

# Edgar Allan Poe's Chevalier Auguste Dupin: Usage of Ratiocination in Fictional Crime Solving

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**Edgar Allan Poe's Chevalier Auguste Dupin: Usage of Ratiocination in  
Fictional Crime Solving**

Završni rad

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## **Abstract**

Edgar Allan Poe is one of the most famous American authors of all time. He is best known for works which are a part of the dark romanticism genre. However, his genius did not stop there; Poe is also generally considered as the inventor of detective fiction. Poe's influence on detective fiction writers is so large that his fictional detective became the prototype for many later ones; most notably Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and Agatha Christie's Hercules Poirot. The character of the detective Chevalier Auguste Dupin is featured in three of his stories, also known as *The Dupin Tales*, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt," and "The Purloined Letter." In these stories, Dupin solves various crime mysteries with the aid of his unnamed helper. The first tale is an example of a locked room mystery, the second one portrays Dupin as an armchair detective, and the third one introduces the motif of an unlikely perpetrator. All three stories show Dupin's unique method of crime solving which strongly binds his observations and conclusions by the principle of ratiocination showing that no matter how extraordinary a crime is its solution always adheres to the principles of cold logic.

**Keywords:** Edgar Allan Poe, detective fiction, crime mystery, Chevalier Auguste Dupin, *The Dupin Tales*

## **Introduction**

In his relatively short career in literature, Edgar Allan Poe has managed to show a staggering amount of innovativeness. The short stories written by him are easily differentiated from all the others. Although all of his works are exceptional, his fictional detective, Chevalier Auguste Dupin, is one of the most unique. This paper analyzes the character of Dupin and his method of solving crime by the means of ratiocination. The first chapter presents a short timeline and the most important events of Edgar Allan Poe's life to show how his life might have influenced the creation of Dupin. The second chapter explores Poe's influence on the creation and advancement of detective fiction by inventing some of the most popular mystery elements many later writers used. The third chapter examines Dupin's originality, plausibility, and effectiveness as a detective. The subsequent three subparagraphs each delve into how and why Dupin used his method in order to solve the crime mystery.

## 1. The Life of Edgar Allan Poe

It is impossible to deduce anything about the character of a fictional detective without first saying a few words about his creator. Edgar Allan Poe was an alien presence in the first generation of professional American authors. Born in Boston in 1809 and later taken in by John and Frances Allan as an orphan, Poe's early life was a great source of his later dissatisfaction as well as a possible cause of his somewhat odd temper. The relationship with his stepfather John greatly influenced his adolescent life:

At Joseph H. Clarke's academy the boy studied mathematics and geography, excelling in Latin and Greek; he also revealed a gift for verse satire, collecting his clever poems in a portfolio that he begged Allan to publish. His foster father pondered the request and consulted the schoolmaster but finally refused, wishing not to excite authorial vanity. (Kennedy 9)

At first, young Poe wrote poems such as "To Helen," "Israfel," and "The City in the Sea." After the death of his elder brother Henry in March of 1831, however, he began pursuing a more serious literary career, mainly as a writer of prose. He was awarded *The Baltimore Saturday Visiter* prize in October 1833 for his short story "MS. Found in a Bottle" (Sova 162). From the 1830s onward, he was widely recognized as a daring and innovative writer especially after the success of "The Raven" (Carlson 21). Probably his most prominent employment was in numerous newspapers and magazines including the *Southern Literary Messenger*, *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*, *Graham's Magazine*, *The Broadway Journal* and even a journal of his own – *The Stylus*.

