THE SADDEST WORD

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Sir James Barrie describes in his autobiography that he was once travelling on the Scotch Express -- it was not then called the Flying Scotsman -- from Edinburgh to London, and further describes how five young ladies boarded his compartment at Carlisle and had an animated discussion on the topic: Which is the saddest word in the English language?

One, recalling Poe, plumped for nevermore. Another, a Shakespeare fan and a student of King Lear, voted for a plain never. The most aesthetic-looking girl preferred it might have been. Barrie does not mention (or remember) what the other two said, but recalled that they did not reach a consensus. But the nag remained.

There is much to be said for nevermore. "Quoth the raven, nevermore." Nevermore always sounds like the wail of a broken heart. Nevermore is what the waves say, or seem to say, as they dash against the sullen shores and the sea-gulls take up the response or refrain. Nevermore is the grave of human hopes and aspirations turned into and churned with sourness, sickness and ghastliness. It revives the past without redeeming it, making the future even more unbearable and bitter.

Nevermore, like the ubi sunt formula, is at the root of much, if not all, nostalgia. No one can help asking himself, others, gods and God:

Where are the snows of the yesteryear? Where are the loved ones? Where is the friendship by the fireside, the handclasps in the dark? Where the blushing, beautiful faces? Whither are fled the starlit or stormy nights on the river, the boatmen singing strange, spontaneous strains of primal music?

The river glides on, not letting anyone put his same foot twice in its waters. The tender grace of the day that is dead, of the play that is over, will nevermore come back.
On the other hand, a strong case can be presented for never as a sadder word than nevermore. Never is surely more nihilistic, crisper, perhaps more existentialistic than nevermore, for, as the Buddhists would love to say (I wonder what Freud and Jung would have said?) it does not even allow or imply the pleasures of memory. The disappearance of memory, incidentally, means the exit of transcendentalistic epistemology -- Platonic, Hindu and the rest -- and mnemonics.

Nevermore implies that though one might be old, senile, and grey and full of sleep, there have been golden moments of happiness to which one can fondly look back. No such sloppy solace can be had from the stern never.

Nevermore is futuristic, while never encloses the past as well as the future. Never connotes that you know what you have missed and must go on missing to the (bitter) end. (A word is often profaned by overuse, but one wishes that the word had never come one's way. Never is a great but tragic example.) Never is the appropriate word for elegiac moments, a word in keeping with falling, decaying, yellow leaves, the branches shivering in the cold ("burning cold" as Shelley would say; compare it with the Emersonian expression, used non-philosophically here, "ice will burn"), and the birds silent and songless.

The words it might have been always conceal and half-reveal a tragedy, evoking an unshakeable feeling that all one's yesterdays have been a letdown. Nevermore deals with the inevitable. Similarly, howsoever bitter never might be, it is not chargeable to one's account, to use the language of Milton in "On His Blindness." It might have been is, too, an epitome of all regrets -- and all regrets are vain. It is like saying: it is sackcloth and ashes now, but it might have been a silver wedding. One is back at the gate of one's glittering youth -- all honeysuckles and the bees humming, as in the poetry of Homer and Kalidasa.

Some would consider a faded flower the emblem of sadness. In contrast, a blooming flower is the symbol of joy precisely because it is shortlived, here today and gone tomorrow. Faded flowers, discolored ribbons, old albums, scrapbooks, keepsakes and the like sound so terribly depressing and evocative.

And, yet the saddest thing is a saddening word rolled on the tongue, almost sipped like old, delicious wine. An example is a bunch of beautiful ladies in the company of an elderly man saying "He is quite harmless." Nothing more damaging could be said about the old fellow to endow him with his previous "heteroclital sins," as
Thomas Browne put it so well in *Enquires Into Vulgar Errors*. Shades of nevermore, never and it might have been rise, combine, and confront the man in dotage.

**QUERY**

In the May 1969 *Word Ways*, Leigh Mercer presented a pair of 6x10 pentomino rectangles in which the individual pentominoes move from one to the other without rotating. In the August 1969 and February 1970 issues, J.A. Lindon demonstrated that ten six-letter words can be placed in one of the rectangles in such a manner that the rearrangement of the pentominoes in the other rectangle yields ten other six-letter words. Leigh Mercer subsequently discovered a pair of 5x12 pentomino rectangles with the same rotational invariance; these are reproduced below. Can the reader place twelve five-letter words in one rectangle so that they rearrange to twelve other five-letter words in the second rectangle? Should this task prove too easy, the problem can be solved three more times — by inverting both rectangles, by turning both rectangles over, and by performing both operations.