

Course – English Hons. Paper: CC – V (American Literature)

Text - The Purloined Letter by Edgar Allan Poe

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Summary and Analysis of *The Purloined Letter*

Reprising their roles from "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," C. Auguste Dupin and his friend the unnamed narrator appear in a small library room in Paris, silently smoking and, in the case of the narrator, contemplating two of Dupin's previous cases involving the Rue Morgue murders and the death of Marie Rôget. Monsieur G., the Prefect of the Parisian police, enters the apartment to ask Dupin's opinion of a case, although he refuses to do so in the dark because the idea is "beyond his comprehension" and thus an "oddity." He describes the case as simple but puzzling, but ignores Dupin's suggestion that perhaps its simplicity and self-evidence is what confuses the police.

According to G., a letter has been stolen from the royal apartments that the police know the thief will use for blackmail. The letter belongs to a lady who was forced to hastily place it on a table when the person from whom she wished to conceal the secret entered the room. The Minister D., who also entered, saw and interpreted the contents of the letter correctly. He then placed a letter of similar appearance beside it before retrieving the incorrect paper prior to leaving. The lady saw the substitution but was unable to point it out because of the presence of the third person, who noticed nothing. Since then, D. has used his possession of the letter for political blackmail, and because the lady is unable to publicly reclaim the letter, she has asked the police to retrieve it for her.

The narrator notes that the minister must still have the letter, since to relinquish it would be to lose his power of blackmail, but the police have been unable to locate it, despite having thoroughly searched D.'s apartment. D. cannot be keeping the letter on his person, since the police have already searched him twice. Dupin remarks that the minister cannot be much of a fool, although the Prefect disparages the man for being a poet and therefore, in the Prefect's view, unintelligent. The narrator asks the Prefect about the police's method of search, and the Prefect explains how thoroughly they have searched the apartment, particularly since the reward for the retrieval of the letter is so great. The narrator agrees with the Prefect that the letter must not be in the apartment, but Dupin asks G. to search it again before asking for a complete description of the letter.

A month later the Prefect returns, having found nothing on a second search, and mentions that he will offer a reward of fifty thousand francs, since the retrieval of the letter has become increasingly important. Dupin tells the Prefect to write the check; the astonished Prefect does so, takes the letter from Dupin, and rushes away from the apartment. Dupin explains to the narrator that the police were very skilled but that the case was not suited to the unimaginative. He provides the example of a schoolboy who was particularly skilled at a guessing game in which he was to guess whether his opponent had an odd or even number of marbles and in which he bet one marble per game. The schoolboy won because he was able to emulate his opponent's logic by imitating the other boy's face in order to see how the expression made him think. The police only think about what they believe to be the best course and fail to consider the thoughts of the Minister.

Dupin notes that the Prefect believes that D. is a fool. However, D. is also a mathematician and can thus combine creativity and logic. According to Dupin, while normal mathematicians lack imagination and would have hidden the letter away in exactly the type of place where a policeman would search, the Minister foresaw the probable avenue of investigation and chose an alternate route. Dupin offers the example of a game in which one attempts to guess the point on a globe of which the other is thinking. A novice will choose an obscure name, but a skilled player will choose a very prominent name, knowing that the other person will discard such names as possibilities because they are too obvious. The Prefect does not understand this reasoning, but Dupin places himself into the mind of the Minister and realizes that the Minister would have decided to hide the letter in the most obvious place possible.

After coming to this conclusion about the letter, Dupin visits D.'s apartment while wearing green glasses that conceal the fact that he is looking around the apartment. At length, he discovers several visiting cards and a letter that has been torn and altered in appearance hanging carelessly from a rack on the mantelpiece. D., it appears, placed the letter in full view after turning it inside out, readdressing it, and making it appear useless. Dupin memorizes the appearance of the letter while talking with the Minister and leaves a gold snuff box at the apartment. The next morning, he comes back on the pretense of having forgotten his snuff box, and when D. rushes to his window to observe a disturbance involving gunshots that Dupin previously orchestrated, Dupin substitutes the letter with a fake that he created the night before and soon returns home.