During his lifetime Poe received mixed reviews of his works. The best example is the opinion of a prominent literary critic James Russell Lowell who first described Poe as a

genius. By the time he wrote *A Fable for Critics*, however, Lowell expressed a different view of Poe's works:

There comes Poe, with his raven, like Barnaby Rudge,  
Three-fifths of him genius and two-fifths sheer fudge,  
Who talks like a book of iambs and pentameters,  
In a way to make people of common-sense damn metres,  
Who has written some things quite the best of their kind,  
But the heart somehow seems all squeezed out by the mind. (Lowell 59)

Apart from his literary career, Poe's life was outlined by his excessive drinking, peculiar mood, and marriage to his 13-year-old cousin Virginia Clemm. Since the earliest biographies of Poe's life started to appear during his lifetime, he was also given a unique opportunity to manipulate his life story: "Almost every aspect of Poe's life was altered or fabricated in order to mask his real origins and circumstances and to project an image of himself in keeping with his literary ambitions" (Carlson 19).

His abrupt death in 1849 helped in propelling his reputation even farther, although the precise causes of his death have never been determined. Hypotheses run a gamut from stroke, to undiagnosed diabetes or hypoglycemia, to hydrophobia, to gradual poisoning from air pollution (Fisher 10-11). All of these factors intertwined to create a legend suitable of a prominent Romantic author. Nevertheless, Poe's achievements were immense. During his diversified career of barely two decades, he managed to produce a little over sixty poems, close to seventy-odd tales, one completed novel, and a number of essays and reviews.

## 2. Edgar Allan Poe's Influence on the Rise of Detective Fiction

Although the origins of the genre begin with early crime narratives such as *Oedipus Rex*, it is not until the nineteenth century that the rise of detective fiction truly began. Despite his fame for writing macabre novels, “the general critical consensus is that the detective story begins with Edgar Allan Poe, the ‘father’ of the detective genre” (Scaggs 7). With his tales of ratiocination Poe laid the foundations of the genre itself. “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” is often identified as the first detective story, and in this, and the two Dupin stories that followed, Poe set the template for the crime fiction of the next century (Scaggs 19). In this he was aided by Arthur Conan Doyle who created one of the most famous fictional detectives – Sherlock Holmes whose name became a byword for the part. Poe’s influence on detective fiction writers exceeded Doyle and his works became a cornerstone for later crime plots: “In the closing paragraphs of ‘A Detective Police Party,’ he likens detective work to games of chess, played with live pieces,’ perhaps unconsciously invoking Edgar Allan Poe’s detective, Dupin” (Worthington 167).

Poe referred to his detective stories as tales of ratiocination. Three of them feature Poe’s fictional detective Chevalier Auguste Dupin: “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841), “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” (1842), and “The Purloined Letter” (1844). The fourth “tale of ratiocination” named “The Golden-Bug” gained popularity because of its use of cryptography but is not a detective story *per se*. The first tale of ratiocination “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” combined “certain Gothic trappings with the rationalism of a post-Enlightenment age of science” (Scaggs 19).

Every single story introduced a new element into the crime fiction genre: “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” is a locked-room mystery, “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” is the first example of armchair detection, and “The Purloined Letter” introduced the theme of a most



unlikely perpetrator. The last element was, in fact, so influential that author P. D. James warns of its danger:

(it is) ...a ploy which was to become common with Agatha Christie and in danger of becoming a cliché, so that readers whose main interest in the story was to correctly identify the murderer had only to fix on the least likely suspect to be sure of success. (12)

Poe's innovativeness in revolutionizing the genre is clearly visible. By engaging the reader in the solving of the mystery, he accomplished a direct relationship of logic and deduction of the reader alongside those of the detective. There are several elements of detective fiction introduced in his short stories. All the clues are presented both to the detective and to the reader. The clues are simple yet apparently not related with one another. Frequently, the motive and other pieces of evidence point to an innocent person in order to make the story more mysterious. The solution is obtainable through the powers of observation and logic. The police are shown as ineffective, inefficient, and incapable of rational thinking. Additionally, the stories introduce the character of the detective's helper. He is portrayed as less smart than the detective and his function is to mediate between the reader and the detective. The helper in Poe's stories remains unnamed and will not become a crucial story element until Doyle's introduction of John Watson.

