

ANALYSIS
THE STYLE OF EDGAR ALLAN POE
(1809-1849)

"[Poe] has written some things quite the best of their kind,
But the heart somehow seems all squeezed out by the mind."

James Russell Lowell
from "A Fable for Critics" (1848)

[caricature of Poe and parody of his style]: "A haggard, inspired-looking man now approached--a crazy beggar, asking alms under the form of peddling a rhapsodical tract, composed by himself, and setting forth his claims to some rhapsodical apostleship. Though ragged and dirty, there was about him no touch of vulgarity; for, by nature, his manner was not unrefined, his frame slender, and appeared the more so from the broad, untanned frontier of his brow, tangled over with a disheveled mass of *raven* curls, throwing a still deeper tinge upon a complexion like that of a shriveled berry. Nothing could exceed his look of picturesque Italian ruin and dethronement, heightened by what seemed just one glimmering peep of reason, insufficient to do him any lasting good, but enough, perhaps, to suggest a torment of latent doubts at times, whether his addled dream of glory were true...In his tattered, single-breasted frock-coat, buttoned meagerly up to his chin, the shatter-brain made him a bow... I take him for a cunning vagabond, who picks up a vagabond living by adroitly playing the madman." [Italics added.]

Herman Melville
The Confidence-Man (1857)

"Poe's verses illustrate an intense faculty for technical and abstract beauty, with the rhyming art to excess, an incorrigible propensity toward nocturnal themes, a demoniac undertone behind every page--and, by final judgment, probably belong among the electric lights of imaginative literature, brilliant and dazzling, but with no heat."

Walt Whitman
"Edgar Poe's Significance" (1880)

"With the exception of Henry James and Hawthorne, Poe is our only master of pure prose. We lament our dearth of poets. With the exception of Lowell, Poe is our only great poet. Poe found short story writing a bungling makeshift...He wrote the first perfect short stories in the English language."

Willa Cather
Century (12 October 1895) 6-7

"The cult of Poe is an exotic introduced via Mallarme and Arthur Symons. Poe's glory as an inventor of macabre subjects had been shifted into a reputation for verse. The absurdity of the cult is well gauged by Mallarme's French translation--*Et le corbeau dit jamais plus*."

Ezra Pound
"The Renaissance"
Poetry (Chicago 1914)

"Poe is the author of a few...short poems...which do somehow stick in the memory....Poe's influence is...puzzling...In France the influence of his poetry and of his poetic theories has been immense. In England and America it seems almost negligible....And yet one cannot be sure that one's own writing has *not* been influenced by Poe....And the impression we get of the influence of Poe is the more impressive, because of the fact that Mallarme, and Valery in turn, did not merely derive from Poe through Baudelaire: each of them subjected himself to that influence directly, and has left convincing evidence of the value which he attached to the theory and practice of Poe....I find that by trying to look at Poe through the eyes of Baudelaire, Mallarme and Valery, I become more thoroughly convinced of his importance, of the importance of his *work* as a whole."

T. S. Eliot

"All Poe's style...has this mechanical quality, as his poetry has a mechanical rhythm. He never sees anything in terms of life, almost always in terms of matter...or in terms of force, scientific. And his cadences are all managed mechanically....It is this mechanical consciousness which gives...Poe his extraordinary facility in versification. The absence of real central or impulsive being in himself leaves him inordinately, mechanically sensitive to sounds and effects, associations of sounds, associations of rhyme, for example--mechanical, facile, having no root in any passion. It is all a secondary, meretricious process. So we get Roderick Usher's poem, 'The Haunted Palace,' with its swift yet mechanical subtleties of rhyme and rhythm, its vulgarity of epithet. It is all a sort of dream-process, where the association between parts is mechanical."

D. H. Lawrence

Studies in Classic American Literature
Chapter 6 (1923; Viking 1964, 1968)

"The substance of Poe is refined; it is his form that is vulgar. He is, as it were, one of Nature's Gentlemen, unhappily cursed with incorrigible bad taste. To the most sensitive and high-souled man in the world we should find it hard to forgive, shall we say, the wearing of a diamond ring on every finger. Poe does the equivalent of this in his poetry...Foreign observers do not notice it; they detect only the native gentlemanliness in the poetical intention, not the vulgarity in the details of execution. To them, we seem perversely and quite incomprehensibly unjust.

