

Edgar Allan Poe: Borderline-Phenomenon or an American Psychoanalyst Avant la Lettre

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Edgar Allan Poe: A Haunting Phenomenon within the American Literary History of the 19th Century

As the writer who elevated the 'return of the repressed' to a novel subject-matter in 19th century American literature, Edgar Allan Poe also conceived new literary genres such as the first detective novel or the beginnings of the science fiction novel [1]. The story of the Parisian amateur detective C. Auguste Dupin, which decades later served as the raw model for Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes*, was considered by Poe himself to be one of his most successful. In 1960s Paris, Poe's *The Purloined Letter* was the subject of an extensive literary-philosophical debate between the deconstructionist Jaques Derrida and the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan [2]. More than almost any other nineteenth-century American author, Edgar Allan Poe's dark and gruesome work has brought forth psychoanalytically inspired interpretations that are legion and continue to this day. But even in the world of 19th and 20th century artists, Poe's literary productions sometimes bore extraordinary resonances. Claude Debussy, the French composer, based his opera *Pelléas* on Poe's short story *The Fall of the House of Usher*. With *Pelléas and Melisande*, Debussy created a timeless work that is unique in the history of opera [3]. Everything that happens on stage takes place in a mysterious world, where the characters are lost in a mist, meet each other and live in a never-ending dream, which the hypnotic music reflects like a blurred image (Ibid., p.26). In this regard, numerous allegories to Poe's short story are possible. In his numerous letters, the French composer speaks of an obsession that Poe's works exerted on him [4]. He increasingly described his own mental states in terms derived from Poe. Without exaggeration, he could write that he was once again in "Usher's House, where the stones talk to each other" [3]. Film-makers have been drawing on Poe's work since the dawn of the cinema, and the appeal of new adaptations shows no sign of abating, as a recent Netflix miniseries (2022) on the downfall of the House of Usher demonstrate.

Poe - a European Romantic in America?

It almost took hundred years for American literary scholars to turn to the phenomenon of Poe with renewed vigour. Poe returned to his homeland as a Europeanised author after causing a real furor in France [4]. European critics, thinkers and writers were very convincing in appropriating the misunderstood American writer, who had almost been forgotten in his home country after his tragic death. His intellectual affinity with the English Romantics, such as Coleridge, Byron, de Quincey, Shelley and Keats, seemed obvious,

and his assimilation into the tradition of dark romanticism and German horror literature in the vein of E.T.A. Hoffmann seemed unanimous. Today, Poe is indisputably regarded as the forerunner of Symbolism in France. He is the *spiritus rector* of thinkers as diverse as Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Verlaine or Rimbaud [5]. Mallarmé was a congenial translator of Poe's poems into French, striving to be absolutely faithful to the American original [6]. His translations triggered the so-called *vers libre* movement in France, which advocated breaking away from strict traditional guidelines within poetics (Ibid., p. 43). Poe's conceptual works on themes such as beauty, aesthetics and the macabre had an even greater influence on French intellectual life than his translations of poetry (Ibid., p. 47). While Poe's influence in France cannot be overestimated, he was gradually being recognised in the United Kingdom. Famous novelists such as Robert Louis Stevenson and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle paid tribute to him, both identifying the inimitable influence Poe's works had on their literary output.

Poe's Heroes as Torn Between Normalcy and Alienation

Poe's influence on the American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne is evident, on Melville highly probable. Poe's short stories mark the beginning of a new tradition of the grotesque that permeates, for example, the works of William Faulkner [4]. Poe's works reveal the origins of symbolism, tentative attempts at the so-called 'stream of consciousness' technique that point the way to the abstract arts of the 20th century. Poe's view on humanity is ambivalent: on the one hand, he considers humankind as intelligent and rational, on the other hand as absorbed in the realm of the imagination. This insurmountable contrast is reflected in the dualism between unyielding rationality and exuberant imagination [8]. Poe's ideal was to overcome this dualism by creating a synthesis. The two modes of existence described were to be transcended by intuitive and imaginative reason. In the field of fiction, the detective Dupin comes to mind, who is able to solve his cases with unyielding logic as well as with flourishing fantasy. Ultimately, in Poe's view, it was the arts that were able to transcend the growing divide between the natural sciences and the humanities. He favoured the path of an aesthetic sensibility while many of his contemporaries such as Emerson, Thoreau or Hawthorne were drawn to the field of ethics [9]. It is not surprising, therefore, that many American literary critics have categorised Poe as 'un-American', as being not thoroughly rooted in genuine American values (Ibid., p. 37). Contrary to that, Poe's literary achievements can be considered as an attempt to express transcendental experiences. His short stories

symbolize unusual journeys out of the familiar surroundings into a no-man's land of alienation, operating sharply on the borders of madness and death. Based primarily on the transcendental philosophy of German idealism, American transcendentalism combined influences from English Romanticism, mystical ideas and Eastern philosophies [10]. With its optimistic world view, it turned against dogmatic religions as well as materialistic and rationalistic traditions of thought (Ibid., p. 31).

