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The Sarcastic Friend Who Told You So: Poe's Subtle, Yet Witty Warning

Poe's short story "Never Bet the Devil Your Head," follows the day of two friends, the narrator and Mr. Dammit. The narrator observes how Mr. Dammit constantly bets his head to the devil when he makes a wager, because he thinks that nothing will happen to him until he is proven wrong. The short story ends with Mr. Dammit deprived of his head and left to become dog food as a punch line and warning. The fact Poe strayed from obvious, complex language in his works created tension between him and the rising, popular movement of the 1830s called transcendentalism. This religious and literary movement swept New England with the core belief of general unity and goodness in humanity (Britannica). Works of literature transcendentalists produce contrasts from Poe's works greatly. He explores the depths of the human psyche, the range of human emotions, and the imperfections of humanity, rather than the idea of the perfect person. Poe writes a successful satirical piece to convince his audience, middle-class, literate readers, to stop listening to transcendentalism as well as respond to transcendentalists' critiques.

Poe uses the genre of satire in combination with complex language and common storytelling elements to create the foundation of his story as well as hide his warning from his audience and his rebuttal from the transcendentalists. His word manipulation invokes emotion in

both his audiences: humor makes his primary audience complicit to listen to his message and the transcendentalists are angered by the use of insults and snide remarks.

Poe creates an entertaining rebuttal against transcendentalists' claims which discredit him as a rhetor. Through the use of five rhetorical theories, I will prove how he successfully argues his defense. In Section I, a Neo-Aristotelian analysis emphasizes how Poe creates an entertaining story at the cost of the transcendentalists. Through the use of cluster analysis, Section II focuses on Poe's recoding of certain words to conceal his attitude about transcendentalism. The following section uses fantasy theme analysis to point out how Poe uses storytelling techniques to voice his warning through an entertaining, but unfortunate event. Through the use of generic application, Section IV compares this artifact to other examples of the genre of satire to prove it is a successful example of the genre. Lastly, Section V examines how the use of metaphors works to conceal Poe's characterization of the transcendentalists. I conclude this argument with a discussion of the rhetorical theories I applied, specifically looking at how the entertaining example of satire, "Never Bet the Devil Your Head", expresses the same message revealed through the use of a selection of rhetorical analyses.

Section I: Ink on Paper has the Power to Enrage and Entertain

Poe insults his tertiary audience, the transcendentalists, to entertain his primary audience by invoking anger as well as humor in his work. Neo-Aristotelian criticism uses the five canons classic rhetoric from ancient Greek times to analyze an artifact (literature, speeches, performances, films, etc.). The five canons are invention, organization, style, memory, and

delivery. This method focuses on using these cannons to examine the effectiveness of an artifact's ability to persuade its audience. This method works best with the short story because, in this piece, Poe is persuading his primary audience that there does not have to be a larger, hidden meaning within every piece of literature. I will specifically look at Poe's appeal to pathos by invoking anger in his tertiary audience by using snide remarks and insults.

In the short story, Poe incorporates a snide remark as a form of pathos to anger his tertiary audience. He reflects on how “[The narrator] noticed that the effect of our speeches is not always proportionate with their importance in our own eyes...” (Poe, 11). When authors and creators produce a piece of work, the meaning and importance are not always appreciated the same amount by others. Poe directly targets transcendentalist authors and poets with this reflection by disregarding their belief that everything has a greater meaning. The effect and meaning of a piece of work are determined by the audience. That could mean that either they add more meaning to it than was intended or they did not look into it as much as the rhetor wanted. Every person will interpret a piece of work differently from one another. Poe annoys his audience because this point cannot be refuted. He offends his audience by making fun of their cores beliefs. Through the short story, Poe continues to insult his tertiary audience, angering them, until the final line of the short story where the punch line hits.

Poe concludes the short story with a final insult and disregards the transcendentalists' critiques of his work to anger his tertiary audience. Poe reveals that, “the general expenses of [Mr. Dammit's] funeral, sent in my very moderate bill to the transcendentalists. The scoundrels refused to pay it, so I had Mr. Dammit dug up, and sold him for dog's meat” (17). By having the bill sent to the transcendentalists, Poe directly calls them out for criticizing his works because he

does not allude to their beliefs in a hidden meaning. This sentence is the only time that the transcendentalists are mentioned, so when he uses the word “scoundrels”, there is no one else who would feel anger or offense by this. It is also the only actual insult used in the short story, other times when Poe indirectly targets his audience he uses snide remarks and wit. The final sentence of the challenges the transcendental idea of unity between human beings. By specifically saying that Mr. Dammit was made into dog food, Poe puts that character on a lower status and gives him less value which breaks the idea of unity in humanity.

