The Purloined Letter Study Guide

The Purloined Letter by Edgar Allan Poe

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Introduction

Modern mystery writers owe a debt of gratitude to Edgar Allan Poe. Although he is primarily known for his horror stories, Poe also wrote a series of what he called, "tales of ratiocination," which helped define the conventions used in Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes detective stories, and which helped influence the development of the modern mystery. One of Poe's most popular detective stories is "The Purloined Letter." Originally published in *The Gift: A Christmas and New Year's Present for 1844*, an annual magazine, the story was reproduced in Poe's *Tales by Edgar A. Poe* the following year. Today, a copy of the story can be found in *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Tales*, published in 1998 by Signet Classic. As with the other stories that feature C. Auguste Dupin, Poe's famous detective protagonist, "The Purloined Letter" emphasizes the use of deductive reasoning—a specific type of logic that examines all factors in a case objectively— to solve mysteries that have stumped others.

In this story, as in other Poe detective stories, among the people stumped are the members of the French police force, who attempt to find a stolen letter which is being used for political blackmail. The police launch a series of scientific and precise, but misguided, investigations by using logical methods that are based solely on past experience and established systems of thought. Their investigative methods reflect the types of rational thought prevalent in the mid-nineteenth century. In the end, the police are unsuccessful in finding the letter because the thief has hidden it in the most unexpected place—right under their noses. Dupin figures this out and recovers the letter, turning the political tables on the thief.

Author Biography

Edgar Allan Poe, one of America's most influential writers, was born on January 19, 1809, in Boston, Massachusetts. His parents, both struggling actors, died when he was only three years old. Poe was raised—though never officially adopted—by John and Frances Allan in Richmond, Virginia. Allan, a prosperous tobacco merchant, sent Poe to the finest schools, including the University of Virginia, where Poe immediately gambled away all of his money, racked up a massive amount of debt, and drank his first semester away. Even so, he managed to do well in his classes and earn the highest university honors.

This pattern of producing good work under unfavorable circumstances continued throughout Poe's life. Allan pulled Poe out of school because of Poe's dilettante habits, and the already distant relationship between the two went sour. Poe went to Boston, where he attempted to earn his living by writing. Sales were small, however, and he joined the army to earn his living expenses. He performed well in the army but did not enjoy the experience. After receiving an honorable discharge, Poe entered the United States Military Academy at West Point. Lack of financial support from Allan led to Poe's court-martial and dismissal.

Poe, then in his mid-twenties, married his thirteen-year-old cousin, Virginia, and began to support Virginia and her mother. Poe's stories started to sell, but his financial situation never greatly improved. In the following years, he edited and published his work in several journals, which showcased his prodigious talent and innovation in the short story genre, in poetry, and in literary criticism. His work for these journals raised his stature in the literary community, but inevitably, he was fired from each of these jobs, as a result of either a bad economy or his cantankerous disposition.

Poe is often remembered for his short fiction, much of which he published while living in Philadelphia in the 1830s and 1840s. These stories include *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, which contains many of the supernatural and horror tales that people associate with the author. In 1845, he published his last story collection, *Tales by Edgar A. Poe*, which featured "The Purloined Letter," considered by many critics to be one of the first detective stories. In addition to his short stories, Poe is well known for his poetry, most notably "The Raven."

After his wife's death from tuberculosis in 1849, Poe took a trip to Baltimore for unknown reasons. He was found unconscious, and died a short time later on October 3, 1849. A brain lesion is the presumed cause of his death, but many critics and fans have speculated otherwise. Like the stories that Poe wrote, the exact cause of the author's death and the circumstances surrounding his last days remain a mystery.

Plot Summary

The Prefect's First Visit

"The Purloined Letter" begins with a description by the unnamed narrator of one evening in the "autumn of 18—"at C. Auguste Dupin's home in Paris. Both men are sitting silent, smoking, and the narrator is recalling two mysteries that Dupin previously solved—the murders in the Rue Morgue and the murder of Marie Roget. These two mysteries were in fact centerpieces of earlier detective stories written by Poe.

Monsieur G—, the Prefect of the Parisian police, calls on Dupin once again for his help, the mystery of the purloined, or stolen, letter. At Dupin's suggestion, the three men sit in the dark to discuss the case. The Monsieur begins by saying that the matter is simple, and yet puzzling, at which point Dupin says that maybe it is too simple. This notion is funny and odd to the Monsieur, who dismisses it and continues with his description of how the letter was stolen.

Minister D—, a political rival of the French Queen, stole a letter addressed to the Queen from her royal apartment, in plain sight of the Queen. However, the Queen was unable to stop him for fear of drawing attention to the letter and its contents, which contain extremely private information that could be politically damaging to the royal family. The Minister has been using the letter for months to blackmail the Queen, but she has been unable do protect herself from the blackmail, as she cannot openly try to reclaim the letter.

