

A Psychoanalytic Reading of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue"

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Abstract—Psychoanalytic criticism is an important branch of literary criticism that applies theories of psychology to the study of literature. The present paper attempts to analyze Poe's detective story "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" from a psychoanalytic perspective. Poe's skillful characterization and employment of the double motif is intensively discussed. It also deserves noting that the story conveys sensitive messages and exerts influence on readers' psychology.

Keywords—Poe; detective fiction; psychoanalytic; structural theory; doubling; homosexual; psychology

I. INTRODUCTION

As a subgenre of crime fiction, detective fiction depicts the investigation process in which a detective, either amateur or professional, solves a crime (usually a murder). This type of fiction has maintained a continuous popularity among readers around the world since Edgar Allan Poe created the Dupin trilogy, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt," and "The Purloined Letter," in the 1840s. First published in the April 1841 issue of Graham's Magazine, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" is widely recognized as the first modern detective story in literary history. By means of vivid and detailed descriptions, Poe successfully creates a suspenseful and mysterious tone for the story, which drives readers to solve the case with the detective together, and also shows Dupin's extraordinary ratiocinative powers. Over the past two centuries, critics and scholars have never stopped paying attention to this masterpiece of detective fiction, thus contributing to its multifaceted interpretations. Reading the story within a psychoanalytic paradigm, as the present paper will attempt to show, not only helps to better understand the characters' personalities, actions, and relationships, but also offers insights into the latent content of the story and the possible influences of the story on the reader's psychology.

II. CHARACTERIZATION IN TERMS OF THE STRUCTURE OF THE MIND

When doing a Freudian reading of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," many readers are likely to perceive certain links between the characters in the narrative and Freud's structural theory of the mind. According to Freud, the

human psyche can be divided into three basic components — the id, the superego, and the ego. The id represents "the predominantly passionate, irrational, unknown, and unconscious part of the psyche" and is considered as "the source of our instinctual physical (especially libidinal) desires". On the contrary, the superego is the psychic agency of internalized norms and moral values. It acts to make moral judgments and guide human behavior. The ego is characterized as "rational, logical, orderly, and conscious". It serves as the mediator between the id and the superego, and thus "must choose between (or balance) liberation and self-gratification on one hand and censorship and conformity on the other" (Murfin and Ray, 1997, p.311-12). As the culprit of the brutal crime, the orangutan represents the id, "the primitive, instinctive, animalistic portion of the 'unconscious mind'" (Hayward and Webber, 2013, p.122). It is owned by a French sailor from a Maltese vessel. After breaking into the home of Madame and Mademoiselle L'Espanaye, the orangutan commits the frightful butchery with striking ferocity. It acts completely out of its savage instinct, which reveals the disastrous result of releasing the id impulses. In this regard, Poe tactfully indicates the danger of the id as well as the need to control that part of the mind.

The relationship between the orangutan and the sailor resembles the relationship between the id and the ego. Just as the ego restrains the expressions of the id, the sailor locks the orangutan in a closet adjoining his bedroom. Yet by plotting the ape's escape and the subsequent tragedy it causes, Poe shows it is not sufficient to merely suppress the id. "The sailor's mistake," as Rosenheim comments, "has been to assume that once he had succeeded in lodging the ape at his own residence, the danger that it posed was over. The sailor has yet to learn to 'treat the instinctual demands of the [id] like external dangers'" (1995, p.171). Later, through acknowledging the orangutan as his property and exposing its ferocious deeds, the sailor manages to face his id and externalize the dangers from it. This makes it possible for him to regain control over his id, that is, to achieve his psychic reintegration. That the sailor finally recaptures the rebellious animal exactly emphasizes this point.

Despite its brutality, the orangutan is somehow fascinated with the human way of life. The image that it

tries to imitate its master's shaving is quite impressive. Considering that "[s]having codes the body as a part of culture" (Rosenheim, 1995, p.170), the ape's mimicry of its master can be interpreted as an image of the superego, which is distinctly marked by culture. However, since the orangutan is essentially connected with nature rather than culture, it cannot really become a cultivated human being. Consequently, the id easily overpowers the superego. As shown in the story, the orangutan's pacific attempt to shave Madame L'Espanaye soon turns into the violent killings of the two ladies. At this point, I agree with Rosenheim that "[t]he ape's frustrated turn from gesture to violence reveals the abject inadequacy of mimesis in comparison with speech" (1995, p.170). It is language that distinguishes wild animals from civilized humans. From this perspective, the fact that the orangutan has fiercely attacked the L'Espanayes' throats, which are organs of speech associated with language ability, reflects the id's envious revenge against the superego represented by culture and humanity.

