**The Philosophy of Composition**

**Summary**

**Introduction**

[Edgar Allan Poe](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/The-Philosophy-of-Composition/key-figure-analysis/#Edgar_Allan_Poe) begins "The Philosophy of Composition" with a reference to a note from British Victorian novelist Charles Dickens (1812–70). In the letter Dickens asks Poe if he is aware that British philosopher William Godwin (1756–1836) wrote his widely acclaimed novel Caleb Williams (1794) backwards. Godwin reportedly wrote the climax of the novel first and then worked backwards to figure out the obstacles that led to the events of the climax. Poe writes that he does not believe that that was Godwin's exact writing process. However, Poe agrees that nothing is more important for a writer than to figure out the denouement or final outcome of a sequence of events in a literary work before drafting any other part of the story. Poe emphasizes that it is only with the denouement "constantly in view" that a work can show that all actions in the plot lead to a reasonable climax.

Poe writes that the first concern he has when he composes a story is the effect of the work or the impression he wishes the work to make on the heart, mind, or soul of the reader. Once he has determined the "vivid effect" he desires, Poe claims that he considers which particular combination of tones or events will help to achieve that effect.

Poe says that he often thinks about how interesting it would be if a writer were to divulge the details or steps of their writing process in a magazine article. Poe claims that many writers are reluctant to share their composition process because they "prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy—an ecstatic intuition." Poe proposes to share the process by which he composed his most famous poem "The Raven" (1845). His stated aim is to prove that at no point during the writing of "The Raven'' did he ever compose without thinking or planning.

Composing "The Raven"

Poe proceeds into a step-by-step description of the process he used to compose "The Raven." Poe writes that the first feature he considers in his writing is the "extent" or length of the work he will write. He argues that no literary work should be "too long to be read at one sitting" because the unity of effect or impact of the work will be lost as "the affairs of the world interfere." Poe claims that when he started to work on "The Raven," he conceived that the perfect length would be about 100 lines long. The final poem ended up being 108 lines.

Poe states that after he decides on the story's length, he sets out to determine what "impression, or effect" he wants to convey as well as the tone. He suggests that "beauty is the sole legitimate province of the poem" or the function and purpose of poetry. Thus, he decided that poetry would serve his intended effect in writing "The Raven."

Poe's third consideration is the "tone" of the poem. He claims to have decided that the tone of "The Raven" should be one of sadness because beauty "invariably excites the sensitive soul to tears." Poe argues that melancholy is therefore "the most legitimate" tone in poetry.

Poe claims to have next turned toward reasoning to determine the key feature in constructing the poem. Poe settled on the refrain as this structural tool for "The Raven" because it is so widely used in poetry. A refrain is a recurring phrase or verse in a poem. Poe asserts that he wanted to write a refrain that reflected the melancholy tone of the poem and details several steps he took before landing on a refrain of a single word "Nevermore" spoken by a "bird of ill-omen" the Raven.

Poe next mused on a topic which would correspond with the poem's melancholy tone and the ominous monotony of the refrain. According to Poe "the death ... of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world." Thus, "The Raven" became a poem about a grieving lover. Poe details how he determined the climax or peak of the action of the poem and claims that it was only at this point that he "first put pen to paper" to write the poem.

At this point in "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe turns to talk briefly about the versification or the meter and structure of "The Raven." Poe claims to have prioritized originality above all else. He states that there are endless possibilities in regard to meter and rhythm, yet other poets have utterly failed at taking advantage of those possibilities to create truly unique verse. Poe argues that although the meter and rhythm in each individual line in "The Raven" have been used before, no one has ever combined such a rhythmic variety in one stanza.

Conclusion

Poe briefly touches on his logical thought process for the locale or setting of the poem and the entrance of the Raven. He then proceeds to his final argument that some "under-current of meaning" is necessary in a truly rich work of art. Poe posits that a work must have a hidden meaning that gradually reveals itself to the reader because an "excess of suggested meaning" renders a work flat. Poe points out that the final two stanzas of "The Raven" allow the poem's meaning to unveil itself. It is not until the final line of the last stanza that the reader comes to understand the Raven as being "emblematical" or symbolic of "Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance."

