

Tales of Terror and Detection

by Edgar Allan Poe

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Summary

This superb collection of 5 stories reveals Poe's virtuoso gifts for both crime fiction and the macabre. Two of his most famous tales, "**The Mystery of Marie Roget**" (1842) and "**The Purloined Letter**" (1844), recount the exploits of C. Auguste Dupin, the first fictional detective, introduced in "The Murders of the Rue Morgue".

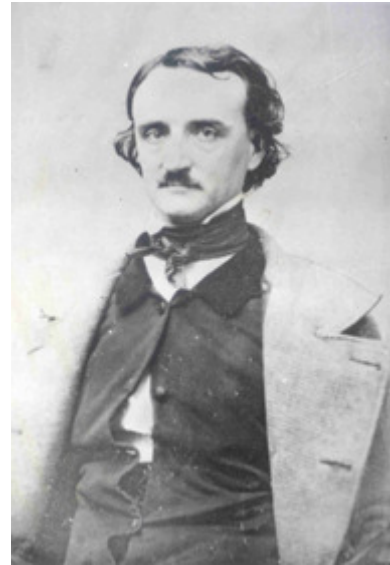
"**William Wilson**" (1839) is a chilling tale of crime and evil. The two remaining stories "**MS: Found in a Bottle**" (1833) and "**The Oblong Box**" (1844) convey a sense of unease, and then of outright terror.

About Edgar Allan Poe (January 19, 1809 – October 7, 1849)

From The Poe Museum website

<http://www.poemuseum.org/life.php>

Edgar Allan Poe was born January 19, 1809 in Boston, where his British mother had been employed as an actress. His father David Poe abandoned the family soon after Edgar was born, and died of alcoholism several years later. Elizabeth Arnold Poe died in Richmond on December 8, 1811, and Edgar was taken into the family of John Allan, a member of the firm of Ellis and Allan, tobacco-merchants.



After attending schools in England and Richmond, young Poe registered at the University of Virginia on February 14, 1826, the second session of the University. He lived in Room 13, West Range. He became an active member of the Jefferson Literary Society, and passed his courses with good grades at the end of the session in December. Mr. Allan failed to give him enough money for necessary expenses, and Poe made debts of which his so-called father did not approve. When Mr. Allan refused to let him return to the University, a quarrel ensued, and Poe was driven from the Allan home without money. Mr. Allan probably sent him a little money later, and Poe went to Boston. There he published a little volume of poetry, *Tamerlane and Other Poems*. It is such a rare book now that a single copy has sold for \$200,000.00

Moldavia, Poe's last home in Richmond located at Fifth and Main Streets. John Allan bought the house in 1825, and Edgar lived there before entering the University of Virginia in 1826.

In Boston on May 26, 1827, Poe enlisted in The United States Army as a private using the name Edgar A. Perry. After two years of service, during which he was promoted to the rank of Sergeant-major, he secured, with Mr. Allan's aid, a discharge from the Army and went to Baltimore. He lived there with his aunt, Mrs. Maria Poe Clemm, on the small amounts of money sent by Mr. Allan until he received an appointment to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Meanwhile, Poe published a second book of poetry in 1829: *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane and Minor Poems*. After another quarrel with Allan (who had married a second wife in 1830), Poe no longer received aid from his foster father. Poe then took the only method of release from the Academy, and got himself dismissed on March 6, 1831.

Soon after Poe left West Point, a third volume appeared: *Poems by Edgar Allan Poe, Second Edition*.

While living in Baltimore with his aunt, Mrs. Clemm, young Poe began writing prose tales. Five of these appeared in the Philadelphia Saturday Courier in 1832.

With the December issue of 1835, Poe began editing the Southern Literary Messenger for Thomas W. White in Richmond; he held this position until January, 1837. During this time, Poe married his 13 year old first cousin, Virginia Clemm in Richmond on May 16, 1836.



Poe's slashing reviews and sensational tales made him widely known as an author; however, he failed to find a publisher for a volume of burlesque tales, Tales of the Folio Club. Harpers did, however, print his book-length narrative, Arthur Gordon Pym in July of 1838. Little is known about Poe's life after he left the Messenger; however, in 1838 he went to Philadelphia where he lived for six years. He was an editor of Burton's Gentleman's Magazine from July, 1839 to June, 1840, and of Graham's Magazine from April, 1841 to May, 1842. In April, 1844, with barely car fare for his family of three, [including his aunt, Virginia's mother, who lived with them], Poe went to New York where he found work on the New York Evening Mirror.

