

Original Article

Edgar Allan Poe's "Philosophy of Composition" and Its Application in "The Raven"

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ABSTRACT: *In "The Philosophy of Composition," Edgar Allan Poe sets out, step by step, the elements he considers essential to a successful literary work: length, unity of effect, and technique, illustrated throughout by his own poem "The Raven." This article examines that essay alongside the poem it claims to explain. It argues that whatever the truth of Poe's retrospective account of his own method, the essay supplies a genuinely useful vocabulary for describing what "The Raven" actually does. The ways in which its length, refrain, rhyme scheme, and choice of subject work together to produce a single, sustained melancholic effect. The article also takes up the long-standing skepticism surrounding Poe's account, from T.S. Eliot's doubts about whether the poem's imperfections are consistent with the calculation Poe describes to Joseph Wood Krutch's characterization of the essay as an exercise in rationalization. It considers why the essay was nonetheless taken up so readily by Baudelaire and, through him, by the French Symbolists. Read as either a literal account of composition or as a retrospective justification, "The Philosophy of Composition" remains one of the most influential statements of poetic craft in the language, and "The Raven" its most thoroughly annotated test case.*

KEYWORDS: *Edgar Allan Poe, The Raven; Philosophy of Composition, Unity of Effect, Poetic Form.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe takes the time to explain, step by step, the elements that make up a good literary work. The essay delivers what its title promises, which is an account of what literature is and what it does when it achieves what Poe calls the unity of effect. To illustrate what he means, Poe uses his own poem "The Raven" as an example. "The Raven" is a narrative poem about a young man mourning the death of his lover and recounting his strange encounter with a mysterious ebony bird, and it is often considered Poe's greatest and best-known work. "The Philosophy of Composition" sets out three considerations that Poe treats as essential to the writing of literature, length, unity of effect, and technique, relating each back to "The Raven" in turn.

On its surface, "The Raven" offers plenty to unsettle a reader such as a dark night, a lost love, the death of a young woman, and a mysterious bird. Beneath these elements runs a tension between the natural and the supernatural. Throughout the poem, the speaker clearly needs the ebony-feathered bird to answer questions he cannot otherwise resolve, perhaps in the hope that it might ease his grief. However, the raven is not a supernatural creature with otherworldly knowledge, only a bird, and the speaker knows as much. His grief and heartbreak nonetheless distort his ability to separate the natural from the supernatural. Instead of settling for the most likely explanation of events, he comes to believe that the raven is taunting him, mocking him by answering every question with 'Nevermore.' The poem offers a glimpse into Poe's characteristic preoccupations while showcasing his skill in poetic composition.

2. DENOUEMENT AND THE PRIMACY OF EFFECT

"Nothing is more clear," writes Poe, "than that every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its dénouement before anything be attempted with the pen" (Poe, 1846, p. 163). Poe opens his discussion by insisting that a literary work should begin with its conclusion, or dénouement, before the writer works backwards to the motivations and causes that lead to that finale. Poe argues that only through this method can the plot acquire an indispensable air of consequence. The dénouement must remain constantly in view. Poe maintains that the intended effect should be settled first, with the whole plot organized around it. After this, the writer determines what combination of incidents and tone will most effectively produce that effect. He defends this method as a form of construction that does not sacrifice originality. It is at this point that Poe turns to "The Raven" at length, describing how he claims to have built the poem by following the very steps he has just outlined.

3. LENGTH

The first argument Poe advances concerns length. He states that the extent of a literary work must always be short, maintaining that there is a distinct limit to all works of literary art, set by what can be read in a single sitting. All literary work, and particularly poems, should therefore be short enough to be read at once, while still running to roughly one hundred lines. Poe accordingly urges poets to settle on the proper length for the poem they intend to write:

The extent of a poem may be made to bear mathematical relation to its merit [...] to the degree of the true poetical effect which it is capable of inducing; for it is clear that the brevity must be in direct ratio of the intensity of the intended effect: this, with one proviso that a certain degree of duration is absolutely requisite for the production of any effect at all. (Poe, 1846, p. 165)

Poe stresses length because he wants literature to be read and appreciated by intellectuals and common readers alike. In his view, a poem's intensity should be within reach of the popular reader without falling so low as to be dismissed by critics. This is why Poe advocates for poems of roughly one hundred lines, and "The Raven" itself runs to one hundred and eight lines across eighteen six-line stanzas. This mathematical approach to the composition of poetry drew considerable criticism in Poe's own time and after. Many writers have argued that a poem cannot simply be contained within a predetermined number of lines, and that the process of writing poetry ought to be spontaneous and uninhibited rather than calculated in advance.

