

Edgar Allan Poe
"The Murders in the Rue Morgue"

SOCIAL CAUSES OF RISE OF DETECTIVE FICTION

1. Detective fiction mirrors changing attitudes to crime and punishment in the mid-nineteenth century.
 - a. Rise of the professional detective follows rise of police, a process which in turn mirrors increasing specialization within professions..
 - b. Demise of martial law (armies enforced against felonies); rise of the police.
"Torture slowly gave way to proof, ordeal to evidence, the rack and the thumb-screw to the trained investigator" (Foucault; Haycraft 161).
 - c. "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" provides an example of how crime and punishment are changing. The story is begun by Dupin and finished by the sailor, whom Dupin convinces to tell his story as an issue of honor, in order to free an unjustly imprisoned man. No torture or threat of punishment are needed; Dupin is able to get the sailor to confess simply by showing the sailor the "puzzle pieces" Dupin has assembled.

2. The rise of what we now call **scientific method** parallels the rise of police: both are dependent on observation and reportage as problem-solving methods. Three basic components of scientific method:
 - a. Empirical evidence: is evidence that one can see, hear, touch, taste, or smell; it is evidence that is perceivable with one's senses. It can be perceived by others and tests of it can be repeated.
 - b. Logical reasoning: proceeding from point to point, always checking premises (unstated assumptions) before proceeding to the next step.
 - i. Scientific method uses linear logic, which relates items to one another through cause-and-effect: 1. Aristotle is a man 2. All men are mortal 3. Aristotle is mortal.
 - ii. Associative logic, such as that used in the introductory exercise below, relates items to one another through proximity or association, not through cause and effect.
 - c. Skepticism: repeatedly and rigorously challenging the assumptions and beliefs that we and other people hold.

POE AS DETECTIVE FICTION WRITER

3. Poe was born in Boston in 1809, orphaned shortly thereafter, legally adopted by a man whose surname "Allan" became Poe's middle name.
 - a. Life beset by poverty, struggle, and failures: expelled from U of VA when John Allan failed to pay his fees. Expelled with dishonorable discharge from West Point after, at court martial, pleading guilty to all charges that could NOT be proved conclusively. [The editor calls this an act of "calculated insubordination."] Unable to get literary fame (worked as an editor). Married his much-younger cousin Virginia Clemm when she was 13 (1836); at 26 she died of TB.
 - b. He was histrionic and a pathological liar, who invented achievements and travels for himself to cover for his infamous crimes as a youth.
 - c. His only literary success came with the publication of *The Raven and Other Poems* in 1845, four years before his death at 40 from alcoholism.
 - d. His poem "Alone" summarized Poe's emotional motivation for writing:

From childhood's hour I have not been
As others were - I have not seen
As others saw - I could not bring
My passions from a common spring -

- e. Critics speculate that Poe kept himself sane by writing horror and detective fictions; he was alcoholic, obsessed with evil, mentally unbalanced, probably schizophrenic or manic-depressive. Poet and Poe contemporary Elizabeth Barrett Browning commented that Poe is so effective at writing horror because he makes it familiar. "The certain thing in the tale in question is the power of the writer, and the faculty he has of making horrible improbabilities seem near and familiar."
4. Poe is sometimes called "The Father of Detective Fiction."
- a. "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" was first published in a magazine in 1841; Poe published most of his stories in magazines, wrote potboilers, barely made a living as a professional writer, and thought of himself as a hack. Day-work as an editor took up much of his time.
 - b. Poe really only wrote four *bona fide* DF stories, and began work on these in the 1840s: "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Mystery of Marie Roget" (not in our anthology; based on actual unsolved murder of New York woman named Mary Cecilia Rogers), "The Gold-Bug" (a hieroglyphic-solving story) and "The Purloined Letter" (another locked-room mystery featuring Dupin). A fifth story, "Thou Art the Man," another attempt at DF, is sometimes lumped together with these four, but most readers agree it is third-rate and only has a few characteristics of DF.

STRUCTURE/FORM OF 'THE MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE'

5. The story is divided into three sections:
- a. an introductory section that describes analysis, calculation, and the scientific method
 - b. a middle section that provides an example of an introductory analysis
 - c. the third section, devoted to the crime and its solution
6. The expository introductory section describes the abilities that characterize good detectives - the interplay between ingenuity and analysis.
- a. Begins by rethinking the category of "analysis."
 - i. Brute strength, once highly valued, has given way to intellectual strength as the most valued characteristic in humans.
 - ii. The ability to calculate [use scientific method of analysis] is good, "yet to calculate is not in itself to analyze."
 - iii. Learning to play games like draughts, whist, and chess is to learn to solve real-life puzzles; these are good exercises for those who want to cultivate their "proficiency," that is, their "comprehension of ALL the sources whence legitimate advantage may be derived." In other words, all the factors that go into the game - not just its abstract rules, but the body-language of the players, the timing, counting of cards, etc., are important.
 - b. The ultimate aim of learning to play games is to learn "the constructive or combining power" - combining "how to calculate" and "what to observe." Poe concludes by saying that a combination of ingenuity and analysis yields the greatest result.
7. The middle section provides biographical information and an example of Dupin's ability to use associative logic.