**Analysis**

Writing Backwards

Edgar Allan Poe begins "The Philosophy of Composition" by arguing that there is a "radical error" in the way most authors construct their stories. In Poe's view the typical author begins with an idea and then "sets himself to work in the combination of striking events" and fills in description, dialogue, and other features as they write. The implication is that most writers begin at the beginning of the story and move steadily toward the end without much advance planning. Poe believes that authors should instead "work backwards." Before writing the beginning of a story, the writer should determine the denouement which is the final outcome of a sequence of events in a literary work. Poe argues that this advance planning is necessary to "give the plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation." It is only by first knowing where the story is going that Poe believes the author can write a story that at all points helps to fully develop what he calls the story's "intention." To Poe writing is not a process of inspiration and discovery but one of careful planning.

Poe demonstrates his own apparent adherence to the method of writing "backwards" when he describes his writing process for "The Raven." Poe claims to have "first established in my mind the climax or concluding query." He then details the step-by-step process he went through to arrive at this climax and claims that it was not until he had determined the climax that he "first put pen to paper in the composition of the stanza." The stanza Poe refers to is the third-to-last in the poem. In this stanza the Raven responds "Nevermore" to the speaker's desperate question about whether he will "clasp" his beloved Lenore in the afterlife. Poe claims that by writing this climactic stanza first, he was able to "better vary and graduate, as regards seriousness and importance, the preceding queries of the lover" to make his poem more effective. He could also ensure that none of the other stanzas could surpass this one "in rhythmical effect." Poe wanted this stanza that he viewed as so essential to the poem's story to stand out above all others. He believes that his backward writing process allowed him to easily achieve that end.

**Disdain toward Other Writers**

Throughout "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe positions himself as an expert who knows the one right way to compose great literature. This stance begins with the title's use of "the" as opposed to "a." Poe does not view his "philosophy of composition" as one possible way to create great literature. He views it as the only right way. Poe was well-known as a literary critic for his harsh reviews of other writers' work which earned him the nickname "the man with the tomahawk" after a type of small ax used as a weapon. In "The Philosophy of Composition," he repeatedly elevates himself and his writing methods above those of other authors.

Poe begins the essay by pointing out what he views as "the radical error" in the method of composition used by most of his peers. Poe describes other writers as simply writing down their ideas as they arrive "from page to page" rather than carefully planning in advance as Poe claims to do. To Poe the approach taken by other writers is a failure because it forgoes the advantages of the "backwards" writing process Poe himself uses.

Poe then examines why no other author has yet written a detailed account of "the processes by which any one of his compositions attained its ultimate point of completion" even though he believes this topic would be very interesting for a magazine article. Poe offers two reasons, both of which denigrate other writers. First, Poe says that most writers "prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy—an ecstatic intuition—and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes." Poe implies that his peers have egos that are too fragile to handle the exposure of their writing processes which are full of "elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought" and "despair." He sets himself up in direct opposition to this fragility as someone who has no "sympathy with the repugnance" others might feel about putting their writing process on display.

Second, Poe claims that his own memory and understanding of his writing process is superior to that of his fellow writers. He argues that most writers are not "at all in condition to retrace the steps by which [their] conclusions have been attained." Poe again denigrates his peers by stating that their writing process is so "pell mell" that it renders them completely incapable of talking about it coherently. Poe believes himself to have no such issue. He claims to have not "the least difficulty in recalling to mind the progressive steps of any of my compositions" unlike his peers' supposed disarray.

Interestingly, Poe accuses other writers of "authorial vanity" but displays the same sin himself. Poe elevates his own methods and talents above those of other writers throughout the essay. He also refers to the essay as a "desideratum" or necessity. Poe believes that the behind-the-scenes writing process must be revealed for the greater good of the literary arts. He then positions himself as the only writer willing and able to make that revelation.