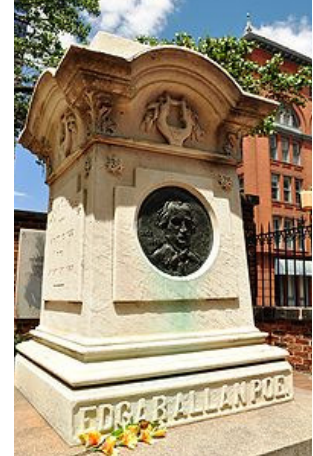
In 1840, Poe's Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque was published in two volumes in Philadelphia. In 1845, Poe became famous with the spectacular success of his poem "The Raven," and in March of that year, he joined C. F. Briggs in an effort to publish The Broadway Journal. Also in 1845, Wiley and Putnam issued Tales by Edgar A. Poe and The Raven and Other Poems.

The year 1846 was a tragic one. Poe rented the little cottage at Fordham, where he lived the last three years of his life. The Broadway Journal failed, and Virginia became very ill and died on January 30, 1847. After his wife's death, Poe perhaps yielded more often to a weakness for drink, which had beset him at intervals since early manhood. He was unable to take even a little alcohol without a change of personality, and any excess was accompanied by physical prostration. Throughout his life those illnesses had interfered with his success as an editor, and had given him a reputation for intemperateness that he scarcely deserved.

In his latter years, Poe was interested in several women. They included the poetess, Mrs. Sarah Helen Whitman, Mrs. Charles Richmond, and the widow, Mrs. Sarah Elmira Shelton, whom he had known in his boyhood as Miss Royster. In personal appearance, Poe was a quiet, shy-looking but handsome man; he was slightly built, and was five feet, eight inches in height. His mouth was considered beautiful. His eyes, with long dark lashes, were hazel-gray

There are conflicting accounts surrounding the last days of Edgar Allan Poe and the cause of his death. Some say he died from alcoholism, some claim he was murdered, and various diseases have also been attributed. Most say he was found unconscious in the street and admitted to the Washington College Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland. He died soon after, on 7 October 1849, and was buried unceremoniously in an unmarked grave in the Old Westminster Burying Ground of Baltimore. On this original site now stands a stone with a carving of a raven and the inscription;

Quoth the Raven, Nevermore
Original Burial Place of Edgar Allan Poe
From October 9, 1849 Until November 17, 1875
Mrs. Marian Clemm, His Mother-In-Law
Lies Upon His Right And Virginia Poe His Wife, Upon His Left.
Under The
Monument Erected To Him In This Cemetery



In a dedication ceremony in 1875, Poe's remains were reinterred with his aunt Maria Clemm's in the Poe Memorial Grave which stands in the cemetery's corner at Fayette and Greene Streets. A bas-relief bust of Poe adorns the marble and granite monument which is simply inscribed with the birth and death dates of Poe (although his birthdate is wrong), Maria, and Virginia who, in 1885, was reinterred with her husband and mother. Letters from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Lord Alfred Tennyson were read, and Walt Whitman attended. The mysterious Poe Toaster visits Poe's grave on his birthdays and leaves a partially filled bottle of cognac and three roses.

All that we see or seem Is but a dream within a dream -- Poe

Selected Bibliography

The works of American author Edgar Allan Poe include many poems, short stories, and one novel. His fiction spans multiple genres, including horror fiction, adventure, science fiction, and detective fiction, a genre he is credited with inventing. These works are generally considered part of the Dark romanticism movement. He is further credited with contributing to the emerging genre of science fiction. He was the first well-known American writer to try to earn a living through writing alone, resulting in a financially difficult life and career.

Link to text of Poe's most famous stories and poems
<http://www.poemuseum.org/works.php>

Tales/Short Stories

"The Black Cat"
"The Cask of Amontillado"
"A Descent into the Maelström"
"The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar"
"The Fall of the House of Usher"
"The Gold-Bug"
"Hop-Frog"
"Ligeia"
"The Masque of the Red Death"
"The Murders in the Rue Morgue"
"The Mystery of Marie Rogêt"
"The Oval Portrait"
"The Pit and the Pendulum"
"The Premature Burial"
"The Purloined Letter"
"The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether"
"The Tell-Tale Heart"

Poetry

"Al Aaraaf"
"Annabel Lee"
"The Bells"
"The City in the Sea"
"The Conqueror Worm"
"A Dream Within a Dream"
"Eldorado"
"Eulalie"
"The Haunted Palace"
"To Helen"
"Lenore"
"Tamerlane"
"The Raven"
"Ulalume"

