
How Ideal Can Be Reached: Poe's Example

In "The Philosophy of Composition," Edgar Allan Poe describes a credible set of short and simple guidelines regarding the structure of a great literary work. These procedures may seem insignificant and useless to experienced writers. On the other hand, amateur writers that may be having difficulty beginning or developing their work might find Poe's strategy legitimate and quite helpful. The poem "The Raven" is proof that these guidelines are effective when used to begin and to develop a literary work. The effectiveness of some of these procedures, such as the development of a dnoement, the length of a work, and the theme of a work, is evident in Poe's "The Raven."

Firstly, Poe's "Composition" suggests that, "Nothing is more clear than that every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its dnoement before anything be attempted to pen" (1). In this statement, Poe is suggesting that the writer should previously develop the dnoement, or the resolution of the climax, before developing any other part of the work. Poe validates this statement with the point that, "It is only with the dnoement constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention" (Composition 1). In this statement, Poe explains that once the conclusion is formed, it acts as the central point to which the causation, the incidents, and the tone all refer back to. For some writers, this "equation" may help them with the process of composing a work. Poe's "equation" is very simple and to the point in that it allows the writer to piece together his or her work step by step, successfully creating a complete literary work.

In addition, Poe explains the creation of "The Raven's" dnoement with the following statement:

Here, then, the poem may be said to have its beginning --- at the end, where all works of art should begin; for it was here, at this point of my preconsiderations that I first put pen to paper in the composition of the stanza:

"Prophet," said I, "thing of evil!

Prophet still, if bird or devil!

By that the heaven that bends above us, by that God we both adore,

Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn,

It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore,

Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore."

Quoth the Raven,

"Nevermore." (Composition 9-10)

In this statement, Poe explains that this verse is the first stanza that he puts on paper and that this verse will be the dnoement of the poem that he is developing. All of the stanzas placed before this original stanza, as well as after it, refer back to the dnoement. Poe's successful development of "The Raven" verifies that establishing the dnoement first and then building off of it can be useful for writers who are having trouble beginning their own literary works.

Secondly, Poe recommends in "Composition" that, "It appears evident, then, that there is a distinct limit, as regards to length, to all works of literary art---the limit of a single sitting" (4). In this statement, Poe suggests that a writer should plan out ahead of time how long he or she would like the work to be, preferably a length that one can read it during one sitting. It is evident that Poe followed this rule with most of his works. His short stories, such as "The Cask of Amontillado" and "The Fall of the House of Usher," as well as his poems, such as "Annabel Lee" and "A Dream Within a Dream," are all short enough to be read all at once. Poe believes, "[...]" that the brevity must be in direct ratio of the intensity of the intended effect: --- that, with one proviso, that a certain degree of duration is absolutely requisite for the production of any effect at all" (Composition 4). In this statement, Poe explains that a short work will produce the intended effect, and that a longer work may result in the loss of the intended effect. Most readers find it very difficult, once they have paused their reading, to pick up where they left off, sometimes being forced to reread certain parts of the story to get back into it. In keeping with this "short, yet affective" method, many of Poe's works are brief, but they still keep the reader's interest.

Furthermore, Poe discusses the way in which he kept "The Raven" short with two different methods: length and rhythm. First, Poe states in "Composition" that before "The Raven" was even composed, "[...] I reached at once what I conceived the proper length for my intended poem, a length of about one hundred lines" (4). Poe just missed his mark, finishing "The Raven" at one hundred and eight lines. Second, Poe explains that he preplanned "The Raven" to contain trochaic feet, "[...] the feet employed throughout (trochees) consist of a long syllable followed by a short [...]" (Composition 11). This continuous pattern of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable creates an upbeat or anxious rhythm in which one is to read "The Raven," such as in the lines, "Eagerly I wished the morrow; --- vainly I had sought to borrow / From my books surcease of sorrow --- sorrow for the lost Lenore" (Poe 36).

This anxious tempo not only follows along with the narrator's anxious state, but also speeds up the reading process for Poe's audience. For a writer having trouble determining the length and tempo of his or her work, "The Raven" is one of many fine yet concise works by Poe that has a predetermined length and upbeat tempo, as well an effect that is not "cut short" in the least.

Lastly, Poe mentions in "Composition" that in order to write a great depressing work, one must use the best melancholy theme. Poe states, "Now, never losing sight of the object, supremeness, or perfection, at all points, I asked myself: 'Of all melancholy topics, what, according to the universal understanding of mankind is the most melancholy?' 'Death' was the obvious reply" (Composition 8). Many of Poe's short stories and poems have a dark theme, and many of those usually involve some aspect of death. Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," for instance, is a short story about a brother who buries his sister alive without knowing it and only finds out what he has done when she returns for revenge and kills them both. Another example of Poe's use of death as the most melancholy theme is the poem "Annabel Lee." In this poem, the narrators speaks of his late love, Annabel Lee, who was taken away from him by envious angels, though he still sleeps beside her body every night inside her sepulcher by the sea.

These examples, as well as many other works by Poe, strongly support Poe's belief that death is the best theme of a work.

Moreover, "The Raven" is a typical example of yet another one of Poe's melancholy works focused on death. The poem begins with a man sitting alone in a dark room and mourning the death of his love, Lenore. "Eagerly I wished the morrow; ---vainly I had sought to borrow / From my books surcease of sorrow --- sorrow for the lost Lenore ---" (Poe Raven 36). The raven enters the tale and soon the narrator is badgering it for answers about his Lenore, tenaciously hoping that his dreams of Lenore returning from the dead will become reality. The narrator pleads, "Tell this soul with sorrow laden if, within the distant Aidenn, / It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore --- / Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore. / Quoth the Raven, 'Nevermore.'" (Poe Raven 42). Finally giving up on his obsessive questioning of the raven, the narrator returns to his mourning of Lenore: "And my soul from that shadow that lies floating on the floor / Shall be lifted --- nevermore!" (Poe Raven 43). Again, Poe's consistent theme of death supports his belief that death is the best topic to write about. If Poe were to give a bit of advice to a writer having problems deciding what to write about, it would be to incorporate death somewhere in the work.

Poe's guidelines for a successful literary work are quite respectable. They are concise and to the point yet very effective, as many of Poe's short stories and poems, written more than likely in the same fashion as "The Raven," can support. Writers of both prose and poems can follow these simple rules of composition. If one is having trouble beginning his or her work, Poe suggests beginning with the dnoement and progressing from there, yet remembering always to relate the causation, the incidents, and the tone back to the dnoement (Composition 1). If one is having difficulty determining whether or not his or her work is too long and confusing for the reader, Poe recommends setting a limit on one's writing so that the reader will be able to interpret it in one sitting, without confusion (Composition 4). Finally, if one is having problems choosing the best melancholy theme in order to attract readers from around the world, Poe's obvious choice would be the theme of death (Composition 8). With all of the respect and appreciation Poe has gained from millions of admirers over the years, it is obvious that he has done something right. When it comes to mastering the art of writing a short, interesting tale about death, Edgar Allan Poe is without a doubt the "Man with a Plan."

Works Cited

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