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# DISTURBED MINDS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

## THE TALES OF EDGAR ALLAN POE AND GUY DE MAUPASSANT

MARTÍN URDIALES SHAW

This article addresses a meeting of the minds between the American author Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) and the French author Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893). These authors belonged to opposing literary movements (romanticism versus realism/naturalism) but their storytelling shared unmistakable thematic and formal interests. This paper begins by looking at the early influences that Poe's short stories had on Maupassant's writing, and then focuses on a selection of stories by the French author that link him to Poe in literary terms (both thematically and narratologically). These tales are related to the fascination both authors felt for atypical mental states and twisted or «disturbed» narrators.

Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe, Guy de Maupassant, story, mental disorder, storytellers, phrenology.

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) and Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893) were not contemporaries, although their lives, over the course of the first and second halves of the nineteenth century, respectively, are strangely similar. Both authors had short and intense lives which ended in tragedy. Poe died within days of being found in a delirious state in the street and Maupassant died in a psychiatric hospital months after a suicide attempt. They both had a sceptical outlook on society and the cultural environment of their times, and due to this scepticism, they developed a shared literary fascination for anything strange or outside of established conventions.<sup>1</sup>

It may seem foolish to compare a romantic author such as Poe (who did not write novels) with a realist/naturalist like

**«THE MID-NINETEENTH  
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WITH ITS POWERS»**

Maupassant (who did not write poetry). However, it is worth considering the various similarities between their approaches to the short story. The French writer's oeuvre includes around three hundred short stories (depending on the versions taken into account). Likewise, there is clear consensus amongst Maupassant critics that his short stories are superior to his six novels in terms of style and quality. As for the American writer, except for the short novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, Poe only wrote poetry and short stories. He was a master of both forms and tried to link them aesthetically in his well-known *Ars Poetica, The Philosophy of Composition*, as the only forms

which the reader can tackle, with interruptions, in «a single sitting» (Poe, 1967).

Before considering the literary perspectives which link the approaches of Maupassant and Poe to the short story, it is worth remembering how the American author's work first reached French readers. Charles

<sup>1</sup> In this assessment I have only highlighted a certain area of Maupassant's literary preoccupations. He was much more prolific than Poe, and dealt with a wide range of subjects in his stories, tackling topics such as social conditions, politics, culture and religion, relationships or the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 (see Urdiales Campos, 1993).

In the nineteenth century the discipline of phrenology became popular. This discipline, which is now considered a pseudoscience, consisted in touching the outside of the skull and compartmentalising the brain into different areas with specific functions. The discipline had an important influence on literature. It can be found in a number of Poe's stories. On the left, you can see the cover of the *American Phrenological Journal* (1848).

Baudelaire, the «accursed poet» translated Edgar Allan Poe's most important short stories into French. A first edition titled *Histoires extraordinaires* was published in 1856 containing thirteen short stories. An extended edition, *Nouvelles histoires extraordinaires*, was published in 1857 with an additional twenty-three stories. Given that Maupassant did not speak English, logic would suggest that his readings of Poe's work were based on the early editions translated by Baudelaire (1998). Taken together, these editions include a considerable amount of the American's literary production, as they contain 36 of his 73 stories.

Maupassant had already shown his interest in Poe through some literary features and reviews. The French author published these articles in the early 1880s in two magazines, *Gil Blas* and *Le Gaulois*, in which he also published many of his first stories.<sup>2</sup> In an essay named *Les Foules*, Maupassant compares Poe to Hoffman using the following terms: «those strange psychologists, half-mad, peculiarly subtle philosophers, who suffer from hallucinations» (*Le Gaulois*, 23/3/82). A year later, he returned to the comparison in a piece named *Le fantastique* in which he describes how Poe's «extraordinary capacity to terrify comes from his skilful and unique way of hinting at the fantastic, and making the reader uneasy using real events which are nevertheless somewhat difficult to explain or almost unexplainable». (*Le Gaulois*, 7/10/83). This assessment is very interesting in the sense that it can also be applied to some of Maupassant's own stories from around the period which culminated in the famous extended short story about «possession» *Le Horla* (1886; 1887).