American Transcendentalism in Edgar Allan Poe

The American Transcendentalists advocated a liberal, self-responsible and nature-orientated way of life. They provided essential impulses for the liberation of slaves, the development of the first women's movements and the nature conservation trend in America (Ibid., p. 36). In the symbolic depiction of journeys to nowhere, numerous affinities between Poe, Hawthorne and Melville can be outlined. Hawthorne, however, was interested in themes of alienation and madness from a different vantage point. For Hawthorne, 'original sin' figured as the primal seed destroying any societal bonds and unity (Ibid., p. 42). He was concerned with collective consequences of 'original sin': in the story *Young Goodman Brown*, which was first published anonymously in 1835, Hawthorne sets the action in 17th century New England at the time of the Salem witch trials [11]. At the centre of the story is a young man named Goodman Brown, wandering through the woods at night to encounter an evil gathering of his fellow churchmen. Traumatized by this experience, he is only able to recognise hypocrisy and sin in his puritanical surroundings after his return (Ibid., p. 52). The religious elite secretly practise devil cults in nocturnal forests. Poe's protagonists, who are more split within themselves, have more in common with the tyrannical Captain Ahab from Melville's novel *Moby Dick* than with the protagonists of Hawthorne's stories. Melville and Poe are united by describing the journey of consciousness or the losing of it. It is always about abandoning certainties and 'plunging into the dark sea' towards the absolute unknown. The natural turns into the unnatural and ultimately into the supernatural [1]. In Poe's short stories, the hero figures as a desolate existence, as an 'outsider' on the brink of normalcy and madness [12]. Poe has created borderline typifications that are not identical with the psychiatric disorder of borderline personality disorder, but rather express a type of person who is haunted by his past, driven to a dismal future and exposed to his excesses and neuroses. The so-called borderline hero of Poe's making is a character 'frozen in time'. He repeats an action as if something else had taken possession of him. It is a character prone to mood swings and drawn to the abyss of morbid ruminations (Ibid., p. 56). The *loci* of Poe's actions always bear the stamp of the exotic. When Dupin solves his criminal cases, he does not do so on America soil, but rather in Paris. Poe makes use of traditional topoi of dark romanticism by evoking remote manor houses, castles or half-ruined abbeys. His descriptions of the uncanny, however, are, without parallels in American literature of his time for he turned the horror inward.

Carl Gustav Jung, the Arcane Discipline of Alchemy and Edgar Allan Poe

In his insightful work *Psychology and Alchemy*, the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung explains that the process of alchemy itself has two natures, one physical and one psychic, one 'profane' and one 'sacred' [13]. The alchemical practices with which we are most familiar are usually physical, specifically the attempt to transform a base metal into gold through certain laboratory experiments. But behind the material utensils that we associate with the alchemist, there exists another layer of meaning: the

profound philosophy of Neoplatonism and the search for the so-called 'philosopher's stone' (Ibid., p. 32). It was a long rite of passage that led the neophyte through various kinds of disciplinary experience to an ideal state of mind. Few Romantic writers were initiated into the obscure aspects of alchemy. At a superficial glance, Poe seemed to be merely playing with this tradition by drafting intriguing alchemical plots in his short stories [14]. However, as far as literary research goes, Poe was at least familiar with Isaac D'Israeli's 1834 note on 'Alchymy' in his 'Curiosities of Literature', which included the provocative suggestion that "modern chemistry is not without hope, not to say certainty, of confirming the golden visions of the alchemists" [15]. The short story that is most indicative of Poe's knowledge of alchemical philosophy is one that is usually discarded as a mere mystery adventure, namely, the intriguing *The Gold Bug*

Poe's *The Gold Bug*: A Treasure Hunt for Alchemy

The Gold Bug was written in 1843. The plot follows William Legrand, who becomes obsessed with an unusual gold-coloured beetle. His servant, Jupiter, fears that Legrand is going mad and visits Legrand's friend, an unnamed narrator. Legrand draws the other two into an adventure after deciphering a secret message that leads to a buried treasure. The story, set on Sullivan's Island, South Carolina, is often compared to Poe's 'Tales of Ratiocination' as a kind of detective fiction. In 1840, Poe became aware of the public interest in ciphers and challenged readers to test their code-breaking skills. The success of the story is based on one such cryptogram. Poe submitted *The Gold-Bug* as an entry to a writing competition. His story won the grand prize and was published in three instalments starting in June 1843. *The Gold-Bug* was an instant success and became Poe's most popular and widely read work of prose during his lifetime. It also contributed to the popularisation of cryptograms and ciphers [17].

