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Wilde's 'Comic Gothic': Echoes of Edgar Allan Poe in "Lord Arthur Savile's Crimes"

Camilla Del Grazia

Independent scholar (<camilla.delgrazia@gmail.com>)

Abstract:

Wilde's admiration for the work of Edgar Allan Poe is well documented both in his letters and in his critical writings. The consonance between some of Poe's theoretical writings, like "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846), and Wilde's own Paterian Aestheticism can undoubtedly account for at least part of this appreciation. Recent scholarship has largely neglected to explore the possibilities offered by this literary connection, focusing at most on echoes of Poe's tales "William Wilson" (1839) and "The Oval Portrait" (1842) on *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). Yet, Wilde's intertextual relationship with Poe is by no means limited to these possible influences. Among the many lines of enquiry opened by this perspective, this paper adopts parodic subversion as a possible interpretive tool to investigate the short story "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime", in particular. Drawing on Poe's body of work as a reference point, we can see how Wilde's comedic stance in these stories borrows from both Poe's gothic tales – particularly their use of the grotesque and the carnivalesque – and his "tales of ratiocination" to craft a subtle satire of social conventions and pragmatism.

Keywords: Comic, Edgar Allan Poe, Gothic, "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime", Oscar Wilde

Although Oscar Wilde and Edgar Allan Poe are rarely read alongside one another, the two authors show significant points of contact in their reflections on literature, especially in their shared emphasis on the careful staging of effect and the creation of a unified aesthetic experience. In an excerpt from a now widely known review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, later generally retitled "The Importance of the Single Effect in a Prose Tale" (1842), Poe asserts that it is the short story, among prose forms, that allows an author to fully express his genius and achieve the "unity of effect" that he considers the mark of a truly accomplished work (Poe 1986, 446). Everything in a story, from tone to structure to plot,

must be “deliberately” arranged to achieve this “effect”, this “impression”: “In the whole composition there should be no word written of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design” (*ibidem*).

While Wilde does share Poe’s insistence on brevity as essential to achieving true Beauty, understood as “an intense and pure elevation of *soul* – *not* of intellect, or of heart” (483), his critical works nevertheless resonate with the quoted passages of Poe’s critique. In “The Critic as Artist” (1891) he has Gilbert quip that “there is no art where there is no style, and no style where there is no unity, and unity is of the individual” (Wilde 2022, 292). Similarly, in “The Decay of Lying” (1891) Vivian contends that “Art creates an incomparable and unique effect, and, having done so, passes on to other things” (Wilde 2022, 230). These quotes clearly reveal the influence of Pater’s philosophy on Wilde’s own aestheticism; yet, they also evidence a fundamental correspondence with Poe’s stance on artistic creation.

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that Wilde’s collection of short fiction in *Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime and Other Stories* (1891) also shows a sustained and self-conscious engagement with narrative strategies commonly associated with Poe’s tales. In particular, “Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime” (originally published in 1887; henceforth LASC), “The Canterville Ghost” (1887) and “The Sphinx Without a Secret” (1887) display both thematic and structural affinities with Poe’s fiction, suggesting a parodic inversion of his tales of mystery and of “ratiocination”. At the same time, these stories draw on other aspects of Poe’s work – most notably his use of irony and carnivalesque subversion – reworking them into Wilde’s distinctive comic and aesthetic mode. While all three stories participate in this parodic engagement with Poe, the present analysis will focus primarily on “Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime”, where these dynamics emerge with particular clarity.

Two caveats are worth noting before proceeding. First, tracing correspondences between Wilde and Poe at the levels of both aesthetic theory and narrative technique opens a vast field of inquiry. The present discussion deliberately narrows this scope by approaching the question through the lenses of parodic subversion, and by focusing on a single short story. Second, this analysis does not seek to establish, beyond doubt, a pervasive influence of Poe on Wilde – though Wilde’s tendency to draw upon a plurality of literary models is well attested. Rather, it proposes a critical reading of Wilde’s story through a specific prism – Poe’s carnivalesque, his detective stories and his Gothic fiction – in order to observe the effects produced by such a perspective.

In arguing that Wilde enacts some form of parodic subversion of Poe’s tales of mystery and of his tales of ratiocination, some attention to the notion of parody itself is warranted. Linda Hutcheon’s conception, understood as “a form of repetition with ironic critical distance, marking difference rather than similarity” (Hutcheon 2000, xii) while perhaps almost too comprehensive, offers a useful lens through which to approach Wilde’s story as well as Poe’s subtle use of irony. This flexible assessment of parody encapsulates well Wilde’s play in LASC: he does not devise a close retelling of one of Poe’s tales, nor an overt spoof of his style, but rather seems to use subtle hints and to merge a variety of possible intertextual references to his macrotext. As the following analysis will show, one of the key structural elements Wilde absorbs and deconstructs from Poe’s tales of mystery is the gradual intensification of narrative rhythm and emotional momentum, through which Poe sustains an ever-heightening tension (Fisher 2004; Stauffer 1996; Joswick 1996; Ekmekçi 2011; Indrusiak 2018, *inter alia*). A thematic one, instead, is the triumph of romance or mystery over rationalism and pragmatism, parodied in LASC, but also in “The Canterville Ghost” and “The Sphinx Without a Secret”.

