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GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

Human duality in Edgar Allan Poe's *The  
Murders in the Rue Morgue*

Alumna: Carla Saes Fernández

Tutora: María del Carmen Diego Amado

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Date:

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Vº Bº

Signature

**Abstract:**

This study tries to offer an analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's C. Auguste Dupin and the villain in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, by examining his characterization of both personae and the gap between them. Additionally, this dissertation presents the crime scene and the witnesses' thoughts proving the duality of man and posing the question of whether the two types of man, the primitive and the intellectual, can be revealed within the same individual.

Key Words: Dupin, orangutan, deductive, instincts, imitation, duality, anthropomorphic.

**Resumen:**

Este estudio tiene como objetivo el análisis de los personajes de Dupin y el villano en la obra *Los Crímenes de la Calle Morgue* de Edgar Allan Poe, examinando la caracterización de ambos protagonistas y la separación entre ellos. Además, este Trabajo de Fin de Grado presenta la escena del crimen y las opiniones de los testigos que prueban la dualidad del hombre, a la vez que se propone la cuestión de si ambos tipos de hombre, el primitivo y el intelectual, pueden manifestarse en un mismo individuo de forma simultánea.

Palabras Clave: Dupin, orangután, deductivo, instintos, imitación, dualidad, antropomorfo.

# Table of Contents

|                         |           |
|-------------------------|-----------|
| <b>Introduction</b>     | <b>6</b>  |
| <b>C. Auguste Dupin</b> | <b>8</b>  |
| <b>The orangutan</b>    | <b>10</b> |
| <b>Conclusion</b>       | <b>14</b> |
| <b>Works cited</b>      | <b>16</b> |

## Introduction

Detective fiction is a popular genre in which an individual has to solve a crime or mystery. There is a dare for the audience to figure out the crime by the hints and what the reading is presenting. Usually, there is someone innocent being considered guilty for the crime, which is why the detective is so important as they help the innocent person, while locking the readers in. Edgar Allan Poe created this new genre with the publication of *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*. It was not considered a new literary form yet, but he was the first author to write about and introduce a persona that would solve mysteries by analyzing facts. He called this “tales of ratiocination,” as these were tales of logical understanding:

“These tales of ratiocination owe most of their popularity to being something in a new key. I do not mean to say that they are not ingenious—but people think them more ingenious than they are—on account of their method and air of method.” (Poe, letter to Phillip P. Cooke)

In his novel *The Murders of the Rue Morgue*, Poe introduces elements that would be developed and adapted by future authors. Poe’s detective is C. Auguste Dupin, a peculiar, exceptional and reclusive character that leads a personal investigation of police cases, as they contact him when they are not able to solve an enigma. Dupin has such sensitive and sharp observation abilities, about which he tells his friend, the narrator of the stories, that “the necessary knowledge is of what to observe.” (Poe 4) Throughout the story, the clues that Dupin finds are available for the reader, offering them the chance to solve the crime. C. Auguste Dupin was the main character of three short stories by Edgar Allan Poe, establishing the main and early features for the detective and the genre. After Poe’s death, it was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle who popularized

this kind of story with his famous character Sherlock Holmes, who shares many characteristics with Poe's Dupin.

The narrator of the story is an unnamed, ordinary man, a friend of Dupin's who shares his eccentric way of life. The man admires Dupin's solutions and tricks, particularly when Dupin seems to be able to be inside his mind and consciousness, knowing what he is thinking. This character serves as a contrast to Dupin, whilst being a device for the readers to maintain their distance from him and his observations, so that Dupin's wit and quick reasoning is emphasized, as well as the mystery around the question of how he came to the solution.

*The Murders in the Rue Morgue* was published in 1841 and is now considered the first detective story. The story begins with the discovery of two murders, the victims being an old woman and her daughter. Dupin and the narrator find out through reading the newspaper, which states that the violent scene was found after the neighbors heard the women screaming. The apartment is apparently sealed from the inside, so the police do not know how the killer got in and out. Dupin and his friend offer their help to the police and by following and interpreting the clues, as well as reading the witnesses' statements, they find out who the killer is; a lost orangutan.

