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Literary Criticism and Edgar Allen Poe's *Murders in the Rue Morgue*

The Murders in the Rue Morgue by Edgar Allen Poe is a departure from Poe's typical style for its lack of gothic imagery, dark tones, and mental instability. Rather, this short story is coined as the very first modern detective story, and the archetype of the character of Auguste Dupin would go on to serve as the inspiration for Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's character Sherlock Holmes. Much has been said on the piece, and these ideas can be combined into one greater whole to create a discourse of literary criticism overtime. With a span from the early 1950s to today, and a wide range of theories including psychoanalysis, logical psychologism, feminism, post-structuralism, and eco-criticism, the discourses can be used in conjunction with each other to glean new ideas and viewpoints from a single text that open up a wide range of interpretations and viewpoints that are simply impossible for a single person to siphon out of the text by themselves.

The short story can be first read with a psychoanalytic viewpoint of Dupin and the larger literary devices Poe uses as a whole. It begins with a three page discourse of sorts that compares analytical power with what the narrator calls "simple ingenuity," the difference described in the essay being that ingenuity does not necessarily encompass analytical thinking. Analysts, says the narrator, are people who know when to think in the box, and also know when to step outside of the box when the rules themselves shift. This essay sets the tone of the piece, for the diction of the entire piece is of a very scientific and analytical nature; the only use of Poe's traditional morose and brooding imagery comes into brief play when the narrator is describing the old mansion in which himself and Dupin live together. Aside from this, the murders themselves read with all the detail and sterility of a police report, as the accounts from each witness are produced and the facts are presented for the reader's perusal.

Dupin gets involved in the solving of the murders not because of a sense of justice, or even to make a grab at any sort of reward, but for personal amusement. This is where Poe is

making a striking point about the nature of the analytic mind; the analytic mind, he says, is solely focused on solving problems. Dupin's passions are not necessarily moved by the murder of two innocent girls, nor is he spurred on by a sense of justice and action; he is merely involved to solve the problem for his own sense of amusement, viewing the event not as a grisly murder of two innocent women, merely as a particularly baffling mystery. He is indeed devoid of pathos throughout, solely investigating for a thought exercise. The narrator describes him as having two souls, one of the creative and one of the analytical, and it is clear that while the analytical soul is in control, there are no thoughts of passion to get in the way of something that Dupin sets his mind to. As the story progresses, Dupin correctly deduces the murderer as an orangutan, which one could find humorous and absolutely off the wall. Dupin does not seem to have any sort of humorous or even surprised reaction to this turn of events however; he merely comes to the conclusion through analytical means and proceeds to the next point of the investigation.

Worth mentioning is the perspective of the story; it is definitely not told through the lens of an analytical standpoint. Indeed, the narrator views Dupin with incredulity throughout the short story, as evidenced by his baffled reaction when Dupin guesses what he was thinking one evening and deduces the thought processes that the narrator had before arriving to his guess. The remainder of the story is told through such a lens; the narrator himself is not very analytical, and does not himself deduce what is going on with the murders and questions Dupin multiple times, both verbally and mentally, about his reasons and practices in going about the investigation of the murders. Poe does this on purpose; as a reliable narrator looking on the seemingly supernatural abilities of Dupin's analytical deductions, the narrator represents the reader, who is simply along for the ride as Dupin's brain does the heavy lifting to figure out this seemingly impossible and definitely improbable case. Indeed, the narrator reacts to Dupin's deduction of the orangutan as the murderer with predictable disbelief in absence of Dupin's reaction to it at

all. Poe uses the narrator to act as a foil for Dupin in much the same way that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle would later do with Watson. The narrator is, at almost every twist in the investigation, at a state of bafflement or at least some other passionate emotion. While he in multiple points is upon a state of mute astonishment, Dupin is five steps ahead in the investigation. The narrator indeed could be representative of the audience's total removal from the pace of the investigation at the head of Dupin.

