

Poe's Typical Short Story Strategies

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Abstract

Edgar Allan Poe, a great mind of the Romantic era, experimented with the genre of the short story as no other American writer before him had. He claimed that the short story should be read over a period of time ranging from half an hour to an hour or two in order to keep the unity or totality of effect unspoiled. Poe's typical stories, especially those written in the Gothic vein, present an allegory of a dream experience unveiled in the narrator's disturbed mind with a hypersensitive, "bi-part soul" hero or heroine who is afflicted with a mysterious disease and eventually dies. However, a typical Poean short story also implies recognizable techniques such as the use of a comical or satirical mode, a copulative ending to the story, repetition of a key word at its beginning and masterful use of audio-visual effects. This paper will try to point out some of the most notable narrative strategies in Poe's most famous short stories.

Keywords: short story, unity of effect, narrative technique, copulative ending, polysyndeton

1. Edgar Allan Poe and the Short Story

Edgar Allan Poe experimented with the genre of the short story as no other American writer before him had. He created a variety of the short stories – extravaganzas, Gothic stories, stories of sensation, stories of ratiocination, post-mortem reveries, and hoaxes. He thought that the short story should be read over a period of time ranging from half an hour to an hour or two in order to keep the unity or totality of effect unspoiled. In his April review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* (1842) published in *Graham's Magazine* Poe claimed that he had always regarded "the *Tale* [...]" as affording the best prose opportunity for display of the highest talent" (p. 568). Poe claimed that the short story has certain advantages which can not be recognized in the novel and, when compared to an essay, it presents a far finer literary field which has even certain elements of superiority over the poem. In his review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* published in the same magazine a month later, in May 1842, he stated that the short story affords "unquestionably the fairest field for the exercise of the loftiest talent, which can be afforded by the wide domains of mere prose" (p. 571). It is here that he claimed that the short story, next to a poem, is a piece of writing that best fulfills the demands of high genius. Since this short prose requires "from a half-hour to one or two hours in its perusal" it means that "the soul of the reader is at the writer's control" (p. 572). Therefore, Poe insists that the ordinary novel is objectionable because of its length. Pauses in reading would destroy the true unity of effect because "[w]orldly interests intervening during the pauses of perusal, modify, annul, or counteract, in a greater or less degree, the impressions of the book" (p. 572).

Poe insists that a good writer conceives a unique or single effect, invents incidents and then "combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect" (p. 572). He claims that the writer should not write a single word which does not imply the tendency, direct or indirect, of pre-established design. Undue brevity is as exceptionable in the short story as in the poem, claims Poe, but undue length is even more to be avoided (p. 572).

In June 1836 Poe published in *Southern Literary Messenger* his review of Charles Dickens' *Watkins Tottle, and other Sketches* in which he states that the novel requires "what is denominated a sustained effort" and this "has but a collateral relation to talent" (p. 205). He emphasizes the fact that the unity of effect is essential in the brief article which is not the case with the novel. The effect of the short story in Poe's vision according to Charles E. May "is synonymous with its overall pattern or design, which is also synonymous with its theme or idea" (p. 15). Eugene Current-García singled out three central ideas of Poe's short story theory: "1) [...] the most effective poem or story is one that can be read at a single sitting; 2) the short prose narrative [...] offers the greatest opportunity next to the poem for the exercise of artistic genius, provided the writer deliberately subordinates everything in his story – characters, incidents, style, and tone – to the development of a single, preconceived effect; 3) the prose tale may be made the vehicle for a greater variety of these effects than even the short poem" (p. 69).

According to Poe, the creation of the story is the process of planning and making construction in which every component brick has its unique and appropriate position. All components are of equal significance and contribute to the

author's plan to achieve the unity or totality of effect. Current-García claims that in the very process of Poe's story creation form, technique as well as content present something more than comes to light. Edgar Allan Poe has always been considered a great literary artist who tried to define the basic postulates of the short story and the way they function. Poe's vision of the short story was that in this piece of writing "as not in the novel, the reader could be placed under the spell of an unbroken enchantment" (Silverman, 1993). He insisted that the short story was to be considered as the supreme form of fiction. According to Silverman, the compactness of the Poean short story "made possible both high excitement in the reader and maximum artistic control by the writer" (9). It is widely known that Poe emphasized the pattern, proportion, structure and composition of the short story. Therefore, Charles E. May states that the meaning of the work for him was its technique, "so much so that in many of his stories he thematizes aesthetic and literary theory issues, making the creation and explication of unity the central thematic 'truth' of the work" (p. 13).

