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English 231C

Page numbers are keyed to the Penguin Classics Edition (Edgar Allan Poe, *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings*, ed. David Galloway 1987).

An outline of the lecture, plus definitions of key terms, can be found at the end of this document.

Edgar Allan Poe "The Gold-Bug": Reading Signs

1. "The Gold-Bug" is Poe's most difficult story - and possibly also his most brilliant.

- a. It is both a sophisticated mathematical puzzle and an exciting adventure story - two genres that seem opposite.

2. Signs: What Are They?

- a. Humans create signs - symbol-systems - to communicate ideas.
 - i. Signs can be **abstract** (such as writing, which bears no pictorial resemblance to the things it represents) or **representational** (such as icons, maps, or pictures, which crudely resemble the things they represent).
- b. Abstract signs depend on group consensus that "X" equals "Y". Abstract signs are arbitrary and must be memorized rote. A further process of memorization is necessary if individuals are going to understand how words "stand in for" cultural customs.
 - i. One example: gas station signs "self" and "full" only make sense to people who understand their idiomatic meanings.
- c. Even representational signs depend for their meaning on the consensus of the group. Example: Mexican restroom signs that have an "umbrella" to signify "women" and a "hat" to signify "men."
- d. Meaning doesn't inhere in signs - it is "assigned" by users of the sign-system.
- e. Consequently, most signs are multivalent - they have more than one meaning.

3. The Bug as Sign

- a. The word "bug" itself is wildly multivalent, meaning "annoy," "obsession or passion," "surveillance device," "source of contagion," "insect," and many other things. Poe challenges us to recognize the multivalence of "bug" by placing a hyphen between "gold" and "bug" in the title, forcing the discerning reader to notice that this story is not about an insect, but about an obsession with gold or wealth.
- b. What's in a bug? The bug keeps getting redefined in the process of the story. It arrives as a puzzle: "It was a beautiful *scarabaeus*, and, at that time, unknown to naturalists - of course a great prize in a scientific point of view. There were two round, black spots near one extremity of the back, and a long one near the other. The scales were exceedingly hard and glossy, with all the appearance of burnished gold. The weight of the insect was very remarkable, and, taking all things into consideration, I could hardly blame Jupiter for his opinion respecting it; but what to make of Legrand's agreement with that opinion, I could not, for the life of me, tell." (291)

- i. Narrator views the bug in two ways. He doesn't see the bug at first, since Lt. G- has it, but instead is given Legrand's drawing of the bug to peruse.
 - (1) He acknowledges it must be a scientific specimen - a "great prize."
 - (2) He also notices, in Legrand's drawing of the bug, that he has "never saw anything like it before - unless it was a skull, or a death's head." However, he is not actually looking at Legrand's drawing, but at the opposite side of the parchment. Coincidentally, on this side of the page, the fireplace heat activated a much earlier drawing of a death's head. Narrator, like Legrand, interprets the death's head as an icon we recognize "stands in" for "death," "pirate" and "poison."
- ii. Jupiter reads literally - that is, he perceives the bug's most basic aspects - that it is "gold" and a "bug." The Narrator points out "his whole intellect seemed to be absorbed by "de bug."
 - (1) He takes the idea of "gold" literally, hears scientific discourse, including the word "antennae" wrong): "Dey ain't no tin in him, Mass Will, I keep a tellin on you, de bug is a goole bug, solid, eery bit of him, inside and all, sept him wing - neber feel haf so hebby a bug in my life." Later Legrand pays tribute to Jup's insight by saying "Do you know that Jupiter's silly words, about the bug being made of solid gold, had a remarkable effect on my fancy?" (309)
 - (2) It's Jup's job to pick up the biting bug when he and Legrand first find it, and he is bitten so many times by this bug that when climbing up the tree he is reluctant to hang on to it (it's dangling from a string) and threatens to drop it. Later we recognize the "bite" works as a metaphor as well, since Jup surmises Legrand's madness must have been caused by bug-bites. On one level he's right: the gold-bug has bitten Legrand.
- iii. Legrand combines the views of the narrator and Jupiter to add another level of understanding about the what bug may "mean."
 - (1) He perceives the bug as a possible scientific "first" or specimen, and asks Jupiter to wrap it up in the parchment and bring it home. Then he lends the bug overnight to his friend Lt. G-, removing it from the scene of the story temporarily.
 - (2) Legrand shows his sophistication by creating an icon of the bug to take its place while it is gone. He shows this picture to the Narrator: "he drew from his waistcoat pocket a scrap of what I took to be very dirty foolscap, and made upon it a rough drawing with the pen. . . . When the design was complete, he handed it to me without rising."
 - (3) Legrand (later in the story) connects "gold" to the "bug" after seeing the design on the parchment, and notes that the insect, which to the Egyptians was a symbol of immortality and resurrection, shall resurrect him: "The bug is to make my fortune. . .to reinstate me in my family possessions."
 - (a) Webster's 3d dictionary 2025: *scarab, scarabaeus*: a large black dung beetle, thought by the Egyptians to represent immortality and resurrection. A talisman, an ornament, an important symbol of resurrection.