Poetry ought to be musical, but musical with tact, subtly and variously. Meters whose rhymes, as in this case, are strong, insistent, and practicably invariable offer the poet a kind of short cut to musicality. They provide him (my subject calls for a mixture of metaphors) with a ready-made, reach-me-down music. He does not have to create a music appropriately modulated to his meaning; all he has to do is to shovel the meaning into the moving stream of the meter and allow the current to carry it along on waves that, like those of the best hairdressers, are guaranteed permanent. Many nineteenth-century poets used these musical short cuts to music, with artistically fatal results."

Aldous Huxley

"The Vulgarity of Poe" (1930)

"E. A. Poe, though he achieved, as his admirers have claimed, a remarkable agreement between his theory and his practice, is exceptionally bad in both." Poe was ignorant of the history of thought, thoroughly "at the mercy of [popular taste]," oblivious to the function of intellectual content in poetry, hence a willful obscurantist, an emotional fool, and a disastrous influence upon world literature, whose insanity was only the most extreme manifestation of his Romantic irrationalism.

Poe appears never to have grasped the simple and traditional distinction between matter (truth) and manner (beauty); he does not see that beauty is a quality of style instead of its subject-matter....In Poe, obscurantism has ceased to be merely an accident of inadequate understanding; it has become the explicit aim of writing...We see the story teller, like the poet, interested primarily in the creation of an emotion for its own sake, not in the understanding of an experience....His clinical value resides in the fact that as a specimen of late romantic theory and practice he is at once extreme and typical."

Yvor Winters

In Defense of Reason
(Alan Swallow 1937-43) 234-61

"There have been strongly divergent evaluations of Poe's literary significance, from Emerson's dismissal of him as 'the jingle man' and Lowell's 'three-fifths genius and two-fifths sheer fudge' to Yeats's declaration, 'always and for all lands a great lyric poet.' The difference of opinion is at heart directed at his criticism, for the poetry consistently exemplifies the theories set forth in 'The Philosophy of Composition,' 'The Rationale of Verse,' and 'The Poetic Principle,' in which he indicated his conception of poetic unity to be one of mood or emotion, and especially emphasized the beauty of melancholy. This Romantic attitude has led to the criticism that his poetry is no more than a sustained tone, entirely dominated by its atmosphere."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 595

"His occupation solely with supernal beauty risks turning even the lyric into a sustained tone, and nothing else. Atmosphere becomes not merely the envelope, but the content. The chief deficiency is owing to Poe's brittle terminology--in such contrast to Coleridge's resilience--which leads him into making mechanical and far too exclusive separation between the spheres of beauty and truth. He was so determined to root out 'the didactic heresy' that he barred truth from poetry, and confined it to science and prose.... Poe's theory held firmly to his central conception about art, that it was not a spontaneous overflow of genius, but a designed effect. This separated him from all romantic theories of expression, and made it, in turn, the catalytic agent that quickened the French reaction from romantic disorder back to classic control of their forms... He was a super-rational analyst, the meaning of whose poems often eludes any analysis.... The relevance of all these complex developments to American poetry lies in the profound attraction that T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens were to discover in symbolism, and thence to bring Poe back to American art by way of France.... Yet his ultimate effect upon our most popular literature was enormous."

F. O. Matthiessen
The Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-1963) 321, 327, 337-39, 341-42

"Varied in subject, treatment, style as Poe's stories are, they have one negative characteristic in common. There is no place in any of them for the human individual as he actually exists in space and time, that is, as simultaneously a natural creature subject in his feelings to the influences and limitations of the natural order, and an historical person, creating novelty and relations by his free choice and modified in unforeseen ways by the choices of others.... Poe is sometimes attacked for the operatic quality of the prose and *decor* in his tales, but they are essential to preserving the illusion. His heroes cannot exist except operatically....

Poe's best poems are not his most typical or original. 'To Helen,' which could have been written by Landor, and 'The City in the Sea,' which could have been written by Hood, are more successfully realized than a poem like 'Ulalume,' which could have been written by none but Poe. His difficulty as a poet was that he was interested in too many poetic problems and experiments at once for the time he had to give to them. To make the result conform to the intention--and the more experimental the intention, the more this is true--a writer has to keep his hand in by continual practice.... The trouble with 'The Raven,' for example, is that the thematic interest and the prosaic interest, both of which are considerable, do not combine and are even often at odds."

W. H. Auden, ed.
Introduction
Edgar Allan Poe: Selected Prose and Poetry
(Holt 1950)

"He has several styles, and it is not possible to damn them all at once.... Poe's symbols refer to a known tradition of thought, an intelligible order, apart from what he was as a man, and are not merely the index to a compulsive neurosis; and... the symbols... point towards this larger philosophical dimension, implicit in the serious stories, but very much at the surface in certain of Poe's works that have been almost completely ignored.... *The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion*, *The Colloquy of Monos and Una*, *The Power of Words*, and *Eureka*."

