

The Man of the Crowd



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF EDGAR ALLAN POE

Edgar Poe was born the second child of two actors in Boston, Massachusetts. Shortly after his father left the family, his mother passed away. Poe was no more than two years old at the time. He was unofficially adopted and renamed Edgar Allan by Frances and John Allan in Richmond, Virginia. After spending a year at the University of Virginia and briefly serving in the military, he began to focus entirely on his writing, which encompassed prose, poetry, and literary criticism. He wrote and edited for several literary journals throughout the United States at various points in his life, but he always struggled with alcoholism and persistent financial issues brought about by debts, low salaries, and an economic depression. In spite of these setbacks, Poe strove to make a living from his passion, writing iconic tales such as *The Raven*, and producing a massive body of work despite his troubles. He knew that his audience would react more strongly to macabre and shocking stories, and these darker themes were often inspired by his own personal tragedies. Poe published *Ulalume*, a poem about his grief, in 1848, the year after his first wife Virginia died from tuberculosis. Poe himself died of unknown causes the following year, leaving behind a lasting legacy that has inspired writers of Gothic literature across the world.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Poe wrote *The Man of the Crowd* at the dawn of the Victorian Era and during the Industrial Revolution. The many social changes and technological advancements of this age affected the entire world, but many of these changes occurred in dense cities like London, where the story takes place. This informs many of the details described as the narrator sits in a café and watches the people around him. He's not only watching people go about their evening; he's watching and identifying specific social classes of people that have been newly created in this quickly developing urban center. These categories include the clerks of a new middle class, the peddlers and "professional" beggars taking advantage of the swarming city population, and even the sick people and "ghastly invalids" who are likely victims of the era's poor sanitation standards. Poe includes these details to effectively portray the world that he and many of his urban readers inhabited: a crowded yet lonely world where people struggled to reconfigure their lives to adapt to the rapidly advancing society around them. The increased urbanization of this period likely inspired Poe to explore dark Romantic themes of human emotion, isolation, and alienation within a busy and bewildering city setting.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

While "The Man of the Crowd" didn't directly influence many other writers in its own right, it's often cited for its similarities to some of Poe's later works. For example, the premise of the story can be considered a precursor to the detective stories he would soon write. The narrator focuses on the minute details of the individuals walking past the window, deducing information about their personal histories, occupations, and social statuses based on seemingly innocuous clues. Poe would later use this idea again in his 1841 short story "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," which features a detective who solves a mystery by noticing the smallest possible details. In this way, "The Man of the Crowd" is also a precursor to other works of classic detective fiction, anticipating famous mystery characters like Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot. Ultimately, Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, and most classic mystery authors probably owe much of their success to stories like "The Man of the Crowd," since such stories planted the seeds that would eventually grow into classic detective story tropes. In particular, "The Man of the Crowd" was one of the first stories about an inquisitive and observant protagonist seeking to solve a dark mystery to uncover a secret crime, though Poe's story ends without resolution, giving it a less tidy ending than most detective stories.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Man of the Crowd
- **When Written:** 1840
- **Where Written:** Philadelphia, United States
- **When Published:** 1840
- **Literary Period:** Romantic, Early Victorian
- **Genre:** Gothic, Gothic Mystery
- **Setting:** The streets of London during a busy evening in autumn
- **Climax:** The narrator tries to confront the mysterious old man he has been following, but the old man simply ignores him and continues on his way.
- **Antagonist:** The story has no traditional antagonist, but the old man whom the narrator follows is presented as mysterious in a sinister, antagonistic way.
- **Point of View:** First Person Limited

EXTRA CREDIT

Genre Pioneer. Edgar Allan Poe is widely considered to be the inventor of the detective fiction genre. "The Man of the Crowd"

features a few early elements of the genre, such as the protagonist making deductions about the people he watches based on the minute details of their physical appearance and mannerisms.

The Unreadable Book. The German book that Poe mentions at the beginning and end of the story is *Hortulus Animae*, which was printed in roughly 1500 in Germany. It was a once-popular prayer book, but according to Poe's unknown source, it "does not permit itself to be read," either because it contained something too horrible to be fully read or simply because there were no existing copies at the time.



