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EDGAR ALLAN POE'S CHEVALIER AUGUSTE DUPIN: THE USE OF RATIOCINATION IN FICTIONAL CRIME SOLVING

Introduction

In his relatively short literary career, Edgar Allan Poe managed to show a staggering amount of innovativeness: there is no genre which he did not make his own: a novel, a play, an essay, a poem, and a short story. The short story stands out as it either represents an outstanding contribution to the burgeoning Gothic literature or it introduces the new subgenres of fiction, namely science fiction, occult fantasy or detective fiction. In what follows, we will examine the character of the first detective in literature – Chevalier Auguste Dupin, his methods of solving the crime by means of deductive reasoning or *ratiocination*, and, by extension, Poe's/Dupin's role in the rise of detective fiction. Beginning with a discussion of the traits and features of mystery/crime fiction, we will demonstrate Poe's influence on the development of detective fiction as he invented some of the most popular mystery elements many later writers have used. The central part of the paper will focus on the examination of Dupin's originality, plausibility, and effectiveness as an amateur detective in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), "The Mystery of Marie Rogét" (1842 – 1843), and "The Purloined Letter" (1844) by delving into how and why Dupin uses his deductive abilities in order to solve the crime mystery.[1]

1 Poe's fourth tale of analytical detection is "The Gold Bug." Minor contributions to the genre of detective fiction are his "The Oblong Box" and "Thou Art the Man" as well. As they do not feature Dupin as a detective, they will not be discussed in the paper.

1. Edgar Allan Poe's Influence on the Rise of Detective Fiction

Although the genre, if we are to believe Dorothy Sayers (cf. Herald, 2006: 142) and Michael Cook (2011: 2), was introduced by the early crime narratives such as Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Othello* or Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto,* it is not until the mid-nineteenth century that the rise of detective fiction truly started. Despite his fame for writing macabre fiction and his acquaintance with Voltaire's *Zadig: Or, The Book of Fate* and François-Eugène Vidocq's *Memoirs of Vidocq, Principal Agent of the French Police Until 1827* (cf. Rollyson – Magill, 2008: 1438; Cook, 2011: 3), "the general critical consensus is that the detective story begins with Edgar Allan Poe, the 'father' of the detective genre" (Scaggs, 2005: 7). With his tales of ratiocination, Poe "fathered" the genre itself. Poe's tales mix an element of crime (the murders of women and the stealing of a letter) with an element of detection involving "solving the puzzle, finding the culprit and bringing him or her to justice" (Herald, 2006: 148) and invite readers to help solve the puzzle. Dupin offers the answer to the question *whodunit?* by working as an "independent operator who answers only to" himself, by not being bound by "any restrictions, including the law" and by having time "to investigate a case, and … focus all of his attention on it while ignoring the rest of the world" (Niebuhr, 2003: 32).

Every story introduced a new element into the crime fiction genre: "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" is a locked-room mystery[2]; "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" is the first example of armchair detection; "The Purloined Letter" introduced the theme of a most unlikely perpetrator. The last element was, in fact, so influential that P. D. James warns of its danger: it is "…a ploy which was to become common with Agatha Christie and in danger of becoming a cliché, so that readers whose main

2 The doors to the victim's home are locked; there are no secret passages; the two windows are shut and fastened by nails; the state of the bodies excludes suicide. However, Dupin is certain that the murderer entered the house through the window, which is later proven true.

interest in the story was to correctly identify the murderer had only to fix on the least likely suspect to be sure of success." (2009: 12)

Poe's innovativeness in revolutionizing the genre is clearly visible. By engaging the reader in the solving of the mystery, he accomplished a direct relationship of logic and deduction of the reader alongside those of the detective: "the reader becomes a detective and the detective a reader. Moreover, a detective like Dupin also becomes an author, who figuratively writes the hidden story of the crime" (Thoms, 2004: 133). There are several elements of detective fiction introduced in his short stories. All the clues are presented to both the detective and the reader. The clues are simple yet apparently not related with one another. Frequently, the motive and other pieces of evidence point to an innocent person in order to make the story more mysterious. The solution is obtainable through the powers of retrospect observation and logic. The police are shown as ineffective, inefficient, and incapable of rational thinking, which is why they are always outsmarted by a detective. The stories, too, introduce the character of the detective's helper. He is portrayed as submissive and having "the reverential attitude [...] towards his detective-mentor" (Lewis, 1990: 99) yet sharing his desire for knowledge and truth. His function is to mediate between the reader and the detective by comprehending "Dupin's ratiocination slowly enough for most readers to feel that they could keep pace" (Lewis, 1990: 99). The helper in Poe's stories remains unnamed and will not become a crucial story element until Doyle's introduction of John Watson. These elements have become the essential conventions of the detective fiction genre, so common and familiar to the readers that it seems that almost nothing has been invented in this genre since Poe.

