

A Review of Allan Poe's Career as a Short Story Writer and Critic

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Keywords: Allan Poe; Short story writer; Critic; Review

Abstract. The art of short stories finds mature expression in Allan Poe's stories and theories. Poe's 70 stories can be clearly identified their publication, which are the fruits of his deliberate practice of his artistic theory. The years between 1837 and 1840 were Poe's first productive period and he got 14 short stories published; from 1841 to 1847, another prolific period, Poe published four refined detective stories and, of course, other well-known horror tales. In his four critical articles he systematically advocates four principles for literary creation: Originality, Totality, Brevity and Single Effect. It's neither necessary nor possible to draw definite lines among so-called Poe's four categories of short stories. Poe's abundant fruits of short stories give great credit to the workableness of his writing theories. A review of Poe's career as a short story writer and critic contributes to better appreciation of Poe's art of short stories and better regard for Poe.

Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) stands as one of the very few great innovators in American literature. It is he who renews Gothic novels, pioneers detective stories and enlightens the creation of modern psychological stories [1]. Critiques on Allan Poe's short stories have been vastly diverging ever since his lifetime to the present day.

There are mainly three attitudes towards his stories: "popular acclaim, measured skepticism and ardent enthusiasm." [2] The critical history of Poe in Western countries (mainly in America, France and Britain) developed in three stages and in each stage different attitudes prevailed in different countries. The first stage of Poe studies in Western countries was from 1829 to the end of the 19th century. The second stage was from the beginning of the 20th century to the 1960s. With the celebration of the centenary of Poe's birth in 1909, his short stories began to enter the critics' agenda. The focus of Poe studies was turned from Poe himself to his works and from his poems to his short stories. And in this period, Jacobs studies Poe's artistic theory in terms of Poe's own life as a critic and journalist [3]. Since the 1970s, Poe studies in Western countries show the trend of diversification.

In China, Poe studies began much later than in Western countries and achieved much less. As Zhu Zhengwu and Gao Limin points out, "compared with Allan Poe studies abroad or Hemingway and Faulkner studies at home, Allan Poe studies in China still lag behind" [4]. Most study achievements were made in recent 20 years. All materials I have collected so far support the observation that very few monologies have been published and most studies are published in the form of essays. In contrast to Poe studies in Western countries, Chinese studies on Poe focus on three aspects: firstly, the form of Poe's works in terms of the language, the narrative techniques, the atmosphere, the use of symbols and imagination, etc., Yu Lei as one of the representative researcher [5]; secondly, the theme of Poe's short stories, Cao Man as a distinctive researcher [6]; thirdly, comparative studies between Poe and some Chinese writers, say Lu Xun, Guan Lizheng as an outstanding researcher [7].

Generally speaking, the achievements which have been made by both Western and Chinese critics are quite enlightening. A clear idea has to be developed about Allan Poe's literary life as a short-story writer and critic in order to establish a general view on Poe's theory and practice. In this thesis, his 70 stories are classified and his four main articles on artistic writing are briefly introduced.

Poe's Life as a Short-Story Writer

Poe began his literary life as a poet, but after failure to attract attention of critics, he turned to short-story writing. Closely following his systematic artistic principles, he created many wonderful short stories. 70 stories can be clearly identified their publication. Poe was the first one to deliberately practise short story as a separate literary type.