The narrator asks why Dupin did not simply steal the letter. Dupin answers that D. might have been desperate enough to have his attendants kill Dupin. In addition, he notes that after a year and a half of being subjected to the Minister's blackmail, the lady will now have the upper hand. He predicts that D. will soon embarrass himself and cause his political downfall, but he has no pity for the man because D. is "an unprincipled man of genius" who once did Dupin a wrong, which Dupin good-naturedly promised to return. Dupin admits that he would like to know the man's thoughts when he opens the letter to read a quote from Crebillon's *Atrée et Thyeste* which translates to "If such a grievous plan is not worthy of Atreus, then it is worthy of Thyestes." Dupin knows that D. will recognize Dupin as having gotten his revenge.

Analysis

Whereas Dupin's investigation in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" established the basic form for a classic whodunit mystery, "The Purloined Letter" takes an entirely different route to highlight Dupin's methods of ratiocination and use of creativity to place himself in the mind of the criminal. The case is clear in that the thief and the details of the crime are perfectly obvious, but what is not clear is how to outwit the thief and return the letter to its rightful owner. The story shows much more of the character of the Prefect, who merely appeared in order to act disgruntled and embarrassed at the end of the first Dupin story. As a result, the narrative includes two characters, the narrator and the Prefect, who serve as obvious foils to Dupin, while the Minister's similarities to Dupin advance the concept of double selves that is prevalent in so many of Poe's stories.

With his energy, obvious emotions, and lack of insight, the Prefect stands in direct opposition to Dupin's calmer, more analytical approach to solving cases. His major fault is that he does not understand that the key to solving a case is to think in a way that successfully approximates the mindset of the criminal; instead, he resorts to trying to find more and more clever ways that he would personally have chosen to hide the letter while chasing answers that are increasingly further away from the correct solution. Whether the case is grisly and bizarre as in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" or simple and clever as in this instance, Monsieur G. requires the assistance of Dupin because of his consistent inability to imagine the psyches of others. The narrator is less removed from Dupin's point of view and is more inclined to think as Dupin would, but he lacks the perception that allows him to reason out the case himself and becomes a

surrogate for the reader. Because the narrator writes in the first person, he takes on the role of conveying and interpreting Dupin's brilliance for the average individual.

The clash between the Prefect and Dupin is revealing of their opposing temperaments, but it is also a source of humor, as Dupin constantly but subtly takes ironic verbal jabs at the oblivious Prefect, whom the story constantly shows at a relative mental disadvantage. When the Prefect explains that the owner of the letter contacted the Parisian police to help her retrieve the letter, for example, Dupin sarcastically remarks that it must be a reflection of the Prefect's intelligence, a prod which the latter fails to notice, therefore highlighting his inability to understand anyone's thoughts but his own. Later, the Prefect dismisses the Minister because he is a poet and thus a fool, but Dupin notes drolly that he too is something of a poet. The exchange is entertaining because the Prefect is totally unaware of the fact that a poet's creativity is the trait that allows one to think like a Dupin or a Minister D. instead of like the Prefect.

On the other side of the divide between the unimaginative and the analytical lies Minister D., who might be Dupin's equal in understanding the human mind. The concept of alter egos often appears in Poe's short stories and Minister D. functions as the criminal version of Dupin, a man who generally acts on the side of the law. Dupin evidently recognizes the similarity, for he tells the narrator that the Minister "is that monstrum horrendum, an unprincipled man of genius," and he takes pleasure in trumping the Minister in a battle of wits. In the fake letter that Dupin leaves for the Minister, he provides a quote about two Greek brothers from mythology, Atreus and Thyestes. Thyestes commits adultery with Atreus's wife, and in revenge, Atreus kills and cooks Thyestes's sons before feeding them to his brother. The quote implies that although Atreus committed a great wrong, Thyestes was as much or more at fault because he started the feud. The example is extreme, but Dupin nonetheless sends the quote to explain that although Dupin may have stolen the letter, the Minister was at fault because he committed the first crime.

Despite all the discussion concerning the whereabouts of the letter in "The Purloined Letter," the letter itself is merely a literary device around which Poe constructs a game of wits. The contents of the letter and its implications in the political sphere are not included because the plot does not need them, and any other object would have served just as well. Significantly, when Dupin finally finds the letter, the Minister has placed it carelessly into a rack hanging from the fireplace after folding it inside-out and making it appear insignificant. The manner of his hiding the letter is extremely relevant for the purposes of the story, but its inconsequential appearance reflects its relative importance in the novel. We might also consider it ironic that after all the fuss over the letter, its contents will never become any more public to the fictional world of Dupin than it will to the reader.

