
Inquire: Edgar Allan Poe

Overview

Edgar Allan Poe, one of the most revered American writers, lived a life touched by tragedy. At a young age, he lost his parents, and he descended into alcoholism early in his life. The darkness of his personal life and his alcoholism and drug abuse frequently appeared in his writing. Poe was also, however, a deeply clever and funny person. “The Philosophy of Furniture” provides a look at how an author can change their ethos depending on the purpose and context of an essay.

Big Question: How does the context and purpose of an essay lead the writer to change their ethos?

Watch: The Life of Edgar Allan Poe

Edgar Allan Poe, born in 1809, lived a life of intense tragedy. Both of his parents passed away by the time he turned three years old, and he was taken in by his godfather, a wealthy tobacco merchant. During his first year at the University of Virginia, he incurred enormous gambling debts that led him to leave before his first year was over and enroll in the military. After an argument, he was eventually cut off from his godfather, and was shortly dismissed from West Point over flagrant rule-breaking.

Though he was publishing poetry by the time he was dismissed from West Point, he had not found any literary success. He worked as an editor for the Southern Literary Messenger, but he was fired on account of his heavy drinking. After this, Poe and his young wife moved to Philadelphia, where he began editing other magazines. In this position, Poe began publishing some of his more well-known dark horror stories: “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “The Tell-Tale Heart.” After this success, the Poe moved to New York City, where he published and found great success with his poem “The Raven.”

In this midst of this success, Poe’s wife Virginia died of tuberculosis. This loss pushed Poe further into alcoholism and drug abuse. He consoled himself by searching for love, and eventually got engaged to his old sweetheart. However, after a night of drinking in Baltimore before the wedding, Poe disappeared. Three days later, he was found in a gutter, barely coherent. He died from this episode at age 40.

Poe is considered one of the great American writers. His style is dark, horrific, and brooding. It’s easy to argue that the losses he suffered throughout his life led him to dwell on the darker aspects of humanity. This fascination with the macabre runs throughout nearly every text he wrote.
He did, however, break from this genre on occasion. This lesson focuses on one of his lesser known texts: “The Philosophy of Furniture.” In this short essay, he takes on a humorous tone and questions the nature of philosophy and American taste in interior decorating.

Considering that his work in the horror genre made Edgar Allan Poe famous, how do you think Poe’s ethos will be different in a humorous essay?

Read: Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Philosophy of Furniture”

Overview: Reading Edgar Allan Poe Rhetorically

Edgar Allan Poe primarily wrote horror and mystery stories and poems. This essay, which is intentionally written to be a bit nonsensical and humorous, is a break from that style. The language can be a bit difficult to understand, so make sure you take your time and reread it as many times as you need to. As you read, focus on the following:

1. What kind of ethos does Poe construct?
2. How does he talk to and about his audience?
3. Where does he use logic to support his point?

Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Philosophy of Furniture”

“PHILOSOPHY,” says Hegel, “is utterly useless and fruitless, and, for this very reason, is the sublimest of all pursuits, the most deserving of our attention, and the most worthy of our zeal” — a somewhat Coleridgey assertion, with a rivulet of deep meaning in a meadow of words. It would be wasting time to disentangle the paradox — and the more so as no one will deny that Philosophy has its merits, and is applicable to an infinity of purposes. There is reason, it is said, in the roasting of eggs, and there is philosophy even in furniture — a philosophy nevertheless which seems to be more imperfectly understood by Americans than by any civilized nation upon the face of the earth.

In the internal decoration, if not in the external architecture, of their residences, the English are supreme. The Italians have but little sentiment beyond marbles and colors. In France meliora probant, deteriora sequuntur — the people are too much a race of gad-abouts to study and maintain those household properties, of which indeed they have a delicate appreciation, or at least the elements of a proper sense. The Chinese, and most of the Eastern races, have a warm but inappropriate fancy. The Scotch are poor decorists. The Dutch have merely a vague idea that a curtain is not a cabbage. In Spain they are all curtains — a nation of hangmen. The Russians no [[do]] not furnish. The Hottentots and Kickapoos are very well in their way — the Yankees alone are preposterous.