PLOT SUMMARY

An unnamed narrator sits in a London coffee-house on an autumn evening, his body and mind having recently recovered from a brief bout of illness. Feeling unusually attentive and curious, he begins to pass the time by watching the crowd of people passing by the coffee-house window. At first, he observes the endless crowd as a whole, but then he starts focusing on the individual people in the throng and sorting them into categories in his mind. He notices small details in the clothing and mannerisms of the people he watches, allowing him to deduce their occupations, personalities, social standings, and so on. He spots people of seemingly every social class in the city, from respectable clerks and merchants to pickpockets, peddlers, beggars, young girls returning from work, and everyone in between.

Eventually, the narrator spies someone in the midst of the crowd who seems impossible to categorize. This person—a feeble old man—wears a bizarre expression on his face that captures the narrator's attention and ignites his imagination. The old man's face seems to portray many contradictory feelings at once. The expression is almost indescribable, combining fear, joy, guilt, triumph, malice, despair, and much more, all in a single confusing countenance. Fascinated, and feeling sure that the old man must be harboring some dark secret or terrible crime, the narrator leaves the coffee-house and follows the stranger through the crowd, taking care not to be noticed.

The narrator follows the old man through the streets for hours as the night wears on. The old man's erratic behavior during this pursuit only makes him appear more mysterious and suspicious. He seems to wander aimlessly throughout London, never taking any notice of the people around him, including the narrator. His clothes appear filthy, but they seem to be made of a beautiful material, and he's carrying what the narrator assumes to be either a **dagger or a diamond**. He wanders through crowds, streets, and alleyways in various parts of town all night long, still followed and watched by the increasingly curious narrator. This pursuit continues until night falls on the

following day.

At last, the narrator is too tired to continue. He steps in front of the old man and faces him directly, but the old man ignores him and walks past him, resuming his mysterious journey through the streets. The narrator gives up hope of learning anything about the old man, calling him "the man of the crowd" and "the type and the genius of deep crime." The old man is never alone in the city's mass of humanity, but he's alone in holding onto whatever he's hiding from the world. The narrator ends his pursuit with more questions than answers, wondering if it's a blessing that some secrets are too terrible to ever reveal themselves.



CHARACTERS

The Narrator – The narrator is the story's unnamed protagonist, who is determined in his pursuit of an old man whose strange demeanor captures his interest. More than any other trait, curiosity is what defines the narrator. His keen interest in the personal lives of the people around him is what ultimately leads to his long and confusing pursuit of the old man, and the story plays out through the narrator's perceptive eyes, which catch every tiny detail. Throughout the story, the narrator becomes a vessel for readers to experience curiosity of their own, as the narrator wonders what secrets the old man could possibly be hiding. However, the narrator's deductions about the old man and the people of the crowd might not be all that realistic—it's totally possible that the conclusions he draws about people are inaccurate. This makes him a potentially unreliable narrator, but one who still notes the details of the people around him and attempts to categorize them. In this way, he tries to impose order on the chaotic world of the city, striving to make sense of the bewildering mass of humanity around him. This turns out to be a futile effort in the end; the old man remains a mystery that the narrator can never solve. But the narrator himself remarks that maybe his ignorance of those dark secrets is a good thing, and that maybe some things aren't meant to be known. Despite this, the narrator embodies the aspect of human nature that is constantly seeking to learn, discover, solve problems, and answer questions. Although he almost seems to abandon his curiosity at the end of the story, the narrator still tries to define and categorize the old man, even if that only means labeling him as uncategorizable.

The Old Man – The old man is a mysterious figure who leads the narrator on a long, strange pursuit through the streets of London. Nothing is known about the old man's past, his motives, or the dark secrets the narrator assumes he has. He is an intentionally ambiguous and confusing character—an embodiment of the unknown. In particular, his bizarre and contradictory facial expression attracts the narrator's curiosity and makes his mind run wild. The old man is assumed to be hiding a terrible secret or past crime, but little evidence actually

points to this being the case, except perhaps the glinting object beneath his clothing, which might be either a stolen **diamond or a dagger**. This is just one of many ambiguities and contradictions that make up his character—he’s carrying either a weapon or a beautiful gemstone; his clothing is dirty but seems high-quality; he’s surrounded by other people but clearly alone in his own troubled mind. Because his main purpose in the story is to ignite the narrator’s curiosity, it’s almost as if he’s hardly even a character in his own right, almost becoming a projection of the narrator’s overactive imagination. The old man is just one unusual figure in a sea of thousands; he’s “the man of the crowd,” and his existence implies that anyone in the vast city could be hiding something. But, of course, he might not be hiding anything terrible at all, despite his strange behavior. It’s this final bit of ambiguity that lets the reader decide what to make of the old man and, by extension, the narrator.



