

The Man Who Was Poe Study Guide

The Man Who Was Poe by Edward Irving Wortis

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Contents

The Man Who Was Poe Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	4
About the Author.....	5
Plot Summary.....	6
Prologue.....	8
Part 1, Chapters 1-10.....	9
Part 2, Chapters 11-18.....	17
Part 3, Chapters 19-22.....	24
Epilogue: Something About Edgar Allan Poe.....	27
Characters.....	29
Objects/Places.....	33
Setting.....	35
Social Sensitivity.....	36
Literary Qualities.....	37
Themes.....	38
Themes/Characters.....	41
Style.....	43
Quotes.....	46
Topics for Discussion.....	48
Essay Topics.....	49
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	50
Further Study.....	51
Related Titles.....	53
Copyright Information.....	54



Overview

In Providence, Rhode Island, in the late 1840s, a boy and his sister have been abandoned by their aunt and are going hungry after a few days without food. They have come from London in search of their mother, who disappeared after coming to America. The boy, Edmund Brimmer, leaves his sister locked in their rooms while fetching some food. When he returns, the door is still locked, but his sister, Sis, is gone. He wanders the streets in search of help and bumps into an odd man who calls himself Auguste Dupin, who says he will solve the mysteries of the missing sister, aunt, and mother. Dupin is brilliant, quick to draw conclusions from small clues, but there are disturbing parallels between what he says of his own family and the family of Edmund—parallels all ending in death.

About the Author

Avi has dysgraphia, a handicap that affects his writing: He transposes words and letters. His manuscripts are often covered with red marks that indicate corrections in syntax and spelling. When his dysgraphia was diagnosed, he was told that he would never become a writer, but Avi had always been an avid reader, and in spite of once flunking out of school because of his bad writing, he strived to become a writer. In the meantime, he took up another seemingly unlikely career, that of librarian.

After earning Bachelor's and Master's degrees in 1959 and 1962 from the University of Wisconsin, he earned a Master's in Library Science from Columbia University.

He worked as a librarian in the Performing Arts Research Center at the New York Public Library from 1962-70, then as an assistant professor and librarian at Trenton State College (New Jersey) from 1970-86.

While attending Antioch University, before going to the University of Wisconsin, he avoided English courses but took playwriting courses. He had a strong-minded teacher who showed how to put together a plot and how to develop characters, and Avi credits him with providing a structural foundation for his own writings.

He was born Avi (pronounced Ah-vee) Wortis in New York City on December 23, 1937, into an artistic family. His father was a psychiatrist and his mother a social worker, both of whom loved the arts and populated their home with books. Avi's relatives includes other artists and writers, and he seems to have been part of lively discussions of arts and artistic enterprises all of his life. Further, he had a great attachment to books, saying that he learned more from reading on his own than he did in school.

His love of the written word transcended his dysgraphia and the efforts of his elders to discourage him from pursuing writing as a career.

His becoming a librarian may have been a compromise between his passion for reading and his difficulty writing clear prose, although he wrote plays continually. On November 1, 1963, he married Joan Gabriner (they later divorced) and they had two children. Avi found himself telling his children stories, letting them pick a subject. Out of this grew his career as a writer for young readers. Slowly, he was able to illustrate other writers' books, then illustrate his own books, and then move on beyond picture books to long fiction for young adults and middle-school youngsters. His picture books brought him renown, and he quickly became anthologized in textbooks on children's literature.

He has won a number of awards, and in 1990, *The Man Who Was Poe* was a Library of Congress best book. Avi lives in Providence, Rhode Island, with his wife Coppelia (nee Kahn), a college professor; he sets much of his fiction in Providence, as he does the events of *The Man Who Was Poe*.



Plot Summary

The plot of *The Man Who Was Poe* mirrors the tradition of detective stories, which Edgar Allan Poe established with his groundbreaking works. The story takes place during Poe's lifetime, specifically during the winter of 1848, and includes Edgar Allan Poe as one of its major characters. The story begins as a locked-room mystery. A young boy named Edmund Brimmer returns to his hotel room one night to find his sister has mysteriously vanished from the locked room. There is no sign of forced entry and no other entry point to the room besides the window. The room is on the top floor of a tall tenement building. Poor Edmund is left alone in a seedy part of town in Providence, Rhode Island. To make matters worse, he hails from England, and this is his first time visiting the foreign land of America. Edmund and Sis came to Providence a month ago with their Aunt Pru on a desperate quest to find their missing mother. Two days before the story opens, Aunt Pru leaves the room to meet a man who claims to have information about her missing twin sister, the children's mother. Aunt Pru never returns from that meeting. Edmund and Sis are left all alone to fend for their selves in a city that their aunt has warned them is dangerous.

When Edmund goes out for food and returns to find his sister missing, he is beside himself. The eleven-year-old boy does not know whom to trust. He finds the locals indifferent to his plight, and eventually he must place his trust in the only man who agrees to help him, the mysterious Mr. Dupin. Dupin is actually Edgar Allan Poe, who has just arrived in Providence and wishes to remain incognito for reasons of his own. When he bumps into the desperate boy, Poe is fascinated by the similarities he perceives between himself and young Edmund. Poe, too, lost his mother at a young age, and his late beloved wife was known by the name Sis, just like Edmund's sister. Poe introduces himself as the detective he created for his story, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," a Frenchman by the name of Auguste Dupin. Poe enjoys playing detective, and at first he relishes pretending to be Dupin. Poe extracts as much information as he can from Edmund and then sets about solving the kidnapping. Along the way, the kidnapping becomes a bank robbery and finally a murder, all perpetrated by the same two scoundrels, Rachett and Peterson. Poe, as Dupin, solves the crime and points the finger at Rachett, Edmund's evil stepfather.

Poe is a tormented soul, though. Suffering from grief over his wife's death, he has fallen into a spiral of depression and drink. His consumption of alcohol increases his moodiness and selfishness, and he quickly loses interest in helping Edmund find Sis. Poe decides he would rather write about Edmund's life story than help the boy. Additionally, Poe is sidetracked by his half-hearted wooing of Mrs. Helen Whitman, a prominent society widow. Poe speaks of love to Mrs. Whitman, but his inner thoughts focus more on the financial benefits of marriage than on any positive attributes of her character. Unable to forget his lost Sis, Poe cruelly tells Edmund to stop believing his sister might be alive. All stories end in death, as far as Poe is concerned. In the end, Edmund must find the courage to defy Poe's gloomy outlook and search for Sis on his own. Shamed by the boy's tenacity, Poe returns to help him in the end. Yet after Sis is safely rescued and Edmund has been reunited with his mother, he cannot help but

wonder if Poe went along to help save Sis, or if he had only wished to witness her potential death.



Prologue

Prologue Summary

Providence, Rhode Island - November 1848: In a tenement on Ann Street, a boy and his sister wait in a drafty room for their aunt to return. Edmund watches his sister, who he calls Sis, as she reads a book of fairy tales. Their aunt went to look for their mother two days ago and has still not returned. The children are hungry, and Sis convinces Edmund to take their last nickel and buy some food. Edmund is afraid to leave Sis alone, for their aunt has warned them that the neighborhood is dangerous and that they should not leave the room. Since she has not returned, Edmund realizes it is up to him to get food. Reluctantly, he leaves his sister and runs down the street to the saloon on Wickenden Street, where he purchases some bread from the man behind the counter. On his way back, an old man with white hair asks Edmund to guide him to Shamrock Street. Edmund is in a hurry to get back but feels that helping the old man is the right thing to do. After showing him the way to Shamrock Street, Edmund runs all the way back to his room. When he unlocks the door, he is horrified to see that Sis is gone. Edmund is alone.

Prologue Analysis

This prologue sets up a classic locked-room mystery in the style of Edgar Allan Poe's writings. While many authors have popularized both the detective story and the locked-room mystery concept, Poe is generally agreed upon as the first author to construct this type of tale. Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" introduced the idea of a locked-room mystery to fascinated readers in the 1840s. His main character, Auguste Dupin, was the first fictional detective to solve crimes using a combination of wits, evidence and the powers of reason. Poe's story paved the way for such great literary characters as Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot.

Locked-room mysteries particularly engage the reader because of the seeming impossibility of a suspect having entered the room to commit the crime. Modern children's author Avi has created a fictional locked room mystery, set up in this prologue, which will incorporate both Poe's literary methodology as well as Edgar Allan Poe himself as a fictional character. The bizarre disappearance of Edmund's sister in this prologue provides an excellent introduction for children to the concept of a locked-room mystery and to the classic writings of the great Poe.



Part 1, Chapters 1-10

Part 1, Chapters 1-10 Summary

Chapter 1: A man carrying a carpetbag plods slowly up the street in the cold winter night. He has a pale face and a dark mustache, and he wears a scowl. Cold, hungry and tired, he looks for a place to spend the night. The man is a writer, but lately he has earned very little money because he has been unable to come up with any story ideas. The man reaches Benefit Street and digs through his carpetbag for the letter he has come so far to deliver. At number eighty-eight Benefit Street, he pauses. The graveyard behind the house frightens him, and he turns to flee. The man crashes into a small boy; it is Edmund. Edmund apologizes. The man stares at Edmund's ragged coat and the thin rags he wears. He asks Edmund if he is all right. Edmund begins to sob and tells the stranger that his sister is missing.

The man asks Edmund about his parents and learns that Edmund's father was lost at sea long ago and that Edmund's mother has been gone for a year. Aunty Pru looks after Edmund and Sis now, but she has been missing for three days. Edmund tells the man about Sis' mysterious disappearance from their locked room on Ann Street. The man offers to help Edmund if Edmund will deliver his letter to Mrs. Helen Whitman at eighty-eight Benefit Street. The man watches nervously from a distance as Edmund delivers the letter. A white hand reaches out to take the letter, and Edmund returns to the strange man. The man wonders aloud if Edmund's predicament might make a good story. He asks Edmund if he can spend the night in Edmund's room on Ann Street, and he introduces himself as Auguste Dupin. As they walk towards Ann Street, Dupin asks Edmund if he's asked anyone else for help. Edmund has asked everyone he's seen, but no one else has agreed to help him. Dupin asks Edmund if he's sure he wants Dupin's help. Edmund considers Aunty Pru's warning about talking to strangers, but he has nowhere else to turn besides Mr. Dupin. As they leave Benefit Street, a servant girl emerges from number eighty-eight. She carries a note to the Hotel American House. The note is addressed to Mr. Arnold and states that Edgar Allan Poe has arrived.

Chapter 2: Dupin studies Edmund as they walk. He wonders if the boy is lying about his situation. Edmund certainly seems desperate, but Dupin is not sure he can trust him. As they approach Ann Street, Dupin asks Edmund if they are close to water. Edmund replies that they are two blocks away from the docks at Narragansett Bay. Edmund and Sis like to spend time at the docks collecting their favorite boat names. They have befriended a man named Captain Elias who knows all about the boats that dock there. Dupin wonders if Sis might have gone to the docks, but Edmund insists she would not have left the room without him. Dupin presses Edmund for details of the night Sis disappeared. Edmund admits that, rather than coming straight back to the room with the food, he stopped to help an old man. Dupin asks him how long the old man delayed him and if Edmund is sure he locked the door. Edmund insists that he did lock the door. Hopefully, he tells Dupin that his aunt must have returned to the room while Edmund was out, since she has the only other key. Even now Aunty and Sis are probably out



looking for Edmund. Dupin tells Edmund that "there is a difference between what happens and what we would like to have happened." (pg. 23)

When Edmund and Dupin reach the docks, Dupin spies two men huddled around a dark shape on the ground. He tells Edmund to wait and approaches the men. One of the men, a bald, burly man with a scarred face, holds a lantern in the air. On the man's jacket is a brass star, indicating that he is a night watchman. The other man is older, thinner and nervous, with white-hair. Dupin sees that the dark shape on the ground is the body of a dead woman. Even in death, she is beautiful. Dupin notes her fair hair and her resemblance to Edmund. The night watchman introduces himself to Dupin as Mr. Asa Throck. His white-haired companion is Fortnoy. Throck tells Dupin that Fortnoy pulled the woman's body out of the water, where she had drowned. Fortnoy explains that he had just been relieved of his watch aboard one of the ships, and on his way down the dock he spotted the woman's white dress floating in the water. Dupin asks the woman's name, but Throck and Fortnoy say they do not know. Throck tells Dupin there will be an inquest tomorrow morning. Dupin beckons Edmund to come closer. Edmund is shocked to see his aunt lying dead on the dock. He tells Dupin that the dress the dead woman wears is not his aunt's dress. Gently, Dupin steers Edmund away, assuring him that the authorities will take care of the body.

