The Role of the Characters of Dupin and Frankenstein in “Murders in the Rue Morgue” and Frankenstein

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Edgar Allen Poe’s “Murders in the Rue Morgue” and Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein both present characters that disassociate from and depersonalize women. These characters are Victor Frankenstein of Frankenstein and Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin of “Murders in the Rue Morgue.” Dupin does this when he views the murders of the two L’Espanaye women as simply a puzzle for him (and the unnamed character who narrates the story) to solve. The only moral attachment he ever indicates in his involvement with the murders is related to his friend, Adolphe Le Bon (a clerk), being accused of the crime (Poe 39 & 41-42). Frankenstein continues this pattern of disassociation and depersonalization of women, from his being totally self-absorbed in his obsession with building the monster and then with his own wretchedness at succeeding, which he does nothing about (Shelley 29-67 & 103-145). Therefore, this results in him ignoring and disrespecting the women in his life. Dupin and Frankenstein willingly choose to limit their personal connection with women, therefore enabling themselves to not develop personal connections to, and respect for, the women in the stories. This limiting of their connection to the women becomes a convenient device for regarding these women as other than people.

The two stories start out from the viewpoint of a man seeking and gaining the companionship of another man. These men, the narrator in “Murders in the Rue Morgue” and Robert Walton in Frankenstein, become companions with the main characters (Dupin and Dr. Frankenstein) in each of the respective stories. These “couples” together establish relationships outside of the presence of women. Dr. Frankenstein, actually, makes many homo-social relationships throughout his life, even though the relationships could be argued to be lacking in true intimacy. The relationship between Dupin and the narrator could alternately be argued to be a bit more intimate in “Murders in the Rue Morgue,” since they are described as living together, walking around with linked arms at night, and Dupin is able to read the narrator’s thoughts by observing his actions. Church states in his essay, ““To Make Venus Vanish”: Misogny as Motive in Poe’s “Murders in the Rue Morgue,”” that he considers this ability of Dupin to read thoughts symbolic of the narrator being placed in the “passive/receptive position,” since he cannot do the same to Dupin (416-417). This relationship is set apart from many others in the community, but when the two men find out about the murders, they intentionally come in contact with other men, like the sailor. They justify this as necessary to solve the mystery of the murders and prove the innocence of Dupin’s friend in the eyes of the authorities.

The only women mentioned in “Murders in the Rue Morgue,” the L’Espanayes and Pauline Dubourg the laundress, are not contacted by Dupin and the narrator. The L’Espanayes are not spoken to for the obvious reasons of being dead, but they did not make (nor have) an excuse for not speaking to Dubourg, a woman who is a witness to the murders. Therefore, Dupin and the narrator intentionally set themselves apart from these women, by choosing to not include them in their lives.

Dubourg distinctly becomes alienated from the two main characters because they choose to not identify her as a person despite her stated connection to the murders by the press. Unlike the many men who are stated as being witnesses, complete with a country of origin and discussed by Dupin as the people who heard the two perpetrators, and the screaming of the L’Espanayes, Dubourg is not discussed by Dupin as an important testifier of information even though her information is still discussed (Poe 48). This is demonstrated by statements by Dupin: “The witnesses, as you remark, agreed about the gruff voice; they were here unanimous. But in regard to the shrill voice, the peculiarity is not that they disagreed but that, while an Italian, an Englishman, a Spaniard, a Hollander, and a Frenchman attempted to describe it, each one spoke of it as that of a foreigner.” (Poe 44). This is opposed to his un-attributed comment: “Madame L’Espanaye and her daughter lived an exceedingly
retired life—saw no company—seldom went out—had little use for numerous changes of habiliment” which contained information that had been mentioned in the newspaper, in the story, as having been stated by Dubourg (Poe 48). It is interesting to note the use of the distinctly gender-related terms of Englishman and Frenchman by Dupin (Poe 37-48).