CURIOSITY, OBSESSION, AND THE UNKNOWN

From the very beginning, the narrator is a curious and nosy character, obsessing over the personal details he perceives in the people in the street outside the coffee-house. Almost every event in the story is dominated by this curiosity, especially as one particular old man’s strange behavior piques his interest. But even before this uncategorizable figure enters the story, the narrator is determined to fill in all of the blanks about each and every stranger walking past the window. As he assigns labels to the individuals in the crowd—concerning their class, occupation, personality, and so on—he’s trying to satisfy his “calm but inquisitive interest in everything,” leaving no room for unknowns in his mind.

But when the old man seizes the narrator’s imagination, leading him on a long, fruitless pursuit through the streets, the narrator finally admits that maybe some things can’t—or shouldn’t—be known. Taken as a whole, the failed quest pushes the reader to think about human curiosity and, more importantly, its limits. After all, the narrator is not omniscient; he could be wrong in his impressions about every stranger he sees, including the old man. In this light, readers might wonder if the narrator’s observations are trustworthy to begin with—and whether the narrator’s unquenchable obsession says more about him than about the strange old man. Ultimately, it’s framed as a blessing that the narrator’s curiosity about the old man can’t be satisfied. Poe suggests that there’s a point at which curious inquiry should end, because there are some things that everyone is better off not knowing—and obsessing over them could lead toward madness.



LONDON, CROWDS, AND URBAN ALIENATION

Despite the hundreds—maybe thousands—of people appearing in it, “The Man of the Crowd” is a story full of loneliness and isolation. The city of London is practically the only feature of the story that has a name; the narrator, the old man, and the countless people of the crowds are never named or given any real identity beyond their outward, everyday appearance. No lines of dialogue are shared between characters, and the two principal characters never meaningfully interact with each other. The narrator spends plenty of time speculating about the personal details of the strangers passing by the coffee-house window, but their true selves can’t really be known from a quick glance. Even these individuals in the crowds are alone, despite being surrounded by people; they’re each alone in their own private worlds, in a sea of strangers. All of these elements come together to create a sense of lonely alienation in teeming 19th-century London. Despite sharing a city and sometimes an occupation, class status, or other personal traits with each other, Londoners



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don’t have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



DARK SECRETS

The narrator spends hours people-watching from the window of a London coffee-house, entertaining himself by categorizing passersby according to their class, occupation, and other readily observable traits. But the story takes a darker turn when the narrator begins to follow a strange old man through the streets, imagining that the inscrutable man must have a remarkable history and maybe even a sinister goal in mind. With his bizarre facial expressions and unusual behavior in the crowds, the old man becomes a darkly fascinating figure in the narrator’s imagination, all because of the secrets that the old man is assumed to be keeping. Just like the reader, the narrator believes that he’s getting closer to revealing a dark truth as he follows the old man, but despite the exhausting chase, neither character is really pursuing a destination, but rather fleeing something. This is why the old man “refuses to be alone” though he ignores the people around him; he’s harboring a burden that he can’t bear to acknowledge. Indeed, as he abandons his pursuit, the narrator can only conclude that the old man is “the type and the genius of deep crime”—somehow a personification of humanity’s “worst heart.” Thus, instead of describing the dark side of human nature directly, Poe uses the unresolved pursuit to suggest that people—not just the old man, but perhaps the narrator and even the reader—keep their darkest secrets locked deep within themselves, going to great lengths to avoid them.

appear isolated, unable or unwilling to form meaningful connections with one another.

Worse, this sense of alienation threatens to erode people's connection to themselves as well. In this bewildering urban setting, it seems easier to follow the crowd than to stop and self-reflect. For example, as he walks endlessly through the crowds and "refuses to be alone," the old man appears to be isolated from any personal sense of identity and purpose, smothering his own existence in the busy activities of others. As life in the city wears on, Poe suggests, maybe it's only a matter of time before more and more "[people] of the crowd" become alienated from themselves and others in this way.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE DIAMOND OR THE DAGGER

