

The role of confession in poe's poetry

Profession, Poet



In his essay, "The Philosophy of Composition," Edgar Allan Poe writes that in an ideal poem, "two things are invariably required first, some amount of complexity, or more properly, adaptation; and, secondly, some amount of suggestiveness some under-current, however indefinite, of meaning." While he claims to use this statement to justify the "suggestiveness" of the final two stanzas of "The Raven," he points at a more universal under-current that lies behind several of his poems, particularly those about deceased women. In poems such as "Annabel Lee" and "The Raven," the speaker covertly confesses to murdering the women about whom they are written. The complexity of these poems lies in the nature of the speaker, who wishes to make his guilt public, yet at the same time enjoys keeping it hidden. The principle of a covert confession serves as Poe's poetic inspiration, drawing a connection between confession and creation. Since the death of beautiful women is such a common theme in Poe's poems, it obviously an inspiring topic. More important than the deaths themselves, however, is the manner in which they are narrated. Poe's speakers tell stories about dead women that hint that they are responsible for killing them. One of the best examples is "Annabel Lee," in which Poe frames the speaker's underlying confession primarily through the use of meter. First of all, the sprung rhythm, or lines of alternating four and three beats, makes the poem sound like a fairy-tale. With the opening lines: "It was many and many a year ago / In a kingdom by the sea," the reader is immediately clued in that what is about to follow is a story, and not necessarily the truth. Thus, the reader is at once skeptical when the speaker declares that the angels in heaven, who coveted their love, were responsible for the death of his maiden. Perhaps the most

revealing part of the covert confession is in the fourth stanza, in which the speaker exclaims, “ Yes! that was the reason (as all men know / In this kingdom by the sea)” The exclamation, which disrupts the general pattern of beats, gives the impression that the speaker is convincing himself of this false excuse, as if he has just now begun to believe it as it escapes his mouth. Another possibility is that the speaker has anticipated the reader's doubtfulness at this point, and feels it necessary to affirm his story by crying, “ Yes!” In either case, the speaker's frenzied exclamation that disrupts the otherwise smooth, almost hypnotic meter, illustrates how the speaker wants the reader to read his confession that lies beneath his thin and meager excuse for his maiden's death. Poe also uses rhyme and alliteration to hint at the speaker's guilt. One of the most subtle, yet effective uses of rhyme is the repetition of the vowel sound at the end of every other line. With the exception of a minor variation in the fourth stanza, the pattern of end rhymes in every other line is: “ sea,” “ Lee,” and “ me.” The continuous rhyming of the word “ me” suggests that the speaker is directing the reader's attention to himself for a particular reason. That is, he is pointing the guilty finger toward himself as if to say, “ it was me.” The alliteration of the “ s” sound in the final two lines of the poem mimics the peaceful lapping of the sea, where the speaker presumably lies down with the corpse. Similarly, the internal rhymes such as “ the stars never rise but I see the bright eyes” and “ all the night-tide, I lie down by the side” force the reader to pronounce the same sounds in each line, mimicking the echo of the speaker's voice within the walls of the tomb in which Annabel Lee is buried. The alliteration, internal rhyme, and peaceful rhythm create a tone of eerie

calmness that reflects the speaker's own calmness and lack of grief another sign of his self-indictment. The guilty speakers in Poe's short stories also claim to be of calm composure. In the beginning of "The Tell-Tale Heart," the speaker attempts to show that he is sane by saying, "Hearken! and observe how calmly I can tell you the whole story." Throughout the story, the speaker goes to great lengths to tell the reader how calm and how careful he is in order to "prove" his sanity; however, the story as a whole serves as a confession of his insanity. Similarly, in "Annabel Lee," the speaker's calmness in the final stanza points to his own guilt, since he is strangely calm enough to lie peacefully next to his lover's rotting corpse. The relationship of calmness to confession is especially strong in "The Black Cat," in the scene in which the police are examining the area in which the speaker has walled up his dead wife and (unknowingly) the cat. Poe writes: 'Gentlemen,' I said at last, as the party ascended the steps, 'I delight to have allayed your suspicions. I wish you all health, and a little more courtesy. By the bye, gentlemen, this this is a very well constructed house.' [In the rabid desire to say something easily, I scarcely knew what I uttered at all.] 'I may say an excellently well constructed house. These walls are you going gentlemen? these walls are solidly put together;' and I rapped heavily, with a cane which I held in my hand, upon that very portion of the brick-work behind which stood the corpse of the wife of my bosom. The speaker, who delights in keeping his composure in the presence of the police so near to the evidence of his crime, has an inexplicable urge to expose the evidence that will undoubtedly point to his guilt. However, there are no indications whatsoever that the speaker's urge to confess is motivated by remorse.

Therefore, it appears that the speaker has an inclination toward self-torment. The inclination toward self-torment is a prevalent topic in “The Raven,” as Poe discusses in his essay, “The Philosophy of Composition.” The speaker’s self-torment is illustrated by his repeated questioning of the bird, whom he knows will only answer, “Nevermore.” According to Poe, the speaker asks, “half in superstition and half in that species of despair which delights in self-torture,” and because “he experiences a frenzied pleasure in so modelling his questions as to receive from the expected ‘Nevermore’ the most delicious because the most intolerable of sorrows”² Delighting in torment is not only a staple of the Gothic genre, but also a correlative of confession. Poe’s narrators enjoy a kind of covert confessing because it is a kind of self-torment. The concept of self-torment, particularly through the act of confession, is closely tied to the idea of narcissism. The very act of tormenting oneself shows at once a degree of self-obsession. By definition, to confess is to disclose information that has previously been kept only in one’s own head. Logically, then, a poem that is characterized by a speaker’s confession is a poem that is about himself. The relationship of self-torture and narcissism is well-defined in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” in which, at the end of the story, the narrator pulls up the floorboards in front of the police to expose the corpse of the man whom he killed. Ironically, the object that drives the speaker to murder the old man is his eye, a homonym for the word “I.” The underlying suggestion is that the “eye” is at the same time the symbol of the speaker’s torment and of his own self-obsession. Narcissism is indeed prevalent in many of Poe’s works both prose and poetry. Several of his poems, while they are written under the guise of being

