



## The Amoral Nature of Edgar Allan Poe's C. Auguste Dupin and the Implications of *Doctor Who*

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Edgar Allan Poe's C. Auguste Dupin has long been accepted as the original detective hero, serving as the blueprint for detectives such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and Agatha Christie's Poirot. However, with the tendency of modern readers to apply moral sainthood to heroes of popular culture, Dupin has suffered interpretations of self-sacrificing sainthood. With the ethically cognizant Doctor from the popular series *Doctor Who* as a point of reference, this article asserts that Dupin is a hero in the classical sense of the term. He exemplifies all the characteristics of a classical Greek hero, even rivaling Achilles in his egocentrism, and aligning himself with one of the most disturbing figures in Greek mythology, Atreus. His tendency toward personal gain, his inability to understand and sympathize with others, and his lack of a relationship with the narrator prove that Dupin upholds the principles of *aristos kratos* rather than the principles of moral sainthood. Likewise, he fails to adhere to the modern definition of a hero and instead resembles the modern villain. The Doctor, through his inability to disengage from moral concerns, provides a perfect example of the modern heroic figure, highlighting Dupin's amoral nature. Through Dupin, readers can glimpse the history of the heroic figure and his alterations within popular culture.

**KEYWORDS:** Edgar Allan Poe; C. August Dupin; Doctor Who; Moral; Ethics; Heroic Figure

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The central figure in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" and "The Purloined Letter" is the detective hero, C. Auguste Dupin, whose exceptional cognitive abilities allow him to solve crimes which baffle the Parisian police. Poe's Dupin has fascinated readers for years, even serving as the blueprint for later detective heroes, such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and Agatha Christie's Poirot. Poe's Dupin stories have "established all the necessary components for . . . the 'classical detective story'" [1]. Likewise, Dupin's status as a detective hero has sometimes been interpreted as having positive moral connotations, as in J. Lasley Dameron's "Poe's C. Auguste Dupin" [2]. However, the idea that Dupin

strives for the betterment of society places him into the category of moral sainthood. The contemporary trend to impose moral sainthood upon heroes, a relatively new development, does not apply to Dupin's character. In fact, Dupin ultimately fails to adhere to any kind of moral code, indulging only in actions of self-interest. Dupin's place within the evolution of the heroic figure provides insight into the nature of modern heroes and their moral quagmires. With the Doctor of the popular series *Doctor Who* as a point of reference, this article will analyze Dupin's heroic nature in relation to the victims of the crimes, his motives, and the narrator, thereby illuminating Dupin's place within the moral evolution of the heroic figure.

Popular culture perpetuates the image of the moral saint as the epitome of heroism. Modern heroic characters, such as the Doctor, exemplify modern society's definition of "hero" due to their tendency to make choices based on an altruistic

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moral code. The modern hero coincides with Susan Wolf's definition of a moral saint: "a person whose every action is as morally good as possible, a person, that is, who is as morally worthy as can be" [3]. However, some adequate examples of a traditional heroic figure exist in popular culture. In the BBC's recent series *Sherlock*, Sherlock Holmes describes himself as a "high functioning sociopath" [4]; this Sherlock, a well-constructed classical hero, often fails to commiserate with those around him, as in the scene when he unrelentingly informs the autopsy technician that her boyfriend is actually gay [5]. The BBC's *Sherlock* represents an exception to the rule that governs most modern heroic figures. Typically, the modern hero never allows the end to justify the means. Nevertheless, a preoccupation with moral quagmires does not mean the innocent will go unscathed. The fact that popular culture heroes often fail to do the "right" thing seems to negate their saintly characteristics. In fact, the Doctor often makes moral decisions which eventually harm his less heroic companions; for instance, in "The Unquiet Dead," the Doctor causes a maid's death due to his belief in the ethical necessity of helping a dying alien species [6]. However, modern heroes always *try* to do the right thing; therefore, they should still be placed in the category of moral saints. Consequently, it is the intention to do good which serves as the division between a superhero and a super-villain. A superhero intends to help others while a super-villain intends to help himself; this clear division differs greatly from the Greek heroic figures who, when pitted against an enemy, face yet another hero, causing the distinction between good and evil to blur and become irrelevant.