The narrator relays a short description of Dupin's attitude as a result of what seems to be the death of his close relatives, which may explain some of his emotionally stunted behavior and purely analytical school of thought: "This young gentleman was of an excellent --indeed of an illustrious family, but…had been reduced to such poverty that the energy of his character succumbed beneath it, and he ceased to bestir himself in the world, or to care for the retrieval of his fortunes" (199). This brief look into Dupin's past could point to reasons why his emotions are so stunted, and he relies solely on logical analysis as entertainment and his sole form of interacting with the world. Because of this event in his life, as a coping mechanism he may have deduced that passionate emotions were not worth his time as an intellectual because they tax the soul and have too many negative effects on the human psyche. As a result of this disconnect with his emotions he must use the energy that these emotions would normally expend and put it into more logical pursuits such as puzzle solving and deduction. Indeed, he does not seem to display much emotion at all throughout the story, nor does he display much empathy for the murdered, and merely treats the solving of the investigation as a mental exercise. This could be considered Poe speaking for the passionate side of people: people who are purely analysts are stunted emotionally, and thus focus solely and single-mindedly upon the act of puzzle solving in order to expend the energy that emotions would usually expend.

One particularly curious literary device is Poe's constant italicization of the word

"acumen." Acumen is defined by the Oxford Online Dictionary as "the ability to make good judgments and quick decisions, typically in a particular domain," and by the text as "discernment" (210) which is curious considering all of the French words in this short story are also italicized. Considering the English speaking audience, one can be inclined to believe that this is a visual joke upon the reader; perhaps Poe is implying that as English speakers they would not stop reading to look up a French word simply because it is in the text, therefore the full meaning behind this text may or may not be fully discerned by the reader if they do not. Considering that conjecture, one can be under the inclination that the word is being used to mock those who are baffled by the investigation. Indeed, Dupin uses the word "acumen" in reference to the French police who have no clue or leads on the murders. Poe uses the italicized words to mock the readers a few times aside from this, including a French phrase "*je les ménagais*" –for which no English translation exists, at least according to the text (212). The footnote on the same page however notes that the phrase can be translated as "I respected them," which in context of the story completes the sentence it appears in though there is no clear reason why the French was necessary.

There are many points in the narrative where some of the things that Poe writes into the short story make little sense. Published in 1982, Leo Lemay's article *The Psychology of The Murders in the Rue Morgue* predictably offers a psychologist reading of the text. Lemay argues that the solution of the crime is of a trivial matter, and it is the manner in which Dupin deduces the solution that truly holds the importance insofar as the text is concerned. Poe writes three metaphors and a final sentence at the end of the short story that refer to why the Prefect of Police was unable to solve the mystery himself and Lemay claims these metaphors "do not make literal sense" (1). The metaphors read as follows: "In his wisdom is no stamen. It is all head and no body, like the pictures of the Goddess Laverna,--or, at best, all head and shoulders, like a

codfish" (Poe 228). Lemay argues that all three of these metaphors point to a head-body dichotomy, and all of them concern sex. Boiling down his argument, sexuality is at the key of the murders here.

The Prefect could not solve the murders because he failed to take sex into account and could not connect the intellect with the sexual aspects of the murders. This is in reference to the first metaphor, "In his wisdom there is no stamen" (Poe 228), which Lemay points out that a stamen is a flower's pollen producing organ, comparable in function to the male genitalia. The second metaphor "It is all head and no body like the pictures of the Goddess Laverna" literally names the head-body dichotomy. Laverna was the Roman goddess of the underworld, night, and thieves. What Lemay is arguing here is that Poe is subverting the traditional thought of wisdom and intelligence being associated with the head and instead is connecting the ideas of crime and evil. The third trope, "all head and shoulders, like a codfish" Lemay argues is Poe's attempt at a penis joke, and he points out the continued use of "cod" in other authors' attempts at humor.