Allan Tate
"The Angelic Imagination"
The Kenyon Review (Summer 1952)

"As a poet, Poe left a small body of distinguished and influential work. Most of it is essentially romantic, though there are examples of compression and symbolic meaning, as in 'To Helen.' Most of his better poems, however--'The Raven,' 'Annabel Lee,' 'Lenore,' 'Ulalume'--are examples of virtuosity in the manipulation of sound. Poe's poetry was of narrow range, but of consummate artistry within than range.

He revised tirelessly--there are 16 versions of 'The Raven.' A student of prosodic devices, he sought to attain a more felicitous verbal music by use of repetition in the forms of alliteration, assonance, echoes, repetends [repetitions], refrains, and onomatopoeia. Sound was more important than meaning to him and was used to reinforce his characteristic effects of melancholy, mystery, terror, and horror. Not a poet of great thought or broad humanity, he is at his best a magical conjurer of mood and the creator of an original music.

Among Poe's most striking tales are those of horror, based on the Gothic novel, but far more concentrated and direct in their effect. He used the conventional properties--old castles, lavishly bizarre chambers, charnel houses, and clanking irons--but he expanded the possibilities of the type, demonstrating that terror was 'not of Germany, but of the soul'...In his prose-poems--'Silence,' 'Shadow,' and 'Eleanora,' for example--Poe used pronounced prose rhythms, tone color, and a considerable amount of symbolism. But some of his tales stand in direct contrast to the ornateness and occasional theatricality of the stories mentioned so far....

Poe's burlesque, 'How to Write a Blackwood's Article,' travesties so clearly the recondite, pedantic extravagance of the contemporary horror story that a question naturally arises as to how seriously he took his own fiction. He often stated quite frankly his canny awareness of the market value of sensationalism. Yet many find the compulsion for Poe's tales in his unconscious, and certain psycho-analytic critics have read into his fiction meanings far beyond Poe's wildest dreaming. It remains an open question whether the stories are uncontrollable fantasies or the skillful contrivances of an artist who, as Poe insisted, always knew what he was doing; but there is no gainsaying the technical skill or the depth of insight into abnormality in Poe's best tales....

The best known of his general critical statements are 'The Poetic Principle' and 'The Philosophy of Composition,' in which he pretends to tell how 'The Raven' was written. It is really less an actual account of the writing of a poem than a defense of his type of poetry. He used the same arguments of unity and intensity to exalt the short story above the novel. In his review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* Poe stated the basic requirement of the modern short story: 'In the whole composition there should be no word written of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one preestablished design.'

Poe is one of the most seminal influences in modern literature. His aesthetic theory and conscious craftsmanship influenced the devotees of art for art's sake, especially in France after Baudelaire's translation in 1852. Poe's dislike of didacticism, his stress upon suggestive indefiniteness, his verbal music, and his confusion of sensory impressions appealed to Verlaine, Mallarme, and the symbolists in general. Dostoevsky was also impressed by Poe's 'fantastic realism' and published translations of 'The Black Cat' and 'The Tell-Tale Heart' in his periodical...

Lillian Herlands Hornstein, ed.

The Reader's Companion to World Literature

(Dryden/New American Library Mentor 1956) 353-56

"He possessed a literary genius that had had no parallel as yet on the American scene. This genius, moreover, was supremely artistic. Poe was a craftsman of exquisite skill in prose and verse alike. He was an innovator in verse, a creator of 'novel forms of beauty,' who influenced poets elsewhere for an age to come. He sought 'the unknown--the vague--the uncomprehended.' His images, instead of creating specific pictures in the mind, evoked a world of sorrowful associations, remote, dim, sinister, melancholy, majestic, his refrains suggested echoes from bottomless gulfs, and when he repeated a word in a rhyme the sound seemed magically altered by the new collocation....

The tales that Poe was writing had much in common with his poems,--they were sometimes even as musical in the beauty of their prose,--and there one also found dim tarns, wild and dreary landscapes and phantom figures flitting to and fro. Evil things in robes of sorrow presided over some of these tales, with their strange effects of horror, the macabre and the grotesque, a world of the phantasmagoric, suggesting the dreams of an opium-eater. A lover of melancholy, mystery, the horrible and the dire, Poe was bathed in the air of his time, and he was a man of a time when people were living 'Gothically' all about him, when

they were building Gothic houses that recalled the school of his childhood in England, with its gates and its pointed windows and ceilings of oak....

