The Murders in the Rue Morgue Study Guide

The Murders in the Rue Morgue by Edgar Allan Poe

Contents

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The Murders in the Rue Morgue Summary

This story begins with an epigraph from Sir Thomas Browne: "What song the Syrens sang, or what name Achilles assumed when he hid himself among women, although puzzling questions, are not beyond conjecture." In other words, no mystery, no matter how unsolvable it may seem, is beyond solving. This sentiment is definitely true of the murders that occur in the Rue Morgue.

Before we get to the details of the story, however, the narrator offers up a discussion of the analytical mind. To the analyst, what matters the most is his ability to untangle any tangled mystery. Analysis, though in some ways related to calculation, is much more. For example, he asserts, chess players must use calculation but they need not necessarily be analytical. Draughts (checkers) and whist are much more analytical, as they require not only game play but the analyzing of the particular habits and tells of each player. He makes the point that even if you can memorize all of the card game rules, as you can conceivably memorize all possible chess moves, that does not make you a good player. He goes on to discuss the difference between analysis and ingenuity, concluding, "while the analyst is necessarily ingenious, the ingenious man is often incapable of analysis." (pg.26). As an example, he sets out his story.

The narrator tells us that at one time in Paris, he met and befriended a young man named C. Augustine Dupin. Dupin, though from a wealthy family, has fAllan on hard times and lives on the brink of poverty. His only luxury is books, which is how he and the narrator meet. The narrator enjoys Dupin's company so much that the two decide to move in together, with the narrator paying the rent. They choose a deserted mansion and live in it completely cut off from the world, venturing out mainly at night and existing in a manner that prompts the narrator to comment that they "should have been regarded as madmen." (pg.28) The narrator notices that his friend has a particularly analytical mind, and that Dupin seems to derive much enjoyment from his analysis.

One night as the two men are walking, Dupin remarks on the appropriateness of an actor named Chantilly for a particular role he is currently performing - a comment that is in direct response to what the narrator was thinking in his head. He is stunned that Dupin seems to be reading his mind, but Dupin explains in great detail the path his analysis followed. It began when a fruiter bumped into the narrator, and from there, Dupin explains, the thought process was as follows: fruiter, the street stones, stereotomy (which is the art of stone cutting), Epicurus, Dr. Nichols, Orion, and finally, Chantilly. The narrator is amazed at his friend's power of analysis.

Soon after, the two men encounter an article in the paper detailing the seemingly unexplainable murders of two women in a home known as the Rue Morgue. The women, Mademoiselle Camille L'Espanaye and her mother Madame L'Espanaye, were found brutally murdered in their own home with no signs of forced entry and doors

locked from the inside. Neighbors had been awakened by the sounds of terrible screaming and had rushed to the home but were unable to enter without a crowbar, which caused some delay. Upon entering they heard angry voices, but when they got to the fourth floor where the voices had been, they found no one.

What the neighbors did find was the room in all sorts of disarray. On the hearth, they found three long pieces of gray hair that look to have been pulled out by the roots. All around are signs of struggle, with drawers pulled out and furniture toppled. The body of the older woman is nowhere to be found but the daughter's corpse is soon discovered, stuffed feet first up the chimney. Upon examination it is revealed that she was killed by strangulation. The mother's body is soon found outside in a small paved yard, her throat cut so deeply that her head falls off.

The next day another account appears in the paper, this time with interviews of all the neighbors and witnesses. The first, a laundress, says that she knew the two women for three years and that they had always seemed on good terms. She believed that the older woman told fortunes for a living, and that there was no furniture in the house except on the fourth story. A second interview with a tobacco salesman who had sold tobacco and snuff to Madame L'Espanaye on occasion corroborated the account of the laundress, adding that at one time she had rented rooms but had grown tired of having tenants. He said he had hardly ever seen anyone enter or exit the home. Many others give similar evidence.