Dr. Frankenstein’s contact with women is presented as limited to the female members of his family, but he makes the effort to do this only at the insistence of his father and/or when he feels that it will free him from the stress and appearance of the monster. These actions could be interpreted as being selfish when he is using the presence of women, namely Elizabeth his cousin, as a comfort for his “miseries.” These “miseries” are those of the wretchedness he felt at creating the monster and the monster’s enacting revenge on him for not giving the monster attention and for abhorring this creation. There is only one instance when Dr. Frankenstein makes contact with a woman at the insistence of another woman. This is when Elizabeth asks him to accompany her on her visit to Justine, their mutual family friend, after Justine is officially charged with the murder of Dr. Frankenstein’s brother, William. He can be interpreted as selfish even in this instance, when Frankenstein states: “Dear, sweet Elizabeth, do not weep. You ought to raise me with thoughts of a better life, and elevate me from the petty cares of this world of injustice and strife” (Shelley 56). His marriage to Elizabeth only comes about due to the impatience of his father and after his father’s acceptance of a delay in the nuptials so that Dr. Frankenstein can travel first. Of course, Frankenstein claims that this reluctance for, and wish to delay, marriage has to do with his inability to feel happiness because of his guilt over the monster’s insistence on the creation of a mate. It is hard to believe that this is the complete truth from Frankenstein, because his narration prior to this and after this claim is unreliable (Shelley 42-44, 55-56, & 103-105). All these men purposely set themselves apart from women through their decisions in the story, in order to not contact them and therefore to deliberately disassociate themselves from them.

“Murders in the Rue Morgue,” depersonalizes women in its writing, first when Dupin and narrator read about the murder of the L’Espanaye women in the newspaper. Dupin lacks any sort of emotional response and he does not discuss what he read with the narrator until he reads that his friend, Le Bon, has been arrested for the murders. It appears the women become nothing more than murder victims, to Dupin and the narrator, in a case involving Le Bon. This relates to the previously mentioned mind reading abilities of Dupin, since it gives more evidence of Dupin being a “powerful man,” to the point of being “lethal” (Church 416-417). According to Church this idea becomes particularly true, because of the wording of Dupin’s attention as not only being very engrossed in the newspaper article, but “arrested.” The relation created by Church to Dupin’s skills at reading thoughts is that the narrator’s placement in the “passive/receptive position,” stated by Church to be “womanly”, is then reversed by his identification with Dupin (416-417). When Dupin’s discussion resumes, it appears initially to challenge the skills of the Parisian police, in which he claims to have better gifts at analysis (Poe 41-42, 56). Church states that this challenge of analytical skills is aimed at making fun of the masculinity of the Prefect of Police, in particular, as evidenced by his final comments explaining how he (Dupin) solved the mystery rather than the Prefect (410). The statement Dupin makes to imply this is: “I am satisfied with having defeated him in his own castle. …our friend the Prefect is somewhat too cunning to be profound” (Poe 56). Dupin implies that this man is symbolically castrated, which is connected to Freudian criticism (Church 410). The ending comments of Dupin are, in my opinion, more proof that he views solving the mystery of the murders as a sort of game, as first implied with the reference to the use of certain types of intelligence in chess and card games (Poe 30-32). All these examples demonstrate the ability of Dupin and the narrator to solve a murder mystery without having any sort of emotional or moral attachment to it.

This attitude by Dupin of not appearing to care about the women themselves as people who have not only been robbed of life, but murdered in a very brutal fashion, continues to be exemplified in Dupin’s viewing the sailor as completely free of any charges (Poe 53-54). In the imaginary circumstance of this case being real and tried in a modern court, it seems likely that the sailor would be convicted of second degree murder, since he could not control his animal, the orangutan, and did not make that great an effort to stop the murders. For instance, the neighbors were not warned until they heard the screams of the women, an action far too late to save them. Church states that the importance of these screams is in the contrast of the sounds to Dupin and the narrator’s abilities to discuss subjects, including the murders, in a logical fashion. This positions them in the story as superior to these women, a reversal of the woman’s intellectual prowess demonstrated before the attack of the orangutan. (Church 411). Therefore, this situation is in opposition to reality, leading to the implication
that there must be some sort of deeper meaning behind the way the murder investigation is carried out.