The glinting object hidden in the mysterious old man's clothing symbolizes the sense of ambiguity and uncertainty that overtakes the narrator. Although the narrator spots this shining object as he follows the old man, this detail itself doesn't actually help him answer any of his questions about the man—rather, this clue only serves to heighten the narrator's curiosity, as he guesses that the object is either a diamond or a dagger. This raises more questions, none of which are answered by the end of the story. If it's a dagger, the old man might be dangerous. If it's a diamond, he might be a thief. And, of course, it's possible that the glinting object is something else entirely. Similar to the old man's strange facial expressions, then, the object he's carrying represents a fascinating but unknowable secret. The narrator assumes he can deduce facts about it through observation, but he never finds out what it is, suggesting that sometimes it's nearly impossible to arrive at accurate conclusions about strangers, all of whom have their own hidden lives. To that end, the reader—and the narrator himself—never gets to see what, exactly, the object is. Instead, the story simply highlights the way this object makes the narrator's mind run wild with possibilities. In turn, the object itself comes to represent the unfathomable mysteries lurking in the lives of strangers and, moreover, the human tendency to become fascinated with the other people's secrets.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Everyman's Library edition of *The Complete Stories* published in 1993.

The Man of the Crowd Quotes

☞ Now and then, alas, the conscience of man takes up a burden so heavy in horror that it can be thrown down only into the grave. And thus the essence of all crime is undivulged.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Old Man

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 442

Explanation and Analysis

Before recounting his strange day in London, the narrator reflects on the nature of dark and heavy secrets that people keep to themselves for the rest of their lives. He alludes to a "horror" that must be hidden and buried rather than faced, foreshadowing the old man's ultimate refusal to reveal the secrets that seem to torment him. It's implied that there are people in the world who are hiding within themselves a deeper, central secret at the heart of "all crime," unable to be discovered by the world at large simply because some things are too terrible to ever share with another human being.

The use of the word "conscience" is worth noting; perhaps the old man and all people who keep terrible secrets consider it their moral obligation to never disturb the people around them with their horrific truths. In this way, their secret truly is a "burden" that they carry, as they can neither share it with another person nor easily bear the weight themselves. This is reflected in the old man's erratic behavior later on. He acts almost as if he's physically holding onto something that's causing him private grief and agitation—something he can't bring himself to reveal.

☞ Others, still a numerous class, were restless in their movements, had flushed faces, and talked and gesticulated to themselves, as if feeling in solitude on account of the very denseness of the company around.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 443

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the narrator begins his evening of people-watching by observing the more "respectable" upper-class men walking by the window, including businessmen and lawyers. Among

this group, he notes people who act as though they're alone despite walking in the midst of a massive crowd on a busy London street. Their restlessness and disregard for the people around them suggests that they feel no connection to the rest of the crowd, seemingly content to be "in solitude" in their own private worlds.

This behavior reinforces the theme of urban alienation: the emotional disconnect and sense of loneliness that defines Poe's depiction of London. Instead of experiencing the company of the thousands of other people in the city, everyone seems to retreat deeper into themselves, treating the crowd as a curtain of privacy—nothing but background chatter and white noise. In contrast to the people outside, the narrator is the only character who appears to take a genuine interest in the people around him, and he frames his own inquisitive attitude as an exceptional, unusual state of mind.

●● They all had slightly bald heads, from which the right ears, long used to pen-holding, had an odd habit of standing off on end. I observed that they always removed or settled their hats with both hands, and wore watches, with short gold chains of a substantial and ancient pattern.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 444

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator continues his examination of the people outside the coffee-house window, noting the most minute details of their appearance and mannerisms. This is just one example of the level of detail the narrator applies to his observations. His obsessive curiosity drives him to focus on the most subtle and intricate traits of the people walking by, even including minor habits such as the way they hold their hats and slight differences in the angles of their ears. His almost absurd powers of perception prompt the reader to question whether the narrator's point of view can be fully trusted.

Regardless of his detective skills or lack thereof, the narrator notes many clear and unambiguous details as well, and these highlight the often extreme class disparities in Poe's rendition of London. The tradesmen, with their watches and gold chains, represent the highest social class that the narrator examines. These are contrasted against

the lower classes in a long list of gamblers, beggars, peddlers, and "invalids" later on, demonstrating how the city's social isolation is caused, at least in part, by class stratifications. In describing the wide variety of people in the street, Poe depicts how their differences keep them apart rather than bringing them together.