Of the day in question, the first to testify is a policeman who arrived on the scene to find twenty or thirty concerned neighbors at the gate trying to get inside. He could hear the screams from inside the house, and he heard them stop as he gained entrance to the gate. Once inside, he heard two angry voices, one a gruff Frenchman, the other shrill and indecipherable though he believed it to be speaking Spanish. He heard the gruff voice say the words 'sacre' and 'diable.' A neighbor backed up this story but attributed the shrill voice to an Italian. A passing restaurant owner, speaking through a translator, asserts that the shrill voice spoke in French - a language he is unfamiliar with - and corroborates the words the policeman heard, adding also 'mon Dieu.'

The next to be questioned was a banker, who said that three days before her death Madame L'Espanaye had withdrawn 4000 francs. A clerk, Adolphe Le Bon, says on that day he accompanied her home and helped her carry the bags of gold home. He saw no one but her and her daughter.

More witnesses are questioned and all tell similar stories, differing only in their accounts of the language spoken by the shrill voice; one says German, one claims English, and the third believes it to have been Russian. As with the others, each individual does not speak the language he names. Several also testify that the chimneys were much too small for anyone to pass through, and that there were no passages or other means for anyone to have passed them to exit the house. A doctor, with a corroborating surgeon, explained that the daughter had indeed been strangled while the mother had been horribly mutilated and beaten with a heavy object Her neck had been cut so violently, apparently with a razor, her head had fAllan off.

The newspaper ends with a report that there are no real clues , and though there is no evidence against him, Adolphe Le Bon has been arrested. Upon learning of this, Dupin tells the narrator that the case should not be judged unsolvable. He is determined to form his own theories because Le Bon once helped him with some matter. Dupin says he knows the head of police and will be able to obtain permission for them to visit the crime scene. Permission is granted, and the two men make a thorough investigation of the scene.

Afterward, the narrator relates Dupin's apparent disdain of the police investigation so far; he feels they are not focusing on the important aspects of the case. Dupin believes the police are choosing instead to grab on to the first suspect they find and place a flimsy motive upon him, when the gruesomeness of the murder defies any motive. He tells the narrator that he is currently awaiting the arrival of someone who knows of the crime, but who was probably not directly involved. He says that they may need to detain the man, and gives the narrator a pistol. Dupin begins to explain what he believes to have happened.

First of all, he points out that even though it seems they were locked in the room together at the time of the murder, the women did not kill each other. Somehow the killer was able to leave the room. Also, though all of the witnesses identified a French voice, all were unsure of the second voice, only agreeing that it was a foreign tongue. He concludes that with the exception of the windows, all manners of exit were impossible; therefore, since someone did exit, it had to be through the windows.

His first look at the windows showed him that they were both nailed shut from the inside, a fact the police had also noted and used to conclude that no one could escape through them. Dupin discovers on closer inspection, however, that one of the spring mechanisms makes it only seem that the window is nailed shut; the nail is forced into its place by the spring and appears untouched. Dupin also finds that directly outside the window is a lightning rod. This, combined with a precise swing from the outside shutters, could allow entrance and exit. With this set out, Dupin then goes back to the killer's odd voice and unusual strength, mentioning also that robbery was obviously not a motive as none of the money or jewelry lying about was taken. He informs the narrator that he found hair in the grasp of Madame L'Espanaye that is not human hair. Dupin then shows him that, from drawings he had obtained of the bruises around the daughter's neck, she was not strangled by human hands. The killer, Dupin hypothesizes, is an orangutan.

Dupin explains to the narrator that he has placed an ad in the paper saying that he is in possession of a stray orangutan, presumably lost by a sailor. He explains to the narrator that even if the owner is not a sailor is of no real matter, but he believes the chances of the owner being a sailor are good. A sailor would have a better chance of having an orangutan; also, Dupin tells the narrator that he found a ribbon at the scene like those sailors use to tie back their hair. When a man finally comes, Dupin locks the door and lets him know he has a pistol, but assures him he means no harm - he simply needs details of the murders at the Rue Morgue in order to clear Le Bon. The sailor tells his story, declaring that he is innocent.

