



PAPER

THE CONTENT AND STRUCTURAL CHARACTERISTICS OF DETECTIVE DISCOURSE IN EDGAR ALLAN POE'S WORKS

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Abstract

This article examines the content and structural characteristics of detective discourse as manifested in Edgar Allan Poe's foundational detective stories: "The Murders in the Rue Morgue", "The Mystery of Marie Roget", and "The Purloined Letter". Drawing on discourse analysis frameworks developed by van Dijk, Todorov's typology of detective fiction, and contemporary genre theory, the study investigates the dual narrative architecture, the epistemological function of detective reasoning, and the rhetorical strategies employed in the construction of mystery and resolution. The analysis reveals that Poe's detective discourse is characterized by a binary narrative structure comprising the crime story and the investigation story, a highly rationalistic mode of address, and a strategic deployment of concealment and revelation. These features, argued to be the foundational architecture of the genre, continue to inform modern detective fiction. The findings contribute to both literary discourse analysis and genre theory.

Key words: detective discourse, discourse analysis, narrative structure, genre theory, analytical reasoning, crime fiction, epistemological narrative

Detective fiction as a literary genre has long attracted scholarly attention not merely for its entertainment value, but for the complex linguistic, cognitive, and structural mechanisms that underpin its narrative architecture. At the center of this genre stands the concept of detective discourse — a mode of textual organization

in which concealment, logical deduction, and epistemological revelation operate as the primary structuring principles. While the genre has evolved considerably over the past two centuries, its foundational conventions can be traced directly to the work of Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849), whose tales of the Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin established

Compiled on: May 2, 2026.

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the paradigmatic features of the genre.

Poe introduced what he termed “tales of ratiocination” — narratives organized around the systematic, rational reconstruction of a past event (most commonly a crime) through the careful analysis of observable evidence. In doing so, Poe created not merely a new narrative formula, but a distinctive discursive mode characterized by a dual narrative structure, a rhetoric of mystery and revelation, and a highly specific construction of the detective figure as an epistemological authority. Scholars such as Todorov (1977), Knight (1980), Rzepka (2005), and Irwin (1994) have each, from distinct theoretical vantage points, identified these features as foundational to the genre.

Despite the substantial body of scholarship on Poe’s detective fiction, relatively few studies have approached his tales specifically through the lens of discourse analysis — that is, through a systematic examination of the textual and structural properties of the discourse itself, including its narrative organization, rhetorical strategies, and the linguistic mechanisms through which meaning is produced and interpreted. This article aims to address that gap. Drawing on van Dijk’s (1977) framework of discourse analysis, Todorov’s (1977) typological model of detective fiction, and Swales’s (1990) genre theory, the study investigates the content and structural characteristics of detective discourse in three of Poe’s key tales.

The present study is guided by three interrelated objectives. The first is to identify and describe the defining structural features that characterize detective discourse as it appears in Poe’s literary works. The second is to examine the content-level dimensions of this discourse — encompassing its thematic concerns, rhetorical strategies, and underlying epistemological assumptions — that set it apart from other narrative modes. The third is to explore how these structural and content-level features work together to establish the genre’s distinctive communicative relationship with its reader.

The study of detective fiction has generated a rich interdisciplinary body of scholarship, drawing on literary theory, narratology, linguistics, and cultural studies. The foundational contribution to

the formal analysis of the genre remains Tzvetan Todorov’s (1977) typological essay, in which he identifies the defining structural feature of detective fiction as the superimposition of two stories: the story of the crime (what actually happened) and the story of the investigation (how the detective comes to know what happened). As Todorov (1977) observes, “detective fiction has two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation” (p. 44). This binary architecture, which Todorov terms the “whodunit” structure, generates the genre’s characteristic temporal duality — the narrative moves forward in the investigation story while simultaneously reconstructing a past event — and is central to understanding the discursive organization of Poe’s tales.