●● The wild effects of the light enchained me to an examination of individual faces; and although the rapidity with which the world of light flitted before the window prevented me from casting more than a glance upon each visage, still it seemed that, in my peculiar mental state, I could frequently read, even in that brief interval of a glance, the history of long years.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 446

Explanation and Analysis

This is the point at which the narrator's seemingly objective observations of the crowd begin to veer heavily into speculation. The narrator feels as though he can intuitively learn the intimate histories of the people walking past, just by glancing at their features. But this sensation doesn't seem to be deliberate on his part; instead, he feels "enchained" by the interesting play of the lights in the streets, and by his own curiosity and overactive imagination. He feels forcibly compelled not only to categorize the people of the crowd, but to imagine entire backgrounds and life stories about them in the brief moments while they pass by.

The narrator admits that this state of mind is "peculiar," and this moment marks the stage in his people-watching when his obsessive curiosity digs itself too deeply in his mind to be ignored. This serves as the setup for the appearance of the old man, whose personal history is difficult for the narrator to imagine. From here on, the narrator is driven by curiosity, in the sense that it seems to control him. Just as he was "enchained" by the light's effects to imagine the histories of the strangers outside the coffee-house, he's bound by his obsession to pursue the old man and fill in the tantalizing blanks in his imagination.

Any thing even remotely resembling that expression I had never seen before. I well remember that my first thought, upon beholding it, was that Retzsch, had he viewed it, would have greatly preferred it to his own pictural incarnations of the fiend.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Old Man

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 446

Explanation and Analysis

As the narrator sees the strange old man for the first time, he remarks on the extremely unusual expression and compares the old man's appearance to that of the devil himself. Moritz Retzsch was a German painter best known for his depictions of "the fiend," so the narrator invoking this name illustrates just how striking and unsettling he finds the old man's appearance to be. Naturally, the expression only increases the narrator's obsessive desire to learn more about this figure. More importantly, likening the old man to Satan immediately gives him strong thematic associations with darkness, evil, and the promise of forbidden knowledge, pursued by the curious narrator.

This comparison encourages the reader to see the old man in the same way that the narrator does—as a suspicious criminal hiding a dark secret. The reader only perceives the old man and the rest of London through the narrator's point of view, but no information is ever revealed concerning the old man's devilish crimes, assuming he committed any at all. Whether or not the narrator is correct in his assumptions, framing the old man as Satan primes Poe's audience to read the rest of the story through that lens, always expecting a dark secret or deception to come to light.

His clothes, generally, were filthy and ragged; but as he came, now and then, within the strong glare of a lamp, I perceived that his linen, although dirty, was of beautiful texture; and my vision deceived me, or, through a rent in a closely-buttoned and evidently second-handed *roquelaire* which enveloped him, I caught a glimpse of both a diamond and of a dagger.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Old Man

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 446

Explanation and Analysis

As the narrator begins following the fascinating old man and looking at him more closely, he notices a few strange and seemingly contradictory details in his appearance. This description of the old man goes out of its way to depict polar opposites existing at the same time, echoing the description of his conflicting expressions when the narrator first saw him. The old man's clothes aren't just high quality; they're "beautiful" despite being filthy, an image which is difficult to imagine and all the more interesting as a result. As the reader tries to picture the old man's bizarre appearance, the reader becomes just as curious about him as the narrator is, even as the narrator admits his eyes might be playing tricks on him.

The most striking image to this effect is the mysterious object glinting within the old man's clothing. The narrator says he spies "both" a diamond and a dagger, as if he's seeing two different objects occupying the same space at once. The item—whether it's a diamond, a dagger, or neither—seems to shapeshift in the half-light of the streetlamps, taunting the narrator's imagination with another contradiction: is it something beautiful and valuable, or something sinister and dangerous? The shifting symbol of the diamond or the dagger is one of many ambiguities that heightens the story's theme of curiosity. The old man is impossible not to follow while he's carrying such an interesting item that's just on the cusp of clear visibility.

By and by he passed into a cross street, which, although densely filled with people, was not quite so much thronged as the main one he had quitted. Here a change in his demeanor became evident. He walked more slowly and with less object than before—more hesitatingly.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Old Man

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 447

Explanation and Analysis

Partway into his pursuit, the narrator notices a shift in the old man's behavior when the two of them enter a comparatively less busy area of the city. This "change in his demeanor" occurs several times throughout the pursuit,

whenever the old man walks into a part of London that has fewer people in it. He moves “hesitatingly” in these less populated zones, while back in the thronging main street, he had walked much more quickly and seemingly with more purpose. His increased discomfort in this moment indicates that he’s reluctant to be alone, or even close to alone.