### 3. Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin

The first three Poe's tales of ratiocination, also called *The Dupin Tales*, feature the character of his fictional detective Le Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin who was created before the word "detective" even existed. In *The Dupin Tales*, there are not that many pieces of information about Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin as a person. About his previous life it is only said that he was once a wealthy individual who has been humbled by an unfortunate series of events. In the tales, Dupin lives in Paris together with his unnamed friend and helper whom he accidentally met in an obscure library while searching for a rare volume: "here the search for an elusive text becomes a metaphor for detection, suggesting how the investigator is not only a reader but also a figurative writer seeking possession of a hidden story" (Thomas 134). Almost immediately after their acquaintance they began living together within a manor in Faubourg Saint-Germain. His unnamed helper is also acquainted with the police prefect "G--" who frequently asks the duo to help him.

Dupin is described as an analytical genius with an eccentric and a reclusive nature. His remoteness from the mainstream society, poor regard for social norms, and refusal to admit visitors place him side by side with Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes who was based on the character of Dupin. Not only has Dupin made a lasting impression on Sherlock Holmes, but on many other fictional detectives as well. The author John Scaggs states that:

Holmes carries off a similar feat of deduction in "A Study in Scarlet," and, despite disparaging Dupin's abilities in the same story, he exhibits the same characteristics of reclusiveness, eccentricity, and penetrating analytic ability that are present, in varying degrees, in all the fictional detectives created in the one hundred years following the publication of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue."

(20)

Such immense popularity of Poe's detective makes a strong case for the credibility of Dupin's character. It seems that by fabricating the personality of Dupin Poe did not only create a single fictional individual, he created an archetype of a detective many later writers will be bent on following.

Perhaps equally as famous as Dupin himself is his method of fictional crime solving – ratiocination. His peculiar temperament may have made Dupin more believable as a character, but it is the way in which he solves crimes that truly makes him come to life. Various online dictionaries state that the term ratiocination comes from Latin *ratiocination* meaning reasoning, argumentation, a syllogism. As for most of Dupin's characteristics so far, ratiocination – or deductive reasoning, was also made more famous by his Doyle counterpart Sherlock Holmes.

Ratiocination is a combined method of inferences, hypotheses, and experience bound together by logic and based on Dupin's observation of the criminal mind, i.e. a deductive sequence of facts and guesswork arrived at only by the power of one's intellect. Although the rules of such thinking are fairly simple, and always logical, average people fail at even the most simple ratiocination attempts because they are too bound by the common, day-to-day, way of thought. This is why Dupin's seclusion from society becomes so pronounced almost as if Poe suggests that to think clearly, you have to think outside the bunch.

### **3.1. The Use of Ratiocination in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”**

The initial Dupin Tale opens with a list of observations about the analytical mind. The first two pages do not mention Dupin by name but the conclusions stated hint at his type of a person. Poe lists characteristics of a “He” – an undefined, masculine, analytical category of people: “He examines the countenance of his partner...He considers the mode of assorting the cards in each hand...He notes every variation of face as the game progresses...” (3). By listing such observations, Poe actually lays down the features of a detective in the broadest sense. This is emphasised by the use of modals such as “should not be” and “will be” (Poe 4). After the introduction, the author presents some basic information about Dupin: his full name, his background, and his first meeting with the narrator. The house which the duo rents is typically gothic like many others in various Poe’s stories:

I was permitted to be at the expense of renting, and furnishing in a style which suited the rather fantastic gloom of our common temper, a time-eaten and grotesque mansion, long deserted through superstition into which we did not inquire, and tottering to its fall in a retired and desolate portion of the Faubourg St. Germain. (Poe 4)

The first mention of the murder comes via a newspaper article which already labels it as “extraordinary” (Poe 7). The account of the murder is given from the perspective of several newspaper articles which include witness testimonies as well. The majority of Dupin’s deductions are made right there and seem to be the main point of all his ideas. Poe continues by labelling the crime an “insoluble mystery” (12).