Chapter 3: As Dupin and Edmund arrive at the Ann Street tenement, Dupin is stunned to learn that Edmund calls his sister Sis. Sis is also, coincidentally, the name of Dupin's late wife. Edmund is disappointed to find the room empty, having hoped Sis would be back by now. Dupin is disappointed at the lack of food, candles and other amenities in the room. Dupin gives Edmund a coin and sends him to the same saloon where Edmund purchased food before. While Edmund is gone, Dupin pulls out a notebook and makes notes for his story about a boy and his missing sister. Dupin feels better whenever he writes, but he is tormented by the thought of death and cannot think of any other ending to the story than a death. Upset by these morbid thoughts, he drinks from a liquor bottle until he falls asleep. Meanwhile, on the street below, Edmund hears footsteps following him down the street. He looks around. In the foggy night, he thinks he glimpses a fair-haired person following him. He calls out his Aunt Pru's name, thinking he has seen her ghost. Then Edmund remembers that Aunt Pru told him there is no such thing as ghosts.

At the saloon, Dupin's money allows Edmund to buy a small meat pie and two candles. Throck, the night watchman, is in the saloon. After Edmund leaves, Throck explains to the man behind the counter that the dead woman on the pier was Edmund's aunt. Just then, Fortnoy enters and reports that Edmund came to the saloon and returned to the Ann Street tenement without making any other stops along the way. Fortnoy also reports that the man who was with Edmund on the docks is still with Edmund in the room. A curious patron overhears this. The man behind the counter explains that Throck has been working on a case with Fortnoy's help. There is a reward being offered, by a Mr. Poley at Providence Bank, for the location of Mrs. G. Rachett of London, England, who is believed to have been living in Providence, Rhode Island.



Edmund returns to the room only to find Dupin asleep, surrounded by empty liquor bottles. Edmund breaks the meat pie in two and hungrily eats the larger half. Edmund wonders if Dupin can be trusted. His Aunty Pru taught him that adults know how to handle situations that children do not, but she also taught him that drinking is bad. Tired and confused, Edmund drifts off to sleep. In the middle of the night, someone slips a piece of paper under the door.

Chapter 4: Dupin wakes up, his mind dull from the alcohol. He cannot at first recall where he is or who Edmund is either. When he does remember, he immediately regrets his offer to help the boy. Dupin has other matters to attend to. He is involved with courting Mrs. Whitman, and he needs to write and earn money as well. He reaches for his carpetbag, but he is disappointed to realize that all the liquor bottles inside it are empty. He notices the meat pie and consumes it hungrily while idly reading the newspaper it was wrapped in. It is the classified section. Dupin reads a notice regarding an oyster supplier named Frank Foster. Another notice posted by a businessman named William Arnold solicits customers to call on him at his residence at the Hotel American House. Finally, a third notice advertises the services of R. Peterson, an accountant at the Providence Bank who seeks part-time evening work. Bored with the paper, Dupin lays it down and picks up his carpetbag, intending to leave. He stops short when he sees the piece of paper slipped under the door. It reads: "Meddle at your peril!" (pg. 39) Intrigued by the note, Dupin stands uncertainly, holding his bag. Edmund awakes and asks Dupin if he still intends to help find Sis. Caught, Dupin agrees to spend the morning looking for Sis, but he insists that he has an important appointment in the afternoon.

Dupin pulls out his notebook and pen and proceeds to question Edmund further while writing down the boy's answers. Dupin explains that although Edmund does not realize it, he already has all the information Dupin will need to find Sis. Dupin learns that Aunty Pru brought Edmund and Sis to America from London a month ago hoping to find their mother, Pru's sister. Edmund's mother left a year ago and has not been seen since. Aunty Pru received a message from a sailor indicating that Mum was in Providence, Rhode Island. Since their arrival, Aunty has spent her days looking for Mum. A few days ago, Aunty found a man who was going to help her, but she was nervous about meeting with him. Dupin asks what Aunty's trunk contains, but Edmund says it is locked. Dupin tests the lock on the front door to see if Sis could have opened the door while it was locked, but the lock holds fast. Dupin tells Edmund the only other possible way in or out of the room is the window, which faces the window of another tenement building situated just a few feet away. Dupin and Edmund run to the neighboring building and break down the door of the room that faces Edmund and Sis' room.

Chapter 5: The room is empty. However, Dupin finds a wooden plank inside, which when they open the window, fits neatly between the two buildings, forming a walkway between this room and Edmund's room. Dupin says that Sis must have walked across the plank to the other room. To prove this theory, Edmund finds a button from Sis' shoe inside the room. Edmund insists Sis would not have left him, and Dupin says that someone must have forced Sis to leave. Pretending to be a city official, Dupin questions the landlady of the neighboring tenement. She tells them a large man using the name



Smith rented the room across from Edmund's two weeks ago. He came and went with another man. Her eyesight is poor, and she cannot describe the men.

After this, Dupin asks Edmund to take him to the tavern where Edmund bought the meat pie. Inside the tavern, they find Night Watchman Throck, talking about the dead woman he found on the pier. Dupin questions Edmund further, asking if there was any other time, beside the night Sis disappeared, when Edmund left her alone in the room. Edmund insists they were together the whole time until he went to get food. Dupin replies that the men in the room across the way must have been watching Edmund and Sis, waiting for Edmund to leave Sis alone before entering through the window to steal her away. Dupin suggests that the white-haired man who delayed Edmund the night of Sis' disappearance was intentionally keeping Edmund away so his partner would have time to steal the girl. Dupin further suggests that since Aunty Pru received a verbal message, not a written letter, from Edmund's Mum telling Pru to come to Rhode Island, Mum must have been in trouble. The man Aunty went to meet is most likely the man who killed her and also the man who stole Sis. Edmund asks who these two men are. Dupin glances at Throck and says he has a good idea.

The waiter arrives, and Dupin orders food for the both of them and drink for himself. The waiter tells them that the Providence Bank was robbed last night. Edmund asks Dupin if they should go to the authorities. Dupin tells Edmund that Night Watchman Throck is right there if Edmund wishes to ask for his help, but he warns Edmund that Throck will not be much help. Throck approaches their table. Quickly, Dupin sends Edmund away, bidding him go to a clothier and ask the price of a coat, which Dupin wishes to buy Edmund. He tells Edmund to stay away at least a half an hour.

Chapter 6: Throck sits down in the chair vacated by Edmund. Dupin studies Throck and guesses that Throck is a former military man who enjoys violence and was kicked out of the military due to excessive brawling. Throck is stunned that Dupin has guessed all this. Dupin explains that he pays attention to details like Throck's mannerisms and the army-style coat he wears, which is similar to the coat which Dupin received whilst in the military. Throck assumes Dupin wishes to hear about the Providence Bank being robbed the night before, but Dupin asks only if there is any more information about Edmund's dead aunt. Throck tells Dupin that Edmund's mother may be in the area. Throck suspects that Dupin is Edmund's father. He also tells Dupin that the inquest into the aunt's death will be held at eleven this morning at the courthouse. Dupin shows Throck the note he found under the door and asks if Throck wrote the note. Throck tells Dupin that he intends to find a relative of Edmund's, as he was hired to do.

After Throck leaves, Dupin marvels at the similarities between his life and Edmund's. Dupin confuses Edmund's life with the story he is writing, and he almost believes that his story and Edmund's are the same. But if this is the case, the story must end with the death of Sis. Meanwhile Edmund enters a clothier's shop down the street. A portly man is being fitted for a coat, but upon seeing Edmund, the man panics and leaves the shop without his coat. The clothier mistakes Edmund for a beggar boy and kicks him out. Humiliated, Edmund watches the distraught fat man hail a cab. The man tells the cabbie to take him to Church Street, but then in his panic, he changes his mind and rushes



away on foot. When Edmund returns to the tavern, Dupin is drunk. Dupin asks Edmund where he has been, having forgotten that he sent Edmund to the clothier's. Dupin writes a note and asks Edmund to deliver it to eighty-eight Benefit Street. This time Edmund is to make sure he delivers the note to Mrs. Helen Whitman personally, and he is not to give her the note unless she is completely alone. Dupin promises to remain in the tavern until Edmund returns. However, the moment Edmund leaves, Dupin asks for directions to the courthouse.

Chapter 7: At the house on Benefit Street, Edmund insists on seeing Mrs. Whitman personally when the maid answers the door. She asks who has sent the note, and Edmund tells her it is from Mr. Dupin. The servant girl leads Edmund to Mrs. Whitman, a beautiful woman with soft brown eyes. Mrs. Whitman asks for the note, but Edmund insists she send the maid away first before handing it over. Mrs. Whitman asks who Mr. Dupin is. She repeats the name several times before recognition lights her face. She sends the maid away and reads the note. Mrs. Whitman is distressed to learn that Mr. Dupin sent another letter the previous night. She asks Edmund if Mr. Dupin has been drinking, and Edmund admits that he has been. Mrs. Whitman sighs. She begs Edmund to tell no one about the note and then sends him down to the kitchen to eat and wait for her to call for him. Meanwhile, Dupin is at the courthouse listening to Throck and Fortnoy testify about finding Aunt Pru's body. Fortnoy states that he does not know who the dead woman is, though. The inquest is boring, but one of the spectators leans forward attentively. The spectator groans in pain upon hearing the details of the death. Dupin stares at the spectator. His drowsy mind has conjured a vision of the dead woman herself, watching her own inquest.

Chapter 8: Edmund waits in Mrs. Whitman's kitchen. The cook gossips non-stop about the bank robbery of the preceding night. Cook disappears to find Catherine, the maid, but when neither of the women returns, Edmund goes in search of them. Outside of a closed door, he overhears a conversation. A woman speaks in a hushed tone to a man named Mr. Arnold. The unknown woman assures Mr. Arnold that she did not give Mrs. Whitman the note from Mr. Poe. The woman thinks Mr. Poe is unsuitable to marry Mrs. Whitman and would rather see Mrs. Whitman marry Mr. Arnold. Mr. Arnold thanks the woman, calling her Mrs. Powers. The voices move further away. Alone in the foyer, Edmund notices a scrap of paper on the ground. It contains some odd writing which he cannot decipher. He pockets the scrap just as Catherine finds him. She leads him to Mrs. Whitman, who asks Edmund if he thinks Dupin is trustworthy when he is drinking. Edmund, having wondered the same thing, does not know how to answer. Mrs. Whitman sighs and tells Edmund to have Dupin meet her at the cemetery behind her house. The cemetery entrance is on Church Street, and Dupin is to meet her at three-thirty.

Outside the courthouse, Dupin reflects on the inquest. He has learned that Edmund's aunt's death was indeed a murder, not an accident. Dupin shakes off these somber thoughts and turns his mind to courting and marrying Mrs. Whitman. On his way back to the tavern to meet Edmund, Dupin sees the recently robbed Providence Bank building. He thinks of Throck's desire to discuss the bank robbery, and he notes that criminals often draw attention to their own criminal acts. Dupin studies the building curiously. All of



the windows are barred. Pretending to be an insurance investigator, he is allowed to enter the bank by the policeman on guard. The man in charge, Mr. Poley, instructs bank clerk Peterson to show Dupin the bank vault. Peterson is a young man with hair so blond that it looks almost white. Peterson tells Dupin that only the bank personnel knew that the gold was in the vault. A heavy door is the only entrance to the vault. In the ceiling there is a small airshaft leading to the roof, placed there in case anyone were ever trapped inside the closed vault. Peterson tells Dupin that they discovered the vault empty this morning. The only things inside the vault were a white button and a piece of string. Peterson suggests the vault would make an excellent tomb, and Dupin faints at the thought.

Chapter 9: When Edmund returns to the cafe, Dupin is not there. He learns that Dupin, who promised not to leave, left immediately after Edmund was dispatched with the note. However, the waiter says that Dupin left a notebook behind, and he gives it to Edmund. Edmund finds Dupin's notes about his story based on Edmund's situation. Edmund is horrified to see that Dupin thinks the story should end with Sis' death. He wonders again if he should trust Dupin, but he has no alternative.