This foreshadows the narrator’s assessment of the old man at the end of the story, when he claims that the old man “refuses to be alone” to avoid facing his dark secrets. The old man’s mood swings also mirror the behavior of the other citizens of London walking through the main thoroughfare outside the coffee-house. Both the old man and the “respectable” people of the city use the crowd around them as a buffer, giving them both aloneness and the comfort of distracting chatter at the same time. This emphasizes the theme of urban alienation, making the reader wonder if the old man is really an exceptional figure, or if anyone in the cold and isolating city could easily become just like him.

“This old man,” I said at length, “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 his deeds.”

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Old Man

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 450

Explanation and Analysis

After finally facing the old man directly, only to be ignored as the old man continues on his lonely way, the narrator gives up his chase and attempts to explain his quarry’s strange behavior. He “refuses to be alone,” so he must be hiding something terrible, even from himself. This explanation seems to be mostly for the narrator’s own benefit, as he still feels compelled to satisfy his curiosity despite giving up. Although he admits that he “shall learn no more” of the old man, the narrator nonetheless ends his tale by trying to categorize the old man in the same way he categorized the passersby at the beginning of the story.

This last speech is the narrator’s attempt to understand something that, in his opinion, cannot ever be understood. Calling the old man “the genius of deep crime” allows the narrator to concede his ignorance while still holding on to his suspicions about the old man harboring a dark and unmentionable secret. In this way, the narrator has hardly changed since the beginning of the story; he still can’t help but attempt to classify, explain, and feel like he understands. The narrator declares to himself that the old man is “the man of the crowd,” but his own obsessive pursuit through the crowded streets might make him more similar to the strange, lonely old man than he’d like to admit.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE MAN OF THE CROWD

The unnamed narrator briefly reflects on the idea of secrets and crimes that are too terrible to ever be revealed. He mentions a German book that “does not permit itself to be read,” comparing it to the dark secrets that die along with the people who keep them, never having told them to another living soul. He guesses that the true heart of human evil will never be fully revealed, simply because people are compelled to keep their most horrifying thoughts and deeds hidden deep within themselves.

The narrator sits by the window in an unnamed coffee-house in London, as an autumn afternoon comes to an end. He notes his cheerful and inquisitive mood as he’s recently regained his strength of body and mind following a period of sickness. After entertaining himself by glancing at newspaper advertisements and the other patrons of the coffee-house, he turns his curious attention to the seemingly endless crowd of people walking down the busy street just outside the window. He begins by observing and thinking about the masses as a whole, but then he focuses on the more intricate details of the passing individuals, completely absorbed by his sudden interest in people-watching.

The narrator spends quite a while examining the personal details of the people walking down the street, mentally separating them into groups based on their class, occupation, appearance, social status, and so on. Though he starts by considering groups of people, he soon begins to note the appearance, clothing, and mannerisms of the people of the crowd in great detail, inferring much information about their personalities and ways of life simply by observing them.

The narrator’s opening thoughts set the stage for the story’s focus on dark and unspeakable secrets. They also engage the reader’s curiosity and establish the narrator as an inquisitive figure who is interested in things that he shouldn’t necessarily know about. Setting a mysterious and intriguing tone is the main purpose of this short speech; it lets the audience know what they’re in for, promising more questions than answers.



Here, the narrator’s curiosity immediately begins to take hold of him, beginning as little more than an idle interest in the people around him. His strange mood following his illness signals that whatever’s about to happen to him is going to be unusual, or at least it might seem that way in his heightened mental state. The narrator’s curiosity is his strongest defining trait, and it manifests itself early here, innocently enough for now.



This is the point where the narrator’s idle curiosity begins to lean towards obsession. During his people-watching, his almost superhuman level of attention to detail suggests either a highly perceptive mind or an overactive imagination—possibly both. His complete focus on the strangers outside the window also hints at a potential reluctance to examine himself, priming the reader to take his observations and assumptions with a grain of salt. It’s possible that his conclusions about other people could be nothing more than fantasies or even projections.



The narrator notices the “business-like demeanor” of those who are mainly concerned with just getting through the crowd, some even talking to themselves as if “feeling in solitude” amidst the throng. When other people in the crowd bump into them or block their way, they either ignore it and continue on their way when possible, or bow and smile to the other people in an absent sort of way, single-mindedly focused on whatever they’re thinking about. Their dress reveals they’re of the “decent” class, including noblemen, merchants, and attorneys. Ultimately, the narrator doesn’t find them very interesting.

