

Dupin and the power of detection

6. See Walter Benjamin's remarks on how "the masses appear as the asylum that shields an asocial person from his persecutors" in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: NLB, 1973), p. 40.
7. Shawn Rosenheim, "Detective Fiction, Psychoanalysis, and the Analytic Sublime," in *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 161, points out that "the description of the orangutan virtually reverses Cuvier's actual claims." See also Burton R. Pollin, "Poe's 'Murders in the Rue Morgue': The Ingenious Web Unravelled," in *Studies in the American Renaissance: 1977*, ed. Joel Myerson (Boston: Twayne, 1978), p. 253.
8. Poe to George Roberts, 4 June 1842, *Letters*, 1: 200.
9. Qtd. in John Walsh, *Poe the Detective: The Curious Circumstances behind "The Mystery of Marie Roget"* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1968), p. 55.
10. Walsh, *Poe the Detective*, pp. 61, 63, 69.
11. Poe to George Roberts, 4 June 1842, *Letters*, 1: 200.
12. Many readers have noted similarities between Dupin and the Minister. Joseph J. Moldenhauer, "Murder as a Fine Art: Basic Connections Between Poe's Aesthetics, Psychology, and Moral Vision," *PMLA* 83 (1968): 294, describes Dupin as "the double of the criminal" and remarks that "the investigator's motives are hardly more philanthropic than the Minister's." Babener, "The Shadow's Shadow," 329–331, explores the links between detective and criminal and notes, like my discussion, Dupin's "morally dubious" motives. See also Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 64, and Martin Priestman, *Detective Fiction and Literature: The Figure on the Carpet* (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 54.
13. John Douglas and Mark Olshaker, *Mindhunter: Inside the FBI's Elite Serial Crime Unit* (New York: Scribner, 1995), p. 32.
14. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), pp. 202–203, writes: "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection."
15. J. Gerald Kennedy, *Poe, Death, and the Life of Writing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), pp. 120, 124–126, also discusses how Dupin stuns his opponents.

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Poe's feminine ideal

Poe's vision of the feminine ideal appears throughout his work, in his poetry and short stories, and his critical essays, most notably "The Philosophy of Composition." Especially in his poetry, he idealizes the vulnerability of woman, a portrayal that extends into his fiction in stories such as "Eleonora" and "The Fall of the House of Usher." In these tales, and even moreso in "Morella" and "Ligeia," the heroines' unexpected capacities for life beyond the grave indicate that females may have more strength and initiative than the delicate models of his verse. The most significant trait of his ideal, however, is her role as emotional catalyst for her partner. The romanticized woman is much more significant in her impact on Poe's narrators than in her own right.

The concept of using females merely as a means to a (male) end appears explicitly in "The Philosophy of Composition," wherein Poe also supplies his philosophy of beauty: "When, indeed, men speak of Beauty, they mean, precisely, not a quality, as is supposed, but an effect – they refer, in short, just to that intense and pure elevation of *soul* – *not* of intellect, or of heart – upon which I have commented, and which is experienced in consequence of contemplating 'the beautiful'" (*E&R*, 16). Thus the value of what is viewed lies solely in the response induced in the observer, and the subject takes complete precedence over its object. Scenic images in Poe's work fall more into the realm of the sublime than the beautiful, so instead, the inspiration for the experience of Beauty in all its melancholy extremity is "the death . . . of a beautiful woman" and, appropriately, "equally it is beyond doubt that the lips be . . . , 19). The

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in the Rue Morgue,” “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt,” “The Assigination,” “The Oblong Box,” and “The Premature Burial.” Floyd Stovall comments that Poe’s poetic theory “has been partly substantiated by the excellence of these productions, most of which are among the best things that he did. There is in them, however, much repetition . . . and in spite of the poet’s excellent art the theme grows monotonous.”¹