In addition, as pointed out by Gavin Cologne-Brookes, Poe’s detective fiction already contains an element of ironic subversion: “the pursuit of truth is laced with irony. The urge to subvert to the point of irony remains” (2022, 3). “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841), with

its murderous orangutan, and “The Purloined Letter” (1844), which revolves around a possible political scandal and a theft in the queen’s boudoir, are indeed not especially “plausible” (Cologne-Brookes 2002, 3). Poe himself was quite cognisant of the artifice involved in constructing this type of “rational” tale, writing in a letter to Phillip P. Cooke that:

These tales of ratiocination owe most of their popularity to being something in a new key. I do not mean to say that they are not ingenious – but people think them more ingenious than they are – on account of their method and *air* of method. In the “Murders in the Rue Morgue”, for instance, where is the ingenuity of unravelling a web which you yourself (the author) have woven for the express purpose of unravelling? (Poe 1846)

To be sure, one of the most quoted (and misquoted) maxims attributed to Sherlock Holmes is that “when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth” (Conan Doyle 2009, 111) – a proviso that appears to demand a strong suspension of disbelief even within a supposedly logical process of deduction. The paradox of such carefully constructed rationality seems integral to detective fiction itself. The self-awareness at the heart of this *trompe-l’œil*, according to Cologne-Brookes, makes detective fiction a privileged site of subversion, insofar as its structure already contains the tools for its own undoing when authors engage in metaliterary winks at the implausibility of their own reasoning. This in turn fits with Hutcheon’s notion that parody contains “the potentially conservative effect of repetition” as well as “the potentially revolutionary impact of difference” (2000, xii). Emphasising the potential expressed by parody rather than its undeniable effects, this description proves to be nuanced enough to capture the unsolved paradox(es) that lies at the heart of LASC.

A final concept that requires clarification is that of the carnivalesque. In Bakhtinian terms, the carnival designates a historically situated moment of sanctioned subversion, typically organized around festivity and therefore intrinsically linked to what Bakhtin defines as moments of “crisis”. As he observes, “the feast is always essentially related to time [...] through all the stages of historic development feasts were linked to moments of crisis, of breaking points in the cycle of nature or in the life of society and man” (Bakhtin 1984, 9). The carnival thus marks a temporary suspension of normative structures and hierarchies, opening a space in which established values may be inverted or destabilised. Within the development of literary realism, this carnivalesque impulse incorporates the logic of the grotesque, whose defining principle is degradation, understood as “the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract” (19). This process does not simply negate meaning but reorients it toward the material. Ultimately, the carnival spirit enables what Bakhtin describes as a radical reconfiguration of perception, insofar as it “offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things” (34).

Studies on Poe’s grotesque and carnivalesque, among which two recent ones by Ib Johansen (2015) and Timothy Jones (2024), highlight that his tales of mystery often incorporate a comic vein that is expressed along the lines of a “productive confusion between horror and comedy” (Jones 2024, 64). Tales like “King Pest” (1835), “The Masque of the Red Death” (1842), “Hop-Frog” (1849) and even “William Wilson” (1840) deploy the focus on the body and on material effects of the grotesque and the “festive” setting of the carnivalesque – the feast being a site of horrific inversion, rather than celebration. The reversals of order proposed in these tales significantly leads to a final climax – invariably, death – that however ends in a suspension, a deferral of meaning that is never fully reached. The effect on readers may be detachment, for “we remain free to distance ourselves from whatever horrible scenario is being depicted” (Jones 2024, 74). At the same time, the question left unanswered may lead to a reconceptualization:

“in exploring our own brain processes, we are refining our assessment of the sensations that beset us. We are learning to think ever more critically” (Cologne-Brookes 2022, 9).

Examining Wilde’s reuse of Gothic tropes in a comic vein, Neil Sammells (2024) identifies the same subversive potential in both his critical writings – such as “The Critic as Artist” and “The Decay of Lying” – and his fiction, most notably *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), but also his fairy tales and short stories. According to Sammells, Wilde simultaneously deploys the Gothic to widen his narrative range and to reflect on the genre itself, in a manner that (as Hutcheon argues) is characteristic of parody. On the one hand, then, “the Gothic sanctions and enables Wilde’s desire to write humorously and satirically about modern life and to address contemporary notions of cultural and ethical decadence (*fin de siècle, fin du globe*) without holding a mirror up to it and thus contradicting his rejection of naturalism and realism” (Sammells 2024, 98). The Gothic thus provides a mode that occupies an intermediate space between the realistic and the fantastic, allowing Wilde to engage with a real referent without committing to the minutiae of a fully realised realism. On the other hand, Wilde does not adopt the genre unquestioningly, but rather “he is knowingly exploiting it and holding it up for inspection, while attempting to thrill his readership” (100). This also means playing with some of the typical features of the genre, like the double, or the ghost (in “The Canterville Ghost”), or crime (in LASC), or the unspeakable secret (in “The Sphinx Without a Secret”) and turning them on their head.

If Poe may be counted among the possible intertexts for these stories, an additional layer emerges: the subversion appears to target his techniques for constructing suspense, ultimately dismantling them through wit and comedy. Poe himself, however, is no stranger to comic effects or to the use of paradox as a means of defusing tension, as exemplified by “The Sphinx” (1845). The tale unfolds from premises similar to those of “The Masque of the Red Death”: a man retreats from New York to the countryside, seeking refuge from a cholera outbreak in a relative’s “cottage orné” (Poe 2023 [1845], 293). From the opening lines, tension is carefully cultivated: “not a day elapsed which did not bring us news of the decease of some acquaintance. [...] At length we trembled at the approach of every messenger. The very air from the south seemed to us redolent with death” (*ibidem*). Immersed in this macabre atmosphere, the protagonist becomes convinced that he has seen a monstrous figure bearing the mark of a death’s head, which he describes in meticulous detail to his host. The latter, more rational and clear-headed, correctly infers that his guest’s perceptions have been distorted by morbid brooding: what appeared as a distant monster is revealed to be a sphinx moth hanging from a window frame. The narrative thus progresses from ominous beginnings and a crescendo of horror to a final moment of disillusionment, producing an effect of bathos. It also replicates the structure of deduction present in the Dupin tales, although these play on suspense, rather than pure horror.

