

Discovering Poe as a Compositionist: Edgar Allan Poe's "The Philosophy of Composition" and Process Theory

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Abstract

Though Poe has commonly been remembered for his contributions to the detective, horror, and science-fiction genres, we should consider how his innovation extended into other areas. This includes his critical works, such as his essay "The Philosophy of Composition." Despite Poe's classical training and the trends in composition instruction before and during his educational career, the theory of composition argued for in his critical essays is more analogous to the Process Theory established by compositionists over 100 years later than the teaching methods of his time, suggesting that Poe's concept of composition was very progressive. To truly understand Poe's environment, we must examine the tradition that informed early nineteenth-century educational systems as well as Poe's own academic experience. In order to discover the connections between Poe's critical methodologies and those of later composition theorists, we must compare the preexisting notions in the field to the developments seen in composition theory during the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries.

Edgar Allan Poe's name has become synonymous with the detective story, the Gothic, and the single effect¹; however, these are not the only notable contributions Poe made during his career. As were a number of his contemporaries, Poe was interested in both writing fiction and reviewing the writings of others. This diverse engagement with others' works led to one of Poe's less discussed contributions: his philosophies about composition and the writing process. Despite Poe's classical training and the trends in composition instruction before and during his educational career, the theory of composition argued in his essays is more analogous to the process theory established by compositionists over 100 years later than the teaching methods of his time, suggesting that Poe's concept of composition was well ahead of its time.

The atmosphere surrounding the teaching of composition changed drastically over the two hundred years preceding Poe's life. Early schools in America resembled those found in Britain and Europe. A seventeenth-century minister, John Brinsley, put forth his plans for a grammar school in Virginia in the 1660s and published *A Consolation for Our Grammar Schools* (1662), which outlined these plans.² While writing about Brinsley's plans, Elizabeth A. Wright and S. Michael Halloran state, "Brinsley's views were typical of formal English education in the early seventeenth century. Writing English was closely connected with study of the classical languages, and with oral pertated [sic] material and printed texts, and recitation both catechetical and disputational were standard classroom activities."³ This preference for instruction in classical languages continued in Britain and America into the eighteenth century.

In their essay, "From Rhetoric to Composition," Linda Ferreira-Buckley and Winifred Bryan Horner discuss the eighteenth-century grammar school system that was popular in the British Isles. These schools had been religiously based and focused primarily on teaching students to read and write in Latin.⁴ Students continued to study ancient languages as they moved into their secondary education, studying "Greek and rhetoric while continuing to improve their proficiency in Latin by writing verse."⁵ While this method of instruction was wide-spread during the eighteenth century, Wright and Halloran comment that "[d]uring the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, [...] the sovereignty of the classical languages

1 Edgar Allan Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition," in *Essays and Reviews*, ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 13-14. The single effect is an emotion or feeling that the author wishes the audience to experience. It is decided upon at the onset of writing and is considered by the author as he or she makes each decision about the piece. This effect is conveyed through the choice of setting, tone, incidents, and characters.

2 Elizabeth A. Wright and S. Michael Halloran, "From Rhetoric to Composition: Teaching Writing in America to 1900," in *A Short History of Writing Instruction: From Ancient Greece to Modern America*, ed. James J. Murphy (Mahwah, NJ: Hermagoras, 2001), 214.

3 Wright, "From Rhetoric to Composition," 216.

4 Linda Ferreira-Buckley and Winifred Bryan Horner, "Writing Instruction in Great Britain: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries." in *A Short History of Writing Instruction: From Ancient Greece to Modern America*, ed. James J. Murphy (Mahwah, NJ: Hermagoras, 2001), 189.

5 *Ibid.*, 189.

was increasingly challenged, and writing instruction in English evolved in response to social, political, religious, and economic developments.⁶ Despite this general shift, some schools wanted to maintain the old methods of instruction while many embraced English as appropriate for academic writing, and the instruction of composition in English gained ground. These radical changes in education occurred in both England and America and exposed students to both classical teaching pedagogies and composition in English and other modern languages. These varied methods of instruction greatly affected Edgar Allan Poe. His exposure to classical training as well as writing in English informed his concepts of literature and composition.