Other works

Politian (1835) – Poe's only play
The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket (1838) – Poe's only novel
"The Balloon-Hoax" (1844) – A journalistic hoax printed as a true story
"The Philosophy of Composition" (1846) – Essay
Eureka: A Prose Poem (1848) – Essay
"The Poetic Principle" (1848) – Essay
"The Light-House" (1849) – Poe's last incomplete work

More Online Information about Edgar Allan Poe

Poe National Historic Site in Philadelphia <http://www.nps.gov/ner/edal/>

The Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore <http://www.eapoe.org/>

Edgar Allan Poe Museum of Richmond <http://www.poemuseum.org/index.php>

Edgar Allan Poe Cummings study guides
<http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/index.html#PoeStudy>

Poe stories celebrated <http://www.poestories.com/>

Knowing Poe -Great interactive site
http://knowingpoe.thinkport.org/default_flash.asp

"MS. Found in a Bottle" (1833)

is a short story by American writer Edgar Allan Poe. The plot follows an unnamed narrator at sea who finds himself in a series of harrowing circumstances. As he nears his own disastrous death while his ship drives ever southward, he writes an "MS." or manuscript telling of his adventures which he casts into the sea. Some critics believe the story was meant as a satire of typical sea tales.

Poe submitted "MS. Found in a Bottle" as one of many entries to a writing contest offered by the weekly *Baltimore Saturday Visiter*. Each of the stories were well-liked by the judges but they unanimously chose "MS. Found in a Bottle" as the contest's winner, earning Poe a \$50 prize. The story was then published in the October 19, 1833, issue of the *Visiter*.

Plot summary

In Poe's tale, an unnamed narrator, estranged from his family and country, sets sail as a passenger aboard a cargo ship from Batavia (now known as Jakarta, Indonesia). Some days into the voyage, the ship is first becalmed then hit by a Simoon—which, in Poe's story, is a combination of a sand storm, typhoon, and hurricane—that capsizes the ship and sends everyone, except the narrator and an old Swede, overboard. Driven southward by the magical Simoon towards the South Pole, the narrator's ship eventually collides with a gigantic black galleon, and only the narrator manages to scramble aboard. Once the new ship arrives, the narrator finds outdated maps and useless navigational tools throughout the ship. Also, he finds it to be manned by elderly crewmen who are unable to see him; he steals writing materials from the captain's cabin to keep a journal (the "manuscript" of the title) which he resolves to cast into the sea. This ship too continues to be driven southward, and he notices the crew appears to show signs of hope at the prospect of their destruction as it reaches Antarctica. The

ship enters a clearing in the ice where it is caught in a vast whirlpool and begins to sink into the sea.

Analysis

"MS. Found in a Bottle" is one of Poe's sea tales, which also include "A Descent into the Maelström" and "The Oblong Box". The story's horror comes from its scientific imaginings and its description of a physical world beyond the limits of human exploration. It emphasizes ideas, calling the reader back to the introduction of the story, in which the narrator announces his allegiance to realism. That realism is lost with the descent into the whirlpool, as, presumably, is the narrator's life.[original research?]

Poe biographer Kenneth Silverman says that the story is "a sustained crescendo of ever-building dread in the face of ever-stranger and ever-more-imminent catastrophe".[This prospect of unknown catastrophe both horrifies and stimulates the narrator. Like Poe's narrator in another early work, "Berenice", the narrator in "MS. Found in a Bottle" lives predominantly through his books, more accurately, his manuscripts.

Some scholars suggest that "MS. Found in a Bottle" was meant to be a parody or satire of sea stories, especially because of the absurdity of the plot and the fact that the narrator unrealistically kept a diary through it all. "MS. Found in a Bottle" is also one of Poe's most celebrated stories of science fiction. Poe was fascinated by the South Pole, and he obsessively read the journals of Alexander von Humboldt, a German contemporary who traveled all over the world as part of his cosmological research. Poe became interested in the fantastic notion of a hole in the South Pole that emptied out to the other side of the globe. The image of the whirlpool marks the South Pole as a region beyond human rationality. Poe so enjoyed this line of narrative that he returned to it in subsequent stories

Source: The Legend of The Flying Dutchman

.Poe apparently derived inspiration for "Ms. Found in a Bottle" from one of many versions of a story about a seventeenth-century Dutch ship sailing to or from the East Indies. It was a fast ship, so fast that its captain was said to have received help from the devil. When this "flying Dutchman"—a name that can refer to the ship or the captain—was rounding the Cape of Good Hope off South Africa during a tempest, the captain vowed that he would weather the storm if he had to sail until doomsday. The ship never returned from its voyage. Over the years, the crews and passengers of numerous ships reported sightings of a "ghost ship" in the cape and sometimes elsewhere, referring to it as The Flying Dutchman. Sailors regard it as an ill omen..