The Prefect Explains the Police's Methods

The Prefect gives a brief overview of the methods he and his police force have used to try to reclaim the letter without the Minister's knowledge, a task that seems as though it should be easy, as the Minister leaves his home every night. Motivated both by political reasons and by the large reward attached to the finding of the letter, the Prefect and his men have spent every night for three months ransacking the Minister's apartment, but have not procured the letter. The Prefect says that the Minister, being a poet, is by extension somewhat of a fool, so the Minister assumes that the police will be able to determine the whereabouts of the letter. He also explains that the letter has to be somewhere near the Minister, since he needs to be able to use it at a moment's notice. The Prefect has even had undercover policemen act like thugs and mug the Minister twice, under the assumption that he might have it with him, but the Minister has not been discovered carrying the letter.

The narrator suggests that the Prefect give very specific details about how he and his men searched the Minister's apartment, at which point the Prefect launches into a very detailed description. The police force searched the entire building, focusing on the most secret areas they can imagine. They searched for hidden drawers, took apart chairs,

and looked under table tops and within table legs. They searched for hollow spots that could hide the letter, and used microscopes and other scientific methods to unearth clues. Furthermore, they looked around the grounds of the Minister's home, examined every page and cover of every book within his library, searched under the carpets and floorboards, and even searched the cellars.

After this exhaustive description, Dupin still tells the Prefect that he needs "to make a thorough research of the premises," but the Prefect assures Dupin that he has done so and that the letter cannot be at the Minister's residence. Dupin asks for a description of the letter, and the Prefect provides the description and takes his leave.

The Prefect's Second Visit

One month later, the Prefect returns to visit Dupin, and says that he has examined the Minister's apartment once again, but once again, has found nothing. Dupin asks about the reward, and the Prefect says that it has been doubled, and that he will give fifty thousand francs to anybody who can obtain it. At this point, Dupin has the Prefect make out the check, at which point Dupin produces the letter. The astounded Prefect examines it to make sure it is the same purloined letter for which he has been searching, then rushes out without bothering to hear how Dupin obtained the letter.

Dupin's Explanation

After the Prefect leaves, Dupin explains to the narrator how he found the letter. First, he notes that the Parisian police made as thorough a search as they could of the Minister's home, given their knowledge of how to do such things. He further notes that the police's methods were carried out perfectly, but that they were the wrong methods to use in such a case. In explaining his meaning, he tells a fable about a schoolboy who was very good at guessing games because the boy knew how to observe his opponents' behavior and figure out how his opponents think. Dupin continues, saying that the Prefect's mistake was in thinking about how he would hide a letter, and assuming that everyone would think about the situation in the same manner. He also explains that the Prefect's assumption that the Minister is a fool because he is a poet is flawed. Dupin knows for a fact that the Minister is both a poet and a mathematician, and it is this combined tendency toward both creativity and reason that has allowed the Minister to hide the letter effectively. Furthermore, Dupin notes that the Minister, being a shrewd political opponent, knew about the ransackings, and even encouraged them, because he was sure the police would not know where to look for the letter, and that they would eventually give up their searches.

Dupin talks about the concept of hiding something in plain sight by making it extremely obvious— so obvious that no one would ever think to look in that spot. Dupin says that, given his knowledge of the Minister and his ways of thinking, after the Prefect's first visit with Dupin, he had deduced that the letter must, in fact, be hidden in plain sight. With this idea, Dupin went to the Minister's home one morning under the pretense of a social

visit. Dupin wore dark eyeglasses—complaining about his weak sight—so that he could survey the Minister's home without the Minister's knowledge. Dupin observed a seemingly unimportant letter sitting in plain view, crammed in a letter rack. The letter bore little resemblance to the purloined letter, because it had been ripped and had a new seal on it. Dupin explains, however, that he was sure that this was the letter in question, especially when he noticed that it showed signs of having been turned inside out.

When Dupin leaves the Minister's home, he intentionally leaves behind his gold snuff-box on the Minister's table. Dupin returns the next day under the pretense of picking up his snuff-box, and the two men resume talking. Suddenly, a musket shot rings out in the street. The Minister rushes to the window, and Dupin quickly takes the purloined letter, leaving a fake duplicate in its place. Dupin joins the Minister at the window, observing the disturbance that Dupin himself had planned. The narrator asks why Dupin simply did not take the letter and run, and Dupin explains that the Minister is a powerful political opponent, and that he may have killed Dupin before he left the building. Also, Dupin—a supporter of the Queen—explains that since the Minister did not know that Dupin had returned the stolen letter to the Queen, the Minister will try to use it to blackmail her again. This time, however, it will not work, and it will backfire in the Minister's face—something that appeals to Dupin's political bent.

On a personal note, Dupin says that he is also getting back at the Minister for an offense he committed against Dupin a long time ago. Because of this, and because he does not want to leave a

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

The story begins at night in the office of C. Auguste Dupin. An unnamed, first person narrator and Dupin are sitting in Dupin's back library smoking pipes and saying nothing. Prefect G- of the Parisian police interrupts to consult with Dupin and the narrator.

The Prefect partially describes a problem that is confusing him by saying that it is both simple and difficult. Dupin responds that it may be so simple that it is difficult. The Prefect is nearly bowled over with laughter at the idea that something could be so plain that it is too difficult to figure out.