2. Poe's Typical Short Story Strategies

Gothic stories with elements of the marvelous and supernatural were extremely popular particularly due to influential British magazines which were easily available in antebellum America. Poe significantly experimented with this type of short story creating a world of ghostly castles and ancient houses, usually narrated by a narrator who is heavily influenced by the events he recounts. Everything alludes to an enigmatic and mysterious world in which the key motif proves to be the motif of rotting, decay and disintegration, both in a literal and metaphorical sense. The typical Poean Gothic method implies creation of characters who do not manage to escape the claws of death and whose life is endangered by darkness and chaos, the progression of the outside world which inevitably ends in destruction. The main characters in a typical Poean Gothic story are the offspring, usually the last in the line, of an aristocratic family, but with no precise sense of identity, usually secluded from the realm of reality and the terrestrial. The setting and the time perspective are vague and obscure. The narrator of "Berenice" states:

"My baptismal name is Egæus, that of my family I will not mention. Yet there are no towers in the land more time-honoured than my gloomy, grey, hereditary halls. Our line has been called a race of visionaries; and in many striking particulars – [...] – there is more than sufficient evidence to warrant the belief" (Poe in Quinn and O'Neill, 1989).

In a similar manner, the narrator of "The Black Cat", revealing no details of his origin, family traits or his wedlock claims:

"From my infancy I was noted for the docility and humanity of my disposition. My tenderness of heart was even so conspicuous as to make me the jest of my companions. [...] I married early, and was happy to find in my wife a disposition not uncongenial with my own." (Poe in Quinn and O'Neill, 1989)

Edgar Allan Poe wrote a special subtype of the Gothic story called the story of sensation in which, as Kenneth Silverman put it, "the victim minutely records his sensations while trapped in some harrowing predicament, as in 'The Pit and the Pendulum'" (p. 7).

Almost in all of his stories Poe exploits the theme of the death of a young, beautiful woman – the theme masterfully developed in his poetry. The narrator of "The Oblong Box" recounts his travel to New York during which he meets Cornilius Wyatt. The unusual "luggage" of a young painter does not conceal a copy of Leonardo's *Last Supper*, as was assumed by the narrator, but the dead body of his beautiful wife. The aforementioned theme was developed in many Poean stories such as "Ligeia", "The Oval Portrait", "Morella" or "Berenice". The main protagonist after experiencing a great loss and being bereft frequently does not manage to cope with his past. Many protagonists consider remarriage as betrayal of the dead spouse. A perfect example of the great affection to the late beloved is recognized in Cornilius Wyatt who, during a terrible night at sea, tied himself with a rope to the oblong box which contained the body of his wife and therefore chose eternity in the vast bosom of the ocean.

It is not hard to observe that images of drowning and swallowing are exploited in many ways. Silverman states that "[a]s the words 'swallowed' and 'jaws' suggest, these images of engulfment are part of a still larger network of images having to do with biting, devouring, and similar oral mutilation" (p. 20). In "The Devil in the Belfry" the image of the devil who comes to "the finest place in the world", the Dutch borough of Vondervotteimittiss, at five to twelve and who approves that "no good can come from over the hills", is given in detail:

"His countenance was of a dark snuff-color, and he had a long hooked nose, pea eyes, a wide mouth, and an excellent set of teeth, which later he seemed anxious of displaying, as he was grinning from ear to ear. [...] There he sat in the belfry upon the belfry-man, who was lying flat upon his back. In his teeth the villain held the bell-rope, which he kept

jerking about with his head, raising such a clatter that my ears ring again even to think of it" (Poe in Quinn and O'Neill, 1989).

The narrator of "Berenice" is obsessed with her teeth. That is why he claims "The teeth! – the teeth! – they were here, and there, and everywhere, and visibly and palpably before me; long, narrow, and excessively white, with the pale lips wreathing about them, as in the very moment of their first terrible development" (Poe in Quinn and O'Neill, 1989). The narrator of "The Pit and the Pendulum" states the following: "the tall candles sank into nothingness! their flames went out utterly; the blackness of darkness supervened; all sensations appeared swallowed up in a mad rushing descent as of the soul into Hades" (Poe in Quinn and O'Neill, 1989).