**The Logical Process of Writing**

Poe's vision of the writing process is logical, intentional, and precise. It leaves little room for inspiration or spontaneity. For Poe the process of writing a poem or story is such that no part of the "composition is referable either to accident or intuition." Poe insists that his "work proceeded step by step ... with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem." In fact, Poe frequently uses the language of mathematics to describe what he believes is the ideal writing process. He states that "brevity must be in direct ratio of the intensity of the intended effect" and presents the precise number of 100 as the ideal number of lines for "The Raven." He points out that "the extent of a poem may be made to bear mathematical relation to its merit." He claims that he determines what to include in a poem by "induction" which is the process of using logic to arrive at a conclusion as well as a type of mathematical proof.

Poe presents the choices he makes in writing "The Raven" as proceeding logically and almost inevitably toward their end. For example, Poe decides that the structural device most suited to his purpose and upon which the entire poem will "pivot" is the refrain which is a repeated word or phrase within a poem. Poe claims that this decision "led me at once to a single word as the best refrain." In Poe's presentation of his writing process, there is little of the messiness or "elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought" of which he accuses his peers. Poe presents himself as simply knowing the logical next step. Similarly, he says that "the thought of introducing [the Raven] through the window was inevitable" and that in his search for the right word for the refrain it was "absolutely impossible to overlook the word 'Nevermore.'" This air of inevitability has a dual impact. It elevates Poe and his logical process of composition above other writers with their disordered and "pell-mell" writing processes. It also values the workings of an orderly mind over creative inspiration. If certain features are inevitable or completely obvious in the process of writing, then there is little room for a great work to grow out of passion or inspiration. In this way Poe breaks with his brethren of the Romantic period of writing in the late 18th to mid-19th centuries who placed emotion above reason in their hierarchy of values.

However, there is opinion embedded within Poe's ideas about the writing process even though he cloaks it in the language of mathematical precision and logic. Poe argues for example that "melancholy is thus the most legitimate of all the poetical tones" and that a beautiful woman's death is "unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world." Poe presents these statements as facts but they are opinions. Despite Poe's definitive tone, many other writers, readers, and critics questioned his ideas here and more broadly in his writing.

**Poe and Romanticism**

Edgar Allan Poe is classified as a writer of Romanticism which was an intellectual movement that flourished from the late 18th century to the mid-19th century and emphasized subjective values such as emotion, the imagination, and the aesthetic. Many of the considerations Poe lays out for his writing of "The Raven" are very much in line with the general ideals of Romanticism. The Romantic movement in art and literature prioritized the aesthetic experience of beauty above all else much like Poe emphasizes the importance of "that intense and pure elevation of the soul ... which is experienced in consequence of contemplating 'the beautiful.'"

Writers of the Romantic era also placed high value on feeling and centered strong emotion as the origin of aesthetic experiences. A particularly well-known Romantic writer was William Wordsworth (1770–1850) who described poetry as a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." Poe similarly points out that "a poem is such only inasmuch as it intensely excites, by elevating the soul." For Poe great literature is not written to impart moral lessons but rather to present aesthetic beauty to the reader and excite their emotions.

In Romanticism art was considered to be better equipped than science to express the universal truths of humanity. However, art and literature were not merely the province of the wealthy and educated as they had often been in earlier eras. Romanticists believed that the elevated ideas expressed in art must be accessible to the common person. Poe emphasizes this idea throughout "The Philosophy of Composition." He repeatedly claims to have set as his goal with "The Raven" the writing of "a poem that should suit at once the popular and the critical taste." Poe also claims to have "kept steadily in view the design of rendering the [poem] universally appreciable." These ideals are characteristic of the Romantic era, but Poe's emphasis on universal appeal may also have masked a practical consideration. Poe struggled throughout his life to find financial success and very much needed his works to sell so that he might remain financially solvent.