After recovering, the Prefect explains that a document was stolen from someone in the royal apartments and it is being used as blackmail. The person who purloined (which means "to steal") the document is known because the person whom it was stolen from saw the thief take it. The Prefect also knows that the document is still in the thief's possession.

Dupin does not understand the Prefect's vague statements. The Prefect says that the document would give a certain person power over a very lofty person and could put the honor of the document's owner in question. After Dupin presses him further, the Prefect comes mostly clean and explains that Minister D- is the man who stole the document.

The Prefect then goes on to say that a woman's letter was stolen. While reading her letter, she was interrupted by another person who entered the royal bedroom. She desperately wanted to hide the letter from the new arrival, but she was unsuccessful.

At that point, Minister D- showed up to discuss some things with the second person and when Minister D- saw the address on the letter and saw the concern on the face of the owner, he rightly guessed the contents. Therefore, he resolved to steal it.

The Minister took out a letter very similar to the first letter and pretended to read it. As he finished, he set his letter down next to her letter. When he got up to leave, he took the woman's letter instead of his own and walked out the door. Since then, the Minister has held this woman in his clutches. Therefore, she asked the Prefect to retrieve her letter.

The Prefect performed a thorough, very secret search of the Minister's lodgings. Fortunately, the Prefect is very good at searching for hidden things and his methods can find just about anything. The Prefect searched the Minister's rooms with a microscope that could show any holes drilled in furniture where the letter could be safely rolled up and tucked away. In addition, he used needles to probe the cushions of furniture. The entire hotel, the grounds around the hotel, and the buildings on both sides of the hotel were thoroughly searched down to the minutest detail. The Prefect even had some of

his men act as though they were thieves so that they could rifle through the Minister's pockets.

The Prefect knows that the letter has to be near the Minister, as the Minister needs to be able to produce the letter quickly and easily. Thus, either he must be carrying the letter or it must be in his home. The Minister is clearly not carrying it, leaving only one option.

After three months, the Prefect has not come up with so much as a hint of the letter and he is forced to abandon his search. Dupin asks the Prefect for a description of the letter, which he provides. After this, the Prefect leaves.

About one month later, the Prefect returns to visit Dupin and the narrator, when the narrator asks him about the purloined letter. The Prefect has made no headway in the case. The reward for it has increased, but to no avail. The Prefect cannot search any harder than he already has.

The Prefect says he would pay fifty thousand francs (his share in the reward) to find the letter. Dupin asks him to write a check to him for that amount, whereupon he will hand the Prefect the letter. The Prefect, stunned, complies. Dupin examines the check, then hands the Prefect the stolen letter. The Prefect walks out, speechless and stunned.

Dupin then explains how he found and retrieved the letter. First, he discounts the methods of the Parisian police. He says that they are good for most criminals, as they will find objects that were hidden in small holes and hidden compartments, but they will not work for exceptionally cunning people or idiots.

Dupin says that the police assume everyone will act in the way that they would act, were they to hide something. However, people who are either more or less intelligent than the police will act in ways that the police do not expect. Instead of changing they way they think, the police merely apply the same techniques in every situation. The simple answer eluded them because they did not expect the simple answer.

Dupin goes on to say the Minister is not only a poet, but also a mathematician. The combination of these things is very powerful, as it allows the Minister to apply two different thinking methods to any problem. Mathematicians are too simple, Dupin explains, because they cannot get away from the mathematical logic they are trained to use. Furthermore, Dupin says that mathematics is a close approximation of reality, not the absolute truth mathematicians believe it to be.

The Prefect's problem, according to Dupin, is that he fails to grasp the fact that an intelligent man can anticipate the searching methods of the police and then act in a way that will confound their efforts. Dupin compares it to a game where people pick names on a map and try to guess each other's choices. The novice tries to pick the names of rivers and towns that are written very small. The expert, however, will pick a name that stretches across the entire map because it is so large that people do not notice it.

With this in mind, Dupin paid the Minister a visit at his hotel. He wore a pair of green-tinted glasses as he visited D- with the explanation that he had weak eyes. While he chatted up the Minister, his hidden eyes scanned the room. Eventually, he saw a letter that was the same size as the stolen letter, but was cleverly altered. Dupin realized this was the stolen letter. He departed, but left behind a gold snuffbox.

The next day, Dupin came for his snuffbox. He carried with him a duplicate of the Minister's letter. As they were talking, a man Dupin had hired fired off a musket in the street. As the Minister rushed to the window to see what was going on, Dupin switched the two letters. Dupin left once the Minister was satisfied no one was hurt by the shot.

However, Dupin was not satisfied merely leaving a blank letter behind. He feels that he needed to give the Minister a clue as to who stole the letter back. He wrote the following in the letter:

--Un dessein si funeste,

S'il n'est digne d'Atrée, est digne Theyeste.

Analysis

"The Purloined Letter" opens with the heading "Nil sapientiae odiosius acumine nimio" (p. 1). This translates from the Latin to "Nothing is more detestable to wisdom than too much subtlety." Poe attributes this line to Seneca, but it does not actually appear anywhere in his work.

