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The Crimes in the Murderer's Mind: An Analytic Approach to Edgar Allan Poe's
Criminals.

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The FINAL PROJECT is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original and my own work, except as acknowledged in the text. The work in this thesis has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university.

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Fernando Guerrero Ruiz

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Signature:

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'F. GUERRERO RUIZ', with a large, stylized flourish above the name.

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Abstract

This essay is an analysis of the figure of the criminal in the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe. These stories feature unbalanced characters who best represent the image of a psychotic criminal. Poe is skilled at instilling emotional shock in his fictional crimes, allowing readers to only follow the thoughts of an unbalanced narrator. The insane criminals in Poe's stories serve as untrustworthy sources of information for understanding the story itself. Readers are merely puppets of the manipulative narrators, who force them to follow the characters' own impulses and thus reverse the moral effect of Poe's tales. Poe instills in some of his criminals a strong desire to commit murder. No human being can escape or control this desire because it satisfies all of the unbalanced criminals' secret desires. The preposterousness of the criminals' acts represents the link between man and his own destruction. The truth is that many of the narrators of the stories embody the downfall and destruction of man. Man finds his own deposition by breaking with a higher source of life and light, ultimately God. Poe's criminals' identity is in God, but when they reject the creator to establish themselves as creators and designers of their own reality, they become outlaws of nature and the divine.

Keywords: crimes, rationalization, psychopathy, logical structure, manipulative accounts, unity, disunity, outcasts, brutes, hatred, identity.

Resumen

Este ensayo es un análisis de la figura del criminal en los cuentos de Edgar Allan Poe. Estos relatos presentan personajes desequilibrados que representan mejor la imagen de un criminal psicótico. Poe es muy hábil a la hora de infundir un choque emocional en sus crímenes de ficción, permitiendo a los lectores seguir únicamente los pensamientos de un narrador desequilibrado. Los criminales dementes de los relatos de Poe sirven como fuentes de información poco fiables para entender la propia historia. Los lectores no son más que marionetas de los manipuladores narradores, que les obligan a seguir los propios impulsos de los personajes, invirtiendo así el efecto moral de los cuentos de Poe. Poe inculca a algunos de sus criminales un fuerte deseo de cometer un asesinato. Ningún ser humano puede escapar o controlar este deseo porque satisface todos los deseos secretos de los criminales desequilibrados. Lo absurdo de los actos de los criminales representa el vínculo entre el hombre y su propia destrucción. Lo cierto es que muchos de los narradores de los relatos encarnan la caída y la destrucción del hombre. El hombre encuentra su propia deposición al romper con una fuente superior de vida y luz, en última instancia Dios. La identidad de los criminales de Poe está en Dios, pero cuando rechazan al creador para erigirse en creadores y diseñadores de su propia realidad, se convierten en proscritos de la naturaleza y de lo divino.

Palabras clave: crímenes, racionalización, psicopatía, estructura lógica, relatos manipuladores, unidad, desunión, parias, bestias, odio, identidad.

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The Crimes in the Murderer's Mind: An Analytic Approach to Edgar Allan Poe's
Criminals.

1. "To Do Wrong for Wrong's Sake:" An Introduction.

Edgar Allan Poe's mastery of crime storytelling widely expands the limits of gothic literature and creates indelible criminals. His tales are an unforgettable means of describing macabre crimes as justifiable events that open moral and ethical debates. These short stories show unbalanced characters that best defend the figure of an insane criminal. Poe is skillfully capable of endowing his fictional crimes with an emotional shock in which the readers can only follow the thoughts of an unbalanced narrator. In most of them, Poe offers a logically structured account of the justification of a crime that is ultimately controversial and raises questions about moral doubts. Therefore, the reader could consider Poe's criminals examples of psychopaths that commit crimes against other individuals. The characters could also be conceived as outcasts of society and of themselves. They deny the existence of a unified universe with a unitary principle set in God, as they usurp the divine roles. Many of these characteristics faithfully embrace the inner realm of the characters and classify them as psychologically unstable characters. This mental instability links the characters to the settings, which represent their mental state: gloomy mansions that tremble to their core, as in "The Fall of the House of Usher," long, bone-chilling catacombs with darkening dead-end corridors, as in "The Cask of Amontillado," or a burnt-down house, as in "The Black Cat."

This paper analyses the criminals' minds, actions, and frames of mind, and explores and addresses questions of sanity, identity, and unity in Poe's horror stories. Firstly, this research paper approaches and explores the criminals' minds from a

psychological perspective. Secondly, their mental traits help the study of darker registers and their relationship with the divine. Finally, this essay approaches and conceives of Poe's criminals as outcasts of nature, the divine, and themselves, because they usurp the roles of God.