Next, the narrator observes members of the “gentry,” such as clerks, pick-pockets, and gamblers. The clerks dress sharply and have an “affectation of respectability,” while the narrator looks more unfavorably on the pick-pockets. He wonders how this class of people could ever be “mistaken for gentlemen,” and mentions that all great cities are “infested” with them. The gamblers wear a variety of outfits, but the narrator still spots them in the crowd easily, noticing their dim eyes and hushed voices when talking to others. All of these people are lumped into a vague middle class by their clothing quality and occupations, but the narrator regards most of them with wry scorn.

Finally, lower down in his classification, the narrator observes peddlers, beggars, and “women of the town.” Everything in the manner of the peddlers seems humble and deferent, except for their flashing, shrewd, hawk-like eyes. Meanwhile, “professional” beggars scowl with resentment at other beggars more genuinely desperate than they are, and the sick search for “some lost hope” in the faces of the crowd. The women of the crowd include young girls returning from work and feeling uncomfortable around “ruffians,” and women who look beautiful on the surface but have an “interior filled with filth.” The narrator watches these and many other kinds of people pass by, his senses almost overwhelmed by the crowd’s mass of noisy activity.

Despite being the most comfortable and upper-class people that the narrator observes, this group is haunted by the same sense of alienation that affects seemingly everyone else in London. The men talking and gesturing to themselves appear to feel alone in the crowd because the masses around them don’t emotionally register as people; everyone feels disconnected from everyone else. This sense of isolation manifests itself a bit differently in each social class, and in this case, the tradesmen and lawyers are focused entirely on their own inner monologues and private matters, treating the people around them as minor roadblocks to be politely avoided.



At this point, the narrator not only observes the people of the crowd, but also begins to make moral judgements about them. His lack of respect for most of the members of this social class is evident in the way he describes them. He even uses the word “infested,” as if comparing gamblers and pick-pockets to rats or other urban pests. This reinforces the feeling of alienation that defines this depiction of London; the narrator sees a portion of this social class as almost less than human, widening the divisions between his classifications of the city’s people. In his mind, then, the citizens of London are separated not only by their level of wealth, but also by the different roles they’re expected to fulfill.



As the narrator’s assessment of strangers continues into the lower classes, the most desperate and isolated people of the city are revealed to be the most alienated, even from others of their class. Even the beggars are divided into sub-categories: the deceptive opportunists and the genuinely needy. The lines between these groups might be blurred or arbitrary in some cases, but there’s never a point of genuine human contact between any two people in the street. There’s a focus on eyes and on false appearances in this passage. The eyes of the peddlers and the invalids search the crowd, watching people just like the narrator is, but they never seem to find what they’re seeking in the eyes of others. Their reluctance to engage with the people around them could stem from the idea that the people of the city are dishonest—like the beautiful women “filled with filth,” they’re assumed to be different from what they appear to be.



As night begins to fall, the narrator spots one person in the crowd who defies the easy categorization that he's been applying to everyone else. This person is an old man wearing a bizarre facial expression that completely bewilders the narrator. The expression seems to contain all sorts of conflicting emotions at once, from malice to merriment to triumph to terror and everything in between, all at the same time. The narrator compares the old man's appearance to that of the devil himself. He's surprised and deeply intrigued by the old man's contradictory expression, and feels a sudden desire to know what kind of history or dark secret could possibly produce such an unusual countenance.

Consumed by his curiosity, the narrator immediately pulls on his overcoat and steps out into the street, beginning to follow the old man while being careful not to attract his attention. As he gets a closer look, he notices that the old man is very short, gaunt, and feeble-looking, and he wears ragged and dirty clothing that nonetheless seems to be made of a beautiful sort of fabric. Beneath a small opening in the old man's clothing, the narrator thinks he spots a glinting object, which he guesses to be either **a dagger or a diamond**. These observations only make the narrator more eager to learn about this strange man, so he continues to follow him through the crowd as night, fog, and rain descend on London.

The narrator begins a long and confusing pursuit through the streets of London. For hours, he doggedly follows the strange old man through the main thoroughfare, down several side streets and alleys, and through various locations ranging from a busy bazaar to a thronging theater to the more squalid side of the city and "one of the palaces of the fiend, Gin."

The old man's expression is what fully turns the narrator's curiosity into obsession. He's compelled to learn anything he can about the old man in the same way he'd be forced to scratch an itch; his curiosity sweeps him up, hardly allowing him any free will in the matter. Up to this point, the narrator has "figured out" everyone else in the street (or at least he assumes he has), so the strange old man poses a new and irresistible challenge for him. Comparing the old man to Satan symbolically associates him with dark, forbidden knowledge that's too tempting to resist, and the narrator reacts accordingly.