The narrator says that he and Dupin had been sitting in comfortable silence for at least an hour as the narrator mulled over their previous conversation. This is important as it establishes the two as men of thought. They can comfortably sit and think without needing to fill silences with words. These men do not converse; they discuss. With nothing further to discuss, they can fill their minds with their own thoughts.

When Dupin keeps the room dark to consider the Prefect's problem, we can assume that his reasons are that darkness dims the sight and the ears are rendered more acute. In darkness, Dupin is able to listen without examining the Prefect with his eyes. As well, it places more stress on the images in the mind without clouding his thoughts with physical images. Dupin is heightening the senses he needs by eliminating those he does not need.

When Dupin tells the Prefect that the solution to the problem of the purloined letter is so simple that he cannot see it, Poe is foreshadowing that the solution will be something very simple. In addition, Dupin is the man who can see the very simple answer that the Prefect cannot see.

The narrator's phrase "This ascendancy… would depend upon the robber's knowledge of the loser's knowledge of the robber," (Page 3) means that the person who lost the

document must know who stole it. If the loser does not know who stole the document, the loser cannot perform favors for the robber.

Though the Prefect does not say it, the fact that the stolen letter was received by a woman sitting alone in the royal apartments shows that the letter belongs to the queen. Moreover, undoubtedly, it was the king who interrupted the queen while she was sitting in the royal apartments reading her letter, as only he and some trusted servants would be permitted to walk in on the queen while she was alone in the bedroom. In addition, the queen would not worry about the servants, as it is their job to keep royal secrets.

Since the letter was the queen's and she wants to hide it, or risk losing her honor, the most obvious conclusion for this is that the letter is a letter from or concerning a lover.

Dupin is very cynical about the queen's choice of the Prefect to retrieve her letter and says, "no more sagacious agent could, I suppose, be desired, or even imagined" (Page 4). The Prefect does not hear the sarcasm behind the flattery and practically thanks him for his kind words.

The narrator observes to the Prefect that the power of the letter is in its threat, not in its use. Once the Minister shows the letter to the king, it is powerless. If the king sees the letter, he will either annul the marriage or forgive her. However, the queen does not want it to come to that. Neither does the queen want to keep doing the Minister favors. Therefore, she is absolutely anxious and insistent that the letter be found and returned to her.

After the Prefect says that the Minister must be a fool because he writes poetry, Dupin admits to writing some poetry, but he does not contradict the Prefect openly. From this we can infer that the Prefect's assessment of poets is far off the mark.

There are, in a way, two climaxes to "The Purloined Letter." The first climax occurs when Dupin offers to give the letter to the Prefect. The fact that this comes out of almost nowhere is such a surprise that it is the main climax. However, there is a second climax in the anticlimax of Dupin returning the letter. The story of Dupin finding the letter in the Minister's apartments is a framed narrative inside the larger story. This framed story has a climax of its own: Dupin switching the false letter for the queen's letter while the Minister's back is turned.

The symbolism of the microscope and needles used by the Parisian police is very important. Poe is not only taking aim at mathematicians, he is also aiming at scientists. Through the microscope and needles, Poe is saying that science is perfectly capable of finding what it is looking for if it is small; but the big mysteries are written too large -- just like the names in the map-guessing game -- for a microscope and cannot be probed for with needles. Instead, a wide view and the insight of a keen mind must be employed for the difficult questions. Poe implies that science looks for small, complex solutions. This is futile when the answer is so large and so simple that it will escape notice.

Dupin's green-tinted spectacles are also a very important symbol. While he is examining the Minister's apartments, he is not looking through "rose-colored glasses." In fact, he is

viewing the scene in a hue that is exactly opposite red on the color wheel. Thus, Dupin is a wise realist who does not consider optimism. He sees things as they are, not as they should be. The closing lines in the story translate to:

--a design so deadly,

If not worthy of Atreus, is worthy of Thyestes.

This is an allusion to a Greek myth. Thyestes seduced Atreus's wife. Atreus, the king of Mycenae, took revenge by killing the children of Thyestes and serving them to him at a banquet.

Characters

Minister D—

Minister D—is a daring political opponent of the French Queen; he steals one of her letters, and uses it to blackmail her so that he can achieve his political ends. Although the Queen knows he has stolen it, neither she nor the police Prefect, another one of her allies, can recover the letter openly, for fear of publicizing its contents.

The Minister knows this, and he also knows that the police will try to search his home whenever he is away. At one point, he purposefully leaves to let them do this, because he has hidden the letter in an ironically obvious hiding place, where he is certain the police will not look for it. Without the Minister's knowledge, Dupin, the hired detective, deduces that this is exactly what the Minister has done, and on a visit to see the Minister, Dupin notices the letter sitting in a letter rack. On a second visit, the Minister is distracted by a diversion that Dupin has set up, and Dupin secretly switches the purloined letter with a fake letter. Although the Minister's fate is never seen, Dupin tells the narrator that since the Minister does not know about the fake letter, he will try to use it as he has used the real one, and it will backfire in his face, leading to his political downfall.