Discussion questions for M.S in a Bottle

1. Discuss some techniques Poe uses to build suspense.
2. Do you believe the narrator is a reliable witness to the terrifying events?
3. Discuss how Poe's use of nautical terminology and skillful descriptions that undergird the mood of the story.
4. Comment on the following: The central theme is that Science cannot explain everything; mysterious and chimerical events do occur.
5. Discuss your reaction to the ending of the story.
6. Some claim this story was likely an influence on Herman Melville and bears a similarity to his novel Moby-Dick. Comments?
7. This is one of Poe's sea stories and an early science fiction work. Compare this to Poe's other sea and sci fi inspired works.
8. Discuss the character of Old Swede and contrast him with the narrator.
9. How does Poe use black and white imagery in this story?

William Wilson (1839)

is a short story with a setting inspired by Poe's formative years outside of London. The tale follows the theme of the ***doppelganger*** (a ghostly double of a living person that haunts its living counterpart) and is written in a style based on rationality. It also appeared in the 1840 collection *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, and has been adapted several times

Plot Summary

The story begins with the narrator, a man of "a noble descent" who calls himself William Wilson, denouncing his profligate past, although he does not accept blame for his actions, saying that "man was never thus [...] tempted before". After several paragraphs, the narration then segues into a description of Wilson's boyhood, which was spent in a "large, rambling Elizabethan" schoolhouse, "in a misty-looking village of England". The house was huge, with many jumbled paths and rooms, and situated on extensive grounds; the students were kept on site perpetually, however, hemmed in by a fence surmounted by broken glass, only being released for short, guided walks and church service.

William describes meeting another boy who shared the same name, who had roughly the same appearance, and who was even born on exactly the same date — January 19 (which was also Poe's birthday). The other William represents his

only competition in academics, sports, and popularity. The boy seemed to compete with him so easily, however, that William thinks it "a proof of his true superiority; since not to be overcome, cost me a perpetual struggle". William's name (he asserts that his actual name is only similar to "William Wilson") embarrasses him because it sounds "plebeian" or common, and he is irked that he must hear the name twice as much on account of the other William.

The boy gradually begins copying William's mannerisms, dress and talk; although, by a "constitutional defect", he could only speak in a whisper, he imitates that whisper exactly. He begins giving William advice of an unspecified nature, which he refuses to heed, resenting the boy's "arrogance". One night he stole into the other William's bedroom and saw that the boy's face had suddenly become exactly like his own. Upon seeing this, William left the academy immediately, only to discover that his double left on the same day.

William eventually attends Eton and Oxford, gradually becoming more debauched and performing what he terms "mischief". For example, he steals exorbitant amounts of money from a poor nobleman by cheating him at cards and trying to seduce a married woman. At each stage, his double eventually appears, his face always covered, whispers a few words sufficient to alert others to William's behavior, and leaves with no others seeing his face. After the last of these incidents, at a ball in Rome, William drags his "unresisting" double—who was wearing identical clothes—into an antechamber, and stabs him fatally.

After William does this, a large mirror suddenly seems to appear. Reflected at him, he sees "mine own image, but with features all pale and dabbled in blood": apparently the dead double, "but he spoke no longer in a whisper". The narrator feels as if he is pronouncing the words: "In me didst thou exist—and in my death, see [...] how utterly thou hast murdered thyself

Background

The setting of "William Wilson" is semi-autobiographical and relates to Poe's residence in England as a boy. The "misty-looking village of England" of the story is Stoke Newington, now a suburb of north London. The school is based on the Manor House School in Stoke Newington which Poe attended from 1817 to 1820. Poe's headmaster there, the Reverend John Bransby, shares the same name as the headmaster in the story, though, in the latter, he acquires the dignity of being a "Doctor"..

Poe acknowledged that the idea of a story about the irritation one feels by meeting someone with the same name, thereby ruining a feeling of uniqueness, was inspired by an article by Washington Irving. At the end of Irving's tale, the main character kills his double with his sword, only to see his own face behind the mask.