2. Chevalier Auguste Dupin

The character of Poe's fictional detective Chevalier Auguste Dupin was created before the word "detective" even existed. The reader does not find out much about his previous life as the narrator only reveals that Dupin was once a wealthy individual who has been humbled by an

unfortunate series of events. In the tales, Dupin lives in Paris together with his unnamed friend and helper whom he accidentally met in an obscure library while searching for a rare volume. His search "for an elusive text becomes a metaphor for detection, suggesting how the investigator is not only a reader but also a figurative writer seeking possession of a hidden story" (Thoms, 2004: 134). Almost immediately after their acquaintance they began living together within a manor in Faubourg Saint-Germain devoting themselves to the life of mind. Emphasized by his reclusive, humble, and mind-devoted existence in a Gothic-like manor, Dupin's remoteness from the mainstream society seems to assure the reader that he is an unbiased, objective observer whose mind is not clouded by earthly pleasures or social trappings. Such was the first impression, the impression that greatly changes as *the Dupin Tales* unfold. The narrator's initial statement that "it had been many years since Dupin had ceased to know or be known in Paris" (Poe, 1994: 122) becomes self-contradictory as Dupin gradually transforms into a worldly detective who is well connected (the Prefect G–, the Minister D–, Le Bon, etc.) and driven by different motives (money, revenge, entertainment, repaying the favor, etc.). This duality of Dupin's persona is further confirmed by the hints of the bi-part soul/madness he exhibits: imagination and cold analysis, melancholia and enthusiasm.

The similar traits of being an analytical genius with an eccentric and a reclusive nature who stands outside of the mainstream society, has poor regard for social norms, and refuses to admit visitors are featured by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. Not only has Dupin made a lasting impression on Sherlock Holmes but on many other fictional detectives as well:

> Holmes carries off a similar feat of deduction in "A Study in Scarlet," and, despite disparaging Dupin's abilities in the same story, he exhibits the same characteristics of reclusiveness, eccentricity, and penetrating analytic ability that are present, in varying degrees, in all the fictional detectives created in the one hundred years following the publication of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." (Scaggs, 2005: 20)

Such immense popularity of Poe's detective makes a strong case for the credibility of Dupin's character. By constructing the personality of Dupin in such a way, not only did Poe create a single fictional individual but also an archetype of a detective many later writers will be bent on following.

Perhaps equally as famous as Dupin himself is his method of fictional crime solving – ratiocination. His peculiar temperament may have made Dupin more believable as a character, but it is the way in which he solves the crimes that truly makes him come to life. Various dictionaries state that the term ratiocination comes from the Latin word *ratiocination* meaning reasoning, argumentation, a syllogism. Ratiocination is a combined method of inferences, hypotheses, and experience bound together by logic and based on Dupin's observation of the criminal mind, i.e. a deductive sequence of facts and guesswork arrived at only by the power of one's intellect. This "higher form of reasoning permits Dupin to detect what others have overlooked or dismissed as unimportant" (Sova, 2001: 154). Although the rules of such thinking are fairly simple and always logical, average people fail at even the simplest ratiocination attempts because they are too bound by the common, day-to-day, way of thought. This is why Dupin's seclusion from society becomes so pronounced almost as if Poe suggested that to think clearly, you have to think outside the box.

3. The Use of Ratiocination in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue"

The initial Dupin tale opens with a list of observations about the analytical mind. The first two pages do not mention Dupin by name but the conclusions stated hint at his type of a person. Poe lists the characteristics of a "He" – an undefined, masculine, analytical category of people:

> He is fond of enigmas, of conundrums, of hieroglyphics; exhibiting in his solutions of each a degree of acumen which appears to the ordinary apprehension preternatural. His results, brought about by the very soul

> and essence of method, have, in truth, the whole air of intuition. [….] Deprived of ordinary resources, [he] throws himself into the spirit of his opponent, identifies himself therewith, and not unfrequently sees thus, at a glance, the sole methods (sometimes indeed absurdly simple ones) by which he may seduce into error or hurry into miscalculation. [….] He makes, in silence, a host of observations and inferences. [….] He notes every variation of face as the game progresses. (1994, 118-120)

By listing the characteristics of an unnamed analyst, Poe actually lays down the traits of a detective in the broadest sense. This is emphasized by the use of modals such as "should not be" and "will be" (Poe, 1994: 120 – 121) as well as by the use of Present Simple Tense indicating that the narrator believes that these facts were true before, are true now, and will be true in the future.