Traditional heroes have questionable intentions centered exclusively on personal gain, as in the case of Achilles who betrays the Greeks in order to uphold his pride when Agamemnon slights him. They feel no obligation to those around them, causing their egocentrism to grow exponentially. Bernard Knox, in his introduction to Robert Fagles' translation of Homer's *The Iliad*, states, "heroes might be, usually were, violent, antisocial, and destructive" [7]. However, "they offered an assurance that in some chosen vessels humanity is capable of superhuman greatness" [7]. The Ancient Greeks saw the heroic figures of Achilles and Odysseus as above morality in the same way that the gods exist above morality. Their virtues do not include moral virtues but rather heroic and god-like virtues: intelligence, leadership, courage, strength, and a desire to push beyond the bounds of human comprehension. They represent *aristos kratos*, the power of the best, and often wield this power without regard for those around them. According to Wolf, "a necessary condition of moral

sainthood would be that one's life be dominated by a commitment to improving the welfare of others or of society as a whole" [3]. Clearly, the traditional hero cannot coexist with the moral saint whose virtues bind him either through a true desire to act them out (i.e. the Loving Saint) or through a suppression of his true desires (i.e. the Rational Saint).

Dameron's contemporary interpretation of C. Auguste Dupin brings the character into conflict with his own nature. He views Dupin as "the self-sacrificing intellectual whose chief concern is the pursuit of truth" [2]; this implies that Dupin pursues the betterment of humanity as a whole and "the promotion of the welfare of others" [3]. The "pursuit of truth" suggests that Dupin searches for a meaningful objective beyond his own narcissism, and that his motives are good. Clearly, Dameron's claims argue Dupin's status as a moral saint. But while Dupin is, to an extent, the intellectual Dameron describes, he also pursues his goals with a mercenary single-mindedness. Consequently, he exhibits a disregard for the human aspect of the crimes he solves.

Dupin's aloofness is, ultimately, a result of his heroic, and god-like nature. Robert Daniel claims that Dupin's normal routine consists of locking himself in a decrepit old mansion and venturing "forth only at night, and [passing] his days in reading and dreaming" [8]. This is reminiscent of the tendency of gods to retreat away from human society and into a distant realm (Heaven, Asgard, Olympus). Likewise, Dupin's retreat differs greatly from the modern heroic figure who allows himself to embrace humanity. In "The End of the World," the Doctor praises humans for their unique adaptability and in every episode expends his energies toward advancing humanity both physically and morally [9]. In contrast, Dupin's inability to embrace ordinary humanity causes his retreat and subsequent apathy. Due to his god-like abilities, he cannot connect with others on an emotional level and therefore cannot have the empathetic connection needed to achieve moral sainthood.

In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," Dupin remains unmoved by the terrible murders which the narrator describes vividly [10]. The daughter of Madame L'Españaye "had been throttled to death" and her body shoved, "head downward," up the chimney [10]. The Madame herself was found "with her throat so entirely cut that, upon an attempt to raise her, the head fell off," yet Dupin never expresses real pity or disgust [10]. According to David Trotter, Dupin "views these corpses as the vehicle of an enigma" [11]. In "The Mystery of

Marie Rogêt,” Dupin faces another terrible murder and remains immune [12]. Marie, a beautiful young coquette, “[is] found floating in the Seine,” and the circumstances surrounding her death are, of course, mysterious [12]. Again, Dupin views the victim’s body as just another clue to the crimes, never thinking beyond her worth as evidence; this reaction to violence differs greatly from the Doctor’s reaction. In “The Empty Child,” the Doctor feels bound to commiserate with the suffering of others and is often moved to tears and anger when confronted with victims [13]. Likewise, Dupin’s “detachment will ensure the continued suppression of moral and material horror,” [11]. Dupin will never be capable of the horror an ordinary human being would feel when confronted with a grotesque murder.