Section II: A Concealed Attitude

Poe recodes the words “head” and “transcendental” to make certain connections in his audience's minds. Cluster criticism focuses on identifying key terms that are used either many times throughout an artifact or used in an intense way. To use this method, search the artifact for words that are either used frequently or intensely. Then look at the surrounding words to determine what the rhetor wants to persuade his or her audience. In using this method, I identified the words “head,” a word used ten times, and “transcendentalists,” a word used only four times but has a powerful impact on how the rhetor expresses his or her message. Then I looked at words surrounding those key terms, only five words out from them, to determine how Poe redefines these key terms within the context of the surrounding words. Poe frames his wording reveals how he truly thinks about the transcendentalism to his primary audience, middle-class, literate magazine readers, as well as his tertiary audience, the transcendentalists.

When analyzing the word “head”, I found that Poe refers to the people who believe in transcendentalism as mindless followers. The words that follow this key term include “loss,” “pertinacity,” “exclusiveness,” and “deprived.” The words that surround the key term imply that the people who believe in transcendentalism are stuck in their ways and are narrow-minded. According to Vocabulary.com, pertinacity is “the quality of sticking with something, no matter what”. By using this word, Poe implies that the people involved in this movement are stuck in their ways instead of broadening their knowledge and understanding like they claim to do. The use of “deprived” builds off this idea. By sticking to their ways, transcendentalists limit themselves by only surrounding themselves with people who agree with their beliefs. This is a loss according to Poe because instead of enlightening themselves, which is a goal of transcendentalism, their view of the world becomes smaller rather than larger. By recoding the word “head” with the context of these surrounding words, Poe subtly layers in a warning to his audience of what they could possibly become should they listen to transcendentalist beliefs.

Poe uses the word “transcendentalist” three times as he refers to the leaders of the movement as a disease. The words that surround the key term include “affected”, “not well enough versed”, “cured of”, and “scoundrels”. The words that surround the key term imply that the transcendentalist leaders infect other people and how they think with false knowledge. Poe’s attitude of the transcendentalists is overall negative because they spread their beliefs within society similar to how a disease spreads in a town. Poe’s use of the phrase “cured of” implies that the movement is wrong and needs to be corrected. Though Poe claims that his intention of this piece is not to attack the transcendentalists, the final sentence of the story calls them “scoundrels” which “suggests a connection, since Poe objected to their abstruse ... metaphysical

writings” (Carlson 136). Carlson notes that Poe does not agree with the writings of transcendentalists because they are too difficult to understand from the hidden meanings. The combination of these words creates the message that transcendentalism is something that needs to be fixed in society.

Section III: Who? What? Where?

The use of storytelling techniques allows Poe to make his warning appear as a simple, short story. Fantasy theme interprets the events of a time period and separates them from their time and place then creates a new reality where the rhetor comments on the actual events. This method involves coding the characters, actions, and setting of the artifact to analyze what the rhetor’s message is. The character theme describes characters through traits and thoughts. The action theme is what the character does to create drama. The setting theme is where the actions occur. To use this method, highlight the main characters, their important actions, and the setting that they are at during the situation. Then determine rhetor’s rhetorical vision when using these characters to perform certain actions in the setting. In this artifact, the characters are Mr. Dammit, the narrator, and the old man set under a bridge where a bet takes place to exemplify the consequence of becoming a mindless follower. To clarify what characters are connected with which actions and settings, refer to the following table.

Character	Action	Setting
Mr. Dammit	Betting	Bridge

	Jumping	
Old Man	Challenging Disappearing	Bridge
Narrator	Observing Warning	Bridge Mr. Dammit's Grave

The old man represents transcendentalist ideas spreading from one person to the next. The old man is vaguely described, "... [the narrator] perceived that he wore a black silk apron over his small-clothes; and this was the thing which [the narrator] thought very odd" (Poe 10). Poe makes an emphasis to highlight how the old man wears black which symbolizes the unknown. Poe does this to warn his readers that they do not truly know what the transcendentalists' intentions are, and they should be wary when they listen to the transcendentalists' ideas. The narrator comments how he has, "... noticed the effect of our speeches is not always proportionate with their importance in our own eyes" (Poe 11). When the old man makes the bet with Mr. Dammit, Poe associates it with transcendentalists sharing their ideas with the easily deceived public. They offer a new way to view the world from a different perspective.

