**AN EXPLICATION OF "THE PHILOSOPHY OF COMPOSITION"**

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**"THE PHILOSOPHY OF COMPOSITION"**

In spring of 1846, [Edgar Allan Poe](https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/literature-and-arts/american-literature-biographies/edgar-allan-poe) (1809–1849) moved from [New York](https://www.encyclopedia.com/places/united-states-and-canada/us-political-geography/new-york) City to his country cottage in Fordham where he wrote "The Philosophy of Composition," an essay that promises to recount the method he used to write his famous poem "The Raven" (1845). In the essay Poe challenges those who suggest that writing is a mysterious process prompted solely by the imagination. Although the it offers a number of precepts for good writing, at the end of the essay, Poe undercuts his step-by-step instructions by insisting that all writing should have an "under-current" of meaning. Because he never demonstrates how to create that "under-current," Poe's essay never completely reveals the process that makes his work so powerful.

**THE IMPACT OF "THE RAVEN"**

At dawn on the full-moon morning of 19 July 1845 explosions at a saltpeter storehouse in lower Manhattan caused a widespread fire, rivaling the disastrous [New York](https://www.encyclopedia.com/places/united-states-and-canada/us-political-geography/new-york) fire of 1835; hundreds of buildings went up in flames and many people died. Quite coincidentally, or maybe not so coincidentally, this was the day [Edgar Allan Poe](https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/literature-and-arts/american-literature-biographies/edgar-allan-poe) would give his recitation of "The Raven" at the home of Anna Lynch (1815–1891), the well-known literary salon hostess. Ms. Lynch described Poe's performance that night as "electrifying" in a letter to the poet Sarah Helen Whitman (1803–1878), who later had a short-lived relationship with Poe. Granted, Poe was known for his intent performances, but his reading "The Raven" on a night of full moon and devastation must have enhanced the drama and haunting effect of his poem.

Poe's poem had dazzled many readers, and numerous printings of "The Raven" appeared in magazines and newspapers around the country and abroad after its initial appearance in *The New York Evening Mirror* on 29 January 1845 (in which it was printed as an "advance of publication" copy that would appear in the *American Review* the next month). On 19 November 1845, almost a year after its initial appearance in the *Mirror,* "The Raven" was published by Wiley and Putnam in a collection using the famous poem in its title, *The Raven and Other Poems.* Two days later, the book was reviewed in the *Mirror* by the poet and editor George Pope Morris (1802–1864), a friend of Poe's. Morris described Poe's poetry this way: "Tall shadows and a sighing silence seem to close around us as we read. We feel dream land to be more real and more touching than the actual life we have left" (Thomas and Jackson, p. 592). A month later, Thomas Dunn English (1819–1902), a poet, physician, editor, politician, and sometime friend of Poe's, wrote a review in the New York monthly magazine the *Aristidean* and described Poe's poetics in the following terms: "much of the effect depends upon the mode of construction, and the peculiar arrangement of words and incidents" (Thomas and Jackson, p. 599). Poe would later use these two approaches to his poetry—concern with effect and construction—to chart the process he used in composing "The Raven" and to suggest that "no one point in its composition is referable either to accident or intuition" (p. 195). But this dissertation would come much after Poe had enjoyed the fame his "raven" had brought him.

With this newfound popularity and his position as owner and editor of *The Broadway Journal,* Poe was finally able to live in a fashionable neighborhood near Washington Square Park at 85 Amity Street. In this neighborhood and in his role as editor, Poe came into contact with prominent writers and artists of his time and because of the appeal of "The Raven," his fame as a poet grew at home and abroad. This idyllic time, however, was short-lived. On 3 January 1846 *The Broadway Journal* folded, and by the end of February Poe was forced to move his family from 85 Amity. In addition, his wife's poor health and her displeasure with the gossip about Poe's "affairs" and his "pending institutionalization" to cure his "insanity" prompted Poe's move from the city to the country in Fordham (Thomas and Jackson, pp. 623–624).

Shortly after this move, Poe wrote "The Philosophy of Composition," partly to build on the popularity that "The Raven" had afforded him and partly to counter the negative criticism written about his poetry and the numerous parodies of "The Raven" that had appeared in the press. Having earned the reputation of the "tomahawk critic" for his harsh analyses of other poets' works, Poe's poetry received similarly harsh appraisals; though praised by many, his poetry was also called "childish," "puerile," and "absurd" (Thomas and Jackson, p. 627). One of Poe's answers to such criticism was "The Philosophy of Composition," an essay that purports to detail the method he used to write poetry, a method that proceeds with "the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem" (p. 195).

