Content Overview

Many people consider Edgar Allen Poe to be one of the finest literary critics of his time. Literary critics examine what other people have written. Through this examination, they often outline what they feel is good writing. Their analysis often gives readers a framework for looking at a text. It provides readers with background information and other thoughts they may not have considered in interpreting a piece of literature.

Some critics today say Poe was at his best as a literary critic when he wrote "The Poetic Principle." (The site links to this essay if you would like to read it.) In it, Poe explains his thoughts on poetry and its creation.

In this interactive, students can make their own choices about the factors that define good poetry, based on their own opinions, and then see how they would use their criteria to "rate" Poe's Annabelle Lee.

You might introduce this activity with the video clip introduction found at the start of "the Poetic Principle" section. In the clip, Poe re-enactor John Astin says this: "Like most poets, I have often tried to come up with a good definition of the art of poetry. What I have found is this: To me, poetry is the rhythmical creation of beauty. In contemplating that beauty, I believe the soul can arrive at a pleasure that is the most pure, the most elevating, and the most intense, all at the same time. It is an experience of such exquisiteness that we cannot be sure that the poem itself was not created in heaven."

NOTE: *Don't miss the narration!*

| 1 | "And here, in the beginning, permit me to say a few words in regard to a somewhat peculiar principle, which, whether rightfully or wrongfully, has always had its influence in my own critical estimate of the poem. I hold that a long poem does not exist. I maintain that the phrase, "a long poem," is simply a flat contradiction in terms." - Edgar Allen Poe |

Poe thought that a poem must be experienced all at once. He thought that, if it took any longer than a half-hour to read the poem, then the experience of the poem was lost, and the poem stopped being a poem.

What do you think? Click on a button below.

? I agree with Poe. A good poem should be short enough to read and enjoy in one sitting.

? I disagree with Poe. A good poem can be long or short. It doesn’t matter how long it takes to read it.

| 2 | "On the other hand, it is clear that a poem may be improperly brief. Undue brevity degenerates into mere epigrammatism. A very short poem, while now and then producing a brilliant or vivid, never produces a profound or enduring effect. There must be the steady pressing down of the stamp upon the wax." - Edgar Allan Poe |

To Poe, the emotional experience of a poem was the most important part. If the poem was too brief to allow the reader the fullest of emotional experiences, it didn’t meet Poe’s definition of a poem.

What do you think? Click on a button below.

? I agree with Poe. A good poem shouldn’t be so brief that the reader does not get to experience any of the emotional feelings behind the words.

? I disagree with Poe. A good poem can include just a few words.
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| 3    | "It has been assumed, tacitly and avowedly, directly and indirectly, that the ultimate object of all Poetry is Truth. Every poem, it is said, should inculcate a morals and by this moral is the poetical merit of the work to be adjudged. . . . but the simple fact is that would we but permit ourselves to look into our own souls we should immediately there discover that under the sun there neither exists nor can exist any work more thoroughly dignified, more supremely noble, than this very poem, this poem per se, this poem which is a poem and nothing more, this poem written solely for the poem's sake." – Edgar Allan Poe  

Poe thought that a poem should not be written to teach people how to live their lives. This kind of writing, he said, is the very opposite of what poetry should be. In teaching people about the morals they should live by, Poe said, writers needed to use simple language in an unemotional way.  

Poetry, he says, is just the opposite. It is an emotional and artistic experience. True poems, Poe believed, are written with passion.  

What do you think? Click on a button below.  

? I agree with Poe. A good poem is an experience in itself. It doesn't need to teach lessons about life.  

? I disagree with Poe. A good poem can educate as well as entertain. |
| 4    | "It by no means follows, however, that the incitements of Passion or the precepts of Duty, or even the lessons of Truth, may not be introduced into a poem, and with advantage; for they may subserve incidentally, in various ways, the general purposes of the work: but the true artist will always contrive to tone them down in proper subjection to that Beauty which is the atmosphere and the real essence of the poem." - Edgar Allan Poe  

Poe admitted that, sometimes, poems could be include elements of instruction about "Duty" or "Truth," (a sense of morality or instructing people about ways to live their lives.) However, he felt these elements had to be less important in the poem than its elements of pure beauty. He believed that nothing should stand in the way of the emotional and soulful experience of a poem.  

What do you think? Click on a button below.  

? I agree with Poe. A good poem can include some elements that teach or illustrate a good lesson—as long as its primary purpose is to present a beautiful and emotional experience.  

? I disagree with Poe. A good poem can have a single purpose—to teach a truth, to encourage people to act one way, or to be an emotional and soulful experience. |
| 5    | "He who shall simply sing, with however glowing enthusiasm, or with however vivid a truth of description, of the sights, and sounds, and odors, and colors, and sentiments which greet him in common with all mankind — he, I say, has yet failed to prove his divine title." - Edgar Allan Poe  

Poe thinks that the experience of beauty that is poetry is complicated. He says that there are many things in nature that are beautiful. However, merely telling people about these beautiful things is not enough. It is more important, in Poe's eyes, to help readers experience their beauty on an emotional level, connecting one's whole to the whole of the beauty of objects and feelings. He says, "It is no mere appreciation of the Beauty before us, but a wild effort to reach the Beauty above.”  

Poe often stated in other works that the effect of a poem on its readers is one of its most important characteristics. The poet, therefore, writes to people's hearts, minds, and souls.  

What do you think? Click on a button below.  

? I agree with Poe. A good poem gives emotional substance to the beauty in the world around it.  

? I disagree with Poe. A good poem paints an accurate and unemotional picture of the beauty in the world around it. |
In his essay, Poe included portions of several poems which, to him, contain all the elements of a true poem.