A reading of an early detective story

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-49) often gets the credit for inventing the detective story. Although some earlier candidates have been proposed – such as E. T. A. Hoffmann's 'Das Fräulein von Scuderi' (1819), and 'The Secret Cell' (1837), written by Poe's own publisher, William Evans Burton – it was Poe who really showed what could be done with the detective story form. 'The Purloined Letter' (1844) is one of three ground-breaking stories Poe wrote featuring C. Auguste Dupin, his amateur sleuth without whom the world would never have had Sherlock Holmes or, one suspects, virtually any other fictional detective.

You can read 'The Purloined Letter' here. But how should we analyse this pioneering detective story? First, a quick summary of the story, which makes Poe's influence on Conan Doyle apparent. The narrator and his friend, C. Auguste Dupin (later to provide the model for Dr Watson and Sherlock Holmes respectively) are smoking together one autumn evening in Paris, when the door to Dupin's room opens and a French policeman enters. He has come to share the details of a case the police have been working on – one that is simple, yet odd, in its details.

A letter containing delicate information has been stolen, or 'purloined': an important woman was in her boudoir when the letter arrived (presumably written by a man with whom she was having an affair) but as she was reading it, her husband came into the room. She placed the letter down on a table. A minister, identified only as 'D—', then entered the room as a guest, and spotted the letter, recognised the handwriting, and guessed the lady's scandalous secret. Producing his own letter from his pocket, he placed it down on the table next to the incriminating letter while he was talking to the lady and her husband, and then discreetly picked up the other letter (the scandalous one) in full view of the couple. The lady saw him do this, but obviously couldn't draw attention to the act in front of her husband, because then the letter's contents would become known to him.

The police have searched the minister's rooms from top to bottom, while he's out, in the hope of locating the letter he stole. They are sure that he would not be carrying it around on his person (in case he's mugged or accosted while out and about) but, equally, they know he would need to be able to access the letter at short notice, so wouldn't have stored it somewhere else. Yet the police, despite searching everywhere in the minister's rooms – behind the mirrors, under the carpets, in the cellars, within his books – have been unable to find the purloined letter. Dupin advises making another thorough search of the premises, but the police prefect says it would do no good.

About a month later, the prefect returns to Dupin's rooms, and reports to the detective and the narrator that he had undertaken another search of the minister's rooms, but still didn't manage to locate the purloined letter. Dupin asks what reward is being offered for the return of the letter. The prefect says he would hand over a cheque for 50,000 francs to the person who could return the purloined letter to him. Dupin announces that he will hand over the letter to the prefect if the policeman gives him the 50,000 francs. The prefect, shocked and overjoyed, hands over the cheque, and leaves with the letter.

Dupin, a master of logical analysis, then explains how he managed to solve the mystery of the purloined letter, beginning by reminiscing about his schooldays, and a clever schoolboy he knew who played a game of 'even and odd' with his peers. A boy would place either an odd or even number of marbles in his hand, and the clever schoolboy would then try to guess. He might guess wrong the first time, but by analysing how clever (or stupid) his opponent was, he would then be able to second-guess his opponent's next move (e.g. a stupid boy who picked up an even number for the first game would have just the right amount of wit to change the number to odd for the second; a cleverer person would try to outthink the guesser, by putting himself in the shoes of the guesser and trying to out-reason him).

In summary, Dupin says that the problem with the police prefect is that he misjudged what kind of man he was dealing with: he wrote off the minister's intellect because the minister writes poetry and is therefore, in the policeman's view, a 'fool'. But Dupin – who admits to having written 'doggerel' of his own – realises that this marks out the minister a man of superior, rather than inferior intellect. Armed with this knowledge, Dupin dons a disguise and calls upon the minister at his rooms. He soon finds the purloined letter, turned inside out and stuffed into a different envelope, in plain sight on the mantelpiece in the minister's rooms. He deliberately leaves his snuff-box on the table, so he'll have a reason to return the following day to retrieve it, on the pretext that he'd forgotten it. When he returns to the minister's rooms, having arranged for a paid accomplice to fire a musket in the street so as to cause a diversion, Dupin then goes to the mantelpiece, takes the letter, replaces it with a copy he had prepared at home to resemble the original, and leaves with the purloined letter in his possession.

In the substitute letter, Dupin reveals that he left a sheet on which he had written words taken from Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon's *Atrée*: 'A design so deadly, if not worthy of Atreus, is worthy of Thyestes.' The lines allude to the story from mythology, in which King Atreus of Mycenae, in revenge for his brother Thyestes' seduction of his wife, kills Thyestes' sons and serves them to him in a pie. The reference is Dupin's way of saying he has discovered the minister's plan, and foiled his scheme. (Dupin also reveals that he owes the minister some payback after 'an evil turn' the minister did to him in Vienna.)