The tales of Poe were impressive precisely because they were not fabrications but involuntary ebullitions of his own sick mind. 'Wild visions, opium-engendered, flitted, shadow-like' before his eyes, as before the eyes of the narrator of 'Ligeia,' with the tottering figures of pallid tenants of tombs....Poe longed for material luxuries but he was a lover of spiritual beauty, and occasionally, in his prose and verse, his love and genius crystallized and formed a gem of purest ray serene. Moreover, one absolutely believed the impossible when the art of Poe presented it, so great was the force of his imagination and the skill with which he introduced the trivial and precise details that imparted to the whole effect an air of truth. It was this power of the factual detail that carried one, helpless with terror, to the bottom of the hideous gulf in the 'Descent into the Maelstrom' and roped one down with the rats in the Spanish pit. One shared Poe's nightmares more vividly than one felt one's own."

Van Wyck Brooks & Otto L. Bettmann
Our Literary Heritage: A Pictorial History of the Writer in America
(Dutton 1956) 34-35

"For the orderly tale of linked incidents chronologically treated, the sort of tale of which 'Rip Van Winkle' is one of the most graceful, humorous, and urbane examples, Poe substituted something else: the concentrated tale of effect, its single, preconceived impression attained with the greatest economy and directness of means, its action focused upon the climactic moment, its mood controlled from first to last, its improbabilities made plausible by a concreteness as great as Defoe's, and a sensuous impressionism learned from the Romantic poets. The technique which he began, developing in 'Metzengerstein' and gave critical definition in his review of Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales* ten years later was pre-eminently designed to make the incredible credible; and though time has not dealt too kindly with Poe's particular kinds of effects, which are related too consistently to the horrors and sensationalism of the German romantics and are heavily draped in Gothic black, it must be said that the short story probably would not have developed as it did without these vivid sensationalisms to demand vivid means of expression.

Poe said that his terror was 'not of Germany but of the soul,' but for most modern readers the effects he produces seem no deeper than gooseflesh. He was not actually a very profound psychologist; his 'madness,' that undifferentiated aberration that so many of his characters share, is more literary than observed. His habit of rather cold and unrealistic contrivance, his concentration on effects that are merely physiological, and the restriction of his subject matter to the horrific and the 'ratiocinative,' mean that he now has more readers among the young than among adults. But what he called the tale of ratiocination, which is the immediate parent of the detective story complete with its Watson, its dumb cop, its super-intelligent amateur detective, and its delightful game of false clues and miraculous deductions, is as lively as when he made it in 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue.' That it is a lesser literary genre should not lead us to underestimate Poe's importance as an innovator. His horror tales are likewise a lesser literary genre--like the tales of ratiocination, they represent great skill devoted to fairly trivial ends. Before Poe could make his terror truly the terror of the soul he would have had to know more souls than his own--a thing which he never did. His best effects are claustrophobic, as he was himself.

But if his effects are limited, the technique he developed for achieving them is not. The focus upon a single intense impression was a trick that in other hands could be devoted to other and often deeper purposes. In the hands of Fitz-James O'Brien neither intention nor technique changed greatly: 'The Diamond Lens' shows the same mad protagonist, the same pseudo-science, the same attempt at persuasive verisimilitude. In the hands of Ambrose Bierce it is made to produce effects even more chilling, though less Gothic, than Poe's own. But leap a long way ahead, to such modern stories as Shirley Jackson's 'The Lottery,' or Flannery O'Connor's 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find,' and you may detect the same techniques of persuasiveness used to quiet our disbelief, in circumstances and for effects quite different from Poe's.

The influence of Poe is so pervasive that it is impossible to overestimate it; he has influenced everybody, practically, who writes stories. Both the influence and the modification of it are demonstrated in such a story as Conrad Aiken's 'Silent Snow Secret Snow'--superficially like Poe in that it is the record of an individual going 'mad.' But Aiken's effect is human, not artificial; his tone is understanding and

compassionate, not chilling. If it were merely a clinical record of a boy slipping over the edge into a schizophrenic withdrawal, the story would not move us as it does. It moves us because its terror is really, as Poe's was not, of the soul....

