

# Edgar Allan Poe's Influence on Contemporary Serial Killer Narratives

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Diplomski sveučilišni studij engleskog jezika i književnosti (dvopredmetni)

**Mia Mitrić**

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Edgar Allan Poe's Influence on Contemporary Serial Killer Narratives

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Zadar, 2023.



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Zadar, 30. siječnja 2023.

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## 1. Introduction

“An intriguing cipher, an enigma, a puzzle with no key. He might be a character from one of his own tales, or a merry prankster gently mocking readers who fall under his spell.” (Savoye 4) is a quotation that succinctly describes the mystery and genius that defines America’s first professional author, Edgar Allan Poe. As the pioneer of the detective story, horror genre and science fiction, Poe’s influence on the literary world can hardly go undetected. Primarily a Gothic author, he was among the first to thoroughly explore the themes of death, depravity and violence. This influence increased further with the evolution of cinema; Poesque elements can be traced in numerous contemporary motion pictures, especially those of macabre, gloomy nature, a defining characteristic of Poe’s work. He paved the way for serial killer narratives specifically, adding a new component – in his works, he frequently explored human psyche, as well as offered psychological analyses of murderous minds in particular. Such an approach is frequently used on big screens; the contemporary serial killer figure on film commonly has emotional layers and depth that marked Poe’s protagonists.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the effect Edgar Allan Poe’s had on contemporary serial killer narratives, precisely those depicted on film. Poe’s short stories, *The Black Cat* (1843), *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1843) and *The Imp of the Perverse* (1845) all revolve around a homicide and a murdering madman, and have been used as basis of research. To showcase contemporary cinema, three influential films featuring a serial killer have been chosen: *Se7en* (1995), *American Psycho* (2000) and *Joker* (2019), due to their overall popularity, serial killer portrayal and narration resemblance to Poe’s works. While discussing Poe’s impact, both his positive and arguably negative influence will be mentioned, as well as the parallels and dissimilarities between the Poe’s traditional base and modern portrayal. In the initial chapter of the paper, Poe’s life, work and general influence will be discussed. It will be

followed by an overview of the term ‘serial killer’ and the rise of the serial killer narratives throughout the years, as well as the analysis of the depiction of the figure on film. Chapter five forms the core of the paper, examining the key traits Poe’s murderers in aforementioned stories possess, such as being abnormally normal or narcissistic, and the particular narrative style he employs, adding a focus shift, unreliable narrator and the twist. The three films are subsequently analysed in detail according to said research points and the final comparison and commentary is laid out, together with the question of whether Poe’s genius accidentally contributed to the glorification of the serial killer.

## 2. Edgar Allan Poe

### 2.1. Life

Born in 1809 in Boston, Edgar Allan Poe had a difficult upbringing. As Lorine Pruette describes, Poe's life was a tragedy, a sequence of disasters which "drove him into opposition with most of the world, deprived him of the love he so inordinately craved, paralyzed his creative abilities, seduced him to seek a vague nepenthe in the use of drugs and stimulants, and, its relentless purpose achieved, cast him aside, a helpless wreck, to die from the darkened tragedy of a Baltimore saloon" (Pruette 370).

Son of stage actors, Poe was born into a poor family. With a distant, drunkard father that later abandoned him, as well as death of his mother, Poe's life was marked by tragedy early on. Orphaned at an early age, he was adopted by John Allan, a tobacco merchant (Kippen and Brady 236). Poe claimed that he "never received the parental affection or family sympathy for which he longed" (Pruette 372) and his foster parents indulged his wishes by financially allowing him more than necessary, rather than offering the love he desired.

Poe briefly attended the University of Virginia in 1826. He was starting to get known for his writing and was spoken of as a gifted child with several talents, but lacking social skills. As his gambling and drinking addiction left him penniless, he decided to join the army, an endeavour that came to a similarly swift end due to misbehaviour. It is at this time that he published his first poems. Following the expulsion from the service, he moved to Baltimore with his aunt and his cousin, soon-to-become his wife. He soon started publishing and editing stories and reviews for the *Southern Literary Messenger*. In 1836 he married his cousin Virginia Clemm, then a 13-year-old girl. Upon moving to New York City in 1838, he published *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym on Nantucket*, his only complete novel, which later served as inspiration for Melville's *Moby Dick*. He started struggling financially once again, as well as dealt with the deteriorating health of his wife who ultimately passed



due to tuberculosis. Such circumstances made him turn to alcohol and self-destructive behaviours and prompted him to write more about the darker side of life and human nature, an example being the publication of a well-known horror story, *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839) and the first detective story *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841). One of his most praised poems was published at the time too, *The Raven* (1845), receiving national acclaim. Poe did not outlive Virginia by much, passing away in 1849, at age 40. The cause remains unknown, and numerous speculations keep emerging even today (Kipen and Brady 237).

## 2.2. Literary Work and Style

Poe was fundamentally a Gothic writer. He explored the concepts of “perversion, criminality, monstrosity, transgression, violence and destruction”, all synonymous with the notion of darkness that pervaded Gothic literature (Lima 22). Still, his writing had unconventional elements. He transformed gothic literature by incorporating a more psychological approach; instead of the mere depiction of ghosts or eerie settings, he added the human element, depicting character’s turbulent inner world (Perry and Sederholm 2). Poe’s style was macabre, bizarre and terror-inducing, and his focus, therefore, the human psyche and all its dark components (Pezer 10). His fascination with the darker aspects of the human mind derived from the tragedies he had to endure during his childhood and reached its peak as his wife was battling a life-threatening illness.

His protagonists are mostly autobiographical: melancholic, lonely, neurotic and often on a quest for vengeance (Pruette 384). Often depicting the figure of a madman, he would give his protagonists a unique complexity. His characters often went to the limits of their insanity, committing unthinkable acts against whoever they deemed deserving, be it a family member or a stranger. According to Stahlberg:

Poe's characters are undeniably complex; goaded and tormented by imps of the perverse, inspired by vengeance yet racked with guilt, fascinated by and attracted to death yet fearfully and frequently grotesquely repelled by it, they display an ambivalence that is beyond the too often reductive psychological or physiological explanations of insanity - though insanity, or near insanity, is often a product of this ambivalence. (16)

The way he achieved such complexity was through the use of the first-person narration. By applying such a method, he allowed the reader to get into the mind and the inner world of the character, giving it a newfound sense of depth and detail (Pezer 11). A skilled writer of mystery, Poe tended to use this type of narration to present protagonist's intentions ambiguously in a way that would leave readers uncertain of the narrator's reliability, causing a so-called "narrator unreliability". He would never offer response to such ambiguity, further creating "anti-closure", which inevitably made his works open to interpretation and hypothesizing (Sun 95).