Hence, the story shows a mysterious character, capable of reasoning in a way that few people can, solving crimes just by observing around him and collecting clues. He is a cultured man who loves poetry, riddles and mathematics, who is highly analytical and creative and whose mind allows him to be steps ahead of the police and villains. Alternatively, there is the "villain", the orangutan, an individual of a semi-solitary species that remains, to some extent, social. These are strong and curious animals that have shown cognitive abilities such as recognizing themselves in mirrors and tool use and production. And, as it turns out, the creature that perpetrated the vicious

crimes, who everyone thought to be a person, but was actually an animal. Thus, by analyzing the murderer's character and Dupin's mysterious nature in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, this essay will try to demonstrate how people seem to consider that there are two sides to humanity.

### C. Auguste Dupin

The reader is in suspense, waiting for an introduction to the owner of the analytical mind that the narrator describes, a mysterious start to the ostensible and gory tale the title seems to suggest. Poe created a character who is a logical investigator, an intelligent man, infallible, who uses reasoning and science without needing the police's means for the resolution of his cases. To get to the cause of the occurrences, Dupin is able to combine his prodigious logic with a touch of artistic imagination. Moreover, during his investigations, he proves to be excellent at reading body language, when reading the suspects. This way, Dupin can anticipate any possible feeling of impatience, aversion, doubt or surprise and solve the mysteries. Dupin's rationality is such that he can seemingly read his companion's thoughts while he is thinking them, but he can also explain the chain of analysis that led him to the narrator's thoughts just by observing and watching his face expressions:

“Poe's narrator may emphasize the almost preternatural nature of Dupin's gifts; but Dupin himself scorns recourse to the supernatural: he pursues explanations always grounded in empiricist assumptions about causation and human consciousness.” (Frank 171)

Dupin creates a casual, chronological and associative sequence of ideas based both on nature and on laws ruling the functioning of the human mind. In this character, Poe portrays Dupin as an individual of history that has to recreate the past, without any soothing awareness of the



future. At the same time, Poe is addressing how intellectual beings are looked at bizarrely and peculiarly by others: “Had the routine of our life at this place been known to the world, we should have been regarded as madmen—although, perhaps, as madmen of a harmless nature.” (Poe 8)

Dupin was, without doubt, an innovative character, an unconventional, quick-witted detective. He is a brilliant, eccentric, educated and logical individual with a well-defined character and profile. *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* mixes this eccentric personality, a violent crime and an investigation. In addition to this, Dupin and his reasonings are presented in a way that the entire inference process and all of his methods are highlighted. In this story, Dupin solves the so called “impossible mystery”, that of a murder perpetrated in a locked room. He is not a professional detective; he investigates mainly to keep himself entertained: “An inquiry will afford us amusement.” (Poe 27) Secondly, he does so to prove the innocence of a falsely accused person (Adolphe Le Bon, who once did him a favor and was the last person to see the victims alive). In fact, Poe himself was an obsessive riddle-solver, both in cosmology and cryptanalysis, drawing, through Dupin, a perhaps romanticized self-portrait.

Dupin is presented as a thinking machine, dehumanized and only interested in logic, but through his method he embodies the criminal to find out what is in their minds and by knowing what and how they think, he is able to solve the crimes. Gerald Kennedy stated about this that “Poe [...] established the prototype of the modern detective story by focusing on the investigative methods of a master sleuth.” (Kennedy 185)

Loisa Nygaard states that “deductive reasoning is generally defined to be reasoning from premises to specific conclusions according to the set rules of logic.” (230) According to this, when Dupin refers to his deductive process, he lends an aura of conviction to his inferences. When solving the crime, Dupin works backwards from the murders themselves, from the mutilated

corpses and the jumbled witnesses' testimonies, to reconstruct what had happened. Dupin reasons that the responsible cannot be, by any chance, a person: "the gigantic stature, the prodigious strength and activity, the wild ferocity, and the imitative propensities of these Mammalia are sufficiently well known to all." (Poe 45) He explains that the criminal is not a human due to the amount of force needed and used in the murders, as well as the strange voices heard by the witnesses when the crime took place, and it is this kind of revelation that shows the importance of the powers of the mind.