Inside the bank vault, Dupin wakes to find Peterson bending over him. Peterson tells his boss, Mr. Poley, that Dupin is ill and offers to escort Dupin back to his lodgings. Before they leave, Mr. Poley hands Peterson an urgent message from his friend Mr. Rachett. Outside the bank, Dupin tells Peterson he can find his way home alone. Peterson tells Dupin that he wants to be an investigator, too, and enjoys reading detective stories. Peterson particularly enjoys Edgar Allan Poe's tale, "The Gold Bug." Peterson gives Dupin his card and asks Dupin's name. Dupin tells him that his name is Edward Grey. The address on Peterson's card is the Hotel American House. When Peterson and Dupin go off in different directions, two men separate themselves from the crowd. One of the men follows Peterson. The other man, Throck, follows Dupin back to the saloon. Edmund has given up waiting for Dupin and has already returned to the room.

When Edmund arrives at his room on Ann Street, he finds the place completely overturned. Someone has searched the room. The only item missing is a drawing of Aunty Pru and Mum. Edmund sets the room to rights. Meanwhile, Dupin finishes drinking and wanders away from the tavern. On Wickenden Street, he passes a clothier's shop and recalls his desire to buy Edmund a decent coat. He enters the shop, and the tailor offers him a coat at reduced price. It seems the man who ordered it rushed out of the shop this very morning, leaving the coat unpaid for. Dupin asks why the man left so suddenly, and the clerk shrugs and says that a beggar boy had entered the shop, which for some reason disturbed the man. The man's name was Rachett, the clerk tells Dupin in answer to his question. Dupin tells him that the coat is too large and thanks him anyway. Dupin strolls off down Wickenden Street, where Edmund finds him after spending an hour searching for his only friend. Edmund's anger is cooled by Dupin's announcement that he has news of Edmund's sister.

Chapter 10: Back at the tavern, Edmund is too anxious to eat. Dupin is in no hurry to tell Edmund what news he has about Sis. Dupin asks Edmund what he has been doing all day. Edmund, surprised, replies that he delivered the message as Dupin asked. Dupin



does not recall giving Edmund a message, but he is pleased to hear that Mrs. Whitman wishes to meet him at the cemetery on Church Street, behind her house, at three-thirty. Edmund asks Dupin what news he has of Sis. Dupin responds that he knows why Sis was taken, but he is not prepared to divulge the reason at this time. Edmund is beside himself. Dupin will not answer any of his questions. Dupin only wants to know Mrs. Whitman's state of mind upon receiving his note. Edmund's eyes well over with tears. He accuses Dupin of abandoning him today. Dupin tells Edmund that he is a creator of the future and will soon have a satisfactory ending for Edmund's story. Dupin tells Edmund that if he doesn't stop prying, Dupin will forget the whole thing. Near tears, Edmund agrees to fetch bathwater to the room on Ann Street for Dupin. On the way back to the room, Edmund tells Dupin about the break-in and the missing drawing. When they arrive, Dupin realizes the room door was not forced. Whoever killed Aunt Pru must have her room key. Edmund is stunned to learn that his aunt was actually murdered, but again, Dupin will not divulge details.

Edmund watches sullenly as Dupin prepares for his date with Mrs. Whitman. Edmund asks if Dupin wants him to accompany him. Dupin tells Edmund to go anywhere else except Mrs. Whitman's house. Desperate to regain Dupin's attention, Edmund admits there is one thing he hasn't told Dupin. Edmund has a stepfather. His stepfather stole Mum's money and abandoned her right after the wedding. Mum came to America a year ago in search of this man, Mr. Rachett. Mum wanted to obtain a divorce, which was not possible in England, and she also hoped to get her money back from her thieving husband. Edmund doesn't know what Rachett looks like, but Dupin tells him that Rachett must have recognized Edmund this very morning in the clothier's shop. Edmund describes the man he saw at the clothier's as best he can for Dupin. Dupin remarks how similar his life is to Edmund's. Like Edmund, Dupin had an evil stepfather. The only thing missing to make their lives a perfect resemblance is that Dupin's wife Sis is dead, while Edmund's Sis is still alive. Dupin sends Edmund to the dock to speak to Edmund's friend Captain Elias. Dupin wants to know if there really is a ship called The Lady Liberty. Under oath this morning, Throck's friend Fortnoy insisted that he had been on watch aboard a ship by this name immediately before discovering Pru's body. Dupin tells Edmund his belief that Fortnoy is actually Pru's murderer. Then, Dupin leaves abruptly.

Part 1, Chapters 1-10 Analysis

Following the detective story tradition, author Avi lays out most of the pertinent clues in this section as he develops his plot. Avi also includes a few red herrings. At this point, the reader has nearly all the information he or she needs to solve the crime, but a few vital pieces are missing. The challenge of the detective story genre, to which Avi wishes introduce to his young audience, is the challenge of solving the crime before the fictional detective reveals the solution. Avi engages his young readers to this task through the character of eleven-year-old Edmund, who is put in the situation of having to solve the crime in order to save his sister. Auguste Dupin's character sheds some light for the reader by telling Edmund that the boy already has all the knowledge he needs to solve the crime. In a detective story, details must first be known or observed, and then they



may be linked together through a chain of reasoning which ultimately points to the killer. By informing young Edmund early on in the story that he already has most of the facts, the author is encouraging the reader to begin piecing those facts together through the deductive process modeled by Dupin.

Although young Edmund does not know it, Auguste Dupin is the name of Edgar Allan Poe's fictional detective in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." Anyone familiar with Poe's work will have already deduced that in this novel, Dupin is actually Poe. Poe's character, fictionalized for the sake of the story, chooses his own character's name as a pseudonym. Poe's reason for this is not explained, but it is clear that there is opposition to his desire to marry Mrs. Whitman, which could be why he chooses to use the false name. Poe's creative mood swings and desire to be left alone despite his international fame are other likely reasons why he might choose to use a fake name. A final possibility, implied by author Avi, is that Poe seeks some emotional distance from his own tragic life. Young Edmund's character reminds Poe of himself. Their names, circumstances and situations are similar. Poe seems to be projecting his own life story onto Edmund. In his often inebriated state, Poe confuses his life with Edmund's and real life with fiction. Perhaps pretending to be the detective Dupin gives him enough emotional distance to conduct a logical investigation. Regardless of Poe's reasons, the choice of Auguste Dupin as his pseudonym seems to inspire Poe's character to think like his groundbreaking detective.



Part 2, Chapters 11-18

Part 2, Chapters 11-18 Summary

Chapter 11: Edmund, tired and confused, stares at the door Dupin has just exited. Edmund doesn't know whether or not to believe Dupin. He decides to follow Dupin to see if he goes where he said he was going, to see Mrs. Whitman. If Dupin actually meets her at the cemetery, Edmund will consider Dupin trustworthy. If Dupin has lied about his plans for the day, Edmund will leave. Edmund catches up to Dupin on Wickenden Street and follows him, but Edmund sees he is not the only one following Dupin. Another figure darts after Dupin along the foggy street. Edmund tells himself that the flitting figure is only his imagination, like the ghost he thought he saw the night before. Edmund continues to follow Dupin and is disappointed when Dupin enters the First Unitarian Church, thinking Dupin has lied about his destination after all.

Inside the church, Dupin suffers a momentary fear that the pews are crowded with ghosts. He shakes off the feeling and proceeds up the steeple steps to the bell tower. From the tower, he surveys the Providence Bank. From this height, Dupin realizes how easy it would be to pull a carriage up to the back of the bank and access the bank's roof from the top of the carriage. On the roof, he sees the airshaft that leads down to the vault. Dupin shudders to think that a child was lowered down this tiny shaft into the vault below, but the evidence is clear. The white button was from Sis' shoes, and Dupin now recognizes the piece of string as being a piece of hemp from a large rope like the bell tower rope.

Edmund is relieved to see Dupin reemerge from the church and continue towards Mrs. Whitman's house. Dupin walks slower and with less purpose as he nears Mrs. Whitman's, and yet ultimately he finds his resolve and strides purposefully down Church Street to the cemetery entrance. Reassured, Edmund turns to leave, but he sees Mrs. Whitman's maid, Catherine, rushing out the front door of the house. Edmund decides to follow her. She goes to the Hotel American House.

Meanwhile, Dupin waits nervously in the cemetery for Mrs. Whitman. A woman emerges from a mausoleum, but it is not Helen Whitman. Dupin realizes to his horror that it is Edmund's dead aunt. She pleads with Dupin to give her back her children. Then, she stares beyond Dupin with an expression of fear and runs away. Dupin runs in the opposite direction, but he is caught and held fast by Night Watchman Throck.

Chapter 12: Edmund watches as Catherine and a bearded man rush out of the Hotel American House. With a shock of recognition, Edmund realizes the man is the same man he saw at the clothier's shop, the man Dupin believes to be Edmund's stepfather, Mr. Rachett. Edmund follows Rachett and Catherine back to Mrs. Whitman's house. From there, Edmund decides to go to the docks and ask Captain Elias about The Lady Liberty as Dupin requested. Edmund does not notice that he himself has been followed ever since he left the Hotel American House.



Meanwhile at the cemetery, Dupin tells Throck about the woman he saw. Throck doesn't believe him, but Dupin enters the mausoleum looking for answers. Inside, Dupin finds a straw mattress. Throck follows him in, and Dupin asks Throck what he's doing there. Throck accuses Dupin of spying on him, having seen Dupin in the crowd at the inquest. Throck says two can play that game and admits to following Dupin after the inquest. Throck saw Dupin go to the Providence Bank yesterday. Throck sees Dupin with Edmund frequently, and he wonders if Dupin is the boy's father. Throck knows that Dupin went up to the bell tower today to look at the bank again, and he thinks Dupin's behavior is very suspicious. Just then, Mrs. Whitman arrives. She calls Dupin by the name Mr. Poe and confirms for Mr. Throck that she planned to meet Poe at the cemetery. Throck leaves reluctantly. Dupin speaks of love to Mrs. Whitman, but she insists they must return to her house at once. She is afraid of being seen meeting alone with Dupin because of the damage this could cause her reputation. She insists they must meet publicly, in her home, where her mother has invited several guests for tea. Helen warns Poe that they will be surrounded by enemies.

Chapter 13: Inside the house, Helen admonishes Dupin to be strong and insists if he cares about her he must present himself well to Helen's mother and her guests. Helen leads him into the parlor and presents Dupin to the assembled guests as the author, Mr. Edgar Allan Poe. Dupin looks around and imagines that the guests are demons wearing masks of black death. He meets Helen's mother, Mrs. Powers. Also among the guests is Mr. Arnold, the other rival for Helen's hand. Arnold begins questioning Dupin/Poe about the fact that his stories all deal with gruesome deaths. Why is Poe so fascinated by evil? Poe looks around the room and realizes that the people he sees as demons are really just his own fears. He decides to confront them. He explains that evil is really another term for the fear which lurks in the hearts of men. Arnold insists he harbors no such fears and asks if Poe can give him an example. Poe offers the example of a man who orders a coat but at the last minute chooses not to take the coat. This act seems irrational on the face of it, but Poe suggests the man might have a perfectly rational reason for not taking the coat. The audience is confused, but Mr. Arnold stands up and leaves hurriedly. Poe feels he has vanquished one of his enemies.

The rest of the guests begin to look more human to Poe, and although they continue to question him about his writing, he no longer feels attacked. One of the guests speaks of Auguste Dupin, the main character in Poe's story "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." The guest doesn't think it's possible for men to reason out crimes as Dupin does. They talk of whether it is possible to read a man's character from his face. Mrs. Whitman asks Poe to have a daguerreotype made for her so that she may study his face at her leisure. Dupin stands to leave, announcing his intention to have a daguerreotype made right away.

Chapter 14: At the docks, Captain Elias is pleased to see Edmund and asks after Sis and Aunty Pru. Edmund doesn't wish to go into the sad story, so he tells Elias that Sis and Aunty are fine. Captain Elias mentions that he thought he saw Aunty Pru early this morning. It turns out the woman was not Aunty Pru, but she was asking about the dead woman found on the docks. Captain Elias told the woman about the inquest. Elias speaks of his role in finding the dead woman's body. Elias personally relieved Mr.



Fortnoy from his watch on board *The Lady Liberty*, and it was after he was relieved that Fortnoy found the body floating in the harbor. Elias claims to be a friend of Fortnoy's, and he also insists that Fortnoy stood watch on board the ship for three days. Edmund recalls Dupin telling him that Fortnoy most likely killed Aunt Pru, but if Elias is right about Fortnoy standing watch for three days, Fortnoy would not have been able to kill her. Edmund, depressed, begins to wonder how many of Dupin's other theories are wrong, too.