Another trademark of his writing, which again ties in well with first-person narration and the narrator unreliability, is his use of suspense and mystery (96). As noted by Sun, Poe utilizes the "unknown suspense" whereby the character and the reader face the unknown mysteries together, being stuck in "half an understanding" (97). There is once again no exit, as Poe never gives the resolution to the questions that arise to the reader; tightly connected to the unreliability element. This allows him to create suspense in a distinctive manner, rather than focusing only on the exposure of the crime and actions involved. Still, he inevitably achieves the tense atmosphere through gruesome murders, disturbing imagery, and generally dark themes of death and burial, all of which naturally incite curiosity in readers.

Furthermore, Poe often merged beauty and horror, both in his poems and novels. He did so most famously in his poem *Annabel Lee*, dedicated to the death of a beautiful woman, famously claiming that “the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world – and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such a topic are those of a bereaved lover” (qtd. in Southall Wilson 680). He takes a dark topic of premature death and gives it an aesthetic dimension, as he often does either directly or through symbolism and expression (Pruette 375).

### 2.3. Influence

As a detective story inventor, horror story writer and a science fiction pioneer, his works served as inspiration to many writers that followed, among which Arthur Conan Doyle with his *Sherlock Holmes* detective stories, or Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. “He is indisputably the founding father of crime fiction, perhaps the most successful narrative genre in the modern world” (Taylor). Poe’s fascination with death and mental illness correlates to contemporary literature and writers who continue to explore the darker side of humanity, prompted by the wars and violence, increase of serial killers and paedophiles, and the threat of global warming (Lima 22). For instance, his science fiction stories, such as *The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall* (1835), inspired H. G. Wells, and his general pessimism and religious scepticism had an impact on Joseph Conrad’s and James Joyce’s novels. Furthermore, his depiction of psychopathy was all but typical for the time period, having written about madmen possessing “superior insight” and also criticising society’s stigmatisation of the mentally unstable. Similar topic is dealt with in Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962), and the film adaptation of the same name (Meyers 490). Along with the impact of his stories, Poe’s poetry also left a mark; it served as a valuable source for the development of French Symbolism. Its most prolific author, Charles Baudelaire, drew inspiration from Poe’s “emphasis on artistic purity, his love of the exotic,

his obsession with morbid subjects and his concern with rationality and conscious method” (493). His *Flowers of Evil* (1857) originally included a poem that resembled Poe’s short stories which are to be discussed in this thesis, featuring a madman who succumbs to sadistic impulses (494). Similar theme can be found in Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* (1866), with its psychological take on guilt and penance of a killer, evidently influenced by Poe’s writing as well (500). Lastly, Stephen King, one of the most influential contemporary novelists and the bestselling horror writer today, was quoted as saying that Poe “wasn’t just a mystery/suspense writer, he was the first”, and went on to confirm the impact that Poe’s works had had on his novels, among which *The Shining* (1977) (Hockensmith). However, Poe’s influence on contemporary serial killer narratives specifically, along with his study of a mentally ill mind, is to be explored in more detail in the upcoming chapters.

### **3. The Rise of the Serial Killer Narratives**

A serial killer is a relatively new term that has come to exist in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The broad definition would entail a person who “murders at least two people in distinctly separate incidents, with a psychological rest period between” and murders are “satisfying act[s]” in and of themselves” (Renner 18). Serial murder cases grew rapidly in mid twentieth century, specifically starting from the 1950s, and the literary works based on such crimes followed soon after, which was when the term ‘serial killers’ was first coined (18). Narratives based on the psychopathic individuals slowly started to take centre stage. As Grant Cook suggests in his thesis “Literary Serial Killer Fiction”, the fictional serial killer “can be viewed as a contemporary extension of Gothic and folkloric traditions” which usually involved vampires, werewolves or demons, and which Poe substituted by the “‘monstrous’ in human form” (Cook 12). Rather than using the supernatural as the source of terror, he presents the horrors of what the ordinary human beings are capable of when they succumb to their true selves.

Cook mentions Jim Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me* as the first example of modern-day serial killer fiction, published in 1952. He stresses his combining of crime fiction tropes with psychoanalysis and social critique as the turning point in contemporary serial killer genre. While earlier novels certainly featured killers, very few entered the mind of the psychopath by telling the story from their point of view, Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866) being one of them, heavily influenced by Poe himself. Beside *The Killer Inside Me*, the 1950s also saw the publication of Robert Bloch's well-known *Psycho* (1959), another novel that signalled the rise of the genre (Cook 5).

The 1980s, which again marked the increase in both real and fictional murderers, was also the time when Poe's gruesome tales became more popular. But if one were to go by the given definition, they may remain confused as to how Poe's portrayals of serial killers fit the description: the protagonists do not seem to commit more than one murder and they do not kill strangers, but rather acquaintances (Renner 18). In her article "Poe and the Contemporary Serial Killer Narrative", Karen J. Renner contends that the term serial killer is a relatively new concept that permits a much broader definition, rather than having an exact limitation. One might argue that Poe did not portray serial killers per se, because the term was not invented yet. However, they still existed; in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, as Poe was producing his works, mentally ill people with similar criminal tendencies were referred to with the term "morally deranged" or suffering from "moral insanity". It was a topic he was clearly fascinated by, as evidenced not only by the numerous written tales, but also by his critique of the expansion of the insanity plea to include the criminally insane (19).

The popular conception of a serial killer today, both in real life and fiction, is that of a white, often middle-aged man who "kills strangers for deeply personal reasons often related to early childhood experiences" (Renner 18). Renner offers the suggestion that "something in the culture (the atrocities of Vietnam, perhaps, or the violent image of Kennedy's

assassination and others) simply made violence more permissible”, resulting in the popularity of the killer persona (31). She also goes so far as to argue that Poe might have had an influence, claiming that a lot of these men grew up at a time when Poe’s murderous confessions stories became a staple of school curricula. She argues that “it is possible that his works shaped the ways in which men already predisposed to violence have understood their impulses and actions” (17). Therefore, Poe’s influence appears to go two different ways: not only does he inspire writers to write about such topics, but his serial-killer-focused works inspire the real serial killers to commit the crime in the first place, making it a vicious cycle.

