

POE FATHER OF SCIENCE-FICTION

By Sam Martinez

Poe has often been referred to by literary critics as the "Father of the Detective Story." But such is not his only claim to fame. A statement that is equally true, but probably not so well recognized is that Poe is also the sire of the modern-day science-fiction story.

Of course, nowadays, in the back-wash of the atom bomb, all kinds and classes of fiction are being published in the guise of science-fiction, ranging from incredibly detailed and authenticated technical masterpieces to the thinly disguised "horse opera in space." Undoubtedly, the bulk of the science-fiction today is of the "pulp" quality, although many of the "slicks" have lowered their standards ... and eyebrows ... to admit this once despised literary form. Many of the more skillfully produced stories of today will probably be of a lasting nature, until outstripped by reality itself! It is certainly no accident that many of the top science-fiction authors and magazine editors are brilliant scholars with scientific degrees. Many of these turn to science-fiction as a regenerating sideline, to provide a refreshing change of pace from the more rigorous demands of their chosen professions.

As for readers, practically any survey will show them to be scientists, students, and others ranking high in imagination and creativity. In addition to providing "escape" from everyday problems and worries, these flights of fancy provide mental stimulation along new and often challenging lines. Many of the extravagant themes of yesterday have degenerated to the commonplace facts of today. Whether or not science-fiction has actually aided in the development of the wonders it so glowingly describes is perhaps arguable, but there is little question but that many great scientists were attracted to the will-o-wisp of science by school-day perusals of such early thrillers.

Before evaluating the influence of Poe on the field of science-fiction, perhaps it is in order to narrow down the field by describing exactly what is meant by the term, and thus avoid possible misunderstanding. Actually, there are two loosely linked, widely divergent forms that are often confused by the non-aficionado. One is the supernatural fantasy story, and the other the cold-facts pseudo-scientific yarn. And, if one listens to the cries of fans in letter-columns, fanzines, and convention bull-sessions, never the twain shall meet!

The modern science-fiction story undoubtedly evolved out of the old horror stories, told before a flickering fire in the dead of night, about ghosts and monsters, and things too terrible to describe. In the days before television, radio, movies, and comic books, this was how the younger generation got its mental stimulation, and exercised its imagination. Today, the true fan ignores such tales as infantile and out-of-date, and protests loudly at the slightest hint of the supernatural or unexplainable.

Today, the true science-fiction story is built around one dominant theme or idea. The author evolves an unproven theory, embellishes it with realistic detail to make it appear plausible, and explores every possible implied ramification. Assuming the basic theory to be true, what is the inferred effect on humanity, as represented by the characters of the story? How does human nature react in a completely foreign environment?

The resulting products are indeed awe-inspiring in their scope and variety. But, although imagination is given freest reign, there is always maintained the strictest adherence to the laws of cause and effect. Woe betide the author who commits the slightest technical error, or who exhibits the least bit of illogical reasoning. His readers will descend on him like vultures and, as any science-fiction editor can attest, science-fiction fans are avid letter writers.

The science fiction story probably displays a greater diversity of plot and setting than any other type of popular adventure fiction. It may take place in the past or in the future...in space or on another planet. The surroundings may be a jumble of chromium and glassware in a laboratory, or the story may occur on the barren reaches of a lifeless asteroid. The plot may revolve around an advanced technological or sociological problem, or it may simply concern the old, universal problems of love, life, war and death, transposed to a new setting. Always, however, the author must adhere to the unwritten law of the genre. He must adhere to rigid scientific principles. No fact, however trivial, may be left

unexplained to the reader, even though the explanation may be more fantastic than the item itself. The reader demands plausibility above all else in his science-fiction story.

This is a far cry indeed from the fantasy story, woven around the unexplained and the implausible. No attempt is made to let the reader understand the meaning of what is happening, for this would destroy the "charm" of the story. The purpose here is not to arouse a thirst for knowledge, or wonder at the complexity of Nature...these stories are primarily designed to evoke stark terror, and man's instinctive fear of the unknown helps to achieve this effect. Thus, old legends and superstitions, based upon ignorance, are commonly the basic theme for this type of story. Spirits of the dead (today's commonest form of superstition) are the most popular theme, closely followed by monsters, zombies, demons, angels, elementals, and similar non-mundane beings. Creatures of the darkness such as witches, vampires, ghouls, werewolves, etc. are currently enjoying a field day with the younger generation. But, summarizing all this, the basic element of the fantasy story is fear, and as such, it carries an emotional appeal to the reader, in contrast to the intellectual appeal of the science-fiction story in which the supernatural is strictly exorcised.