4. "The Gold-Bug" is a Story (Series of Signs) about the Multivalence of Signs

- a. On the surface, "The Gold-Bug" is a story about how a man adept at reading signs is able to read and interpret a treasure map that results in his recovery of \$450,000 worth of treasure buried by Captain Kidd. As an adventure story, and a story about code-breaking, it is fascinating.
- b. But Poe has done something else with this story. Instead of placing all his signs at "street level," so that the story can only be read as an adventure story, he has embedded signs and commentary on signs throughout the narrative, where readers may not even recognize that they are perceiving signs.
- c. Poe's double emphasis on signs prompts the reader unconsciously to focus on the importance of signs, while giving the reader subtle clues that enhance the impact of Legrand's final solution to the mystery.
- d. Unconsciously we assimilate clues that allow us to see the final solution as even more satisfying than we might have done otherwise.

5. In "The Gold-Bug," Poe Asks Us To Read Variety of Multivalent Signs: Concrete and Abstract

- a. A "cipher" is a paradigm of sign-series that needs to be unpacked, explained, interpreted

Webster defines "cipher" as "A. a character or symbol denoting the absence of all magnitude or quantity; nought; zero." B. A method of secret writing that substitutes nonsense characters for the letters intended, or transposes the letters after arranging them in blocks; also a substitution alphabet so used." A cipher is a **private** sign-system that deliberately scrambles a **public** sign-system to foil readers.
- b. Bug itself as Concrete Cipher
 - i. Bug significant to Legrand because it provides a missing link in an evolutionary code scientists are always trying to assemble: the puzzle of how phyla and species "fit together."
 - ii. Bug also carries cultural symbolic baggage: the scarab is the Egyptian symbol of resurrection and immortality, and is usually found buried with the dead. Notice that this means not only that the bug confers good luck on the possessor, but that its good luck is usually found buried with human bodies.
 - iii. Bug's metallic color and its heaviness put both Jupiter and later Legrand in mind of the element, gold, which is yellow, shiny, and heavy. They "read" the bug as more than it is.
- c. Words as Multivalent Ciphers
 - i. The hyphen in the title changes the adjective "gold" into a compound noun with "bug." This, to the careful readers, changes its significance from a bug that is merely gold to a bug somehow connected with the idea of gold (something Jupiter smartly picks up on).
 - ii. The word "bug" means more than "beetle": its obsolete meaning is "bugbear" or "bogy," "an imaginary object that excites fear; any object of dread." The bug is a biter; it "bugs" Jupiter so much he doesn't want to carry it out onto the tree-branch; it drives Legrand crazy while he's thinking about it.

- d. Characters (pun) as Multivalent Ciphers and as Sign-Readers
 - i. Legrand's name is a clue both to his former moneyed status and to his abilities and status to come.
 - ii. The narrator himself is a cipher - a nameless nonentity that "stands in" for the reader to mark but not occupy a place. He is the "site" that will allow the full explanation to happen, the instigator, unwitting, of the solution of the story (he holds the parchment to the fire and questions the quality of Legrand's drawing).
 - iii. The narrator's "cipher" status reminds us of the paradoxical value of ciphers in the solution of other kinds of "ciphers" or puzzles. [The concept of "zero" was invented by the Aztecs, and considered an important mathematical advance. The cipher in this story isn't a "zero" - his promptings and presence allow important things to happen.
 - iv. Jupiter is technically a "cipher" - a nonentity - and the object of racist scorn and humor, but he turns out to be the instigator of the solution; his name, which the author seems at first to have assigned sarcastically, is the name of the Etruscan god identified with Zeus, king of the Heavens, a royal personage of great power.
- e. Language/Stories/Pictures as Multivalent Ciphers
 - i. Language is itself a "cipher" - a puzzle to be worked out.
 - ii. Jupiter's dialect speech reminds reader that language is a code - a cipher - that reader/narrator must crack. Examples: "pissel" for "epistle" (289), "syphon" for "ciphering" (288), "syfe" for "scythe" (290), etc. This puts the reader in the interpreting mood, while foregrounding the arbitrariness of language. (Note that Jupiter's most comic malapropisms involve archaic or difficult words.)
 - iii. Place-names in the cipher such as "devil's seat" and "bishop's hostels" turn out to be themselves ciphers that are easily enough interpreted once a few correct pieces of information are inserted. For a few days Legrand asks around; discovers that "Bishop's Hostel" turns out to be "Bessop's Castle," a rock outcropping, where a natural seat in the stone comprises "devil's seat," which makes a circular opening in which the treasure is hidden uniquely visible.
- f. Narratives are "ciphers" that must be uncoded, unpacked.
 - i. Detective narratives like "The Purloined Letter" and "The Gold-Bug" are "ciphers" themselves: deliberate rearrangings of a set formula, designed to puzzle readers, with the solution appearing conveniently at the end.
 - ii. The treasure-map "cipher" itself - written as language - becomes a map, a visual representation of a physical reality, a uniquely precise picture of a terrain.