4. UNITY OF EFFECT AND THE PROVINCE OF BEAUTY

Poe next urges the author to infuse the work with the desired emotional response, a principle he calls the unity of effect. The writer is instructed to settle every other detail, tone, theme, setting, characters, conflict, and plot, only after deciding in advance the single impression the work is meant to leave on the reader. The aim is to draw out emotion through the poem's setting and predicament. This is visible in "The Raven" in the contrast between the calm of the narrator's chamber and the turbulent storm outside, as well as in the speaker's lingering grief for his beloved Lenore, a grief that cannot be diminished. Poe clearly wants to do more than hold the reader's attention; he wants to produce an emotional response. He claims it is through this unity of effect that "The Raven" achieves its broad appeal.

Now I designate Beauty as the province of the poem, merely because it is an obvious rule of Art that effects should be made to spring from direct causes that objects should be attained through means best adapted for their attainment no one as yet having been weak enough to deny that the peculiar elevation alluded to, is most readily attained in the poem. (Poe, 1846, p. 165)

Poe declares Beauty the sole legitimate province of the poem, clarifying that he means beauty not as a quality but as an effect, one that can only be pointed to rather than described. For Poe, Beauty is the most intense, pure, and elevating of all pleasures. Once he has settled on beauty as the poem's province, he treats sadness as its highest manifestation. "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" (Poe, 1846, p. 165). Poe recommends to every author, whatever the tone of the poem in question, the technique of the refrain that he himself employs, and that is a repeated key-note in word, phrase, or image that sustains the poem's mood. He justifies the device by noting that it "is not only 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" (Poe, 1846, p. 165).

5. THE REFRAIN AND THE SYMBOLISM OF THE RAVEN

This principle is realized in "The Raven" through the word 'Nevermore.' Poe suggests that repeating a word throughout a poem heightens both its effect and the weight of the statement it carries, and the repetition of 'Nevermore' accordingly accentuates the grief, despair, and fatalistic hopelessness of the speaker. While the narrator mourns his lost love, the dark bird taps at his window and perches on a bust of Pallas above his chamber door. With its fiery eyes, the raven's expression is serious and unyielding. Associated with the forces of darkness, the bird can speak, but 'Nevermore' is the only word it mysteriously knows. Poe maintains that the sound of 'Nevermore,' and what it evokes as a word, is intertwined with memory and loss, specifically the speaker's own.

Through the refrain and the unity of effect together, Poe sets the poem's melancholic tone, reinforced by details such as the stormy night, the dark raven, and the month of December, historically associated with the powers of evil and darkness and therefore a fitting setting for the poem. The tempest outside further heightens the eerie, frightful atmosphere that Poe establishes from the opening lines. However, the poem's central symbol is the raven itself, chosen because it can speak while lacking reason. Its black feathers signify death, set against the white marble of the Pallas Athena bust that signifies wisdom. Ravens are typically seen as a sign of ill omen, which makes Poe's choice of bird well suited to the poem's melancholic register.

6. THEME: THE DEATH OF A BEAUTIFUL WOMAN

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. (Poe, 1846, p. 166)

Contrary to the practice of many writers, Poe moves from the abstract to the concrete, treating his characters as vehicles for ideas rather than the reverse. After having settled on the poem's tone and combined the considerations discussed so far, he

turns to theme, asking what topic is most melancholic. He briefly answers death. For Poe, death must ally itself with beauty to be fit subject matter for a poem, and he concludes that the death of a beautiful woman is the most poetical topic in the world. This leads him to the plot of "The Raven". The poem deals with a beautiful young woman named Lenore, whose death leads her lover into lingering grief and a subsequent descent into madness as he attempts to converse with a raven that can only answer 'Nevermore.' Poe claims to have composed the third-to-last stanza first, allowing it to set the rhythm, meter, and general arrangement for the rest of the poem.