Chronology of Poe's Short-story Writing. The publication of five stories in 1831 marked the beginning of Poe's life as a short-story writer. Poe began his literary life as a poet in the summer of 1827 when he published at his own expense a thin volume of poems. He got published in December of 1829 a second one and again in 1831 a new edition of his poems. However, his poems had failed to attract attention. Therefore, Poe turned to story writing and worked frantically. In 1831, Poe submitted five stories, "Metzengerstein" "The Duke de l' Omelette" "A Tale of Jerusalem," "Loss of Breath," and "Bon-Bon" to compete for the prize offered for the best short story by the Philadelphia Saturday Courier, but he missed the prize. These five stories were published in 1832. In June 1833, he attended another contest held by the Baltimore Saturday Visitor with another six stories including "Ms. Found in Bottle," "Lionizing," and "The Visionary" ("The Assignment"). This time he won 50 dollars, the short-story award with "Ms. Found in a Bottle" and got it published. In January 1834, "The Visionary" was published. In 1835, six stories were published in succession. They are "Berenice," "Morella," "Lionizing," "The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaal," "King Pest," and "Shadow: a Parable." Then in 1836, his former stories and another new one were published together. In the same year Poe married his cousin. The year between 1837 and 1840 were the first productive period. About 14 stories were published among which were the well-known "Ligeia," "The Fall of the House of Usher," "William Wilson," and "The Man of the Crowd." Poe explored deeply the split personality and the psychological state of people in his fiction. 1841 witnessed the first detective story in the world, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." From 1841 to 1847, another prolific period, Poe published four refined detective stories and, of course, other well-known horror tales such as "The Masque of the Red Death," "The Pit and the Pendulum," "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Black Cat," "The Premature Burial," "The Imp of the Perverse," and "A Cask of Amontillado." Poe's wife died in 1847 and Poe died in 1849. From 1848 to 1849, only five stories got published.

Poe's short stories, as his poems, never gained wide fame and fortune in America for Poe when he was alive. Poe encountered nothing but failures and denials after he reached manhood. All his life he reveled and floundered in loss of love, failure to get fame and fortune, and torments of a nightmarish world. He dodged in the private world of his dreams and tales with cold and detached eyes.

Classification of Poe's 70 Stories. Poe wrote about 70 stories including "The Light House" which was not finished. Except "The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym" of about 120,000 words, other 69 are short stories which can be finished almost "in a single sitting." [8] Critics classify his short stories into different categories. Some contend to classify them into tales of horror, Death tales, Revenge tales and tales of ratiocination. Some generalize them into two kinds, Horror tales and tales of ratiocination. Cao Minglun, a translator and critic for Poe's works, classifies them into four categories, namely horror tales, detective stories, scientific stories and satires [9]. However, I think it is impossible to draw definite lines among the four categories because some stories bare the characteristics of one category and at the same time of another. Take "The System of Dr. Tarr and Pro. Fether" for example. It touches upon hypnotism, thus it can be classified as a scientific story; it also opens up some horrible scenes to the reader, thus it can be also regarded as a horror tale. Take "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" for another example. It is generally regarded as the first detective story, but no one would deny that the bloody scene of killing causes terror. In fact, it is not important to definitely classify Poe's stories. What's important is that Poe's short stories do well exhibit his exquisite skills. Poe's writing was governed by his artistic theory. Among his 70 stories, about 20 of them are the most celebrated, including "Ligeia," "William Wilson," "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Masque of the Red Death," "The Pit and the Pendulum," "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Black Cat," "The Premature Burial," "A Cask of Amontillado," "The Man of the

Crowd,” “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” “The Mystery of Marrie Roget,” “The Golden Bug,” “The Purloined Letter,” and so on. These exemplary tales offer access to Poe’s art of short-story writing.

Poe’s Life as a Critic and His Artistic Theory

Allan Poe is regarded as one of the most influential critics in American history. His life as a critic began with “A Letter to Mr. B,” the introduction to *Poem*, Second Edition published in 1831. Poe entered a contest organized by the *Baltimore Saturday Visitor* in June 1833 and gained the attention of John P. Kennedy, one of the judges of the contest, a wealthy lawyer and amateur novelist. On Kennedy’s recommendation Poe in August 1835 became assistant editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger* published at Richmond. He wrote many forceful and slashing reviews and only in 1836, he wrote over 80 critical reviews. He was discharged in January 1837 for drunkenness and intemperance. In July 1839 Poe gained the post of the editor of *Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine* in Philadelphia, but was soon fired because of disagreement on editorial policies with Burton. From April 1841 to May 1845, Poe worked as editor of *Graham’s Magazine*, the renewed edition of *Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine*. This was another productive period. It was in this period that Poe published one of his most famous reviews, “Reviews on Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales*,” in which he states some of his artistic ideals. After that, he became assistant editor of *Sunday Times*. Then in 1845, he found a job as assistant editor of the *Evening Mirror*. Later on, he was offered a better position as assistant of the *Broadway Journal* and then editor. He even bought the journal in October 1845, but unfortunately it died in his hands at the very beginning of 1846.

