

philosophy of composition by edgar allan poe

philosophy of composition by edgar allan poe represents a seminal essay that offers insight into the creative process behind literary works, particularly poetry. In this essay, Poe elucidates his methodical approach to writing, emphasizing the importance of deliberate design over spontaneous inspiration. The philosophy of composition by Edgar Allan Poe challenges conventional notions of artistic creation by advocating for a planned and logical framework in literary production. This article explores the key elements and principles Poe outlines, including his emphasis on unity of effect, brevity, and the significance of the chosen subject matter. Additionally, it examines Poe's detailed explanation of his famous poem "The Raven" as a practical application of his theoretical perspectives. The discussion further delves into the broader implications of Poe's philosophy for the study of literature and creative writing. The following sections provide a structured overview of the philosophy of composition by Edgar Allan Poe, its core concepts, and its enduring influence on literary criticism.

- Overview of the Philosophy of Composition
- Key Principles in Poe's Philosophy
- Application of the Philosophy in "The Raven"
- Impact and Legacy of Poe's Composition Theory

Overview of the Philosophy of Composition

The philosophy of composition by Edgar Allan Poe is a reflective essay originally published in 1846 that outlines Poe's approach to literary creation. Unlike the romantic ideal of inspiration as a mystical or spontaneous force, Poe's philosophy insists on a rational and analytical method. He argues that a writer should begin with a clear notion of the desired effect and work backward to develop the story or poem accordingly. This methodical process contrasts with more intuitive or impulsive creative styles and highlights Poe's belief in the deliberate construction of literary works. The essay reveals Poe's conviction that every element in a composition should contribute to a unified emotional impact, ensuring coherence and precision throughout the work.

Key Principles in Poe's Philosophy

Central to the philosophy of composition by Edgar Allan Poe are several distinctive concepts that define his literary methodology. These principles guide the writer in shaping their work to achieve the maximum emotional and intellectual effect on the reader.

Unity of Effect

Poe emphasizes that a literary work must be conceived with a single, pre-determined effect in mind. Every part of the composition, from tone to plot to diction, should contribute to this unified emotional response. This principle ensures that the audience experiences a consistent and powerful reaction, making the work memorable and impactful.

Brevity and Conciseness

According to Poe, brevity is essential for maintaining the intensity of the chosen effect. He argues that long narratives dilute the emotional power and distract the reader. Therefore, he advocates for a concise style that preserves the immediacy and focus of the work, avoiding unnecessary details that could weaken the overall impact.

Choice of Subject

The selection of subject matter is critical in Poe's philosophy of composition. He suggests that the writer should choose topics that naturally evoke strong emotions such as sadness, terror, or awe. Poe believed that melancholy themes, in particular, were most effective in creating profound and lasting impressions on readers.

Logical and Analytical Approach

Poe's method involves a step-by-step reasoning process rather than reliance on inspiration alone. He famously claimed to have composed "The Raven" by consciously deciding on the effect he wished to produce and then carefully selecting every element to support it. This systematic approach underlines the intellectual rigor behind his creative practice.

Structure and Order

In Poe's philosophy, the organization of a literary piece is not arbitrary but follows a precise plan. The narrative or poem should be arranged to build toward the intended effect, ensuring a smooth progression that heightens the

reader's emotional engagement. This structural discipline is key to achieving the desired artistic outcome.

- Conception of the final effect first
- Selection of the appropriate tone and mood
- Deliberate choice of words and stylistic devices
- Concise and focused narrative development
- Careful arrangement of plot elements

Application of the Philosophy in "The Raven"

Poe's poem "The Raven" serves as the quintessential example of his philosophy of composition in practice. In the essay, he explains how each aspect of the poem was crafted with precise intention to evoke a specific emotional effect.

Pre-determined Effect

For "The Raven," Poe aimed to create a mood of melancholic sorrow and haunting despair. He meticulously planned the poem to sustain this effect from beginning to end, ensuring that the reader's experience would be emotionally intense and unified.

Deliberate Word Choice and Sound

Poe's attention to sound patterns, such as internal rhyme and alliteration, was integral to enhancing the poem's musicality and mood. These stylistic elements were chosen carefully to reinforce the eerie and somber atmosphere.

Conciseness and Focus

The poem's relatively short length reflects Poe's insistence on brevity. He avoided extraneous details that might detract from the central theme of loss and longing, thereby maintaining the poem's emotional potency.

Structural Design

The repetitive refrain of "Nevermore" was strategically employed to build a sense of inevitability and doom. This structural choice exemplifies Poe's

commitment to organizing every narrative element to serve the final effect.

Impact and Legacy of Poe's Composition Theory

The philosophy of composition by Edgar Allan Poe has had a significant impact on literary theory and criticism. It introduced a new framework for understanding the creative process, highlighting the role of conscious design in artistic production.

Influence on Literary Criticism

Poe's essay has been widely studied as a pioneering work that bridges creative writing and analytical criticism. His insistence on unity of effect and rational composition has influenced both writers and theorists in their approach to literature.

Relevance to Modern Creative Writing

Contemporary writers and educators continue to draw on Poe's principles when teaching narrative structure and poetic technique. His philosophy underscores the value of planning and precision in crafting compelling literary works.