The Plot of *The Gold Bug*

After losing his family fortune, William Legrand has moved from New Orleans to Sullivan's Island, South Carolina, bringing with him his African-American servant, Jupiter. The narrator of the story, Legrand's friend and doctor, visits him one evening to examine an unusual scarab-like beetle he has found. The beetle's weight and shiny appearance convince Jupiter that it is made of pure gold. Legrand has lent it to an officer stationed at nearby Fort Moultrie, but he draws a sketch of it for the narrator, with markings on the carapace that resemble a skull. As they discuss the bug, Legrand focuses on the sketch and carefully locks it away in his desk for safekeeping (Poe, p.240). Confused, the narrator retires into the night. A month later, Jupiter visits the narrator on behalf of his master and asks him to come immediately, fearing that Legrand has been bitten by the beetle and gone mad. Once on the island, Legrand insists that the beetle is the key to recovering his lost fortune. He leads them on an expedition to a certain tree on the mainland and has Jupiter climb it until he finds a skull nailed to the end of a branch. On Legrand's instructions, Jupiter drops the beetle through an eye socket and Legrand goes to a spot where the group starts digging (Ibid., p. 266). Finding nothing, the three return to the tree and Legrand repositions the stake he used to mark the spot where the beetle landed. As the group continues to dig, they find two skeletons and a chest filled with gold coins and jewellery. Legrand explains that on the day Jupiter found the beetle on the mainland coast, he picked up a piece of parchment to wrap it in. Legrand kept the parchment and used it to sketch the beetle for the narrator; however, he noticed traces of invisible ink, which were revealed by the heat of the fire on the hearth. It turned out that the parchment contained a cryptogram, which

Legrand deciphered as instructions for finding a treasure buried by the notorious pirate Captain Kidd. The final step was to throw a projectile or weight through the left eye of the skull in the tree; the first excavation failed when Jupiter accidentally dropped the beetle through the right eye. Legrand suggests that the skeletons may be the remains of two members of Kidd's crew who buried the chest and were then killed to silence them (Ibid, 267).

The Tulip Tree: An Alchemical Metaphor

It is the contention of this article that Poe used alchemy to fuse the many divergent and sometimes contradictory elements of his narrative into an aesthetic whole, and that the story becomes even more elucidating when its seeming inconsistencies are thoroughly examined. One literary critic writes:

Turning from the beetle to the tulip tree, we find a very small mistake. In a somewhat pedantic style, Poe refers to it as 'Liriodendron Tulipiferum'. The correct spelling, of course, is 'Liriodendron Tulipifera'. The misspelling is perhaps hardly worth mentioning, except that it is amusing that Poe should make such an egregious error in the erudite manner of a professor of botany [17].

The reason why Poe may have preferred the wrong ending in Tulipiferum is, supposedly a pun on ferrum, which means the metal iron or any iron tool. On the tree hangs the figure of the black servant Jupiter, and 'Jupiter' was the symbolic name in alchemy for 'tin', one of the seven 'planetary' metals. In the allegorical illustrations intended to complement the alchemical writings, a main symbol was the 'Tree of Life', sometimes called the 'Tree of Wisdom' or the 'Tree of Philosophers' [18]. Many of these representations of the tree showed a figure either climbing or descending the tree, the figure representing either destructive knowledge or divine revelation, often associated with Mercurius, depending on its earthly or heavenly origin (Ibid, p. 8). Jupiter, the servant of Poe's protagonist, Legrand, actually fulfils both roles, as he initially miscalculates and almost drives his master to despair while later correcting his mistake and finding the spot that points to the true hiding place of Captain Kidd's gold treasure. Poe is careful to let the attentive reader know that the branch Jupiter climbs is the seventh on the trunk of the tree, as indicated in Legrand's parchment, since the number seven was the highest number in the alchemical hierarchy, which ran in ascending order from tin/Jupiter, lead/Saturn, mercury/Mercury, iron/Mars, copper/Venus, silver/Moon, and gold/Sun. In Poe's short story, Legrand even tempts Jupiter to climb to the end of the seventh branch, symbolising the golden state of transformation, by bribing him with a silver dollar (Ibid, p. 13). As for the tree itself, Jung calls it "a symbol of the process of development leading to the unity of the filius philosophorum or lapis [i.e. "philosopher's stone"]" [19]. The tree is an outward sign of the mystery of transmutation. Poe's native "philosopher tree" finds its most successful interpreter in William Legrand, a native of New Orleans, intellectual outsider and recluse on Sullivan's Island. "Educated, with unusual powers of mind, but afflicted with misanthropy and subject to perverse moods of alternating enthusiasm and melancholy", Legrand, with his questing and 'mercurial' temperament, is in direct descent from the most famous alchemist in Western literature, Goethe's *Faust* [16].

