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### Snicket & Poe: A Juvenile Mystery

Riddle me this: Why is it that so much has been said on the influence of Edgar Allan Poe across film and literature and poetry and theater, but not much has been said about how his ideas translate to a young audience? Though Poe is the virtually undisputed father of modern Gothic, horror, detective, and even science fiction stories, it seems counterintuitive that his decidedly dark, often morbid themes could appeal to children still young enough to believe in the boogeyman. Yet in Lemony Snicket's (a.k.a. Daniel Handler's) acclaimed *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, Poe's fingerprints are all over the place in ways both obvious and obscure, including similarly grim and serious subject matter. How, then, does Snicket pull it off? That is, how does he adapt such grotesque ideas into a form that leaves his young readers not crying and shivering beneath their covers, but mentally stimulated and clamoring for more? The answer lies at least in part in the way he presents his morbid messages. Like Poe often does himself, Snicket uses a quaint combination of seriousness and satire, which allows his books to entertain rather than become overbearingly grave. In order to better understand how Snicket gets away with this paradoxical relationship, it is worth exploring a number of the connections between the authors' works that produce comparable effects in their respective spheres. Among these are the narrative style, certain plot points, characters and their names, symbolism, and the fixation on Gothic themes.

Snicket's tone as an immersed yet distanced character within the story gives him a distinctive voice and creates a unique effect that can nonetheless be easily traced back to Poe. The character of Lemony Snicket considers himself a private investigator, collecting information and evidence to piece together the lives of the Baudelaire orphans and an account of their various misfortunes, all the while attempting to understand the motives and inner cogs that led to everything ending the way it did. In many ways, this persona compares with the detective figure of Dupin in Poe's mystery tales such as "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Purloined Letter." However, while adopting some of the same analytical strategies as Dupin, Snicket assumes a rather blunt and downcast attitude toward his tasks. In fact, he is so up-front about the morbid nature of the story that he actually discourages potential buyers from reading on, addressing readers on the back cover of each novel with a sense of formal pessimism. "*Dear Reader,*" he says in *The Bad Beginning*, "I'm sorry to say that the book you are holding in your hands is extremely unpleasant...but there is nothing stopping you from putting this book down at once and reading something happy, if you prefer that sort of thing" (*Bad Beginning* back cover). However, Snicket is clearly speaking with verbal irony here and in most of his narrative commentary throughout the series; even children catch on that by defying his grim recommendation, they will not actually have a miserable time reading the book. Thus, the promise of Poe-inspired morbidity is manipulated into an actual hook to draw young readers in with its cleverness and multiple layers of meaning rather than turn them away like a gory trailer for a bad horror movie. As Ashley Starling states, "What sets Handler's masterpiece apart from other works for children is that he does not censor or filter what he wants children to be exposed to. There are a limited number of children's novels that deal with the issues that Handler puts forth: death, misery, misfortune, orphanhood—all aspects that detract from a possible happy

ending” (Starling 5). The negative topics addressed by Poe for various psychological and artistic reasons are handled by Snicket to accomplish an entirely different aim: to entertain and instruct young readers.

The events described by this bemoaning speaker are no less indicative of Poe’s influence. Although specific plot details do not exactly match those of Poe’s works, a few particular tropes call especial attention to their Gothic origins. For instance, the popularity of cryptography in Poe’s day inspired the author not only to regularly challenge subscribers of his journal to send in difficult word puzzles for him to solve, but to incorporate such ciphers as key elements of some of his stories such as “Some Words with a Mummy” and “The Gold-Bug.” *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, in similar manner, relies heavily upon code-cracking in many instances: when a fake suicide note from the Baudelaires’ grammar-loving guardian requires them to extract grammatical errors to assemble her true message (*The Wide Window* 111-116); when they are confronted with anagrams that lead them down a trail of bread crumbs toward discovering the hidden identities of villains and secret organizations (*The Hostile Hospital* 76, 151-162); and when they must rescue their kidnapped friends by deciphering couplet riddles delivered to them by an unknown source (*The Vile Village* 67, 87, 142, 193-196). In this respect, Snicket has no real need to soften up the material for his audience since unraveling ciphers has its own natural appeal, but he does simplify the codes from Poe’s intensive cryptography to be more accessible, and he does add witty humor in the process of solving them (like misinterpreting V.F.D. to mean “Very Fancy Doilies” or “Village of Fowl Devotees”) because he’s Lemony Snicket and he can.

On another less obvious note, the series honors Poe’s nurturing of the Gothic doppelganger or double in at least a couple ways. First, in *The Penultimate Peril*, there is a hotel with its reflection mirrored in a lake below (*The Penultimate Peril* 20-23). However, it turns out

that this “reflection” is actually another hotel built underground and perfectly concealed by the reflection. It represents the noble principles engendered by those with the Baudelaires’ best interests at heart even while its counterpart, filled with corruption and secrecy and destructive mob psychology, burns to the ground. Second, most if not all of the books feature a dualistic contrast between whichever guardian the orphans are presently in the custody of and Count Olaf, the dastardly villain who constantly opposes any attempts by the Baudelaires to live happy, normal lives, usually resulting in the disposal of the naïve or unfortunate guardian. This dualism harks back to Poe stories such as “William Wilson” in which William’s double seeks to negate and oppose his every effort. Again, Snicket channels plot tricks that were championed by Poe into his own books with a levity that has yielded over 60 million copies sold worldwide.