The sailor gets away with the murders, even though the orangutan has been proven to be dangerous, due his murdering of the two women. The original story, in fact, states that the sailor already knew that the orangutan was violent when he brought him aboard the ship, yet Dupin vouches for the sailor’s innocence (Poe 54 & 56). Dupin claims this is only a ruse used to get information out of the sailor. Dupin’s true motives for obtaining this information appear to be mostly for personal knowledge, public knowledge, or posternity, rather than for the victim’s families or to free Le Bon. These motives appear to come from Dupin’s sympathizing with the sailor, even though he mentions some partial guilt, when he states to the sailor:

I suppose you have called about the Ourang-Outang. Upon my word, I almost envy you the possession of him; a remarkably fine, no doubt a very valuable animal. I perfectly well know that you are innocent of the atrocities in the Rue Morgue. It will not due, however, to deny that you are in some measure implicated in them. Now the thing stands thus. You have done nothing which you could have avoided-nothing, certainly, which renders you culpable. You were not even guilty of robbery, when you might have robbed with impunity (Poe 53).

Church states that the sympathy Poe evokes in the character of Dupin is actually to the point where Dupin directly wishes he were in the sailor’s and the orangutan’s place (414-415). The sequence of events then ends with no one getting blamed for the murders; the orangutan can’t be deemed responsible because he is only acting within his normal nature, the sailor claimed to not be able do anything to stop the murders, and Le Bon was found to be completely innocent. Also, the sailor is able to get the money he was originally attempting to gain by bringing the orangutan to France. Therefore, Dupin and the narrator’s actions lead to the lack of a true resolution for the murder.

Church does not deny this sequence of events as having to do with the blatant disregard for the situation of the women, but he also goes further in stating that this represents misogyny; this is his thesis. He also states that this misogyny is symbolic of men forcing women to stay in their place because Dupin is presented as jealous of the L’Espyanacé’s greater monetary income (Church 409-411). Other portions of this theory of misogyny as motive for why the women had to die are not so clear in their relation Dupin’s possible jealousy of them, because in all other aspects Dupin appears to be their superior.

The depersonalization of women in Frankenstein is not as direct as it is in “Murders in the Rue Morgue.” This is mostly due to the fact that Dr. Frankenstein has connections with women, but he presents a pleasant facade toward them that undermines his true feelings. Throughout the book both his father and Elizabeth ask if he is truly still committed to Elizabeth enough to marry her, because they can tell that he is preoccupied with something. The obvious answer is just what Frankenstein claims to the reader, that the monster and the monster’s demands, and deaths of Frankenstein’s loved ones due to the monster’s revenge on Frankenstein, are constantly on his mind (Shelley 103-105). This then can be interpreted as him being disrespectful to the women in his life, due to his inability to tell them the truth and therefore establish emotional intimacy with them.

The clearest example of Frankenstein’s depersonalization of women is when the monster gives Frankenstein this proposal: that in return for building him a mate he would leave him and the rest of the world alone (Shelley 97-100). Frankenstein’s response, after he completes the structure of the female monster’s body, is to rip it apart (Shelley 115). This is an act of defiance by Frankenstein to both the original monster and nascent female monster, which he claims has to do with stopping the two monsters having sex that would then create more monsters. He does not think about any of this when creating the male monster, so it could be thought that he destroyed and therefore depersonalized the female’s body due to his inherent hatred of women and or, most obviously, the female body’s easier association with sex and progeny connected to pregnancy and birth. Frankenstein holds the ultimate choice in this matter, as opposed to the female monster who remained inanimate. This allows Frankenstein to keep his power over her destiny and in the process depersonalizes her, since he does not allow her a chance to form her own identity. Just as Dupin depersonalizes women by seeing them only as dead bodies to be analyzed, Frankenstein sees a woman’s body as something to rip apart; because he has not yet given it life, so he holds the prerogative to take it away (Shelley 114-116).

The works “Murders in the Rue Morgue” and Frankenstein present male-female relations as based on whether or not the characters are capable of connecting with women on a more personal level. It is almost as if inequality is justified in the minds of the characters by the fact that they feel no connection to these women, and so they cannot respect them as people, which are self-imposed actions. The choice is
taken from the women to establish these connections, though, so the freedom of personhood is also taken away from them. The underlying reasoning behind the male characters choice of separation is debateable, but it creates a good excuse in their minds for considering the female characters as less than human.

Works Cited

Church, Joseph. ""To Make Venus Vanish": Misogny as Motive in Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue." Rhode Island: ATQ. 407-418.