#### **4. Serial Killer on Film**

Narrative aspects tie together two different art forms: literature and film. Poe’s two-centuries-old relevance continues not only due to literary works he inspired, but also his influence on different types of media, such as film and art. In modern society, with the evolution of output devices, the impact of the audiovisual is ever-growing, and the film industry especially has had a substantial cultural impact on society as a whole (Elezaj). The serial killer trope, first popularised by Poe, is one that emerges in several cinema classics, and one that has gained significant popularity in recent years. The film industry’s impact on society unfortunately includes the negative aspect too, as cinema, due to its high reliance on visuals, may be the most effective medium for depicting violence out of all the arts. It has been observed that individuals predisposed to violence get inspired by characters on screen just as much, if not more, than those in written fiction. One such example is the shooting of U.S. president Ronald Reagan in 1981, perpetrated by John Hinckley Jr. who studied the film *Taxi Driver* in detail, watching it “at least 15 times” and modelling the assassination attempt after the character in the film (Rose).

The increased fascination with serial killers can be evidenced by the popularity of multiple films of the horror or thriller genre. Some of these include *Psycho* (1960), *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), adapted from the books of the same names, *Halloween* (1978), *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* (1980), *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), and similar. The depiction of the killer in cinema is not constant, but rather dependant on each individual film – he is either an antihero or a villain, a born murderer or shaped by society, irreparable or just unlucky. However, like in literary texts, the general template is that of a “white, heterosexual, middle to upper class, propertied male” (Tyrrell). The killers on screen were initially inspired by the factual murderers, such as the notorious Ed Gein, the American serial killer whose disfigurement of victims and utilisation of their skin for different purposes clearly served as inspiration for the plot of *The Silence of the Lambs* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). What defined those two pictures, as well as the genre as a whole, was the “anticipation of chase” and, with the emergence of slasher films in late 1970s, “jump scares, severing of bodies, blood-curdling screams” (Duwyn), exemplified by *Scream* (1996) and *Halloween*. In recent years, however, screenwriters and directors started applying a more psychoanalytical approach, bringing the serial killer persona even closer to the audience.

Due to the evidenced grip that the cinema has on popular culture and modern society, this thesis focuses on the impact of Poe’s work on contemporary film rather than literature. The films to be discussed, *Seven* (1995), *American Psycho* (2000) and *Joker* (2019), with their killers John Doe, Patrick Bateman and Arthur Fleck, all feature a narcissistic villain or an antihero with violent tendencies and obsessions who kills strangers with no remorse and eventually confesses his crimes. These three films have been selected due to their overall popularity, serial killer portrayal, character and narration resemblance to Poe’s works, and the year of release. While only five years divide *Seven* and *American Psycho*’s release, *Joker* succeeds the two by two full decades, and demonstrates the arguable shift in the portrayal of

the serial killer where empathy takes front seat. The shift is arguable, however, given that such films existed before too. The focus on the psychology behind killer's motives in film has existed since *Psycho*, in which Alfred Hitchcock depicted a serial killer with depth that distinguished him from many, and thus established Norman Bates as one of the most recognizable figures of the serial killer genre. Likewise, the audience gets access into the mind of *Seven*'s John Doe toward the end of the film, and *American Psycho*'s Patrick Bateman throughout the entire runtime. However, the empathy is hardly as emphasized as in *Joker*, which is only made more controversial by the popularity of the film. While all three films fall into the psychological thriller category, *Joker* is also an origin story; an in-depth examination of character, which inevitably grants it more space for cultivating empathy and character identification. Ultimately, although the characters might have different objectives and the plots allow them less or more exploration, compared both among themselves and with Poe's works, the focus still remains the exploration of the killer's psyche, a link to Poe's selected short stories.

## 5. Poe's Influence on Contemporary Serial Killer Narratives

In the 1840s, Poe published three first-person short stories that all revolved around a homicide and the mental state of the person behind it: *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1843), *The Black Cat* (1843), and *The Imp of the Perverse* (1845). After committing murder, all three protagonists seem to lack motive and guilt. They all ultimately reveal themselves after futile attempts at covering the crime (Renner 16). These characters can be seen as the basis for the serial killer prototype used in contemporary fiction and media.

### 5.1. Serial Killer Portrayal

In her article, Renner lists several parallel traits that can be found both in Poe's protagonists and more modern narratives. Focusing on the figure of the serial killer and his



portrayal, these include: “his ability to blend in with “normal” society, the ways that the details of his seemingly motiveless murders contain clues to his psyche, and his so-called God complex” (16). All mentioned will be discussed more in detail in the section that follows.

#### 5.1.1. Abnormal Normality

McCoppin notes that Poe’s murderers had the clever “ability to blend in with “normal” society” (Renner 20) and go undetected. Mark Seltzer, in his book *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture*, defines this trait as “abnormal normality” and “ordinariness” (9). He claims that an average serial killer has the unnerving capability of being indistinguishable from the mass. His “chameleon-like” character allows him to fit in and be seen as a regular person one would come across in their daily life (10). Seltzer cited a NYC Police Commissioner: “He’s the kind of guy who probably goes to work every day. Maybe he does something with statistics. An accountant or a clerk. He just kind of melts into the city scene” (16). Seltzer further defines this abnormal normality as a result of the “mimetic compulsion”, or their ability to imitate others in order to blend in. They are essentially neutral, empty and non-identifiable (45). Seltzer’s claims can easily be applied to serial killers on film, as they are often portrayed to be ordinary “men next door”; often anonymous, white, heterosexual, middle-aged, harmless looking individuals.

Poe achieves this by not specifying his protagonist’s name, appearance or any personal information; he is unidentifiable. All three stories feature a nameless narrator with minimal descriptions of physical features or personal background. Furthermore, as he manages to temporarily hide his crime and remain unnoticed, the protagonist displays his ability to blend in with the ordinary. In *The Black Cat*, the police find nothing after investigating the disappearance of his wife whom he previously killed and bricked behind the wall in the cellar; it is only after he brings attention to the wall himself that the crime gets

revealed. Similarly, in *The Tell-Tale Heart*, the authorities do not suspect anything about the narrator being guilty of murder of the old man whom he had murdered and concealed under the floorboards, and it is once again the narrator's confession that reveals it. In the *Imp of the Perverse*, his poisoning of the victim is classified as an accident, as he goes on to enjoy the freedom and new wealth inherited from the man, but ultimately turns himself in, like the two narrators before him. All the protagonists manage to conceal their murders successfully, be it only shortly or for years as is the case in *The Imp*, and appear ordinary to the authorities. However, given the first-person narration and protagonists' fixation on the realization of murder, the ordinariness is not truly explored, and the reader is offered but a glimpse of it. Still, such a skill of blending in seems to often be translated into the modern portrayals of serial killers, which are soon to be analysed, instilling fear in readers or viewers that they live near us and walk among us, perfectly adapted (Renner 20).