#### ■ MAUPASSANT AND POE: NARRATIVE CONVERGENCE

During the same period, Maupassant published two stories in the same magazines making explicit references to Poe's narrators or characters. What is even more striking is that these stories — in a more or less obscure manner — seem to establish an intertextual relationship with Poe's plots or characters. At the beginning of *Le tic* (*Le Gaulois*, 1884), Maupassant introduces two characters with the following description:

#### «EDGAR ALLAN POE AND GUY DE MAUPASSANT SHARED A SCEPTICAL OUTLOOK ON THE SOCIETY AND CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT OF THEIR TIMES»

Ils me firent l'effet [...] de personnages d'Edgar Poe [...] L'homme était très grand et maigre, un peu voûté, avec des cheveux tout blancs, trop blancs pour sa physionomie jeune encore; et il avait dans son allure et dans sa personne... cette tenue austère que gardent les protestants. La fille [...], était petite, fort maigre aussi, fort pâle, avec un air las, fatigué, accablé [...] Elle était assez jolie, cette enfant, d'une beauté diaphane d'apparition.<sup>3</sup>

Without entering into a detailed comparative analysis, it suffices to say that the plot of *Le tic* is largely reminiscent of the final part of Poe's well-known story, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, in which Madeleine Usher is buried alive by her brother in the family tomb underneath the house. She manages to escape, and

returns covered in blood to claim her brother's life, and by bringing about his downfall she also causes the house to collapse in a final scene full of allegorical resonance. The same «buried alive» scenario occurs in *Le tic* and Maupassant seems to superficially recreate some of the Gothic elements of Poe's story: just like the Usher family, the father and daughter, who are from a wealthy

background, live in an isolated *château* and the girl reappears covered in blood following her gruelling fight to escape from the tomb. Both stories are based around catalepsy or similar medical symptoms. However, whilst in *Usher* Madeleine's burial can also be read on a symbolical level<sup>4</sup>, in *Le tic* it is always evident that it is a terrible error due to bizarre medical symptoms, and the father is devastated by his daughter's (apparent) death. Maupassant does not try to endow *Le tic* with any symbolic resonance, and although both stories have first person narrators, Poe's narrator is a witness to the unfolding events whilst Maupassant's narrator hears a story which has already taken place.

In another of Maupassant's stories, *Magnétisme* (originally published in the magazine *Gil Blas* in 1882),

<sup>2</sup> All quotations from stories or newspaper features by Maupassant have been used (with permission) from the «Features» and «Stories» sections to be found on the web page created by José Manuel Ramos González (2013).

<sup>3</sup> They reminded me of some of Edgar Poe's characters [...] The man was very tall and thin, rather stooped, with perfectly white hair, too white for his comparatively youthful physiognomy; and there was in his bearing and in his person that austerity peculiar to Protestants. The daughter [...] was small in stature, and was also very thin, very pale, and she had the air of one who was worn out with utter lassitude. She was rather pretty; with a transparent, spiritual beauty.

<sup>4</sup> In view of E.A. Poe's frequent use of pairs, and the additional characterisation of the twins Roderick and Madeleine — the former suffering from sensory overload and the latter, passive, seemingly deaf and dumb — some critics read *The Fall of the House of Usher* as a journey into the mind, where a dual battle is fought between the conscience and unconsciousness, or between reason and irrationality. This would lead to an association between Madeleine and what Freud calls the «repressed self».



The similarities between the short stories of Guy de Maupassant (shown in the image) and Edgar Allan Poe are notable. The French writer published different stories containing explicit references to Poe's narrators or characters. The stories of both writers include references to the psyche or illnesses such as catalepsy.