What Lemay spends most of his article on however is the final sentence of the story, which Lemay finds just as puzzling as the three metaphors. The final sentence reads "I mean the way he has '*de nier ce qui est, et d'expliquer ce qui n'est pas"*" (Poe 228). It is a quotation from Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloise* and it translates to something like "of denying that which is, and of explaining that which is not." Lemay argues that the quotation does not make sense in the context of the story, for the Prefect never explains nor denies what is or is not; indeed the Prefect does not necessarily do much of anything in the story. In the original context of Rousseau's text, the statement concerns Plato's explanation of ghostly apparitions, which confounds Lemay; is the reader supposed to think that the Prefect spent his time looking for ghosts instead of solving the mystery? The answer Lemay presents regarding this is, in short, that the Madame and Mademoiselle L'Espanayes brought their own murders upon themselves for their repression of

sexual desire. When Dupin frees Le Bon when the truth is revealed that the murderer was an orangutan, Lemay argues that "Poe is implying that we will free the good in man when we correctly identify the murderer as the repressed libido, for then we acknowledge it necessary to unify the opposing forces that exist in man" (188).

As a whole, Lemay's argument is poorly structured, and altogether does not make a whole lot of sense. He essentially blames the victims for their own murders based upon their sexual repression, and he comes to that conclusion based almost entirely on three metaphors at the very end of the short story in reference to the Prefect, not the L'Espanayes. Moreover, these metaphors were in reference to the Prefect's incompetence in solving the murders. The implication that the Madame and Mademoiselle were murdered because they were sexually repressed simply does not hold water, for if that were the case then I would argue most people would be in grave danger of orangutans swinging into their homes and murdering them in a grisly fashion. Considering that seems to be a special event, one cannot put much stock into Lemay's argument.

Taking Lemay's argument further is essential if one is to make some sort of sense of it. Published in 2006, Joseph Church's *To Make Venus Vanish* presents a feminist reading of the text, and argues that misogyny is a motive of Poe's in writing not only *Murders*, but indeed is a general theme throughout all of Poe's literary works as well as part of his every day ideology. The article brings up ample points in Poe's work of inherent misogyny, focusing on *Murders*. Church points out that the murders go strangely unpunished by the Prefect and the Parisian police; despite the fact that the murderer was an orangutan, there should have at the very least been some sort of repercussions against the sailor for the brutal murder of two innocent women. Church highlights that there simply is no punishment whatsoever: the sailor goes free and sells the orangutan, arguably profiting from the venture despite his grievous lapse in caretaking of the

animal.

Church goes on to point out the status of the murdered women: they owned the house that they lived in, and indeed lived on the topmost floor of the building. They had money, and were of a higher class and social status. There was no man in the picture, merely the women living alone. Church implies that Poe seeks to punish these women for their wealth which he thinks they did not earn, or further did not deserve: "Poe's tale in fact mocks the legitimacy of Madame L'Espanaye's wealth by several times repeating the rumor that she "told fortunes for a living"" (411). As well, Church highlights Dupin's sheer lack of reaction to their dead bodies still on the floor of the room in which they were murdered: instead his focus resting solely on the contents of the room and the exits and windows. Dupin has no concern or empathy for the bodies of the women, seeking only to solve the mystery for mental exercise rather than as a means of bringing justice to two innocent women.

In identifying Dupin as Poe's spiritual double, Church highlights Dupin's preference to live amongst only male figures like the narrator, and considers his own intellectual superiority over other men an exultation of competitive rivalries of the dominant sex. "[Dupin] deems this imaginative acumen a male power, for when he bests the superficially rational Prefect of Police, he mocks the unimaginative man as castrated" (410). Dupin is home in the intellectual male role and this is precisely where he stays and is comfortable, and when presented with femininity his is of complete ignorance and decided apathy. "He must see in the circumstances of these two women, and modem women generally, their possession of new powers—intellectual, material, and sexual—and therein must experience an excruciating affront to man's, but above all, his own superiority" (410).

Church makes thunderous points on the misogyny inherent in both the short story and Poe's works as a whole, quoting numerous times from Poe's *Complete Works* where Poe goes off

on chauvinist tirades about the inferiority of female writers, the rightful place of the woman, and their natural subservience. Church takes Lemay's argument a step further, indeed chastising Lemay for his point of the women bringing the murders upon themselves; "Lemay clarifies some of the psychological machinations, especially the unconscious doubling, in the story, but he deplorably errs when he claims that the women bring their murders upon themselves" (409). Church instead pins the blame of the murders solely on Poe himself for his horrendously misogynist viewpoints and unconscious (or indeed, conscious) efforts to marginalize women in his works. "Indeed, a closer reading of *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* reveals not only an intense ambivalence toward women in the tale but also Dupin's and the narrator's (and by extension Poe's) own misogynistic satisfaction in the deaths of the mother and daughter" (409).