In addition to narrative and plot connections, the series is rich with character allusions to Poe both in name and demeanor. The most obvious of these is the recurring character Mr. Poe. According to Starling,

When considering the banker Mr. Poe in relation to the poet from whom he is named, the reader will find that the allusion is perhaps the most suitable of all for the character....Mr. Poe’s important arrivals happen shortly before or after a major death has taken place. His very first appearance establishes him as a signal of misfortune....In fact, Mr. Poe can be seen as a grim reaper of sorts, as wherever he appears death is sure to follow. (Starling 9)

To think of Edgar Allan Poe as a sort of herald of death in Snicket’s series seems simultaneously appropriate and chilling. However, the seriousness of Mr. Poe’s foreboding role is eased by the author’s choice to portray him as a well-meaning, bumbling, chronically coughing ignoramus. When faced with Mr. Poe in the story, readers are more likely to face-palm and perhaps laugh at

his quirky mannerisms than fear his appearance—even when they know the man will never be the bearer of good news. Another of Snicket’s major shout-outs to Poe is the last name of the protagonists: Baudelaire. Charles Baudelaire was the French author who drew upon Poe for inspiration more than any other, becoming a sort of “French Poe” himself. Even Dupin makes an appearance as one of Count Olaf’s rather conspicuous disguises; it is an ironic parody on Snicket’s part that results not in the detective identifying and apprehending the murderer, but in Olaf framing someone else in order to conceal the fact that he committed the crime himself (*The Vile Village* 153-170).

Snicket’s characters also frequently exhibit the traits of deformity and madness so beloved by Poe in various forms—from sociopathic murderers to almost unbelievably ignorant citizens; circus freaks to a woman so paranoid about her safety that she has come to harbor irrational fears of stoves, doorknobs, and realtors. Unlike the unsettling speakers of stories like “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Black Cat,” however, Snicket mitigates the shock value of these woe-begotten characters by infusing their descriptions and personalities with unusual yet very human idiosyncrasies. The murderous Count Olaf, for example, dons ridiculous disguises that seem impossibly transparent, which is why we laugh when no one except the Baudelaires recognizes him as a peg-legged sea captain, ill-reasoning detective, or female receptionist. They are just human enough for us to sympathize with and just strange enough to distance our emotions from their misfortunes and misdeeds. It’s hardly likely Snicket brought his characters to life the way he did by accident.

Just as deliberate as Snicket’s Poe-inspired characters are a few of the symbols that serve crucial roles in the series. In *The Vile Village*, the Baudelaires find themselves at the mercy of a town of people who all but worship the hundreds of resident ravens. Here Snicket reaches a high

point of unconcealed acknowledgement of the series' Gothic roots—possibly a dual reference to Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* and Poe's "The Raven." Starling expounds on this idea by pointing out how in the cases of the village of ravens and Poe's "The Raven,"

both...use birds to convey messages. In the case of Poe's original work, the narrator asks the raven questions of his lost Lenore to which the raven always responds with 'Nevermore' (line 48). The Baudelaires receive messages by way of the crows that roost in the Nevermore Tree each evening. These messages are revealed to be from the Quagmire triplets, their own lost ones (*The Vile Village* 71). What this allusion helps to imply in this book is an overall feeling of hopelessness. (Starling 17)

The similarities between the birds' roles are uncanny, yet while one blackbird instills dread and provokes the imp of the perverse within its addressee, the other just unwittingly delivers paper scrolls to the Baudelaires while roosting in the conveniently named "Nevermore Tree" and enjoying a near deified state of protection by the village's hundreds of ridiculous, raven-venerating rules. Starling adds that

looking at the connection between the Nevermore Tree and 'The Raven,' however, brings forward the idea of losing a person that is dear and the devastating emotions that come with such departure....The young reader can relate to the sense of bereavement felt by the Baudelaires, especially as the Baudelaires find couplets at the base of the tree, reminders of both how close and how far away are their friends. The coherence comes out of the shared emotional turmoil for children at that age (Starling 19-20).

Thus, despite the completely unrealistic premise of the book, Snicket wins the emotional investment of his readers by adapting Poe's version of loss to one that is more relatable to children.

In addition, eyes as a symbol play a large part in arranging the ominous sense of mystery predominant throughout the series. The Baudelaires' preoccupation with the recurrence of this symbol on ankles, documents, containers, and even wallpapers (as featured in the film adaptation) compares with the speaker's obsession in "The Tell-Tale Heart" with the bulging eye of his enemy and intended victim. It even shares some symbolic relevance with Poe's maelstroms, which typically signify a sublime descent into the unknown charged with fear and awe; for the Baudelaires, the eye represents a link to solving the mystery of their parents' death and the organization their parents belonged to, something the children long to unravel in spite of the perils they must inevitably surmount in the process. They are drawn to the center of their lives' mystery just as Poe's doomed vessels are drawn to the center of the deadly whirlpool. While this symbol remains fairly serious for the duration of *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, a sense of ridiculousness is again conveyed by the bizarre placement of the eye tattoos on ankles as well as the eventual discovery of the symbol's core meaning—as opposed to the gruesome murder of the eye's owner in "The Tell-Tale Heart" or the lingering unresolved mystery of the maelstrom's victims.