Wilde’s “The Sphinx Without a Secret” echoes both the structure of Poe’s tale and that of his detective fiction: a mystery is introduced, clues are gradually supplied, and a solution is eventually proposed, though the enigma concerns a different kind of “monster” – a marriageable woman. Courted by a friend of the narrator, who is enamoured with her aura of secrecy, the woman is observed periodically visiting rooms that do not belong to her. When questioned by her fiancé, she adopts a posture of terror and implores him not to pursue the matter further. This refusal precipitates a violent quarrel, leaving the man “mad, frantic” and the woman “dreadfully white” (Wilde 2003, 204). Shortly thereafter, she dies of a cold, and the mystery appears to be resolved: she had rented the room herself and merely sat there reading. The rational narrator offers a simple, even prosaic, explanation: she delighted in the performance of mystery itself, feigning the existence of a secret. The grieving fiancé, however, resists this closure, responding only, “I wonder?” (205), a phrase that pointedly undermines the sufficiency of logical deduction.

As in Poe, the rational voice insists that the “monster” is no monster at all, but here the final displacement of mystery remains incomplete. Although the narrative follows a familiar trajectory from enigma through rising tension to bathos, its open ending defers definitive interpretation, preserving an irreducible residue of romance rather than fully dispelling it.

The same ambivalence, playing between a comic pragmatism and mystery or romance, also characterises “The Canterville Ghost”, as frequently evidenced (Höfele 1999; O’Connor 2004; Markey 2010; Balakrishnan 2011; Ponciano 2025). Arguably, the same is true of LASC. In this short story, a young man of the upper classes on the verge of marriage – Lord Arthur, the eponymous protagonist – attends a social gathering at which a cheiromantist predicts that he will kill a man. Rather than reacting with the terror or psychological disintegration typical of the protagonists in Poe’s tales, Lord Arthur responds with a striking degree of composure and pragmatic resolve. Interpreting the prophecy as an obstacle to be managed rather than a source of existential dread, he concludes that the only way to preserve his marriage and social future is to plan the murder himself with meticulous care. He subsequently makes two unsuccessful attempts to kill distant relatives, each of which ends in comic failure, until he encounters the chiromancer by chance during a nocturnal walk and resolves the situation by killing him directly.

The opening of the story immediately signals some correspondence with Poe’s carnivalesque:

It was Lady Windermere’s last reception before Easter, and Bentinck House was even more crowded than usual. Six Cabinet Ministers had come on from Speaker’s Levée in their stars and ribands, all the pretty women wore their smartest dresses, and at the end of the picture-gallery stood the Princess Sophia of Carlsruhe, a heavy Tartar-looking lady, with tiny black eyes and wonderful emeralds, talking bad French at the top of her voice, and laughing immoderately at everything that was said to her. It was certainly a wonderful medley of people. Gorgeous peeresses chatted affably to violent Radicals, popular preachers brushed coat-tails with eminent sceptics, a perfect bevy of bishops kept following a stout prima-donna from room to room, on the staircase stood several Royal Academicians, disguised as artists, and it was said that at one time the supper-room was absolutely crammed with geniuses. [...]

Lady Windermere returned to the picture-gallery, where a celebrated political economist was solemnly explaining the scientific theory of music to an indignant virtuoso from Hungary, and began to talk to the Duchess of Paisley. (Wilde 2003, 167)

Firstly, the reception at Lady Windermere’s takes place before Easter, thus, according to the Roman calendar, precisely ending Carnival to begin Lent, a time for repentance and sacrifice. Even more significantly, Easter is associated with death and resurrection, therefore subtly anticipating the theme of the story. The crowd assembled at Lady Windermere’s, moreover, is a veritable who’s who of dignitaries, politicians and aristocrats, described with close attention to detail that caricatures their “smart dresses” and “stars and ribands” as costumes. Princess Sophia, loudly declaiming in fashionable French and laughing “immoderately”, also appears as a carnivalesque mask; the collection of human types – peeresses, Radicals, preachers, sceptics, bishops, a prima-donna – basks in the merriment disregarding their differences and Royal Academicians act as critics, “disguised” as them. In typical Wildean fashion, everyone is histrionic, and more than that, everyone has a character to play in Lady Windermere’s script, although – as mused by Lady Windermere herself later in the night – “the world is a stage, but the play is badly cast” (175). The party becomes a masquerade insofar as everyone is compelled to wear a disguise and to present themselves as something they are not. This atmosphere of subtle ridicule initially frames the story as a witty comedy, even though it should be the tale of a crime foreshadowed by the ominous title, immediately hinting at a dissonance that Wilde plays on for the entirety of the short story.

The most immediate “Poesque” referent is “The Masque of the Red Death”, in which Prince Prospero and his court take refuge in a splendid palace to escape a raging pestilence. The feast that Prospero defiantly stages in the face of Death is disrupted precisely by the guest everyone seeks to exclude: Death itself, which figuratively and literally unmasks the partygoers. These prove to be an assembly as varied as that present at Lady Windermere’s, a crowd of “dreams” and “phantoms” (Poe 2023, 174) notoriously described as grotesque: “there was much of the beautiful, much of the wanton, much of the bizarre, something of the terrible, and not a little of that which might have excited disgust” (173). To the description of exquisite décor and revelry, Poe contrasts the slow stride of the masked Death, building a crescendo that gradually suffocates joy and transforms it into dread. At the stroke of midnight, finally, the pendulum that has continuously reminded the revellers of the inevitable signals the arrival of the end, as “Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all” (176).