Allan Poe wrote a large number of critical articles in his life but only a few of them can be found now. The most refined are “A Letter to Mr. B,” “The Philosophy of Composition,” “The Poetic Principle” and “Review on Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales*.” These four pieces systematically elucidate Poe’s theory on creative writing. Some critics argue that the first three essays are expressions of Poe’s views on the writing of poetry and only the fourth one, “Review on Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales*,” is on short-story writing. They give their reasons: “A Letter to Mr. B” was published as the introductory statement to Poe’s *Poems* in 1831; “The Philosophy of Composition” was composed after he wrote “The Raven,” his most famous poem; “The Poetic Principle” has “poetic” in the title and uses “Waif,” Longfellow’s poem, as an example. However, ideas expressed in these three articles are also Poe’s views on the creation of short stories. Poe usually employed the word “poetry” or its cognates to refer to any practice of imagination only if its aim is the creation of Beauty as he called. He defines Beauty as “the elevation of soul.” In Poe’s opinion, only provided that a tale works to achieve Beauty, it is worth the name “poetry.” Therefore, it can be acknowledged that for Poe, any exercise of imagination with the creation of Beauty as its object can be called “poem” and the artistic principles he advocates in his critical articles, including those written in the name of poems, are actually also for his short stories which certainly represents an imaginative search for Beauty.

These four essays are mutually complementary, contributing to Poe’s theory on artistic writing as a system. “A Letter to Mr. B” constitutes Poe’s views on his poetics for the first time, which demonstrates Poe’s initial understanding of the aims of poetry. Poe claims that poetry, different from a work of science, romance and prose, aims at pleasure, not truth, to arouse the reader’s “indefinite sensations.” This idea is developed in his later essays. “Review on Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales*” discusses the great importance of “design” for “the unity of effect or impression” which is in fact what he calls “pleasure” or “indefinite sensations” in “A Letter to Mr. B.” [10] In order to achieve the purpose that “During the hour of perusal the soul of the reader is at the writer’s control,” the writer should conceive an effect and then arrange every element in “a very lofty order.” What’s more, Poe mentions “invention, creation, imagination, originality,” but he doesn’t go to the depth in “Review on Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales*.” In “The Philosophy of Composition” he clearly identifies the central role of “effect”: “the conscious choice of an emotional atmosphere that takes primacy over incident, character, and versification.” This is the most noteworthy point of this essay. He also talks about Originality, Brevity and Totality and discusses their relationship with

Effect. In “The Poetic Principle” Poe once again stresses the emotional effect of a literary work on the reader and the aim at the “elevation of soul.” [11] Besides, he systematically elucidates his theory on Brevity [12]. As Kent P. Ljungquist says, “these pieces reflect a remarkably coherent, self-conscious view of poetry and the creative process.” [13] Systematically, these four essays enunciate Poe’s principles on artistic writing: Originality, Brevity, Totality, and Single Effect.

Summary

Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories impress readers with their consummate craftsmanship, great logic lucidity and a gift of imaginative revelry. A review of Poe’s career as a short story writer and critic contributes to better appreciation of Poe’s art of short stories and better regard for Poe. Poe’s 70 stories can be clearly identified their publication, which are the fruits of his deliberate practice of his artistic theory. The years between 1837 and 1840 were Poe’s first productive period and he got 14 short stories published; from 1841 to 1847, another prolific period, Poe published four refined detective stories and, of course, other well-known horror tales. In his four critical articles he systematically advocates four principles for literary creation: Originality, Totality, Brevity and Single Effect. It’s neither necessary nor possible to draw definite lines among so-called Poe’s four categories of short stories. Poe’s abundant fruits of short stories give great credit to the workableness of his writing theories.

Acknowledgements

This article is a research result of a teaching-reform project funded by Dianchi College, Yunnan University. The Project is “Reading-Discussion-Writing Integrated Practice” Based on the Concept of CLIL in the English Writing Course of an Independent College and the project number is 2018TB0210.

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