#### 5.1.2. Performance Art and Narcissism

Poe's protagonists often seem to murder for reasons beyond, such as "philosophical or even spiritual reasons" and "practicing a fine art of killing" (Renner 22). They are, as Seltzer puts it, "performance artists", and their murders works of art (4). Poe's narrators all surrender to the imp of the perverse, the eponymous metaphor possibly coined by Poe himself, representing an inherent impulse to do wrong just because there is a possibility to do so. They act on impulse, yet still rationalise and justify their behaviour. Renner suggests that the killers in all three stories believe to have a special talent for murder, as only those with it can execute such acts, which points to their narcissistic trait. They consider themselves artists, as they come up with different scenarios on how to kill, as well as elaborate ideas on how to conceal a murder. For example, in *The Black Cat*, the protagonist contemplates "cutting the corpse into minute fragments, and destroying them by fire," or "casting it in the well in the yard" (Poe 74). He thinks it to be a challenging task, as not everyone could do it successfully,

thus titling himself gifted. The other two protagonists put the equal amount of thought into the crime and its concealment, “pondering upon the means of the murder for weeks, for months” (Poe 195), as is the case in *The Imp*, or hiding the body “so cleverly, so cunningly, that no human eye (...) could have detected anything wrong” (Poe 187) in *The Tell-Tale Heart*.

Often hand in hand with them being performance artists, they display an inflated sense of self as well, or put differently, suffer from the God-complex (Renner 22). DSM-5 describes Narcissistic Personality Disorder as “comprising a pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), a constant need for admiration, and a lack of empathy” (American Psychiatric Association). In *The Tell-Tale Heart*, the protagonist is convinced to have a supernatural sense of hearing that allows him to “hear all things in the heaven and in earth” and “many things in hell” (Poe 183). He also believes that the old man’s eye sees everything like God’s would, including his evil deeds. Threatened by it and crippled by fear, he murders the man and symbolically also God and his laws of right conduct (Renner 23). In *The Black Cat*, the narrator considers the concealment of his wife’s corpse in the wall a victory against God, as he says: “Here at least, then, my labor has not been in vain” (Poe 75), and as Renner observes, labor done in vain is not God’s work. In *The Imp of the Perverse*, the protagonist’s deliberate poisoning is ruled by the coroner to be “death by the visitation of God” (Poe 195). He also believes himself to be a God – able to set the rules of what is morally right or wrong (Renner 24). It can be concluded that all Poe’s antiheroes exhibit narcissistic behaviour, a common denominator of many killers today, be it real or imaginary, that ultimately leads them to self-actualization (McCoppin 43). The fictional works today feature a similar type of killer motivated by completing their imagined artwork or doing a greater good, among which Hannibal Lecter, Dexter, or John Doe, an example to be analysed further in the thesis. They

all “see their work as having a higher purpose” (Renner 23). In their mind, committing crimes for the greater good implies fulfilling grand duties on behalf of God, displacing him.

## 5.2. Narrative Style

### 5.2.1. Focus Shift

Poe’s influence extends beyond just the killers’ personality traits and particular beliefs and behaviours. From narrative point of view, he subverted readers’ expectations by shifting the main focus of his murderous confessions – instead of centring on the crime itself or who committed it, he pushes forward the reasoning: the comprehension of motive behind the murder and the mental condition of the perpetrator. Contemporary fiction does the same, as it “privileges comprehending the killer over apprehending him” (Renner 21). The audience gets a unique access (in)to the killer’s mind whose thoughts are like a puzzle of cues useful for revealing his motives. The goal is to understand *why*, rather than just observe *who* or *what*. Poe achieves this through the use of first-person narration, giving the reader an insight into the inner workings of the protagonist’s mind.

### 5.2.2. Unreliable Narrator

Poe was seemingly fond of the unreliable narration in particular, a narrative style that differs from the traditional, reliable first-person storytelling. The storyteller lacks credibility due to reasons such as insanity or purposeful deception, and the readers are oftentimes left to decipher whether the story told is real or the mere product of the narrator’s imagination. According to McCoppin, Poe’s protagonists are “obsessed narrators plagued by their unconscious” (McCoppin 105) and the subjects of their obsessions seem bizarre, such as a vulture-like eye. They suppress their impulses, a tendency which leads to obsessions, which in turn push them to commit crimes (McCoppin 41). In *The Imp of the Perverse*, Poe mentions that there is darkness and violence in all of us, in our unconscious, and that

humanity has only tried to suppress its existence. As the narrator gets plagued by thoughts of murder, he justifies them as part of human nature instead of controlling them. His fixation is on the murder itself (45). When he kills the man, it is a result of succumbing to his instincts (46). Like the other two protagonists of Poe's tales, he justifies his actions as out of his control and is set on persuading the reader into not doubting his sanity. They are scared of facing their true selves, but their obsessions do exactly that. By their neuroticism displayed toward random, innocent objects, the reader can make the connection early on that the narrator is not of sound mind and cannot be relied on. However, Poe does so in a manner that makes the reader question which parts are true, and sheds light on "reality being limited by subjective perception" (McCoppin 106). In the case of *The Black Cat*, the protagonist's obsession, cats, bring forward his dark side. They haunt him by showing him how far he can go and symbolise his torturing unconscious. As McCoppin notes, the "burned image of the cat" and the "blinded eye of both cats" (107) serve as a reminder of his sin. The black cat on top of his wife's corpse serves as a final condemnation and the ultimate reveal of his unconscious. In all the tales, the protagonists ultimately face and accept who they really are (108).