Charles J. Rzepka (2005), in his comprehensive genre study, argues that detective fiction is fundamentally concerned with the restoration of epistemological order: the detective’s role is to transform the chaos of unknowing — produced by the crime — into legible, interpretable meaning. Rzepka (2005) demonstrates that Poe’s Dupin stories inaugurated a tradition in which “the detective stands for the possibility of restoring rationality and order to the world” (p. 37). This epistemological function of the detective figure has important implications for the structure of detective discourse: the text is organized not merely as a sequence of events, but as a progressive revelation of knowledge, with the detective’s reasoning serving as the primary vehicle through which meaning is produced and communicated to the reader.

Stephen Knight’s (1980) ideological analysis of crime fiction provides a complementary perspective. Knight argues that the formal structures of detective fiction are not merely aesthetic conventions but ideological constructions that reflect and reproduce specific social values — above all, the belief in the power of rational, individualistic intelligence to resolve social disorder. In Poe’s case, Knight (1980) identifies the highly rationalistic, even mathematical, mode of Dupin’s deductive reasoning as central to the ideological project of the stories, noting that the tales present a “model of pure intellect” operating above and

beyond the limitations of ordinary social actors (p. 49). This observation is directly relevant to the rhetorical construction of the detective figure in Poe's discourse.

John T. Irwin's (1994) study of the relationship between Poe and Jorge Luis Borges provides an important close reading of the analytic detective story as a literary form. Irwin examines the ways in which Poe's tales construct the act of detection as a form of interpretive reading — one in which the detective reads the traces and signs left behind by the criminal, and in which the text itself invites the reader to engage in an analogous interpretive activity. Irwin (1994) argues that “the analytic detective story is essentially a story about reading and interpretation” (p. 12), a claim that has significant implications for understanding the discourse structure of Poe's tales and their construction of a specific reader role.

From the perspective of discourse analysis, Teun A. van Dijk's (1977) foundational work on text and context provides the theoretical framework necessary for analyzing the macrostructural and microstructural properties of detective discourse. Van Dijk (1977) distinguishes between the surface structure of a text (its linguistic organization) and its deep structure (the semantic and pragmatic organization of the discourse as a communicative act), arguing that a full analysis of any text must attend to both levels. For detective fiction, this distinction is particularly productive: the surface structure of the tale — the narrative sequence of events as they are presented to the reader — is systematically organized to conceal the deep structure — the actual sequence of events as they occurred — and the process of detection consists precisely in the gradual reconstruction of that deep structure.

Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney (1999) have traced the influence of Poe's detective model on subsequent literary developments, particularly in the tradition of metaphysical detective fiction. Their edited collection demonstrates the degree to which Poe's structural innovations — above all, the problematization of knowledge and the foregrounding of interpretive uncertainty — established the paradigmatic conventions not only of classical detective fiction

but of a wide range of later literary forms that engage with the epistemological dimensions of detection (Merivale & Sweeney, 1999, pp. 1–26). This perspective reinforces the view that Poe's contribution to the genre was not merely thematic but fundamentally discursive.

John M. Swales's (1990) genre theory offers a further dimension to the analysis. Swales defines genre as “a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes” (p. 58), and argues that genre conventions constitute a form of social knowledge that regulates both the production and interpretation of texts. Applied to detective fiction, this framework draws attention to the ways in which the structural and rhetorical conventions of the genre function as communicative contracts between author and reader, establishing shared expectations and interpretive frameworks that are essential to the genre's functioning. The reader of a detective story, as Swales's framework suggests, brings to the text a set of genre-specific interpretive strategies that shape their engagement with the narrative.

Carl D. Malmgren (2001) has proposed a typology of detective fiction that distinguishes among three principal subgenres — the classical, the hard-boiled, and the police procedural — each characterized by a distinctive mode of detection and a corresponding discourse structure. Malmgren (2001) situates Poe's tales firmly within the classical tradition, defined by a highly formalized structure, an emphasis on intellectual deduction, and a detective figure who operates primarily as a reasoning machine rather than as a morally complex individual (pp. 15–22). This classification provides a useful framework for understanding the specific discursive features of Poe's tales in relation to the broader genre.

