

# Murders in the Rue Morgue Short Guide

## Murders in the Rue Morgue by Edgar Allan Poe

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## Overview

Poe gained great recognition in the early 1840s for his creation of a type of story that has grown in popularity ever since—the detective story, or tale of ratiocination, which features an amateur sleuth who, by his superior deductive abilities, outsmarts criminals and outclasses the police. Such stories as "Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Mystery of Marie Roget" created a small sensation in America when they were first published. "The Purloined Letter" the third and final story in the Dupin series, has been the subject of a great deal of critical analysis since its publication as a model of ironic and tightly-structured plot.

"Murders in the Rue Morgue," is the most popular of the three because it combines horrifying, inexplicable events with astonishing feats of deductive reasoning. The narrator, the forerunner of Dr. Watson of the Sherlock Holmes stories, meets Auguste Dupin in this story and very early recognizes that he has a double personality, a Bi-Part soul.

Dupin is simultaneously wildly imaginative and coldly analytical. The reader's first view of his deductive ability occurs when Dupin seems to read his companion's mind by responding to something that the narrator had only been thinking. When Dupin explains the elaborate method whereby he followed the narrator's thought processes by noticing small details and associating them, Poe begins a long history of fictional detectives who take great pleasure in recounting the means by which they solve mysteries.



## About the Author

Edgar Poe was born on January 19, 1809, in Boston, Massachusetts, the son of indigent actors. At age three, when his parents died, Poe was taken in by John Allan, a merchant from Richmond, Virginia. He attended a private school in England where he lived with the Allans between 1815 and 1820. After returning to America, he continued private schooling until 1826, when he entered the University of Virginia. However, he was forced to leave after less than a year because of gambling debts which John Allan refused to pay.

After quarreling with his guardian, Poe went to Boston where, under an assumed name, he joined the army. A few months later, at the age of eighteen, his first collection of poems, privately financed, was published. In 1829, after the death of John Allan's wife, Poe was discharged from the army. He reconciled with his guardian and received an appointment to West Point. However, because Allen would not support him adequately (and because he did not like military life) he purposely neglected his duties to get himself dismissed from the academy.

Poe then went to Baltimore, where he took up residence with his impoverished aunt and her young daughter Virginia.

In 1832 he began his career as a writer of bizarre and romantic short stories by publishing "Metzengerstein," a tale about feuding families and supernatural revenge. However, his first real success came the following year when his "MS.

Found in a Bottle," an eerie tale about a shipwreck and ghostly seamen, won a fifty dollar prize given by a Baltimore newspaper. More importantly, it won him recognition and led to a position as an editor on a monthly magazine published in Richmond.

In 1836, Poe married his cousin Virginia, who was not quite fourteen years old at the time, and in 1837, after the end of his editorship, he and his child bride and her mother moved to Philadelphia. Poe soon published the only novellength fiction he ever wrote, The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym. a rambling adventure yarn filled with mutiny at sea, shipwreck, cannibalism, fierce South Sea natives, and a voyage to the South Pole.

Between 1838 and 1849, the year he died, Poe was at the center of magazine publishing in America, serving as the editor of several different journals and writing reviews, critical articles, stories, and miscellaneous pieces which won him admiration for his critical genius and courage. His most famous works— including gothic horror stories such as "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "Ligeia," detective stories (a genre he invented) such as "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Purloined Letter," and tales of obsession such as "The Black Cat" and "The Tell-Tale Heart"— were all published during this period. He also earned great fame and wide acclaim with poems such as "The Raven" (1845).



However, for all this renown, Poe waged a constant struggle for money. To add to his distress, in 1847 his young wife developed tuberculosis and died, leaving Poe almost mad with grief. In early October 1849, while on a trip from Richmond to New York, Poe stopped in Baltimore and began drinking, a habit for which he had absolutely no tolerance. On October 3, election day, he was discovered near a polling place in a coma. He died three days later of delirium tremens and was buried in a Baltimore cemetery where, on Halloween, a mysterious, unidentified person places flowers on his grave.

# Setting

The story is set in the city of Paris, France, in the mid-nineteenth century.

The particularly brutal murders of a woman and her daughter have stumped the police. A young man of noble birth but of diminished financial means, Auguste Dupin decides after reading about the crime in the newspapers that he can solve what the police cannot. As a result, the physical setting of the story is less important than its mental setting—the mind of Dupin. There is little overt action in the story; the details of the crime itself are all derived from newspaper accounts. The solution of the crime requires no overt action, but, as has become the tradition of the detective story, is an armchair process whereby the detective recounts the events of the crime as he has deduced them from the available clues.