The danse macabre depicted in Poe’s tale is also evocative of the phantasmagoria in the Tapestry Chamber that heralds Virginia Otis’ travel to a supernatural realm and her return at the stroke of midnight in “The Canterville Ghost”, two of the most earnest passages in the short story. Incidentally, the Ghost’s description of the Garden of Death – “there the grass grows long and deep, there are the great white stars of the hemlock flower, there the nightingale sings all night long” (Wilde 2003, 225) – is reminiscent of a similar description in Poe’s “Eleonora” (1842), the Valley of the Many-Coloured Grass, a sort of Eden in which the pure love of the protagonists can blossom and fade as the titular Eleonora dies. Like “The Canterville Ghost”, in this tale, too, Love is the key to peace, and brings absolution on the head of its seeker: “Sleep in peace! For the spirit of Love reigneth and ruleth, [...] thou art absolved, for reasons which shall be known to thee in Heaven” (Poe 2023, 170).

Compared to Poe’s tale, LASC initially lacks the sense of impending doom and foreboding that permeates Prospero’s party and is punctuated by the strikes of the pendulum. As noted above, the “masque” at Lady Windermere’s instead adopts the tone of comedy. However, if in “The Masque of the Red Death” time is incessantly marked by the sound of the pendulum, LASC likewise contains multiple references to time (Nassaaar 1974, 10). Princess Sophia departs at “nearly half past eleven” (Wilde 2003, 167), and the cheiromantist appears shortly thereafter, invoking the fateful approach of midnight.

With his entrance, parodic reversal comes fully into play. The guests at Lady Windermere’s wear seemingly mismatched masks, and Mr. Podgers, the fortune-teller, is no exception: “well, he is not a bit like a cheiromantist. I mean he is not mysterious, or esoteric, or romantic-looking. He is a little, stout man, with a funny, bald head, and great gold-rimmed spectacles; something between a family doctor and a country attorney” (169). The cheiromantist deliberately inverts generic expectations: instead of adopting the costume and theatricality associated with his profession, he appears as an ordinary, undisguised man. This incongruity immediately parodies the role of the fortune-teller and undermines its authority from the moment of his introduction. In keeping with the incipit, Mr. Podgers’ appearance also defies his very role – to introduce dread into the life of Lord Arthur, hitherto charmed and spotless. Since everyone in the room is a “performer”, playing a part within Lady Windermere’s theatricals, and since he himself does not look the part, the reader is primed to conclude that Mr. Podgers is not, in fact, a cheiromantist at all.

Yet at this point Wilde’s parody operates through “repetition with a difference” (Hutcheson 2000, xii), shifting the tone of the story in an attempt to recover some of the foreboding characteristic of mystery tales:

But when Mr. Podgers saw Lord Arthur’s hand he grew curiously pale, and said nothing. A shudder seemed to pass through him, and his great bushy eyebrows twitched convulsively, in an odd, irritating way

they had when he was puzzled. Then some huge beads of perspiration broke out on his yellow forehead, like a poisonous dew, and his fat fingers grew cold and clammy. Lord Arthur did not fail to notice these strange signs of agitation, and, for the first time in his life, he himself felt fear. His impulse was to rush from the room, but he restrained himself. It was better to know the worst, whatever it was, than to be left in this hideous uncertainty. (Wilde 2003, 173)

The grotesque details of Mr. Podgers' bushy eyebrows twitching oddly; the perspiration on his "yellow forehead"; his fat, cold, clammy hands all contribute to a distinctly un-romantic portrait. Yet they also attest to the very real danger perceived by someone who, until this moment, had performed according to expectations, entertaining the other guests. Someone whom readers moreover suspect of being a fraud, not a "real" fortune-teller at all. Like a romance hero, Lord Arthur has been sheltered by his status and his fortune, until fate comes knocking on his door. Then, in characteristic chivalric fashion, Arthur – whose name is indeed a "speaking" one (see Giovannelli 2001) – presses on, attempting to overcome his sudden fear.

Mr. Podgers then tries with Lord Arthur's other hand, but then, too, "for a moment his face became a white mask of horror" (Wilde 2003, 173), before giving the young man only broken portions of his "vision". The theme of the mask interlaces with that of horror, signifying that although the cheiromantist is trying to defuse the moment, something terrible has just taken place. As readers gather later, when Lord Arthur's fortune is revealed in full, Podgers here becomes a mask of death itself – ironically, his own. Lord Arthur does not miss these signals of dread:

All this time Lord Arthur Savile had remained standing by the fireplace, with the same feeling of dread over him, the same sickening sense of coming evil. [...] He seemed turned to stone, and his face was like marble in its melancholy. He had lived the delicate and luxurious life of a young man of birth and fortune, a life exquisite in its freedom from sordid care, its beautiful boyish insouciance; and now for the first time he became conscious of the terrible mystery of Destiny, of the awful meaning of Doom. (174)

Compared to Mr. Podgers, whose "coarse, fat face" becomes "a sort of greenish-yellow colour" (*ibidem*), Lord Arthur's Classical beauty turns him into the most noble of stones. The grotesque is contrasted with the romantic, while both men feel the grip of fate closing on them. In a tale of mystery – and more specifically in one of Poe's stories – this sequence functions as part of the build-up: a crescendo that leads to the dénouement of a horror bound to destiny. This pattern is a recurring trope in Poe's work: the prisoner's discovery of the pit in "The Pit and the Pendulum" (1842), the appearance of the vortex in "A Descent into the Maelström" (1841) and the awakening underground in "The Premature Burial" (1844) all deploy the same moment of reckoning – a confrontation with horror before the abyss. In each of these tales, a man faced with impending doom and the shadow of death must rely on his instinct and resources to evade an apparently inescapable fate.