Both 'The Fall of the House of Usher' and Hawthorne's 'Young Goodman Brown' are built on a journey and a return, an arrival and departure; both move from light into darkness and back into light, or light of a sort. But where Poe's darkness is the theatrical dark of the horror tale, Hawthorne manages to communicate his sense of the dark wood as the darkness of the soul, the forest of sin and evil. Young Goodman Brown's initiation into the abiding sinfulness of all mankind, his conviction that virtue is a mask and all men are guilty, is not much more obviously 'realistic' than much of Poe. But observe how this witchcraft of Hawthorne's translates into other terms, how naturally Brown comes to represent all the cheerless, life-hating coldness of Puritanism, how his venture into witchcraft can be read as every man's experience with temptation and the nature of evil, every man's descent into his own unconscious 'heart of darkness.' Young Brown's destruction is of another kind than he feared, but is even more complete. And in 'specific gravity' this story, by comparison with the Poe story, is as granite to pine. The New England anatomist of guilt and sin and the sick soul knew more and felt more than the Virginia manipulator of sick minds, and the Puritan darkness in the end is much closer to human reality than the Gothic."

Wallace Stegner

Introduction

Great American Short Stories (Dell 1957) 11-14

Wallace & Mary Stegner, eds.

"The typical Poe story occurs within the mind of a poet; and its characters are not independent personalities, but allegorical figures representing the warring principles of the poet's divided nature....Not everyone will agree with me that Poe's work has an accessible allegorical meaning. Some critics, in fact, have refused to see any substance, allegorical or otherwise, in Poe's fiction, and have regarded his tales as nothing more than complicated machines for saying 'boo.' Others have intuited undiscoverable meanings in Poe, generally of an unpleasant kind. I recall one Freudian critic declaring that if we find Poe unintelligible we should congratulate ourselves, since if we *could* understand him it would be a proof of our abnormality. It is not really surprising that some critics should think Poe meaningless, or that others should suppose his meaning intelligible only to monsters. Poe was not a wide-open and perspicuous writer; indeed, he was a secretive writer both by temperament and by conviction.

He sprinkled his stories with references to himself and to his personal history. He gave his own birthday of January 19 to his character William Wilson; he bestowed his own height and color of eye on the captain of the phantom ship in 'Ms. Found in a Bottle'; and the name of one of his heroes, Arthur Gordon Pym, is patently a version of his own. He was a maker and solver of puzzles, fascinated by codes, ciphers, anagrams, acrostics, hieroglyphics, and the Kabbala. He invented swindles; he perpetrated the famous Balloon Hoax of 1844, and one of his most characteristic stories is entitled 'Mystification.' A man so devoted to concealment and deception and unraveling and detection might be expected to have in his work what Poe himself called 'undercurrents of meaning.' And that is where Poe, as a critic, said that meaning belongs: not on the surface of the poem or tale, but below the surface as a dark undercurrent....

Poe conceived of art...not as a means of giving imaginative order to earthly experience, but as a stimulus to unearthly visions. The work of literary art does not, in Poe's view, present the reader with a provisional arrangement of reality; instead, it seeks to disengage the reader's mind from reality and propel it toward the ideal....Therefore Poe's criticism places a positive value on the obscuration of meaning, on a dark suggestiveness, on a deliberate vagueness by means of which the reader's mind may be set adrift toward the beyond....

Many of Poe's stories, though superficially dissimilar, tell the same tale. We begin to have this sense as we notice Poe's repeated use of certain narrative patterns; his repetition of certain words and phrases; his use, in story after story, of certain scenes and properties. We notice, for instance, the recurrence of the *spiral* or *vortex*. In 'Ms. Found in a Bottle,' the story ends with a plunge into a whirlpool; the 'Descent into the Maelstrom' also concludes with a watery vortex; the house of Usher, just before it plunges into the tarn,

is swaddled in 'a whirlwind of chaotic fire'; and at the close of 'King Pest,' Hugh Tarpaulin is cast into a puncheon of ale and disappears 'amid a whirlpool of foam.' That Poe offers us so many spirals or vortices in his fiction, and that they should always appear at the same terminal point in their respective narratives, is a strong indication that the spiral had some symbolic value for Poe. And it did. What the spiral invariably represents in any tale of Poe's is the loss of consciousness, and the descent of the mind into sleep....