The sailor had gained possession of the orangutan while in Borneo, where he had captured it with a friend. The friend later died, so the sailor was taking care of the orangutan while he nursed a wound it had received. His plan was to sell it when it was well. On the day of the murders, the sailor had arrived home to find the orangutan pretending to shave with a razor. A struggle ensued, and the orangutan ran off. The sailor arrived at the Rue Morgue in time to see the monkey trying to shave Madame L'Espanaye; the orangutan became enraged and cut off her head, then strangled her daughter. Terrified of being caught, the monkey shoved the daughter up the chimney and the mother out the window. Once Dupin relates these details to the police, Le Bon is cleared and released.

The Murders in the Rue Morgue Analysis

The narrator makes great notice of the powers of analysis, especially those of his friend Dupin. Dupin serves as a template for great deductive minds of literature, from Sherlock Holmes to Christie's Poirot. It is his ability to observe his surroundings and then deduce what everything means that sets him apart. Though this story is quite gory, and Poe does have the friends set up house in a Gothic mansion, this is less a tale of horror and more a meditation on the powers of the mind.

Characters

Narrator: The Murders in the Rue Morgue

Once again, the narrator is a first person narrator, but this narrator seems pretty sane, though he does seem to enjoy some of the trappings of the eccentric, such as the gothic mansion and keeping to himself. He is very fond of his new friend Dupin, seeming enamored of him in an unromantic way - the narrator is extremely impressed with his analytical mind. The narrator here is more like a sidekick, the Watson to Dupin's Holmes.

C. Augustine Dupin: The Murders in the Rue Morgue

Friend of the narrator. The two meet as they both are searching for a rare book and discover they have a lot in common. Dupin is poor, and moves into an old mansion with the narrator, where he lives rent-free. He has a great analytical mind and is able to deduce almost anything simply by observing the world about him in great detail and understanding human nature.

Mademoiselle Camille L'Espanaye / Madame L'Espanaye: The Murders in the Rue Morgue

Murder victims who resided in the Rue Morgue alone. Daughter Camille was strangled and shoved up a chimney, while her mother's head was sliced off and she was tossed out a window - all by an angry orangutan.

Sailor: The Murders in the Rue Morgue

Owner of the killer orangutan. He was not involved in the murders in any way, and his story, when discovered by Dupin, is able to set bank clerk Adolphe Le Bon free.

Objects/Places

Draughts

The British name for the game of checkers. The narrator mentions draughts as an example of a game that makes use of an analytical mind.

Whist

A four-person card game, similar to Backgammon. The narrator compares playing card games like whist to using the analytical powers of the human mind.

Hoyle

Edmund Hoyle (1672-1769) published his first Short Treatise on the Game of Whist in 1742, and is the leader in publishing rulebooks for many types of games.

Rue Morgue

Location of the horrific murders of Mademoiselle Camille L'Espanaye and her mother Madame L'Espanaye.

Orangutan

A large species of monkey. This particular orangutan turns out to be the "killer" in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*.

Gothic Mansion

Home shared by the narrator of *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* and Dupin.

Themes

Sanity and Insanity

Poe uses the theme of insanity vs. insanity, and all the nuances in between, in many of his short stories, often charging his insane narrators with the futile task of proving that they are not mad. Often, in stories such as *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Imp of the Perverse*, though the respective narrators of each claim they are of sound mind and seem completely unremorseful, they are driven to confess by a persistent reminder of their crime. In other tales, such as *The Cask of Amontillado*, the narrator is unquestionably insane, and yet there is no remorse *and* no confession, and though his *actions* are insane, he is very levelheaded when it comes to their execution. Crime is not the only indicator of insanity, however. In *Ligeia*, the narrator commits no crime that is spoken of, yet there is an air of instability to his narrative. He does admit to heavy opium use, but it is his overwhelming grief and obsessive love for Ligeia that cast a questioning light on his state of mind. All this mental instability leads to a stable of unreliable narrators; Poe was a master at creating believable, unreliable narrators, so much so that many historians have cast him as much less stable than he was, instead of recognizing his skill at crafting first-person narration.