In LASC, the effect is incomplete because of the parodic difference introduced by Wilde in the incipit: doubt. If the cheiromantist does not look like a cheiromantist at all, and if the act of palm reading is presented as a game in which many of Lady Windermere's guests participate, Lord Arthur's reaction appears paradoxical, even disproportionate:

How mad and monstrous it all seemed! Could it be that written on his hand, in characters that he could not read himself, but that another could decipher, was some fearful secret of sin, some blood-red sign of crime? Was there no escape possible? Were we no better than chessmen, moved by an unseen power, vessels the potter fashions at his fancy, for honour or for shame? (174-175)

These lines, which as pointed out later, also seem to satirise the post-Darwinian, Lombrosian tendency to read physical features as sure signs of degeneration and criminality, are again out of context if compared with Lady Windermere's gathering, its brilliant conversation, beautiful dresses (or costumes) and boisterous laughter. In this way, Wilde creates a moment of estrangement, inserting the gothic and mysterious into a context that he has otherwise structured according to the codes of comedy. Death enters the festivity, but it goes unrecognised; readers are caught between the almost exasperated seriousness of Lord Arthur's interior monologue and the carnivalesque parade that frames it.

As the story progresses, the contrast between comedy and mystery – with a touch of detective fiction – is sustained: the structure recalls that of one of Poe's tales, while the tone remains generally associated with Wilde's own theatrical works, except when it turns to a self-conscious caricature of the language and pathos of mystery fiction. The dissonance lies in the constant juxtaposition of life (even mundane life) and death, reality and mystery, pragmatism and romance. Lord Arthur's fate, as read by Mr. Podgers, is that he will soon lose a distant, elderly relative and that he will commit murder.

His initial reaction is a frantic, obsessive rumination on what he has been foretold: rambling through the streets of London at night, he records every person he meets and every sensation, every shadow and colour, every omen he associates with murder, in a distinctly flâneuristic manner reminiscent of Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" as well as anticipating Wilde's own *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (see Nassaar 2014, 137). This is the first of two flâneries, both of them pivotal moments in the short story: here, Lord Arthur seems to "absorb" London in its many facets, a collection of impressions or effects that, after some recollection, lead him to his decision-making. The second, taking place near the end of the story, results in the impromptu murder of Mr. Podgers.

In "The Man of the Crowd", the *flâneur* is thus characterised by the narrating voice who is observing him push through the mob:

there arose confusedly and paradoxically within my mind the ideas of vast mental power, of caution, of perniciousness, of avarice, of coolness, of malice, of blood-thirstiness, of triumph, of merriment, of excessive terror, of intense – of supreme despair [...]

[...] this [...] man [...] is the type and the genius of deep crime. He refuses to be alone. *He is the man of the crowd*. It will be in vain to follow; for I shall learn no more of him, nor of his deeds. (Poe 2023, 101; 105)

The man of the crowd famously contains multitudes, "*lässt sich nicht lesen*" (105) – refuses deciphering. He is a sort of carnival onto himself, a collection of masks that amazes and terrifies the spectator. As a matter of fact, the narrator himself engages in a similar attitude, watching, as the city grows darker by night, the multitude change faces and habits. The reader of LASC witnesses a similar display in Lord Arthur's flight through London:

with face blanched by terror, and eyes wild with grief, Lord Arthur Savile rushed from Bentinck House, crushing his way through the crowd of fur-coated footmen that stood round the large striped awning, and seeming not to see or hear anything. [...] Murder! that is what the cheiromantist had seen there. Murder! The very night seemed to know it, and the desolate wind to howl it in his ear. The dark corners of the streets were full of it. It grinned at him from the roofs of the houses. [...] Then he wandered across Oxford Street into narrow, shameful alleys. Two women with painted faces mocked at him as he went by. From a dark courtyard came a sound of oaths and blows, followed by shrill screams [...] And yet it was not the mystery, but the comedy of suffering that struck him; its absolute uselessness, its grotesque want of meaning. [...] He walked hastily in the direction of Portland Place, now and then looking round, as though he feared that he was being followed. (Wilde 2003, 177-178)

Like Poe's man of the crowd, Lord Arthur moves through the city without a precise destination, observing its inhabitants and being looked at, though not necessarily noticed. His state of mind, oscillating between thoughts of murder, terror and grief from a keen perception of the grotesque, of the "comedy of suffering", is also reminiscent of the illegible, multiform *flâneur*. The same can be said of his intersectionality, his ability to move from the upper echelons of society to "narrow, shameful alleys".

In pure Wildean fashion, it is only after two encounters – one with "natural" beauty, in the form of rustic country people bringing produce to Covent Garden, and another with finery, comprising a good night's sleep, a morning cup of hot chocolate, a luxurious bath, and a contemplation of the portrait of his beloved fiancée, Sybil Merton – that his horror finally gives way to resolve. To protect her, their pure love, and the future she embodies (again, quite literally, given her name), Arthur sees no other solution than to carry out this fastidious business of murder as soon as possible.

He then begins to plan the murder with meticulous care, mirroring the obsessive attention to detail found in several of Poe's tales that hinge on a crime committed by the protagonist: "The Black Cat" (1843), for example, depicts a man rendered progressively more paranoid by alcohol, who first kills the beloved family cat and then murders his wife, immuring both bodies. In "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843), the protagonist coldly plots the murder of the elderly man in his care and is gradually driven to monomania by the imagined sound of a heartbeat that persists even after the crime. "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846), the only tale in which the murder remains undetected, follows a similar structure: the murderer meticulously reveals the plot he has devised, piece by piece. Finally, "The Imp of the Perverse" (1845) also centres on a carefully planned and executed murder, which remains hidden for years before being revealed in a moment of uncontrollable exaltation.