In “The Purloined Letter,” the reader encounters a more disturbing instance of Dupin’s aloofness because the victim of this crime faces eminent danger [14]. The victim in “The Purloined Letter” is a living person who needs active help. Unfortunately, Dupin does not exhibit the characteristic desire which the modern reader ascribes to a hero, the desire to rescue a distressed victim. This is, perhaps, the most fascinating of the three stories because this is the only one in which the crime is actually happening, a fact which makes this scenario comparable to the scenarios in which the Doctor finds himself on a regular basis. The crime is currently being committed, the victim is calling out for help, but Dupin stalls, even refusing to give the letter to the police until after he has been rewarded. Again, in “The End of the World” the Doctor acts as soon as he realizes his help is needed and is thereby able to rescue the representatives of various branches of the far-flung human species [9]. Dupin, on the other hand, toys with the Prefect before rendering aid, effectively illustrating his lack of concern. He fails to feel any empathy for the victim who, in this case, happens to be the Queen. However, this raises the question of why Dupin would choose to solve these crimes if not for altruistic reasons.

“The Murders in the Rue Morgue” involves the mysterious death of a woman and her daughter, later proved to be the result of an orangutan gone berserk [10]. However, Dupin’s motive for solving the crime has nothing to do with the victims. Instead, the motive lies in the fact that the police have accused an old friend. The narrator states: “It was only after the announcement that Le Bon had been imprisoned that [Dupin] asked my opinion respecting the murders” [10]. Dupin’s friendship has moved him to help. Though this may not seem like such a terrible motive, it does show a disregard for the murders. Dupin lacks any altruistic desire to do good for

strangers while a modern hero, like the Doctor, would not need a personal connection with the victims in order to help them. He would, without asking any repayment, rescue the victims from their predicament even at the expense of his own safety, as in “The Parting of the Ways” when he knowingly faces destruction at the hands of the Daleks in order to preserve the universe [15].

Dupin’s motive for solving the crime in “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” is of a mercenary nature. Dupin decides to solve Marie’s murder in order to gain the sizeable reward. The narrator states that the Prefect of the Paris police “made [Dupin] a direct and certainly a liberal proposition, the precise nature of which [he does] not feel at liberty to disclose” [12]. The narrator never states the exact amount of money Dupin receives, but his discomfort in disclosing the amount proves the immensity of the sum. The desire for and acceptance of monetary gain are greatly at odds with the moral saint image and provide yet another proof against considering Dupin as altruistic.

“The Purloined Letter” contains a more complex motive than the previous stories because Dupin has two motivations: money and revenge. Dupin tells the narrator that the Minister, “at Vienna once, did [him] an evil turn, which [Dupin] told him, quite good-humoredly, that [he] should remember” [14]. Dupin’s statement, clearly tongue-in-cheek, misleads the reader because his revenge is far from the good-natured warning he gave the Minister. His actions have delivered the Minister into the hands of the Queen who can, if she chooses, cause “his political destruction” [14]. The reader never truly understands the reason behind the revenge, but Dupin does leave a clue in the false letter. The quote, translated from French into English, is “Such a baleful scheme, while not worthy of Atreus, is worthy of Thyestes” [14]. Dupin has aligned himself with Atreus who, as a Greek heroic figure himself, defies the laws of the gods in a moment of terrible revenge against his brother who committed adultery with his wife, Aerope. “When [Atreus] learnt of Aerope’s adultery, he pretended reconciliation with his brother and at a feast served up to him the flesh of the latter’s own sons” [16]. The tie between the Atreus story and Dupin illustrates the fact that Dupin himself has recognized his own classical heroism. He has, essentially, applauded the hateful nature of his revenge.

In addition to revenge, Dupin pursues the letter for the sake of monetary gain. The obviousness of the second motive lies in the fact that Dupin refuses to give the letter to the Prefect until after the Prefect gives him his “fifty thousand francs” [14]. Without the check, Dupin would never have given the letter

to the police. He would have kept the letter to himself, possibly causing more harm in the process. Dupin's duplicity corresponds with Knox's definition of a hero and leaves the reader with no doubts as to his moral values. He never allows altruism to alter his decisions and he continually acts out of a desire for personal gain. Dupin, it would seem, bears a striking resemblance to the Doctor's nemesis, the Master. In the 1983 film *Doctor Who: The Five Doctors*, the government of Gallifrey asks the Master to rescue the Doctor from the Death Zone [17]. However, in order to persuade him the council offers to forgive the Master all of his previous "transgressions" [17]. The Master, like Dupin, needs the offer of a reward before he will commit a "good" act.