Where Church deconstructs the gender agenda in the short story, the short story can be deconstructed critically as well. Published in 2012, Paul Hurh writes *The Creative and the Resolvent*. It is a poststructuralist reading, arguing that the first sentence of the short story prophesizes the impossibility of analyzing analysis. Jacques Lacan in 1966 held a seminar on *The Purloined Letter*, which proved to be an uncanny story not only in terms of analysis, but also of "the infinitely regressive qualities of poststructuralist analyses themselves" (466). Essentially, Hurh explains, the short story describes the theft and concealment of an important letter, which is then stolen. The post-structuralist critics took this and ran with it, seeing their own interpretations as something similar in nature. "From Lacan to Derrida to Johnson to Irwin, analysis –the method of rational thought at the center of Poe's detective fiction—slips from the grasp of the critic, and by its own peculiar logo allows each framing conclusion to itself be framed by the next critic in the queue" (467). In this manner, the letter of each analysis by each critic was purloined as it were by the next post-structuralist critic to analyze the analysis. Considering the titular letter in *The Purloined Letter* is never actually revealed in its contents, one can say that

with a chain of post-structuralist analyses, the mysterious contents of the letter in fact remain a mystery.

In highlighting this problem, Hurh implicates *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* as being even more immune to analysis if it were possible. He states that the very first sentence confounds the act of analysis by analyzing analysis before an analysis can even be attempted. The first sentence of the short story reads as such: "The mental features discoursed of as the analytical are, in themselves, but little susceptible of analysis" (Poe 196). So essentially the narrator is saying that analytical thought is impossible to analyze, and what Hurh is saying is that the analysis of the narrator's analysis of analytical thought being impossible to analyze is, therefore, impossible to analyze. Hurh however goes on to say that this is not always the case, for in a very early publishing of the *Murders in the Rue Morgue*, there was a paragraph before the first sentence of the story as it is known today, and confronts this compositional problem of analysis previously stated.

Published in 1841 in *Graham's Magazine*, *Murders* was prefaced by an excised paragraph that conflated the ideas of "resolution" and "creation" as opposing forces, and in their opposition then constitutes a mutual identity (Hurh 473). Therefore the idea of analysis being impossible to analyze was come to as part of a greater idea, and the removal of this important first paragraph removes that idea in order to echo a more circular narrative, where Dupin's analysis is impossible to analyze from beginning to end. Hurh highlights the importance of the first paragraph then, for "the proximity between "composition" as an analytical term and Poe's representation of it as both "creative" and "combining" implies that the narrative performance of analysis…is part of the analytical process" (Hurh 474).

With this being said, Hurh has in essence taken all of the fun away from the poststructuralist critics via in essence successfully analyzing the nature of analysis, but as Hurh

points out the nature of analysis is not the essence of analysis, which indeed continues to elude analysis (469). However, with the reintroduction of the excised first paragraph of the original publication, Hurh has done a considerably important task by putting Poe's interest in phrenology at the time of writing into the forefront of the ideas that surround the short story and indeed Dupin's thought process. Of course, apropos to a poststructuralist reading, Hurh's reading ultimately muddies the waters of understanding while at the same time offering up some admittedly important details that are ultimately unnecessary for understanding Dupin as a character and Poe's intentions with him. Cutting through Hurh's cleverness, it's quite clear that despite Poe's interest in phrenology at the time of publication, the first paragraph was excised for its irrelevance, and it remains irrelevant to a critical standpoint.

From a critical standpoint however, plot holes are of massive importance when discussing literary criticism at large for they can completely scuttle a story. Published in 1950, Sylvester Ryan's article *A Poe Oversight* highlights the most important flaw of the text: "Poe failed to record the presence of blood in the room where the murders occurred" (408). Ryan, with this sentence, throws the entire story and Dupin's brilliance into question as he goes on to say that "the presence of blood would have led the police to discover all the facts that Dupin revealed, except, perhaps, the fact that the killer was an animal" (408). In one fell swoop, this plot hole completely ruins the brilliance of Dupin's intellect, for if there had been descriptions of the blood of the murdered, that indeed "inflamed [the orangutan's] anger into phrenzy" (Poe 227), then Dupin's presence in the story would have been completely superfluous. The police would have been able to figure out the means of egress of the murderer, and indeed if the blood had pooled in such a manner that the orangutan could have stepped in it and left tracks, the police themselves would have discovered the identity of the orangutan.