As a young boy, Poe moved to England with his foster family, the Allans, and was exposed to the British education system. Poe's family was in Scotland and England for several months before his foster father, John Allan, enrolled him at the Misses Dubourg's Boarding School in 1816.⁷ At the boarding school, Poe was learning "English grammar and composition" using the works of Joseph Addison or Oliver Goldsmith as models for writing prose and the models of John Milton or James Thomson for writing verse.⁸ Notwithstanding the level of education Poe was receiving at the Misses Dubourg's, Allan sent Poe to a "better and more expensive school" outside of London, run by the Reverend John Bransby in late 1817 or early 1818.⁹ At this school, Poe continued to receive aspects of classical education¹⁰, learning Latin in addition to modern languages such as French and other subjects including literature, history, and dance.¹¹ Despite John Allan's financial hardships, as he was forced to move his family back to Richmond in 1820, he continued to invest in Poe's education.¹²

Upon their return to Richmond, Allan arranged for Poe to study under Joseph H. Clark. At Clark's school, Poe continued his study of Greek and Latin as well as mathematics, science, and elocution. Poe did well in school and excelled at elocution, even winning a city-wide contest. In 1823, John Allan sent Poe to study at William Burke's school where his academic success continued. Because of his previous mastery of many of the classics, Poe was allowed to pursue independent study at Burke's school and continued to complete assignments early in order to devote time to "desultory reading and creative writing."¹³ In 1825, Allan received a large inheritance from his late uncle and purchased a new home in

6 Ibid., 173-174.

7 Arthur Hobson Quinn, *Edgar Allan Poe, a critical biography* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1941), 67-69.

8 Kevin J. Hayes, *Edgar Allan Poe* (Chippenham, U.K.: Reaktion, 2009), 36-37.

9 Quinn, *Edgar Allan Poe*, 69-71.

10 Kevin J. Hayes, *Edgar Allan Poe in Context* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 221-222. A classical education included learning to read and recite Latin and Greek. Poe read ancient texts from "Ovid, Caesar, Virgil, Cicero, and Horace in Latin" and "Xenophon and Homer in Greek."

11 Ibid., 71-73.

12 Ibid., 79-80.

13 Hayes, *Edgar Allan Poe*, 37-39.

downtown Richmond; as a result, Poe left Burke's school. At this time, Poe was sixteen years old and considered prepared for the university.¹⁴

In 1826, Poe began attending the University of Virginia. The school was rather new but was already considered "among the finest institutions of higher learning in the nation."¹⁵ Its founder, Thomas Jefferson, had established a progressive curriculum, which allowed students to pursue their interests by creating individualized plans of study. Poe continued to study modern and ancient languages and wanted to continue his study of mathematics, but he could only take two courses per term because Allan would not pay for a third. He also pursued learning outside of the classroom by becoming part of the Jefferson Society, a group that met to discuss literature.¹⁶ Poe was only able to remain at the University of Virginia for one year. He had not been given adequate money for school books or supplies and had taken to gambling to supplement the small amount of money supplied by Allan. After Poe's first year at the university, Allan came to collect him but paid very few of his debts before returning with him to Richmond,¹⁷ effectively ending Poe's education until 1830, when he was appointed at West Point after a short time in the army.¹⁸

As a military institution, West Point expected its cadets to endure a great deal of physical training and develop discipline in addition to progressing through their standard curriculum. After Poe passed an entrance exam testing his abilities to read, write, and perform basic arithmetic, he participated in encampment and spent two months focusing on military instruction before being allowed to move on to academic courses.¹⁹ During his time at West Point, Poe continued his studies of mathematics and French but was stifled in his more fanciful pursuits. The university rules disallowed cadets from possessing novels, poems, or books that were not directly related to their studies.²⁰ As Poe had a growing interest in writing his own poetry and pursuing self-study, these restrictions made it difficult for him to follow the rules even as he did well in his coursework. His records from the school show that "he stood third in French and seventeenth in Mathematics in a class of eighty-seven."²¹ Between the limitations being placed on Poe academically and his foster father choosing to remarry after the death of his foster mother, Poe began neglecting his military duties and decided to resign from West Point to pursue his writing aspirations. Allan would not support this course of action, and Poe was court-martialed and removed

14 Ibid., 39.

15 Ibid., 39.

16 Ibid., 39-42.

17 Quinn, *Edgar Allan Poe*, 108-112.

18 Ibid., 166.

19 Quinn, *Edgar Allan Poe*, 169.

20 Ibid., 169.

21 Ibid., 171.

from service for his "Disobedience of Orders" and "Gross neglect of Duty."²² Despite this inauspicious end, Poe was a superior student throughout his academic career.

Poe's experiences in the English and American educational systems certainly affected his perception of writing in addition to his feelings about poetry and prose, but they did not dictate his future approaches. He wanted to discuss the writing of others and found an outlet for that in his reviews. Poe read and reviewed dozens of works by various authors, and as he developed as an author and proto-theorist, he wanted to present his own theories about composing poetry and prose. He was able to present these ideas in critical essays that were published in *Graham's Magazine*, *Southern Literary Magazine*, and *Sartain's Union Magazine* from 1846-1850. These publications included "The Philosophy of Composition," "The Rationale of Verse," and "The Poetic Principle." Poe's theory culminated in his "Philosophy of Composition," but it began as Poe reviewed the works of other writers and assessed their literary value.

