

Tell-Tale Art: Antebellum Racialism in the Fiction of Poe

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There are few figures in the history of American literature that are as widely read or as well known as Edgar Allan Poe. The master of all things macabre and the father of the modern detective story, Poe's work is read and loved today by children and adults alike. However, though many of us are familiar with his work, there is much about the man himself that remains unknown. For example, there has been a significant debate within the academy recently regarding Poe's positions on race and the institution of slavery, a conversation largely focused upon the analysis of certain commentaries and critiques Poe authored while working as editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*. There are noteworthy positions on both sides of this argument, and it is difficult to reliably ascertain Poe's beliefs regarding race from these kinds of texts alone. However, a careful review of his published fictional works can lead to an understanding of Poe's philosophies that is not only more complete but also less ambiguous and therefore not as easily discounted. Specifically, it becomes evident that Poe was a racist and a pro-slavery sympathizer, a position that is most significantly reflected in the works *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," and "Metzengerstein."

Poe's most thorough treatment of racial issues can be found in his only novel-length work, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. The novel begins with a collision between two ships, the Ariel and the Penguin. Shaindy Rudoff, of Israel's Bar-Ilan University notes, "To read these ship names allegorically is to recognize that Poe's adventure novel begins with a collision between a literary figure and a bird that 'embodies' the novel's obsession with blackness and

whiteness" (61). Indeed, what follows is a story that, for all of its cryptic language and vague symbolism, remains an apparent and grim portrayal of the division between black and white. Much of the story's allegory revolves around the nature of servility and racial subordination, and whether these institutions are natural or man-made (Rudoff 63). Poe achieves this discourse through the travel of his main character, Pym, to a fictitious southern island inhabited by black natives who have an intense aversion to "whiteness." The novel is full of stark, racially divisive imagery. For example, when Pym takes one of the natives captive, the captive actually dies from the exposure to whiteness, an image that Maurice Lee of the University of Missouri interprets as "suggesting that black people have no place in the 'perfect whiteness' at the end of the book" (763). This "natural" incompatibility of the races is a prominent and recurring theme of the novel. However, it is difficult to attribute this position directly to Poe based on Pym alone, as there is a considerable amount of careful ambiguity throughout the work. Thus, while the novel alone may not be independently definitive, it nevertheless provides what Rudoff describes as "a glimpse into the origins-obsessed racist culture of the nineteenth century," and, as such, is the key to understanding the implications of Poe's other works (80).

The topic of race takes on different and more subtle tones in Poe's short story "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." Widely credited as the story that created the modern detective genre, the plot revolves around the mysterious and brutal murder of two Parisian women by an escaped orangutan. At first glance, the racist implications of the story may not be immediately obvious to contemporary readers, but a careful examination of the work when taken in the context of antebellum American culture reveals unmistakable racial undertones. Prominent Poe researcher Joan Dayan notes that in Edward Long's *History of Jamaica*, a work with which Poe was familiar, Long makes a direct, repeated comparison between people of African origin and

orangutans (243). Similar to African-Americans, he claims, "the oran-outangs brain is a senseless icon of the human ... it is mere matter, unanimated with a thinking principle" (Dayan 243). Poe doesn't just leave this as an unspoken metaphor; the last pages of the story are full of loaded and suggestive language. Words like "fugitive," "escaped," "whip," and "master" are used to reinforce the association with black slaves. Ed White, a professor of English at Louisiana State University, argues that this association is "not only possible for virtually everyone in the nineteenth century, but practically unavoidable" (98). The underlying ramifications of this are significant. Slave rebellions were becoming a common occurrence throughout the country in Poe's day; in fact, one of the better known of these, Nat Turner's Rebellion of 1831, took place less than seventy five miles from Poe's hometown of Richmond (Dayan 263). Poe's tale seems to offer a symbolic, prophetic warning to the white southerners who lived in fear of these rebellions. White summarizes it best: "here we have a humanoid captured in a distant land by sailors; brought to a metropolitan center for sale ... frightened by the master's whip into fleeing into the streets, where it finds two white women who are killed with brutal ferocity" (95). Here, Poe takes a clearer stand on what he thinks about and expects from African--American slaves: allowed to run free, they will murder brutally and mercilessly. It is also interesting to note Poe's victim is not the abusive master but two innocent and "helpless" women who fall prey to an indiscriminate animal rage.

