

PHIL 4403: Philosophy of Art
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2/25/05
Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition"

*Before sitting down to write, the author should have the denouement planned out and in mind.

"It is only with the *denouement* 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." (208)

*Poe explains that his writing procedure was to first come up with an *effect*, novel and vivid, that he wishes to bring about. He then searched for the best means to achieve this effect.

*Recall Kant's comments on genius when reading this passage by Poe:

"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." (208)

--Poe criticizes the view that the poet accomplishes his/her end primarily by inspiration, as opposed to more mechanical and laborious processes.

--Poe claims to be able to recollect how his works were produced. He will explain how "The Raven" came about, in particular. It followed a very logical plan:

"It is my design to render it manifest that no one point in its composition is referrible either to accident or intuition—that the work proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem." (209)

*Poe's Procedure:

--First, consider length—a work that cannot be read in one sitting loses unity. All poems should be read in a single sitting. And Poe is much more specific than that when it comes to his own productions:

"Holding in view these considerations, as well as that degree of excitement which I deemed not above the popular, while not below the critical, taste, I reached at once what I conceived the proper *length* for my intended poem—a length of about one hundred lines. It is, in fact, a hundred and eight." (210)

--Second, consider the desired effect. Poe wanted 'The Raven' to be "universally appreciable". Beauty should be the desired effect for all poems.

--Third, consider the tone. Poe decided to use a repeated, but varied, refrain (because of the past successes and universal acceptance of refrains). Since the refrain would be repeated, but varied, it should be short (to allow for enough good variations). From these considerations alone Poe even reached a conclusion regarding the character of the refrain!:

"That such a close, to have force, must be sonorous and susceptible of protracted emphasis, admitted no doubt: and these considerations inevitably led me to the long *o* as the most sonorous vowel, in connection with *r* as the most producible consonant." (211)

Thus, 'Nevermore'.

--Fourth, Poe has to come up with a reason to keep repeating this word. Naturally, a human being wouldn't keep repeating this word. So, let's have a parrot say it. No, a raven better fits the tone. Go with a raven uttering "Nevermore".

--Fifth, Poe has to come up with a topic—the most beautiful topic is death, the death of a beautiful woman in particular.

--Sixth, Poe decided how the poem should end, and then proceeded from there (all works of art should begin at the end—recall the first line).