How this happens it is not difficult to see. We have no aristocracy of blood, and having, therefore, as a natural and, indeed as an inevitable thing, fashioned for ourselves an aristocracy of dollars, the display of wealth has here to take the place, and perform the office, of the heraldic display in monarchical countries. By a transition readily understood, and which might have been easily foreseen, we have been brought to merge in simple show our notions of taste itself. To speak less abstractedly. In England, for example, no mere parade of costly appurtenances would be so likely as with us to create an impression of the beautiful in respect to the appurtenances themselves, or of taste as respects the proprietor — this for the reason, first, that wealth is not in England, the loftiest object of ambition, as constituting a nobility; and, secondly, that there the true nobility of blood rather avoids than affects costliness in which a parvenu rivalry may be successfully attempted, confining itself within the rigorous limits, and to the analytical investigation, of legitimate taste. The people naturally imitate the nobles, and the result is a thorough diffusion of a right feeling. But, in America, dollars being the supreme insignia of aristocracy, their display...
may be said, in general terms, to be the sole means of aristocratic distinction; and the populace, looking up for models, are insensibly led to confound the two entirely separate ideas of magnificence and beauty. In short, the cost of an article of furniture has, at length, come to be, with us, nearly the sole test of its merit in a decorative point of view. And this test, once established, has led the way to many analogous errors, readily traceable to the one primitive folly.

There could be scarcely anything more directly offensive to the eye of an artist than the interior of what is termed, in the United States, a well furnished apartment. Its most usual defect is a preposterous want of keeping. We speak of the keeping of a room as we would of the keeping of a picture; for both the picture and the room are amenable to those undeviating principles which regulate all varieties of art; and very nearly the same laws by which we decide upon the higher merits of a painting, suffice for a decision upon the adjustment of a chamber. A want of keeping is observable sometimes in the character of the several pieces of furniture, but generally in their colors or modes of adaptation to use. Very often the eye is offended by their inartistic arrangement. Straight lines are too prevalent, too uninterruptedly continued, or clumsily interrupted at right angles. If curved lines occur, they are repeated into unpleasant uniformity. Undue precision spoils the appearance of many a room.

In the matter of glass, generally, we proceed upon false principles. Its leading feature is glitter — and in that one word how much of all that is detestable do we express! Flickering, unquiet lights are sometimes pleasing — to children and idiots always so — but in the embellishment of a room they should be scrupulously avoided. In truth even strong steady lights are inadmissible. The huge and unmeaning glass chandeliers, prism-cut, gas-litten, and without shade, which dangle by night in our most fashionable drawing-rooms, may be cited as the quintessence of false taste, as so many concentrations of preposterous folly.

The rage for glitter — because its idea has become, as I before observed, confounded with that of magnificence in the abstract — has led also to the exaggerated employment of mirrors. We line our dwellings with great British plates, and then imagine we have done a fine thing. Now the slightest thought will be sufficient to convince any one who has an eye at all, of the ill effect of numerous looking-glasses, and especially of large ones. Regarded apart from its reflection the mirror presents a continuous, flat, colorless, unrelieved surface — a thing always unpleasant, and obviously so. Considered as a reflector it is potent in producing a monstrous and odious uniformity — and the evil is here aggravated in no direct proportion with the augmentation of its sources, but in a ratio constantly increasing. In fact a room with four or five mirrors arranged at random is, for all purposes of artistical show, a room of no shape at all. If we add to this the attendant glitter upon glitter, we have a perfect farrago of discordant and displeasing effects. The veriest bumpkin, not addle-headed, upon entering an apartment so bedizened, would be instantly aware of something wrong, although he might be altogether unable to assign a cause for his dissatisfaction. But let the same individual be led into a room tastefully furnished, and he would be startled into an exclamation of surprise and of pleasure.

