

# Random Notes ON AMERICAN LITERATURE

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## I

### *The Masque of the Red Death* and Poe's Theory of the Short Story

EDGAR ALLAN POE was a conscious artist. He first elaborated a theory of his art and then began to write in accordance with its principles. Thus he formulated his own ideas of what the short story should be before he ventured to write in that medium. The present paper will attempt, first, to summarize the basic principles of Poe's theory of the short story and, second, to show how those principles have been exemplified in one particular story, namely, *The Masque of the Red Death*.

Poe did not write an independent treatise on the short story. The basic principles of his theory must be gathered together from various of his critical essays. Particularly valuable in this respect are his *Philosophy of Composition* and his review of *Hawthorne's Twice-Told Tales*. The pertinent passages are these.

In *The Philosophy of Composition* Poe wrote:

I prefer commencing with the consideration of an effect. Keeping originality always in view—for he is false to himself who ventures to dispense with so obvious and so easily attainable a source of interest—I say to myself, in the first place, 'of the innumerable effects, or impressions of which the heart, the intellect, or (more generally) the soul is susceptible, what one shall I, on the present occasion, select?' Having chosen a novel, first, and secondly, a vivid effect, I consider whether it can be best wrought by incident or tone—whether by ordinary incidents and peculiar tone, or the converse, or by peculiarity both of incident and tone—afterwards looking about me (or rather within) for such combi-

nations of events or tone as shall best aid me in the construction of the effect.

In his review of *Hawthorne's Twice-Told Tales* occurs this passage which contains, at least implicitly, Poe's definition of the short story.

A skillful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents—he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. And by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction. The idea of the tale has been presented unblemished, because undisturbed: and this is an end unattainable by the novel. Undue brevity is just as exceptionable here as in the poem: but undue length is yet more to be avoided.

From these and other passages the following principles emerge: first, a short story is a prose tale or narrative, deliberately and carefully conceived to produce a certain unique or single effect by the combination of such events or incidents as will best establish that preconceived effect. Second, since unity of effect or impression is a point of the greatest importance in almost all classes of composition, the prose

tale must be of such length that it can conveniently be read within the space of half an hour at the least, or one to two hours at the most. Third, the prose tale is superior to the novel as an art form because the novel, by reason of its length, makes this necessary unity of impression, if not impossible, at least more difficult to attain. Fourth, the very first sentence of the tale must contribute to the establishment of that preconceived and dominant impression. In the whole composition there should be nothing that does not, either directly or indirectly, tend towards the attainment of that effect. Finally, Poe admits that, while the highest genius can best exercise its powers in the composition of a rhymed poem that does not exceed what might be perused in an hour, the prose tale, in at least one point, is superior even to such a poem. The reason for this is that while the rhythm of a poem contributes essentially to its beauty, that very rhythm acts at the same time as a bar to the communication of Truth. Truth, he says, is frequently the aim of the prose tale. By way of conclusion it may be added that for Poe the unity of impression that is the fundamental principle of the prose tale (as of almost all classes of composition) is not merely unity of plot but unity of atmosphere and point of view as well.

Let us now apply these principles to a consideration of Poe's short story *The Masque of the Red Death*.

The single impression that Poe wishes to convey in this story is one of horror and precisely of such horror as is occasioned by the presence of a mysterious, plaque-like

disease that causes almost instantaneous death in a horrible and horrifying manner and against which there is no possible protection or means of defense. In accordance with Poe's theoretic principles, the very first sentence of the story must contribute to the 'outbringing' of that effect. This is certainly the case in the story under consideration.

"The 'Red Death' had long devastated the country. No pestilence had ever been so fatal, or so hideous." Each succeeding sentence of the opening paragraph adds another detail that heightens the intended effect. In only thirteen short lines the word *red*, or a synonymous term, is used six times. Still there is no impression of monotonous repetition or of redundancy because either synonymous terms or words that are explanatory of the adjective *red* are employed. Thus the plague is called the red death because blood is "its atavar and seal." That this is not healthy and life-giving blood is evident from the appended phrase—"the redness and horror of blood." The disease causes profuse *bleeding* and leaves upon the body, and especially on the face, *scarlet* stains which ban the afflicted from the fellowship and sympathy of men. The initial paragraph of the story thus paints a horrible picture of the pestilence—a pestilence which brings swift, inevitable death to its victims by causing profuse bleeding and which deprives them, in their agony, of the company and solace of their fellow-beings.