Critics have used biographical and psychological arguments to explain this preoccupation of Poe’s. Doubtless, Poe lost an unusual number of beautiful, relatively young, nurturing females in his lifetime: his mother, Eliza Poe; his foster mother, Fanny Allan; the mother of one of his friends, Jane Stanard; and his own wife, Virginia Clemm. Poe witnessed his mother’s death before he turned three, and this traumatic event caused him not only to seek desperately for replacement caregivers but to re-enact this bereavement in his poetry and prose. Kenneth Silverman believes that in his tales Poe “nourished himself on a young woman’s death, in the sense that art was for him a form of mourning, a revisitation of his past and of what he had lost, as if trying to make them right. Since nothing could, he returned to the subject of ‘the one and only supremely beloved’ again and again.”² All three of these key biographical figures show signs of consumption, a disease that kills its victims without destroying their appearance.

In fact, often the consumptive woman ironically becomes increasingly beautiful as her skin pales to translucence and her cheeks and lips redden from fever. Washington Irving depicted the demise of a young girl whom he observed in the throes of consumption as exemplifying “a kind of death that seemed devoid of pain, deformity, filth, or horror.” Examining Poe’s depictions of death, Gerald Kennedy comments:

Poe implies that through this insidious transformation, temporal loveliness approaches the perfection of eternal beauty, and theoretically at least the corpse of the dead woman briefly incarnates an ideality. But because death also entails physiological decay, the beauty of the just-departed contains an element of terror, since the passage of time implies a subsequent and inevitable mutation to loathsomeness. . . . The dying woman became a sign of her own fate, and her dissolution presented a spectacle at once irresistible and unbearable.³

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the wasting Madeline Usher and Berenice, whose emaciated body, “hollow temples,” and “thin and shrunken lips” revolt the narrator almost as much as her teeth do (*P&T*, 230). In other cases where the female falls ill without lessening her beauty (“Morella,” “Ligeia,” “Eleonora”), he is at the bedside of his wife for her last breath.

Serving chiefly as inspiration for the narrator’s melancholy experience of “Beauty” in the loss of this increasingly attractive figure, Poe’s poetic and fictional females lack individual development. The dying woman passes silently from this life, rarely expressing her feelings on the matter. Madeline Usher is speechless in her only pre-entombed appearance; Berenice smiled her ghastly grin but “spoke no word” (*P&T*, 230), and the wife in “The Oval Portrait” disturbs her husband’s labor not at all but instead quietly dies in her chair as he paints. In other cases, such as those of Ligeia, Morella, and Eleonora, their dying thoughts focus not on their own plight but on that of the narrator. In Poe’s fictional and poetic world, the suffering and death of the beloved figure repeatedly pales into insignificance beside the self-absorption of her survivor.

Poe’s female characters thus become a receptacle for their narrator’s angst and guilt, a *tabula rasa* on which the lover inscribes his own needs. His fictional “ideal” is a woman who can be subsumed into another’s ego and who has no need to tell her own tale; she is killed off so quickly that her silence is inscribed quite irrevocably. Instead her image functions merely as a mirror that reflects man at twice his size, as Virginia Woolf has described.⁴ I join other critics in arguing that Poe never truly wrote about women at all, writing instead about a female object and ignoring dimensions of character that add depth or believability to these repeated stereotypes of the beautiful damsel. Nina Baym asserts that there “are neither portrayals of women, nor attitudes toward them, in Poe’s fiction and biography,” since he uses females to stand for ideas that can almost be construed as morals of his tales.⁵ On the other hand, Joseph Moldenhauer points out that Poe’s women, although admittedly representing ideals, are disturbingly “wish[e]d into death” in order for Poe to fulfill his art, thus making him “symbolically, a killer of beautiful women.”⁶ It is hard to determine which repeated treatment of women is more demeaning: to see them as creatures in their own right, but ones who must die to serve the narrator’s emotional needs, or to see them as mere objects to be used and discarded. Poe’s recurring ideal was is merely a placeholder, the less obtrusive the better, for some need in the narrator himself. As Jean Derron remarks, Poe’s