The narrator figure, the only factor actively attempting to soften Dupin's character, acts as a mediator between the reader and the God-like, amoral Dupin. According to Daniel, "Dupin is a sort of secular god" [8]; this leads to the conclusion that the narrator functions as a secular priest, marveling at the wonders his god produces. In addition, the narrator allows others to worship Dupin through himself as he relates the story in human terms. The narrator's constant child-like amazement at Dupin's achievements allows readers to view Dupin favorably. Oftentimes, the narrator refuses to reveal Dupin's amoral aspect. In fact, he never discloses the amount of money Dupin receives for solving Marie Rogêt's murder [12]. The narrator's "astonishment" in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" at witnessing Dupin's "miracles" successfully disguises Dupin's amoral motives and distance [10]. His deceptive nature serves as the main contributing factor to Dupin's false image of sainthood as seen in Dameron's article. The narrator distracts the audience with his exaggerated praise of Dupin's abilities; in a sense, he acts as a smoke screen, serving as a buffer between the reader and Dupin's motives and actions.

However, the most fascinating aspect of the narrator is also the simplest—his lack of a name. In the Sherlock Holmes stories, Dr. Watson is as powerful a figure as Holmes himself. In fact, the contemporary BBC production develops his character far more than the original stories. In the first episode, the audience is introduced to Watson before they are introduced to Sherlock, and he has an updated backstory to which the audience immediately connects [4]. Likewise, Sherlock actually cares for Watson, as evidenced by his hesitation when Moriarty holds Watson captive in "The Great Game" [5]. For Dupin, the narrator becomes a vacant space and functions as a recorder. For Sherlock, Dr. Watson serves as a confidant

(especially as he is portrayed in the new series). Dr. Watson exists as the crack in Sherlock's exterior façade, while the narrator of the Dupin stories can do nothing more than further the façade. Dupin's false relationship with his narrator sets him apart even from Achilles who had a confidant of his own, Patroclus. The relationship between Patroclus and Achilles is so strong that Patroclus' death causes Achilles' return to the Trojan War [18]. In fact, Dupin's total self-centeredness compares only to the extremity of Atreus, whose willingness to destroy his own family has become one of the most disturbing mythological stories in Greek literature.

Likewise, the aloofness of the narrator relationship is yet another division from popular culture heroes. The narrator falls into a long tradition beginning with the Chorus in Greek Dionysian theater. As is common knowledge, the Chorus would interrupt the play, condensing the plot points and explaining them to the audience, as in *Oedipus Rex*. In popular culture, the narrator figure has developed into a sidekick figure. For instance, the Doctor travels with companions to whom he feels a connection. Like the narrator of the Dupin stories, the Doctor's companions act as an audience, listening to his sometimes convoluted explanations and allowing the true audience to understand the details of the plot. However, the Doctor is constantly aware of his obligation to the companion. In "The Parting of the Ways," the Doctor sacrifices his own escape in order to ensure Rose's safety, thus assuaging his own guilt for having placed her in danger [15]. In contrast, Dupin manipulates his narrator companion, constantly attempting to awe him with his intellectual abilities, as in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" when he first reveals his skills to the narrator [10]. Clearly, the discrepancies between the Doctor and Dupin are so immense that any attempt to place them in the same category would distort the already problematic moral schism dividing them.

The obvious disparity between Dupin and current popular heroes as exemplified by the Doctor is enough to confuse many modern readers who expect all heroes to fall inside the characteristic parameters of moral sainthood. Perhaps the true cause behind the misreading of his character lies in popular culture and the tendency to create heroes who adhere to a strict moral code, striving toward "the good." Due to this tendency, many modern readers project ethical cognizance on all literary heroes, even the most unlikely. Dupin defies a strict moral code and is clearly a classical hero as described by Bernard Knox, never allowing altruism or morals to invade his character or motives [7]. His form of perfection actually seems to negate any

hope of moral fortitude, again bringing to mind Susan Wolf's article. She states that "for the moral saint, the promotion of the welfare of others might play the role that is played for most of us by...the opportunity to engage in the intellectual" [3]. For Dupin, the exact opposite occurs and personal gain through intellectual pursuits eclipses any desire to help others. Therefore, the modern trend of emphasizing moral sainthood as opposed to the previously accepted amoral heroism can lead only to misconceptions and misunderstandings concerning the traditional heroic characters who seem to bear a closer resemblance to the villains of popular culture.

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