**«MAUPASSANT TOUCHED UPON THE TOPIC OF MADNESS DURING THE 1880S, AND EVENTUALLY BECAME PERSONALLY INFLUENCED BY IT»**

a rationalist character alludes to Poe's narrators in order to mock his fellow member's beliefs in paranormal phenomenon:

On vint à parler du magnétisme, des tours de Donato et des expériences du docteur Charcot. [...] Un seul souriait, un vigoureux garçon ... chez qui une incroyance à tout s'était ancrée si fortement qu'il n'admettait même point la discussion. [...] Il répétait en ricanant: «Des blagues! des blagues!» [...] M. Charcot, qu'on dit être un remarquable savant, il me fait l'effet de ces conteurs dans le genre d'Edgar Poe, qui finissent par devenir fous à force de réfléchir à d'étranges cas de folie.<sup>5</sup>

The reference to Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893) is not without significance. A neurologist and professor of anatomical pathology, he is now considered to be the father of modern neurology for his descriptions of sclerosis, neuromotor-type diseases and muscular atrophies. However, the allusion to Charcot concerns his fascination with hypnosis, a phenomenon he would experiment with in relation to hysteria. This is the most controversial area of Charcot's legacy from a scientific perspective.

Maupassant skilfully «frames» the story with these introductory comments made by the rational and disbelieving conversationalist, in order to then narrate two events which can only be explained using telepathy. The sceptic is not mentioned again, perhaps he has been silenced by the rationalistic explanation he has heard, and therefore can no longer mock Poe's «mad» narrators. Here, there is a debatable reference to the mad criminal from *The Tell-Tale Heart*. On the other hand, this allusion is symptomatic of Maupassant's preoccupation with madness, already present in 1882. This is a theme he would refer to often over the course of the decade, and one which would ultimately affect him personally. The short story *Qui sait?* published in 1890 (a year and a half before his suicide attempt) is now interpreted by critics as being an autobiographical piece.

#### ■ FROM PHRENOLOGY TO THE PSYCHE: THE INFLUENCE OF THEORIES FROM THE PERIOD

The short story *Magnétisme* is also of interest in relation to the time period when it was written,

<sup>5</sup> We began to talk about telepathy, about Donato's tricks and Dr Charcot's experiments. There was only one person who smiled, a vigorous young fellow [...] who was so incredulous that he would not even enter upon the discussion [...] He repeated with a sneer: «Humbug! humbug!» [...] As for M. Charcot, who is said to be a remarkable man of science, he produces on me the effect of those story-tellers of the school of Edgar Poe, who end by going mad through constantly reflecting on queer cases of insanity.



which transcends the work of Poe and Maupassant, but should be considered as influencing them as well as other nineteenth-century authors. Indeed, the middle of that century witnessed the spread and rising popularity of theories attempting to «structure» the functions of the human brain. These theories also showed a particular fascination with the powers of the brain. The main theory was named phrenology and consisted in touching the outside of the skull, and «compartmentalising» the brain into different areas, which were assigned to different specific functions. Nowadays, it is considered a pseudoscience as it clearly lacks any suitable scientific methodology. Likewise, it postulated a deterministic vision of behaviour, with its «essentialist» approach of associating different regions of the brain with specific functions or abilities. Phrenology foreshadows modern neurology, which can now identify which parts of the brain are related to particular abilities. Phrenology reached its peak during the first half of the nineteenth century and exerted a large influence on literature. It can be seen in Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick*, in the work of British authors such as Wilkie Collins (the father of British detective fiction) and Arthur Conan Doyle, whose detective Sherlock Holmes uses deductions based on phrenological observations (Taylor, 1988). It is also a reference point in some character descriptions written by the Brönte sisters, and in Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula*. Some publications about phrenology such as the *American Phrenological Journal* also wrote about similar «sciences» such as *magnetism* (which is now called *telepathy*) or physiognomy, which attempted to link physical traits with personality (see Wikipedia, particularly sections 2. *Method*, 5. *Reception* and 7. *In Popular Culture*). The influence of phrenology on Poe's work has been studied in detail by Erik Grayson (2005), who finds evidence of its relevance in the stories *Imp of the Perverse*, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, *The Black Cat* and *The Tell-Tale Heart*.