Notably, this final story follows a similar pattern to *LASC*, in that murder provides the protagonist security and happiness for many years; however, Lord Arthur lacks the pivotal moment of 'perversity' that would push him to confess. On the contrary, Poe's tale appears to end where Lord Arthur's begins: Lord Arthur fixates on the word "murder" ("Murder! murder!" he kept repeating, as though iteration could dim the horror of the word", 2023, 177), before quieting down and recovering his self-possession. Poe's unnamed protagonist, on the other hand, mutters to himself "I am safe" to maintain control over his disturbed psyche, until one day he is no longer able to restrain himself:

while sauntering along the streets, I arrested myself in the act of murmuring, half aloud, these customary syllables. [...] now my own self-suggestion that I might possibly be fool enough to confess the murder of which I had been guilty confronted me, as if the very ghost of him whom I had murdered – and beckoned me on to death. At first, I made an effort to shake off this nightmare of the soul. I walked vigorously – faster – still faster – at length I ran. I felt a maddening desire to shriek aloud. Every succeeding wave of thought overwhelmed me with new terror, for – alas! – I well, too well understood that to *think*, in my situation, was to be lost. I bounded like a madman through the crowded thoroughfares. (Poe 2023, 282-283)

In addition to presenting multiple correspondences with Lord Arthur's nightly wanderings – for instance, the feverish walk that almost turns into a sprint, the repeated word ringing in the protagonist's ears, or the crowd looking on – this paragraph exemplifies well the general form of these tales leading from a planned murder to paranoia. In *LASC*, Wilde alters the progression followed by Poe: from planning, to murder, to calm, to paranoia, to horror becomes horror, to paranoia, to quiet realisation, to murder. The moment of *flânerie*, in both cases marked by

the growing anxiety felt by the protagonist, is then conducive to opposite ends. Removing the asphyxiating crescendo devised by Poe to substitute it with a reinvigorating breakfast and a bath, a move that anticipates the sense of bathos that frequently punctuates the story, Wilde again uses the frame of comedy to recontextualise the mystery, thus parodying it.

Compared to Poe's tales of "planned murder", LASC exhibits a further stylistic difference: the narrator is external rather than internal. In place of Poe's unreliable narrators destabilised by intoxication, frenzy, or criminality, Wilde employs a third-person focaliser who wittily comments on the partygoers, Mr Podgers, and Lord Arthur himself, immediately counterbalancing the murder plot. This oscillation between despair and composure, mystery and pragmatism, ultimately renders the question of Lord Arthur's reliability irrelevant. First, although this is ostensibly his story, he is not its narrator; the narrative voice repeatedly reminds the reader that Lord Arthur would never have spoken of these events to anyone. Second, the effect Wilde appears to aim for is not the suspense characteristic of Poe, but a perpetual dissonance: the reader is never able to settle fully into either mystery or comedy, as each mode rapidly collapses into the other.

Furthermore, Destiny, invoked earlier by Lord Arthur (Wilde 2003, 174), plays an ambivalent role those of Poe's tales that involve murder: demise tends to be the doing of the protagonist himself and his own perverse instinct to sabotage his own plans, or succumb to the voices in his mind. In other words, save perhaps for "The Black Cat" – and even then, the main character plays a role in his own discovery – Destiny is not the main force behind evidence of crime coming to light. In fact, in "The Cask of Amontillado", wrongdoing remains happily undetected. On the contrary, Fate notoriously becomes a strong driving force for action and one that acts inexplicably and even maliciously in tales that deal with the death of a female figure rather than crime and its detection: "Berenice" (1835), "Morella" (1840), "Ligeia", "Eleonora", "The Oval Portrait" (1842), for instance.

In Wilde's "comic gothic", his reworked mystery, Lord Arthur is materially obstructed by destiny. Acting on Mr. Podgers' prophecy, he first attempts to poison the elderly Lady Clementina, a distant relative, hoping to unite the two elements of the prediction. He presents her with a decorative pillbox containing what she believes to be a heartburn remedy, then immediately departs for Venice – a fitting place, if ever there was one, to await the outcome of a murder. Lady Clementina does die, and Lord Arthur returns, even inheriting property she has left him. However, when he later discovers that she never took the poison and had in fact died of natural causes, he is plunged into profound despair: "Lady Clementina had died a natural death after all! The shock of the discovery was almost too much for him" (Wilde 2003, 188). His despair, again a recurrent feature of mystery tales, is usually typical of murder being discovered, or death killing a beloved one, or being overcome by circumstances beyond one's control that directly imperil the protagonist. Here, the parodic contrast emerges from Lord Arthur being melancholic on account of *not* having killed someone – someone he even likes – of crime *not* having been committed. The difference contained in this repetition, that is, is yet again the recontextualization of a familiar trope into the "wrong" tonal frame.

The same happens with his second attempt at murder:

it took him days to get over his terrible disappointment, and for a time his nerves were completely unstrung. His excellent common sense, however, soon asserted itself, and his sound, practical mind did not leave him long in doubt about what to do. Poison having proved a complete failure, dynamite, or some other form of explosive, was obviously the proper thing to try. He accordingly looked again over the list of his friends and relatives, and, after careful consideration, determined to blow up his uncle, the Dean of Chichester. (Wilde 2003, 189)

Lord Arthur's nerves, wound up by his innocence, recover their customary activity only after his common sense dictates a new course of action: dynamite is the "proper" medium. Here, too, Wilde's witticism is deployed in favour of a tonal incongruity that juxtaposes the sphere of society manners – what is proper – and violent crime. The protagonist's methodical listing of his friends and relatives with the objective of finding a suitable prey is also quite discordant, given that Arthur is presented as the loving, heroic youth who would protect his (future) family at any cost. Be that as it may, his plan fails: the dynamite, hidden in a clock, only produces a puff of smoke and much amusement for the Dean's family. This inconspicuous little incident is yet again magnified in Arthur's mind: "he had tried to do his duty, but it seemed as if Destiny herself had turned traitor. He was oppressed with the sense of the barrenness of good intentions, of the futility of trying to be fine" (195).