One of Poe's crucial narrative strategies is the repetition of the keyword at the beginning of the story in order to emphasize a certain intention or idea and to achieve word-play. Kenneth Silverman points out that in the story "Hop-Frog" Poe used the word "joke" with its variants eight times. However, this narrative technique was exploited in many other of Poe's stories.

In the story "The Business Man" the word "method" as well as its variants is used five times.

"I am a business man. I am a *methodical* man. *Method* is the thing, after all. But there are no people I more heartily despise than your eccentric fools who prate about *method* without understanding it; attending strictly to its letter, and violating its spirit. These fellows are always doing the most out-of-the-way things in what they call an orderly manner. Now here, I conceive, is a positive paradox. True *method* appertains to the ordinary and the obvious alone, and cannot be applied to the *outré*. What definite idea can a body attach to such expressions as '*methodological* Jack o' Dandy,' or 'a systematical Will o' the Wisp?'" (Poe in Quinn and O'Neill, 1989; italics S. Simović)

The verb "to see" in its simple past form ("saw") is repeated seven times in "The Pit and the Pendulum". Such repetition contributes significantly to the specific presentation of the protagonist's perception.

"Yet, for a while, I *saw* – but with how terrible an exaggeration! I *saw* the lips of the black-robed judges. They appeared to me white – whiter than the sheet upon which I trace these words – and thin even to grotesqueness; thin with the intensity of their expression of firmness – of immovable resolution – of stern contempt of human torture. I *saw* that the decrees of what to me was Fate were still issuing from those lips. I *saw* them writhe with a deadly locution. I *saw* them fashion the syllables of my name; and I shuddered because no sound succeeded. I *saw*, too, for a few moments of delirious horror, the soft and nearly imperceptible waving of the sable draperies which enwrapped the walls of the apartment. [...] [A]ll at once, there came a most deadly nausea over my spirit, and I felt every fibre in my frame thrill as if I had touched the wire of a galvanic battery, while the angel forms became meaningless spectres, with heads of flame, and I *saw* that from them there would be no help" (Poe in Quinn and O'Neill, 1989; italics S. Simović).

In the story "Diddling Considered as One of the Exact Sciences" the adjective "great" is used four times in the first passage of the story while the word "diddling", with its variants, is exploited five times in the second passage and repeated constantly in the text.

"He has been much admired by Mr. John Neal, and was a *great* man in a small way. The other gave name to the most important of the Exact Sciences, and was a *great* man in a *great* way – I may say, indeed, in the very *greatest* of ways.

Diddling – or the abstract idea conveyed by the verb to *diddle* – is sufficiently well understood. Yet the fact, the deed, the thing *diddling*, is somewhat difficult to define. We may get, however, at a tolerably distinct conception of the matter in hand, by defining – not the thing, *diddling*, in itself – but man, as an animal that *diddles*." (Poe in Quinn and O'Neill, 1989; italics S. Simović)

In "The Island of the Fay" Poe masterfully exploits the aforementioned technique by repetition of the word "music" both in English and French reinforced by repetition of the word "talent", in its singular and plural forms (p. 354).

Edgar Allan Poe's narrative manner implied copulative ending of the story exploited with the masterful use of the rhetorical figure polysyndeton or frequent use of conjunctions, mostly with no grammatical necessity. Thus "he devised a trick of composing the final sentence or two as a series of 'and' clauses, arranged to emphasize each element, as at the end of 'The Masque of the Red Death'" (Silverman, 1993). The prime aim of this technique, according to modern criticism, is to make readers focus on every detail of the sentence, especially its rhythm. A specific and thoroughly exploited use of polysyndeton is evident in "The Oval Portrait" in which out of thirteen sentences which constitute the last paragraph six of them begin with the conjunction "and" with its inevitable internal repetition and a series of "and" clauses.