'The Purloined Letter' has the force of a fairy tale or parable: there is a purity to its plot, a simplicity, an ability to resonate with deeper philosophical meaning. This is probably why so many twentieth-century thinkers, from the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan to the founder of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida, were so interested in it. The epigraph, which Poe attributes to the Roman writer and philosopher Seneca, translates as: 'Nothing is as hostile to wisdom as too much subtlety.' The idea of the purloined letter 'hiding in plain sight' makes the story archetypal in its ability to carry symbolic significance. It seems to invite interpretation as a parable about the dangers of over-interpretation. T. S. Eliot once complained that an early reviewer of *The Waste Land* had 'over-understood' the poem. In summary, it's perhaps possible to become too obsessed with understanding something, with the result that one misses the obvious – in this case, the fact that the letter has been placed in just about the most visible and easily discovered place imaginable ... with the result that it isn't discovered (at least not by the police prefect).

In this story, too, we also see so many of the features that Conan Doyle would go on to use to such effect in his Sherlock Holmes stories. Not only is Holmes, like Dupin, a master of logical analysis and an amateur sleuth working independently of the official police, but Holmes, too, will go on to use the idea of distraction in order to locate a missing or reclaim a missing item from a criminal (most famously seen in 'A Scandal in Bohemia').

'The Purloined Letter' isn't perfect: it's really a ten-page story spun or spread out to double that length, which weakens the effect of the reveal, and Dupin's long-winded explanation of this theory of ratiocination is less effective by being advanced using a few too many examples from logic and the world of games. But we can forgive Poe these failings, for with this story – and with the methods of analysis and deduction Dupin practises in the other two Poe stories in which he features – he was inventing the modern detective story. Writers have been purloining, and reinventing, Poe's central idea ever since.

Summary and Analysis "The Purloined Letter"

Of all of Poe's stories of ratiocination (or detective stories), "The Purloined Letter" is considered his finest. This is partially due to the fact that there are no gothic elements, such as the gruesome descriptions of dead bodies, as there was in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." But more important, this is the story that employs most effectively the principle of ratiocination; this story brilliantly illustrates the concept of the intuitive intellect at work as it solves a problem logically. Finally, more than with most of his stories, this one is told with utmost economy.

"The Purloined Letter" emphasizes several devices from "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and adds several others. The story is divided into two parts. In the first part, Monsieur G ———, Prefect of Police in Paris, visits Dupin with a problem: A letter has been stolen and is being used to blackmail the person from whom it was stolen. The thief is known (Minister D ———) and the method is known (substitution viewed by the victim, who dared not protest). The problem is to retrieve the letter, since the writer and the victim, as well as Minister D ———, have important posts in the government; the demands he is making are becoming dangerous politically. The Prefect has searched Minister D ———'s home thoroughly, even taking the furniture apart; he and his men have found nothing. Dupin's advice is that they thoroughly re-search the house. A month later, Monsieur G ——— returns, having found nothing. This time, he says that

he will pay fifty thousand francs to anyone who can obtain the letter for him. Dupin invites him to write the check; when this is done, Dupin hands the Prefect the letter without any further comment.

The second half of "The Purloined Letter" consists of Dupin's explanation, to his chronicler, of how he obtained the letter. One of his basic assumptions is an inversion of one of the aphorisms that was introduced in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue"; the case is so difficult to solve because it appears to be so simple. Beyond that, Dupin introduces the method of psychological deduction. Before he did anything else, he reviewed everything he knew about Minister D ——. Then, he reviewed what he knew about the case. With this in mind, Dupin tried to reconstruct the Minister's thinking, deciding that he would very likely have hidden the letter in plain sight. Using this theory, Dupin visited Minister D —— and found the letter in plain sight but boldly disguised. He memorized the appearance of the letter, and he left a snuffbox as an excuse to return. Having duplicated the letter, he exchanged his facsimile for the original during a prearranged diversion. Retrieving his snuff-box, he departed. His solution introduces into detective fiction the formula of "the most obvious place."