Reflect: Are You Serious?

Poll
What is the best way to get you to reflect on a serious subject?

- A well-researched essay that asks you to change your opinion
- A humorous essay that causes you to view something differently
Expand: Rhetorically Reading “The Philosophy of Furniture”

Ethos

Note how Poe begins this essay. He opens by citing Friedrich Hegel, a noted German philosopher. This seems like a strange way to open a humorous text. Normally, we would think that citing a philosopher to open an essay would help add to a writer’s credibility, but, in this case, it seems to do something else. As the Hegel quote argues that philosophy is “the sublimest of all pursuits,” and as we know Poe is about to apply this “sublime pursuit” to furniture, we can assume that his use of this quote is a bit tongue-in-cheek.

By opening his essay in this way, Poe alerts the reader to the fact that his tone is not serious, causing them to view his language through a different lens. Poe employs some elevated diction in this essay, with phrasing and word choice that can sometimes be difficult to understand. As the reader, we should be considering the dissonance between Poe’s words and Poe’s meaning; he uses a serious tone to talk about an unserious subject.

Pathos

So, how does Poe talk to his audience? As noted above, he casually references Hegel, and he follows that up with the term “Coleridgian,” which is a reference to noted romantic poet Samuel Coleridge, who wrote deeply complex and philosophical poetry. By opening with these two references, Poe clearly assumes that his audience will have at least a passing familiarity with both figures. He assumes that his audience is well-read and intelligent.

This essay was published in Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine, for which Poe was the editor. This shows that Poe was most likely correct in his assumption that his audience were well-read, as readers of a gentleman’s magazine would have been fairly well-educated. The essay would also have been written for an American audience, which is noteworthy considering that the selection primarily makes fun of Americans’ interior design tastes. Poe simultaneously appeals to his audience’s intelligence and mocks them for their taste in furniture.

Logos

In an essay that is clearly not meant to be taken seriously as a persuasive text, there is little in the way of “logos” for readers to analyze. There are moments, however, when Poe makes a cogent argument. At one point, he notes: “We have no aristocracy of blood, and having, therefore, as a natural and, indeed as an inevitable thing, fashioned for ourselves an aristocracy of dollars, the display of wealth has here to take the place, and perform the office, of the heraldic display in monarchical countries.” Poe reasons that the Americans, in contrast to the English, have no monarchy or aristocracy. In place of this, he argues, Americans value the passing on of wealth, and therefore display their wealth like Englishmen display their heraldry and lineage.

Purpose

What is to be said of purpose in humor writing? Is the purpose to entertain? Poe has clearly done so. He pokes fun at America’s tendency toward garish displays of wealth in place of good taste which, arguably, could still apply today. Embedded in this humor, however, are grains of truth that Poe asks his readers to consider: is philosophy really applicable to the study of everything? Do Americans display their wealth at the expense of good taste? Do Americans celebrate their wealth the way other nations celebrate their lineage?
A good essay, no matter the genre, will still have a purpose that should challenge its readers in some way.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

Edgar Allan Poe - Writer | Mini Bio | BIO
- A mini biography of Poe’s life
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x-387NMCR6w

Cool History - Who Was Edgar Allan Poe... Really? | Cool History
- A quick history giving more interesting facts about Poe’s life
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iQOhM6c0-Lo

Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore
- A website featuring many of Poe’s works and a chronology of his life in Baltimore
- https://www.eapoe.org/index.htm

Analysis: The Philosophy of Furniture
- An article further exploring the tone and purpose of “The Philosophy of Furniture”

Lesson Glossary

diction: the types of words and phrases chosen for a particular piece of writing

Check Your Knowledge

1. Edgar Allan Poe lived a life of poverty.
   A. True
   B. False

2. This humorous style of writing is what Poe was most well known for.
   A. True
   B. False

3. This essay does not have a clear purpose because it is a humorous essay.
   A. True
   B. False

Answer Key:
Citations

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