The serial killer as an unreliable narrator permeates modern moviemaking too, especially in the horror and thriller genre. McCoppin lists Hitchcock's film *Vertigo* (1958) and Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense* (1999) as perfect examples of unreliable, obsessed protagonists who, as the story unfolds, are forced to come to terms with their true selves (109). These, and similar films, show that unreliability remains a strong storytelling tool due to its power to captivate the viewers and make them "question their own identity and reality" (McCoppin 109). However, the depiction of these characters differs from Poe's prototype; there is an added sense of 'character identification'. A viewer can sympathise with the narrators, as they seem more trustworthy and relatable. Poe's antiheroes lack the human

touch, and their insanity creates a space between them and a reader, or so-called ‘narrative distance’, whilst contemporary films remove it by humanising the protagonist.

### 5.2.3. The Twist

Beside unreliability, McCoppin mentions the “twist” technique as an important component of Poe’s tales which had an impact on the filmmaking today (109). After convincing the reader how sensible their acts are for the entirety of the story, the narrators unexpectedly turn themselves in at the end of all three stories, even if not understanding the reason why themselves. They do not confess out of guilt or fear of getting caught, but rather out of anxiety over being ignored or misunderstood. Still, the twist is handled in a different manner in film. In written works, several literary devices allow for deeper internal focalization, but the first-person narration in books also limits the reader’s perception of the whole story. This perception, however, is easily broadened in films, as the visual or auditory cues help the viewer connect the dots (110).

## 6. *Seven*

Released first among the three films to be analysed, *Seven* (1995) was directed by David Fincher. The screenwriter Andrew Kevin Walker, inspired by New Yorkers and the sins that he would notice daily on the streets, created the plot that revolves around a killer punishing the sinners in a serial killing spree (Allen 1150). Two detectives, William Somerset (Morgan Freeman) and David Mills (Brad Pitt), work together to solve the case and capture John Doe (Kevin Spacey) after he has murdered five people who he found guilty of committing different deadly sins. He finally turns himself in before completing the last two, with a plan at the ready – by killing Mills’ wife out of Envy, he provokes the desired reaction out of Mills, who in turn completes his mission by embodying Wrath and shooting him in the head.

*Seven* bears resemblance to certain parts of Poe's representation of the killer and narrative style. In line with Poe's depiction of the killer, John Doe appears to be an average man that blends into society seamlessly. Appearance-wise he is the stereotypical "man next door" – white, middle-aged, harmless, therefore fitting the abnormally normal figure. His anonymity is emphasised throughout the film through particular camerawork – the audience does not see his face for the majority of the film; he manages to escape and get lost in the crowd. He can barely get detectives Somerset's and Mills' attention when handing himself in, shouting multiple times. Only once they notice him is his face revealed to the viewer as well, demonstrating his ability to go unnoticed. That is, like Poe's protagonists, he is unidentifiable and a "no one". His name John Doe testifies to this, as a placeholder-name used for unidentified offenders. He manages to hide from the police skilfully, leaving no trace or witnesses behind. As Richard Dyer observes in his book analysis of the film, "he has no bank records, no social security number, no employment records" (45), and goes as far as to remove the skin from his fingertips in order to escape identification. Doe's ordinariness is ultimately a tool which helps him accomplish his goals, or rather, complete his "artwork".

Doe has a strong disdain for the humankind and society, and he turns to religious extremism in order to justify the hatred. He considers himself ordinary, unimportant, but his "work" exceptional: "I'm not special. I've never been exceptional. This is though, what I'm doing... My work" (*Seven* 1:42:50-1:42:59). Similar to Poe's narrators, Doe sees his crime as an intricate web of doings that only few could devise and execute, a performance art of sorts. Furthermore, a cynic and a narcissist, he deems humans unworthy as they do not realize how bad of a place the world is, or they purely accept it, moulding into it and perpetuating it by becoming bad people themselves. Despite Doe claiming not to be exceptional, clear traits of narcissism become glaringly obvious throughout his words and actions. His act of punishing those he labels immoral can be directly interpreted as himself playing God. To Somerset's

question whether he thinks what he did was God's good work, Doe replies that "the Lord works in mysterious ways" (1:50:03-1:50:15), only establishing that he suffers from delusions of grandeur, or God complex. The meaningfulness he gives to his own killings, and the pride he feels in his ability to execute them, further point to his inflated sense of self. Doe believes to be setting the example: "What I've done is going to be puzzled over and studied and followed... forever" (1:48:00-1:48:20). He feels superior for having reached the awareness of how bad humanity has become and wishes for his murders to be studied in the future, as well as for himself to be a hero by bestowing that lesson upon the society. Additionally, his narcissistic nature blinds him to the hypocrisy of his actions. His "masterpiece" is sinful throughout, as he tries to punish others for their sins. However, Doe is perfectly conscious of that, but justifies it by being chosen by a higher power and defending his enjoyment of killing by claiming there is "nothing wrong with a man taking pleasure in his work" (1:46:20-1:46:25). His murder is the last piece of the puzzle in his grand plan. Still, it is planned for selfish motive too; not in order for him to finally get punished for all the killings because he thinks he deserves it, but rather to provoke Mills to become the personification of Wrath in order to complete his crime and become a martyr. He was wrathful all along while killing the sinful, but failed to consider that as a fault in his perfect masterplan. His "artwork" is flawed and not as exceptional as he regards it to be.

Attempting to capture Doe, the detectives Somerset and Mills, serving also as the viewers' counterparts, make an effort to dig deeper into his mind. They take on Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* to try to understand his next move, as the audience does the same. However, as opposed to the other two films to be analysed, the audience only gets direct access to his mind briefly, toward the end of the film. When he gives himself up to the police and drives them to the final location, Doe finally reveals his motives, closing his monologue by saying: "We see a deadly sin on every street corner, in



every home, and we tolerate it. We tolerate it because it's common, it's trivial. Well, not anymore” (1:47:40-1:48:02). Instead of killing just for satisfaction, or for no apparent reason as was often the case in traditional fiction pre-Poe, he instead does so for a “higher purpose”, believing to be cleansing the world of the sinful and the evil. Despite the hypocrisy and the narcissistic nature, John Doe’s motives are existent and expressed in detail, and the viewer gets to comprehend his reasoning, leading even to arguable character identification. He is not a motiveless threat for the sake of shock value, but rather a well-developed character with real psychological depth, as were characters in Poe’s stories.

Also, an indirect but inevitable connection with Poe can be made by looking at the detectives Somerset and Mills. While Poe’s detective stories are not the focus of this thesis, and further analysis of the link between them and *Seven* cannot be made without digressing, it is worth reiterating that Poe was the creator of the genre. It is safe to assume that without Poe’s C. Auguste Dupin and his notable characteristic of placing himself in his enemy’s shoes and understanding the workings of his mind, detectives Somerset and Mills would have hardly been depicted as such.

