

Foreword

When, in the autumn of 1894, Arthur Conan Doyle visited New York, the press besieged him with questions about Sherlock Holmes. One reporter asked him if he had been influenced by Edgar Allan Poe when he created the great detective. Many of the journalists apparently thought he would be irritated by the question. 'A hush fell on the room,' wrote the reporter from the *New York Times*. 'It could be heard as distinctly as if the string of a violin had snapped.'

Conan Doyle, however, was not in the least annoyed. 'Oh, immensely!' he replied. 'His detective is the best in fiction.'

'Except Sherlock Holmes,' suggested another reporter.

'I make no exception,' said Doyle, and went on to consider the question 'very earnestly'. 'Dupin is unrivalled,' he said. 'It was Poe who taught the possibility of making a detective story a work of literature.'

Poe's claim to fatherhood of the detective story, in anything like a recognisable modern form, is really beyond dispute. The annual awards made by the Mystery Writers of America are called 'Edgars' in his honour.

Everything else about Poe is more difficult. The American literary world still holds him in extraordinarily high esteem; extraordinary, that is, from a European perspective. Americans talk of him as though he were a combination of Byron, H.G. Wells and Wilkie Collins – but better than any of them. If we leave aside for a moment the detective stories, what else did he write that has survived? A small body of certainly very fine quotable verse – 'the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome', 'Quoth the Raven 'Nevermore'', *Annabel Lee*. A few short stories which are familiar largely because they have been made into horror films – *The Pit and the Pendulum*, *The Masque of the Red Death*. And surely not much more.

The simplest explanation of this transatlantic difference in

judgement is that the body of American literature in his day – 1809-1849 – was very thin. His biography too has a kind of tragic glamour which qualifies him as an idol of American Bohemia. His parents, both of whom were actors, having died when he was very young, he was brought up by a foster father with whom he eventually quarrelled. After two improbable starts at a military career, he settled into making a living – or trying to make a living – by his pen. He contributed to, and edited, several small literary magazines. He had no time for democracy. He aspired to the manners of, and dressed as, a Southern gentleman, although he lived mainly in the North.

He was very attractive to women and married his cousin Virginia when she was not quite fourteen years old, with all concerned pretending that she was of a proper age; a marriage which was very happy until she died eleven years later. His poems, and his dramatic readings of them, achieved some fame but brought little money. He endured grinding poverty, drank, took opium and died in squalor; after which, the press lauded him and squabbles began about the ownership of his literary legacy. In short, a perfect Bohemian life.

His detective, the Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin, is, in some ways, the kind of character he liked to imagine for himself – aristocratic, impoverished but self-sufficient, living in circumstances of respectable eccentricity. The name ‘Dupin’ he seems to have borrowed from Marie Dupin, the heroine of a story about Vidocq, whose extraordinary life as both the French Minister of Police and a career criminal forms a notorious chapter in the history of crime and crime fiction.

Even to call Dupin a ‘detective’ is to beg a number of questions. The word itself had not been invented when the first of the three stories about him appeared, and any talk about ‘detective fiction’ requires a debate over definitions. Crime as a subject for tales around the fireside obviously goes back to the very beginning of settled communities. Puzzle stories too are of

limitless antiquity: so are stories of ingenious discoveries (what we might call ‘clues’) and traps laid for lying witnesses, as in the celebrated case of *Susanna and the Elders*. However, these are not real detective stories in the sense of narratives describing the logical reconstruction, after a crime has been committed, which leads to the identity of the perpetrator. Poe never thought of his Dupin stories in such a way. He called them tales of ‘ratiocination’.

The Gold Bug, although Dupin is not in it, probably belongs in this category and has its own link with detective stories proper in that Conan Doyle copied its most memorable feature for his Sherlock Holmes story, *The Dancing Men*. Both stories involve the solution of a code. By modern standards of cryptography, the code and its solution are ludicrously simple. The code is just a substitution of symbols for letters, so the solution depends on the frequency with which various letters of the alphabet occur in an English text. The fact that ‘e’ is the commonest letter sticks in everybody’s mind. From that simple fact have been built vast towers of cryptography. Ratiocination indeed.

Poe, then, was not aware of having invented anything particularly new. He had no special interest in the Dupin stories or enthusiasm to continue the series. To him they were just three linked stories among the many and varied short stories he wrote. For us, however, they were innovatory in many directions.

The first of them, *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, may be said to have invented the sealed room mystery. The second, *The Mystery of Marie Rogêt*, gave us the armchair detective, working from testimony brought to him rather than sallying forth personally to investigate. The third and best, *The Purloined Letter*, endlessly copied since, introduced the paradoxical idea of something too obvious to be noticed. Still more significant is Dupin’s own role; from it and its logical concomitants are

derived essential characteristics of almost every subsequent fictional detective.

The detective must obviously be (though not necessarily be obviously) intelligent. But intelligence is not enough. He must be interesting, which means he must have sharply defined characteristics, whether flamboyant brilliance like Poirot or conspicuous modesty like Father Brown. To demonstrate his brilliance and to display his characteristics he needs a foil, who may, as with both Dupin and Sherlock Holmes, be the story's narrator. This foil must be less bright than the detective but not stupid or charmless, because he has a dual role to play: he must, by contrast, bring out the detective's cleverness but he also represents the reader. If the detective is an amateur, he will stand in some relation to the authorities, who may or may not respect him but are necessarily less percipient.

Of course excellent examples can be found who contradict all these points. The Dupin stories are not a template but they are a wellspring from which innumerable writers have drawn. Agatha Christie, deciding she didn't need a foil for Poirot, discarded Captain Hastings: but the fact remains that Sherlock Holmes without Watson would not have been half the man he is.

In two of the Dupin stories Poe was acting as his own armchair detective. *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* was derived from reports of a Parisian prostitute's murder, combined with an account in the *Shrewsbury Chronicle* of a bizarre scheme for vicarious robbery. *The Mystery of Marie Rogêt* constitutes Poe's own solution to the killing, or at any rate the dubious death, of a New York woman called Mary Rogers.

A rigorous critic has, rightly, pointed out severe logical weaknesses in all three stories. Readers to whom they are new and may still have a satisfying element of surprise need not, as they say of recorded football matches on television, look away now. Instead, they should in due course turn to page 179, an

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'Afterword', where they will find these flaws discussed.

Poe himself said in a letter: '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 most people think them more ingenious than they are – on account of their method and air of method.' This is true. Their 'air of method' is the real novelty, the very thing which renders argument about solutions possible and worthwhile.

As to its historical significance there can hardly be any doubt. From these modest beginnings came the literally innumerable volumes which, under the general heading of Crime Fiction, burden the shelves of any large bookshop. Many have strayed far from the ratiocinative principle but their ancestry remains perceptible. As Conan Doyle wrote in a book about his favourite books and authors, 'Poe is the master of us all. If every man who receives a cheque for a story which owes its springs to Poe were to pay a tithe to a monument for the master, he would have a pyramid as big as that of Cheops.'

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