With regard to the themes dealt with by Poe and Maupassant in their stories, there is a striking amount of symmetry between how both authors write about the psyche or, more broadly speaking, the *self*. This includes all of the stories relating to madness, confessional stories about changing criminals, stories involving a *doppelgänger* (double of the self), and stories about dream states or hallucinations, hypnosis, trances, catalepsy and telepathy. Catalepsy is the link between Maupassant's *Le tic* and Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*, whose final part, which we have already mentioned, in turn includes the main idea of *The Premature Burial* which had been published previously. Four stories by both authors involve forms



Paris V René Descartes University

André Brouillet, 1887. *A Clinical Lesson at the Salpêtrière*. Oil on canvas, 425 x 300 cm. References to science during the period can be found in the writing of Guy de Maupassant, such is the case of the Dr Jean-Martin Charcot, who is now considered one of the fathers of modern neurology. In the short story *Magnétisme*, Maupassant alludes to Charcot and experiments with hypnosis to treat hysteria. The painting shows the French Doctor performing a clinical demonstration in front of his students.

of mind control or communication, such as hypnosis, telepathy, or telekinesis: *The Facts in the Case of M Valdemar* and *Mesmeric Revelation* by Poe, and *Un fou?* and *Magnétisme* by the French author. The conceptualization of the double or *doppelgänger* has often been commented by critics of Poe as a common pattern present in different stories: it has been linked with (at least) *The Fall of the House of Usher*, *William Wilson*, *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Man of the Crowd*. Three of these stories conclude with the double's violent death, which can be interpreted to imply the death of the self. Significantly, the presence of a double – using labels such as «the invisible one», «the other», or the outsider, who seem to possess the self, or inhabit a parallel world – can be seen in some of Maupassant's most famous and mysterious short stories which are linked to madness: *Lettre d'un fou*, *Lui?*, *Le docteur H. G.* and both versions of *Le horla*. It is



worth mentioning, to a lesser extent, some oneiric or hallucinatory stories, which do not explicitly mention doubles but which refer to mental states outside of normal consciousness: *La nuit*, *L'endormeuse*, *Sur l'eau*, *L'homme de Mars* and *Rêves*.

Apart from these thematic parallels, it is also worth noting that there are other similarities relating to tone and narrative perspective. The influence of certain Maupassant stories on later North American authors in relation to structural development was described in a formalist study by Richard Fusco (1994). This study also highlighted the relevant ways in which the French author was inspired by Poe's story-writing techniques. However, Fusco does not devote much analysis to one of the most striking elements of this influence, which is the particular way in which Poe and Maupassant use first-person narrators. First-person narration is common in Poe's work. However, whilst some narrators attempt to rationalise, or act as a «mediator» between the reader and the narrator of strange occurrences, at other times, Poe confronts the reader directly with changed narrators, or narrators who gradually become agitated, in certain stories where strangeness does not only stem from the nature of events, but is also contained in the narrators role as

the perpetrator of events. Essentially, this explains the underpinnings of *William Wilson*, *The Tell-Tale Heart*, *The Black Cat* and *The Imp of the Perverse*, as each of them is a confessional tale. The critic Christopher Benfey has described the intentions of the criminal-narrator in these and similar stories in detail:

*The Tell-Tale Heart*, *The Black Cat* and *The Imp* all record a confession – a perverse confession since the crimes would otherwise have been undetected. [...] The fear of the criminals is not... being caught, it is the fear of being misunderstood.

BENFEY, 1993:37

It is worth noting the extent to which Benfey's assessment of the fear of being understood can be applied to some of Maupassant's first-person narrators. The short stories *Lui?* (1883), *Le Horla* (1887 version, in the style of a diary), and *Qui sait?* (1890) adopt the perspective of narrators who undergo an important change, who have doubts about their sanity, are generally in conflict with their own conscience, the perception of «doubles» or unexplainable events. Readers find themselves caught in the difficult position of having to piece together the testimony of narrators who try to make them participate in perplexing experiences which cannot be explained rationally. At other times, the parallels go much further, such as in the short story *Fou?* (1882), in which the distressed narrator, who is a criminal and a lunatic, bears an uncanny resemblance to Poe's narrator in *The Tell-Tale Heart* (Urdiales Shaw, 2012). Both include detailed accounts of how they perceived the victim, prepared the crime, and even how they justify their actions, in a desperate attempt to find approval and seek their readers' complicity. Ⓡ

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