[choice] Read/listen to one of these poems, written by George Gordon, Lord Byron.

[choice] Read/listen to one of these poems, written by Alfred, Lord Tennyson.

(Texts courtesy of the Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore)

Lord Byron Poem

Though the day of my destiny's over,
And the star of my fate hath declined
Thy soft heart refused to discover
The faults which so many could find;
Though thy soul with my grief was acquainted,
    It shrunk not to share it with me,
And the love which my spirit hath painted
    It never hath found but in thee.

Then when nature around me is smiling,
    The last smile which answers to mine,
I do not believe it beguiling,
    Because it reminds me of shine;
And when winds are at war with the ocean,
    As the breasts I believed in with me,
If their billows excite an emotion,
    It is that they bear me from thee.

Though the rock of my last hope is shivered,
    And its fragments are sunk in the wave,
Though I feel that my soul is delivered
    To pain — it shall not be its slave.
There is many a pang to pursue me:
    They may crush, but they shall not contemn —
They may torture, but shall not subdue me —
    'Tis of thee that I think — not of them.

Though human, thou didst not deceive me,
    Though woman, thou didst not forsake,
Though loved, thou forborest to grieve me,
    Though slandered, thou never couldst shake, —
Though trusted, thou didst not disclaim me,
    Though parted, it was not to fly,
Though watchful, 'twas not to defame me,
    Nor mute, that the world might belie.

Yet I blame not the world, nor despise it,
    Nor the war of the many with one —
If my soul was not fitted to prize it,
    'Twas folly not sooner to shun:
And if dearly that error hath cost me,
    And more than I once could foresee,
I have found that whatever it lost me,
    It could not deprive me of thee.

From the wreck of the past, which hath perished,
    Thus much I at least may recall,
It hath taught me that which I most cherished
    Deserved to be dearest of all:
In the desert a fountain is springing,
    In the wide waste there still is a tree,
And a bird in the solitude singing,
<table>
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<tr>
<th>8</th>
<th>Alfred, Lord Tennyson Poem</th>
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| Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean,  
Tears from the depth of some divine despair  
Rise in the heart, and gather to the eyes,  
In looking on the happy Autumn fields,  
And thinking of the days that are no more.  

Fresh as the first beam glittering on a sail,  
That brings our friends up from the underworld,  
Sad as the last which reddens over one  
That sinks with all we love below the verge;  
So sad, so fresh, the days that are no more.  

Ah, sad and strange as in dark summer dawns  
The earliest pipe of half-awaken'd birds  
To dying ears, when unto dying eyes  
The casement slowly grows a glimmering square;  
So sad, so strange, the days that are no more.  

Dear as remember'd kisses after death,  
And sweet as those by hopeless fancy feign'd  
On lips that are for others; deep as love,  
Deep as first love, and wild with all regret;  
O Death in Life, the days that are no more. |

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<th>9</th>
<th>Students will see a list of the following statements, based on the choices they’ve made throughout the exercise. Students can also type in their own additions to the list.</th>
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| A good poem should be short enough to read and enjoy in one sitting. – OR – A good poem can be long or short. It doesn’t matter how long it takes to read it.  
A good poem shouldn’t be so brief that the reader does not get to experience any of the emotional feelings behind the words. – OR – A good poem can include just a few words.  
A good poem is an experience in itself. It doesn’t need to teach lessons about life. – OR – A good poem can educate as well as entertain.  
A good poem can include some elements that teach or illustrate a good lesson—as long as its primary purpose is to present a beautiful and emotional experience. – OR – A good poem can have a single purpose – to teach a truth, to encourage people to act one way, or to be an emotional and soulful experience.  
A good poem gives emotional substance to the beauty in the world around it. – OR – A good poem paints an accurate and unemotional picture of the beauty in the world around it.  
These are the qualities that you have selected as important for a good poem to have.  
Do you want to add any more qualities to the list? |

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<tr>
<th>10</th>
<th>In this section, students will read and listen to the poem Annabel Lee while thinking about their personal criteria for poetry which appears on the right hand side of the screen. Students are asked to think about this: Is Annabelle Lee a good poem?</th>
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| **Annabel Lee**  
(Text courtesy of the Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore)  

It was many and many a year ago,  
In a kingdom by the sea,  
That a maiden lived whom you may know  
By the name of Annabel Lee; —  
And this maiden she lived with no other thought |
Than to love and be loved by me.

She was a child and I was a child,
    In this kingdom by the sea,
But we loved with a love that was more than love —
    I and my Annabel Lee —
With a love that the wingèd seraphs of Heaven
    Coveted her and me.

And this was the reason that, long ago,
    In this kingdom by the sea,
A wind blew out of a cloud by night
    Chilling my Annabel Lee;
So that her high-born kinsmen came
    And bore her away from me,
To shut her up, in a sepulchre
    In this kingdom by the sea.

The angels, not half so happy in Heaven,
    Went envying her and me;
Yes! that was the reason (as all men know,
    In this kingdom by the sea)
That the wind came out of the cloud, chilling
    And killing my Annabel Lee.

But our love it was stronger by far than the love
    Of those who were older than we —
Of many far wiser than we —
And neither the angels in Heaven above
    Nor the demons down under the sea
Can ever dissever my soul from the soul
    Of the beautiful Annabel Lee: —

For the moon never beams without bringing me dreams
    Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
And the stars never rise but I see the bright eyes
    Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side
    Of my darling, my darling, my life and my bride
In her sepulchre there by the sea —
    In her tomb by the side of the sea.