"*And* evil was the hour when she *saw*, *and* loved, *and* wedded the painter. [...] *And* he was a passionate, *and* wild, *and* moody man, who became lost in reveries; so that he *would* not see that the light which fell so ghastly in that lone turret withered the health *and* the spirits of his bride, who pined visibly to all but him. [...] *And* in sooth some who beheld the portrait spoke of its resemblance in low words, as of a mighty marvel, *and* a proof not less of the power of the painter than of his deep love for her whom he depicted so surpassingly well. [...] *And* he *would* not see that the tints which he

spread upon the canvas were drawn from the cheeks of her who sate beside him. *And* when many weeks had passed, *and* but little remained to do, save one brush upon the mouth *and* one tint upon the eye, the spirit of the lady again flickered up as the flame within the socket of the lamp. *And* then the brush was given, *and* then the tint was placed; *and*, for one moment, the painter stood entranced before the work which he had wrought; but in the next, while he yet gazed, he grew tremulous *and* very pallid, *and* aghast, *and* crying with a loud voice, 'This is indeed Life itself'" (Poe in Quinn and O'Neill, 1989; italics S. Simović).

This method is used many times in Poe's short stories. For example, it is used in the second part of the last paragraph of "Silence: A Fable".

"*And* as the Demon made an end of his story, he fell back within the cavity of the tomb *and* laughed. *And* I could not laugh with the Demon, *and* he cursed me because I could not laugh. *And* the lynx which dwelleth forever in the tomb, came out therefrom, *and* lay down at the feet of the Demon, *and* looked at him steadily in the face." (Poe in Quinn and O'Neill, 1989; italics S. Simović)

Poe begins with "and" seven of the nine last sentences of "Shadow – A Parable". The rhythm is masterfully exploited and the repetition of the aforementioned conjunction at the beginning of the sentences is reinforced by a series of "and" clauses in order to describe the shadow with its dwelling near the Catacombs of Ptolemais.

"*And* lo! from among those sable draperies where sounds of the song departed, there came forth a dark and undefined shadow – a shadow such as the moon, when low in heaven, might fashion from the figure of a man: but it was the shadow neither of man nor of God, nor of any familiar thing. *And* quivering awhile among the draperies of the room, it at length rested in full view upon the surface of the door of brass. [...] *And* the shadow rested upon the brazen doorway, *and* under the arch of the entablature of the door, *and* moved not, nor spoke any word, but there became stationary and remained. *And* the door whereupon the shadow rested was, if I remember aright, over against the feet of the young Zoilus enshrouded. [...] *And* at length I, Oinos, speaking some low words, demanded of the shadow its dwelling *and* its appellation. *And* the shadow answered, 'I am SHADOW, *and* my dwelling is near to the Catacombs of Ptolemais, *and* hard by those dim plains of Helusion which border upon the foul Charonian canal.' *And* then did we, the seven, start from our seats in horror, *and* stand trembling, *and* shuddering, *and* aghast, for the tones in the voice of the shadow were not the tones of any one being, but of a multitude of beings, *and*, varying in their cadences from syllable to syllable fell duskly upon our ears in the well-remembered *and* familiar accents of many thousand departed friends." (Poe in Quinn and O'Neill, 1989; italics S. Simović)

A similar situation can be discovered in "The Island of the Fay" where we can identify a variant of Poe's word-play ("and"/ "and again").

"*And again* the boat appeared *and* the Fay, but about the attitude of the latter there was more of care *and* uncertainty *and* less of elastic joy. She floated *again* from out the light and into the gloom [...] *and again* her shadow fell from her into the ebony water, *and* became absorbed into its blackness. *And again and again* she made the circuit of the island [...] *and* at each issuing into the light there was more sorrow about her person, while it grew feebler *and* far fainter *and* more indistinct, *and* at each passage into the gloom there fell from her a darker shade, which became whelmed in a shadow more black" (Poe in Quinn and O'Neill, 1989; italics S. Simović).

At the end of the story "Literary Life of Thingum Bob, Esq." Poe intentionally repeats various types of words (verbs, pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions) in order to achieve a totality of effect and make the text tissue even more demanding and interesting for a further "exploration". Word-play and masterful use of rhythm are essential at the end of the text.