The impression of horror is intensified in the second paragraph by a series of violent contrasts that terminates in the powerful, well-balanced sentence: "All these and security were within. Without was the 'Red Death.' The Prince, ironically named Prospero, is "happy and dauntless and sagacious." He makes elaborate plans to escape the contagion "with a thousand of his hale and light-hearted friends." It is horrible merely to think that in the presence of so deadly a plague there could be men whose one concern was pleasure. "The Prince had provided all the appliances of pleasure." The contrast between

the health, the happiness and the security of the prince and his favorites on the one hand, and the misery, the suffering and the fear of those on the outside on the other, is most powerful. But powerful, too, is the appalling irony of the second paragraph. It is the afflicted who are supposed to be cut off from human fellowship. Here it is the well who are thus sealing themselves off. They are placing themselves in the one situation that marks them as if they were already contaminated by the disease.

Poe continues this series of contrasts in the following paragraphs and thus continues to reinforce the initial impression of horror. Five or six months of seclusion are lightly skipped over with the remark that after that length of time, "while the pestilence raged most furiously abroad," Prince Prospero prepared a masked ball "of the most unusual magnificence," for the entertainment of his friends. The scene of the masquerade is so described that emphasis is repeatedly placed on those details that will heighten the sense of horror.

The hall in which the masquerade is held is of most unusual construction. Each room is painted a different color and the only light that enters filters through a Gothic window outside of which a fire burns in a brazier on a tripod. The last room, hung with black draperies and illuminated by the light that passes through a scarlet pane, is the most unreal of all. On the wall of that room is the ebony clock that marks the passage of time. Its chime is so peculiar that each time the hour is struck, the musicians cease their playing, the dancers are frozen in whatever posture they happen to be. An air of expectancy seems to pervade the room. All the revelers await, as it were, a summons from where or from whom they do not know.

So skillfully has Poe created an atmosphere of expectancy and unreality that the reader's credulity is not strained when the mysterious, masked guest suddenly appears in the midst of the revelers after the hour of twelve has struck. And the progress of that phantom, from the

blue room through each succeeding chamber, is a mounting crescendo of horror that reaches its awful climax when Prince Prospero rushes forward to strike the apparition but falls, dagger in hand, to the floor in death. The concluding sentences of the second last paragraph are overwhelming in their forcefulness. The revelers summon "the courage of despair" as they rush into the black apartment to seize the mummer and find, "to their unutterable horror" that the mask is "untenanted by any tangible form."

The final paragraph of the story is a magnificent *descrescendo* but still on the theme of horror.

And now was acknowledged the presence of the Red Death. He had come like a thief in the night. And one by one dropped the revelers in the blood-bedewed halls of their revel, and died each in the despairing posture of his fall. And the life of the ebony clock went out with that of the last of the gay. And the flames of the tripod expired. And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all.

We are back where we began. The last paragraph is an echo of the first. And it illustrates a final principle of Poe's theory of the short story. It contains the Truth, the moral of the piece. For all and for each death will come, often like a thief in the night. There is none who can escape.

The objection might be raised that *The Masque of the Red Death* does not conform to Poe's principle regarding the proper length of a prose narrative. Certainly the tale can be read in less than half an hour. Obviously Poe did not intend that his statement should be taken in any rigidly restrictive sense. He would allow a little leeway on either side, a little less than half an hour or a little more than an hour or two at the most. Provided that unity of impression can be achieved within these approximate limits, he would be satisfied. Such unity of impression has been achieved in *The Masque of the Red Death*. It is therefore an excellent proof of Poe's theory. #

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## II

*The Winthrop Letters*

THE charming letters of John and Margaret Winthrop are interesting for a variety of reasons. One of these Foerster mentions in the introductory note to his selection of letters in *American Prose and Poetry*. The correspondence of the Winthrops, he assures us, "charmingly reveals the Puritan heart." Perhaps that is the first characteristic of the letters that impresses the reader—they are, indeed, a revelation of the Puritan heart.