In the story, Poe's genius detective, C. Auguste Dupin, assumes the role of the superego. Unlike the orangutan, Dupin is a symbol of the conscious mind. Combining his excellent observational and analytical skills with creative imagination, Dupin succeeds in unraveling the seemingly insoluble mystery of the bloody murders. In comparison with all the other characters in the story, Dupin is always in a superior position to get to the truth, which creates an image of a dominant superego. Besides, his efforts to detect the criminal correspond to the superego's task to monitor and inhibit the monstrous id. Using his intellect to serve law and justice, the French detective can be regarded, like the superego, as a guardian of the social and moral order. That Dupin insistently requests the sailor to confess the truth about the murders also confirms his role as the superego, which provides moral guidance to the ego.

The unnamed narrator is an incarnation of the ego. He is Dupin's faithful friend, who chronicles the detective's investigative process. Although the narrator is less intelligent than Dupin, he also possesses a rational mind, as revealed by his primarily objective mode of narration. Throughout Dupin's investigation of the case, the narrator accompanies him and serves as his sounding board, thus forming a close ego-superego alliance. The narrator's admiration for Dupin's deductive prowess seems to echo the ego's reverence for its superego-mentor.

III. THE DOUBLE MOTIF

In psychoanalysis, doubling is closely related with the phenomenon of dissociation which takes the form of dual or multiple personality (Rogers, 1970, p.15). The unity of characters that appear as doubles thus symbolizes the psychological unity of a person. Already early in the tale, Poe draws the reader's attention to the detective's doubleness. During analysis, Dupin always displays another side of his personality. As the narrator remarks:

His manner at these moments was frigid and abstract; his eyes were vacant in expression; while his voice, usually a rich tenor, rose into a treble which would have sounded

petulantly but for the deliberateness and entire distinctness of the enunciation. Observing him in these moods, I often dwelt meditatively upon the old philosophy of the Bi-Part Soul, and amused myself with the fancy of a double Dupin — the creative and the resolvent. (Poe, 1979, p.533)

The extract makes it plain that Dupin has a dual psychology, which makes him both a creator and an analyst. His ratiocination is exercised on the premise of splitting his whole self, which is signaled by the changes in his manner and voice.

Given that the narrator is the creator of the story, he parallels the creative half of Dupin's psychology. Thus, it is to perceive him as Dupin's double. Lemay (1982) holds that "Dupin is a doppelgänger for the narrator" (p.169). On closer examination, the coincidence that the narrator and Dupin search for "the same very rare and very remarkable volume" in "an obscure library" discloses their similar taste in knowledge. Both of them are obsessed with mental activities such as reading, writing, and conversing, and seek in the night of Paris "that infinity of mental excitement which quiet observation can afford" (Poe, 1979, p.533). In addition, the narrator also mentions their "common temper" and Dupin's exact knowledge of his thoughts. All these details verify the doubling between the narrator and the detective.

Having been impressed by Dupin's double voice, the reader might have a feeling of *déjà vu* when he or she reads the testimony regarding the "two voices in loud and angry contention" in the locked room. Now that the two voices consist of a Frenchman's gruff voice and a peculiar shrill voice, about whose nationality the witnesses have different opinions, the reader feels secretly invited to associate them with Dupin's tenor and treble. Since the two voices actually belong to the sailor and the orangutan, it can be interpreted that the sailor and the orangutan are doubles for Dupin. In view of the fact that Dupin and the narrator double each other, the ape and its master also double the narrator. Another significant point concerning the two voices heard at the murder scene is that Dupin refers to them as belonging to a third party. It thus seems that the sailor and the orangutan represent different aspects of a single person's psychology.

