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Scott Peeples
College of Charleston

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Forum Prompt

What Can Poe Do For You?

Scott Peeples
College of Charleston

For about 180 years, readers have responded intensely to the poetry and fiction of Edgar Allan Poe, experiencing terror, delight, shock, and a kind of melancholic joy, to name a few of the emotions Poe's work inspires. But for all those sensations, does reading Poe do us any good? Do we learn anything, or—dare I say it—become better people for having read him? As it turns out, this is an old question, but one that still resonates.

In a 1937 *American Literature* essay, for instance, Yvor Winters attacked Poe for basically not doing anyone any good: “[P]oetry is not, for Poe, a refined and enriched technique of moral comprehension. It can be of no aide to us in understanding ourselves or in ordering our lives, for most of our experience is irrelevant to it” (387). As for Poe's fiction, “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” (396). Perhaps Winters' humanistic emphasis on moral comprehension as a goal or criterion for art seems merely quaint today. Perhaps it's valid, but he's wrong about Poe. Or perhaps he's right.

Winters based his criticism on Poe's theory as much as his practice; and indeed, in his theoretical writing Poe objected to didacticism in favor of effect—for which he was later championed by “decadent” artists from Baudelaire to Lou Reed. As early as 1831, borrowing liberally from Coleridge, Poe posed that a poem “is opposed to a work of science by having, for its immediate object, pleasure, not truth” (11). And as late as December 1848, less than a year before his death, he would inveigh against “the heresy of The Didactic,” the mistaken belief that “the ultimate object of all Poetry is Truth” (75). Poe was less insistent in his opposition to didacticism in fiction, but in his famous review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, he offered a parallel emphasis on effect and the writer's control of the reader, though he grants that “Truth is often . . . the aim of the tale” (573). Truth, perhaps, but not necessarily an ethical truth: The subtitle of the satirical “Never Bet the Devil Your Head: A Tale with a Moral” (1841) is clearly ironic, as Poe, in the story's introduction, mocks contemporary critics who claim that he has never written a moral tale.

Of course, poetry and fiction need not deliver a clear moral lesson in order to convey a profound understanding of human behavior and our place in the world—in the language of my title, to do something for us. But relatively little literary criticism in recent decades has used that kind of language (“here's what Poe has to tell us”) or concerned itself directly with what might be called fundamental questions, which is why I want to raise that possibility, and offer that invitation, particularly in relation to such an unlikely suspect as Poe.

Let me offer a few examples of critics who I believe have successfully analyzed Poe's work in light of ethics or fundamental questions. In a 1963 essay on “The Masque of the Red Death,” Joseph Patrick Roppolo argues that the intruder who wears the mask is not death itself but a representation (a mask) of death. The revelers are forced to acknowledge what they are attempting to evade when the masked figure invades the castle: “The Red Death is not a pestilence, in the usual sense; it is unfailingly and universally fatal, as no mere disease or plague can be; and blood is its guarantee, its avatar and its seal. Life itself, then, is the Red Death, the one ‘affliction’ shared by all mankind” (140). Prince Prospero and his guests have let the fear of death get the best of them. Roppolo maintains that while Poe's

story is not didactic, it does teach us something about living with the knowledge of death's inevitability: "What Poe has created, then, is a kind of mythic parable, brief and poetic, of the human condition, of man's fate, and of the fate of the universe" (144).

In "Poe and the Unreadable: 'The Black Cat' and 'The Tell-Tale Heart'" (1992), Christopher Benfey describes the two stories' narrators as extreme examples of a twinned longing for and discomfort with intimacy. Invoking Wittgenstein, Stanley Cavell, and Rilke, Benfey explores the philosophical problem of the unknowability of others' minds in light of "The Tell-Tale Heart," whose narrator insists that he does possess this extreme identification with the old man, whom he then kills. Like Roppolo, he reads these stories as cautionary tales:

Poe seems . . . to be saying: These fears are always with us—the fear of love and the fear of isolation. Taken to extremes, they both lead to disaster: One cat avoids us and is blinded, another cat follows us and is killed. To live life is to steer a dangerous course between these extremes and there is no point at which the current widens. (43)

More recently, J. Gerald Kennedy has discussed "Poe's War on Terror" in various lectures, notably one delivered at the 4th International Poe Conference in 2015. For Kennedy, Poe's fiction offers guidance for the twenty-first century on "terror management," despite his reputation for instilling terror.

I admire the scholars I've cited here for their ability to tease meaning from the horrific effects of Poe's tales without reducing them to the kind of didacticism Poe would have abhorred. But where does one draw the line that separates "useful," meaningful interpretation from didacticism? In an essay on "The Black Cat" and New Historicist criticism, Paul Lewis objects to what he sees as the tendency of much late twentieth-century criticism to reduce Poe's highly ambiguous, effect-driven stories to arguments about cultural and political issues of his time. Indeed, much New Historicist criticism associated with Poe, while focused on the 1830s and 1840s, suggested truths about race, gender, and power relations that transcend the concerns of antebellum America. And such uses of Poe have been seen by many scholars as over-determined and preachy. Again, where, if at all, does one draw the line?

We invite readers of *Criterion* to address this broad question in any number of ways. Does Poe's work seriously address ethical issues not specific to his moment in history? Does the history of Poe criticism offer any lessons of its own on how (not) to "use" literature for humanist purposes? If readings such as Roppolo's seem reductive in 2016, how does work informed by more recent approaches—trauma theory, animal studies—avoid the same tendency? Authors might focus on specific Poe texts or examine larger issues of the purpose of literary study with Poe as an example or touchstone.

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