Poe conceived of God as a poet. The universe, therefore, was an artistic creation, a poem composed by God. Now, if the universe is a poem, it follows that the one proper response to it is aesthetic, and that God's creatures are attuned to Him in proportion as their imaginations are ravished by the beauty and harmony of his creation. Not to worship beauty, not to regard poetic knowledge as divine, would be to turn one's back on God and fall from grace. The planet Earth, according to Poe's myth of the cosmos, has done just this. It has fallen away from God by exalting the scientific reason above poetic intuition, and by putting its trust in material fact rather than in visionary knowledge. The Earth's inhabitants are thus corrupted by rationalism and materialism; their souls are diseased; and Poe sees this disease of the human spirit as having contaminated physical nature. The woods and fields and waters of the Earth have thereby lost their first beauty, and no longer clearly express God's imagination; the landscape has lost its original perfection of composition, in proportion as men have lost their power to perceive the beautiful.

Since Earth is a fallen planet, life upon Earth is necessarily a torment for the poet: neither in the human sphere nor in the realm of nature can he find fit objects for contemplation, and indeed his soul is oppressed by everything around him. The rationalist mocks at him; the dull, prosaic spirit of the age damps his imaginative spark; the gross materiality of the world crowds in upon him. His only recourse is to abandon all concern for earthly things, and to devote himself as purely as possible to unearthly visions, in hopes of glimpsing that heavenly beauty which is the thought of God.

Poe, then, sees the poetic soul as at war with the mundane physical world; and that warfare is Poe's fundamental subject. But the war between soul and world is not the only war. There is also warfare within the poet's very nature. To be sure, the poet's nature was not always in conflict with itself. Prior to his earthly incarnation, and during his dreamy childhood, Poe's poet enjoyed a serene unity of being; his consciousness was purely imaginative and he knew the universe for the divine poem that it is. But with his entrance into adult life, the poet became involved with a fallen world in which the physical, the factual, the rational, the prosaic are not escapable. Thus, compromised, he lost his perfect spirituality, and is now cursed with a divided nature.

Though his imagination still yearns toward ideal beauty, his mortal body chains him to the physical and temporal and local; the hungers and passions of his body draw him toward external objects, and the conflict of conscience and desire degrades and distracts his soul; his mortal senses try to escape; his reason urges him to acknowledge everyday fact, and to confine his thought within the prison of logic. For all these reasons it is not easy for the poet to detach his soul from earthly things, and regain his lost imaginative power--his power to commune with that supernal beauty which is symbolized, in Poe, by the shadowy and angelic figures of Ligeia, and Helen, and Lenore. These, then, are Poe's great subjects: first, the war between the poetic soul and the external world; second, the war between the poetic soul and the earthly self to which it is bound. All of Poe's major stories are allegorical presentations of these conflicts, and everything he wrote bore somehow upon them....

The scenes and situations of Poe's tales are always concrete representations of states of mind. If we bear in mind Poe's fundamental plot--the effort of the poetic soul to escape all consciousness of the world in dream--we soon recognize the significance of certain scenic or situational motifs which turn up in story after story. The most important of these recurrent motifs is that of *enclosure of circumscription*; perhaps the latter term is preferable, because it is Poe's own word, and because Poe's enclosures are so often more or less circular in form. The heroes of Poe's tales and poems are violently circumscribed by whirlpools, or peacefully circumscribed by cloud-capped Paradisal valleys; they float upon circular pools ringed in by steep flowering hillsides; they dwell on islands, or voyage to them; we find Poe's heroes also in coffins, in the cabs of balloons, or hidden away in the holds of ships; and above all, we find them sitting alone in the claustral and richly furnished rooms of remote and mouldering mansions.

Almost never, if you think about it, is one of Poe's heroes to be seen standing in the light of common day; almost never does the Poe hero breathe the air that others breathe; he requires some kind of envelope in order to be what he is; he is always either enclosed or on his way to an enclosure....For all his travels [William] Wilson seems never to set foot out-of-doors. The story takes place in a series of rooms, the last one locked from the inside. Sometimes Poe emphasizes the circumscription of his heroes by multiple enclosures. Roderick Usher dwells in a great and crumbling mansion from which, as Poe tells us, he has not ventured forth in many years....You might say that Roderick Usher is defended in depth; and yet at the close of the story Poe compounds Roderick's inaccessibility by having the mansion and its occupant swallowed up by the waters of the tarn....Circumscription, in Poe's tales, means the exclusion of consciousness of the so-called real world, the world of time and reason and physical fact; it means the isolation of the poetic soul in visionary reverie or trance. When we find one of Poe's characters in a remote valley, or a claustral room, we know that he is in the process of dreaming his way out of the world....