The first Dupin tale also brings about the motif of police incompetence. The entire police force is portrayed as flawed and helpless with poor methods of mystery solving. Unlike Dupin, with whom they are contrasted, the policemen do not make any complex conclusions, i.e. they

believe in what they see. They are satisfied with the obvious and strive to embed all the clues into a simple solution. However, the extraordinary crimes Dupin is faced against usually have an equally extraordinary explanation. Poe advocates the rational which is always rational even when it contains some unusual elements. Unlike the police, Dupin's method of ratiocination looks at the big picture, fills it with all the clues, no matter how insignificant or extraordinary they may seem, and makes an assumption from there. That is the strongest point which Dupin makes, the police are not lacking in intellect but rather in method. "The Parisian police, so much extolled for acumen, are cunning, but no more. There is no method in their proceedings, beyond the method of the moments" (Poe 12).

Dupin's motive for solving the murder is clearly personal. He finds it almost entertaining: "As for these murders, let us enter into some examinations for ourselves, before we make up an opinion respecting them" (Poe 13). He has no trouble attaining the permission for doing so because of his connections to the Prefect of Police: "I know G--, the Prefect of Police, and shall have no difficulty in obtaining the necessary permission" (Poe 13).

Dupin's ratiocination begins with close examination of the scene, which his helper thinks is peculiar: "Dupin, meanwhile, examining the whole neighbourhood, as well as the house, with a minuteness of attention for which I could see no possible object" (Poe 13). Dupin is extremely diligent and detail-oriented; he takes everything into consideration even the corpse: "Dupin scrutinized everything – not expecting the bodies of the victims" (Poe 13). From his observations and examinations Dupin makes a series of "legitimate deductions" (Poe 15) upon which his theories are founded. He also examines the crime scene: "Let us now revert to the interior of the room. Let us survey the appearances here" (Poe 19). Likewise, Dupin is critical towards the sources, in this case the newspaper articles: "The conclusion here is absurd. It is a mere guess – a very silly one – and no more" (Poe 19).

Dupin also discusses the notion of the coincidence and probable. He separates the meaningful from the non-meaningful, the important from the unimportant. He uses logic and deduction effortlessly while normal people struggle greatly under its rules. His work is subtle, as if logic was Dupin's intuition. In a way, it is similar to the use of grammar by people who study a foreign language and the people who are the native speakers of it. Although Dupin is irrefutably brilliant and logical, the actual solution to the crime is ridiculous – the perpetrator is the Ourang-Outang. It almost seems as if the explanation for the mystery was intentionally humorous to contrast the seriousness of the crime's analysis.

### **3.2. The Use of Ratiocination in “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt”**

“The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” was written as a direct sequel to the “Murders in the Rue Morgue.” In this tale, C. Auguste Dupin and his helper try to solve the apparent murder of a Parisian perfume shop employee – Marie Rogêt whose body was found floating in the Seine River in a horrific state.

The story is based on the real tragedy of Mary Cecilia Rogers whose murder remains unsolved to this day. Although fictionalizing actual murders and other crimes was fairly common in that era of American literature, “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” was probably the first real-life crime turned into a detective story (Whitley 20). Subsequent editions of the story had to have footnotes included to explain the real-life origin of the story. Poe tried to solve that crime by creating a murder mystery for Dupin to solve. Only minor details of the crime, including the location, were changed while the rest of the facts remained true to reality. It is worth noting, however, that Poe himself had little real evidence (e.g. he was never at the scene) and most of his data about the crime came from newspapers. The shock of the community by the actual murder was also recaptured within the story: “The atrocity of this murder, the youth and beauty of the victim, and, above all, her previous notoriety, conspired to produce intense excitements in the minds of the sensitive Parisian” (Poe 29).

After the publication of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” Dupin has acquired considerable reputation; his name “had grown into a household word” (Poe 28). This reputation has a much larger impact than fame; it provides the blessing of the police which Dupin needs in his attempts to solve crimes. Later detectives, such as Sherlock Holmes and Hercules Poirot, rely much on the reputation which gives them a larger freedom of detecting and credibility to their solutions.