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Poe's essay opens with an intimate tone; the first few words bring the reader into his study, as he points to "a note now lying before me" (p. 193). Referring to this note from the famous British novelist [Charles Dickens](https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/literature-and-arts/english-literature-19th-cent-biographies/charles-dickens) is a purposeful pose on Poe's part to grant his treatise credibility. The basic premise of his dissertation seems to derive from two of England's most prominent authors—Dickens and [William Godwin](https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/literature-and-arts/english-literature-19th-cent-biographies/william-godwin), a philosopher and novelist and the father of Mary Shelley. In his letter to Poe, Dickens remarked that Godwin wrote the second volume of his popular novel, *Caleb Williams* (1794), first and then "cast about him for some mode of accounting for what had been done" (p. 193). Although Poe believed that Godwin did not "precisely" follow the method Dickens suggested, Poe, nonetheless, asserts that the overall approach of keeping the end "constantly in view" is essential to effective composition (p. 193). He appears to base his philosophy of composition on this revelation from Dickens about Godwin's writing process.

Poe's ostensible purpose in publishing "The Philosophy of Composition" is simple: to demonstrate his ability to describe a step-by-step process that leads to a successful poem or narrative. No other author, Poe observes, had had either the desire or ability to do so. Unlike other poets and novelists who resist "letting the public take a peep behind the scenes," Poe promises to reveal all (p. 194).

To be successful, Poe advises, a writer must choose a desired effect before putting pen to paper, he must consider originality at all times, and, of course, he should have the dénouement always in mind. To create a desired effect a writer must determine which combination of tone and incident best provokes this effect (ordinary incident and peculiar tone, peculiar incident and ordinary tone, peculiar tone and peculiar incident). He then must decide upon a suitable length, one that sustains "unity of impression" (p. 196). The length should be directly proportional to the merit of the subject, or, in Poe's words, "the extent of a poem may be made to bear mathematical relation to its merit" (pp. 196–197). The length, however, should be sufficient enough to induce an effect, or, in Poe's words, "a certain degree of duration is absolutely requisite for the production of any effect at all" (p. 197). However, no "literary work" should require more than "one sitting"; otherwise, Poe argues, "the vastly important artistic element, totality, or unity, of effect" is lost (p. 196).

After determining length, the author must choose a theme that is "*universally* appreciable" and induces pleasure (p. 197). Then the writer must decide what form is appropriate to that purpose: poetry, Poe asserts, should elevate the soul and effect "Beauty" while prose should impress the intellect and effect "Truth" and/or impress the heart and effect "Passion." Poe reminds the reader that "Truth" demands precision and "Passion" requires "*homeliness*" (p. 198). Having set these parameters for writing in general, Poe turns to the specific requirements needed to create an effective poem. He allows that poetry can embrace both "Truth" and "Passion" but not at the expense of "Beauty"; "the true artist will always contrive, first, to tone them into proper subservience to the predominant aim, and, secondly, to enveil them, as far as possible, in that Beauty which is the atmosphere and the essence of the poem" (p. 197).

In using his experience of writing "The Raven" as a concrete example of how to write a poem, Poe, again, defers to "experience" rather than "inspiration" as the arbiter of the best choice of tone for poetry: "all experience [he writes] has shown that this tone is one of *sadness*" (p. 198). He continues by posing a rhetorical question: "Of all melancholy topics, what, according to the *universal* understanding of mankind, is the *most* melancholy?" (p. 201). Poe provides a simple, clear answer: "the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world" (p. 201). Such clarity on Poe's part may be why critics and poets so often quote this part of his advice.

After determining length and tone, Poe advises the poet to choose a mechanism, a pivot, around which the poem would be constructed. For "The Raven," Poe chose the refrain, ostensibly because "its employment sufficed to assure me of its intrinsic value" (p. 199). Poe improved the shape of the refrain by insisting on monotone "both in sound and thought" (p. 199). After making this choice, Poe lists the considerations that led him to choose the word "nevermore" for "The Raven." Most important, Poe concludes that he made his choice by imagining the last refrain of the poem: "I first established in mind the climax, or concluding query—that to which 'Nevermore' should be in the last place an answer—that in reply to which this word 'Nevermore' should involve the utmost conceivable amount of sorrow and despair" (p. 202). At this juncture, about halfway through his essay, Poe returns to the initial premise of keeping the ending "always in view," reminding his readers that "the poem may be said to have its beginning—at the end, where all works of art should begin" (p. 202).