Poe's critical reviews positioned him to comment on the composition style of authors such as Charles Dickens, Thomas Moore, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, among others. Although, at the time, many readers were skeptical about Poe's practices as a literary critic, some later scholars, such as Emerson R. Marks, have argued for a reevaluation of Poe in this field. In his article, "Poe as Literary Theorist: A Reappraisal," Marks argues that "Poe is generally credited with having propounded a poetic ontology more thoroughly defined by Coleridge a generation earlier and an analytical method destined to be elaborated by the New Critics a century later."²³ Because Poe drew from both his own education and his critical musings, aspects of his criticism reflect established ideas about composition of poetry and prose as well as progressive ideas about critical theory and composition. His time as a literary critic allowed Poe to refine his theories about composition and build up to his seminal work on the subject.

Poe finally discusses his concepts of composition explicitly in his essay, "The Philosophy of Composition." In this essay, Poe uses his composition of "The Raven" to present his methodologies, and the reader can see the influence of his classical training and years of experience in the magazine business. Poe presents his preference for "unity" and "beauty" as well as his "single effect," which was used as a tool to convey both. Poe's focus on unity in his works was influenced both by his studies of the classics and contemporary sources such as "British periodicals, the criticism of Augustus Wilhelm Schlegel, and the criticism of Coleridge."²⁴ In addition to Poe's discussion of the single effect, unity, and beauty, "The Philosophy of Composition" returns to a concept of planning a story backwards, from the end to the beginning, to ensure the correct causality, an idea he first presented in his second

22 Ibid., 173-174.

23 Emerson R. Marks, "Poe as Literary Theorist: A Reappraisal," *American Literature* 33, no. 3 (November 1961): 296.

24 Beverly R. Voloshin, "The Essays and 'Marginalia': Poe's Literary Theory," in *A Companion to Poe Studies*, ed. Eric W. Carlson (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996), 277.

review of Hawthorne's tales.²⁵ Poe discusses all of these aspects of "The Raven" in the context of rationally planning out the work before commencing the act of composing. Though Poe's experience with the classics influenced how he viewed works, the way he presented his process of composing was very forward-thinking. It was not particularly influential in the United States, but as commented in Dennis Pahl's article, "De-composing Poe's 'Philosophy,'" "the French symbolist poets (Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Valéry), as great admirers of Poe, found in the essay a strong confirmation of their own aesthetic method—a method emphasizing a kind of poetic 'suggestiveness' that would range 'beyond the limits of direct speech.'"²⁶ While the French were considering Poe's theories, he was being largely over-looked in America. Despite Poe's contributions, the field of composition continued to develop without his influence.

From the mid-nineteenth century, when Poe was writing, through the first half of the twentieth century, composition instruction and theory in America underwent broad changes. Beginning in the 1860s, grammar became more universally acknowledged as necessary and worth teaching. Robert J. Connors cites several factors that contributed to this shift. In his book, *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy*, Connors starts with the perception that formal grammar, which primarily constituted learning grammar in ancient languages, was "sterile and impractical," the new-found focus on teaching rhetoric and eloquence through written communication, and the cultural shift toward awareness of correct speaking all contributed to the changing values in education.²⁷ Because this change occurred after Poe's time, his works do not seem preoccupied with grammar. Although Poe was not involved in this movement, "a few theorists saw that rhetoric and grammar would be melded in the developing discipline of composition" and began to work toward the establishment of the field.²⁸ As these pedagogical changes from the late nineteenth century took hold in the universities, professors experienced excessive workloads as they attempted to review each student's written work for mechanical correctness.²⁹ After establishing programs to teach composition and encountering these heavy workloads, some programs followed Harvard's lead, concluding that "composition belongs in secondary schools."³⁰ In John C. Brereton's book *The Origins of Composition Studies in the American College 1875-1925: A Documentary History*, he discusses this time of constant change. During the first few decades of the twentieth century, newly-developed textbooks helped composition instructors as they guided students to produce controlled, predetermined compositions. It

25 Voloshin, "The Essays and 'Marginalia,'" 286.

26 Dennis Pahl, "De-composing Poe's Philosophy," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 38.1 (Spring 1996) N.P.

27 Robert J. Connors, *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and Pedagogy* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), 127.