"Look at me! – *how* I labored – *how* I toiled – *how* I wrote! Ye Gods, did I not write? [...] *You should* have seen me – *you should*. I leaned to the right. I leaned to the left. I sat forward. I sat backward. I sat tête baissée [...], bowing my head close to the alabaster page. *And, through* all, I – wrote. *Through* joy *and through* sorrow, I – wrote. *Through* hunger *and through* thirst, I wrote. *Through* good report *and through* ill report – I wrote. *Through* sunshine *and through* moonshine, I – wrote. *What* I wrote it is unnecessary to say." (Poe in Quinn and O'Neill, 1989; italics S. Simović).

However, Poe used this technique of "piling" conjunctions and starting a series of sentences with "and" even in the middle of his text. A noteworthy example may be found in his short story "Eleonora" in which we can identify a series of six sentences beginning with the conjunction "and", the six sentences "break" and again a series of four sentences with "and" at the beginning with occasional internal repetition.

"*And*, then and there, I threw myself hurriedly at the feet of Eleonora, *and* offered up a vow, to herself *and* to Heaven, that I would never bind myself in marriage to any daughter of Earth – that I would in no manner prove recreant to her dear memory, or to the memory of the devout affection with which she had blessed me. *And* I called the Mighty Ruler of the Universe to witness the pious solemnity of my vow. *And* the curse which I invoked of Him and of her, a saint in Helusion should I prove traitorous to that promise, involved a penalty the exceeding great horror of which will not permit

me to make record of it here. *And* the bright eyes of Eleonora grew brighter at my words; *and* she sighed as if a deadly burthen had been taken from her breast; *and* she trembled *and* very bitterly wept; but she made acceptance of the vow, (for what was she but a child?) *and* it made easy to her the bed of her death. *And* she said to me, not many days afterward, tranquilly dying, that, because of what I had done for the comfort of her spirit she would watch over me in that spirit when departed, *and*, if so it were permitted her return to me visibly in the watches of the night:[...] *And*, with these words upon her lips, she yielded up her innocent life, putting an end to the first epoch of my own. [...] *And* Life departed from our paths; for the tall flamingo flaunted no longer his scarlet plumage before us, but flew sadly from the vale into the hills, with all the gay glowing birds that had arrived in his company. *And* the golden *and* silver fish swam down through the gorge at the lower end of our domain *and* bedecked the sweet river never again. *And* the lulling melody that had been softer than the wind-harp of ÆOLUS, *and* more divine than all save the voice of Eleonora, it died little by little away, in murmurs growing lower *and* lower, until the stream returned, at length, utterly, into the solemnity of its original silence. *And* then, lastly, the voluminous cloud uprose, *and*, abandoning the tops of the mountains to the dimness of old, fell back into the regions of Hesper, *and* took away all its manifold golden *and* gorgeous glories from the Valley of the Many-Colored Grass" (Poe in Quinn and O'Neill, 1989; italics S. Simović).

Edgar Allan Poe has always been considered to be a master of the short story. His literary expression has been recognizable in American and world literature. This Bostonian, yet a representative of Richmond and Southern gentility, has been considered one of the most controversial figures of American Romanticism. As an editor of numerous magazines which circulated through American market in the first half of the nineteenth century Poe had an opportunity to become acquainted with current literary trends and readers' preferences. He created his literary theory in large extent owing to his work in magazines, therefore he was familiar with the ideas of German Transcendentalism, English Romanticism, British aesthetics based on Locke, contemporary events which marked American literary scene. All of his essays, reviews of European and American writers, "Marginalia", "Pinakidia", "The Literati of New York City" were published in periodicals. Poe did not succeed to formulate and systematize the poetics of his critical thought during his lifetime. The statements of his literary theory were scattered throughout numerous reviews and essays. "The tomahawk man" reflected on creativity and originality, demanded high standards of criticism, insisted on competence and dignity of the profession, always pointing out the necessity of "an honest and a fearless opinion".

Edgar Allan Poe has been considered to be a founder of the detective story, the author who contributed to the development of the Gothic story and one of the first writers who introduced elements of science fiction into his works. He developed critical theories and standards which implied literary excellence. Poe insisted on professional literary criticism, dreamt about "launching" an elite literary magazine and cultivating readers' taste. His contribution to the development of the short story as a genre is enormous, which is confirmed by the number of stories he published during his short life as well as reviews, essays and articles in which he discussed the most important issues concerning the theory of the short story.

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