# Social Sensitivity

Poe's fiction is not concerned with social issues. He viewed true reality as a process of the mind, not a fact of physical existence; consequently, for Poe, the human mind rather than the social world is the preferred arena of action.

The only aspect of his detective stories that might suggest social relevance is the fact that crime by its very nature is a violation of the social order. It is the task of the detective to restore order once again. However, although this may be the ultimate result of Dupin's solving of the crimes that confront him, it is obviously not his conscious intention.

Dupin wishes to discover order and meaning in the bits and pieces of the mysterious reality that surrounds him.

If this results in a restoration of the social order as well, then that is an unsought by-product of his ratiocinative abilities.

# Literary Qualities

Although Poe is credited with the creation of the detective story and the character type known as the amateur sleuth, obviously Auguste Dupin and his ratiocinative ability did not spring from nowhere. Probably the two most obvious sources are Voltaire's *Zadig* (1748) and Eugene Francois Vidocq's *Memoirs of Vidocq, Principal Agent of the French Police* (1828-29). Poe probably knew the story of *Zadig's* being able to deduce the description of the King's horse and the Queen's dog by examining tracks left on the ground and hair left on bushes. He also mentions Vidocq, the first real-life detective, in "Murders of the Rue Morgue" as a "good guesser."

However, Poe's creation of the ratiocinative story also derives from broader and more basic interests and sources. In several of his most famous critical essays, such as his 1842 review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* and his theoretical articles, "Philosophy of Composition" (1846) and "The Poetic Principle" (1848), Poe discusses his own aesthetic theory. He maintains that in a literary work every detail should contribute to the overall effect. This theory is appropriate for the creator of the detective story since every detail, even the most seemingly minor, may be a clue to the solutions of the story's central mystery.

Poe was familiar with gothic stories, which were often based on the concept of a hidden sin and filled with mysterious and unexplained events.

Like the detective story, they moved inexorably toward a denouement that would explain these puzzles. The early English gothic novel, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), with its secret guilt and cryptic clues, was a precursor of the detective story.





## Themes and Characters

The central character, Auguste Dupin, is idiosyncratic, more than a little egocentric, and somewhat of a recluse.

He is highly observant and an expert at creating chains of reasoning based on his observations. His companion is a somewhat plain man in comparison to Dupin and primarily exists to serve as Dupin's foil, as well as functioning as an auditor for Dupin's explanations and a transmitter of his thoughts.

The heart of the story, as it is to become the heart of practically every detective story since, centers not on the action of the crime but rather on Dupin's explanation of how he solved it. The points about the murders which stump the police—the contradictory reports of neighbors as to the language they heard spoken and the fact that there seems no possible means of entering the room where the murders took place—are precisely those clues that enable Dupin to master the case. The first problem he accounts for by deducing that the criminal must have been an animal; the second he explains by following a mode of reasoning based on a process of elimination to determine that apparent impossibilities are in reality possible after all. When Dupin reveals that an escaped Orang-Outang did the killing, he is content to have beaten the police at their own game; descendants of Dupin have been beating police inspectors ever since.

# Adaptations

Five full-length films have been made based on "Murders in the Rue Morgue." The earliest is the 1932 version starring Bela Lugosi as Dr. Mirakle and Robert Florey as Dupin. Written by John Huston with others, the approach is an expressionistic horror film. The 1971 version is a sensationalistic reworking, in which the players in a theater become the victims of real murders. The 1986 made-for-television version, starring George C. Scott, boasts atmospheric location photography. The earliest version is probably the best, and is certainly the closest to Poe's story.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Look carefully at the opening pages of the story and discuss the nature of the "analytical" faculty.

2. Discuss the personalities of Dupin and his companion. How are they alike?

How are they different? Is Dupin's personality suited to his amateur detective work?

3. Discuss the method whereby Dupin seems able to read his companion's mind on their stroll through the streets of Paris.

4. Discuss the aspects of the crime, as reported in the newspapers, that most puzzle the police. Which ones most fascinate Dupin?

5. What is the difference between the way the Paris police work to solve a crime and the way Dupin works?

6. Discuss the means by which Dupin solves the crime by recreating the events as he says they "must" have happened?

7. Why does Poe use an animal as the murderer in the story rather than a human being?



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Since this story is said to be the first detective story, and the one from which all subsequent detective stories derive, discuss some of the conventions, techniques, and devices introduced here that appear in later detective stories.
2. Poe believes that all good stories are like detective stories, in which the reader serves as a kind of detective, determining the clues and solving the mystery.