Ryan's article, a mere five paragraphs, throws the entire validity of the narrative into

question, even if it was a farfetched story to begin with. Not only does the supernatural intellect of Dupin not actually matter when presented with the lack of description of blood on the crime scene, but all of his pompous talk against the Prefect of Police is completely unwarranted. Poe simply did not give the Prefect the tools with which to solve the mystery. "Cutting off a person's head would produce a great deal of blood…However, Poe failed to recognize the detail of the blood elsewhere in the story. Neither the police nor Dupin reported finding blood in the room" (Ryan 408). Without the detail of the blood and indeed the knowledge that would be gleaned from it, the Prefect would have solved the case before Dupin had ever heard of the murders.

Ryan's short paper is absolutely vital if one is to look at any sort of criticism of the text, for not only is the text itself flawed inherently, thus lending less credence to its main sleuth's supposedly supernatural abilities, and making the narrator's bewilderment of those supernatural abilities less believable. In five paragraphs, Ryan manages to steal the thunder of the short story, casting it from an impossible scenario solved by an impossible mind into an improbable scenario that did not need an impossible mind in any sense to solve. Had Poe materialized the pools of blood on the floor of the L'Espanayes' apartment, it would have given the Prefect of Police the upper hand in every respect, causing Dupin's criticisms of him at the very end of the short story to ring rather hollow and base: he did not have the tools needed for success, and as a result was stunted from the investigations' very beginning.

Though much has been said about Dupin, the narrator, the Prefect, and Poe himself over the past sixty years, there has been very little written on the matter of arguably the most important character of the story: the orangutan itself. The orangutan can be read as a highly potent ecological symbol, a warning to mankind on the destructive forces of nature. Indeed, the orangutan can be seen as nature learning and adapting to the failings of mankind and using this newfound knowledge to continue its own existence while predicting the extinction of the human

race, and further predicting the existence of nature long after the human race has gone.

In keeping with the idea that the orangutan represents the natural side in the interplay between man and nature, the orangutan as a species has been in existence for far longer than humans have, with science suggesting the divergence of the orangutan into its own species at around thirteen to fifteen million years ago (Israfil, et al.), whereas homo sapiens' own divergence into its own species can be dated at around five to eight million years ago (Brunet, et al.). If the orangutan, as a representative of nature as a whole in the short story, came first on an evolutionary scale then it is important to remember that their status as that representative implies that they will be here long after the extinction of the human. Indeed, in the manner the short story plays out, the orangutan is not killed for its killing of the Madames L'Espanaye, it is simply sold to a zoo with the blood still on its hands: "It was subsequently caught by the owner himself, who obtained for it a very large sum at the *Jardin des Plantes*" (Poe 227). The orangutan's continued life can further support the idea of nature existing after the death of humans

Returning to the text, the reader notes that the orangutan learns from the sailor as he shaves his face every morning, and upon its escape it tries to mimic what it has learned "in which it had no doubt previously watched its master through the keyhole of the closet" (Poe 226). But the instinct of self-preservation perverts the action into a bloodbath, "flourishing the razor about her face, in imitation of the motions of a barber" (Poe 227). Tying this loosely to a real world perspective for a moment, the human population as a whole has produced enough plastic waste pollution to create huge oceanic garbage patches in all major oceans across the world (Carpenter and Smith). Recently however scientists have discovered new oceanic microbes in these patches that seem to use the plastic as their source of food (Kinoshita, et al.). Nature's sense of self-preservation produced this new life form in order to learn from humans and the dross they produce in order to sustain itself, however this self-preservation does not prevent humans from

polluting the oceans that they need to survive. Thus the orangutan and by extension nature learn in much of a "monkey see, monkey do" fashion in order to further their continued existence, but this existence may or may not reflect the continued existence of humankind, as the L'Espanayes can attest. Indeed, nature not only produces plastic-eating bacteria, but flesh-eating bacteria as well (Wilson).