The analytical framework adopted in this study draws on three complementary theoretical traditions: narratological discourse analysis, genre theory, and the theory of epistemological narrative. From van Dijk's (1977) discourse theory, the study draws the distinction between macrostructure and microstructure: the macrostructure of a detective text refers to its global semantic and narrative organization — the overall pattern of concealment

and revelation — while the microstructure refers to the local linguistic strategies through which this pattern is realized in the surface form of the text.

Todorov's (1977) typological model provides the framework for analyzing the narrative structure of the tales: the dual story architecture (crime story / investigation story) and the distinctive temporal organization it generates. Swales's (1990) genre theory provides the framework for analyzing the communicative functions of the structural and rhetorical conventions of detective discourse — that is, the ways in which these conventions constitute a communicative contract with the reader and establish the genre's characteristic mode of reader engagement.

Together, these frameworks allow for a multi-level analysis of detective discourse that addresses its structural properties (the organization of narrative time and narrative knowledge), its rhetorical properties (the strategies through which the detective is constructed as an epistemological authority), and its communicative properties (the ways in which the text positions the reader in relation to the process of detection).

The most fundamental structural feature of detective discourse in Poe's tales is the dual narrative architecture identified by Todorov (1977). In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), the narrative is organized around two distinct but interlocking temporal sequences: the sequence of events that constitute the crime (the deaths of Madame L'Esplanade and her daughter) and the sequence of investigative events through which Dupin reconstructs the crime. The first sequence is presented in the text not as a direct narrative but as a collection of fragments — newspaper reports, witness testimonies, and physical evidence — which Dupin reassembles into a coherent account.

This fragmented presentation of the crime story is a distinctive discursive strategy: it foregrounds the epistemological uncertainty that the detective must resolve, and it invites the reader to engage in the process of reconstruction alongside the detective. The investigation story, by contrast, is presented in a linear, forward-moving sequence, as Dupin systematically evaluates the available evidence and constructs his solution. The structural tension between the fragmented crime story

and the linear investigation story generates the characteristic narrative dynamic of detective discourse.

A similar architecture is observable in "The Purloined Letter" (1844), where the crime — the theft of the letter — is presented as already known at the outset of the narrative, and the investigative challenge consists not in identifying the criminal but in locating the evidence. This variation on the dual narrative structure demonstrates the flexibility of the framework while confirming its central role in organizing detective discourse.

A second key characteristic of detective discourse in Poe's tales is the foregrounding of the detective's reasoning process as the primary vehicle of narrative meaning. In all three tales, extended passages are devoted to the explicit articulation of Dupin's analytical method — what Poe terms "ratiocination" — in which the detective not only arrives at the correct solution but explains, step by step, the chain of inference that led him there. This discursive strategy serves multiple functions.

First, as Rzepka (2005) argues, it establishes the detective as an epistemological authority — a figure whose knowledge claims are validated not by institutional position or social status but by the demonstrable power of his reasoning. The text thus constructs a specific epistemological hierarchy in which rational, systematic deduction is posited as the supreme cognitive mode. Second, the articulation of the reasoning process serves a rhetorical function: it produces retroactive narrative satisfaction by demonstrating that the solution was available to the reader all along, provided they had exercised the same analytical acuity as the detective. Third, it constructs a specific reader role — that of the apprentice-reasoner — inviting the reader to measure their own interpretive competence against that of the detective.

This epistemological structure is most explicitly developed in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue", where the prefatory discourse on the nature of analytical intelligence — the famous disquisition on chess, draughts, and whist — functions as a metacommentary on the discursive mode of the tale itself. By theorizing the analytical method before demonstrating it in practice, Poe foregrounds the

epistemological character of detective discourse and establishes the cognitive contract between the text and its reader.