C. Auguste Dupin

C. Auguste Dupin is the detective in the story, whom the Prefect has called upon in past Poe stories to solve mysteries. In "The Purloined Letter," the Prefect visits Dupin to get help in finding a purloined—or stolen—letter.

With the help of prompting questions and statements, largely from the narrator—who is a friend of Dupin—the Prefect provides Dupin with the details of the case. The letter has been stolen from the Queen, in her presence, by the Minister D—, a known political opponent. However, due to the sensitive nature of the letter's contents, the Queen and her allies, including the Prefect, cannot seize the letter openly, and so have tried to search the Minister's home in private. Dupin asks questions about the Prefect's search methods to determine if the search has been handled correctly. Dupin says that the Minister has conducted a good search, yet he encourages the Prefect to make a thorough search of the premises. The Prefect is confused, but takes his advice. However, a month later, when the Prefect returns to Dupin's home, he has still found nothing. On this second visit, Dupin asks the Prefect about the reward for finding the letter, and the Prefect says that it is fifty thousand francs. Dupin has the Prefect make out the check, then produces the letter.

Later, Dupin explains to the narrator the methods of deductive reasoning that he used to figure out where the Minister was hiding the letter. He notes that the Parisian police have done the best that they could, because they and the Prefect are operating on a

faulty assumption: they assume that the Minister would try to hide the letter in some "secret" compartment, and thus, all of their efforts are concentrated on searching in hidden places. Dupin explains how, by knowing details about a person's behavior and background, one can figure out his actions. In this case, Dupin knows that the Minister is aware of the police's searches, and knows that the police will look in the most hidden spots, but will ignore any area that is in plain view.

Under the pretense of a social visit, Dupin visits the Minister and almost immediately locates the purloined letter in a letter rack on the wall. On a second visit, Dupin creates a diversion, during which time he grabs the stolen letter, replacing it with a fake copy.

G

See Monsieur G—

Monsieur G—

Monsieur G— is the Prefect of the Parisian police, and a political ally of the French Queen; after the Queen's letter is stolen by the Minister D—, the Prefect is charged with finding it. He attempts to recover it on his own by using standard search methods. He and his police force, believing that they are being sneaky, break into the Minister's home every night for three months. On each of these nights, the Prefect and the police perform highly scientific methods in their exhaustive search of potential hiding spots, both in and around the premises.

After this dogged search yields no result, the Prefect visits C. Auguste Dupin, a man who has helped him solve cases in the past. He explains the situation to Dupin, including the various methods that he and the police force have used, and Dupin encourages him to go back and try again. The Prefect returns to Dupin's home a month later, saying that he still can't find the letter, and that the reward is even larger now. At Dupin's request, the Prefect makes out a reward check to Dupin, who promptly produces the letter. The Prefect rushes off to return the letter to the Queen, and does not stay to hear the explanation that Dupin gives to the narrator about how he found the letter.

The Minister

See Minister D—

The Narrator

The unnamed narrator is a friend of C. Auguste Dupin, the detective in the story, and serves as a foil to Dupin. The narrator's presence enhances the idea that Dupin is an incredibly smart and logical person.

When the story begins, the narrator is at Dupin's home, smoking. The narrator is remembering how Dupin has helped to solve two other mysteries, the murders in the Rue Morgue and the murder of Marie Rogêt. The Prefect arrives, saying that he needs Dupin's help recovering a stolen letter from an already identified thief. Throughout the story, the narrator asks a number of direct questions that help to advance the plot. In this way, the narrator serves as the reader's representative, by asking the questions that are on the reader's mind. The narrator's questions are directed at both the Prefect and Dupin. In both cases, the matter eventually comes back to Dupin, who then shows his intellectual prowess through his answers. This trend continues throughout the story, and concludes with the long, final conversation between the narrator and Dupin, after the Prefect has taken the purloined letter and left. Here, as the narrator prompts Dupin with questions and statements, Dupin reveals how he deduced where the letter was in the Minister's home, and how he recovered it.

The Prefect

See Monsieur G—

Themes

Logic

The hallmark of "The Purloined Letter" is its use of abstract logic by C. Auguste Dupin. The story is one of what Poe called his "tales of ratiocination," which employed reason—rather than horror, as in many other Poe stories—as a narrative tool. Dupin, who also solves the cases in some of Poe's other tales of ratiocination, is a detective who uses deductive reasoning to solve the case of the stolen letter.

In the story, Dupin relies on what he knows of the situation to deduce the correct hiding spot of the letter. Dupin's reasoning is based on three factors: what he knows of the Prefect's behavior and thought processes; what he knows of the Minister's behavior and thought processes; and what he knows of human nature in general.

As Dupin explains to the narrator, he knows, both from recent conversations with the Prefect and from past knowledge, that the Prefect follows "principles of search, which are based upon the one set of notions regarding human ingenuity" to which the Prefect was accustomed. Dupin notes that the Prefect has "taken it for granted that *all* men proceed to conceal a letter. . . . in *some* out-of-the-way hole." In the Prefect's experience, when somebody wants to hide something, they go to great pains to hide it in a secret compartment or some other hidden area, thinking they are clever. In the past, the Prefect has found many of these compartments, so he assumes that he will do so again. When Dupin tells the Prefect "to make a thorough research of the premises," the Prefect does not understand that Dupin is referring to the obvious ones, and once again looks for the letter in a secret compartment in which a letter might be hidden.