To the uninitiated, Legrand's strange ritualistic actions, having Jupiter climb a tree and drop the gold beetle through the eye of a skull nailed to one of the branches, driving a stake into the ground "at the very spot where the beetle fell", pacing up and down some distance and digging, seem patently ridiculous especially

when his first attempt yields nothing (Ibid, p. 253). But on the second attempt, the treasure is discovered after he corrects Jupiter's mistake, and a sign of the alchemist's success is granted to the group, the so-called "peacock's tail," or the lighting up of all the colors of the rainbow, indicating the culmination of a perfect transmutation (Ibid, p. 261). As Jung writes in his later alchemical study, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*:

the cauda pavonis announces the end of the work, just as the iris, its synonym, is the messenger of God. The exquisite color of the peacock fan announces the forthcoming synthesis of all the qualities and elements that unite in the "roundness" of the philosophical stone [13].

When the narrator of *The Gold Bug* describes the successful completion of Legrand's work to find the treasure of gold, there is a rough parallel to the glow and shine of the cauda pavonis: In an instant, a treasure of inestimable value shimmered before us. As the rays of the lanterns fell into the pit, out of a confused heap of gold and jewels flashed a glow and a dazzle that absolutely dazzled our eyes (Poe, p. 267). As a profane alchemist, Legrand uses the logical tools of cryptography and deduction to decipher Captain Kidd's hermetic manuscript. Yet despite the aura of the purely rational that Poe casts over the story, a closer reading reveals that, as in traditional alchemical works, Legrand is as dependent on the unpredictable grace of unknown forces as he is on his innate ingenuity. The unnamed narrator himself admits:

The materialization of the treasure and the transformation of the lead ball mentioned in Kidd's formula into the bolus of alchemical gold that is the strange scarab would hardly have been possible without an essential ingredient. This prima materia was Legrand's own faith in his work, coupled with a kind of transcendental patience and total dedication to the task (Ibid, p. 256).

Poe's *The Gold Bug* as the Alchemist's Spiritual Quest

In Edgar Allan Poe's *The Gold-Bug*, alchemy serves as multi-layered roles and functions. It as an underlying theme that enhances the story's exploration of transformation and the quest for knowledge. Alchemy, historically associated with the practice of turning base metals into gold and searching for the Philosopher's Stone, a symbol of perfection and enlightenment, parallels the narrative's motifs of treasure hunting and the pursuit of deeper truths. In *The Gold-Bug*, William Legrand's discovery of the gold beetle ignites a transformation in his own life. Once a man of leisure, his obsession with the bug and the subsequent treasure hunt alters his character, pushing him toward determination and intellectual pursuit. This change highlights the alchemical idea of refining oneself through knowledge and experience. Legrand's meticulous decoding of the parchment reflects this pursuit of knowledge. His ability to interpret the symbols and uncover their meaning is akin to the alchemist's journey to understand the secrets of nature and the universe. This pursuit elevates Legrand from a state of idleness back to an engaged, purposeful life, mirroring the alchemist's quest for enlightenment. The gold bug itself can be interpreted as a symbol of transformation. The bug's initial appearance foreshadows the eventual revelation of treasure, emphasizing the belief that great value often lies beneath the surface of the ordinary. Alchemy often embodies a moral dimension as well, emphasizing the refinement of spirit along with the physical transformation of materials. Legrand's adventure symbolizes a metaphorical journey turned inward, toward personal enlightenment, not merely directed outward by acquiring wealth. It is a journey indicative of a deeper understanding of humankind

and the fruitful interplay of reason and imagination. If Poe was a psychoanalytic writer avant la lettre, and there is an abundance of evidence pointing in that direction, then he was more of a Jungian bent who espoused the idea of personal transformation through a spiritual quest.

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