28 Connors, *Composition-Rhetoric*, 127.

29 Ibid., 140.

30 John C. Brereton, *The Origins of Composition Studies in the American College 1875-1925: A Documentary History* (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1995),

was not until the mid-twentieth century, however, that compositionists became particularly interested in how students write, why they write, or what they want to write about. John R. Hayes and Linda S. Flower researched how students write, and their work became the study of Process Theory.

The research of Hayes and Flower, which ultimately resulted in the Process Theory Model, was progressive and included the use of “think-aloud protocols” to document what each writer did as he or she approached a given writing task and as he or she completed it. Think aloud protocols include training the test subjects to verbalize every aspect of their cognitive process while writing.³¹ After collecting and coding their data, Hayes and Flower determined that there were three primary component processes in the writing process: planning, translating, and reviewing.³² Hayes and Flower subdivided these primary processes into their sub-processes and further researched them. After five years of research, Flower and Hayes published “A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing,” in which they present the four key points that serve as the basis for their cognitive process theory. They found that “writing is best understood as a set of distinctive thinking processes which writers orchestrate or organize during the act of composing”; “the processes of writing are hierarchically organized, with component processes embedded within other components”; “writing is a goal-directed process”; and “writers create their own goals in two key ways: by generating goals and supporting sub-goals which embody purpose; and, at times, by changing or regenerating their own top-level goals in light of what they have learned by writing.”³³ Flower and Hayes’s findings about the writing process have been and are very influential in composition instruction. Despite their great influence, though, Flower and Hayes were not the first to muse about how writers go about writing. Edgar Allan Poe addressed some of these same questions in his essay, “The Philosophy of Composition,” over 100 years before Flower and Hayes’s 1981 article.

While Poe’s “The Philosophy of Composition” did hearken back to the works of Coleridge and many of the Scottish aestheticians who influenced his early schooling with his discussions of beauty and unity, his methodologies for investigating his writing process is much more similar to that of the twentieth century.³⁴ Like Hayes and Flower, Poe muses about how others write. In his “Philosophy,” he states, “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 process by which any one of his compositions attained its ultimate point of completion.”³⁵ Poe’s “Philosophy” is his attempt to exhibit this step-by-step journey

31 John R. Hayes and Linda S. Flower, “Identifying the Organization of Writing Processes,” in *Cognitive Processes in Writing*, eds. Lee W. Gregg and Erwin R. Steinberg (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1980) 4-5.

32 Hayes and Flower, “Identifying the Organizaition,” 12.

33 Linda S. Flower and John R. Hayes, “A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing,” *College Composition and Communication* 32 (December 1981): 366-381.

34 James M. Hutchisson, *Poe* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 66.

35 Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition,” 14.

through the writing process in which he uses “The Raven” as his example. He discusses his planning throughout the essay and contends that every work of literature must be planned all the way through before writing starts. On this point, Poe comments, “Nothing is more clear than that every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its *dénouement* before any thing be attempted with a pen.”³⁶ As a part of Poe’s planning, he also settles on an *effect* that will inform all of the choices he makes while completing the work. These choices include his choice of a melancholy tone because it “is thus the most legitimate of all the poetical tones,” his choice of a raven because it was “equally capable of speech [as compared to his first consideration of a parrot], and infinitely more in keeping with the intended tone,” and his choice of an enclosed setting because he saw it as “absolutely necessary to the effect of insulated incident.”³⁷ In both the choice of the raven and the choice of the enclosed chamber, Poe reviewed his first choices, a parrot and a forest or open field respectively, and decided to revise them during his planning process based on his desire to maintain his intended effect. Poe goes on to consider the audience of the work as well as the proper length for his poem in his planning. All of Poe’s choices as outlined in his “Philosophy” greatly resemble the basis of process theory as proposed by Flower and Hayes: Poe presents his procedure for planning, translating, and reviewing and the components of each of those processes; he proposes that certain decisions need to be executed first, such as deciding tone or effect; he sets goals throughout his planning, primarily focusing on bringing his single effect to fruition; and he reevaluates the importance of his decisions based on his goals. In opposition to many of the ideas promoted during Poe’s extensive education, he developed his own thoughts about the writing process that would not be fully embraced or expanded upon until the mid-twentieth century.

Poe has been recognized for his contributions to literature and is beginning to be better recognized for his contributions to literary theory, but Poe’s early commentary on composition theory has been largely overlooked. The educational environment that Poe experienced was rigid and primarily focused on classical ideals of education, so his musings about the writing process and his foray into data collection about his own writing process, which resembles the think aloud protocols used by Flower and Hayes, is that much more informative and relevant for the history of composition research.

36 Ibid., 13.

37 Ibid., 17-21.

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