

Overview: Poe and the Evolution of Criticism

Literary criticism is not a single, clearly definable enterprise. Invariably works of literature are involved, but how the critic deals with these texts and what assumptions, perspectives, and goals he or she brings vary from critic to critic and have changed course many times over the years. Understanding critics' ideas about Poe's tales requires some basic understanding of these "schools" of critical thought.

Some might challenge the use of the word "evolution" in relation to literary criticism, inasmuch as that word implies a progression to a more advanced state. To some, the succession of literary theories seems less like progress—in the sense of scientific progress in understanding the atom—than mere swings in intellectual fashion. At least from a present-day perspective, however, it does seem like progress to recognize that books and their meanings are not frozen; seeing the simultaneous existence of different ways to view works of literature brings us closer to the heart of the literary experience.

In regard to Poe in particular, our understanding has come a long way. Research on Poe tells us that there is a great deal more to Poe than first meets the eye. It certainly provides a picture of Poe's work very different from what most readers conceive. Research has revealed, indeed, a bewildering tangle of contradictions in his work, which leaves us with astonishingly little consensus about what Poe is all about. Most scholars would agree that his work is, by design, perplexing. As such it offers an inviting opportunity to young scholars of today and tomorrow to carry on the effort to come to terms with this towering but enigmatic author.

Poe in His Own Time

Poe was a fairly well-known writer in his day, but not one of the superstars. Although criticism today focuses largely on his tales, he was

better known as a poet and probably best-known as a magazine editor and critic. Toward the end of his short life, he traveled about giving lectures on the poets and poetry of America, literary politics, and the function of criticism. As a reviewer, he was renowned for his talent and taste for devastating pans, which earned him the sobriquet “Tomahawk Man.”

Poe started his writing career as a poet and turned to story writing mainly for financial reasons (though his tales also earned very little, in those days before copyright laws). He never stopped writing poetry, however, and in 1845 published “The Raven,” which was sensation-ally popular. Prior to that time, when Henry Wadsworth Longfellow brought out a collection of American poems that did not include Poe’s work, and again when Rufus Griswold’s *The Poets and Poetry of America* came out with only three of Poe’s poems, Poe complained bitterly about this treatment. It seems that Poe’s reputation was high enough that he could reasonably claim unfairness but not so high that editors felt obliged to make more room for him in the first place.

The short story at this time was just in the process of being invented. Indeed, Poe is credited, probably more than any other single writer, with creating and defining the genre. His tales were widely recognized for their power and artistry. One criticism, however, was repeatedly leveled at him during his career, and it has dogged him ever since: his Gothic sensationalism.

As early as 1836, reviewers were lamenting what was then referred to as Poe’s “Germanism.” One critic of the day described Poe as “too fond of the wild—unnatural and horrible.” Why, this critic complained, “will he not disenthral himself from the spells of German enchantment and supernatural imagery?” (Thomas and Jackson 202). T. W. White, the editor of *The Southern Literary Messenger*, a prominent literary journal of the time, expressed the view of many. White generally admired Poe’s work but repeatedly complained about his use of “too much German horror” and his blending of the “shadows of the tomb with the clouds of sunshine of life” (qtd. in Ingram 117).