Analysis

"William Wilson" clearly explores the theme of the double. This second self haunts the protagonist and leads him to insanity and also represents his own insanity. According to Poe biographer, Arthur Hobson Quinn, the second self represents the conscience. This division of the self is reinforced by the narrator's admission that "William Wilson" is actually a pseudonym. The name itself is an interesting choice: "son" of "will". In other words, William Wilson has willed himself into being along with the double which shares that name.

Poe wrote the story very carefully and with subtlety. Sentences are balanced, with very few adjectives, and there is little concrete imagery beyond the description of Wilson's school. Pacing is purposely set as leisurely and measured using a formal style and longer sentences. Rather than creating a poetic effect or mood, as Poe recommends in "The Philosophy of Composition", Poe is creating a tale based on rationality and logic.

Topics for Discussion

1. Is the double William's conscientious angel or his unrelenting judge? How does the relationship between the two change in the course of the story?
2. There are some autobiographical hints scattered throughout this story. What message is Poe giving about himself and his life in this story?
3. The complex relationship of love and hate herein echoes Poe's treatment of the subject in "The Black Cat" and "The Tell-Tale Heart." Here, as in "The Black Cat" and "The Tell-Tale Heart," the narrator's initial love turns gradually into hate and finally into murder. Compare and contrast with the other stories.
4. The game of hiding and revealing of identities that a masquerade produces is appropriate because the narrator and his other self cease to hide their identities from each other, and the two bodies are symbolically reduced to one. Discuss.
5. Who is the narrator of this story? Is there a good William and a bad William, and who remains at the end of the story?
6. Discuss the interpretation that William Wilson is a sane man who becomes the victim of paranormal activity? Or, does he suffer from a mental disorder, such as split personality or schizophrenia.
7. This is a story of the war of the wills, between conscience and the subconscious mind. It's as if the narrator has two personalities, each of which alternately gains control,
8. Is this narrator insane? Compare and contrast this narrator to the narrator in The Tell Tale Heart

The Mystery of Marie Roget (1842)

The *Mystery of Marie Rogêt*", often subtitled *A Sequel to "The Murders in the Rue Morgue"*, is a short story by Edgar Allan Poe written in 1842. This is the first murder mystery based on the details of a real crime.[1] It first appeared in *Snowden's Ladies' Companion* in three installments, November and December 1842 and February 1843.

Plot summary

Poe's detective character C. Auguste Dupin and his sidekick the unnamed narrator undertake the unsolved murder of Marie Rogêt in Paris. The body of Rogêt, a perfume shop employee, is found in the Seine River and the media take a keen interest in the mystery. Dupin remarks that the newspapers "create a sensation... [rather] than to further the cause of truth." Even so, he uses the newspaper reports to get into the mind of the murderer.

Dupin uses his skills of ratiocination to determine that a single murderer was involved who dragged her by the cloth belt around her waist before dumping her body off a boat into the river. Finding the boat, Dupin suggests, will lead the police to the murderer.

The narrative is based upon the actual murder of Mary Cecilia Rogers. She disappeared on October 4, 1838, in New York City and became known as the "Beautiful Cigar Girl". Only a few days later the newspapers announced her return. It was said she had eloped with a naval officer. Three years later, on July 25, 1841, she disappeared again. Her body was found floating in the Hudson River on July 28 in Hoboken, New Jersey.[The details surrounding the case suggested she was murdered. The death of this well-known girl received national attention for weeks. Months later, the inquest still ongoing, her fiance was found dead, an act of suicide. By his side, a remorseful note and an empty bottle of poison were found.

Writing about Rogers as a sequel to "The Murders in the Rue Morgue", Poe tried to solve the aforementioned enigma by creating a murder mystery. As Poe wrote in a letter: "under the pretense of showing how Dupin... unravelled the mystery of Marie's assassination, I, in fact, enter into a very rigorous analysis of the real tragedy in New York". He situated the narrative in Paris using the details of the original tragedy. Although there was intense media interest and immortalizing of a sort by Poe, the crime remains one of the most puzzling unsolved murders of New York City. "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt", however, was likely the first real-life crime turned into a detective story.

Analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Mystery of Marie Roget"

"The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" is limited to a single setting detached from the scene of the offense. In the company of the narrator, Dupin reads several newspaper articles pertaining to the murder and explains his conclusions to his friend. Unlike "Rue Morgue," Dupin does not visit the crime scene, examine evidence, or exert himself in capturing its perpetrator.

Upon scrutinizing the articles, Dupin solves the crime to the point of knowing how to find the murderer but without actually learning his identity. He explains to the unnamed narrator the falseness of particular theories and witness statements. In doing so, he often makes assumptions the reader must accept as learned but that are often nearly as conjectural as those of the journalists and law enforcement officers he criticizes.

