
An Introduction to “Edgar Allan Poe’s Murder, Detective and Horror Stories”

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The detective stories are masterpieces in a minor vein. Poe portrayed the prototype for Sherlock Holmes. These stories are called “tales of ratiocination,” because of Poe’s meticulous attention to the rational process by which mysteries are unveiled. His science-fiction stories are developed with the same careful regard for rational credibility. Poe was unconsciously rebelling against the 19th century excessive faith in the private sensibility and inspiration of the artist and the accidental nature of art. Poe’s first detective story ‘*The Murder in the Rue Morgue*’ pioneered the sub-genre of the ‘locked room’ mystery by presenting a seemingly impossible crime. The second story ‘*The Mystery Of Marie Roget*’ is interesting both historically and structurally. Because the story is based upon the real New York murder case of Mary Rogers; structurally because the narrative’s use of newspaper reports and textual sources anticipates the kind of fragmentary structure that would be used by Wilkie Collins in ‘*The Woman in White*’. ‘*The Purloined Letter*’ has become significant in terms of psychoanalytic theory following Jacques Lacan’s analyses of the story and Jacques Derrida’s reading of Lacan. But in a wider sense the stories are significant for introducing us the figure of the detective in Dupin. Dupin would be a template for many of the detectives to appear in the late nineteenth century. This earliest work of detective fiction as understood today was that detective Dupin became the model for those who solved crimes by deduction from a series of clues.

There is a psychological intensity that is characteristic of Poe’s writings, especially the tales of horror that comprise his best-known works. These stories which include ‘*The Black Cat*,’ ‘*The Cask of Amontillado*’ and ‘*The Tell-Tale Heart*’ are often told by a first person narrator, and through this voice Poe probes the workings of a character’s psyche. This technique foreshadows the psychological realism. In his Gothic tales, Poe employed an essentially symbolic, almost allegorical method which gives such works as ‘*The Fall of the House of Usher*,’ ‘*The Mask of the Red Death*’ and ‘*Legeia*,’ an enigmatic quality that accounts for their enduring interest and also links them with the symbolical works of Hawthorne and Melville. The influence of Poe’s tales may be seen in the work of later writers, including Ambrose Bierce and H. P. Lovecraft, who belong to a distinct tradition of horror literature. Just as Poe influenced many succeeding authors and is regarded as an ancestor of such major literary movements as Symbolism and Surrealism, he was also influenced by earlier literary figures and movements. In his use of the demonic and the grotesque, Poe evidenced the impact of the stories by E.T.A. Hoffman and the Gothic novels of Ann Radcliff, while the despair and melancholy in much of his writing reflects an affinity with the Romantic movement of the early 19th century. It was Poe’s particular genius that in his work he gave consummate artistic form both to his personal obsessions and those of previous literary generations, at the same time creating new forms which provided a means of expression for future artists. A tale of sickness, madness, incest and the danger of unrestrained

creativity, "*The Fall of the House of Usher*" is among Poe's most popular and critically examined horror stories. The ancient decaying House of Usher filled with tattered furniture and tapestries and set in a gloomy, desolate locale is a rich symbolic representation of its sickly twin inhabitants, Roderick and Madeline Usher. Besides its use of classical Gothic imagery and gruesome events including escape from live burial the story has a psychological element and ambiguous symbolism that have given rise to many critical readings. Poe used the term "arabesque" to describe the ornate, descriptive prose in this and other stories. "*The Fall of the House of Usher*" is considered representative of Poe's idea of "art for art sake," whereby the mood of the narrative, created through skillful use of language, overpowers any social, political or moral teaching. The story is also one of several of Poe's which utilizes as a central character the decadent aristocrat. This mad often artistic noble heir took the place of the traditional Gothic villain in tales portraying the sublime hostility of existence itself rather than the evil embodied by individuals. In addition to "*The Fall of the House of Usher*," such characters appear in his stories "*Metzengerstein*" (1840), '*Berenice*,' '*Legeia*,' '*The Oval Portrait*' and '*Masque of the Red Death*.' Central to the setting in many of these stories is a large, ominous castle, likened by critic Maurice Levy to the medieval fortress that appear in the writing of Radcliff, Maturin and Walpole. Interior architectural elements, such as the moving tapestry in "*Metzengerstein*," serve almost as character in these tales.

A second group of Poe's tales has obsessive detail on the horror and misery wrought by a guilty conscience. These include '*The Black Cat*,' '*The Tell-Tale Heart*,' and the doppelganger story '*William Wilson*.' '*The Black Cat*' is narrated by a once kind man who has fallen for alcoholism. One day, in a rage, he hangs his cat and is forever haunted by the image. Upon attempting to kill the cat's replacement, he kills his wife. It appears his deeds will go unpunished until he is given away by the screaming narrator. While not widely acclaimed during his lifetime, it has become one of Poe's most famous stories. While stories like '*Hop Frog*,' '*The Pit and the Pendulum*' and '*The Cask of Amontillado*' do not take a guilty conscience as their starting point, they share the same paranoid intensity. Poe first gained widespread acclaim for his poem '*The Raven*,' which exhibits elements of the tales in both groups identified above. Set at the stroke of midnight in an otherwise empty chamber, the narrator hears a tapping at his door. The narrator, tormented by the ominous raven revealed to be the source of the noise, is not wracked with guilt, however. Rather, he mourns the loss of his love, Lenore, while the Raven serves as a despicable and terrifying reminder of her death. Poe completed only one novel, '*The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*' in Gothic tradition. The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym of Nantucket is his only complete novel. It is at once a mock non-fictional exploration narrative adventure, hoax, largely plagiarized travelogue and spiritual allegory. The journey is about establishing a national American identity as well as discovering a personal identity. The plot both soars to new heights of fictional ingenuity and descends to silliness and absurdity. In order to present the tale as an authentic exploration, Poe used a number of the travel journals that proliferated at the time he was writing. Poe's most significant source was the explorer Jeremiah N. Reynolds whose work addresses on the subject of a surveying and exploring expedition to the Pacific Ocean and the South Seas. This was reviewed favorably by Poe in January 1837. It is one of the most elusive major texts of American literature.

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