Having set the defining traits of an ideal analytical mind, Poe introduces the reader to its "real-life" counterpart: Chevalier Auguste Dupin. The reader learns Dupin's full name, his background, and is a witness to his first meeting with the narrator. The house which the duo rents is typically Gothic like many others in various Poe's stories:

> I was permitted to be at the expense of renting, and furnishing in a style which suited the rather fantastic gloom of our common temper, a time-eaten and grotesque mansion, long deserted through superstition into which we did not inquire, and tottering to its fall in a retired and desolate portion of the Faubourg St. Germain. (Poe, 1994: 122)

The first mention of the murder comes via a newspaper article which already labels it as "extraordinary" (Poe, 1994: 126). The account of the murder is given from the perspective of several newspaper articles which include witness testimonies as well. The testimonies greatly differ when it comes to a voice of the murderer as the witnesses claim they heard the voice in several foreign languages. The majority of Dupin's deductions are made right there and seem to be the main point of all his ideas. Poe continues by labelling the crime an "insoluble mystery" (1994: 132).

The first Dupin tale also brings about the motif of police incompetence. The entire police force is portrayed as flawed and helpless with poor methods of crime solving. Unlike Dupin, with whom they are contrasted, the policemen do not make any complex conclusions, i.e. they believe in what they see. They are satisfied with the obvious and strive to embed all the clues into a simple solution. Dupin thus shows that the police are not lacking in intellect but rather in method:

> The Parisian police, so much extolled for acumen, are cunning, but no more. There is no method in their proceedings, beyond the method of the moments. They make a vast parade of measures; but, not unfrequently, these are so ill adapted to the objects proposed, as to put us in mind of Monsieur Jourdain's calling for his robe-de-chambre – pour mieux entendre la musique. The results attained by them are not unfrequently surprising, but, for the most part, are brought about by simple diligence and activity. When these qualities are unavailing, their schemes fall. (Poe, 1994: 132).

Dupin's opinions on the effectiveness of the Paris police does not prevent him, however, to rely on the connections and acquaintances he has within the force, namely that of the Prefect G–: "I know G–, the Prefect of Police, and shall have no difficulty in obtaining the necessary permission" (Poe, 1994: 133), which will eventually help him solve the mystery.

Unlike the police, Dupin's method of ratiocination looks at the big picture, fills it with all the clues and signs, no matter how insignificant or extraordinary they may seem, and makes an assumption. It begins with a close examination of the neighborhood, which his helper thinks is peculiar: "Dupin, meanwhile, examining the whole neighborhood, as well as the house, with a minuteness of attention for which I could see no possible object" (Poe, 1994: 134). Dupin continues his investigation by looking at the crime scene: "Let us now revert to the interior of the room. Let us survey the appearances here" (Poe, 1994: 142). As he is extremely diligent and detail-oriented, he even examines the corpses: "Dupin scrutinized everything – not expecting the bodies of the victims" (Poe, 1994: 134). From his observations and examinations Dupin makes a series of "legitimate deductions" (Poe, 1994: 137) upon which his theories are founded. In

a way, he is a sign/clue interpreter. Dupin is, too, critical towards the sources, in this case the newspaper articles: "The conclusion here is absurd. It is a mere guess – a very silly one – and no more" (Poe, 1994: 142).

Dupin also discusses the notions of the coincidence and the probability. He separates the meaningful from the non-meaningful, the important from the unimportant. He uses logic and deduction effortlessly while normal people struggle greatly under its rules. His work is subtle, as if logic was Dupin's intuition. In a way, it is similar to the use of grammar by people who study a foreign language and the people who are native speakers of it. Although Dupin is irrefutably brilliant and logical, the actual solution to the crime is ridiculous – the perpetrator is the Orang-Outan. It almost seems as if the explanation for the mystery was intentionally simple and humorous to contrast the depth and seriousness of the crime's analysis, as if its solution was "hidden in plain sight, announced in the story's first lines" (Rosenheim, 2006, 69) and hinted at by the clues planted throughout the story. The clues are present in the narrator's descriptions of the crime as "something altogether irreconcilable with our common notions of human action" (Poe, 1994: 143), "absolutely alien from humanity" (Poe, 1994: 144), and "brutal" (Poe, 1994: 144).