In the end, Dupin constructs the method for discovering Marie's killer, but he does not employ it. The killer himself is not captured within the confines of Poe's tale.

"In stark contrast to "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," C. Auguste Dupin is not met with an extraordinary or fantastical crime to solve. He also is not privy to entirely true (though not always correctly comprehending) witness accounts of the circumstances. Instead, Dupin must wade through false assumptions and irrational conclusions in order to decipher the truth. The murder is common in its elements, yet unsolvable, and all too real. Poe fictionalized the real-life, New York murder of Mary Rogers, even quoting heavily from actual newspaper articles concerning Rogers' death.

Through reasoning, , Dupin is able to solve the crime. However, Dupin's analysis reads more like a lecture than a detective story, void of any tension or climax. Reviving C. Auguste Dupin for a third and final story, "The Purloined Letter," Poe would give new dimension to his crafty logician. "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt," however, is the worst of Poe's three detective stories and pales in comparison to most of the author's poems and Gothic horror tales

http://www.trutv.com/library/crime/notorious_murders/classics/mary_rogers/index.html

The Murder Mystery of Mary Rogers—link to detailed story above

Dupin/Poe believed the murderer to have been a naval officer of dark complexion who had previously attempted to elope with Mary/Marie (thus explaining her first disappearance in 1838) and who killed her the second time she ran off with him. Loss's deathbed confession came to light before the last installment had been published, but Poe managed to hint at a bungled abortion in the final episode, and later added footnotes that further brought his fictional story into line with the known facts of Mary's case.

The Oblong Box (1844)

The Oblong Box" is a short story by Edgar Allan Poe, first published in 1844, about a sea voyage and a mysterious box

Plot summary

The story opens with the unnamed narrator recounting a summer sea voyage from Charleston, South Carolina to New York City aboard the ship Independence. The narrator learns that his old college friend Cornelius Wyatt is aboard with his wife and two sisters, though he has reserved three state-rooms. After conjecturing the extra room was for a servant or extra baggage, he learns his friend has brought on board an oblong pine box: "It was about six feet in length by two and a half in breadth." The narrator notes its peculiar shape and especially an odd odor coming from it. Even so, he presumes his friend has acquired an especially valuable copy of *The Last Supper*.

The box, the narrator is surprised to learn, shares the state-room with Wyatt and his wife, while the second room is shared by the two sisters. However, for several nights, the narrator witnesses his friend's surprisingly unattractive wife leaving the state-room every night around 11 o'clock and going into the third state-room before returning first thing in the morning. While she is gone, the narrator believes he hears his friend opening the box and sobbing, which he attributes to "artistic enthusiasm."

As the Independence passes Cape Hatteras it is caught in a terrible hurricane. Escape from the damaged ship was made via lifeboat, but Wyatt refuses to part with the box and issues an emotional plea but was denied by Captain Hardy. Wyatt decides he cannot part with the box and returns to the ship, ties himself to it with a rope. "In another instant both body and box were in the sea--disappearing suddenly, at once and forever."

About a month after the incident, the narrator happens to meet the captain. Hardy explains that the box had, in fact, held the corpse of Wyatt's recently deceased young wife. He had intended to return the body to her mother but bringing a corpse on board would have caused panic among the passengers. Captain Hardy had arranged, then, to register the box merely as baggage. As passage was already registered with Wyatt and his wife, so as not to arouse suspicion, a maid posed as the wife.

Analysis

Poe biographer James Hutchisson equates "The Oblong Box" with Poe's series of "tales of ratiocination" or detective fiction stories, a series which includes "The Murders in the Rue Morgue". Scott Peeples compares "The Oblong Box" to this genre as well but notes that it is not strictly a detective story because it did not emphasize the character of the detective and his method. He also notes that the protagonist is "bumbling" because he allows his opinions to taint physical evidence, leading him to incorrect conclusions.

In writing "The Oblong Box", Poe recalled his experience while stationed at Fort Moultrie many years earlier by setting the ship's embarking point as Charleston, South Carolina to New York. Just a few months before the story's publication, Poe had recently experienced his own sea voyage when he moved to New York via steamboat. His wife, Virginia, had begun showing signs of her illness about two years before in 1842

The Purloined Letter (1844)

"The Purloined Letter" is a short story by American author Edgar Allan Poe. It is the third of his three detective stories featuring the fictional C. Auguste Dupin, the other two being "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt". These stories are considered to be important early forerunners of the modern detective story

Plot Summary

An unnamed narrator is discussing with the famous Parisian amateur detective C. Auguste Dupin some of his most celebrated cases when they are joined by the Prefect of the Police, a man known as G—. The Prefect has a case he would like to discuss with Dupin. A letter has been stolen from the private sitting room of an unnamed female by the unscrupulous Minister D—. It is said to contain compromising information. D— was in the room, saw the letter, and switched it for a letter of no importance. He has been blackmailing his victim.