Mr. Dammit portrays a foolish person who entertains transcendentalist ideas without recognizing how serious the consequences are. Poe emphasizes how Mr. Dammit bets his head to the devil seven times and believes nothing will happen. When he makes this bet, it represents the naivety of Poe's readers should they listen to the transcendentalists. After Mr. Dammit makes his attempt of jumping over the stile, the narrator notices: "... he had been deprived of his head" (Poe 16). Mr. Dammit going through with the bet represents when the public listen to

transcendentalists and mistakenly think they are innocent. The most impactful setting for Mr. Dammit takes place at the bridge where he loses his head. Bridges represent the “process of knowing oneself, of discovering oneself and the world, means to be in touch and create communication...” (Badescu 6). The choice of setting the event under a bridge symbolizes Mr. Dammit taking a risk in listening to the mysterious, old man in order to define himself. In reality, people risk listening to the transcendentalists when they try to define themselves but become a mindless follower instead. The possibility of transcendentalism spreading increases when more people take this risk.

Poe uses the narrator as a vessel to express his personal opinions and try to stop his friend from making a serious mistake. Only the narrator’s thoughts and commentary on Mr. Dammit’s bad habit reveal his personality. Poe uses the narrator to exemplify his wariness and distrust of transcendentalists as well as vocalize his warning to his readers: “[with Mr. Dammit] the thing was a mere formula- nothing more” (Poe 1). Poe refers to how transcendentalists see rhetorical devices as a must have in their literary works and follow the same process to create them. Right before Mr. Dammit makes his attempt to jump over the stile, the narrator tries to talk some sense into his friend, similar to Poe writing this short story as a warning against transcendentalism. After Mr. Dammit loses his head, the final setting is his grave. There the narrator calls the transcendentalists scoundrels for not acknowledging they caused Mr. Dammit’s death: “... for the general expenses of his funeral, sent in my very moderate bill to the transcendentalists. The scoundrels refused to pay it...” (Poe 17). The narrator feels angered at the fact that he lost his friend due to the risk of accepting the old man’s challenge. Poe solidifies his message by making

this the last impression of this short story: transcendentalism conforms people to fit their mold which leads to a loss of free will and an increase of mindless followers.

Section IV: The Original Passive Aggressive Sticky Note: Satire

The genre of satire allows for the rhetor to comment on a situation or person in a witty response. Generic application looks at whether the selected artifact is successful or unsuccessful in its genre by analyzing other texts from the same genre. This method requires for the genre of the artifact to be defined, finding a selection of examples, then analyzing them for similarities and differences in situational requirements, substantive characteristics, and style characteristics, then questioning why those similarities and differences are there. Merriam-Webster defines satire as, “a literary work holding up human vices and follies to ridicule or scorn.” I will look at “Poor Richard’s Almanack” by Benjamin Franklin, “The Devil’s Dictionary” by Ambrose Bierce, and “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County” by Mark Twain to distinguish similarities and differences of the genre. To use generic application, look at multiple artifacts to find a pattern or similarity within them. I will look at how quips and recharacterization are used to comment on events and practices from the time period of the artifacts.

Three of the texts incorporate quips as a way to humorously and snidely comment on certain practices and situations that occur in the world. According to Merriam-Webster, a quip is, “a witty or funny observation or response usually made on the spur of the moment.” In Poe’s “Never Bet the Devil Your Head,” Mr. Dammit had been flogged left-handedly and, “... a child flogged left-handedly had better be left unflogged” (Poe IV). People were forced to use their

right hands due to the association of the left hand with the devil, which came from the strong religious beliefs and practices of the 1830s. Then “Poor Richard Almanack” contains a list of Franklin's observations. One of which, he notices that even the most generous acts of kindness have a catch: “God heals, and the doctor takes the fees” (Franklin 22). Though doctors help diagnose the patients and prescribe them medicine, they do not actually heal the ailment. Finally, Bierce makes fun of friendship with his definition of the word beggar in “The Devil’s Dictionary:” “One who has relied on the assistance of his friends” (Bierce eighteenth entry under the letter B). Although friends are enjoyable companions, they can also prove to be an expensive investment. These quips work to bring awareness of morals and situations, but present them in a humorous way. With that presentation, the audiences can enjoy what rhetor discusses, but when the laughter dies they realize the reality that the world is not as kind and perfect as it seems.