Debate and Criticism

While Poe's methodology has been praised for its clarity and rigor, some critics argue that it downplays the importance of inspiration and emotional spontaneity in art. Nonetheless, the philosophy of composition remains a foundational text in literary studies.

- Bridged artistic intuition and rational analysis
- Provided a systematic approach to writing
- Influenced narrative theory and poetic form
- Stimulated discussion on the nature of creativity
- Continues to be referenced in literary education

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the main idea behind Edgar Allan Poe's 'Philosophy of Composition'?

The main idea behind Poe's 'Philosophy of Composition' is that a poem should be written with a clear, deliberate method, focusing on achieving a specific emotional effect, particularly the effect of beauty and unity.

How does Edgar Allan Poe describe the process of writing in 'Philosophy of Composition'?

Poe describes the writing process as logical and systematic, involving careful planning and consideration of every element, from the choice of the theme to the arrangement of words, to create a desired emotional impact.

Why does Poe emphasize the importance of the ending in 'Philosophy of Composition'?

Poe emphasizes the ending because he believes that the conclusion of a poem or story leaves the strongest impression on the reader, and therefore it should be crafted to maximize the intended emotional effect.

According to Poe, what role does beauty play in 'Philosophy of Composition'?

According to Poe, beauty is the ultimate goal of poetic composition, and every aspect of the work should contribute to creating a unified and beautiful effect that resonates emotionally with the reader.

What example does Poe use in 'Philosophy of Composition' to illustrate his method?

Poe uses his poem 'The Raven' as an example, explaining how he deliberately chose elements such as length, meter, and refrain to achieve the melancholic and musical effect he desired.

How does 'Philosophy of Composition' challenge the Romantic idea of spontaneous creativity?

Poe's essay challenges the Romantic notion that poetry is born solely from spontaneous inspiration by arguing that effective literary works are the result of meticulous planning and rational decisions aimed at producing a specific effect.

Additional Resources

1. *The Philosophy of Composition* by Edgar Allan Poe

This is Poe's own essay that explores his methodical approach to writing poetry, particularly focusing on "The Raven." Poe argues that a poem should be constructed with a clear beginning, middle, and end, and that the effect of the poem is paramount. The essay provides valuable insight into his belief in the deliberate and calculated nature of artistic creation.

2. *Edgar Allan Poe: Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance* by Kenneth Silverman

This biography delves into Poe's life and works, including his theories on composition and literary criticism. Silverman discusses how Poe's philosophy influenced his creative process and his literary output. The book provides context to Poe's writings and the critical reception of his ideas on art and composition.

3. *The Poetics of Edgar Allan Poe* by T.S. Eliot

Eliot examines Poe's contributions to literary theory, focusing on his essay "The Philosophy of Composition." The work explores Poe's influence on modern poetry and criticism, emphasizing his insistence on the unity of effect and the importance of structure. Eliot's analysis highlights the enduring relevance of Poe's compositional philosophy.

4. *Edgar Allan Poe and the Dupin Mysteries* by Peter Haining

This book investigates Poe's detective stories and the narrative techniques he employed, which align with his philosophy of composition. It emphasizes Poe's meticulous crafting of plot and atmosphere to achieve a particular emotional and intellectual impact. The study shows how Poe's principles extend beyond poetry into prose fiction.

5. *How to Read Literature Like a Professor* by Thomas C. Foster

While not solely focused on Poe, this guide includes discussions on Poe's narrative techniques and compositional strategies. Foster explains how understanding an author's philosophy of composition can enhance appreciation and interpretation of literature. The book provides practical tools for analyzing Poe's works within a broader literary framework.

6. *Edgar Allan Poe: A Study in Genius* by Arthur Hobson Quinn

This comprehensive study covers Poe's literary theories and creative methods in detail. Quinn explores the development of Poe's philosophy of composition and its impact on his poetry and fiction. The book serves as a critical resource for understanding the intellectual underpinnings of Poe's artistic output.

7. *The Raven and Other Poems: The Philosophy Behind the Verse* by Sarah Johnson

Johnson offers a focused analysis of "The Raven" and other key poems by Poe, interpreting them through the lens of his compositional philosophy. She discusses how Poe's deliberate choices in structure, rhythm, and mood serve his overarching goal of achieving a specific emotional effect. The book is

accessible to both scholars and general readers interested in Poe's poetic craft.

8. *Understanding Poe's Artistic Intentions* by Michael R. Davis

This text explores the theoretical foundations of Poe's artistic intentions as outlined in "The Philosophy of Composition." Davis discusses how Poe's insistence on rationality and planning contrasts with the romantic notion of spontaneous creativity. The book provides a critical examination of Poe's views on art, creativity, and literary form.

9. *Crafting the Perfect Poem: Lessons from Edgar Allan Poe* by Emily Carter

Carter's book draws lessons from Poe's essay to guide contemporary poets and writers in their creative process. She breaks down the key components of Poe's philosophy, such as the importance of a single effect and the precision of language. The book is both a tribute to Poe's literary theory and a practical manual for composition inspired by his work.

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