2. Manipulative minds.

Poe's stories ingeniously play with the readers' moral code and expectations of a crime. Ethically, a murder should never be accepted or legally forgiven. However, playing with readers' moral expectations is one of the most important aspects of Poe's construction of crime. Elena V. Baraban claims that some of Poe's horror stories are logical puzzles where he plays with the results and the methods of solving crimes (47-62). His illustrative character, C. Auguste Dupin, to whom Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes or Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot very much resemble, exercises logical thought over mysterious crimes. In both "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Mystery of Marie Roget", Dupin is the traditional crime solver who uses his logical mind to masterfully solve homicides. The detective auspiciously solves any arising case, even the one of a brute animal that murders a woman and her daughter. Dupin is indeed the counterpart to many of Poe's characters, he is both logically and poetically an intuitive crime-solver. Poe's describes him in "The Purloined Letter": "as poet and mathematician, he would reason well; as mere mathematician, he could not have reasoned at all" (Poe, 217). Dupin's success in his deed resides, as Viorica Patea claims, in his method of investigation, a conjunction between poetic intuition and mathematical observation (12). As a counterpart, this symbol of the pursuit of truth appeals directly to the distorted vision of reality of Poe's criminals in certain stories.

The insane criminals in Poe's tales function as unreliable sources of information for the understanding of the tale itself. This aspect of Poe's tales makes the readers focus on the diegesis of the criminal and ignore morally debatable deeds. Vicky Hestir and Emily Seguir defend the "narrator's ability to lure audiences into believing large parts of the tale" as a significant factor for making readers explore mentally unstable characters (176). Eventually, readers are mere puppets of the manipulative narrators who force readers to follow the characters' own impulses and reverse the moral effect of Poe's tales. As a matter of fact, these scholars often refer to the malefactors as psychopaths. The narrators and criminals often justify their deeds without seeking acceptance or forgiveness. This is the example of the narrator of "The Black Cat", who mentions: "I neither expect nor solicit belief. Mad indeed would I be to expect it" (Poe, 223). In this story, the narrator himself assures the reader of his sanity, but again, he plays with the expectations of the reader, killing his own wife and the black cat in a psychotic attack. Furthermore, the supernatural vision of the successor of Pluto, the first killed cat, is also part of the evidence that the murderer might be psychologically deranged. Even the narrator in "The Tale-Tell Heart" defends his sanity, asserting: "the disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them" (Poe, 303). Regardless, he does not specify the sort of disease he suffered from. In this case, he eventually kills the old man due to the insufferable "hearty tone" that was in his head (303). In both instances, the narrators induce the reader into the justification of their homicides. In this manner, they play with the readers' moral codes, seeking redemption for their deeds, claiming that they are extremely sane.

The criminals' manipulative abilities reside in a relevant trait of Poe's stories, the rationalisation of devilish deeds. Hestir and Seguir explore the criminals as if they

were psychotic characters who manipulate the course of the stories. But Poe seeks something darker, something deeper in the criminal's mind, an impulse that he names "perverseness" the "mobile without motive, a motive not motivirt" (281). It is an interior "unconquerable force which impels us" something that moves the individual to "do wrong for wrong's sake" (281). Poe bestows some of his criminals with an immense desire to commit murders. No human being may escape or control this desire, as it satisfies all the secret desires of unbalanced criminals. In "The Imp of the Perverse," Poe proposes an example of how subjects on the verge of an abyss imagine their possible terrible deaths. The concept of the imp of the perverse is applicable to Poe's criminals eventually, as they are moved by inner impelling evil forces. The story marks the beginning of the understanding of the criminal interior in Poe's tales. The rationalisation of the desire for killing is the force that plays with the expectations of the diegesis. It is the starting point for a debate on if it is morally acceptable to forgive the criminals' deeds merely because they are impelled by an unavoidable force. Therefore, it is easily perceivable that in certain tales, the narrators make a rational self-defense of his irrational deeds. In this line of thought, author John Cleman determines that the "self-defensive posture constitutes evidence in a determination of partial insanity (632)." This partial insanity merges into the storytelling biased on rational reasoning, and, therefore, marks a key aspect in understanding the way in which Poe's criminals manipulate the world with their own perception of reality.