Like the author himself, Dupin makes the majority of his solutions of the crime based on various newspapers. In doing so he became one of the first examples of armchair detection, which Poe even mentions by name: “Dupin, sitting steadily in his accustomed arm-chair, was the embodiment of respectful attention” (30). Although newspapers are his major source of facts, Dupin also criticizes their sensationalism: “it is the object of our newspapers rather to create a sensation – to make a point – than to further the cause of truth” (Poe 37). Such criticism of the provided sources is typical in all three stories.

After Dupin dispels the falsehoods published by the newspapers, he comes to a conclusion that only one murderer dragged Marie by the cloth belt around her waist and then dumped her body off a boat into the Seine. Many critics found Dupin’s solution to be implausible which is why “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” received mixed reviews and is considered the least successful of the three Dupin tales.



### 3.3. The Use of Ratiocination in “The Purloined Letter”

“The Purloined Letter” is the final of the three Dupin tales. Some time before its initial publication, Poe wrote to James Russell Lowell that he considered “The Purloined Letter” “perhaps the best of my tales of ratiocination” (qtd. in Quinn 421). In this tale, Dupin and his helper are enjoying a peaceful evening when G--, the prefect of the Paris police, enters the room and tells them a mysterious story. A certain royal lady received a secretive letter which Minister D-- was able to take from her desk because she did not want to draw attention to it in the presence of the royal man (possibly the king). The Minister used that letter to blackmail the lady and she asked for G--’s help. Although the prefect searched for the letter in every corner of Minister D--’s house, he was not able to find it. After a month, G-- returns to Dupin’s house in total frustration and offers to pay fifty thousand francs to anyone who can find the letter. Dupin accepts, hands him over the letter, and explains how he found it.

Dupin’s motivation behind his use of ratiocination to solve the crime in this story is purely a financial one. He accepts the offer of G-- to solve the crime for money and thereby absolve him of the shame of it being unsolved. The motif of the police ineffectiveness is present again; G-- says that the police “opened every package and parcel; not only opened every book but turned over every leaf in each volume, not contenting themselves with a mere shake” (Poe 125-126). Although the police are so thorough, their hard work produces little result against the Minister D--’s cunning. Dupin, however, solves the mystery of the purloined letter by identifying with the perpetrator:

that if the Minister had been no more than a mathematician, the Perfect would have been under no necessity of giving me this check. I knew him, however, as both mathematician and poet, and my measures were adapted to his capacity, with reference to the circumstances by which he was surrounded. (Poe 130-131)

In this case, ratiocination does not comply with the universal rules of logic but with those similar to the perpetrator's way of thinking. Because Dupin tried to identify with Minister D--, he correctly assumed what kind of a person D-- was and where such a person would hide the letter.

An important element of the story is, again, the helper. He assumes the role of the reader and is important for the reader's understanding of Dupin's method which would otherwise be left out if Dupin were the narrator. Dupin guides the helper throughout the story. He presents him with clues needed to solve the case (which Dupin already asserted). An important characteristic of ratiocination is that, in most cases, it is actually directed at the helper, i.e. the reader. Although ratiocination uses rationality to solve the crime, it is logical only in retrospect – when explained by the detective.

## **Conclusion**

With the creation of Chevalier Auguste Dupin, Edgar Allan Poe created something more than a fictional character – he established the archetype of a detective so plausible that many later writers adhered to his formula and created some of the best known works of literature. The elements Poe invented, such as the peculiar genius reclusive detective, his “ordinary” helper, the impossible crime, the incompetent police force, etc., have become firmly embedded in most mystery novels of today.

Within Dupin’s masculine analytical world everything, even the most extraordinary of crimes, must have a logical explanation. His highly successful method of ratiocination includes almost every element of modern crime investigation: examination of the scene and the body, interrogation of witnesses, and critical analysis of gathered evidence. Although his motives for solving crimes differ, Dupin is ultimately an entertaining creation, in spite of his utter lack of charm. Through his character Poe makes a stark contrast between the ordinary reader and the remarkable genius, which seems to suggest that in order to understand the extraordinarily logical you have to be extraordinary yourself.

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