The Prefect makes two deductions with which Dupin does not disagree:

- 1.) The contents of the letter have not been revealed, as this would have led to certain circumstances that have not arisen. Therefore Minister D— still has the letter in his possession.
- 2.) The ability to produce the letter at a moment's notice is almost as important as possession of the letter itself. Therefore he must have the letter close at hand.

The Prefect says that he and his police detectives have searched the Ministerial hotel where D— stays and have found nothing. They checked behind the wallpaper and under the carpets. His men have examined the tables and chairs with microscopes and then probed the cushions with needles but have found no sign of interference; the letter is not hidden in these places. Dupin asks the Prefect if he knows what he is looking for and the Prefect reads off a minute description of the letter, which Dupin memorizes. The Prefect then bids them good day.

A month later, the Prefect returns, still bewildered in his search for the missing letter. He is motivated to continue his fruitless search by the promise of a large reward, recently doubled, upon the letter's safe return, and he will pay 50,000 francs to anyone who can help him. Dupin asks him to write that check now and he will give him the letter. The Prefect is astonished but knows that Dupin is not joking. He writes the check and Dupin produces the letter. The Prefect determines that it is genuine and races off to deliver it to the victim.

Alone together, the narrator asks Dupin how he found the letter. Dupin explains the Paris police are competent within their limitations, but have underestimated who they are dealing with. The Prefect mistakes the Minister D— for a fool because he is a poet. For example, Dupin explains how an eight-year old boy made a small fortune from his friends at a game called "Odds and Evens." The boy was able to determine the intelligence of his opponents and play upon that to interpret their next move. He explains that D— knew the police detectives would have assumed that the blackmailer would have concealed the letter in an elaborate hiding place, and thus hid it in plain sight.

Dupin says he had visited the minister at his hotel. Complaining of weak eyes he wore a pair of green spectacles, the true purpose of which was to disguise his eyes as he searched for the letter. In a cheap card rack hanging from a dirty ribbon, he saw a half-torn letter and recognized it as the letter of the story's title. Striking up a conversation with D— about a subject in which the minister is interested, Dupin examined the letter more closely. It did not resemble the letter the Prefect described so minutely; the writing was different and it was sealed not with the "ducal arms" of the S— family, but with D—'s monogram. Dupin noticed that the paper was chafed as if the stiff paper was first rolled one way and then another. Dupin concluded that D— wrote a new address on the reverse of the stolen one, re-folded it the opposite way and sealed it with his own seal.

Dupin left a snuff box behind as an excuse to return the next day. Striking up the same conversation they had begun the previous day, D— was startled by a gunshot in the street. While he went to investigate, Dupin switched D—'s letter for a duplicate.

Dupin explains that he left a duplicate to ensure his ability to leave the hotel without D— suspecting his actions. As a political supporter of the Queen and old enemy of the Minister, Dupin also hopes that D— will try to use the power he no longer has, to his political downfall, and at the end be presented with an insulting note that implies Dupin was the thief:

Analysis

Along with "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Purloined Letter" establishes a new genre of short fiction in American literature: the detective story. Poe considered "The Purloined Letter" his best detective story, and critics have long identified the ways in which it redefines the mystery genre—it turns away from action toward intellectual analysis, for example. As opposed to the graphic violence of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," which features bodily mutilation and near decapitation by a wild animal, "The Purloined Letter" focuses more dryly on the relationship between the Paris police and Dupin, between the ineffectual established order and the savvy private eye. When the narrator opens the story by reflecting upon the gruesome murders in the Rue Morgue that Dupin has helped to solve, Poe makes it clear that the prior story is on his mind. Poe sets up the cool reason of "The Purloined Letter" in opposition to the violence of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." The battered and lacerated bodies of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" are replaced by the bloodless, inanimate stolen letter. However, just as the Paris police are unable to solve the gory crime of passion in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," they are similarly unable to solve this apparently simple mystery, in which the solution is hidden in plain sight.