Rhetors also redefine words and characterize people in a humorous way to comment on the respected kairos of the artifacts. In “The Devil’s Dictionary,” Bierce redefines a selection of common words in a snarky manner: “ BRAIN, n. An apparatus with which we think what we think. That which distinguishes the man who is content to *be* something from the man who wishes to *do* something. ... [Under] our republican form of government, brain is so highly honored that it is rewarded by exemption from the cares of office” (Bierce fourth to last entry under letter B). Instead of making an observation about friendship, Bierce expresses his disdain for the elected government during the Progressive Era. Conservatives such as himself thought the new, liberal reforms were not benefitting the nation. In “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calavera County,” Twain characterizes Daniel Webster as a trained frog. His owner, Smiley, “... kept [his frog] in practice so constant, that he’d nail a fly every time as far as he could see

[Smiley]” (Twain 2). Twain uses the frog to embody Webster in this short story to poke fun at his political loss. Similarly, in “Never Bet the Devil Your Head, the narrator observes how, “... the old man [limped] off ... having caught and wrapt up in his apron something...” (Poe 16). Poe redefines the transcendentalists, representing the old man as the devil who collects his prize of Mr. Dammit’s head. These redefinitions of words and characters conceal the rhetor’s true subject. By doing this, the rhetor creates a deceptively quaint and humorous story or excerpt that easily hides what they actually comment on in society. Satire allows for rhetors to avoid offending their true subjects by describing them in a sarcastic and entertaining manner.

Section V: Show It, Don’t Hide It

Poe’s use of metaphors creates a sense of mystery and distrust to express his concern surrounding transcendentalism. Metaphor criticism examines an artifact for metaphors in which the message or moral is conveyed through (Foss 267-274). After gathering all the metaphors in the artifact, determine how to analyze them. I chose to analyze how the vehicle reveals how the rhetor conventionalizes the subject (Foss 271). I will look at the larger metaphor, references to the devil, in how it paints the transcendentalists in a negative and distrustful manner. Then I will examine how the use of a minor metaphor, comparing Toby Dammit to a dog, where the audience naively listen to an untrustworthy suggestion.

Poe’s overall metaphor through the story revolves around the devil and becomes clear through the characterization of the old man, who represents the devil in this piece. The old man, though Poe directly describes him, is portrayed as mysterious: he came out of nowhere and left

without a trace of being under the bridge. When he first appears under the bridge the narrator notices how, "... he wore a black silk apron over his small-clothes..." (Poe 10). This metaphor focuses the color black, which represents the unknown and fear. Right away, the old man invokes distrust into the narrator. This metaphor works to invoke wariness within Poe's audience by making very little known about the old man, which he shows again after the bet. When Mr. Dammit loses the bet, the narrator notices, "... the old gentleman limping off at the top of his speed, having caught and wrapt up in his apron ..." (Poe 16). Poe characterizes the old man with a limp to allude that he is actually part goat due to his gait. The devil had come to collect his winning from Mr. Dammit after all this time. Poe uses the devil metaphor to make audience realize that the transcendentalists are not as trustworthy as they seem by comparing them to an what appears to be a normal old man.

Poe uses the comparison of Mr. Dammit to a dog, to subtly state that this short story acts as a warning. Mr. Dammit is a man of vices who cannot limit himself and control his bad habit. His friend, the narrator, describes him as, "a sad dog ... and a dog's death was that he died" (Poe III). The comparison of Mr. Dammit and a dog makes him appear weak. Poe's "effect on the reader is achieved using rhetorical devices such as ... the use of metaphors, and the treatment of characters" (Lehan III). This metaphor paints Mr. Dammit as a pitiful human being due t the effect of his bad habit of betting his head to the devil. Poe parallels this characterization to his audience: if they choose not to be cautious of who they listen to, they will fall prey to untrustworthy groups. Just as Mr. Dammit did. The short story ends with the narrator at Mr. Dammit's grave where the narrator had him, "... dug up at once, and sold him for dog's meat," when the transcendentalists do not pay for the funeral expenses (Poe 17). Poe's rude treatment of

Mr. Dammit after his death works rhetorically to warn his audience that they will not have sympathy if they fall prey to untrustworthy groups. By opening and concluding the short story with this metaphor, Poe declares this warning by creating a naïve character that meets an unfortunate end due to his actions.