As Edmund turns to leave the docks, he spots a figure from the corner of his eye. Edmund realizes that he has not been seeing ghosts at all. He is being followed. Alone on the dark pier, Edmund seeks a way to escape. He spots a wharf extending some fifty yards into the river. It occurs to him to walk out to the end of the wharf. Whoever is following him will think he is trapped, but Edmund plans to duck to the underside of the wharf and make his way back until he is behind his pursuer. He walks down the wharf and stops at the midway point, pretending to examine a small boat named *Sunrise* but really making sure his pursuer is following him. Confident he's being pursued, Edmund runs to the end of the wharf and throws himself over. He grabs onto the wooden planking, and after a perilous moment, he finds a foothold underneath the wharf. He crawls along the underside of the wharf until he hears his pursuer's footsteps above him. When the footsteps move away from the end of the wharf, Edmund knows his trick has worked. He pulls himself back onto the dock and sees a shadowy man with white hair. Edmund wonders if the man is Mr. Fortnoy, but he cannot be sure. Still, he is pleased with his successful escape plan and cannot wait to tell Dupin about it.

Chapter 15: Looking for Dupin, Edmund returns to the cemetery where Dupin was to meet Mrs. Whitman. In the graveyard, he is surprised to see a young man with fair, almost white, hair kneeling as if praying or digging. The man smiles and approaches Edmund. Just then, the back door of Mrs. Whitman's house opens, and Edmund explains he is waiting for someone from the house to meet him. The man runs away hurriedly, dropping a small book in the process. Edmund picks it up. It is a prayer book from the First Unitarian Church. Dupin stands in the doorway of Mrs. Whitman's house, looking into the cemetery. He bids Edmund to enter the mausoleum and tell him what he sees. Fearfully, Edmund enters the crypt, but he sees nothing at all. Dupin tells Edmund that he has seen a ghost, and therefore he must be mad. Edmund asks if the ghost was his aunt's or his sister's, but Dupin only says that he must go have a daguerreotype made. Dupin tells Edmund that the story is over. Angry, Edmund insists Sis is alive. Dupin tells him he can believe this if he wants.

Edmund follows Dupin, shouting at him and tugging at his coat, trying to get him to stop and listen. Dupin ignores him and enters a daguerreotype studio. Edmund follows. The man who runs the studio settles Dupin in for his portrait and tells him to stay still for an entire minute while the portrait is taken. Dupin stares at the portraits on the opposite wall as the seconds tick down. A look of horror grows on his face, however, as the photograph is taken. As soon as the time has elapsed, Dupin leaps from his chair and points to one of the portraits on the wall, demanding to know when it was taken. The startled photographer tells him it was taken months ago. Dupin asks Edmund to confirm that his aunt only came to America a month ago. "'Then who is this?' Dupin insisted,



snatching at the boy with one hand, pointing toward the portrait with the other." (pg. 144) Edmund looks at the portrait and is surprised to see the face of his mother. He tells Dupin that his aunt and his mother were twins, just like Edmund and Sis.

Astounded, Dupin rushes out of the daguerreotype studio with Edmund in tow. They return to the mausoleum, where Dupin insists they search thoroughly, though he cannot say for what. Inside the crypt, Dupin finds some straw where the mattress had previously lain. He also finds another white button from Sis' shoe.

Chapter 16: As Edmund and Dupin leave the cemetery, Edmund peppers Dupin with questions, but Dupin refuses to answer them, as usual. Frustrated, Edmund stops short and demands that Dupin tell him what he knows. He berates Dupin for treating Edmund well sometimes and then suddenly treating him poorly. Edmund is angry and confused. Dupin asks if he's sure he wants to know the truth. Edmund insists. Dupin admits that until recently, he thought Edmund's mother, aunt and sister had all been murdered. Now that he realizes the women are twins, however, he thinks that either Edmund's aunt or his mother is still alive. Dupin reminds Edmund that when Edmund saw Aunt Pru's body, he noticed she wore a strange dress. Dupin asks Edmund if he checked on The Lady Liberty. Dupin is very surprised to learn the ship actually exists and that Fortnoy was indeed keeping watch on board at the time of the murder. Dupin is further surprised to hear about the white-haired man who followed Edmund. Dupin decides he needs a drink. Edmund tries to prevent him by telling him he behaves badly when he drinks. Edmund demands to know who Dupin really is. Dupin admits he is Edgar Allan Poe. Edmund asks why he lied, and Dupin says that Poe's life is too filled with the tragedy of death. Drinking eases the pain. Dupin promises to tell Edmund about the woman he saw in the cemetery if Edmund takes him to a tavern for a drink. At the tavern, Edmund refuses to eat because Dupin is drinking. He berates Dupin for lying, but Dupin insists, "Lies have their own truth." (pg. 152)

On the wall, Edmund notices a poster advertising a reward for finding Mrs. G. Rachett of London, England. Anyone with information regarding Mrs. Rachett is to contact Mr. Poley at the Providence Bank. Edmund tells Dupin that Mrs. Rachett is his mother. Edmund also tells Dupin about following the man he now realizes is his stepfather, Rachett, from the Hotel American House to Mrs. Whitman's home earlier in the day. As Edmund describes Rachett, Dupin stares at him thoughtfully and then tells Edmund that Rachett uses the name Arnold here in Providence. Edmund recalls overhearing a conversation between Mr. Arnold and Mrs. Powers this very morning in Mrs. Whitman's house. Edmund reports that Mrs. Powers, Helen's mother, wants Mr. Arnold, not Mr. Poe, to marry Helen. Dupin exclaims that this is the motive. He grabs the poster and shows it to the man behind the counter, asking if Mr. Throck takes private cases and if Throck has been working on finding Mrs. Rachett. The counterman admits it is true, and Dupin leaves the tavern in a hurry.

Outside on the street, Edmund warns Dupin as a man steps out of the shadows with a pistol. Edmund throws himself at the man, who hits Edmund with the pistol. By the time the man returns to pointing the gun at Dupin, Dupin is charging the man head on. The gun goes off, and Edmund watches the gunman run away down the street. He



recognizes the man as Mr. Rachett. Dupin is irritated because he should have anticipated an attack by Rachett. Edmund guides Dupin back to Edmund's room on Ann Street. Once inside, Dupin tells Edmund that if he wants the story to have an ending, he must find the piece of newspaper that the meat pie came wrapped in the other night. Edmund finds it and reads the notices aloud as instructed. Dupin wants to hear a couple in particular. Edmund reads the notice placed by the accountant, R. Peterson, who is looking for part-time evening work. The notice says Peterson can be reached at the Providence Bank. Edmund reads another business notice placed by Mr. William Arnold, residing at the Hotel American House. Dupin exclaims that he is right.

Edmund mentions the encoded piece of paper he found at Mrs. Whitman's house after eavesdropping on Mr. Arnold this morning. Dupin stares at the paper and states that he wrote this code in his famous story, "The Gold Bug." Using his own code, Dupin deciphers the message. It reads: "'Meet me at the hotel. I have moved girl and gold. Must leave. Sunrise at six a.m.'" (pg. 159) Edmund has several questions on his lips, but Dupin insists on ten minutes of silence. At the end of this time, Dupin announces that he understands everything now.

Chapter 17: Dupin lays two white buttons, a piece of string, a business card and the coded message on the table. He asks Edmund to listen carefully as he links the details together. Dupin begins the story with the betrayal of Edmund's mother by Mr. Rachett. Dupin states that Rachett has used Edmund's mother's money to get close to Mrs. Powers, a prominent local woman. Rachett uses the name Arnold because the Arnold family has a good reputation in Providence. Edmund's mother discovers that Rachett is in Providence, posing as Arnold, and follows him there hoping to recover her money and obtain a divorce. Aunty Pru hears nothing from her sister for a year, at which time she receives a message from a stranger bidding her to come to Providence to aid her sister. Since Aunt Pru receives no other letters from her sister, only this urgent message, Dupin concludes that Edmund's mother was already being held captive by Mr. Rachett. Edmund's aunt arrives and speaks to Mr. Poley at Providence Bank about offering a reward for finding Mrs. Rachett. Night Watchman Throck takes the case and tries to warn Dupin away with a threatening note because Throck wants the reward money.

Meanwhile Peterson, at the bank, learns of the details of the missing person's case. Rachett hears about it too, but he does not know if Aunt Pru knows that Rachett is using the pseudonym Arnold. To find out, Rachett places a business classified ad under the name Arnold to see what reaction he gets from Aunt Pru. Rachett must check the paper to ensure his ad has been placed properly, and in so doing he must have noticed Peterson's ad, which ran right next to Rachett's ad. Since Peterson lives in the Hotel American House, it seems likely Rachett/Arnold would have talked to Peterson. From Peterson, Rachett could have also learned about the gold in the vault. Dupin turns the conversation to talk of motive. Rachett hopes to marry Mrs. Powers' wealthy daughter, Helen Whitman. In order to do so, he must get rid of his existing wife, Edmund's mother, and he will also need enough money to convince Mrs. Powers he is a good prospect. With Peterson as his partner, Rachett is able to take care of both problems, the wife and the money. Peterson learns from Poley where Aunt Pru is staying, and then he and Rachett rent the room across the way. One of the men lures Aunty away with the



promise of information regarding her sister while the other man waits for Edmund to leave the room and then steals Sis.

Now Rachett holds both Edmund's aunt and mother. A cautious criminal, he decides to kill only his wife. The sisters learn of this plot and switch clothes so that the children will not be left motherless. Rachett kills Aunt Pru thinking she is his wife. Then on the night of the bank robbery, while Rachett and Peterson are away, Edmund's mother escapes. Edmund's mother is the grief-stricken woman Dupin saw at the cemetery, searching for her children. Dupin maintains that Rachett and Peterson kidnapped Aunt Pru in the first place so that the children would be vulnerable. Although they have Aunt Pru's key to the room, secrecy is essential. Therefore they wait until one of the children leaves and then snatch the other child through the window. Dupin points out that Edmund was kept away from the room by a man with white hair, Peterson, while Rachett grabbed Sis. Dupin explains that the airshaft leading into the bank vault is only large enough to lower a child through. Sis was so lowered and forced to pass up the gold bars until the vault was empty. Dupin points out the fairy tale book that Sis had been reading and notes that like Hansel and Gretel, Sis leaves a trail of boot buttons behind. The button in the mausoleum proves that Sis was kept there after the robbery. From courting Mrs. Whitman, Rachett knows that no one ever goes to the cemetery, and so it is a good place to hide Sis.

Upon spotting Edmund in the clothier's shop, Rachett panics. He searches Edmund's room and finds the portrait of his wife and her sister. Rachett begins to wonder if they've killed the wrong woman. He realizes that he must make a getaway. Rachett writes out the coded message and rushes to the mausoleum, where he retrieves Sis. Before he can leave the message there for Peterson, Mrs. Powers spots him and insists on talking to him about marrying Mrs. Whitman. Rachett drops the message, and Edmund finds it. Rachett returns to his hotel to meet Peterson and plan their escape. While Rachett goes to Mrs. Powers' tea party, Peterson is supposed to snatch Edmund. Edmund gets away on the wharf, and while at the tea party, Dupin alludes to the incident at the clothier's. Rachett believes Dupin knows the truth and therefore tries to kill him. Right now, Rachett and Peterson must be preparing to flee. Edmund remembers the white-haired young man he saw at the cemetery, and Dupin says it was Peterson. Edmund shows Dupin the prayer book Peterson dropped. Dupin idly remarks that the book must have been left behind by Edmund's mother. The Unitarian Church allows the homeless to sleep there, and he suggests Edmund's mother may be there right now. Edmund insists they go find her, but Dupin says his work is done. Dupin reminds Edmund that he is Edgar Allan Poe, an author, not an adventurer. As far as Poe is concerned, both women and Sis will die at the end of his story. Edmund tells him that this is real life, not a story, but Poe does not care. Edmund rushes out of the room.