It is impossible to trace back to the origin of the supernatural story. It goes back, in one form or another, far beyond the earliest written records. Early religions and legends, handed down from generation to generation, might even be included in this category. Man could observe the awe-inspiring forces of Nature at work about him, and the stronger leaders invented stories of explanation with which to reassure the weaker members of the tribe. Such tales, carefully preserved and collected, became the nucleus about which the religious beliefs of mankind crystallized. But always, such stories appealed to the imagination, and required faith rather than proof.

Poe, in his early youth, was strongly attracted to the "horror" type of supernatural tale, undoubtedly because of the flights of fancy it evoked in his unusually imaginative brain. These were enjoying a surge of popularity at the time, and many magazines were featuring the so-called "Gothic" tales. One of the foremost exponents of this class of fiction was the Blackwood Magazine, a British publication in which many of our greatest fantasy classic made their first appearance. Such, then, was the literary environment when Poe arrived upon the scene.

During his school days, we find Poe avidly spinning ghostly yarns for his schoolmates. His early stories all show a fierce, imaginative supernatural theme. In them, he reveals a certain, immature fascination for the weird and gruesome. After leaving school, Poe became bitter and melancholy, two characteristics that are strongly reflected in the biting irony of his tales, as well as the general tone of mournfulness, death and decay. During this time, he felt estranged from the world and, retreating into a protective mental shell, he compensated by giving free play to his fertile imagination.

However, he could not completely retreat from the world. Sordid economic necessity required that he earn enough to make living expenses...especially since his foster father, John Allen, had cut him off. While still in school, Poe had become imbued with an ambition to become a great writer, and he stuck grimly to this goal, in spite of many hardships and obstacles. Journalistic work earned him a living wage, but he clung to his dream of some day being a recognized and respected writer.

Poe was keenly analytical, and in his self-training in the short story field, he made a careful study of the form, as it existed at that time. He closely observed the various techniques employed by published writers, and skillfully imitated them, trying to put his own writing on a paying basis. In one of his letters to T. W. White (April 30, 1835) he described the necessary qualities of the popular story in demand at the time as....."the ludicrous heightened into the grotesque, the fearful colored into the horrible, the witty exaggerated into the burlesque, and the singular heightened into the strange and the mystical."

As a result, his early works are lurid,, and often intentionally shocking to the reader, his whole purpose being one of effect. To Poe, the use of the supernatural was the most dramatic method of achieving this end. Such stories as "Berenice," and "Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," show Poe's conscious efforts toward sensationalism.

Poe was not above poking fun at some of these more or less mechanical methods of production. In his story, "How To Write a Blackwood Article," he skillfully satirizes the horror story, pointing out the little literary tricks which should be employed to produce the desired effect. In it he says.....

"Sensations are the great things after all. Should you ever be drowned or hung, be sure and make a note of your sensations ... they will be worth to you ten guineas a sheet. If you wish to write forcefully, pay minute attention to sensations."

With tongue in cheek, Poe lists the other requirements of a successful "sensation" story, as follows:

1. Write illegibly. When a manuscript can be read, it is not worth reading.
2. Get yourself into such a scrape as no one ever got into before.
3. Choose the proper tone or manner of presentation, such as:
 - a. The tone didactic
 - b. The tone enthusiastic
 - c. The tone natural
(These he does not recommend, as being too commonplace)
 - d. The tone laconic or curt. It consists of short sentences, brief phrases, and never a paragraph.
 - e. The tone elevated, diffusive, and interjectional. This is best when the writer is in too great a hurry to think.
 - f. The tone metaphysical. Use lots of big words and instead of explaining, give footnote references.
 - g. The tone transcendental. Hint everything, assert nothing, see into the nature of affairs a great deal farther than anyone else.
 - h. The tone heterogeneous. This is simply a judicious mixture of all the rest.
4. Fill up your story after it is finished. This consists of the addition of unrelated facts or similes, piquant expressions and quotations, preferably in a foreign language. These give the story an air of erudition and afford evidence of extensive general reading.

Poe concludes this delightful satire with a horrible example entitled, "A Predicament," in which the principal character sticks her head through a hole in the face of a huge steeple clock, from the inside, and is trapped by the descending minute hand. She describes in great detail the sensations she undergoes as her head is slowly cut off. Carrying the tale ad absurdum, Poe even relates her actions and feelings following the beheading, all in the first person.

