

Poe/tics

Poetic needs make something plausible though impossible preferable to what is possible but implausible.

Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Stephen Halliwell, 1461b11–12.

Doyle did, of course, have important predecessors. The most obvious of these was Poe...but...[there are] glimmerings of “rational inquiry leading to the containment of crime” in the 18th-c. compilations of criminal lives, *The Newgate Calendar* (or *Malefactor’s Bloody Register*); William Godwin’s *Caleb Williams* (1794); the *Mémoires* (1829) of François Eugène Vidocq (an ex-criminal who became the first head of the Parisian Sûreté); Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone* (1868); the detective figure (Robert Audley) in a ‘sensation novel’ like Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862); and many others. None of these texts, however, crystallized the role of the detective and the nature of the detective story in the way that Holmes did.

Lee Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 21.

- 1809 Edgar Poe b. Boston
- 1811 orphaned in Richmond, VA; raised by John and Frances Allan
- 1826 drops out of UVA (gambling debt)
- 1827 *Tamerlane and Other Poems* (Boston: Calvin F.S. Thomas)
- 1838 *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (New York: Harper)
- 1839 editor/contributor for *Gentlemen’s Magazine* (Philadelphia)
- 1841 “Rue Morgue” in *Graham’s* (successor to *Gentlemen’s*)
- 1844 “Purloined Letter” in *The Gift: A Christmas, New Year, and Birthday Present. MDCCCXLV* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart)
- 1843 “The Gold-Bug” (story) a big success
- 1845 “The Raven” (poem) a huge success
- 1845 *Tales* (New York: Wiley and Putnam)
- 1849 d.

The three tales before the last, are “Murders in the Rue Morgue” —“Mystery of Marie Roget”—and “The Purloined Letter.” They are all of the same class—a class peculiar to Mr. Poe. They are inductive—tales of ratiocination—of profound and searching analysis.

There is much made of nothing in “The Purloined Letter,”—the story of which is simple; but the reasoning is remarkably clear....

The incidents in the “Murder in the Rue Morgue” are purely imaginary. Like all the rest, it is written backwards....

Most writers get their subjects first, and write to develop it. The first inquiry of Mr. POE is for a novel effect—then for a subject.

[Poe?], review of *Tales* by Edgar A. Poe, *Aristidean* 1, no. 4 (October 1845), 318–19, [American Periodicals Series](#).

THE GIFT is an American annual of great typographical elegance, and embellished with many beautiful engravings. It contains an article, which, for several reasons, appears to us so remarkable, that we leave aside several effusions of our ordinary contributors in order to make room for an abridgment of it. The writer, Mr. Edgar A. Poe, is evidently an acute observer of mental phenomena; and we have to thank him for one of the aptest illustrations which could well be conceived, of that curious play of two minds, in which one person, let us call him A, guesses what another, B, will do, judging that B will adopt a particular line of policy to circumvent A.

“‘The Gift,’” *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal* (November 30, 1844): 343, [British Periodicals](#). “The Purloined Letter” follows in abridged form.

The more specific problem with our analysis of reading [in Bennett, Emmison, and Frow, *Accounting for Tastes: Australian Everyday Cultures* (Cambridge, 1999)] has to do with its account of genre. On the one hand we took a set of labels—romance, thriller, “contemporary novels,” science fiction, and so on—as the names of definite realities. It’s true that we didn’t simply pluck these labels from the air: they were constructed in an initial phase of the project in which we asked a series of focus groups about what they read, and derived our categories from what they told us. But this merely means that these were folk categories, derived in turn from a popularized and incoherent literary lexicon and from the pragmatic taxonomies of bookshops and public libraries. On the other hand, our analysis was largely unable to elaborate meaningful interpretations of the correlations between genres and social groups—that is, to develop an understanding of the ways in which genres organize knowledges in specific patterns of coherence. Our use of qualitative material from the focus groups to supplement statistical analysis produced the most banal of commentaries on what our respondents gained from their reading: hardly surprising, since descriptions of the experience of reading can only ever be as good as, and will always reflect, the available (and often archaic) languages of literary criticism as they are diffused through a population. Genres, in our analysis, were black boxes which we failed to unseal, whose inner workings we failed to understand.

John Frow, “On Midlevel Concepts,” *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 241–42, [Project Muse](#).