Poe moves away from violence and action by associating Dupin's intelligence with his reflectiveness and his radical theories about the mind. This tale does not have the constant action of stories like "The Cask of Amontillado" or "The Black Cat." Instead, this tale features the narrator and Dupin sitting in Dupin's library and discussing ideas. The tale's action, relayed by flashbacks, takes place outside the narrative frame. The narrative itself is told through dispassionate analysis. The intrusions of the prefect and his investigations of the Minister's apartment come off as unrefined and unintellectual. Poe portrays the prefect as simultaneously the most active and the most unreflective character in the story. Dupin's most pointed criticisms of the prefect have less to do with a personal attack than with a critique of the mode of investigation employed by the police

as a whole. Dupin suggests that the police cannot think outside their own standard procedures. They are unable to place themselves in the minds of those who actually commit crimes. Dupin's strategy of solving crimes, on the other hand, involves a process of thinking like someone else. Just as the boy playing "even and odd" enters his opponent's mind, Dupin inhabits the consciousness of the criminal. He does not employ fancy psychological theories, but rather imitates the train of thought of his opponent. He succeeds in operating one step ahead of the police because he thinks as the Minister does.

This crime-solving technique of thinking like the criminal suggests that Dupin and the Minister are more doubles than opposites. The revenge aspect of the story, which Dupin promises after the Minister offends him in Vienna. Dupin's note inside the phony letter, translated "So baneful a scheme, if not worthy of Atreus, is worthy of Thyestes," suggests the rivalry that accompanies brotherly minds. In the French dramatist Crébillon's early-eighteenth-century tragedy *Atrée et Thyeste* (or *Atreus and Thyestes*), Thyestes seduces the wife of his brother, Atreus. In retaliation, Atreus murders the sons of Thyestes and serves them to their father at a feast. Dupin implies here that Thyestes deserves more punishment than Atreus because he commits the original wrong. In contrast, Atreus's revenge is legitimate because it repays the original offense. Dupin considers his own deed to be revenge and thereby morally justified.

Discussion Questions

Do you agree with Dupin that a police investigator should rely as much on intuition and imagination as on logic and science?

What do you think was the secret message in the letter?

Read "The Purloined Letter" and "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." Discuss Dupin.

What differences did you note in Dupin, the crime and the criminal between this story and Poe's other detective tales?

Minister D "hid" the letter in plain sight. Does this ploy sound plausible?

Can you think of movies or TV series that imitate the way Poe told his tale?

What seems to be Dupin's attitude toward Monsieur G?

Describe Monsieur G's problem, step by step. What is Dupin's advice? How is what he advises different from what Mr G interprets ?

What is the point of the marble game discussion? How does it relate to Monsieur G? How is he similar to the detectives in "Rue Morgue"? What is the point of the "mathematician" discussion?

How does Dupin solve the crime?

Further Reading

Biography, Critical Analysis and Non-Fiction

Ackroyd, Peter, *Poe : a life cut short*

Barnes, Nigel *A dream within a dream : the life of Edgar Allan Poe*

Bloom's Literary Criticism *Edgar Allan Poe*

Burlingame, Jeff. *Edgar Allan Poe : "deep into that darkness peering"*

Lange, Karen E *Nevermore : a photobiography of Edgar Allan Poe .*

Meltzer, Milton, *Edgar Allan Poe : a biography*

Poe, Edgar Allan, *In the shadow of the master : classic tales (annotated)*

Poe illustrated : art by Doré, Dulac, Rackham and others

Silverman, Kenneth. *Edgar A. Poe: mournful and never-ending remembrance*

Sova, Dawn B. *Critical companion to Edgar Allan Poe : a literary reference to his life and work*

Stashower, Daniel. *Beautiful cigar girl : Mary Rogers, Edgar Allan Poe, and the invention of murder*

Strathern, Paul, *Poe in 90 minutes*

Fiction inspired and referencing Poe

On a raven's wing : new tales in honor of Edgar Allan Poe by Mary Higgins Clark, Thomas H. Cook, James W. Hall, Rupert Holmes, S. J. Rozan, Don Winslow, and fourteen others

Bayard, Louis. *The pale blue eye*

Dobson, Joanne. *The raven and the nightingale : a modern mystery of Edgar Allan Poe*

Fairstein, Linda A. *Entombed*

Gray, John *Not quite dead*

Lippman, Laura, *In a strange city*

May, John *Poe & Fanny*

Pearl, Matthew. *The Poe shadow : a novel*

Rusch, Sheldon *For Edgar*

Schechter, Harold. *Edgar Allan Poe mystery series*

Silvis, Randall *On night's shore*

Taylor, Andrew, *The American boy* and *An unpardonable crime*