



12-15-2017

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Hugie, Alex (2017) "Snicket and Poe: A Juvenile Mystery," *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol10/iss2/7>

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Snicket and Poe

A Juvenile Mystery

Alex Hugie

It's no mystery that Edgar Allan Poe is the virtually undisputed father of modern Gothic, horror, detective, and even science fiction stories. Though much has been said on the influence of Poe across film, literature, and other forms of media, hardly anything has been said about how his ideas might translate to a young audience. Considering the nature of his work, however, it seems counterintuitive that his decidedly dark and 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, Snicket uses a quaint combination of seriousness and satire, which allows his books to entertain rather than become overbearingly grave. Snicket justifies this paradoxical relationship between gruesome themes and children's stories through the tactical application of a number of Poe-inspired elements. Catered to serve Snicket's satirical purposes, these elements include Gothic themes and plot devices, morbid narrative style, and Poe-inspired characters and symbols.

Snicket's unconventional application of Poe's dark material complicates our entire conception of what Gothic literature is supposed to accomplish, and what kinds of stories can resonate with young minds.

One of the most significant parallels between Poe's and Snicket's narratives is the thematic content—chiefly, the Gothic and grotesque which is abundantly present in both corpora, but in Snicket's case is tweaked to be less depressing and more meaningful to young readers. Myriam B. Mahiques, writer of "Architectural Space in the Gothic Novel," defines Gothicism as "the interest in the non-rational experience . . . [and] a Romantic reaction against the hard rationalism of the Enlightenment," while Fred Botting, simply calls it "what happens when rules are broken." However one defines Gothicism, it is found in abundant supply within the corpora of both Snicket and Poe. David R. Saliba, author of *A Psychology of Fear: The Nightmare Formula of Edgar Allan Poe*, provides a systematic way of analyzing the form Gothicism takes in each corpus. He identifies five key indicators of the Gothic mode, including "a victim who is helpless against his torturer", a setting which is set "at some point within impenetrable walls", "a victimizer who is associated with evil and whose powers are immense or supernatural", an atmosphere that is "pervaded by a sense of mystery, darkness, oppressiveness, fear, and doom", and a victim who "is in some way entranced or fascinated by the inscrutable power of his victimizer." All of these components are used by both Poe and Snicket—though to very different ends.

Poe's works set a precedent for how Saliba's Gothic indicators were to be used. His stories "The Pit and the Pendulum" and "The Cask of Amontillado" demonstrate helpless torture victims in mind-bendingly agonizing ways. His stories also literally incorporate impenetrable walls with underground dungeons, sealed-off wine cellars, and a sepulcher which entombs one protagonist's sister alive. Additionally, the evil, supernatural victimizer can be found in the vengeful murderers of "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat." In order to achieve a dark atmosphere, Poe portrays both literal crypts and mental darkness, such as creepy houses, unusual rooms, 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. And for examples of victims being fascinated by their oppressors, one need look no further than Fortunato in "The Cask of Amontillado" or the king's court in "Hop Frog," who appear disbelieving even in the midst of being buried and burned alive, respectively. In all of

these cases, Poe incorporates such dark materials in order to produce the singleness of effect that he often championed, which in these stories meant darkness, fear, and often madness.

Snicket, on the other hand, utilizes Saliba's indicators with a younger audience and a lighter purpose in mind. He does place 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. They also 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, how many times they stop Count Olaf, 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, comes hilarious coincidences and colorful new settings, characters, and challenges, which make otherwise terrifying ideas and situations viable for child consumption. Snicket's victimizer comes primarily in the form of Count Olaf, who is as relentless and murderous as Poe's madmen, but at the same time is consistently outsmarted by the orphans' creative problem-solving skills. This allows readers to learn something from the villain's evil antics while enjoying the debacles of the Baudelaires' lives all the same. Snicket also creates dark atmospheres, but unlike Poe, he offers hope in the end against seemingly insurmountable odds. Even with all kinds of environmental obstacles—violent thunderstorms, blizzards, poisonous mushrooms, sea monsters, leeches, snakes, and lions—the Baudelaires find a little light at the end of the tunnel which is just enough for them to go on. That light is what Snicket uses to inspire readers with hope as powerful as the Baudelaires' despair.

Finally, the Baudelaires also play the role of entranced victims because while despising Count Olaf and everything he stands for, they 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. Snicket separates the Baudelaires' fascination from that of Poe's disbelieving victims by depicting his heroes as active thinkers determined to pursue their questions until they are answered and until their

lives are no longer threatened by mysterious forces—as opposed to simply succumbing to gruesome deaths. Because Snicket incorporates the Gothic trance in this way, it becomes an unconventional source of uplifting empowerment for his audience, again breaking from tradition in a surprisingly effective way. In doing this, Snicket applies each of Saliba’s five Gothic themes, but he softens his material somewhat and provides hopeful sparks that successfully immerse young readers in the stories and themes without drowning them in morbidity.