- a. Dupin is identified here as the eccentric detective; the narrator (nameless) establishes himself as the sidekick, and we learn about their environment.
- b. While linear logic enables Dupin to solve the murders, associative logic - tracing the narrator's thoughts back through actions and conversation - is also important in life.
- c. Dupin shows his virtuosity by demonstrating that he can use both kinds of logic. This reinforces the assertions in the opening of the story that it is the ability to combine strategies and ideas that is the mark of the true genius.

THE SOLUTION OF THE MURDERS PROVES THE UTILITY OF IDEAS INTRODUCED THE FIRST TWO SECTIONS OF THE STORY

8. In the last section of the texts - the part that actually focuses on the "Murders" of the title - Dupin uses scientific method and associative logic to solve the crime.
 - a. Empiricism: the clues of the window, the ribbon, the lightning rod, and the tufts of hair, along with the intact money, show Dupin a clear path of events.
 - b. Logical reasoning: the same clues demonstrate that the police have followed their assumptions and disregarded logical reasoning.
 - c. Skepticism: Dupin does not assume that the window-hardware works, or that it is impossible for someone to escape from the window, or that someone with such large hands must be "preternatural" in order to have committed the murders.
 - d. Associative logic: Dupin connects the ribbon, the concepts of sailing and climbing, and the red hair into a single "story" of what possibly happened; then he creates another story to lure the sailor to his apartment to explain what happened.
 - e. Dupin serves as judge and jury and lets the sailor go free, imprisoning the dangerous ape in the local zoo.
 - f. The story's conclusion is also without assumptions or moralizing about the nature of crime, punishment and evil.
 - i. The ape did not intend to murder the two women
 - ii. The victims did not deserve to be murdered
 - iii. The sailor is not guilty of the deaths, though he was implicated in them
 - g. The story's refusal to apply a moral to the crimes is its best example of logical reasoning; it forces readers to confront the idea that evil deeds may be done for no particular reason, and that terrible things may happen to good people just by accident. The detective's job is not to restore order, or make everything all right, but to explain and allot consequences.

HOW DOES THE STORY OF THE MURDERS RELATE TO THE FIRST TWO SECTIONS OF THE STORY?

9. Poe seems to be arguing that mental activities that are "gamelike" actually have concrete, important uses.
 - a. The story echoes/illustrates the precepts of the prologue.
 - b. Analytical - deductive - powers that appear petty or gamelike (Dupin's analysis of his companions thoughts about the theatre) have important practical uses. The master of game-playing may also be a master of street-smarts.
 - c. Deduction allows Dupin to free the unjustly imprisoned Le Bon. Poe implies that many prisoners may have been imprisoned and executed because they activated someone's prejudices or preconceived notions about crime - not because they committed a crime.
 - d. Dupin's superior deductive reasoning suggests that the police can't do their job. Though newly powerful, they are enchained by their prejudices - their inability to observe and analyze purely - to see instead of looking.
 - e. Narrative itself grows from the same sources as logical reasoning; we read stories for the same reasons Dupin solves crimes; we hone our intellects likewise.

'MURDERS' INTRODUCES THE ELEMENTS OF THE LOCKED-ROOM MYSTERY

10. Though Poe offers the story itself as merely "a commentary on the propositions just advanced," it contains (introduces!) all the elements that characterize the classics of the DF genre.
 - a. **An introductory "exercise"** - Dupin appears to "read the mind" of the I-narrator, but demonstrates through deduction how he figured out what the I-narrator was thinking.
 - b. **A brilliant, eccentric detective** - "Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin" - whose analytic abilities are apparent early.
 - c. **Admiring, stupid foil/sidekick** - "I" narrator who lives with Dupin, becomes his "one and only" while they are living together in Paris: "we existed within ourselves alone" and emerging only into darkness.
 - d. **Well-intentioned, but blundering, unimaginative official police** (they let their assumptions, such as the idea that people murder people for money - overcome their powers of observation. The money is left untouched and instead some inexpensive linens are stolen).
 - e. **The locked-room convention** (the sealed crime scene makes it easy for Dupin to investigate).
 - f. **The pointing finger of unjust suspicion or "red herring"** (Adolphe Le Bon, the hapless bank clerk who brought to the Espanayes their last bank withdrawal, is imprisoned for the murders.)
 - g. **A staged ruse** to force the culprit's hand (putting the ad in the paper to draw the sailor who owns the Orang-Outang)
 - h. **The solution by surprise** (few readers would imagine such a solution; indeed, after the excessive violence of the crime, it seems almost like a cop-out.) This is usually transmitted through an expansive and condescending explanation by detective (both to "I" narrator and to the police)