

# Poe and his literary standards



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

An Examination of Poe's Literary Standards In Comparison with His Own Writings Edgar Allan Poe, in addition to being a poet and master of the short story, proved to be extremely successful as a literary critic during the early nineteenth century. Possessing the innate ability to distinguish truly remarkable writing from the ordinary and unimpressive, Poe definitively asserted his views regarding the importance of certain aspects of the short story and poetry in several of his literary reviews, specifically his review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's text *Twice Told Tales* as well as his essay "The Philosophy of Composition." Poe especially stressed the importance of "unity of effect," originality, as well as the revelation of truth in the short story and beauty in poetry. However despite his assertions regarding the importance of these aspects in literature it can be seen that Poe did not always adhere to his own critical standards. Poe asserted several things in his review of Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales* the first of which claimed the short story to be one of the greatest form of prose in that the 'tale,' as he referred to the short story, "afforded[ing] the best prose opportunity for display of the highest talent" (Review).

He believed that all good literature should be short enough to be read in one sitting but still maintain enough length to have lasting impact. He disliked the novel, and asserted that because of its immense length it did not have the ability to profoundly affect the reader on an emotional level, instead preferring poetry and 'tales'. In his opinion these forms of literature possessed the ability to evoke an instinctual reaction of the baser instincts, which should be the objective of fictional literature.

In this same review Poe asserted the importance of “unity of effect” in writing. He praised Hawthorne citing his writing as “purity itself” and that “his tone was [is] singularly effective- wild, plaintive, thoughtful, and in full accordance with his themes” (Review). In this aspect Poe himself is also very successful. In ‘tales’ such as “The Fall of the House of Usher” Poe ingeniously enthralls the audience through the use of evocative imagery depicting the extravagantly gothic landscape which complements the morose story.

The opening line of this story immediately establishes the gloomy setting as well as the overwhelmingly oppressive feeling of the tale. Poe subsequently reinforces this throughout the story, utilizing dark imagery and language such as “with an utter depression of soul,” “an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart - an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught” (738). The negative connotations of the phrases only add to the shadowy, mysterious, and miserable sentiment expressed by Poe in “The Fall of the House of Usher. However, “the unity of effect” that Poe stressed to be so important in his review of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Twice Told Tales” is imperfect. Scenes such as when the narrator recounts the story of the “Mad Trist” of Sir Launcelot Canning detracts from “the unity of effect.” This almost humorous scene disrupts the whole tone of the story and is an extreme contrast to the events detailed immediately prior and after the story. Poe also believed that all prose should be original, however, he, himself failed to be entirely original in several of his own works.

Poe recycled important themes and pivotal plots. Themes focusing upon questions relating to death appear several times in Poe's tales, as well as the issue of premature entombment can be seen in "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Cask of Amontillado," and "The Premature Burial." All three of these stories focus the death of a character by way of premature burial. In "The Fall of the House of Usher" it is evident that it is Madeline Usher whose death is the focal point of the story.

Her brother Roderick, continually expresses his fear that his sister is close to her falling victim to her long drawn out illness leaving him as "the last of the ancient race of Usher", and it is she that eventually dies but not it is not the for the expected reason of her illness (742). Instead Madeline ultimately meets her demise at the hands of her brother who effectively 'buries her alive' while she is unconscious. Similarly the character Fortunato in "The Cask of Amontillado" is the victim of an untimely interment at the hands of his supposed friend Montresor.

In the third story focusing upon death and being buried alive, "The Premature Burial" the narrator who is also the main character of the story is preoccupied with his own death and has an irrational fear of being buried alive, and describes in great detail several instances in which this happened as well as all of the precautionary measures he himself has taken to prevent this from happening. Poe also reused themes such as mental instability and murder. In both "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Cask of Amontillado" insanity is prevalent in the main characters.

In the first tale it is displayed by Roderick Usher and in the second it is Montresor who displays an unsoundness of mind. In both of these stories Poe

also features scenes in which secondary characters are intentionally buried alive as a result of the aforementioned insanity. Usher buries his sister alive and Montresor bricks his supposed friend Fortunato into a wall. In both instances these deaths are instances of murder, which is another prevalent theme in Poe's body of work.

This is particularly obvious in 'The Cask of Amontillado' when Montresor asserts that he had borne "the thousand injuries of Fortunato as best I could; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge" (763). Murder also makes appearances in "The Tell-Tale Heart" as well as in some of Poe's detective stories. While it is true that Poe did pen works extremely original, such as "The Man of the Crowd" however even this tale, which meets several of Poe's requirements, does not fully comply.

This story demonstrates no true underlying point, such as a clear emotional impact, establishment of an ironic situation, or statement about the nature of humanity, which Poe stressed as being important. He disliked didacticism and allegory, asserting these forms of literature to no longer be art as they contain an obvious point. Yet he found it important that art must have meaning, and preferred that the point of the piece be subtly instilled to the audience, as asserted in his literary review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales*.

Poe's essay "The Philosophy of Composition" furthermore asserts the belief that short stories may deal strictly with some aspect of truth, such as an emotional truth, as perceived within the confines of the fiction genre, while poetry should focus upon beauty. In this essay Poe extensively analyzes his own poem "The Raven," asserting the many ways that it adheres to this

belief. However Poe's poem "A Sonnet to Science" contradicts this by failing to discuss beauty. In no way does this poem deal with any aspect of the beauty of science as the title ironically implies.

Instead this poem is in fact about the truth of science and the perceived negative implications for art and society. An example of a similar contradiction would be "The Purloined Letter." While this tale explicitly deals with truth it there is no true emotion conveyed in the piece, no true unity of effect that will leave a lasting impression, which as mentioned earlier, Poe prized highly. Despite being extremely talented both as a master of the short story and a reviewer, Edgar Allan Poe was in several instances unable to adhere to the high standards he imposed on the authors whose many works he critiqued.

Read also Edgar Allan Poe Drugs

His reuse of themes, placements of scenes such as the "Mad Trist" in "The Fall of the House of Usher," and ironic statements regarding the state of society in poems such as the "Sonnet to Science" are all a part of what made Poe so talented as a writer and popular, particularly posthumously. However all of these things and more are examples of instances when Poe did not follow his own literary advice and adhere to the standards he himself outlined in essays such as "The Philosophy of Composition" and his review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales*.