Dupin also knows, given his knowledge of the Minister and his habits, that the Minister is a very clever person. Dupin correctly deduces that the Minister must have known about "the secret investigations of his premises," and that if he left his home every night and made it easier for them to search, they would eventually come to "the conviction that the letter was not upon the premises." Furthermore, as Dupin deduces, the Minister has seen that the police would rely on tried-and-true search methods, and that the Minister "would be driven, as a matter of course, to *simplicity*, if not deliberately induced to it as a matter of choice."

The final clue that Dupin uses to figure out where the letter is hidden is his knowledge of human nature, something in which he knows the Minister is also well versed. As Dupin explains to the narrator, some items can "escape observation by dint of being excessively obvious." In his example, Dupin relates a game that is played with a map. The object of the game is to have one's opponent find a specific word somewhere within the map. As Dupin notes, "a novice in the game generally seeks to embarrass his opponents by giving them the most minutely lettered names." Like the Prefect, these novices think they can beat their opponent by focusing on obscurity. However, as Dupin says, "the adept selects such words as stretch, in large characters, from one end of the

chart to the other." When someone is specifically looking for something obscure, that person will miss obvious items that do not fit the profile of the search.

Scientific Investigations

Although it is Dupin's form of deductive logic— which is bound only by the factors in the particular case—that solves the case, the Prefect also uses logic. However, the Prefect's brand of logic is bound by his past experience—in this case, the investigative methods that normally bring him success.

The Prefect gives an exhaustive inventory of these methods, many of which rely on rational, scientific methods of thought. When speaking of the Minister's home, he says, "we divided its entire surface into compartments, which we numbered, so that none might be missed." Within each of these precise areas of searching, they used a "powerful microscope" on such items as chairs and tables, in an attempt to find any hidden compartments. "There is a certain amount of bulk—of space—to be accounted for in every cabinet. Then we have accurate rules. The fiftieth part of a line could not escape us." In other words, by comparing an object's exterior dimensions to the actual interior space that can be seen, the Prefect and the police can determine whether there is any extra space—a hidden compartment.

The Prefect's methods are so scientific and precise that he claims that even small signs would tip them off. "A single grain of gimlet-dust, for example, would have been as obvious as an apple." Of course, as Dupin suggests at the beginning, "it is the very simplicity of the thing" that thwarts the Prefect, who thinks he has "investigated every nook and corner of the premises in which it is possible that the paper can be concealed." However, in this instance the Prefect's methods are useless, because they only take into account "secret" areas, and ignore the obvious areas.

Politics

The reason for the letter's theft is political in nature. The Minister, a political opponent of the Queen's, steals the letter, and holds it hostage. As the Prefect notes, "the power thus attained has, for some months, been wielded, for political purposes, to a very dangerous extent." Although the contents of the letter are never explained, it is noted that it could be particularly damaging to the royal family. Dupin, who is an acquaintance of the Minister, is also a political ally of the Queen. As he tells the narrator, "You know my political prepossessions. In this matter, I act as a partisan of the lady concerned." This is one of the main reasons why Dupin is willing to get involved with the case and help find the letter.

A savvy political player himself, Dupin knows that if he can take the letter without the Minister realizing it—replacing it with a fake—he can spin the situation to his advantage and bring about the Minister's political downfall. As Dupin notes, the Minister, "being unaware that the letter is not in his possession, . . . will proceed with his exactions as if it was." In other words, by trying to blackmail the Queen with the fake letter, the Minister

will assume that the Queen will do his bidding, and will undertake the same kinds of daring schemes he has been doing for the past eighteen months, which he would not do without protection of the letter. This action will lead, as Dupin notes, "to his political destruction." Dupin says of this downfall, that, "[i]n the present instance I have no sympathy—at least no pity—for him who descends." In Dupin's mind, the Minister is an "unprincipled man of genius," who deserves harsh punishment for his political transgressions.

Style

Detective Story

Many critics agree that with tales of ratiocination like "The Purloined Letter," Poe earned the title of father of the modern detective story. Three of C. Auguste Dupin's characteristics in particular—his mysterious nature, his civilian position, and his deductive reasoning—influenced the detectives found in both literature and film.

When Poe introduces Dupin, he provides very little information about his background. He and the narrator sit in the dark, smoking their pipes. When the Prefect visits him to talk about the case, Dupin purposely does not light the lamp, saying that "if it is any point requiring reflection. . . . we shall examine it to better purpose in the dark." This idea, of the mysterious, silent detective sitting and smoking in the dark while listening to his clients' cases, is one of the hallmarks of future "private-eye" stories.