Death and Mortality

In almost all of Poe's works, death is a central issue. Whether a tale of murder (*The Cask of Amontillado*, *The Tell-Tale Heart*), a tale of horror (*The Fall of the House of Usher*), a Gothic horror romance (*Ligeia*), or an allegory (*The Masque of the Red Death*), Poe's stories, by nature of his preferred genres, are full of death. Though many of his stories deal with either the murder of someone, the solving of a murder, or the supernatural resurrection of someone who has died, it is his allegorical look at mortality, *The Masque of the Red Death*, which most clearly sums up Poe's themes of death. Here, very simply, death is seen as inevitable, something that can be avoided by no one, no matter what precautions they take or how wealthy they are. Poe used death to terrify people, as he was a writer of horror stories and most people are afraid of death. Yet he seemed fascinated by it, and with his use of dark and Gothic elements seemed to embrace it.

Isolation and Confinement

Throughout many of Poe's short stories, characters are placed in stifling, claustrophobic settings that add to the overall feeling of panic and fear. In some, such as *Ligeia* and *The Fall of the House of Usher*, most of the action occurs in one room or one house, closing off the characters to any outside influence. *The Pit and the Pendulum* takes this idea a step further, imprisoning the narrator in a dungeon. Poe highlights this theme in *The Cask of Amontillado*, in which the murderous narrator literally encloses his victim in

a tomb. In *The Masque of the Red Death*, the castle is completely cut off from any means of entrance or exit. The most intense confinement, however, can be found in the minds of Poe's narrators. While we as readers experience physical isolation (i.e. one, room, one house, one walled-up vault), the intensity of the confinement is exacerbated by the point of view of the narrators. We see the world through one set of eyes, and the thoughts of these narrators, often thoughts that are unstable at best, imprison us in a non-physical "prison" of panic and fear.

Style

Point of View

Once again, Poe employs a first-person narrator to tell his tale. This narrator is unlike the unreliable narrators of stories such as *The Cask of Amontillado* and *The Imp of the Perverse*, however, and is more of an observer than a participant. His role in the story is to explain the story to the reader, allowing a more balanced picture of the entire detective story and of the analytical mind of Dupin. He does seem to be slightly in awe of Dupin, but his narration seems unharmed by his affections.

Setting

The story is set in Paris during the 1800s. Other than the site of the murders, the streets of Paris and the Gothic mansion the narrator shares with Dupin provide most of the locale. Poe is able to create a cozy home for himself in this mansion, which may explain why he seems to be a much calmer, more content narrator.

Language and Meaning

Poe makes an intriguing point about language in this story. Every witness who describes the voice of the second killer describes it as foreign to him; the French policeman hears Spanish, the Dutch restaurant owner hears French, and so on. The point Poe seems to be making here is that to most people, a language that is not their own may as well be the grunts of a monkey.

Structure

This story is heralded as one of the first detective stories, and its structure follows the detective story template. First there is a crime, then a list of witness and suspect interviews, then the detective gives his exposition of the crime and the culprit is brought to justice. Though there is no real "culprit" here, the story does follow that basic outline.

Quotes

These quotes are taken from the Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe.

"True! - nervous - very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why *will* you say that I am mad?" (*The Tell-Tale Heart*, pg. 13)

"'Villains!' I shrieked, 'dissemble no more! I admit the deed! - tear up the planks! - here, here! - it is the beating of his hideous heart!'" (*The Tell-Tale Heart*, pg. 21)

"As the strong man exults in his physical ability, delighting in such exercises as call his muscles into action, so glories the analyst in that moral activity which *disentangles.*" (*The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, pg. 22)

"'The riddle, so far, was now unriddled.'"(*The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, pg. 57)

"Of my country and of my family I have little to say. Ill usage and length of years have driven me from the one, and estranged me from the other." (*MS. Found in a Bottle*, pg, 77)

"When I look around me I feel ashamed of my former apprehensions." (*MS. Found in a Bottle*, pg, 92)

"The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could ; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge." (*The Cask of Amontillado*, pg. 94*)*

"*For the love of God, Montressor!*" (*The Cask of Amontillado*, pg. 104)

"There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart - an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime. What was it - I paused to think - what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher ?" (*The Fall of the House of Usher*, pg. 106)