As opposed to Poe’s first-person narration and the unreliability that follows, *Seven* has no narrator. Still, the narrative aspect that can be traced back to Poe and his innovative methods, is the twist. As mentioned, John Doe eventually decides to surrender to the authorities, like many of Poe’s antiheroes before him. The twist, however, proves to be twofold. In contrast to Poe’s killers, or *American Psycho*, Doe does not do it not knowing why and succumbing to his unconscious, but rather as part of his well-orchestrated plan. He needs to do so in order to complete his “exceptional work”. As Mills receives a severed head of his wife and acts on impulse, he shoots Doe, finally embodying Wrath, the last of the remaining sins. This marks Doe’s victory and fulfilment of his artwork, subverting viewers’ expectations.

## 7. *American Psycho*

Patrick Bateman is another major figure of the serial killer genre on film, and one that has gained a cult following in pop culture, featuring in several music videos, or on social media in form of memes. *American Psycho*, released in 2000 and directed by Mary Harron, is an adaptation of Bret Easton Ellis' novel of the same name, published in 1991. It follows Patrick Bateman (Christian Bale), an investment banker and a yuppie with sadistic tendencies, or in Tylim's words, "a lawless 20th-century greedy misogynist and misanthrope in designer clothes who follows his own moral code" (738).

Like John Doe and Poe's protagonists before him, Patrick Bateman is a heterosexual white male that appears harmless and ordinary to the naked eye. But Bateman is not a typical "man next door"; he is a corporate banking executive living a lavish lifestyle. The upper-class gives him an even bigger cover in a modern, capitalist society. Blending into this elevated corporate world, he is seemingly incapable of committing monstrous crimes. He is also a "no one", or as Tylim puts it, he is like "a glossy surface with no psychological depth, a high-maintenance, quasimechanical being in need of constant grooming" (739). He claims to be only a concept, an entity: "There is an idea of a Patrick Bateman. Some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me. Only an entity-- something illusory. (...) I simply am not there" (*American Psycho* 06:40-07:10). In such a society he disappears in the mass; the names are not important, only appearances. The ending of the film serves as the primary example of how insignificant the individual is, as Bateman mentions his murders to his lawyer Harold Carnes once again, but he is quick to confuse him for another man: "By the way, Davis, how's Cynthia? You're still seeing her, right?" (1:31:30-1:31:35).

Beside the pathological grooming and obsession with appearance, or perhaps going hand in hand, Patrick Bateman is a malignant narcissist and a compulsive consumer with a

tendency for violence. He wants everything for himself and has zero empathy for others; the aim of his aggression is to control the other in order to feel superior. Tylin supports this statement by listing Bateman's attempts to control his secretary's clothing choice and his renaming of the hired prostitutes, unwilling to learn their real names and telling them precisely what to do according to what pleases him, completely negligent of their own desires. Furthermore, the way for him to enjoy sex is by staring at his own reflection, and his obsession with his exercise and beauty routine in order to keep in shape and look impeccable only reinforces the presence of the narcissistic trait. What eventually drives him over the edge is another superficiality – the superior design of his colleague's Paul Allen's business card, which threatens his fragile ego (739, 740). As a result, he lashes out on a homeless person. He bluntly expresses his lack of empathy while doing so, saying he “doesn't have anything in common with him” (21:47-21:52), right before he takes out a knife, stabs him and kills his dog – a first act of violence on screen. Jealous of Paul Allen's lifestyle and capacity to get whatever he desires, among which a reservation at a fancy restaurant or an apartment that overlooks the park, he resorts to violence once again and kills him with an axe. Bateman sees Paul as better than himself and thus an enemy; he kills because he feels threatened and cannot handle someone challenging his false sense of superiority.

Bateman does not seem to kill for any philosophical reason, nor does he believe his murders have a divine purpose like Doe. He does, however, somewhat fit the performance artist profile present in Poe's stories. Although his final killing spree departs from any form of organized, well-thought-out or creative killing that marked John Doe, or elaborate scheming behind concealing the murders as is the case with Poe's narrators, the killing of Paul Allen seems to have been more than an impulsive homicide. It takes place in his perfectly polished, white apartment, with all the furniture meticulously covered with white sheets in order to prevent the blood splattering and staining the interior. Still, it is highly

probable that it is only the matter of his perfectionism and obsession with cleanliness, rather than the detailed organization of a perfect crime that he considers artistic. He is organised, but not methodical. On the other hand, the frantic bloodshed he causes at the climax of the film correlates with Poe's protagonists' impulsive killings. Their murders are rash and uninhibited, and they are fixated on a random object that eventually triggers them to turn violent. A similar narrative development can be noticed in *American Psycho*. Just like the old man's vulture eye in *The Tell-Tale Heart*, the business card of Paul Allen seems to be the switch for Bateman in *Psycho*.

*American Psycho* handles the "comprehending the killer" differently than *Seven*. Just like with Poe's short stories, the focalization is internal, and the viewer gets to experience everything through Bateman's eyes only. It is hardly his aim to make the viewer understand his motives, as he does not entirely understand them himself. The audience is left to make connections alone and to reach the conclusion that the cause of Bateman's aggression is in fact the consumerist society that pushes people over the limit and simultaneously turns a blind eye to the damage produced. The individual is left to his own devices from start to finish. Bateman's confession is not only overlooked but ignored completely, as the capitalist wheel keeps turning and the audience, if paying close attention, blames the society rather than an ostensibly motiveless killer. Perhaps a subtle case of traditional narratives favouring the killer and offering the audience the chance to somewhat identify with the character, as is becoming more and more frequent today.