6. What Allows Legrand to Solve the Cipher?

- a. Solving the cipher(s) requires skepticism, observational abilities and the ability to read signs both literally and figuratively. The narrator interprets Legrand's abilities as "lunacy" and "illness."
- b. Legrand finds the parchment because he is a skeptic about the established orders of things:
 - i. a poor man, beachcombing when others are working

- ii. a natural heretic (a Protestant among Catholics).
 - iii. a scientist (out trying to find and classify new species) using scientific method.
 - iv. an apparent "lunatic" who does not see the world as others do.
- c. Legrand first unpacks the iconic ciphers - recognizes the map in the drawing, and makes the series of complicated, correct readings of visual (the picture of the goat) - and then the verbal (the code itself) ciphers.
- i. Notices (on beach) the parchment's durability; something important must be on it.
 - ii. Notices the change in parchment next to the fire - puts map away.
 - iii. Notices the pictorial signs on the parchment itself: must stand in for something else
 - iv. Notices the language on the parchment: must stand in for directions/areas.
- d. Legrand must make a series of accurate deductions based on mathematical probability and known facts about pirates, Cpt. Kidd, etc., to figure out the parchment's significance.
- i. Ciphers follow linguistic logic: most common letters are most commonly substituted (Legrand uses "e" and "the" as examples.)
 - ii. Language changes over time - Bishop's Castle transforms into Bessop's Hostel.
 - iii. Kidd not intelligent; picture equivalency means language likely to be English.
- e. Then Legrand must precisely - literally - follow directions to find the buried treasure.

7. **What Is the Reader to "Cipher" from Poe's "Cipher"?**

- a. The message encoded in the story/cipher echoes the messages created by all the sign-systems in the story: if you refuse to take things at face value, and you are able to supply a few pieces of information, you will find that the world is a puzzle filled with treasures that are available to those who can recognize and fill in the blanks.
- b. The buried skeletons of Kidd's compatriots pose an indirect threat to Jupiter and the narrator - why does Poe end on this note?

Edgar Allan Poe, "The Gold-Bug": Signs and Sign-Readers

Cipher (note that this word functions as both noun and verb) 1: The symbol 0 denoting the absence of all magnitude of quantity: NAUGHT, ZERO. **2a:** a method of transforming a text in order to conceal its meaning (1) by systematically replacing the letters of the plaintext by substitutes in the same sequence either singly or in pairs or other polygraphs (as by writing 1 for A, 2 for B, etc., or F for A, S for B, etc.) or (2) by systematically rearranging the plaintext letters into another sequences (as by writing them normally in a rectangle and then copying them off from the columns taken in an arbitrary succession. . . **3:** an Arabic numeral: NUMBER, FIGURE **4a obs:** a symbolic character (as a letter, hieroglyph, or astrological sign) **b:** a combination of symbolic letters; *esp* the interwoven initials of a name: DEVICE, MONOGRAM . . . **5:** one that has no weight, worth, or influence: NONENTITY (*Webster's 3d International Dictionary* 408).

Multivalent (adjective) 1: having more than one meaning.

Scarab, scarabaeus (noun) 1: a large black dung beetle, thought by the Egyptians to represent immortality and resurrection. **2:** A talisman, an ornament, an important symbol of resurrection (*Webster's 3d International Dictionary* 2025).

Outline of Lectures

1. What are signs?
 - a. Signs are abstractions that we use to communicate with one another - some are iconic (pictures) while others are letters (arbitrary marks that bear no resemblance to the objects they represent).
 - i. every word, picture or concept is a sign
 - ii. every sign is multivalent (has multiple meanings).
2. Signs are ciphers
 - a. Each sign is a puzzle (a cipher) that must be solved - its various meanings unpacked - so that we can discover what it means in its current context.
 - i. deciphering signs requires the reader to be flexible and to entertain multiple possible meanings for any given sign
 - ii. some signs are more important than others, but we must understand them all to determine which ones deserve most attention (that's why you need to look up all unfamiliar words and phrases!)
 - b. A series of signs together (a sentence, a story, a set of directions) creates an even larger and more complex "cipher" - a sign-*system* that must be interpreted.
 - c. The process of interpretation/deciphering that the characters engage in is mirrored by the process of interpretation that the reader must engage in to follow the story. In other words, Poe makes **you** decipher what LeGrand, Jupiter, and the narrator have to decipher.
3. The story presents ciphers at every level - and all signs and sign-systems have important meanings
 - a. Individual words and icons function as multivalent ciphers ("The Gold-Bug," scarab, kid, shovel)
 - i. not even language is easy to unpack: we must decipher Jupiter's dialect
 - b. The characters (pun) function both as multivalent ciphers and as sign-reading role-models for the reader of the story (LeGrand, Jupiter, the "cipher" or nameless narrator)
 - c. The code of the treasure-map is an obvious "cipher" - a puzzle to be worked out
 - i. yet other codes embedded within it, such as the names of places, are also codes that must be unpuzzled
 - d. The events that led to Kidd's burial of the treasure must be "deciphered"
 - e. Stories (like "The Gold-Bug" and other representations of reality are "ciphers" that must be uncoded, unpacked.
4. What Is the Reader to "Cipher" from Poe's "Cipher"?