The image of the unknown object carried by the old man is a perfect representation of the ambiguity at the heart of his character. A dagger could mean that the old man is dangerous, while the diamond could mean that the old man is a thief, or is maybe running some suspicious errand. Or it could be neither, as the narrator's eyes could be playing tricks on him. Either way, the purpose of the object is to be a constantly shifting contradiction that drives the narrator deeper into his obsessive curiosity. The diamond or the dagger represents the old man himself, reflecting his ever-changing and seemingly unknowable nature. It also hints at the dark secrets he's assumed to be keeping to himself; whatever he's carrying, it must be something interesting or sinister—at least according to the narrator's imagination.



The sheer length of the narrator's pursuit of the old man reveals just how obsessive he's become. This is far from passive curiosity; the narrator is practically stalking the old man all night long, on the mere suspicion that he might be hiding something. This invites the reader to draw parallels between the narrator and the old man. Both of them are participating in this bizarre journey through the streets at night, and both seem compelled by something that they can't explain or resist. The narrator insists the old man is the strange one, yet both of them are alone and alienated in the crowds.



During this pursuit, the old man's behavior changes occasionally, but it becomes no less bewildering. He passes in and out of his state of agitation throughout the night, completely ignoring the crowds of people around him, and never seeming to notice the narrator following him and watching his every move. The old man travels "without apparent aim," wandering through the streets and alleys without giving any clear indication of either his past or his future.

Eventually, the narrator and the old man reach the main thoroughfare where it all began, and the pursuit continues in the same way all through the following day. As the second night closes in, the narrator is too exhausted to carry on following his quarry. He finally steps right in front of the old man and stares him in the face directly, but the old man takes no notice and continues on his way, just as before.

The narrator stops following, and remarks to himself that he can learn nothing of this old man or his dark secrets. He concludes that the man is "the type and the genius of deep crime" who "refuses to be alone" and "is the man of the crowd." He guesses that the old man's horrible crimes, whatever they are, can never be brought to light. The narrator once again mentions the German book that never allows itself to be read, considering it a blessing that there are some unmentionable secrets that will never be revealed.

The old man's changes in demeanor are mostly determined by the density of the crowd around him—the fewer people there are, the more uneasy he appears to become. As the narrator declares later on, the old man "refuses to be alone," and his shifts in behavior illustrate this clearly. He's figuratively alone in the crowd as he buries himself in it, but if he was truly, literally alone, he'd have no way to distract himself from the terrible secrets presumably haunting him. One aspect of alienation is feeling disconnected from oneself. The crowd allows the old man to avoid facing himself, and it's possible that the old man does the same for the obsessive and outwardly-focused narrator—that is, he provides the narrator with a convenient distraction.



At this turning point of the story, the narrator is forced to face his own ignorance. What feels like it should be a climactic, revelatory moment is an intentional disappointment, reinforcing the idea that some mysteries will remain unsolved forever. The narrator is an investigator at heart; he believes that he's uniquely qualified to follow this old man and uncover what he's hiding. But in this moment, the old man treats the narrator like any other stranger he's passed in the street, dismissing his efforts by refusing to make a connection of any kind.



The narrator's final speech to himself mirrors his opening remarks about dark secrets that follow people to their graves. More than anything, this is an attempt by the narrator to satisfy his own curiosity, which has been his driving force throughout the story. His conclusions about the old man might very well be true—the old man's behavior was strange, as he went out of his way to surround himself with people only to ignore them. But ultimately, the names and designations the narrator applies to the old man are for the narrator's benefit. The mystery can't be solved, but the narrator can at least settle the matter in his own mind by categorizing the old man as unknowable. He tells himself that the world's ignorance of humanity's darkest crimes is a blessing, but that might just be something he says to comfort himself. Or it could be true. Appropriately, the story ends on this one last ambiguous note.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Davis, Cameron. "The Man of the Crowd." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 29 Jun 2022. Web. 28 Oct 2022.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Davis, Cameron. "The Man of the Crowd." LitCharts LLC, June 29, 2022. Retrieved October 28, 2022. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-man-of-the-crowd>.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Man of the Crowd* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Man of the Crowd*. Everyman's Library. 1993.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Man of the Crowd*. London: Everyman's Library. 1993.