; the imagery here implies that whatever it is that controls human destiny doesn't have anything pleasant in store.

As this chaotic drama unfolds, nothing ever really seems to change. People run around in "circle[s]," mindlessly making the same terrible mistakes. It seems the "Madness" and "Horror" will continue on endlessly.

But it turns out that isn't the case. All of a sudden, a horrible "blood-red thing" appears from out of nowhere. This "writh[ing]" creature devours the actors and the angels weep as the play becomes a bloodbath.

When the show is over, the angels, practically sick, agree that the play they just watched is a metaphor for human existence in all its futility, misery, and horror.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) was an important and influential 19th-century writer: a major figure not just in the United States, where he was born and lived most of his life, but all over the world. He is best known for his short stories and essays, but poetry was his first love. While he's considered one of the fathers of the horror genre, he also set the stage for later styles like realism, mystery, and science fiction. His work would go on to influence French Symbolism and Surrealism, two movements which dramatically reshaped literature in the late 19th century.

Poe himself was deeply indebted to the sinister stories of E.T.A. Hoffmann and to Ann Radcliffe's 18th-century Gothic romance novels. Poe's work also has roots in Romanticism, the dominant poetic movement during his lifetime. Where earlier Enlightenment-era writers like Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift aspired to elegant phrasings and satirical wit, the Romantics preferred to write passionate verse that valued the mysteries and terrors of the imagination over crisp rationality. Poe's nightmarish visions fit right into that tradition.

In 1838, Poe published "Ligeia," a short story in which the titular character writes "The Conqueror Worm" and the speaker, her husband, reads it after she has died. "The Conqueror Worm" was later published as a stand-alone poem in the January 1843 issue of *Graham's Magazine*. The poem was finally collected in *The Raven and Other Poems* (1845).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Poe's life was a tragic one; it's no wonder he wrote poems about the "Horror" of living.

Poe was born to the actors David and Elizabeth Poe in 1809. David Poe abandoned his family in 1810, and less than a year later, Elizabeth Poe died of tuberculosis. In the wake of this tragedy, the young Poe and his siblings were separated, all sent to different foster families.

Poe's relationship with his foster mother, Frances Allan, was affectionate, but overshadowed by his contentious relationship with his foster father, John Allan. Although John was a father figure to Poe growing up, the two became more and more combative as Poe grew older. Allan was stingy with his resources, and repeatedly failed to send Poe enough money for basic expenses while Poe attended school. Poe tried to increase the little that he had by gambling, but this just drove him into debt and further alienated Allan. Unable to pay his debts, Poe quit school and in 1827 enlisted in the army, hoping to gain some independence.

Frances Allan died in 1829 after a long and painful illness. It's likely that John Allan didn't even write Poe to let him know his foster mother was sick: Poe missed her funeral, arriving the day after she was buried. Not long after, Allan remarried and formally disowned Poe. Poe was left to make his living as a writer.

Poe's 1845 publication of "The Raven" won him considerable fame, but it didn't exactly pave an easy path to success. The publishers he worked with often paid their writers late or not at all. Poe thus grappled with financial difficulties throughout his life. He died poor and obscure, not knowing what a vast influence his work would have on later generations of writers.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Aloud — Hear the poem recited—with gusto!—by American actor Vincent Price. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zIJ5CAGUrqU)
- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Edgar Allan Poe's life and work. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/edgar-allan-poe)
- Poe's Manuscripts — Peruse an online catalogue of Poe's letters, manuscripts, and personal belongings from the Poe Museum. (https://poemuseum.catalogaccess.com)
- Poe's "Ligeia" — Read "Ligeia"—a story of Poe's that includes "The Conqueror Worm" as part of its plot. (https://poestories.com/read/ligeia)
- Poe's Legacy — Read an article about Poe's contributions to literature, his enduring legacy, and the circuitous way his work entered the mainstream. (https://www.mysteryscenemag.com/blog-article/38-evermore-the-enduring-influence-of-edgar-allan-poe)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER EDGAR ALLAN POE POEMS

- A Dream Within a Dream
- Alone
- Annabel Lee
- Sonnet to Science
- To Helen

HOW TO CITE

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