
THE MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE –THE HELPLESS MAIDEN

G.R.K. PRASAD, M. NARENDRA

Abstract: The object of this article is to show how women in Poe's tales are completely ignored, with special reference to "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." In Poe's tales women seem to be attractive, but passive victims who are murdered at the beginning of the tale or during the tale. They are most widely read and are thus the most popular ones. However, Poe's oeuvre offers more variation on the representation of women than "the beautiful, dead woman". Unfortunately, these variations where women are in fact smart and play an active role go mostly unnoticed. It is worth to have a look at the variety of women that Poe really presents to his readers, especially in his prose works. It is also interesting to investigate the representation of this beautiful, dead woman, seeing that she might not be so passive and victimized as she may seem at first sight.

Many researchers have investigated how women are represented in the stories of Edgar Allan Poe. Most critical attention has gone to the tales of the Dark Ladies; "Bernice", "Ligeia", "Morella" and "The Fall of the House of Usher". The other lesser known stories also can offer a new insight on Poe's representation of women. These tales also illustrate how often women appear in Poe's tales.

Keywords: Poesque women, Poe's oeuvre, "the beautiful, dead woman," victimized, Dark ladies.

The helpless maiden: While discussing women in the works of Edgar Allan Poe, the reader notices how often they are completely ignored. Though women do appear in his stories, they are often placed in the role of helpless victims. The readers may analyze the image of the helpless maiden that has become the cliché of gothic literature and that is evidently present in Poe's works as well. This image is the one that is best known among Poe readers and therefore constitutes the prototypical Poesque woman. Yet it is interesting to observe that exactly the tales where the female character is helpless and dependent of men are the most popular ones. The tales where a woman is intelligent and independent go mostly unnoticed.

The Dupin tales: According to Stovall, the women who merely serve as mechanisms of the plot – and thus receive no important role in the story whatsoever – can be found strikingly in the detective stories about C. Auguste Dupin (205). Indeed, these tales are among the most famous works of Edgar Allan Poe, especially considering that they are widely acknowledged to be the first detective tales (Thomas, 133). When reading these tales, the reader notices how the women are characterized in these tales – or better yet, how they lack any character of their own. Stovall recognized that they "are usually not described, and [...] exist for no other purpose than to satisfy the exigencies of the plot" (205). For example "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" has become so popular, because the women in these tales have helped in creating the image of the helpless and dead or dying maiden that is seen as stereotypical of Poe's works. Indeed, the most important women in this tale, Madame L'Espanaye and her daughter Mademoiselle Camille L'Espanaye, are identified only by their helpless shrieks and deformed corpses.

"The Murders in the Rue Morgue": In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue", it is a man who is described as being clever and a remarkable analyst. In this respect, the reader notices in the beginning of the tale, the whole explanation of what an analyst is, is characterized by the personal pronoun "he", not "she". The two murdered ladies do not get speaking roles and are not described physically, apart from the wounds inflicted on their bodies. Joseph Church observes "Poe locates meaningful, rational discourse in the two men and limits the two women to 'shrieks' and 'screams'" (411). The harshness of the violence towards these women has led researchers to various theories. Marie Bonaparte reduces the story to "a Freudian 'primal scene'" (qtd. in Church 409) while Lemay sees the murders as "The deleterious consequence of modern humankind's sexual repression" (qtd. in Church 409).

In his article about misogyny in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue", Church stresses how the "women's deaths [remain] strangely unpunished" (409). Indeed, every man remotely involved is set free without charges and even the orang-utan is not killed for his aggressive behaviour but is sent to the Jardin des Plantes in Paris. Church even goes so far as to state that Dupin and the narrator show a "misogynistic satisfaction in the deaths of the mother and daughter" (409). His arguments consist of Dupin and the narrator living together in a secluded way – not needing women in their lives – and of Dupin wishing to establish "his mental superiority over other men" (410). Church thus deduces that Dupin must see in the circumstances of these two women, and modern women generally, their possession of new powers – intellectual, material, and sexual – and therein must experience an excruciating affront to man's, but above all, his own superiority (410).

It is indeed interesting to observe that both mother and daughter do not have any men in their lives. They take care of themselves, and the only other person who helps them with domestic chores is also a woman, Pauline Dubourg, the laundress. They are known to have money and Madame L'Esplanade is said to have rather mystical powers, telling fortunes. Naturally, such self-reliant women could pose a threat to some men who feared the women's lack of need for a male person in their lives. Joseph Church observes "The women apparently consider themselves superior to and satisfied without men" (411). This view of the women as considering themselves superior makes the murders all the more interesting. It seems that women who pose a threat to man's superiority are being killed to eliminate this threat. Concluding, Church claims that "[t]he tale thus mocks and punishes the women for aspiring to be men when they should be sexually subservient" (413). Even though the women in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" represent a rather ambiguous image with them supposedly being a threat to masculinity by living alone, not needing men and having a lot of money, the readers may believe their helplessness and typical female role in stressful situations is emphasised more convincingly. They only utter shrieks and screams, in the moments before the murders they were in their night-ropes, the mother was combing her hair, they did not perceive what was going on behind them, and in the end the daughter faints at seeing so horrible an event. Throughout the tale the powerlessness of women is stressed in general as well, as it can be perceived in quotes such as "[n]o woman could have inflicted the blows with

any weapon" (Poe 379) and "the strength of Madame L'Esplanade would have been utterly unequal to the task of thrusting her daughter's corpse up the chimney as it was found" (383). It seems that they are such an easy, obvious target, just because they are women. This is indeed a rather misogynist view, yet it stresses how a lot of people perceive the women of Poe's tales.

Conclusion: After observing the overall passivity and speechlessness of the women in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" it remains clear that the image presented to the readers of the famous Poesque woman is a fairly negative one. These women hardly receive speaking roles – if shrieks even count as speaking roles – and have therefore no opinion of their own. Moreover, they are murdered right at the start of the tale. Even though this detective tale does not belong to the Gothic genre, the image of the female character that the readers are offered throughout does correspond to the stereotype of the helpless maiden of this popular 18th-century literary genre.

Though the new genre of detective fiction is introduced with this tale, it is rather disappointing that the readers do not find a new position for the women. Instead, their position as powerless, naive and dependent girls is only reinforced. The women of the Gothic fiction did receive speaking roles but in this tale the women are only shown as dead or desperate and voiceless. Sadly, this new genre just builds on previous traditions regarding women – probably because of the popularity of these rather antifeminist tales.

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G.R.K. Prasad
 Prof. M. Narendra, S.V. University
 GRK Prasad/ S.V. University/Tirupati
 Prof. M. Narendra/S.V. University/Tirupati