

FEB 04 1994

REPRESENTATIVE CRITICAL COMMENTS
ON THE ARTISTIC VIEWS
of
EDGAR ALLAN POE

A DIGEST OF A THESIS
PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY
OF DANBURY STATE COLLEGE

by
Richard L. Montesi
June 1960

To grasp the real significance of Edgar Allan Poe's work, it is essential that we acquire a knowledge and an understanding of his purpose in writing. To do this, we must examine his theories on art. This examination will reveal that Poe was interested in art for the sake of art, and that he developed his theories for the purpose of improving the practice of art.

The purpose of this paper is to present Poe's artistic and critical theories, and to offer divergent authoritative reactions to them. The writer hopes that such a presentation will give the reader a clearer understanding of Poe's purpose in writing, and thus establish a valid criterion for judging his efforts.

Poe's critical reviews, prose, and poetry are dealt with only in so far as they serve as examples to demonstrate his theories at work. In works of creation and criticism, Poe adhered tenaciously to his creed. His theories are exemplified in nearly all that he wrote.

Poe's central artistic and critical standards, set forth in two of his best known critical essays ("The Poetic Principle" and "The Philosophy of Composition"), can be summarized briefly. The end of art is pleasure, not truth; all works of art must be brief ("a long poem does not exist"); beauty is the chief aim and sole province of poetry; poetry is close to music, and the artist's goal should be to unite the two; and all works of art must be limited to "a single effect." The prose tale may produce effects such as horror, terror, or passion.

This paper indicates that Poe was best known to his contemporaries in America as a critic. However, his critical writings were not well received. One of the major criticisms leveled against him was that the principles upon which he formulated his judgments were too inadequate, too limited in scope. When he condemned long poems and didactic poems, he was accused of being ignorant of literary history, and was denounced for his tendency to reckon as literature of high quality only the kind that met his personal artistic standards.

This paper also illuminates the fact that Poe's work seldom evoked mild reactions. When his works were criticized, they were severely criticized; when they were esteemed, they were highly esteemed. An example of the former is T. S. Eliot; of the latter, W. H. Auden.

Eliot is extremely critical of Poe's work, but puzzled by his influence. He describes Poe's writing as "slipshod," and refers to his works as "haphazard experiments." Yet, he attests to the fact that Poe's influence is both widespread and powerful.

Auden recognizes Poe's genius. He describes him as a "hard-working and conscientious professional writer." He dwells upon Poe's successes, and defends Poe's depreciation of the longer forms of composition.

For most of the years that have elapsed since Poe's death in 1849 his importance went unrecognized in America. The founder of the American short story, the originator of the modern detective story, the prophet of symbolism, had been neglected. The writer

hopes that this paper, with its emphasis on Poe's theories and purpose in writing, will aid in bringing Poe to his rightful place among the world's literary greats.