Heed My Warning

Poe uses the genre of satire to express his disdain for transcendentalists to his audience. He relies on the structure of satire to get people to become complicit by creating an entertaining story where the transcendentalists are depicted as mysterious and untrustworthy, evident in both the old man's characteristics and the use of metaphors. In addition to the structural manipulation, Poe manipulates the key terms "head" and "transcendentalists" to invoke a humorous and spiteful pathos in his audiences. This works rhetorically to convey his overall warning and attitude towards the effect of transcendentalism: society should be wary of a movement that promotes goodness in humanity, yet they deviously conform people to think like them.

Satire easily conceals the true subject that a rhetor discusses by creating a story that recharacterizes the subject in order to make the audience complicit to the rhetor's message. Like other satirical contributors, Poe recharacterizes his tertiary audience in order to conceal who he is truly critiquing: "[he] redefines the transcendentalists, representing the old man as the devil who collects his prize of Mr. Dammit's head" (Section IV). By doing this, he merely alludes to who he believes is the villain in the story. Poe builds his argument on the foundation of a satirical,

short story as he creates the main metaphor. He uses color symbolism and animal traits to subtly allude to a connection between the transcendentalists and the devil.

Poe uses this connection to invoke wariness into his audience by depicting the transcendentalists as untrustworthy and evil. The color black symbolizes, "... the unknown and fear. Right away, the old man invokes distrust..." (Section V). Poe uses the symbolism and narrator's direct reaction to relay to his audience how they, too, should be wary of the unknown and strangers. He then uses the gait of a goat, "... to allude that [the old man] is actually part goat..." and solidifies the comparison to the devil (Section V). This metaphor works to continue to conceal Poe's negative attitude towards the transcendentalists by acting on superstition that came from how religiously oriented society was during the 1800s. The combination of metaphors and actions, found in Fantasy Theme, depict the old man in an untrustworthy manner, so Poe can voice a cautionary message to his audience. The initial action of the old man challenging Mr. Dammit to jump over the turnstile represents, "... transcendentalists sharing their ideas with the easily deceived public" (Section III). By believing these ideas are seemingly harmless, the public allows for themselves to be deceived. A simple interaction, such as a friendly wager, is enough to allow transcendentalist ideas to spread from one person to the next and produce mindless followers. These three rhetorical theories work together reveal Poe's message which is hidden under an entertaining story through the use of subtle, complex language.

The combination of complex language hides Poe's message behind a humorous, improbable event to entertain his audience, but his word choice continues to push for caution. Poe depicts the transcendentalists as an infectious disease through recoding the word "transcendental": "... they spread their beliefs within society similar to how a disease spreads

through a town” (Section II). Not only does Poe recode the transcendentalists as a disease, but he makes a pathos connection to invoke anger in them. The word association of disease works with the insults to push this pathos connection: “[The word “scoundrel” is] the only actual insult used in the short story, other times when Poe indirectly targets his audience he uses snide remarks and wit.” (Section I). Poe uses complex language and insults to make the story humorous for his audience, but also prove to the transcendentalists that he is a capable rhetor. The insults work to create the punch line of the story to humor his primary audience as well as conceal his warning. He relays that they should not believe they will become enlightened from listening to transcendental ideas. Instead, they will become a mindless follower with a, “... view of the world that becomes smaller rather than larger” (Section III). Poe uses humor to make his audience complicit to his warning, because the person laughing has to agree with what he is said, in order to find it funny. The combination of subtle, complex language and the structure of satire allow for Poe to create an entertaining story about the danger of an improbable event, but connects it to the danger of listening to transcendentalism.

Poe uses the combination of structural manipulation and word manipulation to hide his warning by telling the story of an unfortunate gambler. He makes the foundation of the story by using the genre to satire in order to comment on how foolish society is for being so gullible. The improbable event of the story has characters who act in a manner that invokes caution in not only the other characters, but also Poe’s primary audience. In combination with the characters’ actions and characterization, the use of recoded words and metaphors invoke these feelings as well to continue to push this warning into his audience’s minds. Poe leaves his audience with the punch

line of the story along with a lingering message: should anyone fall prey to the
transcendentalists- he warned them.

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