"For a moment she remained trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold - then, with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated." (*The Fall of the House of Usher*, pg. 133)

"While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened - there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind - the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight - my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder - there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters - and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the *House of Usher*." (*The Fall of the House of Usher*, pg. 133)

"Arousing from the most profound of slumbers, we break the gossamer web of some dream. Yet in a second afterward, (so frail may that web have been) we remember not that we have dreamed." (*The Pit and the Pendulum*, pg. 156)

"Amid the thought of the fiery destruction that impended, the idea of the coolness of the well came over my soul like balm. I rushed to its deadly brink. I threw my straining vision below. The glare from the enkindled roof illumined its inmost recesses. Yet, for a wild moment, did my spirit refuse to comprehend the meaning of what I saw. At length it forced — it wrestled its way into my soul — it burned itself in upon my shuddering reason. — Oh! for a voice to speak! — oh! horror! — oh! any horror but this!" (*The Pit and the Pendulum*, pg. 136)

"The 'strangeness,' however, which I found in the eyes, was of a nature distinct from the formation, or the color, or the brilliancy of the features, and must, after all, be referred to the expression." (*Ligeia,* pg. 163)

"That she loved me I should not have doubted; and I might have been easily aware that, in a bosom such as hers, love would have reigned no ordinary passion. But in death only, was I fully impressed with the strength of her affection." (*Ligeia,* pg. 168)

"I trembled not — I stirred not — for a crowd of unutterable fancies connected with the air, the stature, the demeanor of the figure, rushing hurriedly through my brain, had paralyzed — had chilled me into stone." (*Ligeia,* pg. 182)

"The scarlet stains upon the body and especially upon the face of the victim, were the pest ban which shut him out from the aid and from the sympathy of his fellow-men." (*The Masque of the Red Death*, pg. 184)

"But the Prince Prospero was happy and dauntless and sagacious. When his dominions were half depopulated, he summoned to his presence a thousand hale and light-hearted friends from among the knights and dames of his court, and with these retired to the deep seclusion of one of his castellated abbeys." (*The Masque of the Red Death*, pg. 185)

"There are chords in the hearts of the most reckless which cannot be touched without emotion. Even with the utterly lost, to whom life and death are equally jests, there are matters of which no jest can be made." (*The Masque of the Red Death*, pg. 191)

"And the flames of the tripods expired. And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all" (*The Masque of the Red Death*, pg. 193)

"The intellectual or logical man, rather than the understanding or observant man, set himself to imagine designs — to dictate purposes to God." (*The Imp of the Perverse*, pg. 195)

"Through its promptings we act without comprehensible object; or, if this shall be understood as a contradiction in terms, we may so far modify the proposition as to say,

that through its promptings we act, for the reason that we should not." (*The Imp of the Perverse*, pg. 196)

"They say that I spoke with a distinct enunciation, but with marked emphasis and passionate hurry, as if in dread of interruption before concluding the brief, but pregnant sentences that consigned me to the hangman and to hell." (*The Imp of the Perverse*, pg. 209)

Topics for Discussion

These topics concern the general works of Edgar Allan Poe.

Explain what is meant by the term "unreliable narrator." How does Poe use this technique in different ways with different stories?

Poe has been called "the father of the detective story" - but does he go too far out of the realm of possibility by making an orangutan the killer? Defend your answer.

Are the crewmen on the "Discovery" ghosts? Is there another explanation as to why they do not acknowledge the narrator?

How does Poe portray the doppelganger, or character double, in *The Fall of the House of Usher*?

How does Poe use a closed setting in *The Pit and the Pendulum*, *The Cask of Amontillado*, and *The Fall of the House of Usher*?

What is the role of history in *The Pit and the Pendulum*? How does the reality of the action contribute to the story's terror?

Compare and contrast the narrator of *The Imp of the Perverse* with the narrator of *The Tell-Tale Heart*.

Do you believe Poe meant for us to believe in the resurrection of Ligeia as a means of proving her strength of will and the great love between herself and the narrator, or as a sign of how far the narrator's mind has slipped?

Did Ligeia poison Rowena, or did the narrator?