In addition, Snicket’s tone as an immersed yet distanced narrator within the story gives him a distinctive voice that is recognizably morbid like Poe’s, although Snicket’s ultimate aims are to entertain and instruct his young audience rather than instill psychological terror. The character, Lemony Snicket, considers himself a private investigator. He collects information and evidence to piece together an account of the lives of the Baudelaire orphans and 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” (Snicket, 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 they will not actually have a miserable time reading the book if they defy his grim recommendation. 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. 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). Because morbid children’s books

are in such short supply, as Starling points out, Snicket's books serve as a kind of model for how these dark subjects can serve a nontraditional audience. The negative topics addressed by Poe for various psychological and artistic reasons are handled by Snicket to accomplish an entirely different aim: to provide an enjoyable and instructive experience for young readers.

The Gothic plot devices implemented 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, the particular trope of puzzle solving calls 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 in 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 (Snicket, *The Wide Window* 111–16), when they are confronted with anagrams that lead them down a trail of breadcrumbs toward discovering the hidden identities of villains and secret organizations (Snicket, *The Hostile Hospital* 76, 151–62), and when they must rescue their kidnapped friends by deciphering couplet riddles delivered to them by an unknown source (Snicket, *The Vile Village* 67, 87, 142, 193–96). 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 also adds witty humor in the process of solving them (like misinterpreting V.F.D. to mean "Very Fancy Doilies" or "Village of Fowl Devotees"). This light-hearted accessibility in turn lends the material to appeal to children and even teach them a few things along the way.

On another less obvious note, *A Series of Unfortunate Events* honors Poe's nurturing of the Gothic doppelgänger (a dark, duplicate version of oneself) in at least a couple ways. First, in *The Penultimate Peril*, there is a hotel with its reflection mirrored in a lake below (Snicket, *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, secrecy, and destructive mob psychology, burns to the ground, reminiscent of some of Poe's self-destructive

doppelgangers. Second, most, if not all, of the books feature a dualistic contrast between the orphan's present guardians and the dastardly villain Count Olaf, which usually results 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. Snicket's doppelgangers, as opposed to Poe's, aren't intended to inspire raw fear, but to pique curiosity and to convey simple but profound symbolic meaning to readers. The dual hotels and guardians serve as a basic representation of good versus evil—with the added nuance of villains who have complex reasons for their evil acts and heroes who are often weak and fail to act at all. They are doppelgangers with an ethical purpose rather than simply an emotional one: a purpose that teaches readers about a world filled with darkness, light, and every shade in between. In this way, Snicket channels a plot trick that was championed by Poe into *A Series of Unfortunate Events* 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." She goes on to point out that every time Mr. Poe appears, it's shortly before or after someone's death. Furthermore, "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). Considering Starling's "grim" suggestion, 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 Snicket'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 facepalm 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. In *The Vile Village*, 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 (153–70). Contrasting these connected characters reveals how Snicket uses similar names not just to give a neat shout-out to his Gothic predecessor, but to personify Poe's Gothic themes through individuals who convey these themes in a manner that is appropriately lighter for Snicket's audience.

Snicket's characters also frequently exhibit the traits of deformity and madness so beloved by Poe in various forms while still accomplishing the author's purpose of appealing to his young readers. These deranged characters range from sociopathic murderers to almost unbelievably ignorant citizens, from 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 is this tricky balancing act of believability and outrageousness that allows Snicket to convert Poe's dark content into manageable morsels which both please and nourish Snicket's audience.

With that same deliberateness, Snicket employs some of Poe's trademark symbols, such as ravens and eyes, to create foreboding psychological effects. 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," birds are used to convey messages. In Poe's case, the narrator and the raven interact through questions by the former concerning his lost loved one, Lenore, and the latter's inevitable response of "Nevermore." In Snicket's case, he has the Baudelaires receive messages from the crows roosting in the Nevermore Tree every night. These messages, which come in the form of couplet riddles, are from the Quagmire triplets, the Baudelaires' lost loved ones. Starling concludes that the allusion contributes to "an overall feeling of hopelessness" (17). With Starling's thematic

connection in mind, 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 "the young reader can relate to the sense of bereavement felt by the Baudelaires," mainly through the characters' sense of simultaneous closeness and distance from their friends when they receive messages at the base of the Nevermore Tree. She asserts that "the coherence comes out of the shared emotional turmoil for children at that age" (Starling 19–20). It's a connection that occurs not a literal level, but at an empathic one. 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 to the symbolic raven, eyes play a large part in arranging the ominous sense of mystery that is 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. This ridiculousness once again contributes to the lighter tone that allows the books to entertain and instruct as Snicket intended.

Though there is much more that could be said about the numerous similarities between Poe and *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, it is clear even from this limited sample of comparisons that Snicket drew upon Poe's

brilliance to make the Gothic genre accessible to children and young adults. 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, Poe scholar Ecaterina Hantiu asserts that “poetry and cruelty are intermingled with laughter and horror in the works of the American writers attracted by such issues” (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” (10). Indeed, 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 Poe’s immortal black cat is with its unstoppable quest to bring light to the darkness of its master’s devious deeds and as Count Olaf is with his various disguises. These stories can be manipulated to serve their author’s purpose just as the stories themselves can manipulate us. Snicket’s Poe-inspired stories particularly manipulate the author’s young readers into developing a deeper understanding of our world’s dark realities—even while they are convinced they’re just turning the pages for some light entertainment.

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