In some of Poe's rooms, there simply are no windows. In other cases, the windows are blocked up or shuttered. When the windows are not blocked or shuttered, their panes are tinted with a crimson or leaden hue, so as to transform the light of day into a lurid or ghastly glow. This kind of lighting, in which the sun's rays are admitted but transformed, belongs to the portrayal of those half-states of mind in which dreams and reality are blended. Filtered through tinted panes, the sunlight enters certain of Poe's rooms as it might enter the half-closed eyes of a daydreamer, or the dream-dimmed eyes of someone awakening from sleep. But when Poe wishes to represent that deeper phase of dreaming in which visionary consciousness has all but annihilated any sense of the external world, the lighting is always artificial and the time is always night. Flickering candles, wavering torches, and censers full of writhing varicolored flames furnish much of the illumination of Poe's rooms, and one can see the appropriateness of such lighting to the vague and shifting perceptions of the hypnagogic state."

Richard Wilbur
"The House of Poe"
Anniversary Lectures 1959
Reprinted in *Edgar Allan Poe*
(1959; Chelsea House/Modern Critical Views 1985) ed. Harold Bloom

"Poe's main contribution to fictional technique is his emphasis on the rendering of sensation to the point where Andre Gide has credited him with the invention of the interior monologue.... If Poe were more of an allegorist and less of a materialist, we should be tempted to interpret Pym's salvation in theological terms."

Harry Levin
The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville
(Vintage 1960) 20, 107-8, 117

"Poe is quite obviously the poet of dream-work. The obviousness makes for a kind of over-insistence which to American readers at least must seem to be no less than vulgar. To recall the gross characteristics of the poems: metrical effects are forced until they become virtually hypnotic, and language is used primarily as it carries exotic, unworldly meaning, or can be made to do so...We can view him as what he appears to have set out to be--a kind of culture hero of the imagination....If the poems are only a little short of the hysterical in their assertion of the absolute power of the creative imagination, the detective stories are almost droll in their demonstration that common sense is itself powerless unless pushed to apparently ridiculous extremes...of the imagination....

The poetic must be disengaged from the 'real' world if it is to survive and reveal 'ultimate' meaning. That meaning is never discovered...All that the poet can do is interpret the sign as the clearest indication that it is his vocation solely to make poems celebrating the disjunction of the creative spirit from reality.... His poetry came to be in the end a series of manic oxymorons: expressive of nothing more than the fact that they would express the inexpressible. It is tragic that the value of Poe's poems lies primarily in their over-insistent exhibitions of an imagination trying in vain to demonstrate its power to reach beyond itself....

It is the fact of Poe's poetic gift which set the pattern of his fiction--with its concern to explore the delicately harrowing relations between the world of common sense and that of the dream. Because his

fiction has pattern, it is greater than his poetry, which has only force....For him the poetic act in the end signifies absolutely nothing but itself."

Roy Harvey Pearce
The Continuity of American Poetry
(Princeton 1961) 141-153

"I call the poems new in the 1831 edition a result of the highest lyric impulse of Poe's youth, and 'To Helen' his ultimate masterpiece. This I stand by. 'The Raven,' 'Annabel Lee,' and 'The Bells' are flamboyant, but they are mechanical; as Professor Gay Wilson Allan says, 'the critic ruined the poet.' The failure of 'The Raven' is discussed in the text, but it is perhaps interesting to note at this point that translations of this and some of Poe's other late poetry are often better than the original. *Jamais plus* is more colloquial than 'Nevermore,' but in Czech the refrain sounds very much like the croak of a raven!"

William Bittner
Poe: A Biography
(Little, Brown 1962) 288

"Poe cared less for his tales than for his poems. Nevertheless, he had a firm and workable theory about the short story, which he expounded in his famous review...of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*....He insisted on unity of mood as well as of time, space, and action. Poe is credited with the invention of the modern detective story with its amateur sleuth. He was similarly original in his version of the treasure hunt, 'The Gold Bug'...The style of Poe's stories progressed from one highly decorated and elaborate, as in 'The Assignment,' to one of straightforward simplicity, as in 'The Imp of the Perverse' and 'Hop-Frog.' He said the stories of pure beauty, most notably 'The Domain of Arnheim,' had in them much of his soul."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

"The mood of a poet who is his own God and prophet marks one salient feature of Poe and of nearly all his poetry: Poe feels himself the scapegoat, the innocent wronged one, the outcast. If there really is a God, He is on *their side*; therefore, the poet must be his own god or else find another one....The central bifurcation in Poe was between two sides of the self, between emotion and intellect, feeling and the mind.... In the end it was prose against poetry, thought against emotion. Feeling was intense, bewildering, terrifying; thought or mind was rational, comprehensive, and fascinating...The split was, finally, disastrous, for the wider it became, the less the imagination had to do except to do over what it had already done... Poe's greatness lies in his few explorations into the dark underside of human consciousness, and subconsciousness--that variable world of thought, dream, and terror beyond life and knowledge....Poe's greatness lay in his projection of that horror in wholly new terms."