Compare the action of a reader of a story with a detective as Poe defines him.

3. In another Poe detective story "The Purloined Letter," Dupin says that a successful criminal, as well as a good detective, should combine the mental qualities of the poet and the mathematician. How does Dupin combine these qualities in "Murders in the Rue Morgue"?
4. Discuss the manner in which the story is presented, focusing on its lack of any real action and the fact that most of the story either repeats newspaper stories or is a monologue of Dupin telling how he solved the crime.
5. Read Poe's two other Dupin stories, "The Mystery of Marie Roget" and "The Purloined Letter." Write an essay on the character of Dupin as he is developed in all three stories, focusing on the quality and nature of his mind.

## For Further Reference

Buranelli, Vincent. *Edgar Allan Poe*. New York: Twayne, 1961. This is a basic introduction to Poe's works, focusing primarily on his fictional and poetic themes.

Carlson, Eric W., ed. *The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966. This is an invaluable collection of the bestknown and most influential essays on Poe and his work.

Davidson, Edward H. *Poe: A Critical Study*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957. One of the most intellectually powerful and thus one of the most influential studies of Poe, this book created a new respect for his work.

Hoffmann, Daniel. *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972. Although this is a highly personal and idiosyncratic consideration of Poe, it is worth reading as a psychological study of his tales.

Quinn, Arthur Hobson. *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography*. New York: Appleton-Century Crofts, 1941. This is the most authoritative and most trustworthy biography of Poe.

Thompson, G. R. *Poe's Fiction: Romantic Irony in the Gothic Tales*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1973.

An important study of Poe's use of romantic irony in his tales to create hoaxes, this work represents a new approach to Poe's fiction.

Thomas, Dwight, and David Jackson, eds. *The Poe Log*. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1987. This is the most basic biographical source for information about Poe.

It includes thousands of documents and notes about his life on an almost day-to-day basis.



## Related Titles

William Legrand, the central character in "The Gold Bug" (1843), shares some characteristics with Poe's famous amateur sleuth, Auguste Dupin. Like Dupin, he alternates between gloomy melancholy and excited enthusiasm, which leads the narrator (also similar to the narrator in the Dupin stories) to suspect that he is the victim of a species of madness. The basic premise of "The Gold Bug" is that Legrand is figuratively bitten by the gold bug after discovering a piece of parchment on which he finds a cryptogram with directions to the buried treasure of the pirate Captain Kidd. As with the more influential Dupin stories, "The Gold Bug" focuses less on action than on the explanation of the steps which lead to the solution of the mystery.

Although "The Mystery of Marie Roget" also focuses on Dupin's solving of a crime primarily from newspaper reports, it is actually based on the murder of a young girl, Mary Celilia Rogers, near New York City. Because the crime had not been solved when Poe wrote the story, he made use of the actual facts of the case of Mary Rogers to tell a story of the murder of a young Parisian girl, Marie Roget, as a means of demonstrating his superior deductive ability. "The Mystery of Marie Roget" contains some of the primary conventions that find their way into subsequent detective stories, but it is the least popular of the Dupin narratives. It contains so much reasoning and exposition that very little narrative emerges; because of its length and complexity many readers tire of the details of Dupin's analyses of the newspaper articles.

Literary critics have signaled out "The Purloined Letter" — the most ironic, economical, and classically-pure of the Dupin stories — as the most brilliant of Poe's ratiocinative works.

Here the crime is much more subtle than murder, for it focuses on political intrigue and manipulation. Although the crime is quite simple — the theft of a letter from an exalted and noble person — its effects are quite complex.

The story depends on several ironies.

First of all, the identity of the criminal is known, for he stole the letter in plain sight of the noble lady; second, the letter is a threat to the lady from whom he stole it only as long as he does nothing with it; finally, the Paris police cannot find the letter, even though they use the most sophisticated and exhaustive methods of searching for it, precisely because, as Dupin deduces, it is in plain sight.

The various techniques of deduction developed by Poe in the Dupin stories are so familiar to readers of detective fiction that to read the Poe stories is to be reminded that very few essential conventions of the genre have been invented since Poe. Indeed, with the publication of the Dupin stories, Poe truly can be said to have singlehandedly brought the detective story into being.



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