Therefore, by saying that "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." (Poe 2) Poe is contrasting the man's animalistic instincts, symbolized by the orangutan, and Dupin's intellectual nature. Additionally, there is a duality between Dupin and the reader, since the unexpected turn at the end creates a mysterious environment in which the reader is not able to decipher the crime since they would need Dupin's unique powers of deduction to realize that the criminal is, in fact, an animal. Hence, Poe creates the ancestor of the famous family of sleuths, from Doyle's Sherlock Holmes to Christie's Hercule Poirot, an intelligent, dehumanized man, prone to reasoning and observing, a recognizable self-portrait of himself, enhanced and infallible when solving impossible cases.

### **The orangutan**

The orangutan (*Pongo pygmaeus*) in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* could be considered the most important character in the short story. Dupin discovers that it was the animal through the strength needed for the killings, the non-human hair found at the scene, the way in which the criminal must have entered the building, the fact that no witness was able to distinguish the

language heard during the crime and the newspaper article about a lost orangutan. Since it is a wild animal, Dupin himself, nor the readers or the owner cannot figure out exactly why he murdered the two women. However, the owner describes the animal as friendly and even social, not wanting to hurt anyone.

The orangutan comes from Borneo, where a French sailor captured it and brought to Paris in order to sell it. The way in which the sailor disciplines the animal is described in detail; he has the animal “under control” through the use of a whip and by instigating fear. Consequently, the perpetrator of the crime is an abused animal that only knows violence and fear and reacts to stress that way. As its owner describes, the ape is not violent by nature but ends up becoming a brute through the sailor’s system of control.

The society of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was science-fixated to the extent that the century culminated with the publishing of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*. Animals represented the “otherness”, they are fundamental non-beings, the marginal non-human. This leads scholars to believe that a man-like ape, such as an orangutan, is referring to the differences and similarities between humans and animals, as Møllegaard states:

“The manlike ape of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” evokes philosophical questions about what separates humans from animals and to what extent humans’ claims of possessing superior reason is not an illusion – radical questions during Poe’s lifetime.”  
(Møllegaard 18)

As well as in *The Black Cat*, another one of Poe’s short stories featuring animals, the wild nature of human beings (animality) operates as motivation for the so-called uncanny. These two

stories use animals as agents of evil, leading to violent murders in closed spaces. Nonetheless, in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* the case is closed without anyone being charged with the crime, despite the bloodshed and violence. Moreover, the animal is thought to be human, despite the brutality of the murders, for some human agency is assumed until Dupin shows otherwise. By using animals as doubles and mirrors for his human characters, Poe alters the ontological borders and limits between madness and sanity, fear and desire, instinct and reason and reality and fantasy. In addition to this, the ape is defined by its connection to humans, essentially by the slave-master relation, since he is confined in the sailor's house waiting to be sold: "He at length succeeded in lodging it safely at his own residence in Paris, where, not to attract toward himself the unpleasant curiosity of his neighbors, he kept it carefully secluded." (Poe 52) The Frenchman kept the animal quiet by whipping it.

Additionally, the witnesses at the scene thought the animal to be a person, and by its noises, they thought to be discerning the language of a foreign, even though they did not understand it: "Each auditor was able to Project the language and identity of a foreign being into the open space of animal noise." (Lippit 788) That being so, Poe illustrates how animal sounds could be mistaken for human sounds, if a person confuses a semantic structure with a rhythmical sound, like the grunts of an ape. With regards to this, Georges-Louis Buffon stated that orangutans are "brutes of a kind so singular, that man cannot behold it without contemplating himself." (*Histoire Naturelle Generale et Particuliere*)

When the animal was brought to Paris, it began observing and acquiring human characteristics simply by learning through imitation: "Razor in hand, and fully lathered, [it was] sitting before the looking – glass, attempting the operation of shaving, in which it had no doubt previously watched its master through the key – hole of the closet." (Poe 52) Fearing the

punishment for being outside the closet, the ape flees from its master, razor still in hand, portraying man's inner "animality" breaking loose when afraid. When the orangutan imitates the actions of a barber with Madame L'Esplanaye he is, in fact, thinking like a man, even using a man-made tool; this is indicative of man being capable of dreadful actions when their primal urges take over. Moreover, Poe shows how man and ape would deal with the situation in the same way; feeling shame when they are caught doing something inappropriate:

"Conscious of having deserved punishment, it seemed desirous of concealing its bloody deeds, and skipped about the chamber in an agony of nervous agitation; throwing down and breaking the furniture as it moved and dragging the bed from the bedstead." (Poe 55)

The animal realizes its faults and tries to hide the evidence, seizing the daughter's body first and putting it in the chimney and then hurling the mother's corpse through the window. The Frenchman escapes from the scene as soon as he sees what the animal has done, while the orangutan runs away when it hears voices outside. Poe connects the sailor and the animal to the same foundation as they both are afraid of their actions and do not want to face the reality of them. About this, the narrator emphasizes how, when asked about the murders,

"[...] the sailor's face flushed up as if he were struggling with suffocation. He started to his feet and grasped his cudgel, but the next moment he fell back into his seat, trembling violently, and with the countenance of death itself" (Poe 51)

Hence, it is this fear that ultimately leads the scared animal to flee from its owner looking for somewhere to hide and killing the two women, when it realizes that they are in its hiding place, as well as how it is fear that makes the French sailor run from the scene and keep quiet about what the animal has done.

Also, the use of an anthropomorphic animal being violent towards women instead of its master represents how men take their anger and primitive savage forces out against innocent and vulnerable women and what is more, are even able to escape in shocking ways. The orangutan did not act towards the Frenchman for he had both more power and the whip, just like men had more power over women in the society of the time. The author is using violence as an inhumane and negative act, reinforcing the inherent animalistic instincts under the semblance of male beings. Thus, this wild animal is used to describe something within society and within individuals, something that humans believe they have control over, but is ultimately arbitrary and unmanageable. The ape also represents that part of Dupin that could break free anytime and perpetrate an inconceivable act, showing the dual nature between the man and the animal.

## **Conclusion**

At the beginning of the story, the author makes clear the difference between the beast and the intellectual, claiming that the animal, the brute, seizes power using its strength, while the intellectual analyses and keeps it to himself, thinking about his actions. This shows the contrast between the intellectual behavior of Dupin, the investigator, and the violent and animalistic behavior of man, portrayed by the orangutan.

In addition to this, Poe has a genius, Dupin, solve the mystery, while demonstrating the great contrast between the inner functioning of a man's consciousness and mind, using the man-like ape to symbolize and represent a man. The beast, the orangutan, is uncivilized, vicious and primitive, whilst Dupin is represented as the embodiment and personification of society and civilization. The story contrasts the two types of man: the thoughtless and uncultured man and the logical and civilized man. Poe teaches how all men have brutal and innate impulses deep down

and how these instincts are usually taken out on innocent women. However, he asks the question of whether both types of man, both characteristics, can be part of and can be manifested in the same man, simultaneously.

Dupin proves the police wrong, but just as a way to show his cognitive male-on-male competitiveness, another reason why he took the case in the first place. He does not really care about the murdered women, and it is this indifference that shows Dupin's dual nature in a world of rational problem solving and reasoning. Hence, he is using his powers, not against women like the orangutan did, but not for them either; he solves the case to show his superiority, to help Le Bon and keep himself busy.

All in all, the story features a truly analytical thinker and a wild animal, thinking and trying to act like a person. They are different in their personae, but similar in their looks (as orangutans are anthropomorphic animals) and their ways, as well as cognitive capabilities. Orangutans are able to produce and use tools, in addition to being able to learn by mimicking. Even though humans are characterized by their intellect and consider apes as primitive and brutish, both species react the same way to similar scenarios, as addressed through the French sailor and his orangutan at the time of the crime. Poe wrote Dupin as the epitome of the community of his time and the escaped and scared orangutan as Dupin's inner self, capable of the unimaginable, symbolizing men and their animalistic and violent instincts, taken out especially on women as a way of being in control.

With *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, Edgar Allan Poe narrowed the gap between orangutans (*pongo*) and humans (*homo sapiens*), placing them in the same subfamily, while depicting the brutal transgression of humanity and recounting the framing of man's paradigms about animal and beast actions.

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