Chapter 18: Edmund runs through the rain to the Unitarian Church. Here he finds his mother, who he has not seen for a year. They hold each other a long time, and then Edmund asks her to tell him everything. Mrs. Rachett found her husband living under the name Arnold and confronted him. Arnold told her she could have a divorce, but not her money. Mrs. Rachett stood firm, saying she would have both. Fearing she would cause him a scandal by revealing the truth, Rachett took her prisoner. Mrs. Rachett



managed to get a message to her sister eventually. When Aunt Pru arrived with the children, Arnold decided to use the children to commit a crime because he needed money to marry the wealthy Mrs. Whitman. At this point, Mrs. Rachett had agreed to leave Arnold alone if he would only let her go and leave the children be. Instead, Arnold kidnapped Pru. The two sisters learned of his plan to kill Edmund's mother. Pru convinced her sister that she should die in her place to spare the children from being orphaned. Mrs. Rachett escaped, and she followed Peterson to the mausoleum, where she found the mattress and presumed that her children were being kept prisoner there. Unable to locate the children, she returned to the church. Edmund promises to find Sis for her.

Part 2, Chapters 11-18 Analysis

In this section, the final pieces of the puzzle are carefully placed. The reader has by now received all the necessary clues to solve the murder, the bank robbery and the kidnapping of Sis. Because Avi writes for a young audience, he uses Poe's character to guide the reader along. Poe, as the detective, shares his thought process a bit more than is typical in detective stories, where usually all of the explanation is saved until the end. Chapter 17 represents the final explanation of the crime and revelation of the criminals, which is a standard part of the detective story genre. However, given the circumstances of poor Edmund's plight, it is rather cruel of Poe not to enlighten the boy further. Poe's melancholic character becomes an obstacle to solving the crime. What is Edmund to do when his clever detective, Dupin, decides he prefers to abandon the case and simply write about it instead?

Avi portrays Poe as a tormented soul, a brilliant thinker and a selfish drunkard. It is a surprisingly complex character portrayal for a children's book; Avi gives his young audience a lot of credit for their ability to comprehend the nuances of adult characters. Avi seeks to present some practical and moral lessons to his readers in the context of this entertaining historical fiction tale. Poe's character has many fine qualities, but he is also greatly flawed. Because of this, young Edmund is forced to learn the art of discernment. Edmund struggles to decide whether or not to trust Dupin/Poe, and in the end he comes to an important decision. Edmund realizes that he needs Poe's help, but also that ultimately Edmund must make decisions for himself. Because his only protector is so flawed, Edmund is forced to trust his own judgment even above the judgment of adults. Thus, this detective story is also a coming of age tale for young Edmund.



Part 3, Chapters 19-22

Part 3, Chapters 19-22 Summary

Chapter 19: Poe drinks and writes late into the night. He is interrupted by the arrival of Edmund and his mother. At first, Poe does not recognize Edmund because he is so absorbed in his story. For a moment, he believes that the characters he is writing about have come to life. Poe continues to write, but Edmund interrupts and asks him for money for food. Grudgingly, Poe gives Edmund money to buy food. Edmund is afraid to leave his mother with the drunken Poe, but because he must get food, he reluctantly leaves, locking the door behind him. Edmund sees Throck at the tavern where he goes to buy a meat pie. Edmund boldly asks Throck if Aunt Pru hired Throck to find his mother. Throck admits it is true. Edmund tells him his mother has been found, but his sister is missing. He needs Throck's help. Throck wants to know if the other man, meaning Poe, is getting the reward money for finding Edmund's mother. Edmund promises to put in a good word for Throck regarding the reward if Throck helps him find Sis.

Edmund tells Throck the whole story and then takes him back to the room. Poe tells Edmund that Throck is no longer part of his story and then dismisses the boy. Edmund pleads for Poe's help, but Poe insists his story is more important. Edmund snatches Poe's writing from his hands and threatens to rip up the story if Poe will not help. Throck convinces Poe to help by withholding his liquor. Grudgingly, Poe reads the decoded message to Throck: "Meet me at the hotel. I have moved girl and gold. Must leave. Sunrise at six a.m." (pg. 190) Throck points out that sunrise is at seven o'clock this time of year, just five hours from now. Throck and Poe drink together as Edmund watches them, feeling betrayed. Exhausted, Edmund falls asleep.

Chapter 20: Edmund wakes up at four a.m. His frail mother is deep asleep, and both Poe and Throck are passed out from drink. In a panic, Edmund realizes that none of the adults are in any shape to help him, and sunrise is not far away. Desperately, he recalls what the coded message said. If sunrise is not at six a.m., then the message is a lie of sorts. He recalls what Poe told him about lies having their own truth. Edmund ponders this and suddenly remembers the ship called Sunrise that he saw on the dock. That must be where they're keeping Sis. He tries to wake Poe, but Poe mumbles that it's too late and that Sis is dead. In a rage, Edmund rips up Poe's story, takes Throck's pistol and heads for the docks. On the wharf, he sees a light on in the Sunrise. Creeping closer, he sees Peterson untying the lines that keep the Sunrise moored to the dock. Edmund realizes he has just moments before the ship leaves with his sister. He points the gun at Peterson and demands his sister back. Peterson says Mr. Rachett has every right to take his daughter with him. Edmund says Rachett is no father to Sis. Peterson admits if it were up to him, Sis would be gone by now, but Rachett thinks she makes a good bargaining chip. Peterson tricks Edmund into coming closer, and then he knocks Edmund unconscious.



Chapter 21: Edmund wakes up moments later to find Poe and Throck bending over him. Edmund points to the Sunrise, already sailing away, and tells them that Sis is on board. Quickly, Throck readies a smaller boat called the Peggy. Edmund jumps on board before the two men can leave without him. Edmund learns that Poe figured out the meaning of the coded message in a dream and thanks him for coming. Poe chides him for destroying his manuscript and tells Edmund again that Sis is dead. Edmund insists that this is life, not a story, and that Sis is alive. Throck asks Edmund about the pistol, and Edmund realizes that Peterson must have taken it from him.

In a daring chase across wind-swept waters, the Peggy cuts off the Sunrise, trapping the ship in the bay. Peterson begins shooting at the ship, and the Sunrise tries to pull the Peggy onto the rocks. The boats sail head to head, and Edmund watches as Peterson brings his sister up on deck. Sis is alive. Sis scrambles away from Peterson, and Rachett lets go of the wheel to try and catch her. Sis scrambles overboard, and Edmund dives into the water to save her. When he surfaces with his sister in tow, he sees the Sunrise overturn in the water. It slides beneath the waves with Peterson, Rachett and the gold bars on board.

Chapter 22: Six hours later, Edmund leaves Sis and their mother in the room as he walks Poe down to the street. Edmund asks if Poe will marry Mrs. Whitman, but Poe thinks it is doubtful because too many people oppose their union. Poe says his art is too strong, and it frightens the timid. As Poe starts to walk off, Edmund demands the truth. Was Poe really trying to save Sis, or was his goal all along to make sure Sis died so that his story would end properly? When Poe does not answer, Edmund accuses him of being afraid, not of dying, but of living. Poe suggests that Sis would have lived longer through his story than she could in reality. Poe drops what remains of his story to the ground and turns on his heel. After Poe leaves, Edmund picks up the pages. The pages contain a prologue that begins in a tenement on Ann Street. The boy in the story is named Edgar, but that name has been crossed out and now reads Edmund.

Part 3, Chapters 19-22 Analysis

The climactic action scene in Chapter 21 gives Edmund an opportunity to make his own choices and determine his own fate. Edmund has realized that Poe has his own agenda and is not terribly interested in saving Sis' life. Therefore the daring little boy chooses to dive into the frigid, choppy waters in order to single-handedly rescue his sister. Poe's morbid determination that Sis should die because his own wife by the same name is already dead shows the reader that Poe has given into his depression and despair. Rather than see Edmund's story as a second chance to create a better ending to his life's story, Poe is determined that Edmund should wind up as desolate as he. Poe's refusal to hope for Edmund's happiness reflects Poe's choice to wallow in his own depression. Poe has given up on life, and even his indecisive courting of Mrs. Whitman reflects his lack of inner drive.

Whether this is true of the real life author, Edgar Allan Poe, cannot be definitively known by historians. However, Poe's real life decline into depression and alcoholism certainly



suggests that Avi's characterization of the great author has merit. Regardless of the truth, Avi's story combines true historical details of Poe's life along with true details about Poe's fictional characters in *The Man Who Was Poe*. The style of the novel mimics the style of Poe's detective stories, and Edmund's character is meant to parallel the circumstances of Edgar Allan Poe's life. Avi successfully meshes the elements of Poe's life and works into this unique children's tale. As a final touch, Avi further blends fact and fiction by revealing that the story Dupin/Poe has been writing begins precisely, to the word, the same way as *The Man Who Was Poe*. This book should inspire its young readers to an interest in both history and literature.



Epilogue: Something About Edgar Allan Poe

Epilogue: Something About Edgar Allan Poe Summary

Edgar Allan Poe was born in 1809 in Boston. His parents were actors. His father abandoned him shortly after his birth, and his mother died when he was three. A man named John Allan took Edgar into his home in Richmond, Virginia, where Edgar grew up. As a young man, Poe acquired a reputation for drinking and gambling and had a falling out with John Allan. Poe ran away to Boston and published a few poems, but he was unable to earn a living and so joined the army. Hoping to reconcile with John Allan, Poe entered West Point, but he was shortly expelled. This led to a complete break in relations between Poe and Allan. Poe moved to New York City and later to Baltimore. Here his writing career took off, and his reputation as a writer became legendary. Poe's aunt, Mrs. Clemm, took him in and became like a mother to Poe. Poe eventually married her daughter, Virginia. At the time of the marriage, Poe was twenty-seven years old, and Virginia, whom he called Sis, was only thirteen.

Poe published "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," considered to be the first detective story, in 1841. The name of Poe's fictional detective is Auguste Dupin. "The Raven" was published in 1845, which made Poe's fame international. His wife died in 1847, and Poe fell into depression and heavy drinking. In 1848, Poe courted two women, Anne Richmond of Massachusetts and Sarah Helen Whitman of Providence, Rhode Island. In Providence, Poe had a daguerreotype made for Mrs. Whitman. Over the objections of his would-be mother-in-law, Mrs. Powers, Poe and Mrs. Whitman became engaged. Mrs. Whitman later broke the engagement due to Edgar's drinking. A year later, Poe died mysteriously in Baltimore.

Epilogue: Something About Edgar Allan Poe Analysis

In this final section, the author presents his young readers with a brief biography of Edgar Allan Poe. Throughout the course of the novel, Dupin/Poe remarks frequently on the similarities between his life and young Edmund's. In this biographical section, the reader can judge for him or herself just how similar the two characters may have been. Like Edmund, Poe lost both mother and father at a young age. However, Edmund's mother did not disappear until Edmund was ten, unlike Poe, who lost his mother at the tender age of three. Also, Edmund's kindly aunt appears in his life much earlier than Poe's aunt, Mrs. Clemm. Perhaps this is what makes the difference between their two characters, for Edmund has at least had the benefit of being nurtured and mothered by both mother and aunt in his youngest, most formative years. Perhaps by the time Poe's kindly aunt entered the picture, it was already too late for Poe, whose own character was formed in the complete absence of a maternal figure in his youth. In any case, it becomes clear from the biography how many details of the story are woven around

historical truth. This final section proves Avi is an excellent researcher and has a fine imagination for fleshing out minor historical details into a rich, creative fictional story.



Characters

Edmund Albert George Brimmer

Edmund Brimmer, as the story begins, is a very frightened little boy. He has been recently traumatized by the mysterious absence of his mother, followed by a long sea voyage to the foreign land of America where his Aunt Pru tells him he is not safe. Aunt Pru has passed her fears down to Edmund, and she has also taught him to always trust adults. But now that Edmund finds himself alone and unsupervised in a strange city, he must decide for himself whether all adults are trustworthy or not. His early inclination to obedience is gradually replaced by the realization that he must rely on his own sense of internal guidance. In this way, young Edmund begins to come of age. He is smart enough to know his limitations and actively seeks adult guidance with his perplexing situation, but Edmund quickly learns not to trust adults blindly.

The arrival of Auguste Dupin into his life helps Edmund along in learning this lesson. Dupin at first is a great help and comfort to Edmund. Dupin's logical mind sorts out Edmund's predicament and begins to make sense of the scary situation in which Edmund finds himself. Dupin provides the boy with food and becomes Edmund's only source of security in this strange city. Unfortunately, Dupin's nature has a dark side, and he becomes both careless and negligent when he drinks heavily. Edmund feels understandably betrayed by Dupin's lack of follow-through, and he begins to challenge Dupin's decisions. Edmund finds the courage to stand up to Dupin even though he is dependent on this mysterious man, who turns out not to be named Dupin at all. In the end, Edmund finds he has had the knowledge and the power to save his sister's life all along. Although Dupin comes along for the ride in the final chase scene, he does not contribute to the rescue effort. Edmund chooses to trust Night Watchman Throck despite Dupin's warning, and together Edmund and Throck save the day and rescue Sis.

