

Role of the City in Poe's Murders in the Rue Morgue and Hoffmann's Mademoiselle de Scudery

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Role of the City in Poe's *Murders in the Rue Morgue* and Hoffmann's *Mademoiselle de Scudery*

Professor's comment: This student perceptively examines the role of the city as a setting and frame for detective fiction. Focusing on two early examples, Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue" and Hoffmann's "Mademoiselle de Scudery," both set in Paris, his sophisticated essay illuminates the "cityness" or framed constraint that renders the city a backdrop conducive to murder—such as the city's crowded, constricted nature, promoting vertical rather than outward movement and increasing hostility and the fact that so much urban life occurs at night, a reversal of the natural order and facilitating illicit activity. He compels us to look in new ways both at the city and at detective fiction. The Rue Neuve-Sainte-Genève in particular is like a bronze picture frame. It is the only frame suited to our story....—Honoré de Balzac, *Père Goriot*.¹ Here like has been ensepulchered with like; some monuments are heated more, some less And then he turned around and to his right; we passed between the torments and high walls.—Dante, *Inferno IX*.² The city, writes St. Augustine, "builds up a pilgrim community of every language ... [with] particular concern about differences of customs, laws, [and] institutions" in which "there is among the citizens a sort of coherence of human wills."³ Put simply: the city is a sort of platform upon

which “a group of people joined together by their love of the same object” work towards a common goal.⁴ What differentiates Augustine’s examination from other literary or theological treatments of the city is his attempt to carve out a vision of how the city operates—both the internal qualities and external middle of paper² Dante, *Inferno* (New York: Bantam, 1982) 83.³ St. Augustine, *The City of God* (London: Oxford UP, 1963) 348.⁴ Robert Pinsky, “Foreword,” *Inferno* (New York: Noonday, 1994) ix.⁵ Edgar Allen Poe, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue, The Gold-Bug and Other Tales” (New York: Dover, 1991) 33. All future references will appear in the text.⁶ *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989) 140. All future references will appear in the text.⁷ Charles Baudelaire, “The Moon’s Favors,” *Paris Spleen* (New York: New Directions, 1970) 79.⁸ Hoffman, “Mademoiselle de Scudery,” *Tales of Hoffman* (New York: Penguin, 1984) 17. All future references will appear in the text.⁹ The term is borrowed from linguistics, referring to the process by which the specific nature of a given sound in a particular word changes or assimilates the sound preceding it.

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