Like these private eyes, Dupin is also a civilian. Although he is outside of the law, the Prefect still comes to talk with Dupin any time he has "some official business" that gives him "a great deal of trouble." In this case, as in many other detective stories, the Prefect gives Dupin privileged information, such as when he is describing the importance of the letter: "I may venture so far as to say that the paper gives its holder a certain power in a certain quarter where such power is immensely valuable." Although the Prefect tries to keep this information vague, he eventually reveals more sensitive information, including the identity of the thief and the specific nature of the stolen item, "the document in question—a letter, to be frank."

Using his deductive reasoning, Dupin is able to solve the case with the same information that the police have. The difference is that he examines all of the factors of the case holistically, not depending only on factors consistent with established systems of thought. "I dispute the availability, and thus the value, of that reason which is cultivated in any especial form other than the abstractly logical," says Dupin to the narrator. For Dupin, traditional systems of scientific logic, which rely on set rules, do not always help when solving cases about humans, who do not always play by these rules. Therefore, the optimal method of logic that can be used to deduce a solution to a mystery is abstract logic, which takes into account other relevant factors in its analysis.

Foreshadowing

Although neither the narrator nor the Prefect picks up on it, Dupin gives them the solution to the case of the purloined letter twice before he explains how he does it. In the beginning, after the Prefect has introduced the mystery but before he has given any details, he says about his police force that "we have all been a good deal puzzled because the affair *is* so simple, and yet baffles us altogether." Dupin notes that "perhaps the mystery is a little *too* plain," "a little *too* self-evident," an idea that the Prefect finds

laughable. However, Dupin is giving both the Prefect and the reader a clue as to the solution of this mystery. Dupin does this again at the end of this first visit, after he has heard all of the methods that the Prefect has used to try to find the letter. The Prefect, expecting some good advice, asks Dupin what he should do next, to which Dupin replies, "make a thorough research of the premises." The Prefect does not realize that Dupin is giving another clue to the mystery. Dupin knows that the Prefect has only concentrated on the secret areas of the Minister's home, so he tells the Prefect to check all of the areas, including the obvious ones.

Exposition

Most fiction writers attempt to expose facts to the reader, a technique known as exposition, as seamlessly as possible, by bringing the reader up to speed slowly through dialogue and narration. In fact, one of the ways in which some critics and readers measure the worth of a story is in its level of mastery of exposition, considered one of the hardest tasks for a writer. In "The Purloined Letter," however, the exposition is very blatant. An unnamed narrator, acting on the reader's behalf, asks very direct questions—which Dupin's character would not be likely to ask—that advance the plot. It is the narrator who asks the Prefect, "And what, after all, *is* the matter at hand?" thereby prompting the Prefect to start his tale. When the Prefect is being vague, the narrator says, "Be a little more explicit." When Dupin says something that is even slightly confusing, the narrator repeats the confusing part. An example of this is when the narrator repeats the phrase, "Its susceptibility of being produced?" which Dupin stated to indicate that having the letter handy so that it could be destroyed, if necessary, is equally as important as having the letter at all.

This trend continues in the second half of the story, when Dupin is explaining his methods of reasoning to the narrator. "So far as his labors extended?" the narrator repeats, when Dupin is trying to get across the idea that the Prefect and his men have only done everything that they know how to do, and not everything they could do. Once again, the narrator prompts Dupin to explain anything that could possibly be confusing to the reader. However, while many other stories would fail with this type of blatant exposition, which can kill dramatic tension, in Poe's case, it works. The reason it works is that the reader is hooked from the beginning of the story by the mystery: because the reader wishes to know where the letter was hidden, and because Dupin does not reveal until the end where the letter was and how he recovered it, the direct exposition of facts helps to build up the dramatic tension.

Historical Context

The Mass-Market Publishing Industry in America

In the mid-1820s, Poe was one of many writers on the East Coast submitting his works to the growing mass-market publishing industry. Better transportation and improvements in paper production and printing technologies led to the establishment of several newspapers, magazines, and book publishers, and writers and editors clamored to be a part of it.

Copyright Issues for American Authors

In these early years of publishing, American authors were unprotected by any strict copyright legislation, something for which writers like Poe lobbied heavily. Because writers could not protect their works from being plagiarized or reprinted without their permission, they realized that the value of their works would drop after the first printing. As a result, many authors guarded their unpublished works closely, so that they could negotiate higher payments for the initial publication.

Poe mocked this trend in his story, "The Purloined Letter," where the narrator notes that it is the "possession, and not any employment of the letter, which bestows the power." Says Terence Whalen, in his essay, "The American Publishing Industry," "Regardless of what it may have meant to the queen, the stolen letter retains its power only so long as its contents remain secret." Whalen further notes that with this treatment of the letter, Poe "develops the tendencies of the capitalist publishing industry to a logical and perverse extreme."

Political Manipulations

The election of President Andrew Jackson in 1828 introduced competitive new methods into presidential elections. Says J. Gerald Kennedy, in his article, "Edgar Allan Poe, 1809-1849: A Brief Biography," "[t]he contest of 1828 had transformed presidential elections forever by introducing national political tactics" and "fierce partisanship." This partisanship carried over to governing itself, Kennedy notes, as Jackson began to "reward allies and punish enemies."