By identifying the orangutan with Dupin, Poe effectively blurs the boundary between good and evil through doubling. Accordingly, the reader may come to realize that there exist certain latent criminal elements within the detective. In fact, there are also other instances of doubling in the text which serve to achieve such an effect. For the narrator, Dupin is a man with "bizarrerie[s]" and "wild whims". This becomes relevant when the narrator later attributes the features of the orangutan to a "raving maniac" before knowing the murderer's identity. Therefore, Dupin's freaky disposition doubles the orangutan's frenzy. Besides, Dupin also doubles the ape in terms of his value to the narrator. Like the ape, which means a precious commodity to the sailor, Dupin is greatly valued by the narrator, who views his companionship as "a treasure beyond price". Just as the orangutan doubles the sailor by imitating his shaving routine,

Dupin doubles the orangutan by drawing a facsimile of the indentations of its fingers. Moreover, Rollason (1988) has argued that the detective doubles the ape through a symbolic decapitation of the Prefect of the Parisian police (p.14), as shown in his assessment of the Prefect: "In his wisdom is no stamen. It is all head and no body." (Poe, 1979, p. 568)

As soon as Dupin and the narrator start to live together, they live a very secluded life and reject visitors. They keep all the shutters of their mansion closed during the day, which perfectly excludes them from the outside world, and they always stay up late into the night. Similarly, Madame and Mademoiselle L'Espanaye live "an exceedingly retired life" so that "[n]o one was spoken of as frequenting [their] house" (Poe, 1979, p.539). The shutters of their house are also closed except those of the chamber in which they live. When the murders take place at about three o'clock in the morning, the two ladies are still awake. It also deserves noting that both couples live on the fourth floor. Therefore, when Dupin and the narrator confront the potentially dangerous sailor in their locked room, who carries with him a huge cudgel, they seem to be in a similar situation with the Mmes L'Espanaye, who encounters the razor-wielding orangutan in another locked room. With all these details in mind, the reader may conclude that the two couples are symbolic doubles. Since Dupin and the narrator are also doubled by the orangutan and the sailor, all of the six characters double one another.

IV. IMPLICIT MESSAGES WITHIN THE STORY

When it comes to psychoanalytic criticism, a literary work is viewed as analogous to a dream. Skura (1981) has once maintained that "there is a connection between dreams and certain kinds of literature that insist, like the dream, on a gap between what the text seems to mean and the deeper meaning it seems to imply" (p.149). Beneath the manifest text of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," an undercurrent of homosexuality could be detected by the reader. By implication, Poe suggests that Dupin and the narrator is a homosexual couple. Deeply attracted by Dupin, the narrator ardently expresses his inner feelings toward this young French gentleman: "I felt my soul enkindled within me by the wild fervor and the vivid freshness of his imagination" (Poe, 1979, p.532).

The two men's subsequent decision to live together reflects their desire to build a more intimate relationship which goes beyond the boundaries of friendship. Moving together into a deserted house in Paris, Dupin and the narrator carefully keep their cohabitation unknown to others and go out only at night. Obviously, they do not want to attract any attention to their shared life. In this context, at least for me, their relationship is quite unusual. Here, the fact that homosexuality is strictly prohibited in the Victorian era seems to provide a good explanation for why the two men choose to live in seclusion. The narrator writes: "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" (p.532). In connection with Lemay's claim, homosexuality indicates "perverse psychology" at that time, the narrator actually

alludes to his and Dupin's homosexual state. The description of their walking arm in arm at night also induces the reader to view them as a loving couple. Further, Dupin's "intimate knowledge" of the narrator's bosom seems to be a pun on their homosexual relationship.

Likewise, the testimony about the L'Espanayes' life reveals homosexual implications. The name "L'Espanaye" already hints at the word "lesbian". Like Dupin and the narrator, the two women live reclusively and are "very affectionate towards each other". Although there are other rooms and beds in their house, Madame and Mademoiselle L'Espanaye share one bedroom and sleep in the same bed. Combined with the deposition that "[i]t was not known whether there were any living connexions of Madame L. and her daughter", the authenticity of their mother-daughter relationship is rather doubtful (Poe, 1979, p.539).