In both attempts, the pattern of crime construction and the spasmodic anticipation of its resolution, familiar from Poe, is reiterated, but ultimately undermined by the final bathos and by a repetition of events that produces a climax – albeit one rooted in absurdity. A second nightly excursion breaks the cycle: Arthur sits on the Thames' banks, when after some time, "twelve o'clock boomed from the tall tower at Westminster, and at each stroke of the sonorous bell the night seemed to tremble. Then the railway lights went out, one solitary lamp left gleaming like a large ruby on a giant mast, and the roar of the city became fainter" (196). The ominous sound of the bell at midnight shuts off the lights, drenching the city in darkness. While the murder does not take place *at* midnight, but some time after two in the morning, the moment signals a shift in Arthur's perception: everything begins to look dreamlike, evanescent. As the scene is not functional to the crime – which again, takes place sometime later – Wilde's inclusion of this specific trope is also stylistically significant, in that it is a clear signpost of his play with Gothic and mystery tales – perhaps even "The Masque of the Red Death".

Indeed, Mr. Podgers – the harbinger of death but also the victim – does appear after this, leaning suggestively (for Arthur's purposes) over the parapet: "Lord Arthur stopped. A brilliant idea flashed across him, and he stole softly behind. In a moment he had seized Mr. Podgers by the legs, and flung him into the Thames. There was a coarse oath, a heavy splash, and all was still" (*ibidem*). The unceremonious and unplanned death of Mr. Podgers is decidedly unromantic: attacked from behind, the grotesque little man goes down in a suitably grotesque fashion. While scholarly assessments tend to stress the hero's "stolid and task-oriented common sense" (Sammells 2024, 104) and pragmatism (see also McCormack 2004, 103; Giovannelli 2001; Jones 2011), it is not his logic that prevails. He fully embraces the most irrational reasoning, believing that Mr. Podgers' fortune is truthful and actively committing to it before his life can progress on the rest of its "rightful" path. When he does murder the cheiromantist, it is almost by accident, in the most unprepared fashion.

As an aside that would merit further investigation, although Lord Arthur's actions are clearly filtered through an ironic lens that plays on the dissonance between his professed common sense, his lamentations over Destiny, and his careful planning of a murder, his firm belief in the signs deciphered by Mr. Podgers may also be rooted in contemporary theories of criminality. As an ample body of scholarship has shown, the Victorian *fin de siècle* was permeated by what would now be recognised as pseudo-scientific discourses on the physical markers of criminality and the outward signs of degeneration (Stocking 1991; Leps 1992; Greenslade 1994; Lightman 1997; Thomas 1999; Frank 2003; Ferguson 2006; Pittard 2011; Conlin 2014; Karschay 2015, *inter alia*). Wilde – who would shortly become one of the targets of Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1892) – was undoubtedly cognisant of these theories, traces of which surface in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Hanson 2013; Karschay 2015; Ferrari 2017; Raitt 2017; Del Grazia 2023).

LASC likewise combines a grotesque emphasis on physical features with an ironising treatment of the assumption that such traits might reveal moral character or even determine one's future: "could it be that written on his hand, in characters that he could not read himself, but that another could decipher, was some fearful secret of sin, some blood-red sign of crime?" (Wilde 2003, 175). Later, as Lord Arthur wanders through London, he wonders whether others are similarly trapped by fate: "were these the children of sin and misery predestined to their end, as he to his? Were they, like him, merely the puppets of a monstrous show?" (177). Even Wilde's insistence on Mr. Podgers' fleshy fingers, yellow face, "sickly feeble smile," and "sensual mouth" (196) gestures toward a rhetoric of deviance, one that is not entirely negated when Lady Windermere later exposes him as an impostor (199).

After having committed murder, Lord Arthur, far from being besieged by the obsessive fear of being found out, only cares to verify that the cheiromantist is well and truly dead; when a notice appears in the newspaper that his body has been found in what is being classified as a suicide, Lord Arthur's bliss is almost complete. The love match, framed as the pure aim of Lord Arthur's every thought, including his hyper-rational, prosaic, almost stolid reasoning for homicide, is secured precisely by the criminal action. The young man qualifies it as a necessary sacrifice, something never to mention to his beloved Sybil, to spare her not the horror of a nonsensical killing, but rather what he conceives of as his self-sacrifice. The final paradox of comic subversion is underlined by the success of the young lovers' match: "never for a single moment did Lord Arthur regret all that he had suffered for Sybil's sake, while she, on her side, gave him the best things a woman can give to any man – worship, tenderness, and love. For them romance was not killed by reality. They always felt young" (198).

In this paragraph Wilde seems to hint at the paradox that in killing Mr. Podgers, Lord Arthur, with his task-oriented, pragmatic attitude, has chosen to remain firmly within the realm of romance. The death of the cheiromantist makes his romantic prophecy a reality, and obliterates what is, in fact, most probable from the beginning: that, as Lady Windermere suggests in the close of the short story, Mr. Podgers was "a dreadful impostor" (who often borrowed money from her) (199). Despite Wilde's ironic insistence throughout the story on Lord Arthur's "essentially practical" nature and his "common sense" (181; 188), the young man – who, like all heroes, will remain young forever, at least at heart – is ultimately not guided by logic, but by romance.