Once the pivot is established the poet would then choose an appropriate locale and characters to reinforce the desired tone and effect. Complementary versification is essential. Yet Poe insists that originality in versification is not a matter of intuition but rather a matter of "negation"; such negation presumes a thorough knowledge of prosody and poetic precedent. Poe asserts that his "Raven" exhibits originality of versification only because of the way he combined individual lines of ordinary rhythm and meter: "nothing even remotely approaching this combination has ever been attempted" (p. 204). As Thomas O. Mabbott points out, this claim is suspect, and he suggests that Poe borrowed heavily from Elizabeth Barrett's "Lady Geraldine's Courtship" (1844), especially its "stanzaic form" (p. 356).

The rest of "The Philosophy of Composition" outlines the decisions Poe made in constructing "The Raven," purportedly revealing the linear progression of thought that produced his poem while citing complete stanzas as examples. In fact, the essay ends with the last stanza of "The Raven": "And my soul *from out that shadow* that lies floating on the floor / Shall be lifted—nevermore" (p. 208). Yet just before this dramatic ending is a paragraph that effectively undoes most of Poe's insistence that poetry can be written with "the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem" (p. 195).

In this important paragraph Poe reveals that even if a poet diligently follows all of the suggestions he poses, an "under-current, however indefinite, of meaning" must be imbedded in the poem (p. 207). That "under-current," Poe claims, creates the "*richness*" so necessary to any poem of merit (p. 207). Poe also takes aim here at the "Frogpondians," Poe's disdainful nickname for the [New England](https://www.encyclopedia.com/places/united-states-and-canada/miscellaneous-us-geography/new-england) transcendentalists including, for example, [Ralph Waldo Emerson](https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/literature-and-arts/american-literature-biographies/ralph-waldo-emerson) and [Henry David Thoreau](https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/literature-and-arts/american-literature-biographies/henry-david-thoreau). Poe's strong rejection of pedantic poetry is evident when he asserts that "excess" of meaning "turns poetry into prose" (pp. 207–208). For Poe the most important element of poetry is the "suggestiveness" that underlies a poem's effect. Even though Poe asserts that didacticism turns poetry into prose, he writes that the very suggestiveness of "The Raven" "disposes the mind to seek a moral in all that has been previously narrated" (p. 208). This is a curious contradiction that does not square with Poe's overall disdain for poetry that has a "moral" agenda. Following this conclusion is another questionable assertion. Poe claims that the phrase found in the last stanza of "The Raven," "from out *my heart,*" is the "first metaphorical expression in the poem" (p. 208). This claim is simply not true. What about "Night's Plutonian shore," or "fiery eyes now burned into my bosom's core," or "perfumed from an unseen censer / Swung by seraphim whose foot-falls tinkled on the tufted floor"? These two contradictions lead the reader to question Poe's claim that he will reveal the "wheels and pinions" of his writing process (p. 195).

**CRITICAL RESPONSE**

In his introduction to "The Raven," Mabbott says quite simply that "The Philosophy of Composition" "includes a partly fictional account of the planning of 'The Raven'" (Poe, "The Raven," p. 353) and reminds readers that Poe "admitted freely that his 'Philosophy of Composition' . . . was not expected to be taken as literal truth" (p. 359). Some critics have suggested that Poe's essay is a purposeful hoax while others make a less strident assessment, as G. R. Thompson does when he characterizes the essay as "possibly half tongue-in-cheek" (p. xl). Daniel Hoffman argues that in "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe reveals "the method of his art [that] enables the madness of his matter to be spoken" (p. 92). Hoffman also points out that Poe must have taken pleasure in having [George Graham](https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/science-and-technology/technology-biographies/george-graham) publish his essay after rejecting "The Raven" years earlier. As Hoffman succinctly puts it, Poe made Graham "eat raven" (p. 80). Dennis Pahl argues that "The Philosophy of Composition" not only "ends up reproducing many of the poem's features—becoming as it were seduced by the very rhetoric it is supposed to analyze" (p. 10) but also ultimately "engages in violating boundaries, in questioning assertions of mastery, in what might be called in other words, 'writing in the feminine'" (p. 20). No one has suggested that the essay is simply a recipe for good writing, yet many have excerpted particular ideas as nodal points of Poe's literary sensibility, especially the following: the death of a beautiful woman as "the most poetical topic in the world," the need for an "under-current" of meaning in all artworks, and the importance of "unity of effect."

