

Poe as a literary professional



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As an aspiring Southern gentleman, Edgar Allan Poe longed for the glamour of fame and wealth, prominence and prosperity. To gain this through his writing, Poe understood that he must be able to sell his writing to make money, but he also must appeal to the genteel to gain respect in their community. This stark divide in audience made it difficult for Poe to balance his writing in such a way as to target both populations, the literary elite and the popular middle class. Still, this divide creates a unique brand of writing by Poe that utilizes tactics to appeal to both audiences, creating art that works with Poe's definition and the definition of his audience.

Art to Poe is a complicated thing. While he longs to belong to a class that determines art as an elite substance, he must work to create art that applies to more than just the elite. However, as Poe writes in "The Philosophy of Composition," "Let us dismiss, as irrelevant to the poem per se, the circumstance - or say the necessity - which, in the first place, gave rise to the intention of composing a poem that should suit at once the popular and the critical taste" (1375) for a moment. To Poe, it seems that art involves premeditated process, focused upon very specific elements. As he opens his essay, "The Philosophy of Composition," he praises the author of "Caleb Williams," claiming that he "was too good an artist not to perceive the advantage derivable from at least a somewhat similar process" (1373). Poe writes this in regard to the idea that the author begins his process by planning his writing backwards; he clearly admires the process as a means to create art, while the product itself may be less important to Poe. This can be seen in his work, as well, as the typical pattern Poe follows in his writing involves very long sections of rising action and character development with

dramatic climaxes near the end of the story. If climaxes can be read as the final culmination of a story, Poe shows his investment in the development leading up to this moment. For example, “ William Wilson” tracks the life of William Wilson for twenty pages before the final paragraph of the story reveals the fate of the man and, perhaps, the moral attached to the story (337-357). Additionally, stories such as “ Berenice,” “ Hop-Frog,” and “ The Oval Portrait” all utilize several pages worth of backstory and suspense, creating the ultimate effect; in this way, Poe recognizes the importance of the journey within art.

At the same time, Poe’s understanding of effect relies on the brevity of the work. “ If any literary work is too long to be read at one sitting,” he explains, “ we must be content to dispense with the immensely important effect derivable from unity of impression – for, if two sittings be required, the affairs of the world interfere, and every thing like totality is at once destroyed” (1375). Poe believes in complete focus and attention to art; no distractions should be present through his work; this may speak to a bit of self-importance from Poe, which makes sense, considering his aspirations to Southern aristocracy. Poe relies on a delicate balance between brevity and excitement, excitement and class. According to Poe, there is a “ proper degree of excitement” that is “ not above the popular, while not below the critical, taste” (1376). Poe seems to think that he has found the correct correlation between brevity and excitement, with shorter length leading to more intensity, that can appeal to both classes of audience, holding the attention of enough readers to create an enjoyable tale for all.

Finally, Poe understands art as a creation of beauty. The beauty Poe speaks about is that of a feeling, not necessarily of something seen. According to him, “ 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” (1377). This explains his branded tone of despair in many of his stories and poems. Additionally, “ When it most closely allies itself to Beauty: the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world” (1379). The reader sees this in practice in “ The Raven,” in which a melancholy narrator mourns over his lost lover, as well as in “ The Oval Portrait” and “ Eleonora,” to name a few. In “ The Oval Portrait,” Poe reflects upon art itself as taking away the life of an innocent woman. “ And he would not see that the tints which he spread upon the canvas were drawn from the cheeks of her who sate beside him” (483). This can be read as Poe considering his own favorite theme, the death of a beautiful woman, taking ahold of his art and manifesting itself in real life, as Poe loses many of the important women in his life. When he writes “ Eleonora,” this real-life theme again shows itself, breaking away from Poe’s typical tropes of horror and showing vulnerable sorrow and loss of a loved one, creating an entirely different kind of beauty that still relies on the same art form.

While Poe wished to be accepted as a Southern gentleman, he understood his actual audience quite well. While he was read by the literary elite, he was also read by the general population, being published in anthologies and gift books for everyone. According to Poe, “ I kept steadily in view the design of rendering the work universally appreciable” (1376). Despite acting as a

superior gentleman, occasionally, Poe marketed himself properly in order to allow art to be accessible for the entire population; this is probably why Poe has a lasting impression on the literary cannon today. He created original, unique works that were incredibly thought-out in terms of impression and art. He allowed publication in various magazines for popular entertainment and he utilized the media in his favor. While Poe may have had aspirations for prosperity and renown, his fame today proves that he has earned his spot as an artist in his own terms and in the minds of several different audiences.