Dupin is, of course, the original eccentric but brilliant detective. He seems to be a very private person, though one with connections and acquaintances in many places. He prefers the darkness and the evening; darkness, he feels, is particularly conducive to reflection. He prefers to gather his information and to ponder thoroughly before any action is taken. He talks little; an hour or more of contemplative silence seems common. And, of course, he is an expert in the psychology of people of various types; indeed, he seems to be learned in a number of areas — mathematics and poetry, for example.

The Prefect, Monsieur G ——, is a contrast to Dupin. Whereas Dupin is primarily concerned with the psychological elements of the case, G —— is almost wholly concerned with physical details and evidence. G —— talks much and says little. Dupin considers things broadly, while G ——'s point of view is extremely narrow. Anything G —— does not understand is "odd" and not worth considering; for Dupin, that is a matter for investigation. G —— believes in a great deal of physical activity during an investigation, while Dupin believes in a maximum of thought and a minimum of physical exertion. Though Dupin says that the Paris police are excellent within their limitations, it is clear that G ——'s limitations are quite severe.

The personality of the unnamed narrator, the Dupin-chronicler, lies between these two extremes. Though he shares some of Dupin's tastes — silent contemplation in darkness, for example — and has some understanding of Dupin's methods, he seems psychologically closer to G —— than to Dupin. He seems to be a rather ordinary person with rather ordinary views and ideas. Thus, his assumptions and his interjections are often erroneous; he assumes, for example, that if the police have not been able to find the letter after their search, then it must be elsewhere. In his argument with Dupin about mathematicians, the narrator takes the common view and attitude toward mathematicians, a position that Dupin explicitly suggests is idiocy. In other words, the narrator is a mediator between Dupin and the reader. His reactions are similar to those of the reader, though he is somewhat less astute than the reader, so that the reader can feel superior to him. Naturally, such a narrator guides our attitudes toward Dupin, G ——, and the case. He is, for example, in awe of Dupin's abilities and methods; while the reader may maintain a more critical distance, he is guided in that direction to some degree. Finally, such a narrator determines the amount of information which a reader receives and guides the attention of the reader to the information received. In this case, the narrator tells us everything, but only as he receives it; because he did not witness the case being solved, the reader doesn't either.

The idea that the reader is a participant in the investigation of a crime and thus should be given all the information on which the detective bases his conclusions is quite modern. In "The Purloined Letter," the reader has little chance to participate, first because little information about Minister D ——'s character is given in the first half of the story, and, second, because there is no indication of any activity by Dupin until the second half. Poe's purpose was not to invite reader participation, but rather to emphasize

rationality, stressing logical thinking as the means of solving problems. Consequently, Dupin's exposition of his thought processes are the most important part of the story. Without this highlighting of the logical investigation and solution of a problem, the detective story may never have developed; it would certainly be very different if it had. However, with this method and approach established, it became logical, and rather easy, to evolve the idea of the reader as a participant.

Attempting to determine the psychology of the criminal is an honorable tradition in detective fiction. The particular methods that are used change as more is learned about human beings, their behaviors, and their motivations; they also change, perhaps even more, as psychological theories change. Thus, much of Poe's — or Dupin's — psychology, especially the explanations, seems dated. For instance, the boy whom Dupin uses as an example arranges his face so it is as similar to the other person's expression as possible; this is supposed to give rise to thoughts and feelings that are similar to those of the other person. In the sense that outward expressions — facial expressions, clothes, and so on — are thought to influence the way a person feels, this idea is somewhat still current; however, that effect is thought to be general rather than specific, and we no longer believe that we can gain much knowledge of another person in this way. In addition, it is probably true that certain habits of thinking are likely to contribute to a person's success in a field; however, the distinctions are by no means as rigid as Poe made them seem, nor are the qualities so narrow. Although the principles that Dupin works from are rather outdated, his method is direct. This method is, of course, applicable to other kinds of problems posed in detective fiction; whenever the detective can learn and apply some knowledge of the criminal's psychology, he is closer to the solution of the crime.

Other details in "The Purloined Letter" reveal the story's era — the political system in France, Dupin's comments about poetry, mathematics, and the sciences in particular. Nevertheless, the story still reads well, and the details are overshadowed by the sweep of the puzzle and the story. Even if the story were not still interesting reading, "The Purloined Letter" would be of prime historical importance for it establishes the method of psychological deduction, the solution of the most obvious place, and the assumption that the case that seems simplest may be the most difficult to solve. Whether one is interested in good reading or has a historical interest in detective fiction, "The Purloined Letter" provides both.