**INTERPRETATION**

Clues to whether or not Poe actually revealed his writing method in "The Philosophy of Composition" can be found in the essay itself. Poe often advises the writer to do what is ordinarily done; for example, when he explains how he chose the refrain as the pivot of "The Raven," he says he chose it above all other devices because "no one had been so universally applied as that of the *refrain*" (p. 199). He further advises a writer to rely on themes that are "universally appreciable" and tones that allow for "universal understanding" (p. 201)—as if universality is most important, as if it is best to please the mob. Yet, considering that "The Raven" accomplished its goal of pleasing both "the popular and the critical taste," it is no wonder that Poe chose this poem as the concrete example for explicating his "*modus operandi*" (p. 195). But anyone who knows Poe's work knows a concern for universality would not be utmost in his mind at all times. Granted, he did wish his poetry and fiction to be read and, more importantly, to sell, but his aesthetic principles went far beyond a mere desire to please the populace and earn a living.

Poe wanted to be remembered as a poet even though most of his career was spent as a critic and magazine writer. In 1848, a year before his death, Poe dedicated his prose poem *Eureka,* the work he considered the culmination of his writing career, "to those who feel rather than to those who think—to the dreamers and those who put faith in dreams as in the only realities" (Poe, *Eureka,* p. 5). In *Eureka,* Poe defines intuition as "*the conviction arising from those inductions or deductions of which the processes are so shadowy as to escape our consciousness, elude our reason, or defy our capacity of expression*" (p. 22). This assertion counters his claim in "The Philosophy of Composition" that writers who claim "ecstatic intuition" as the means of production are deluding themselves and others (p. 194). Yet Poe valued most an "under-current" of meaning in a poem or narrative, and Poe's pupil can nowhere find the rule for creating this "suggestiveness" in Poe's "Philosophy." Such "suggestiveness" more often than not is created by a process akin to the definition of intuition found in *Eureka.* Those who follow the steps outlined in "The Philosophy of Composition" would be remiss were they to think that that would be all they need to do to create an "art product." Poems or narratives produced in this way, Poe claims, would "repel the artistical eye" because they lack "adaptation" and "suggestiveness," the two aspects of writing that cannot be taught (p. 207).

Careful readers of Poe's essay would be confounded by what they find in the penultimate paragraph. Here Poe states, "Holding these opinions, I added the two concluding stanzas of the poem—their suggestiveness being thus made to pervade all the narrative which has preceded them" (p. 208). Should not those two last stanzas have been conceived first, according to what Poe says in his introduction? How could he "add" these two stanzas to make the rest resonate with "suggestiveness," when Poe ostensibly holds to the rule of having "the end always in view"? Like the Prefect in Poe's [short story](https://www.encyclopedia.com/literature-and-arts/language-linguistics-and-literary-terms/literature-general/short-story) "The Purloined Letter," do readers overlook what is "in plain view"? Do they overlook evidence "by dint of [its] being excessively obvious"? (Poe, "The Purloined Letter," p. 990).

This glaring but subtle contradiction makes the reader question Poe's "sincerity" and purpose in writing "The Philosophy of Composition." Other hints throughout are not quite so obvious but persistent nonetheless. For example, Poe's insistence on "universality" as a primary consideration for many compositional decisions is suspect. Finally, his direct statement that "from out my heart" is "the first metaphorical expression in the poem" is outright dissembling (p. 208). Poe's essay holds the clues to its project: to purport to reveal all the "*modus operandi*" while withholding the essential components that transform technical prowess into art. Nonetheless, Poe's "Philosophy of Composition" illuminates many of the principles that make Poe's writing so engaging: unity of effect, adaptation of complexity, suggestiveness, careful attention to form as a reflection of content, and a fascination with death and perversity.

*See also*["The Fall of the House of Usher"](https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/culture-magazines/fall-house-usher); [Literary Criticism](https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/culture-magazines/literary-criticism); ["The Poet"](https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/culture-magazines/poet); ["The Raven"](https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/culture-magazines/raven)

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