Auguste Dupin / Edgar Allan Poe

Edgar Allan Poe's character is initially introduced as Auguste Dupin, the name of a fictional detective in one of Poe's own stories. Poe wants to remain incognito when he arrives in Providence, Rhode Island, partly because of the famous author's general sense of melodramatic paranoia. This oftentimes unflattering portrait depicts a maudlin, morbid, moody artist. Yet when Poe pretends to be Dupin, he takes on the characteristics of his great fictional detective with relish. Poe as Dupin enjoys outwitting criminals and tracking down clues. His energetic investigation inspires young Edmund to trust him, and Edmund feels grateful to Dupin for feeding and protecting him as well. Unfortunately, Edmund doesn't realize Poe is playing a role. Once Poe tires of pretending to be Dupin, Poe loses interest in helping Edmund. Poe the tortured artist emerges, and he selfishly leaves Edmund in the middle of a dangerous situation without seeing it through. The determined Edmund forces Poe to finish solving the kidnapping



of Edmund's sister. Thanks to Poe's logical and brilliant deductions, the kidnapping plot is exposed, and the names of the villains are revealed. Yet for Poe this is enough. He tells Edmund he is an artist, not an adventurer, and he refuses to take part in actually rescuing Sis, although his refusal puts both Edmund and Sis into mortal danger.

Mr. Asa Throck

Throck is a night watchman in Providence, Rhode Island. He is hired by Aunty Pru to track down her sister. Unfortunately for Aunt Pru, Throck is more dogged than he is intelligent. Throck does not give up the case even after Pru has been murdered, but he accomplishes rather little in terms of solving the crime. His presence, however, serves to throw the reader off the track as to who the real murderer may be, for Throck always manages to show up at the scene of the crime, looking suspicious. Although Throck is a city official, he would not be confused with a proper gentleman even on his best days. Throck speaks with a lower-class accent and has dealings with some of the rough characters down at the docks. When Poe first meets Throck, he deduces that Throck is a former military man who enjoys a good brawl. Throck was in fact thrown out of the military for excessive brawling. While this fact does not commend his character, nonetheless Throck turns out to be more good-hearted than initial appearances would suggest. Throck is not afraid of hard work and has enough experience as a sailor to be considered 'salty.' Throck takes pride in the fact that he never gives up on a case until it is solved. Eventually, Edmund and Poe realize that Throck is working for, not against, Aunt Pru. At this point, Edmund tells Throck everything they have learned so far, and Throck agrees to help the boy find his sister. Throck proves valiant of heart in the final chase scene as he uses his sailor's ingenuity to trap the runaway ship carrying Sis.

Mrs. Helen Whitman

Helen Whitman is a widow, and yet she is still a young woman. As such, she seeks a new husband and entertains both Mr. Poe and Mr. Arnold as potential suitors. Mrs. Whitman has a poetic, romantic heart, and she is thrilled by the attentions of famous author, Edgar Allan Poe. Mrs. Whitman is also a rich woman and considered very respectable, and so Poe's tendency to drink causes a rift between them and causes Poe's bid for her hand to be rejected by Helen's mother, Mrs. Powers.

The author uses Mrs. Whitman's character to enlighten his young readers a bit as to the treatment of women in the nineteenth century. When Mrs. Whitman meets Poe in the cemetery, she is terrified that they will be discovered together. Although they are doing absolutely nothing that could be considered morally wrong during this meeting, simply being caught alone with a man was enough in those days to disgrace even a highly placed woman like Helen Whitman. Such a scandal would have made her virtually unmarriageable, as she would have been considered 'used goods' simply because she spent two minutes alone speaking to Mr. Poe. Such was the fate of women in this era, trapped by strict, judgmental social convention and unable to move about freely in the world just as if women were prisoners or slaves.



Mrs. Powers

Mrs. Powers is a wealthy and much respected lady in Providence. She is one of the leading social arbiters of fashion and good taste, and anyone who meets her approval is assured a respectable place in Rhode Island society. For this reason, Mr. Rachett, posing as Mr. Arnold, insinuates himself into her good graces. It is Rachett's dream to be considered a gentleman of good standing, although he is in reality just the opposite. Mrs. Powers, unfortunately, falls for Rachett's act and approves of his desire to marry her daughter, Helen. Thus Mrs. Powers becomes Mr. Poe's enemy as she seeks to put an end to Poe's courtship of Helen.

Mr. Arnold / Mr. Rachett

Mr. Rachett is a more genteel criminal than Peterson, although in the end he is not above committing murder for financial gain. Rachett would simply rather order someone else to do the actual killing. Rachett fancies himself a gentleman, or at least it is his fondest desire to be so viewed by society. In pursuit of this goal, Rachett seeks the typical accoutrements of gentlemen, namely lots of money and a wife from a socially powerful family. Apparently, Edmund's mother's English pedigree was insufficient for Mr. Rachett. He marries her only to steal her money, and then he dumps her immediately after the wedding. He absconds with her funds to America, where he presents himself under a false name. The name he uses, Arnold, is the name of a wealthy and respectable family in the Providence area, and it helps him make the right social connections. When his wife pursues him to Providence and threatens to ruin his plan to marry a high society widow, Rachett orders Peterson to kill Mrs. Rachett. He begins to woo Mrs. Whitman before the body of his current wife has cooled. To his deep chagrin, he discovers that Peterson has killed the wrong woman. With Mrs. Rachett still alive and on the loose, she can expose him not only as a thieving husband, but as a murderer and bank robber as well. Rachett is forced to flee with his stolen loot. In the end, when his ship slides under the waves of Narragansett Bay, the reader is more inclined to mourn the loss of the stolen gold bars.

Mr. Peterson

Peterson is Arnold's accomplice in crime. Peterson works at the bank and thus has knowledge that he and Rachett can exploit to steal the gold bars from the vault. Additionally, Peterson provides knowledge of the reward money Aunt Pru is offering for the safe return of her sister. Of the two criminals, Peterson is far more bloodthirsty than Rachett. Peterson looks like the boy next door, but in his heart lurks a sociopathic temperament. Had the decision been his, not Rachett's, Sis and Mrs. Rachett would have been killed as well, and Peterson would have been the one to do the dirty work. Although Peterson is staunchly on the wrong side of the law, he is interested in detective work. He is an avid reader of Poe's detective stories, and he even employs a secret code from one of Poe's stories in the commission of the crime.



Mrs. G. Rachett

Mrs. Rachett is Edmund's mother, and she is not directly introduced to the reader until the end of the story. She is the catalyst who brings Aunt Pru, Edmund and Sis to Rhode Island, into the path of danger. The reader learns little about her personality other than that she is a poor judge of husbands. Mrs. Rachett plays the role of the woman done wrong by her fiendish spouse, Mr. Rachett. By the time Edmund finds his mother, she is too emotionally drained by her experience to be of any use in his quest to find Sis. Edmund must therefore take a leap into adulthood and act in his mother's stead.

Sis

Sis is Edmund Brimmer's sister. Whether Sis is a nickname or real name is not revealed, and since the story is about finding the missing girl, she is not directly present for most of the narrative. However, the reader can deduce that Sis is a clever girl and keeps a cool head in a crisis. When she is abducted by her evil stepfather, she comes up with the bright idea of leaving buttons from her shoes to mark her trail, just as her favorite fairy tale characters, Hansel and Gretel, do. Edmund and Poe are able to track her down by following the trail of buttons.

Catherine

Catherine is the maid Edmund meets at Mrs. Whitman's house. Initially, Edmund cannot understand why Catherine is so hostile to him when he arrives to deliver Mr. Poe's messages. Eventually, Edmund learns that Catherine is not Mrs. Whitman's maid, but rather her mother, Mrs. Powers', maid. Thus Catherine's loyalties lie with Mrs. Powers, who is determined to prevent her daughter from marrying the unsuitable Poe.



Objects/Places

Providence, Rhode Island

Avi, the author of *The Man Who Was Poe*, resides in Providence, Rhode Island and has based this historical fiction novel on several real events which took place in Providence in 1848.

Narragansett Bay

The climactic chase scene between the Peggy and the Sunrise takes place on the choppy, wind-swept waters of Narragansett Bay.

The Docks

The boat dock at Narragansett Bay, where Edmund and his Sis used to play in happier days, is where most of the dangerous action scenes in *The Man Who Was Poe* take place.

Eighty-Eight Benefit Street

Mrs. Helen Whitman resides at eighty-eight Benefit Street in Providence with her mother, Mrs. Powers.

The Cemetery

The cemetery on Church Street is located immediately behind Mrs. Whitman's home. No one ever goes to this old cemetery, and so the novel's villain, Mr. Rachett, finds it an ideal place to hide Sis.

The Hotel American House

Both Rachett and Peterson reside at the Hotel American House. This coincidence brings them together, and they decide to become partners in crime.

Throck's Pistol

Edmund takes Throck's pistol before heading to the docks to save his sister. Peterson wrests the gun from the boy and later shoots at Edmund, Poe and Throck with Throck's own gun.



The Coded Message

Edmund finds a coded message, dropped by Rachett, which reveals the location of the girl and the gold. The message utilizes the same coding system Poe created for his story "The Gold Bug," and Poe is able to translate the message for Edmund.

White Buttons

Like the trail of breadcrumbs left by Hansel and Gretel, Sis leaves a white button from her boots everywhere she is taken by her captors. The buttons help Poe and Edmund track her down.

Poe's Notebook

Poe's notebook contains the fictional account he is writing about Edmund's life. When Edmund finds it and learns that Poe intends to kill Sis off in his story, he is furious. Ultimately, Edmund rips up the story when Poe refuses to help him rescue his sister.

Setting

The Man Who Was Poe is set in the port city of Providence. It is recreated by Avi in rich images of old neighborhoods and wooden ships that traded with the other ports of the world. Woven into the images of the city are historical figures such as Edgar Allan Poe and Mrs. Whitman, the woman he hoped to marry. Fog plays an important role in events, hiding or disguising figures who move about dark streets and across the city's piers.

Social Sensitivity

The Edgar Allan Poe of *The Man Who Was Poe* is an alcoholic whose heavy drinking makes him abusive and delusional—he frequently mistakes people for the spirits of the dead. His alcoholism is ruining his life, making him seem like a lowlife to many who meet him. His emotional intensity is almost like insanity, wherein he imagines amazing events in his surroundings, but this socially acceptable artistic temperament is distorted by his alcoholic hazes, and he often forgets what he has been doing. As a portrait of how alcohol abuse can destroy even a great mind, Avi's Poe is a striking figure—one unlikely to make alcohol abuse appear to be anything better than stupid, and often downright sickening.

Literary Qualities

The Man Who Was Poe resembles a play, with its events taking place in discreet scenes such as Edmund's room and the cemetery; each setting serves as a stage, limiting the action to its boundaries. Within each setting are clues to be discovered. At first it is the mysterious Dupin (Poe) who spots the important details and interprets them, but the logic he uses seems to be a habit of thinking, because Edmund picks up on it and eventually is able to identify clues and make some conclusions of his own. Organizing The Man Who Was Poe as if it were a drama gives the novel a strong you-are-there tone, with characters and clues standing out in high relief from scene to scene, making the settings and people easy to visualize.



Themes

Locked-Room Mysteries

Detective story fans and horror buffs of all ages have long been fascinated by the locked-room mystery genre. In *The Man Who Was Poe*, Avi pays tribute to the originator of this specialized genre, Edgar Allan Poe. By weaving a locked-room mystery into this historical fiction novel about Poe's life, Avi introduces a new generation of readers to the chilling pleasures of the locked-room mystery. The prologue encapsulates the story's locked room mystery with its description of Sis' astounding disappearance. Perhaps because he is writing for a younger audience, Avi varies the rules of this literary genre slightly. For example, Edmund does not discover Sis' dead body in the locked room, which is typically the case with such mysteries. Yet, her disappearance is frightening enough, particularly since eleven-year-old Edmund is now left completely alone in a strange city full of unknown dangers.

