



Teaching in Tumultuous Times: The Case of Edgar Allan Poe

Sami Atassi

Abstract. In the wake of public demands for justice and calls for institutional reforms, studying Edgar Allan Poe's fictional detective, C. Auguste Dupin, can provide a corrective model to the cold confines of academic inquiry that tends to treat life like an academic affair.

While teaching Edgar Allan Poe's stories over the past few years, especially during the Ferguson uprisings, I felt like a cancel culture detective, zooming in on every racist and sexist trope to detect any signs of prejudice in Poe himself. But each time I turned to the OED to look up another convoluted term or burrowed into another Wiki rabbit hole, I gained a deeper appreciation for Poe's ability to make me interrogate my own reactions to the text and, moreover, to the ruinous pile of the past that's been lurking behind us. In the wake of protestors' demands for justice and calls for institutional reforms, I believe Poe's fictional detective, C. Auguste Dupin, provides a corrective model to the cold confines of academic inquiry that assumes, in the words of James Baldwin, "that human life is an academic affair" (Peck).

Defining Poe as the most important U.S. American writer for understanding "closed white images" of blackness and Black life, Toni Morrison argues Poe's writings offer "not a narrow a-historical canvas but a wide historical one; not escape but entanglement" (33, 37). Entangling himself and his audiences in class-, gender-, and race-based variables surrounding the most pressing social conundrums, Poe's detective foregrounds the vital idea of what he calls "that moral activity which *disentangles*" ("Rue Morgue" 528; emphasis in original).

As opposed to being driven by a teleological urge for solutions (let alone for power and wealth), Dupin aims to understand and build off the process itself. Borrowed from

Sami Atassi is a PhD candidate in English literature at Indiana University. He earned a BA in arts and humanities at the University of Texas at Dallas and a master's in English/American literature at the University of Houston. He has taught first-year composition courses inspired by the figure of the detective and published articles on topics ranging from Agatha Christie's orientalist critiques to Edgar Allan Poe's necropolitical humor.