Dupin's motive for solving the murder is clearly personal. Not only does he find it almost entertaining: "As for these murders, let us enter into some examinations for ourselves, before we make up an opinion respecting them. An inquiry will afford us amusement" (Poe, 1994: 133), but he also wants to repay a favor once done to him by Le Bon, one of the suspects: "Le Bon once rendered me a service for which I am not ungrateful" (Poe, 1994: 133).

4. The Use of Ratiocination in "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt"

"The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" was written as a sequel to the "Murders in the Rue Morgue."[3] In this tale, Chevalier Auguste Dupin and

3 Although subtitled "A Sequel to 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue'," both stories share only three common elements: Chevalier Auguste Dupin as the investigator, the reliance on (and criticism of) newspaper accounts, and the Parisian setting.

his helper try to solve the apparent murder of a Parisian perfume shop employee – Marie Rogêt whose body was found floating in the Seine River in a horrific state. The story is based on the real tragedy of Mary Cecilia Rogers whose murder has remained unsolved to this day.

Although fictionalizing actual murders and other crimes was fairly common in the mid-nineteenth century American literature, "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" was probably the first real-life crime turned into a detective story (cf. Whitley, 2000: 20). The subsequent editions of the story had to have footnotes included to explain the real-life origin of the story. Only minor details of the crime, including the location, were changed while the rest of the facts remained true to reality. It is worth noting, however, that Poe himself had little real evidence (e.g. he was never at the crime scene) and most of his data about the crime came from newspapers. The shock of the community by the actual murder was also recaptured within the story: "The atrocity of this murder (for it was at once evident that murder had been committed), the youth and beauty of the victim, and, above all, her previous notoriety, conspired to produce intense excitement in the minds of the sensitive Parisians" (Poe, 1994: 202).

Dupin has acquired considerable reputation after the publication of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." His name "had grown into a household word […] and the cases were not few in which attempt was made to engage his services at the Prefecture" (Poe, 1994: 201). This reputation has a much larger impact than fame: it provides the blessing of the police which Dupin needs in his attempts to solve crimes. Later detectives, such as Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot, rely much on the reputation, which gives them larger freedom of detecting and credibility to their solutions.

Like the author himself, Dupin has reached the majority of his conclusions about the crime by identifying himself with the perpetrator and through the extensive critical analysis of various newspaper articles. In doing so, he became one of the first examples of armchair detection, which Poe even mentions by name: "Dupin, sitting steadily in his accustomed arm-chair, was the embodiment of respectful attention" (1994:

204). Although newspapers are his major source of information, Dupin also criticizes their sensationalism: "it is the object of our newspapers rather to create a sensation – to make a point – than to further the cause of truth. The latter end is only pursued when it seems coincident with the former" (Poe, 1994: 214 – 215).

After Dupin dispels the falsehoods published by the newspapers, he comes to a conclusion that only one murderer dragged Marie by the cloth belt around her waist and then dumped her body off a boat into the Seine. Yet, Dupin's findings regarding the identity of a murderer remain inconclusive. This rather "vague conclusion of the tale fails to attribute motives for the killing of the fictional Marie, just as the apparent conclusion of the real mystery portrays a similarly motiveless death: Mary dies by accident" (Thoms, 2004: 140). Many critics and readers have thus found Dupin's solution to be implausible and the narrative too long, article-like and containing too much reasoning and exposition, which is why "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" has received mixed reviews ever since its publication and is considered the least successful of the three Dupin tales.

5. The Use of Ratiocination in "The Purloined Letter"

"The Purloined Letter" is the final of the three Dupin tales. Some time before its initial publication, Poe wrote to James Russell Lowell that he considered "The Purloined Letter" "perhaps the best of … [his] tales of ratiocination" (Quinn, 1998: 421). In this tale, Dupin and his helper are enjoying a peaceful evening when G–, the prefect of the Paris police, enters the room and tells them a mysterious story. A certain royal lady received a secret letter which the Minister D– was able to take from her desk because she did not want to draw attention to it in the presence of the royal man (possibly the king). The Minister used that letter to blackmail the lady and she asked for G–'s help. Although the prefect searched for the letter in every corner of the Minister D–'s house, he was not able to find it. After a month, the Prefect G– returns to Dupin's house in total frustration and offers to pay fifty thousand francs to anyone who

can find the letter. Dupin accepts, hands him over the letter, and explains how he found it. This tale "is not one of strict detection because the identity of the criminal is known, for he stole the letter in plain sight of the queen; second, the letter is a threat to the lady from whom he stole it only so long as he does nothing with it" (Sova, 2001: 153).