about particular women (such as "For Annie" and "Annabel Lee"), are only about the speaker. For instance, in "Annabel Lee," the woman about whom the poem is written is almost entirely absent from the poem, with the exception of her name. When the speaker describes her, it is in terms of himself. The first piece of information the reader learns about her is that she "lived with no other thought / Than to love and be loved by me." Later, the speaker describes her as "my darling, my darling, my life and my bride." The speaker's self-obsession is made even more apparent by the same device that exposes his guilt: the repetition of the "ee" vowel in the end rhymes leaves the reader saying the word "me." The pervasive narcissism in Poe's works is fundamentally important in making the connection between confession and creation. The self-obsession of the speakers, combined with the absence of the women in the poems, makes it apparent that the speakers are far more concerned with themselves than they are with the women they have killed. It is as if the speakers are making up for the silence of the dead women by inserting their own voices. Therefore, the absence of the women provides a certain poetic inspiration. This is what Poe means in "The Philosophy of Composition" when he writes, "the death 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." The logical deduction from this statement is that a person is justified in killing his lover for the purposes of poetic inspiration. That is precisely what the speakers in "Annabel Lee" and "The Raven" have done. However, what Poe realized in writing these poems is that the speakers are in positions of tremendous power. A person who has killed his lover has the

power to tell about it, but more importantly, he has the power to shape his story any way he chooses, and to reveal as much or as little as he desires. In other words, it is not the murder, but the act of confessing it that inspires poetic creation. Richard Wright explores this relationship in his 1940 novel, *Native Son*. The protagonist, Bigger, gradually claims that he intentionally murdered a girl, while her death was truly accidental. By claiming responsibility for the murder, Bigger takes responsibility for an act of power, thereby redefining his identity. The narrator says, “ He had murdered and had created a new life for himself. It was something that was all his own” (105) Shortly after, the narrator says, “ He wanted suddenly to stand up and shout, telling them that he had killed a rich white girl, a girl whose family was known to all of them” (129). Not only does Bigger expose the relationship between murder and creation; he senses the urge to confess. Bigger's analeptic refashioning of the events of the murder shape a large portion of the narrative, spanning the process of murder to confession, and finally to creation. This is the concept that lies at the heart of Poe's works. The reader is not to believe that Poe killed women in order to write about them. The voice of “ The Philosophy of Composition” is not Poe's, but rather the voice of Poe's guilty speaker. Poe likely wrote “ The Philosophy of Composition” in order inspire people to suspect his narrative voices of this kind of guilt, and to encourage people to re-read his poems, looking for the underlying confessions if they had not picked up on them before. However, the idea about the death of a beautiful woman being poetic holds an aspect of truth. Without writing it plainly, Poe goes a step further than saying that the “ lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover.” In fact,

the only lips better suited for narration than those of a bereaved lover are those of one guilty of murder. The latter affords much more poetic creativity covert confession being the primary example. Poe also writes that, "Beauty is the sole legitimate province of the poem." While the entire essay should be taken with a grain of salt, (since it is indeed another dissembled confession), Poe's obsession with Beauty aligns itself with the relationship of murder to creation. It is not merely the death of a woman that is "the most poetical topic in the world," but the death of a beautiful woman. When a beautiful woman dies, there becomes a shortage of Beauty that may be replaced by the poet's own "Beauty" his poetry. Poe fills the void left by the death of the beautiful women in his poems with his own creative ideas, characterized by the self-tormented, narcissistic confessions of his speakers. Toward the beginning of "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe writes: "I have often thought how interesting a magazine paper might be written by any author who would that is to say, who could detail, step by step, the processes by which any one of his compositions attained its ultimate point of completion. Why such a paper has never been given to the world, I am much at a loss to say" Of course, the entirety of what follows this precursor is precisely what he speaks of a detailed description of his own composing process for "The Raven." Poe then offers an explanation for the absence of papers detailing the process of composition, saying that most poets would "shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes, at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought at the true purposes seized only at the last moment at the innumerable glimpses of the idea that arrived not at the maturity of full view" What Poe does at this point is the same thing that the

speakers in his other poems do he gives a covert confession. The frenzied, disorganized poetic process that Poe attributes to other poets is the very process by which he composes. The process by which Poe claims to have written "the Raven" is utterly absurd, and intentionally presented so. Just as the speaker in "Annabel Lee" gives such a ridiculous excuse for her death that it appears that he wants to be "found out," Poe makes his account of the poetic process so far-fetched that the reader becomes aware of the underlying confession. Similarly, the composing process that Poe describes is unrealistically premeditated and composed, much like the manner in which the guilty speakers narrate. The essay is, in fact, a "key" to reading his other poems. In making the essay a confession in itself, Poe draws the reader's attention to the subtle "complexity" and "suggestiveness" of the hidden confessions that characterize his other poems. At the same time, his use of confession as a basis for an essay about composition affirms the presence of a direct relationship between confession and creation.