To complete this picture we need to look back on one of Poe's earliest works, the short story "Metzengerstein," which is perhaps the most complete representation of Poe's racial philosophies. Lee, in his essay "Poe's Transcendental Racism," describes the tale as "Poe's first serious treatment of slavery and race" (753). But it is more than just Poe's first discussion of the subject; it is also in many ways the most revealing. The plot is centered on the young Baron

Metzengerstein, who inherits a wild horse that appears on his property after the stables of his neighbor and rival Count Berlitzing burn to the ground. When he learns that the Count has perished trying to save his livestock from the fire, the young Baron Metzengerstein decides to keep the horse, though it is branded with the mark of Berlitzing, believing he can break the animal and use it for his own ends. At the end of the tale, a mysterious fire destroys the Castle Metzengerstein, and the Baron, who is out riding the horse at the time of the fire, finds himself inextricably bound to the back of the beast while it carries him into the burning castle to his death. This simple plot is rife with allegory and symbolism. Take the horse for example, described by Poe as "unnaturally colored," with eyes that stare with "human expression" and bearing the brand of Berlitzing. Lee notes that in the antebellum era, horses and slaves were seen alike as "branded, bred, and brutish chattel" (755). He goes on to quote William Byrd, who in 1736 warned that slaves require "tort rein, or they will be apt to throw their rider" (755). By recognizing the metaphor of the horse for an African-American slave, one reveals a vast number of possible interpretations. The Count Berlitzing, who dies trying to rescue his livestock, meets his end for what Lee calls being "too fond of his chattel" (755). If Count Berlitzing then represents a southern plantation owner, his rival, the Baron Metzengerstein, could logically represent either the abolitionist movement or northern industrialists. Either way the message is clear. The horse, emancipated by the death of its previous master, is looked upon by the baron as a potential commodity but proves instead to be the source of his ultimate doom. The theme is remarkably similar to "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," but seems to take it a step further. In "Rue Morgue," the victims are two innocent white women, a powerful image in Poe's day, but not as symbolically significant. Here, the victims are the horse's former master and the man who tried to replace him. To interpret this symbolically, Poe issues a specific warning to both the

master that is "too fond" of his slaves and those Northerners who believe in the redeemable value of emancipated slaves. All will die, Poe warns, at the hands of the chattel they foolishly underestimate, and only the ashes will remain of themselves and their estates.

In a recent contribution to the *Mississippi Quarterly Journal*, Professor David Faflik of the University of North Carolina contends that Poe's writing "sends the right (read, racial) signals to an audience already on the lookout for slavery" (271). His stance, and one that is not uncommon, is that contemporary critics are simply misinterpreting Poe's work, splicing their own agendas into it when it is essentially neutral. Faflik's position is essentially the same rebuttal employed by the Poe faithful for years in response to any unfavorable modern criticism; that is, Poe is never wrong, only gravely misunderstood. However, the facts and circumstances surrounding the life and works of the author do not concur with this position. Of primary interest is the recurrence of these racial themes throughout his life's work and its apparent response to the relevant social issues of the day. "Metzengerstein," the earliest of the pieces considered here, was penned in 1831, within mere months of Nat Turner's Rebellion (White 95). *Pym* followed several years thereafter, and was composed between 1836 and 1838, in a period of increasingly divisive anti-abolitionist fervor. "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," written in 1841, followed on the heels of the Washington, D.C. slave insurrections of 1840 (White 95). These three pieces span what was by far the most productive era of Poe's life, (he died just eight years later, in 1849) which seems to indicate the relative importance of the issue to Poe. The persistent recurrence of racially charged imagery throughout Poe's work is more than a coincidence; it serves to indicate how prominently these issues affected the author's life. Consider that the only novel length work he composed is entirely centered on an examination of racial division. Contrary to what Mr. Faflik argues, one does not have to go looking for slavery in *Pym* to run head-on into a remarkably

polarizing dialogue concerning black and white.

Still the question logically remains, why was Poe not more outspoken about his racist views? Why did he choose to present them so subtly and carefully? There are many answers to these questions, but they all lead back to Poe's image of himself as intellectually superior to the world that surrounded him. Dayan describes what she refers to as "Poe's troubled sense of himself as a southern aristocrat," something I believe came into direct conflict with his sense of himself as an enlightened man (241). He took great pride in his reputation as a sharp and biting critic; becoming entangled in the racial politics of his day would have no doubt taken away from his intellectual esteem, something which he prized highly. However, among his many talents, Poe was also greatly intrigued by ancient and coded languages, something about which he was remarkably knowledgeable (Rudoff 69). Instead of taking sides publicly, he did something that seems perfectly fitting to his eccentric whims—he dressed his philosophies in fictions, tales of mystery and horror on the surface that only another "enlightened" (or like-minded) individual could fully discern. In this manner, the injection of his racist philosophies into his work would not detract from his intellectual esteem but rather might enhance it through the clever manner in which it was executed.

Edgar Allan Poe was a racist and a pro-slavery sympathizer. This position is reflected throughout his life's work, most notably in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," and "Metzengerstein." There are some who based on this fact alone would seek to exclude Poe from the accepted canon of American literature. That is certainly not the aim of this argument, nor is it to take away from or reduce the man or his legacy in any way; rather, my goal has only been to further the understanding of the man and the appreciation of his work. Poe has a reputation as one of the greatest and most recognizable figures in the history of

American literature, and it is a reputation which he deserves. However, any serious literary study must consider the society and culture from which the literature arises and the ways in which the author thought about and responded to them. Since Poe's work will undoubtedly live on and continue to be studied by students around the world, it is important that we are careful to present him honestly, and as he truly was: not the colorblind, cosmopolitan intellectual some would characterize him as, but rather as a racial separatist whose work is colored by his racist southern heritage.

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