Edward Davidson
Poe: A Critical Study
(Harvard 1964) 260
Love and Death in the American Novel
(Dell 1966) 428

"The majority of the most respected American writers and critics have seen no reason to value his work highly. Emerson, usually so kind in his judgments, dismissed him contemptuously."

Hyatt H. Waggoner
American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present
(Houghton 1968) 134

"It is clear that Poe's poetry produces, in a uniquely striking and undeniable manner, what might be called a *genius-effect*: the impression of some undefinable but compelling *force* to which the reader is subjected. To describe 'this power, *which is felt*,' as one reader puts it, Lowell speaks of 'magnetism'; other critics speak of 'magic.' 'Poe,' writes Bernard Shaw, 'constantly and inevitably *produced magic* where his greatest contemporaries produced only beauty.' T. S. Eliot quite reluctantly agrees: 'Poe had, to an

exceptional degree, the feeling for the incantatory element in poetry, of that which may, in the most nearly literal sense, be called 'the magic of verse.' Poe's 'magic' is thus ascribed to the ingenuity of his versification, to his exceptional technical virtuosity....Regardless of the value-judgment it may pass on Poe, this impressive bulk of Poe scholarship, the very quantity of the critical literature to which Poe's poetry has given rise, is itself an indication of its effective poetic power."

Shoshana Felman
"On Reading Poetry:
Reflections on the Limits and Possibilities of Psychoanalytic Approaches"
The Literary Freud: Mechanisms of Defense and the Poetic Will
(Yale 1980)

"Here is the second stanza of the impeccable writer's celebrated lyric, 'For Annie'...Though of a badness not to be believed, this is by no means unrepresentative of Poe's verse. Aldous Huxley charitably supposed that Baudelaire, Mallarme and Valery simply had no ear for English, and so could not hear Poe's palpable vulgarity....No reader who cares deeply for the best poetry written in English can care greatly for Poe's verse. Huxley's accusation of vulgarity and bad taste is just....Uncritical admirers of Poe should be asked to read his stories aloud (but only to themselves!). The association between the acting style of Vincent Price and the styles of Poe is alas not gratuitous....Poe is a great fantasist whose thoughts were commonplace and whose metaphors were dead....Poe is at once the Narcissus and the Prometheus of his nation. Whatever the gap between style and idea in his tales, Poe is central to the American canon, both for us and for the rest of the world."

Harold Bloom
The New York Review of Books 31.15 (1984)

"With a total of only forty-eight poems (many of them turned out at the jingle level that Emerson referred to), Poe pointed the way toward a new kind of symbolist poetry, verses that evoke mood rather than meaning, that call attention to their own technique, and that celebrate experimentation for its own sake. With his horror tales, Poe took over--and, in some of his best examples, transcended--the Gothic. He had inherited the tradition of the romance that located terror in outward places; he relocated it, as he announced, in the soul."

Justin Kaplan
The Harper American Literature I
(Harper & Row 1987) 1510-11

"Because he so often wrote in the first person about vivid events, many people continue to make the mistake of assuming that the 'I' in Poe narratives is Poe himself....He authorized fuller access to dreams, fantasies, and unconscious impulses than had been thought viable by previous artists. On these grounds his influence upon the French Symbolist poets and the later Surrealist painters is readily understandable."

William Goldhurst
The Heath Anthology of American Literature I
(D. C. Heath 1990) 1322, 1324-25

PROSE STYLE

Poe's Romantic prose style of overstatement is the opposite of the objective Modernist prose style of understatement defined by Hemingway as the "iceberg principle." Poe's style has been out of literary fashion since the Civil War. Fiction writers learned that the most effective way to evoke feelings in a reader is the "objective correlative," as T. S. Eliot defined the technique. In his defense, it should be noted that Poe is usually detached from his protagonists, often satirizing them. Often his prose style is aptly Expressionistic, as when he is rendering the consciousness of an insane or hysterical character. Overall, his Gothic vision is contrary to Modernism. His emphasis upon determinism and victimization is comparable to Naturalism, but he has more in common with Postmodernists like Pynchon. Had he lived in the 20th century, he might have written film noir and horror screenplays in Hollywood.

Michael Hollister (2014)