Dupin's motivation behind his use of ratiocination to solve the crime in this story is multiple. Firstly, he accepts the offer of the Prefect G– to solve the crime to absolve him of the shame of it being unsolved. The first motive is intertwined with the second: the use of ratiocination allows him to outclass the rival detective – the Prefect G–, and impress his power over him. Thirdly, Dupin perceives the crime solving as an act of revenge: he has previously encountered the Minister D– who "at Vienna once, did … [him] an evil turn, which … [he] told him, quite good-humouredly, that … [he] should remember. So, as … [he] knew he [the Minister D–] would feel some curiosity in regard to the identity of the person who had outwitted him, … [he] thought it a pity not to give him a clue" (Poe, 1994: 356). Lastly, Dupin is not immune to a generous reward the Prefect G– offers him to solve the crime:

> Why, a very great deal – a *very* liberal reward – I don't like to say how much, precisely; but one thing I *will* say, that I wouldn't mind giving my individual cheque for fifty thousand francs to any one who could obtain me that letter. [….] "In that case," replied Dupin, opening a drawer, and producing a cheque-book, "you may as well fill me up a cheque for the amount mentioned. When you have signed it, I will hand you the letter." (Poe, 1994: 344 – 345)

The motif of the police ineffectiveness is present again; the Prefect G– says that the police "opened every package and parcel; not only opened every book but turned over every leaf in each volume, not contenting themselves with a mere shake" (Poe, 1994: 343). Although the police are so thorough, their hard work and scientific methods of investigation produce little result against the Minister D–'s cunning. Dupin, however, solves the mystery of the purloined letter by identifying with the perpetrator:"…that if the Minister had been no more than a mathematician,

the Perfect would have been under no necessity of giving me this check. I knew him, however, as both mathematician and poet, and my measures were adapted to his capacity, with reference to the circumstances by which he was surrounded." (Poe, 1994: 351)

In this case, ratiocination does not comply with the universal rules of logic but with those similar to the perpetrator's way of thinking. Because Dupin tried to identify with the Minister D–, he correctly assumed what kind of a person D– was and where such a person would hide the letter. Dupin's ratiocination is thus grounded in three elements: (1) his knowledge of the police's/prefect's behavior and mental processes: "They consider only their *own* ideas of ingenuity; and, in searching for any thing hidden, advert only to the modes in which *they* would have hidden it" (Poe, 1994: 348); (2) his knowledge of the minister's behavior and mental processes: "he would be driven, as a matter of course, to *simplicity*, if not deliberately induced to it as a matter of choice" (Poe, 1994: 351), and (3) his observation of human nature in general.

An important element of the story is, again, the helper. He assumes the role of the reader and is important for the reader's understanding of Dupin's method which would otherwise be left out if Dupin were the narrator. Dupin guides the helper throughout the story. He presents him with the clues needed to solve the case (which Dupin already asserted). An important characteristic of ratiocination is that, in most cases, it is actually directed at the helper, i.e. the reader. Although ratiocination uses rationality to solve the crime, it is logical only in retrospect – when explained by the detective.

Conclusion

With the creation of Chevalier Auguste Dupin, Edgar Allan Poe created something more than a fictional character – he established the archetype of a detective so plausible that many later writers adhered to his formula and created some of the best known works of literature. The elements Poe invented, such as the reclusive genius detective, his "ordinary" helper, the impossible crime, the incompetent police force, the

armchair detection, the locked room mystery, etc., have become firmly embedded in most mystery novels of today.

Within Dupin's masculine analytical world everything, even the most extraordinary of crimes, must have a logical explanation. His highly successful method of ratiocination includes almost every element of modern crime investigation: the examination of the crime scene and the victim's body, the interrogation of witnesses, and the critical analysis of gathered evidence. Although his motives for solving crimes differ, Dupin is ultimately an entertaining creation in spite of his utter lack of charm. Through his character, Poe makes a stark contrast between the ordinary reader and the remarkable genius, which seems to suggest that in order to understand the extraordinarily logical you have to be extraordinary yourself.

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