7. FORM, METER, AND RHYME

Poe places considerable emphasis on originality in his essay and pursues it in "The Raven" through its rhyme scheme and meter. The poem's rhythm is monotonously regular, and its meter is trochaic octameter. Poe claims to have deliberately written the last line of each stanza a good deal shorter, at only seven syllables, or three and a half feet, while the second, fourth, and fifth lines run to seven and a half feet. He leaves off a syllable in each line ending on an 'or' sound, so that the crucial syllable sits by itself, unattached, and stands out all the more for it. This close attention to form gives the poem a musical, hypnotic quality that draws the reader further into its world.

In each stanza of "The Raven," the end rhymes of the first and third lines alternate across stanzas, while the second, fourth, fifth, and sixth lines consistently rhyme with one another, producing the pattern ABCBBB. The repetition of the B rhyme throughout the poem contributes directly to its eerie tone and atmosphere:

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary, Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping, As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.
"Tis some visitor," I muttered, "tapping at my chamber door Only this and nothing more." (Poe, 1845, 144)

The poem also makes extensive use of internal rhyme, located within rather than at the end of a line. In the first stanza, 'weary' rhymes with 'dreary,' and 'napping' rhymes with both 'tapping' and 'rapping.' Each subsequent stanza follows roughly the same pattern of internal rhyme, a device that catches the ear and builds tension within each stanza, contributing to the poem's ominous, sinister tone.

8. CRITICAL RECEPTION AND LEGACY

The truthfulness of Poe's account has been doubted almost since it was published. T.S. Eliot, in "From Poe to Valéry," observed that the poem's own imperfections make it difficult to read "The Philosophy of Composition" without concluding that if Poe really had plotted the poem with the calculation he describes, he might have taken rather more care over the result (Eliot, 1967, pp. 27–33). Poe's biographer Joseph Wood Krutch went further by describing the essay as less a work of literary criticism than "a rather highly ingenious exercise in the art of rationalization" (Krutch, 1926, p. 89). Skeptics argue that there is no way to confirm Poe actually followed every method the essay describes while writing "The Raven." Many also question whether his mathematical approach to poetic construction is compatible with the finished result at all, an approach standing in sharp contrast to the spontaneous overflow of feeling championed by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

This skepticism, however, does not diminish the essay's influence. Poe's account of composition found a far more receptive audience in France than in Britain or the United States. Charles Baudelaire, who translated much of Poe's work and championed him as a kindred spirit, took "The Philosophy of Composition" as something close to a manifesto. Later French poets absorbed it directly through Baudelaire's translation, with Paul Valéry in particular building his own theory of the poem as a self-contained object largely out of ideas he first encountered in Poe's essay (Eliot, 1967, pp. 33–38). Whatever the essay's accuracy as an account of how "The Raven" was actually written, its impact on the French Symbolists, and through them on the wider development of Symbolist and Modernist poetics, is well documented and not seriously in dispute.

None of this diminishes the innovation of Poe's method or its contribution to literature. As a writer, poet, editor, and critic, Poe influenced not only American letters but literature internationally. A number of French poets and composers took "The Raven" to have been constructed exactly as Poe describes and attempted to reproduce its effects by following his advice. Poe is also considered among the founders of detective fiction, credited with developing the genre in its earliest form. However, what most distinguishes him from his contemporaries is his commitment to the horror genre. His fascination with dark, sinister tales of mystery and death helped shape the development of Gothic literature. Doubts about his methods have not diminished his lasting influence.

9. CONCLUSION

Read together, "The Philosophy of Composition" and "The Raven" offer something more durable than a verified record of how one poem came to be written. Whether or not Poe followed his own method to the letter, the essay supplies a working vocabulary, length, unity of effect, refrain, and the alliance of beauty with melancholy, for describing exactly what makes the poem work. Furthermore, that vocabulary has outlasted the historical question of its accuracy. The essay's cool, almost mathematical account of poetic construction unsettled readers in its own time and continues to divide critics today, but it also

gave later poets, particularly in France, a theory of the poem as a self-sufficient object that proved more consequential than the biographical question of whether Poe himself ever really wrote this way.

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