The aforementioned internal focalization inevitably implies the unreliability as well; Patrick Bateman, like Poe's protagonists, is a fundamentally unreliable character. On multiple occasions, due to his questionable sanity, the audience is left to wonder if what is being presented is actually real, or merely product of his imagination. He even acknowledges his insanity at a certain point of the film: "I feel lethal, on the verge of frenzy. I think my mask of

sanity is about to slip” (23:00-23:17). Several scenes create a suspicion of whether the killings are real or imaginary, mostly toward the close of the film. Namely, the absurdity of the ATM displaying “Feed me a stray cat” (1:19:17), the police’s complete dismissal of his confession, the apartment previously filled with blood and dead bodies suddenly clean, or the colleague not believing his revelation, as well as claiming that Paul Allen cannot be dead because he had dinner with him ten days prior. All the scenes are a twist in itself, another of Poe’s signature elements. Still, the ultimate twist is, once again, the viewer’s not knowing whether the crimes were really committed or mere fantasies of a psychotic mind. All the answers are largely left to interpretation, challenging the viewer to think independently. The lack of certainty and reliability, as well as openness to interpretation, is a clear connection to the previously analysed short stories written by Poe. The first-person narration takes the viewer on a journey with Bateman who gets no resolution, as he stares into the camera and says: “But even after admitting this, there is no catharsis. My punishment continues to elude me... and I gain no deeper knowledge of myself. No new knowledge can be extracted from my telling. This confession has meant... nothing” (1:36:40-1:37:02). The twist ultimately meant nothing, as the corrupt society continues to gloss over anything that is not surface-level.

## **8. Joker**

A notorious comic book villain, the Joker is undoubtedly among the most well-known figures of the contemporary cinema. Having been portrayed by several actors throughout the sixty years since his first on screen appearance in Don Weis’s television series *Batman* (1966), the character has undergone multiple changes, but the popularity never waned. Despite some differences between the interpretations, Joker remains “a trickster figure” and a clever murderer “who thrives on thwarting expectations” (Yurievich Skryabin 330). But Todd

Phillip's *Joker* (2019) is a psychological thriller that departs from the general depiction of the comic icon, a social commentary biopic that puts an emphasis on Arthur Fleck's mental illness and difficult life. Played by Joaquin Phoenix, he is an alienated, misunderstood individual suffering from a disease characterized by uncontrollable laughter, working as a party clown and pursuing a stand-up career. Weary of being a laughing stock, he shoots three strangers on the subway, followed by his foster mother after finding adoption papers, and in film's culmination, the television presenter Murray Franklin (Robert De Niro) on live TV, which causes riots to erupt all over Gotham city.

Arthur Fleck does not necessarily fit the abnormally normal model of the fictional serial killer set by Poe, as he does not blend with the society in the same way that John Doe or Patrick Bateman do. While certainly a heterosexual, white, middle-aged man, he is a socially inept and alienated individual, ridiculed by the masses. In the first scene, while performing one of his clown routines, he is pushed and beaten up on the street by a group of bullies. Suffering from the pseudobulbar affect (PBA) that causes him to laugh hysterically, he can hardly go unnoticed. In the bus scene at the beginning of the film, he tries to make a child laugh, but starts laughing involuntarily when the mother notices. Moreover, in one of the key moments in the movie, him being bullied for his laughter results in his first bout of aggression and triple murder. After he sees three men harass a woman in the subway, his pathological laughter brings attention onto him and they start beating him up. He abruptly shoots them dead out of self-defence and overall irritation with ongoing social maltreatment. His laughter and general anxiety during his live stand-up act, manifested in sweating and stuttering, get mocked on public television by Murray Franklin: "Here's a guy who thinks if you just keep laughing, it'll somehow make you funny. Check out this joker" (*Joker* 59:39-59:50). It is precisely his mental illness that separates him from the society, as he is ridiculed, abused and shunned. Yurievich Skryabin suggests that Arthur suffers from the Antisocial

Personality Disorder, stating that he continuously exhibits unlawful behaviour, “aggressiveness and disregard for the safety of others, as well as lack of remorse” (331).

These characteristics go in line with Poe’s protagonists who committed heinous acts with no genuine repentance. However, Arthur does seem ordinary for someone with the propensity to kill; he comes across as soft-natured and incapable of violence. While he does not fit in the society for being a mentally ill person, he fits in by being a seemingly non-threatening personality like the great majority of people.

According to Yurievich Skryabin, Arthur, like Doe, Bateman, and Poe’s protagonists, demonstrates behaviours typical of the Narcissistic Personality Disorder (332). Obsessed with the idea of being a guest on the talk show and achieving public acclaim as a stand-up comedian, he showcases the desperate call for attention and the need to be admired. He is lacking in self-confidence and seeking external validation that he ultimately never gets through comedy, which results in extreme violent outbursts throughout the film. It is these outbursts that finally get him the recognition he craves. After confessing to murder and then shooting Murray during the talk show, mass protests begin across Gotham, with masses in clown masks cheering Joker as he dances victoriously atop a car. As Yurievich Skryabin suggests, his vivid fantasies about his next-door love interest, a single mother Sophie Dumond, further prove the presence of the disorder, given that narcissistic personalities often fixate on the idea of ideal love. He imagines them to be closer than they actually are throughout the duration of the film, having delusions of her attending his stand-up act and her general display of romantic interest toward him. As he enters her home after learning the truth in Arkham hospital, she does not really know who he is: “Oh, my God! What are you doing here? You’re in the wrong apartment. Your name’s Arthur, right? You live down the hall. I really need you to leave. My little girl is sleeping in the other room” (1:17:25-1:17:58). Another tell-tale sign of the disorder and simultaneously parallel with Poe’s narrators, as well

as a sign of Antisocial Personality Disorder, is his lack of empathy, as he kills without remorse. He believes the victims to have deserved it by being cruel to him and rationalises his actions toward the end of the film when interviewed by Murray: “I killed those guys because they were awful. Everybody is awful these days. It’s enough to make anyone crazy. (...) If it was me dying on the sidewalk, you’d walk right over me! I pass you every day and you don’t notice me” (1:42:53-1:43:50). The frustration stems from feelings of self-pity and a sense of entitlement, a victim mentality common in narcissistic personalities. Arthur, however, is not a performance artist and most of his murders are not carefully organised, or part of a bigger scheme. He does not kill for art, but rather out of irritation with the world that he believes treats him unfairly, in an attempt to regain control and achieve the attention he yearns for.

As it follows Arthur’s shortcomings, downfall and the final rise of the Joker, *Joker* is essentially a character study film. His life and internal struggles are at the centre of the film, rather than the plot. The audience gains access to his thought process through his journaling, counselling, and general single-character scenes. In his journal, he writes that “the worst part of having a mental illness is that people expect you to behave as if you don’t” (26:52) and tells his therapist that he “just doesn’t want to feel bad anymore” (07:37). Together with the dancing scenes, him obsessively practicing for the interview, and any or all murder scenes, it represents a trip through his psychopathology. As a result, the other characters and the “how” of the crimes take a back seat, bringing the “why” to the forefront, following the example set by Poe.