Finally, one of the most significant parallels between Poe's and Snicket's narratives is the thematic content—chiefly, the Gothic and grotesque. What Myriam B. Mahiques calls "the interest in the non-rational experience...[and] a Romantic reaction against the hard rationalism of the Enlightenment" (Mahiques) and Botting calls "what happens when rules are broken"

(Botting) finds itself in abundant supply within the corpora of both authors. David R. Saliba provides us with a systematic way of analyzing the form Gothicism takes in each corpus.

“1. There is a victim who is helpless against his torturer” (Saliba). “The Pit and the Pendulum,” “The Cask of Amontillado,” and other Poe stories demonstrate this predicament in its most mind-bendingly agonizing form. On the other hand, Snicket places the Baudelaires in a position of relative helplessness, but to provide at least some sense of hope for his young audience, he also empowers the orphans with the faculties to escape some of the worst consequences of their enemies’ designs.

“2. There is also a victimizer who is associated with evil and whose powers are immense or supernatural” (Saliba). We have the vengeful murderers of many previously mentioned Poe stories (“The Tell-Tale Heart,” “The Black Cat,” “The Cask of Amontillado,” etc.), and then we have Count Olaf, who is also relentless and murderous, but at the same time he is consistently outsmarted by the orphans’ creative problem-solving skills.

“3. The setting of the gothic story is at some point within impenetrable walls (physical *or* psychological)” (Saliba). Poe has his underground dungeons and sepulchers and sealed-off wine cellars. During the misadventures of the Baudelaires, they do find themselves in enclosed spaces with a sense of entrapment like a dark elevator shaft or an underwater cavern, but perhaps the strongest form of entrapment for these heroes is psychological: No matter how hard they try, no matter how many times they stop Count Olaf or how many guardians die for their sake or how many clues they uncover about their lives’ mysteries, they seem forever unable to escape from the cycle of unfortunate events that controls their lives. Yet with that cycle come hilarious coincidences and colorful new settings and characters and challenges.



“4. The atmosphere is pervaded by a sense of mystery, darkness, oppressiveness, fear, and doom” (Saliba). Poe accomplishes this with both literal crypts and mental darkness, such as the creepiness of the house of Usher, the unusual rooms of “The Masque of the Red Death,” and the physical and psychological entrapment in “The Premature Burial.” He also provides a plethora of oppressive natural environments like maelstroms and a manor sinking into a tarn. Snicket offers all of these elements as well—again, it is something that sets him apart as a children’s author—but he also offers hope in the end against seemingly insurmountable odds, and in that way he gets away with a dark tone and an even darker sequence of tragedies and failures. Even with all kinds of environmental obstacles—violent thunderstorms, blizzards, poisonous mushrooms, sea monsters, leeches, snakes, eagles, and lions—the Baudelaires find a little light at the end of the tunnel, just enough for them to go on.

“5. The victim is in some way entranced or fascinated by the inscrutable power of his victimizer” (Saliba). Fortunato in “The Cask of Amontillado” and the king’s court in “Hop Frog” are among Poe’s entranced victims, who appear disbelieving even in the midst of being buried and burned alive, respectively. The Baudelaires, meanwhile, while despising Count Olaf and everything he stands for, are extremely curious to know what connects him to the organization their parents belonged to (V.F.D.), the meaning behind the eye on the man’s ankle, and how such a psychopathic serial killer consistently gets away with his crimes scot-free in a society of continually unfulfilled justice.

There is much more that could be said about the almost numberless similarities between Poe and *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. Suffice it to say that although Snicket drew heavily from his predecessor, he still had to formulate a very different strategy to successfully cater to his audience—a strategy that fused humor and horror in a truly innovative manner. When

describing Gothic elements, Hantiu asserts that “poetry and cruelty are intermingled with laughter and horror in the works of the American writers attracted by such issues” (Hantiu 34). Clearly, Poe and Snicket were two such writers. Both were masters of the literary hoax, which according to G. R. Thompson “attempts to persuade the reader not merely of the reality of false events but of the reality of false literary intentions of circumstances—that a work is by a certain writer or of a certain age when it is not, or that one is writing a serious Gothic story when one is not” (Thompson 10). Though their approaches and purposes were quite different, surely we can appreciate the careful artistry requisite to pull off such a delicate balancing act, baffling and captivating readers who are not usually expecting to be manipulated by the narrator to feel normal emotions for unusual things and unusual emotions for normal things. Truly the Gothic tale is as elusive and versatile across diverse times and situations as Count Olaf is with his various disguises and as Poe’s immortal black cat is with its unstoppable quest to bring light to the darkness of its master’s devious deeds. Truly these stories can be manipulated to serve their author’s purpose just as the stories themselves can manipulate us.

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