Avi picks up the locked-room concept again with the subsequent robbery at the Providence Bank. In this case, the locked room is a sealed-off bank vault from which bars of California gold mysteriously vanish. True to the typical locked-room genre, there is only one entrance/exit to the vault, and this is an impermeable, locked metal door. This genre typically permits a small chimney or airshaft, so long as this opening is not accessible to a normal-sized adult. Unluckily for Sis, her child-sized body is just slight enough to fit through the opening in the airshaft. Because of this, the criminal masterminds behind the robbery kidnap the child from her locked hotel room only to lower her into the locked vault. From here she must place individual gold bars into a basket which the criminals then raise out of the vault through the airshaft. As with most stories of this genre, the crime is almost absurdly complicated in detail. Yet, what readers mainly enjoy about locked-room mysteries is the mental ingenuity required to plan - or to solve - the perfect crime.

Death

Death is a difficult subject to address in children's literature. Author Avi finds a unique way of discussing death through the death-obsessed character of Edgar Allan Poe. In the novel, young Edmund is forced to confront the possibility that his mother, his aunt and his sister have all been murdered. This is incredibly frightening emotional territory for a children's book - not only death, but also murder. Further, there is not only one murder, but three potential murders. To make matters worse for poor Edmund, he is forced to actually identify the water-logged body of his aunt as she lies dripping on the docks. Poe is the only person to whom Edmund can turn for help, but Poe is not capable of softening the blow for Edmund's sake. If anything, Poe points out the futility of even trying to save Sis' life because death is inevitable. Poe is of the opinion that the only lasting life is the life of a character in a book. Instead of convincing Edmund to



soldier on and attempt to preserve Sis' life, Poe decides it is more convenient to consider her life already forfeit.

Ironically, Poe's negative influence has the opposite effect on Edmund. Poe is so thoroughly obsessed with death that both Edmund and the reader become impatient with his maudlin thoughts. Poe cannot think of love without thinking of death in the same breath. His feelings for Mrs. Whitman are tied up with his unresolved grief over the death of his first wife. Despite the pain Poe has suffered from the death of his own beloved Sis, he finds death beautiful and utterly moving. Death is an integral part of his art, and he wallows in it to the point of forgetting to live his own life. A great example of his absurd morbidity occurs at the cemetery where he is to meet his fiancée, Mrs. Whitman. Poe preens in front of a crypt, attempting to strike the perfect artistic pose. He wants Mrs. Whitman to see him emerging from the crypt and metaphorically emerging from death. This silly posturing quickly becomes tiring for Edmund, who is more concerned about saving the life of his sister. Poe's negative attitude inspires Edmund to rebel against Poe and take matters into his own hands to save Sis. Edmund sums up this theme when he accuses Poe of using his fear of death as an excuse to hide from life.

Coming of Age

The author achieves a poignant note in the opening scene when Edmund is left all alone in a bad part of town in a strange city. He speaks the language but doesn't know the local customs, which makes this eleven-year-old boy particularly vulnerable. Sadder still are the circumstances in which he's been abandoned. He first lost his mother a year ago, and now his aunt has been missing for days. Edgar and Sis hole up in their dirty tenement room, afraid to venture outside even to buy food. Their fear seems at first unreasonable, but it proves prescient as it turns out that evil is lurking just outside their window. When Edmund goes out for food, he is so frightened that he insists on locking Sis inside the hotel room for her safety. He ventures out into the dark night with their last nickel, but he doesn't even know the value of local currency. Throughout the story, whenever Edmund purchases food, he lays his money on the counter and asks how much it can buy. This young boy from England is at the mercy of strangers who he must rely on for help. Despite being naive and fearful, Edmund is blessed with a great deal of courage. He summons the strength to face his fears when it becomes necessary for his and Sis' survival.

Auguste Dupin is one of the strangers Edmund meets. Edmund begins to rise above his initial naivety through his association with Dupin. Without a trusted adult to guide him, Edmund knows he lacks the knowledge and skill to find his sister. Dupin treats him well at first and immediately learns what's become of Aunt Pru, but when Dupin begins to treat Edmund poorly, Edmund is forced to reevaluate his trust for Dupin. Edmund realizes that he cannot afford to trust anyone blindly, and he begins to rely on his own sense of discernment. Some of Dupin's wise words help Edmund in his coming of age process, which further confuses Edmund. Yet Edmund realizes that he himself must decide which of Dupin's words are wise and which are foolish. As Dupin tells him when

they first meet, Edmund realizes in the end that he has had the knowledge to find his sister inside him all the time.



Themes/Characters

The character in *The Man Who Was Poe* who is likely to spark the most interest is Edgar Allan Poe, the author who is often regarded as the greatest short story writer of all. The facts of his life are disputed; he did not help matters by sensationalizing some of his life in his letters. After his death, those who first wrote of his life, especially Rufus W. Griswold, Poe's literary executor, depicted him in a bad light. They did this to sully his reputation—of which they were envious—but also to sell newspapers, sensational stories attracting large audiences then as they do now.

Poe was depicted as man thrown out of the army for drunkenness, as is mentioned in *The Man Who Was Poe*, and as a drug abuser whose drug-induced delusions inspired his tales and poems such as "The Raven." There seems little room for doubt that he did sometimes behave oddly in public, stumbling as if drunk, and he did have trouble holding down jobs, although was a good and moderately successful newspaper editor for many years. Beginning with Arthur Hobson Quinn's *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography*, published in 1941, researchers began to reassess Poe's life; Quinn pointed out significant flaws in the depictions of Poe's dissolution.

Since the mid-1970s, information has come to light that suggests that Poe was actually a fine, robust military officer who had to end his military career because illness. Medicine was barely becoming a science in Poe's day, and few physicians had a clue as to what was wrong with him, although modern researchers suggest that he had multiple sclerosis, a disease that often has its first onset when its victim is an adult, and which comes and goes, allowing its victim to speak and move about normally, sometimes for long periods, before resurfacing and restricting its victim's speech and mobility. In addition, there is evidence that Poe was allergic to alcohol and rarely touched it. Thus the alternative view of Poe is of a man who fought a poorly understood, debilitating disease with remarkable achievements, and who was far from being a whimpering man lost in a haze of drugs and alcohol, being instead a strong man of strong purpose who worked hard and responsibly all of his life. His death has been alternately described as the result of a prolonged drinking binge and the result of a seizure which left him prostrate and unable to coordinate his movements, leaving him to be made so ill by exposure to cold that he died shortly after being discovered. Those in favor of the latter view cite his recent marriage to a woman he had been unable to marry when young because he was poor and her father was rich and rejected him; he had every reason to live and to behave himself.

Regardless as to which view of Poe is true, Avi has chosen the traditional image of Poe as a tormented personality haunted by the deaths of close family members and of his wife. When Edmund meets him, Poe is in the throes of a delusion, and Edmund seems like a demon to him. Edmund's mystery may serve as a focus for Poe's mind, because he seems to straighten himself and grasp the reality of the situation. That he chooses to be his great fictional detective Auguste Dupin may be his way of pushing his inner demons aside; Dupin has the ability to focus his mind on facts and to exclude distractions. Poe declares himself to be Dupin and tries to behave as his character



would. Too lost in his alcohol addiction, Poe is not able to stay focused for long, but he tends to think of himself as Dupin when alert and as Poe when drunk.

Edmund seems to be his best link to reality; the boy's problems excite his imagination and energize him, making him move when he might otherwise remain torpid.

Edmund Brimmer is from London, England. His father died years ago and his mother then married Mr. Rachett, who took all her money and fled to America, where he used the stolen resources to pose as a well-to-do gentleman. At the opening of *The Man Who Was Poe*, Edmund is a docile, very obedient boy. He and his sister have gone hungry for a couple of days while waiting for their aunt to return, as she told them not to leave. Edmund spends much of the book reminding himself of his aunt's rules that tell him never to question adults and to accept that adults know what is best for children. As he struggles to keep "Dupin" active and himself fed and alive, he learns to take charge of himself. It is a sometimes painful process, but he learns to stand for himself and to trust in his own ability to think. His diving into the bay to rescue his sister is therefore not only a daring and heroic action, it symbolizes his break with the voices of grownups telling him what he cannot do.

Asa Throck and Fortnoy are significant figures, serving at first as red herrings (characters meant to mislead readers away from the real villains). Poe finds them looking at the body of a woman who may be Edmund's aunt or mother (they were twins and only Edmund can tell them apart); they match descriptions of a large man and a white-haired man who used an apartment to spy on Edmund and his sister. Eventually, Fortnoy proves to have been unable to have been the murderer, providing the crucial clue that allows "Dupin" to declare confidently, "Yes, I understand all." Throck plays an important role in the thwarting of the criminals' plans to escape with stolen gold, and he helps Edmund at a crucial time. He is well motivated and remains in character and is no last-minute savior. He wants the reward money for finding the missing woman, and he wants a good word from Edmund to his superiors; his interest all along has not only been in the money but in taking pride in his work, declaring often that he "sees it through" when he takes a job.

The villains themselves are not on stage much, but they are intertwined in the lives of Poe and Edmund. Rachett has been posing as Mr. Arnold, a man of a respected Providence family, and he has been courting Mrs. Whitman, Poe's love. Poe offers Mrs. Whitman an exciting intellectual life, a life of poetry and romance; Arnold offers money (which, as Rachett, he stole). Arnold is also Edmund's step-father. The presence of Edmund's mother in Providence creates problems for a man who intends to marry again; he will give her the divorce she wants, but he will not return her money. Squeamish, he will not do his own killing, but has another kill his wife for him (making a mistake when doing it). The children are merely tools for him. He kidnaps the first one who is left alone in the apartment, Sis, and forces her to help him steal the gold. A clever planner, he makes both the kidnapping and the theft of the gold seem impossible, not realizing that his rival in love, Poe, will find out his crime and prove more than a match for him in cleverness.

Style

Point of View

The Man Who Was Poe is written in the third-person omniscient narrative style. Although the novel is historical fiction, the omniscient narrator does not have a historical point of view. The story is written as if 1848 were the present day. Thus, rather than approaching the story from a historical point of view, the author immerses the reader into living history. This approach is a wonderful way of engaging young readers and allowing them to experience first-hand what life was like in the nineteenth century. The period piece effect of the narrative brings home both the similarities and differences between early America and the modern day. Much of the viewpoint focuses on the young protagonist, Edmund Brimmer, and through his character modern-day children can more easily relate to the different world portrayed within these pages.

The omniscient narrator follows Edmund's train of thought while young Edmund struggles to reconcile the often-conflicting advice he receives from the grown-ups around him. Since the two most trusted adults in his life, his mother and his aunt, are both missing for most of the story, Edmund is forced to decide how far he is willing to trust the strange, brooding figure of Poe. Edmund displays remarkable discernment in what he chooses to accept as truth. Poe shares some remarkable insights with the young boy, such as, "Lies have their own truth," (Part 2, Chapter 16, pg. 152) and, "there is a difference between what happens and what we would like to have happened." (Part 1, Chapter 2, pg. 23) Edmund is able to use these valuable words to his benefit, while at the same time rejecting some of Poe's more negative theories, like Poe's insistence that Sis is dead and that it is futile to look for her.

Setting

The Man Who Was Poe is set in historical Providence, Rhode Island. The story adheres to many real details about Edgar Allan Poe's life as well as creating a realistic portrait of Providence circa 1848. While the author does not indicate if the settings in his story, like the Providence Bank and The Hotel American House, are real, Avi takes great care to describe the type of architecture and city planning which was actually used in this period. The tenements on Ann Street likely refer to real places that existed in Providence, as such run-down buildings were common in the dangerous area surrounding the city's docks. The dock itself is described realistically as well, as are the types of boats used during this era.

The author has taken great care in researching the historical accuracy of the chase scene in particular. The mechanics of sailing the *Peggy* and the *Sunrise* in the story reflect the actual sea-going technology of the day. Only an expert sailor could have maneuvered the *Peggy* so competently through choppy waters in the climactic chase scene, and the author's historical knowledge of sailing elevates him to the rank of expert



in late 1800s sailing vessels. This accurate depiction enlightens the reader well enough so that the reader can follow the exciting chase scene detail by detail. Avi's historical research makes the reader feel at home in this long-ago world of early modern America.