While it is evident that Poe did a great deal of "bread and butter" writing, as many of his lesser works reveal, his later writings show a decided departure from the norm in the "horror" field. Following his acquaintance

with Wirt in 1829, Poe began formulating his theory of unity in which both imagination and reason were necessary to produce a well-balanced story. He believed that fancy alone was insufficient, and that fact was an essential ingredient in the well-rounded tale. He accordingly began explaining his fantasy in terms of scientific facts, thus laying the groundwork for our modern-day science-fiction, in which everything must have an explanation, and nothing can be left to magic or to supernatural means.

Science was a subject of profound interest to Poe from earliest school days, and he read widely in many scientific fields. He had a liking for astronomy from his boyhood days, when he studied the heavens with his telescope. His reading of ancient philosophy had given him the idea of unity as an elementary principle of the universe. From "The Christian Philosopher" by Thomas Dick, he derived a conception of Nature as a system of constituent parts, nicely adjusted to each other. From Coleridge, he derived the theory of centrifugal and centripetal forces in the universe. From such varied sources, Poe later combined and interpreted a great mass of scientific detail to evolve an elaborate detailed concept of the nature, origin, and ultimate fate of the universe.

Another branch of learning that exerted a strong influence on Poe was that of medicine. One suspects, from the graphic anatomical descriptions he sometimes employs, that he derived a morbid delight in dissection room horrors at school, in addition to extensive reading on the subject. The subjects of madness and disease are often-recurring themes in his fiction, and descriptions of strange phenomena associated with various illnesses are given, in terms of medical facts of the day.

As an example, the subject of catalepsy, with its accompanying danger of burial while yet alive, appears in many of Poe's stories. It is not known for sure whether Poe was subject to this disease or not, although in "The Premature Burial" he gives a vivid first person account of a nightmare experience in which a supposed entombment proves to be merely the restraint of a small berth on board ship. This same theme forms the basis for other of his stories, such as "Berenice" and "Fall of the House of Usher."

Other medical subjects in which he showed an interest in his stories were the use of mesmerism, and galvanic currents. These were popular topics in Poe's day, and naturally aroused a great deal of interest. Poe conjectured on the possibility of bridging the gap between life and death, and he pictures, in "A Mesmeric

Revelation" such a contact taking place, the dying patient speaking after death and revealing secrets of the universe otherwise hidden from man. "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" is a similarly plotted story, written from a more sensational and less philosophical viewpoint. In a somewhat lighter vein, Poe satirizes the medical profession, with their dissections and revivifications, in the stories "Loss of Breath" and "Some Words With a Mummy."

Other contemporary scientific sensations are reflected in Poe's writing, usually in highly imaginative settings. However, especially in his later stories, there may be seen a meticulous attention to technical detail that adds considerable verisimilitude to his writing. "The Balloon Hoax," an account of an imaginary balloon crossing of the Atlantic Ocean, first appeared in the New York Sun and created quite a sensation, until later admitted to be a hoax. In this article, Poe described at great length the equipment and construction of the balloon, as well as details of the trip. The whole thing was so cleverly done, the public accepted it as the truth without question. It is interesting to note that the time of the crossing in Poe's story exactly coincided with the actual time required by the dirigible balloon R-34 on its trip across the Atlantic in 1919.

Going a step farther, Poe wrote another balloon ascension story entitled, "The Unparalleled Adventures of One Hans Pfaall." This voyage was somewhat more ambitious, taking place from the earth to the moon. In spite of its obvious absurdity, in the light of today's knowledge, the story reveals a careful reasoning out of the technical problems and difficulties such a trip would entail, as well as unexpected phenomena encountered along the way. Poe's theory of rarified atmosphere pervading the universe is unique, and quite plausibly presented. The whole story stands as an excellent piece of science-fiction, especially considering the fact it was written over a century ago.

"Arthur Gordon Pym," Poe's only attempt at a novel, is another strikingly vivid piece of writing. While it is rather prosaic in its early stages, it ends up in true science-fiction style as the hero is borne toward a mysterious cataract into which the ocean is pouring at the South Pole.

Conjectures as to the form of civilization in the future are a common theme in the science-fiction of today, and Poe was no exception. In his story, "Mellonta Tauta," he pictures conditions as he imagines them to be, a thousand years in the future. In this tale, the characters show radically different trends of thought and social beliefs. They exhibit great scorn for the primitive days of

