

The metaphorical trifecta in how to write a blackwood article



Poe's *How to Write a Blackwood Article* portrayed a symbiotic relationship between the soul, the body and money that drove the Victorian audience to search for an unattainable form of happiness in literature. Poe described the sought-after exhilaration in contemporary trends—at that time—to be so far extricated from real life that desperate writers would risk their well-being for a profitable story. And he questioned the reasoning and purpose behind the pursuit of such experiences with little sustainable contribution to culture and society, other than pure entertainment. The life-threatening stakes posed in *How to Write a Blackwood Article* were metaphorical to the quixotic themes writers pursued, which to an extreme extent could threaten the collapse of Gothic literature. Poe had not exempted his own work in this satire—guilty—but had advocated grounding this literary movement back to relevant cultural, historical and political context.

From the beginning, Zenobia reaffirmed the “Greek” beliefs throughout, alluding to iconic philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato and Socrates who debated the topic of dualism between soul and body. However, the mind creates the imagination, comparable to how the body is a vessel for the soul. Basing off this assumption that the soul and the imagination as one, the metaphor between the current literary trend's sole focus on the imagination and Zenobia's claim that she was “all soul” (278), neglecting the presence of the body, exemplifies the main themes of this essay: specifically, the lack of balance in literary trends that glorify fantasy and overlook the realistic problems or aspects in literature. Zenobia's staunch belief would be disproved throughout the essay with scattered bodily imagery correlated

with the soul, establishing that the mind is a hybrid between the soul and the body.

For instance, in the scene of the dancing dogs, Zenobia relied on her visual senses as well as her mind to process these images into emotions, “ In such a mind, I repeat, what a host of recollections stirred up by a trifle!” (288).

The main problem in Zenobia’s claim was one major purpose of following the current literary trends to earn money for bodily nourishment, which then allowed the imagination to flourish. All three components of the imagination, the literary trends—or, business—and the body were crucial in creating a successful work of literature.

Also, there were repeated sets of three throughout the article, and Zenobia especially underscores this detail that she, Pompey and Diana are “ three”. These sets of three provide a metaphor to the body, soul, and mind—the latter which processes these sensory experiences. How to Write a Blackwood Article describes a related trio that arises from the newfound popularity of sensory-based literature.

Even the name Dr. Money Penny suggests that many writers base their careers according to trends. Furthermore, the metaphor between the separation of the mind from the body compared to the current focus on the imagination without regards to facts could be seen in the imagery. Diana’s appearance, whose “ head was somewhat bigger than her body...” (page 288) illustrated this problem in the form of a disproportionate poodle.

Furthermore, Poe always separated “ every body” and “ any body” throughout the text. The tone between the body and the imagination is

tense, fighting for authority. In one instance, Zenobia lost control to her imagination when the latter assumes greater agency than she is physically capable of. “ The dogs danced! I—I could not!” (page 288). To this observation, the narrator exhibited extreme anguish, which prompted whether the identity is located in the soul or body. Even in the imaginary scenario with Pompey and Diana, the narrator is constantly hindered by her body; she mentions that she had to stop for a breath, and that she could not do certain tasks, even though she could picture them well.

Perhaps Poe had feared that the absence of substantial foundation for imaginative writing, similar to the lack of a body in an excellent writer, would preserve an inaccurate image of this cultural time period. Although *How to Write a Blackwood Article* appeared to be a success in its widespread availability, its audience could deduce very little from that era based on works similar to this article, other than its obsession with sensory experiences in its literature. And Gothic literature in itself already defined itself from its focus on stimulating emotions such as terror and horror, and emphasizing more on this aspect would be excessive.

Perhaps Poe hoped to return Gothic literature back to its original intentions, which Davison summarized as, “ a form that serves as a barometer of socio-cultural anxieties in its exploration of the dark side of individuals.” (Davison, 124). In *Lionizing: Poe as Cultural Signifier* Peeples summarized Doctorow’s commentary, ““ Poe’s writing defies the usual assessments of literary merit, making him impossible to rank...” (page 127). This observation suggests that Poe made efforts to improve and refine the Gothic literary movement, having been recognized as its mascot, as Peeples described Poe’s presence in his <https://assignbuster.com/the-metaphorical-trifecta-in-how-to-write-a-blackwood-article/>

work as both paralleled to his personal life—known to the public—as an addict and a “Gothicist” (page 126). By interweaving these satirized techniques into the story, such as the ever-shifting tone, Poe’s satire itself provided a fascinating story as well as a great success. This proved that these techniques were indeed effective. However, in previous revisions of Poe’s work, critics had revealed that Poe was the master of all techniques satirized in *How to Write a Blackwood Article*. (Fisher 26) For instance, on his apparent discouragement of impracticality, Poe demonstrated a different aspect on his previous works. Fisher noted that, “Other revisions show us how sensitive Poe’s ear was to the appropriate sound effects of his prose.” (Fisher 27). Furthermore, Poe included a French idiom in “*Usher*”—a trope he had satirized in *How to Write a Blackwood Article*. Clearly, Poe had mastered the literary techniques, plot, and substantiality to be a literary success of that time. Perhaps he expected more from himself and his readers by satirizing the techniques he had mastered and perhaps relied on for success.

Moreover, Gothic literature had been founded on “impractical” details. Porterfield’s *Gothic as an Undergraduate Study* stressed on how this literary movement was defined by keen attention to details in word choice contextually instead of individually. If Poe had been striving towards a new, reformed literary movement, the audience could see his critique of the traditionally defining characteristics of Gothic literature in the dialogue between Zenobia and Mr. Blackwood. The extremely meticulous diction—such as Mr. Blackwood’s insisting of referring to “oatmeal” as “buck-wheat cake”—could point to the overly picky attention to spelling changes in Gothic

Literature—as Porterfield mentioned earlier, of how the length difference of a certain syllable could prompt two different meanings of the same word.

(page 79).

“ How to Write a Blackwood Article” has raised the standards for Gothic Literature by raising the importance of cultural, political and social context into works of vivid imagination. Zenobia’s staunch removal of herself from her body and devotion to the soul is a satire that reveals the codependent cycle involving the imagination, the body, and surprisingly—business that would create canonical literary works.

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