Language and Meaning

The Man Who Was Poe is a period piece, and as such, the novel's prose reflects the common verbiage of the era in which it is set. The manner of speaking in 1848 America has been carefully researched and imitated by the author. Mrs. Whitman's character represents the speech of the upper classes, while her servants' patois is slightly differentiated to reflect their lower social status. Introduced into this careful mix is the fact of Edmund's English accent. Edmund, who comes from a well-to-do family, displays the formal speech patterns of the British upper crust. As was common for the day regardless of ethnicity or social status, the characters are referred to by their formal titles throughout the novel.

The biggest challenge facing the young audience for whom this book is intended lies in understanding the societal differences revealed by the language. Youngsters today may be familiar with a dozen trendy clothing labels available in shopping malls, and yet in this book, there is only one clothier's shop in town where each garment is handmade. The author does not interrupt his story to explain these differences, and so the reader must allow him or herself to be absorbed by the world of the story. This is particularly true in the climactic action scene, in which the author uses authentic nautical terms from the late 1840s. While some of the nautical terms used are old-fashioned and out of date, their authenticity helps transport the reader to another place and time.

Structure

The Man Who Was Poe is divided into three parts. It is fronted by a prologue and ends with a separate section containing a brief biography of Edgar Allan Poe. The story structure is completely linear, although in deference to the fast-paced action, the story occasionally cuts back and forth between simultaneous events taking place in different locations. In these instances, it is usually necessary to turn the clock back an hour or two to fill in all the details. Part One of the novel encompasses the first ten chapters. These chapters contain the entire plot exposition, and they bookend the revelation of every detail needed to solve the crime. Chapter 10 ends with Edmund's delayed revelation of his mother's motive for coming to America. Once detective Poe realizes that there is an evil stepfather in the picture, he realizes the picture is complete. Part Two thus becomes an exercise in tracking down the details to verify Poe's theory. The eight chapters of Part Two give the reader a chance to consider all the evidence and reach a conclusion. As always in this type of detective story, the reader has a chance to race the investigator's sharp mind, hoping to grasp the killer's identity before Poe has a chance to explain the murderer, motive and means of the crime. This turning point occurs in Chapter 17, and Chapter 18 rounds out Part Two by providing Edmund's missing mother's side of the story. Finally, Part Three consists of only four chapters,

which include an exciting action-oriented climax and the final resolution of the story. In an interesting twist, the author ends the story by repeating the prologue through the character of Poe's writing. The biography of Poe at the end provides closure for the reader as well as information of historical note.



Quotes

"Oh, why was it so hard to know what to do? Because I'm young, Edmund answered himself. Grownups know what's right. Then he thought, If only I were older and a real man!" Prologue, pg. 7

"And you're sure you want *my* help?' Dupin went on.

"Once again Edmund became aware of the man's eyes. They seemed so fierce, so penetrating. He was reminded of Aunty Pru's constant warning: he and Sis must be very cautious in their dealings with strangers in Providence. But...

"I do want your help, sir,' he finally said. 'I've no one else.'

"I know,' Dupin said darkly." Part 1, Chapter 1, pp. 19-20

"The act of writing eased his tension. He read over what he had done. The words gave him a sharp pang of pain. *Why* must death always be certain? Could he never escape it? Never think of another ending? Depression crowded in." Part 1, Chapter 3, pg. 30

"But let me impress one thing upon you...Edmund - if I remember your name,' Dupin continued. 'It is *you* who have the knowledge that will enable me to resolve this affair.'" Part 1, Chapter 4, pg. 40

"Pulling back from the stench of liquor, Edmund waited.

"Don't,' Dupin admonished, 'don't, under any circumstances, give my letter to Mrs. Whitman *unless* she is *completely* alone.'" Part 1, Chapter 6, pg. 62

"But once again he could almost hear his aunty saying, 'Edmund! There are no such things as ghosts.' So when he saw nothing more, not even a shadow, he decided he'd only imagined some stranger." Part 2, Chapter 11, pg. 106

"There!' cried Dupin, pointing where he had seen the figure. 'The ghost of a woman. Standing before the mausoleum. Demanding her children.'" Part 2, Chapter 12, pg. 113

"Suddenly he understood who these monsters were: They were his own creations, his own torments, his own pain. Confront them, he said to himself. Tell them what they are and they will go." Part 2, Chapter 13, pg. 122

"He made a tentative try, but he could not reach anything below the dock while simultaneously holding on to the top. His arms were too short. It was then that he realized he was going to have to let go of the top - completely - and allow himself to fall." Part 2, Chapter 14, pg. 133

"However, while no grown person can go through that shaft, a *child*, Edmund, a child you or your sister's size could be lowered down by rope." Part 2, Chapter 17, pg. 166



"The characters he'd been writing about had actually come to life. They were standing before him! Never in all his years had he had such a vivid sense of the reality of his own creations." Part 3, Chapter 19, pg. 182

"Lies have their own truth."

"Edmund considered the message another time and tried to pry some new meaning out of 'Sunrise.' Not a lie exactly, but some other sense, some other truth." Part 3, Chapter 20, pg. 192



Topics for Discussion

1. Why would Edmund choose to trust Dupin?
2. Why would Edmund not be able to go to the police?
3. If Poe was the half crazed alcoholic that he seems to be in The Man Who Was Poe, would that mean his writings would not be worth reading? Does a writer's character matter when one reads his work?
4. Why does Poe insist that Sis must die? 5. Why can Poe not tell the difference between one of his tales and real life?

Why does Edmund stick with him when it is clear that Poe has trouble telling the difference?

6. Is Avi fair to Poe? Is there any way you can tell?
7. What does Poe mean by "Lies have their own truth"? Why is it important to Edmund?
8. Why does Mr. Arnold (also Rachett) want to marry Mrs. Whitman even after stealing the gold?
9. If you did not know from the start that Auguste Dupin was a fictional character created by Poe, would The Man Who Was Poe still be fun to read?
10. Why is Poe reluctant to explain to Edmund what is going on?



Essay Topics

Review the brief biography of Edgar Allan Poe provided at the end of the story. In what ways are Edgar and Edmund's life stories similar? How do they differ?

When Poe meets Helen Whitman in the cemetery, he tells her his life has been miserable without her. Given what you know about Poe's character, do you think her absence is what causes him misery? Why or why not?

Poe turns to drinking to ease his emotional pain. In the long run, do you think this works for him? What else might he have tried?

Do you think Edmund was wise to trust his own judgment, or should he have only trusted the adults as his Aunt Pru advised him? Explain your answer.

Describe your impression of America in the late 1800s as it is described in the story. Do you think it is more or less interesting of a place than modern-day America? Why?

This story is meant to introduce you to the classic literary genre of the locked-room mystery. What did you like most about this part of the story?

On the whole, did you find Edmund's experience to be an exciting adventure or a frightening horror story? Why?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. At present, there are two competing images of Poe the man. One depicts him as a dissolute alcoholic and drug abuser whose tales evoked his sexual fantasies. The other says that he was beset by a genetic disease, and that he was a strong, determined man whose reputation was ruined by people who disliked him. Why the disagreement? What is the evidence, either way?
2. Who is Poe's Auguste Dupin? Where may he be found? What is his historical importance? What is his importance to literature?
3. Edmund's Providence has a system of law enforcement that seems very different from modern ones. The events of *The Man Who Was Poe* take place between 1847 and 1849. How was law enforcement organized in Providence at that time? Where would Throck fit in?
4. Why would Edmund's mother have to come to America from London to get a divorce?
5. How close does *The Man Who Was Poe* come to reading like Poe's stories of Auguste Dupin? Does the character Poe use techniques similar to those of Dupin?
6. Where does Avi do his better work, in historical novels such as *The Man Who Was Poe* or in modern realistic novels such as *Nothing but the Truth*?
7. A few of Poe's stories of detection are mentioned in *The Man Who Was Poe*. Which ones? What is each about? Why would each stir the imaginations of readers, maybe even making them want to become detectives themselves?
8. Avi says that Poe died "under mysterious circumstances." What were these circumstances? What causes of death have been suggested? Which seems most probable?
9. Why is Edmund deferential to grownups? What were the customs regarding the relationships between youngsters and grownups in his day? What does it mean for his characterization when he questions Poe's conclusions and even, at the climax, defies him?
10. Throck and Fortnoy resemble the villains and are mistaken for them. In mystery writing, this makes them "red herrings," meaning characters meant to misdirect attention from the real guilty parties. What other techniques typical of mysteries are in *The Man Who Was Poe*?
11. Mr. Fortnoy is a watchman for ships in port. What was this profession and what were its duties? Is it still a profession in Providence or elsewhere?

Further Study

Benson, Sonia. "Avi." In *Something about the Author*. Volume 71. Ed. Diane Telgen.

Detroit: Gale Research, 1993, pp. 7-15.

Benson lists Avi's books and summarizes his life. She includes an informative interview with Avi.

Buranelli, Vincent. *Edgar Allan Poe*. Boston: Twayne, 1977. An introduction to Poe's works for students.

Carlson, Eric W. *Critical Essays on Edgar Allan Poe*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987. A gathering of essays about different aspects of Poe's writings.

Dayan, Joan. *Fables of the Mind: An Inquiry into Poe's Fiction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987. Dayan's study of Poe as a philosopher can offer insight into his portrayal in *The Man Who Was Poe*.

Deas, Michael J. *The Portraits and Daguerreotypes of Edgar Allan Poe*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989. Poe's sitting for a daguerreotype plays an important role in solving the mystery of Edmund's missing mother.

You can find examples here of what Poe would have looked like in a daguerreotype.

Fisher, Benjamin Franklin, ed. *Poe and Our Times: Influences and Affinities*. Baltimore: Edgar Allan Poe Society, 1986. A compilation of essays about Poe's influence on modern literature.

Jacobs, Robert D. *Poe: Journalist and Critic*.

Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969. Jacobs explains Poe's work for periodicals and the influence periodicals had on him.

Kennedy, Gerald J. *Poe, Death, and the Life of Writing*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987. Kennedy sees death as central to Poe's impulse to write. It can be illuminating of Avi's purposes to compare the death-obsessed Poe of *The Man Who Was Poe* to Kennedy's depiction. A book report comparing the views in Kennedy's book to those in *The Man Who Was Poe* could be worthwhile.

Ostrom, John Ward, ed. *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe*. 2 volumes. New York: Gordian Press, 1966. Poe's letters tell of his thoughts and his movements from place to place. Notable are letters in which he fictionalizes some of his life to make it sound more exciting.



Quinn, Arthur Hobson. *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1941. A "critical biography" means that Quinn offers literary criticism as well as biographical details.

This is a somewhat dated effort to correct some of the false impressions of Poe's life.

Shook, Bruce Ann. *School Library Journal* 35, 13 (September 1989): 270. Does not regard *The Man Who Was Poe* as one of Avi's better books.

"Spotlight." *Time for Kids* 3, 9 (November 14, 1997): 1. Mentions audience reaction to *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* and includes Avi commenting on the difference between writing short fiction and long fiction.

Thomas, Dwight, and David K. Jackson, ed.

The Poe Log: A Documentary Life of Edgar Allan Poe, 1809-1849. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987. Documents Poe's life from day to day. When was Poe in Providence? What did he do? You can look it up in here.

"Wortis, Avi." In *Contemporary Authors: New Revision Series*. Volume 42. Ed. Susan M. Trosky. Detroit: Gale Research, 1994, pp.

485-87. Basically a summary of Benson's article in *Something about the Author*.

Watson, Elizabeth S. *Horn Book Magazine* 66, 2 (March-April 1990): 205. A brief review praising *The Man Who Was Poe*.



Related Titles

Avi has written several historical novels for young people, with eighteenth-century America being of particular interest to him.

For instance, *The Fighting Ground* is an account of a day in the life of a thirteen-yearold boy during the Revolutionary War. His experience of battle is harrowing and dispels his romantic notions of combat. Since 1987, Avi's historical fiction has tended to focus on his adopted home town, Providence. In 1988, he set his ghost story *Something Upstairs* in Providence; where the ghost of a slave haunts an old house. The ghosts in *The Man Who Was Poe* are imaginary, products of Poe's feverish, alcohol-clouded mind, but in *The Man Who Was Poe*, Avi captures some of what early nineteenthcentury Providence was like. *The Man Who Was Poe* also indicates some of Avi's interest in the history of seamanship: There is a daring chase across bay waters in a storm.

In 1977's *Captain Grey*, a boy is kidnapped by pirates, and the novel indicates Avi's early interest in the sea. He revisits the sea more sweepingly in *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*, 1991, in which a young woman learns to take charge of her life while surviving a mutiny, storms, and other dangers.



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