For instance, "The Cask of Amontillado" is a representative story of the altered vision of crimes in the criminal's mind. The logical puzzle of this story relies on how Montresor reasonably justifies his assassination of Fortunato for the "thousand injuries" and an "insult" (Poe, 274). The mobile without reason of "The Imp of the Perverse"

leads Montresor to adopt a logical "philosophy of revenge" prompted by the injuries (Baraban, 48). In essence, the narrator's impunity is questionable as he is attempting to cover a crime by giving a logical justification for the crime. However, the readers especially focus on this structure of thought, suspending their disbelief over Montresor's deeds. Poe, once and again, plays with moral expectations. Montresor offers a distorted view of Fortunato, which leads the reader to fall into Montresor's deceitful justification. Other characters like Montresor can be found in the narrators of Poe's tales: in "The Black Cat," "The Imp of the Perverse," or "The Tale-Tell Heart." These reveal their irrational hatred towards other characters and, as a matter of fact, they demonstrate a clear victimisation of themselves throughout the tales (Halliburton, 263). In this way, Poe suspends the moral code of the readers and makes them accept the psychologically unbalanced criminal's just cause. The manipulative traits of these so-called psychopaths and the defence of their own sanity mark Poe's stories and open the door for different approaches to his criminals and their identities.

3. The Criminal's Identity.

The nature of the criminals' identities not only resides in their psychological make-up, but also in their connections with the divine and the mundane. According to Monica Papazu, Poe relies on the identity of the individual as a fallen man's identity (107). The preposterousness of the criminals' acts represents the link between man and his own destruction. The truth is that many of the narrators of the stories embody this downfall and destruction of man. Man finds his own deposition by breaking with a higher source of life and light, ultimately God. Papazu defends that Poe "frees the man from his status as non-essential, powerless being, and offers him access to the great Creation" (109). However, the criminals usurp the role as God and reject the existence of the higher

being. The manner in which the criminals try to manipulate logic also transforms them into characters who oppose and reject God. Thus, the criminals become characters who are liberated from the yoke of the divine. In "The Imp of the Perverse," the narrator clarifies that the logical man "sets himself to imagine designs, to dictate purposes to God" (Poe, 280). In demonstrating this intention, Poe creates a character who rejects the existence of a superior being and asserts his will to shape his own world. Hence, the individual usurps the role of God, moved by the impulse to perverseness, and this leads to his destruction. The criminals' independence from a world created by God leads them to suffer divine retribution and to reject unified entities. They are "monstrum horrendum, an unprincipled man of genius", not human beings but animals, representing the irrational side of men (Poe, 222). In their attempt of denying the unity of the world, the conjunction between man and God, criminals experience their downfall. They are, therefore, outcasts of humanity and of the divine. Connecting the stories and criminals to Spinoza's paradigm of existence, Poe believes that God is the utmost container of all, and that "everything that exists, exists in God" (Papazu, 108).

Nevertheless, the denial of the divine existence remains within the boundaries of the criminal's mind. Their identity is in God, but when they reject the creator to establish themselves as creators and designers of their own reality, they become outlaws of nature and the divine. The dichotomy between man and God in Edgar Allan Poe is forged by the genuine search for truth, for the known and the unknown. The fallen man is linked to the loss of identity in many of Poe's stories. For instance, the character of William Wilson is a man with a distorted identity. He perceives the world in a distinct way by creating the image of a double of himself. His own thoughts have altered his perception of the world and reality. In this manner, the reader can find certain traits of

irrationality in some events of his life or in the attempt to provide a rational explanation of his dark perception of his double. Therefore, one could assert that Wilson is a powerless being who ends up controlling his own world. Criminals' fates are nothing more than divine retribution as a result of their hybris. Their isolation and condition of God's outcasts transform them into unstable individuals where the mind is paramount. In "The Fall of the House of Usher", Roderick Usher is the image of this separation between the divine and the human mind. At the same time, God represents reason and eternal truth, but also a conception of the world which he is not able to grasp (Papazu, 125–136). The mind is a major element in this tale, as his own "mental disorder which oppressed him" has not only transformed the protagonist into an outlaw of himself, but of God (Poe, 232).