When discussing the orangutan it is also of great importance to discuss the sailor's role in the story as well. The sailor is an explorer, a conqueror of nature, and the orangutan is his prize from his travels (Poe 225). However, he loses his control over the orangutan, which allows the murders to take place. This loss of control implies that there never was any true kind of control in the first place, for nature's adaptive abilities are beyond the control of man. Upon the orangutan's recapture it is sold by the sailor for a decent profit, representative of a very capitalist view of seeing nature as merely a source of profit. Despite that there were deaths involved the wheels of capitalism keep turning as money changes hands for the orangutan, rewarding the sailor for his acquisition of the animal in theory. In practice however, this reward also applies to his mishandling of the animal that cost two innocent people their lives. This however is swept under the rug at the end of the story.

On the whole then, the orangutan can be presented as a warning to treat nature with respect or there will be deadly consequences to everyone, including those who are not necessarily doing damage. Nature's consequences as a result of human actions affect everyone equally, and while nature can adapt to the mistakes and mishandlings of humans, the changes nature must make in order to adapt do not guarantee the continued survival of human life. In this manner, the orangutan's adaptations in response to the sailor's abuses resulted in the deaths of two innocent women who were not involved in the slightest. This microcosm can be read as a warning of a much larger and deadlier adaptation by nature in response to human abuse.

This argument however relies on a lot of grasping at straws in order to accomplish any sort of meaning in the text. Certainly Poe did not intend for the orangutan to be a nature allegory, as conservatism was not exactly a huge ideology back in the nineteenth century. However, one has to look at the facts of the story: Poe could have easily used a human as the murderer. It would have made the story a lot less notable, but considering the story is hailed as the first ever crime drama short story, it is exceedingly odd that Poe chose to use an orangutan as the murderer rather than a person. Indeed, if he had the proceeding genre would have had an actual precedence for using human characters as villains, murderers, and thieves. The genre instead goes against actual precedence in the case of Poe's tale however, because *Murders* is the only crime drama in recent memory that uses such a strange plot device. As a result of this stylistic choice, the man vs. natural world connection is one that cannot be ignored, and can indeed be explicated upon. As is predictable with an eco-criticist reading however, one has to conduct outside research in fields of biology and ecology in order to make an argument come to fruition.

The sheer magnitude of meanings that can be gleaned from a single sample text is stunning in scope, especially when one has many different literary critics from many different time periods reading in many different literary lenses. When one takes *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* by Edgar Allen Poe and trawls through the many criticisms of it, one can arguably achieve a greater understanding of the story than by simply reading the story. The beauty of literary criticism is the sheer amount of meanings that can be brought to the story and taken from the story, revealing a network of ideological principles that both add to and detract from the story. When contextualized in the time the story was written, the author's own prejudices and biases, and various edits that the story underwent throughout the author's life-span, each edit and stylistic choice can reveal a massive amount of meaning and can inspire a multitude of different conversations across time and ideologies.

The main issue however with literary criticism is its penchant for forgetting the context of the historical period of the story, and the biases of the author themselves. Instead certain critics bring far too much from the outside of the story and attempt to apply it to the story in ways that make very little sense. As a result of this, one has to parse through the language of the critic in order to determine if they actually have any idea what they are talking about. Multiple critics one reads of Poe's story pore over minor details in the text and drag these analyses out into thirty page diatribes wherein they display more of their knowledge of their interests in ideological thought than actual comprehension of the text. As a result, literary criticism becomes a trial of understanding the sample text, its historical period, and its author in addition to understanding the critic's historical period, the critic's critical lens, and the critic himself. This manifold nature of literary criticism can be seen as an exercise in futility in regards to some critics (and indeed all poststructuralist critics), but it is this very nature where the value of literary criticism comes from. It is up to the reader to determine what is correct and what is not, and from this process of determining what is not correct, the reader reaffirms what is correct about the story and the manner of viewing it, which would be an impossible task if one were to simply read the text and think nothing more of it.

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