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Prospectus

Edgar Allen Poe published the Balloon Hoax as a breaking news story in the New York Sun newspaper in 1844. It was written as an official report on Monck Mason’s successful trip across the Atlantic Ocean in a newly invented hot air balloon powered by coal gas instead of hydrogen. The story is written from a third person point of view and is then followed by a series of primary source journals written by the Mr. Mason and Mr. Ainsworth, balloonists who were also on the trip. They professionally recorded specific details from the voyage, utilizing an academic tone to claim that the trip went smoothly. Even though the plot was entirely made up, some of the people and facts mentioned were actually real. This made the hoax even more intriguing because there was a real blur between the fiction and the non-fiction, which I thought would be interesting to dissect and explore more.

Particularly, I would like to delve deeper into the techniques Poe used to integrate real facts with false ones, ways he appealed to society’s pre-existing fascination with aeronautic discoveries at the time and how his success had a long lasting impact on science fiction. Assessing these topics would be relevant to addressing what guidelines separate fiction from a hoax and whether a genre like science fiction just combines the two ends of the spectrum.

One of Poe’s most effective techniques in integrating real facts is utilizing a real person as his main character—Monck Mason. Although the Monck Mason in his story never existed, there was another balloonist named Thomas Monck Mason, who had written a real account of his flight from London to Weilburg. Further investigation on his work would be required to compare the actual event and Poe’s hoax in order to understand where Poe found many of the realistic details and facts. Furthermore, Poe integrates many other famous aerodynamic scientists of the time, such as Sir George Cayley and Charles Green, into the story, so their scientific contributions may be used to assess the facts that Poe brings up in his hoax. Additionally, the detailed measurements and drawings are really similar to the real facts already known about balloon flight, which made Poe’s hoax all the more convincing.

Consequently, Poe takes advantage of the popularity these aeronautic scientists had already procured and appeals to the public’s pre-existing fascination with progress in aerodynamic discovery. In order to assess how valid his story seemed at the time, it would be helpful to understand the timeline of aviation history and where the most recent discoveries were at the time Poe published this story. After investigating, it would be understandable how excited the public was to hear about this new discovery because flying across the Atlantic Ocean was so far ahead of all the other aeronautic voyages at the time.

As a result of Poe’s success and his widespread influence as a writer, his work contributed to the growth of science fiction as a genre and inspired other famous writers to adopt similar methods. Looking into reviews of the Balloon Hoax, specifically in relation to the field of science fiction, would clarify how future authors were influenced by his work. After thorough investigation of these topics, a more comprehensive view of science fiction and Poe’s techniques will be uncovered.