4. Outcasts of the Divine, Nature, and Themselves.

The idea of being an outcast is certainly key to understanding the criminal's mind in Poe's stories. The criminals' minds are within an earthly realm where they must guide their deeds and where they behave as outlaws of men and God. There is a sense of alienation within themselves that avoids heavenly rules. The criminals live in a gloomy, distorted reality which lacks the figure of a God. God is the representation of light, but in "The Fall of the House of Usher", for instance, light does not appear, and if shadows and gloom reign over the Usher, then God will never conquer that place. There is a separation between the physical and the moral, the description of the instances of the house almost seems to be drawn away from reality. They come from a nightmarish realm, almost a phantasmagoria. In this desperate state of disunity, the criminals are invaded by crime. If shades govern over the minds of criminals as well as in Roderick Usher's, then crime is present where God is neither superior nor present anymore, that

is, in the criminal's mind. The connections between the House of Usher and Roderick are more than evident. The destruction of the house and Roderick's death, the absence of light and his sanity, or the narrow and gloomy descriptions of the house and his inner mind. There is a disunity in Roderick's perception of the world that he cannot avoid. It is the absence of God and of death that leads him to his own downfall and thus the fall of the house of Usher.

The criminals' minds break with this unity at all levels. They accept the role of a creator, break the unity of the world to disrupt reality, and provide a rational explanation for their deeds that embraces illogicality. However, this disunity is more remarkable when it affects the wrongdoers' own selves, nature, and God. As Viorica Patea describes, "Poe's criminals violate the unity of the universe. Crime is possible in a world divided, dissected and alienated (16)." In the short stories, man becomes alien to God, to himself, and to all of nature, provoking his destruction as an individual. The process of disunion is the source of all devilish forces. Therefore, this disunity also functions as a denial of creator. "The Imp of the Perverse" is the mere logical explanation for the illogical crime, and a justification of the disunity of the narrator, foreseeing his own death over a cliff. This inner dissolution of the individual shatters him into two different personalities with distinct traits. One side of the individual represents the mathematician that Dupin mentions in the "Purloined Letter", the rational explainer and the logically biased persona. The other bestows the criminal with a dark conception of himself. He becomes a beast, brutal, almost animal, left to his own devices in a reality that is not his anymore. These aspects are central to the different murderers in the stories. On the one hand, the representation of the orang-outan and its role act as the image of an outcast to humanity in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue,"

and on the other hand, the logically structured justification of the assassins' deeds demonstrates the criminals' rational side.

Nevertheless, this principle of unity goes further beyond the destruction of the self, it also finds its justification in the nature of the murderers. In many of the tales, criminals tend to follow a misanthropic tendency. Their perception of well-formed individuals who are, moreover, part of a community seems to clash with the murderers' state of mind. In "William Wilson," the narrator feels disunity, and the major source of the hatred towards his enemy is himself: "William Wilson is no longer one but two" (Patea, 15). Wilson constitutes the paramount example of self-disunity in Poe's stories by acknowledging his hatred as "the detestation of my race" (Poe, 626). This utterance reaches further meaning when the reader approaches the end of the tale, in which the murderer kills his double because of his own disunity. Another example of how hatred represents the source of disunity in Poe's tales is "The Tale-Tell Heart" where the narrator becomes conscious of the abhorrence he experiences towards the old man as a united whole, as a unified human. Ultimately, the criminal dismembers the old man. Once and again, the criminal's distorted perception of the world embodies the disunity and the denial of a unified whole. The narrator's hatred towards the old man raises the disunity in the criminal's mind. The detestation of himself and of the world created by God, thus, leads these criminals to become brute creatures and outcasts of their own species. Even "The Black Cat" is a case of a criminal who rejects the unity between man and nature. The denial of the bounds between another human being (his wife) and nature (the cat) is what condemns the narrator and criminal to feeling disconnected from this nature-man-God unity. The narrator himself confesses that "that humanity of feeling which had once been my distinguishing trait" had disappeared from his feelings,

which contributes to, as in the case of William Wilson, the detestation of their race (Poe, 227).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Edgar Allan Poe clearly plays with all the expectations that a reader could have of a horror story and a murder. Poe depicts disunity and the denial of unity, which perturbs the minds of criminals. In this way, criminals refuse to embrace their human condition and adopt godly roles that destroy their identity and perturb their vision of the world. The criminals' psychopathic attitudes and the logically structured thoughts of the murderers are common to most of the wrongdoers in the stories. Criminals, being unbalanced, disguise themselves as mathematicians who question the existence of a creator God and usurp his divine roles. These characteristics collectively transform a fallen man into an outcast who is propelled by unseen forces that drive the subject to his own destruction. Eventually, the devil of perverseness, as described by Poe, invades the murderers' minds and enhances their denial of the superior being. Thus, the criminals break their unity not only with God, but also with mankind. Hence, they become outcasts of nature, the divine, man, and, ultimately, of themselves.

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