In the case of the L'Espanayes, Poe also intimates the terrible result of sexual repression. The seclusion of the two ladies also implicitly mirrors their rejection of heterosexual contacts. Perhaps it is their long-term suppression of sexual desires that leads to their homosexual inclination. To better decode Poe's implications concerning the L'Espanayes' sexual repression, it is necessary to examine his "house-as-body metaphor". In Dupin's remark that most people wear "windows in their bosoms", Poe uses the house as a metaphor for the body (Lemay, 1982, p.175). In this sense, Madame L'Espanaye's dissatisfaction with "the abuse of the premises" implies her passive attitude toward the use of the body, i.e., toward sexual activity. Locking up the doors and windows of their house, Madame and Mademoiselle L'Espanaye symbolically prevent access to their bodies. However, as the story shows, their deliberate suppression of sexuality is not only futile but also destructive. It is ironic that the two women are finally killed by the orangutan, which represents aggressive male sexuality. Lemay (1982) comments that "the L'Espanayes has created the monster who kills them." (p.186) The orangutan is a nightmare originating from their subconscious fear of heterosexuality. Thus, on the psychological level, the L'Espanayes destroys themselves through their own sexual repression. Besides, the detail that the L'Espanayes' house is broken into with a bayonet — an instrument with a phallic connotation, implies their failed attempt to protect their bodies from sexual penetration.

V. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF THE STORY

Confronting the baffling Rue Morgue murders, the reader may feel psychologically motivated to track down the killer with the detective. Inspired by Dupin's ratiocinative method of investigation, the reader probably learns to combine analysis with imagination to deal with other inexplicable puzzles. At the same time, he or she is also impressed by Dupin's insightful understanding of how to discover the truth. As Dupin remarks, "Truth is not always in a well. In fact, as regards the more important knowledge, I do believe that she is invariably superficial. The depth lies in the valleys where we seek her and not upon the mountain-tops where she is found." (Poe, 1979, p.545) It is thus possible that some readers would change and improve their

thinking patterns after reading this detective story. Also importantly, since the end of the story shows that any criminal act is doomed to punishment, many readers may subconsciously continue to abide by the law and social order.

However, it cannot be neglected that Poe's graphic descriptions of the murder scene and the women's corpses have a negative influence on the reader's psychology. The sensational images of violence and death inevitably make many readers, especially female readers, feel fear and anxiety. Since Madame and Mademoiselle L'Espanaye are killed at home, women readers who stay all day long in the domestic sphere may automatically worry about the danger of home invasion and become very sensitive to their own safety. For readers with aggressive tendencies, the orangutan's cruel ways of killing, such as the mutilation and decapitation of Madame L'Espanaye, can provoke their psychological excitement. Consequently, the chances that they imitate the orangutan's atrocities in real life would be largely increased.

VI. CONCLUSION

"The Murders in the Rue Morgue" dramatizes how the genius French detective Dupin successfully solves the locked-room murders of the ladies L'Espanaye with his amazing ratiocinative ability. The structural theory of the mind can find its expression in the four characters — the orangutan, the sailor, the narrator, and Dupin. While the sailor and the narrator symbolize the ego, the superego-id dichotomy is seen between the detective and the orangutan. Through the orangutan, Poe shows the mighty power of the id. The aggressive impulses of the id are destructive and must be properly inhibited, yet it proves counterproductive to simply repress the id. As an incarnation of the superego, Dupin works to expose the murdering orangutan and its abominable crime. His triumph represents the superego's dominance over the id. It is also noteworthy that the ego and the superego tend to join together to control the id.

Poe's design of characters also reflects his interest in the motif of doubling. In the story, doubling occurs among the detective, the narrator, the sailor, the orangutan, and the women victims. The characters are reciprocals of one another. In this way, Poe realizes the unity of the characters. Although the characters represent different or even opposing psychological forces, it is necessary to integrate them into an entire self.

On the latent level, the story touches upon the taboo subject of homosexuality. The Dupin-narrator and L'Espanaye couples display the life of homosexuals in the Victorian period. Fearing persecution and punishment, homosexuals of that time have to lead a reclusive life to avoid public attention. Besides, Poe implicitly makes the reader realize that the psychological problem of sexual repression is the real cause of the L'Espanaye murders. In fact, there are certainly other latent motifs within the story, which provide various perspectives for further study of the story.

When the reader immerses him/herself in the fictive world of the story, he/she is exposed to both positive and

negative influences on their psychology. In view of the gendered murders committed by the orangutan, the violent elements of the story seem more easily to leave psychological shadows on women readers. From another perspective, it is also meaningful to further study how Poe takes the reader's psychological demands into consideration when he writes the story.

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