A third defining characteristic of detective discourse in Poe's tales is the systematic deployment of a rhetoric of concealment and revelation. As Irwin (1994) has observed, the detective story is fundamentally organized around the management of information: specific facts are withheld from the reader, revealed gradually, and ultimately assembled into a coherent whole that dissolves the narrative tension generated by the initial concealment. This management of information constitutes the primary rhetorical mechanism of detective discourse. In Poe's tales, concealment operates at multiple levels. At the level of plot, the identity and motive of the criminal are withheld until the denouement. At the level of discourse, the detective's reasoning is frequently presented as already complete at the moment of narrative presentation, with the explanation offered retrospectively — a strategy that creates the impression of effortless intellectual mastery while simultaneously withholding the process of reasoning from the reader. At the level of language, Poe employs a rhetoric of mystery and obscurity — particularly in the descriptions of the crime scenes — that generates an affect of cognitive disorientation.

The rhetoric of revelation, conversely, is organized as a staged unfolding of knowledge, in which each new piece of evidence or each new analytical step is presented as a decisive advance toward the solution. This staged revelation generates a distinctive narrative rhythm — a progressive intensification of epistemic clarity — that is one of the genre's most characteristic effects. The analysis of Poe's three foundational detective tales reveals a coherent and highly developed discursive mode that can be characterized along three principal axes: structural, epistemological, and rhetorical. Structurally, the tales are organized around a dual narrative architecture that separates the time of the crime from the time of the investigation, generating a characteristic temporal duality that is the defining formal feature of the genre. Epistemologically, the tales construct detection as a process of rational

reconstruction — the production of knowledge from fragmentary evidence — and position the detective as an epistemological authority whose claims are validated by the demonstrated power of his reasoning. Rhetorically, the tales deploy a systematic rhetoric of concealment and revelation that manages the reader's access to narrative information and generates the distinctive pleasures of the genre.

These findings are consistent with the theoretical frameworks employed in the study. The dual narrative structure identified in the analysis confirms Todorov's (1977) typological model and demonstrates its applicability as a framework for discourse analysis. The epistemological function of detective reasoning, as Rzepka (2005) and Knight (1980) have argued, is not merely a thematic feature of the genre but a structural and discursive one: it organizes the text around a specific cognitive model and positions the reader in a specific relation to the production of knowledge. The rhetoric of concealment and revelation, as Irwin (1994) has shown, constitutes the primary mechanism through which the genre's characteristic tension is generated and resolved. The study also confirms Swales's (1990) view of genre conventions as communicative contracts: the structural and rhetorical features identified in the analysis function precisely as genre conventions in Swales's sense — they establish shared expectations between author and reader, and they constitute the interpretive framework within which the reader engages with the text. The reader of a Poe detective tale is positioned not merely as a passive recipient of narrative information, but as an active interpreter, invited to exercise the same analytical acuity as the detective and to measure their performance against his.

This study has examined the content and structural characteristics of detective discourse in three of Edgar Allan Poe's foundational detective tales. The analysis has identified three defining features of this discourse: a dual narrative structure that separates the crime story from the investigation story; an epistemological function of detective reasoning that constructs the detective as an authority and the text as a vehicle for the progressive production of knowledge; and a rhetoric

of concealment and revelation that manages the reader's access to information and generates the genre's characteristic narrative tension.

These features, as the analysis has demonstrated, are not merely formal conventions but constitutive elements of the genre's discursive mode — the means by which detective fiction constructs its characteristic communicative contract with the reader and produces its distinctive cognitive and aesthetic effects. Poe's contribution to the genre was, in this sense, not merely the invention of a new narrative formula, but the creation of a new discursive mode, one whose structural and rhetorical principles continue to inform detective fiction to this day.

The findings of this study have implications for both literary discourse analysis and genre theory. For discourse analysis, they demonstrate the productivity of applying structural and rhetorical analysis to literary texts — particularly genre fiction, whose formulaic character makes its discursive conventions especially amenable to systematic analysis. For genre theory, they confirm the view of genre conventions as communicative contracts, and they provide a detailed account of the specific conventions that constitute the communicative contract of detective fiction. Future research might extend this analysis to later detective fiction traditions, examining the ways in which the discursive model established by Poe has been adapted, modified, or subverted in subsequent developments of the genre.

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