While not precisely unreliable to the extent of *American Psycho*, the narration in *Joker* gives some clues to make the audience question Arthur’s reliability. As mentioned in relation to his narcissistic nature, he believes himself and Sophie to be nurturing a relationship. Shown through his lens, the audience believes the same, but soon realizes that their closeness is but a figment of his imagination. The viewer is told so through Sophie’s



rejection and left to wonder how reliable Arthur is in reality. Was he really treated so harshly by the world, like being beaten up by the children at the beginning of the film, or being as badly received by Thomas Wayne? However, since the audience gets a glimpse of his delusion only through Sophie, it can be assumed that the unreliability extended only that far, and that the viewer would have been explicitly told about other instances in the similar manner as well. Moreover, his delusions seemed to consist of himself being treated better, be it by Sophie or the audience during his stand-up routine. Therefore, the violent parts, or the harsh conversation with Wayne, do not fit the unreliable narrative.

Poe's twist shows itself primarily in Arthur's unanticipated transition into Joker. It is an unexpected turn of events as the audience follows him on a journey from a mellow, quiet individual to a violent, vengeful criminal. Poe's protagonists suffer similar dissent into madness and brutality. The murder of the three men in the subways marks a turning point: their mockery and judgement of Arthur whom they see as weaker, and consequently incapable of violent acts, triggers Arthur and results in their shooting. Two other twists take place; Arthur uncovering the truth about himself being adopted, and the culmination scene with the assassination of Murray. Initially wanting to commit suicide, he loses it when Murray mocks him and refuses to see his side of the story, and points the gun at him instead, killing him.

The character identification is a strong point in *Joker*, and unlike Poe's stories, there is no narrative distance. By offering a close-up of his life and presenting his suffering, the audience is expected to understand Arthur's motives and empathise. However, some critics have addressed the risk of the glorification of the figure, stating that the film "appears to justify its protagonist's kill drive as a refusal to be a punchline" (Echrlich). There is a worry that the sympathetic representation of the killer, as well as the praise from the masses at the

end of the film, might encourage those who identify with Joker to act out in a similarly violent manner.

## 9. Conclusion

An influential figure in several different genres, be it horror, mystery, science fiction or crime, Edgar Allan Poe set the standard for countless authors that followed, classic or contemporary. More specifically, the effect he has had on contemporary serial killer narratives is evident not only in the similar storytelling techniques emerging in fiction today, but also in the character dissection – his innovative idea of adding a deeper, psychological dimension to a previously flat serial killer figure can be traced in major films of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, such as *Seven*, *American Psycho* and *Joker*. John Doe, Patrick Bateman and Arthur Fleck are all characters that exhibit fictional killers' traits modelled by Poe. They blend into society as seemingly harmless individuals, suffer from narcissism, and see their murders as well-deserved and a form of art in itself. With regard to the narrative style, Poe's prioritisation of reasoning over crime, first-person narration and subsequent unreliability, and the final twist all occur in each film. However, where the contemporary narratives break away from their precursors is in the creation of character identification. Poe's work emphasized the workings of a corrupt human mind while also maintaining a narrative distance. On the other hand, modern portrayals seem to present an increasingly empathetic killer persona, as evidenced primarily by Arthur Fleck. While it is true that such depictions existed before, they hardly focused on the killer's mental state for the whole duration of the film and reached the popularity *Joker* and its protagonist have. With evidence suggesting that his works were often cited as inspiration for real-life serial killers too, it raises the question of whether Poe's curiosity about the human psyche unknowingly contributed to the glorification of the figure. While this could be the case, such hypothesis seems far-fetched, and far extends

the limits of this paper which aimed to establish Poe's indisputable influence on serial killer narratives specifically. Regardless of whether detrimental or benign from societal perspective, he undoubtedly defined the genre and the literary world in general, and his grip on the audiences does not yet seem to be loosening.

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## 11. Edgar Allan Poe's Influence on Contemporary Serial Killer Narratives: Summary and Key Words

Edgar Allan Poe, with his examination of the human psyche and the workings of a murderous mind in his short stories *The Black Cat* (1843), *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1843) and *The Imp of the Perverse* (1845), paved the way for serial killer narratives. The analysis of key traits of Poe's murderers, such as abnormal normality and God-complex or narcissism, forms the core of the paper, along with the dissection of his writing style marked by first-person narration signalling a focus shift, unreliable narration and the twist. These research points are used to later compare Poe's traditional base to contemporary serial killer depictions on film, taking *Seven* (1995), *American Psycho* (2000) and *Joker* (2019) and their murderers John Doe, Patrick Bateman and Arthur Fleck as examples. Alongside the parallels, dissimilarities are laid out as well, noting the character identification as a detachment from its base, and the final identification of possible dangers that accompany it.

Key words: Edgar Allan Poe, serial killers, contemporary serial killer narratives, abnormal normality, narcissism, unreliable narrator, *Seven*, *American Psycho*, *Joker*

## 12. Utjecaj Edgara Allana Poea na suvremene narative o serijskim ubojicama: sažetak i ključne riječi

Edgar Allan Poe je ispitivanjem ljudske psihe i djelovanja ubojitog uma u svojim kratkim pričama *Crni mačak* (1843.), *Izdajničko srce* (1843.) i *Davao perverzности* (1845.) utro put za narative o serijskim ubojicama. Analiza ključnih osobina Poeovih ubojica, poput abnormalne normalnosti i narcisoidnosti ili kompleksa Boga, čini srž rada, zajedno sa seciranjem njegovog stila pisanja kojeg obilježava pripovijedanje u prvom licu, odnosno nepouzdanu pripovjedač i iznenađujući zaplet. Ove polazne točke istraživanja koriste se za kasniju usporedbu Poeove tradicionalne baze sa suvremenim prikazima serijskih ubojica na velikom ekranu, uzimajući kao primjer filmove *Sedam* (1995.), *Američki psiho* (2000.) i *Joker* (2019.) i njihove ubojice Johna Doea, Patricka Batemana i Arthura Flecka. Uz sličnosti, izlažu se i različitosti; identifikacija s likom je karakteristična isključivo za moderni prikaz ubojice, te se primjećuje odvajanje od Poeove osnove i potencijalno opasne popratne posljedice.

Ključne riječi: Edgar Allan Poe, serijski ubojice, suvremeni narativi o serijskim ubojicama, abnormalna normalnost, narcisoidnost, nepouzdanu pripovjedač, *Sedam*, *Američki psiho*, *Joker*