Sybil's role in the tale is an ambivalent one: under the guise of romance, she unwittingly becomes a catalyst for crime. Her portrait on Lord Arthur's mantelshelf embodies an idealised beauty and innocence:

The small, exquisitely-shaped head drooped slightly to one side, as though the thin, reed-like throat could hardly bear the burden of so much beauty; the lips were slightly parted, and seemed made for sweet music; and all the tender purity of girlhood looked out in wonder from the dreaming eyes. With her soft, clinging dress of *crêpe-de-chine*, and her large leaf-shaped fan, she looked like one of those delicate little figures men find in the olive-woods near Tanagra; and there was a touch of Greek grace in her pose and attitude. Yet she was not *petite*. She was simply perfectly proportioned. (180)

Her youth and innocence, repeatedly emphasised throughout the tale, allow Sybil to incarnate the unspoiled romance and idyllic future that Lord Arthur imagines for himself. Drawing on both Classical ideals and modern detail, she appears almost timeless; indeed, once the prophecy has been neutralised and their future secured, marriage allows both Arthur and Sybil to "always [feel] young" (198). Although Sybil herself is not a prophetess, her name – echoing the Greek Sibyl – and the allusion to votive statuettes foreshadow the theme of sacrifice, a concept Arthur repeatedly invokes to justify the necessity of murder.

Given her role in the story, Sybil also functions as a catalyst for knowledge. Lady Windermere insists that Lord Arthur have his palm read in light of his impending marriage, thereby engineering the meeting between him and Mr. Podgers. This encounter, and the prophecy that follows, propels Lord Arthur from youth into maturity. In a paradoxical apology of murder, the narrator underscores this transformation through what appears to be a tone of pity toward the young man:

He had to choose between living for himself and living for others, and terrible though the task laid upon him undoubtedly was, yet he knew that he must not suffer selfishness to triumph over love. Sooner or later we are all called upon to decide on the same issue – of us all, the same question is asked. To Lord Arthur it came early in life – before his nature had been spoiled by the calculating cynicism of middle-age, or his heart corroded by the shallow, fashionable egotism of our day, and he felt no hesitation about doing his duty. (181)

The contrast between selfishness and love, together with the emphatic sympathy that permeates this paragraph, clashes with the futile motives and criminal action that a strictly rational approach would identify. Yet the distance between these two perspectives creates a space in which readers can perceive the irony of both: a life entirely devoid of romance, and a life dictated by it alone. Sybil, at any rate, remains the muse who enables Lord Arthur to chivalrously “[do] his duty” and enter adulthood on terms that satisfy both the romantic and the rational outlooks.

Compared to Poe's tales that place a female figure at their core (“Ligeia”, “Morella”, “Eleonora”, “The Oval Portrait”, and “Berenice”), Sybil possesses one fundamental advantage: she remains alive. She does not, in other words, become the sacrifice, but instead merely facilitates one – or what is initially presumed to be one. Physically, however, she appears to share several traits with Poe's women, as Poe repeatedly favours “the woman with a ‘classic face’ and ‘hyacinth hair’ [...] With these classic features are usually associated a queenly stature, a pallid brow, bright eyes, and a musical voice” (Stovall 1925, 197).

Moreover, these tales, along with some of Poe's most famous poems, often portray women in ambivalent terms: either young and innocent to the point of childishness, or subtly demonic and dangerously knowledgeable (Stovall 1925; Kot 1996; Carlson 1996; Weekes 2004). In both cases, women arguably function as conduits to higher knowledge: either by instructing the male protagonist through their superior intellect, as in “Morella” and “Ligeia”, or by serving (however unwittingly) as his muse, as in “The Oval Portrait”, “Eleonora”, and “Berenice”. They thus assume the role of a ‘Gothic Beatrice’, guiding the protagonist toward an aesthetic or intellectual ideal rather than a religious one, and invariably accompanying this progress with anguish and death. While Wilde's Sybil Merton likewise acts as a catalyst for Lord Arthur's maturation and innocently draws him toward the realm of death, the trope is ultimately deconstructed, as the murder of Mr. Podgers is revealed to be the price paid not for transcendence, but for a life of blessed romance.

Although the structure of LASC playfully subverts point by point the tale of mystery and of ratiocination, Wilde's conclusion to the story then reveals the success of an aesthetic model that eschews “pure” realism both in Poe and in Wilde in specific steps. First, if in Poe planned murder, aside from “The Cask of Amontillado”, is generally a prelude to the irrational in the sense of paranoia and madness, in LASC the rationally and meticulously planned crime does not come to fruition; instead, it succeeds only when it is unpredictable and unexpected. Second, Lord Arthur is rewarded rather than punished by the fulfilment of his destiny, which he describes as a sacrifice he performed for the greater good: his familial bliss is bought with Mr. Podgers' death. Third, Mr. Podgers' predictions – initially framed as a mere *divertissement* for

Lady Windermere's guests – are, in substance, confirmed. Lord Arthur's behaviour, described by the narrator as essentially pragmatic and action-oriented, is in fact perfectly aligned with the model of mystery and romance, in which Destiny presents an exceptional task to be overcome in a mixture of ingenuity and fate, in the vein of "The Pit and the Pendulum", "A Descent into the Maelström" and "The Premature Burial". Here, the protagonist is saved from death precisely through the murder of the comical, grotesque cheiromancer.

The parody of the Gothic – here specifically a Poesque Gothic, arguably closer to Wilde's sensibility in the light of their common perspective on Beauty and the construction of effect – thus carries a double, seemingly paradoxical significance, in keeping with Hutcheon's account of parody. On the one hand, the detailed depiction of a series of failed murder attempts undermines Gothic conventions and exposes the superficiality of a particular social milieu, as Lord Arthur hyper-focuses on what is "proper" to the detriment of true morals. On the other, the final resolution ultimately confirms the resilience of the paradigm or romance that Lord Arthur takes seriously: one in which the chiromancer, however apparently out of character, does indeed possess the power to predict destiny. While the effect produced by Wilde is therefore unmistakably ambivalent, it nevertheless remains consistent with both his own and Poe's demand for a cohesive, unified narrative – one that resists lingering over overly mundane, explicit, or rational explanations.

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