The Puritan heart was full of well-ordered affections. Order was basic to the Puritan concept of life. This notion of order extended also to the affections of man. First in a Puritan's affections came God. He was acknowledged to be the sole ruler of the universe and nothing, whether of good or of ill, occurred without the permission of God's benevolent providence. That is why Margaret Winthrop desires that "we may be guided by God in all our ways" and praises His mercy when she and all the members of the family enjoy good health. When she receives good news about Henry, her son, she hopes the Lord will make them all thankful for His mercies "to us and ours." That she is forced at times to be separated from her husband is indeed painful, but she finds courage and comfort in the thought that God "will bring us together again in his own good time." And with a delightful touch of humor, she adds "for which time I shall pray."

In thus giving the first place in her affections to God, Margaret Winthrop was but following the lead of her illustrious husband. His letters reveal, if possible, and even deeper faith than hers and a more vivid realization of the primacy of God. John Winthrop believed that "the favor and the blessing of God is better than all things besides" and that favor and blessing he strove to win both for himself and his family by his blameless way of life. He hoped to pass through the course of his pilgrimage in the peace of a good conscience and in the end to attain the haven of eternal happiness. To similar hopes

and efforts he spurred his wife and their children. He enjoined Margaret to "labor to draw him (their son John) yet nearer to God." In all the large and small affairs of his eventful life John Winthrop saw clearly the hand of God. It was the good pleasure of God that enabled him to write yet another letter to his wife before he sailed from Old England to establish a new home in the wilderness. It was God who would guide the Puritans on their perilous passage across the Atlantic. And when the hand of the Lord struck Henry, their son, John urged his wife to praise the mercies of God since he and the rest of the children were safe and in good health. The many privations the early colonists had to endure in the wilderness were but means "whereby God hath ordained to do us good by."

Yet for all his deep piety and faith, John Winthrop was not a befuddled mystic with his head in the clouds. Or, if his head was in the clouds, his feet still remained firmly rooted in solid ground. He had the good common sense of the average Puritan and always retained his practical sense of values. Both the list he prepared of the things needed in the colony and the advice he gave Margaret Winthrop about the goat and the garden amply attest that John Winthrop was a practical man. He was also something of a psychologist and knew well the feminine heart. For the feminine heart, whether Puritan or otherwise, is always susceptible to flattery and John Winthrop was adept at flattery. "Although I wrote to thee last week . . . I must needs write to thee again: for I do esteem one little, sweet, short letter of thine (such as the last was) to be well worthy two or three from me." Or was John Winthrop administering with all possible gentleness a rebuke to his absent wife for the brevity of her letters?

If the letters of the Winthrops "charmingly reveal the Puritan heart," they also afford us an intimate glimpse into a typical Puritan family and home. The basic idea of order is evident also here.

The head of the family is the father to whom all must show reverence and respect. Margaret is ever his "obedient wife" whose one wish is that she may always be pleasing to her husband. "I will do any service wherein I may please my good husband." And he is truly the master of the house, anxiously concerned about everything that pertains to his family—their health, their studies, the upkeep of the land, food and clothing for all. That is why his letters are so full of admonitions and instructions.

The letters are remarkable for their extremely affectionate tone. One can hardly imagine that today a husband and wife would be so effusive in their protestations of mutual love. Various explanations may be offered for this remarkably affectionate tone of the letters. Perhaps it was not customary at that time to express one's love in the more modern manner of affectionate embraces. Recourse had to be had to such written avowals. Then the frequent and lengthy absence of the husband from his wife made it necessary for the respective spouses to reassure one another of their continued and enduring love. Furthermore the Puritan home was supposed to be an earthly replica of the kingdom of God in which membership was attained by faith. But love was simply an expression of faith in the beloved and by remaining always faithful to one another husband and wife hoped to deepen their respective faith in God and thus prepare themselves for eternal union with Him.

The letters are truly charming. They make for interesting and even instructive reading if only because they reveal so completely the characteristics of those men and women who braved the perils of the wilderness to found a new nation in America. If from history we know that these men and women were not without their faults and failings, we are forced nevertheless to admire their utter sincerity and deep faith in God. In this they have bequeathed to posterity an example that is too frequently overlooked or ignored. #