In the story, Dupin is also a political manipulator, who uses his recovery of the letter as a political move. "You know my political prepossessions, " Dupin says to the narrator. "In this matter, I act as a partisan of the lady concerned." Besides reclaiming the letter so that the Minister will be forced to stop blackmailing the queen, Dupin also sets it up so that the Minister will "commit himself, at once, to his political destruction."

The Rise of Rationalism

Poe begins his story by saying that it takes place in the "autumn of 18--." However, since the story was published in 1844, it is likely that this is the general time that he meant for the setting, especially since the story features the type of rational thought that was common in this time.

During the 1830s, when Poe began publishing many of his short stories, several developments took place. In England in 1833, English inventor Charles Babbage discovered the principle of the "analytical engine," a theoretical device for performing calculations. The device, which called for using a system of punched cards to give the machine instructions, eventually helped to lead to the genesis of the modern-day computer.

Two years later, in 1838, a New York Scientist, Charles A. Spencer, introduced the first microscope to America. Although microscopes had been around in some form in various parts of the world since the first crude microscope was built in the Netherlands in 1590, its introduction to America led to many applications.

In 1839, France's Louis Daguerre introduced the daguerreotype, a primitive form of photography, which gave people the ability to produce exact reproductions of life for the first time. Up until this point, reproductions were subject to the interpretation of the individual artist.

Critical Overview

Poe's stories have not always been criticized for their literary merit alone. As Roger Asselineau notes in his entry on Poe for *American Writers*, "the most contradictory judgments have been passed on Edgar Allan Poe's character and works." Asselineau remarks that even Poe's chosen executor, the Reverend Rufus Griswold, "branded him a perverse neurotic, a drunkard and drug addict." On many occasions, this negative sentiment about Poe's vices tainted the author's literary reputation.

Of course, not everybody thought Poe's writing was degenerate. In 1845, the year "The Purloined Letter" was reprinted in *Tales of Edgar A. Poe*, reviewer George Colton noted of this story and the other tales of ratiocination that "the difference between acumen and cunning, calculation and analysis, are admirably illustrated in these tales." In fact, favorable response to "The Purloined Letter" was widespread. As Eric W. Carlson notes in his entry for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, the story was "immediately popular," and "it was among his first translated into French."

The popularity of the story was still evident three decades later. In 1879, Robert Louis Stevenson noted that, "if anyone wishes to be excited, let him read. . . . the three stories about C. Auguste Dupin, the philosophical detective." On a similar note, a year later, Edmund Clarence Stedman noted in *Scribner's Monthly* that Poe's "strength is unquestionable in those clever pieces of ratiocination."

In the twentieth century, the reviews of the story were still largely positive, and many critics, like Vincent Buranelli, noted Poe's role as the father of the detective story, saying that he was "the only American ever to invent a form of literature. "Buranelli notes that Poe "also perfected it," and says that "The Purloined Letter" is one of two detective stories—the other being Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue"—that "may be the best ever written."

While "The Purloined Letter" was more consistently well-liked than many of Poe's other works, not everything about the story was approved. G. R. Thompson notes that Dupin's "role . . . is complex and suspect," and that he is set up as "a godlike omniscience, with the 'I' narrator and the reader playing the role of the dull-witted dupes." Furthermore, Thompson notes that "Dupin and D—. . . are moral doubles, each having a talent for duplicity and malice," and that "Dupin's interest in the case is morally dubious."

In spite of the criticism, with detective stories like "The Purloined Letter," Poe helped to influence many later mystery writers, a fact that is emphasized today by the existence of The Edgar, an annual award presented by the Mystery Writers of America to the best writers of detective stories.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Poquette has a bachelor's degree in English and specializes in writing about literature. In the following essay, Poquette discusses Poe's theory of the "bi-part soul" and its application in Poe's story.

Throughout his career, Poe was fascinated by the idea of a "bi-part" soul, half imagination, half reason—an idea that was expressed in many of his works. As Roger Asselineau noted about Poe in his entry for *American Writers*, "His works reflect this double aspect of his personality: the abandonment of the self-destructive romantic artist and the self-control of the conscious and conscientious craftsman." At first glance, somebody looking at Poe's stories may be tempted to label each one as either a horror story—emphasizing imagination—or a detective story, which emphasizes reason. However, with Poe, it is not always that simple, especially with Poe's detective stories. Kenneth Graham notes in the Introduction to *Selected Tales* that Dupin "is the most famous instance of the fusion of the faculties, in his 'Bi-part soul." The idea of the bipart soul is especially prevalent in "The Purloined Letter," where Poe uses both characterization and dialogue to emphasize and demonstrate the possibilities of this duality.

Out of the four characters in Poe's "The Purloined Letter," only two of them, Dupin and the Minister, embody the author's idea of the "bi-part soul." Consequently, these two men are the political power brokers in the story, engaged in an intellectual war, while the other two—the narrator and the Prefect—trail along behind, oblivious to what is going on around them.

Dupin is a powerful character, who has a reputation for being able to use his logic to solve mysteries that others cannot. As a result, people like the Prefect seek him out when they have a case that gives them "a great deal of trouble." Still, although the Prefect praises him for his logical abilities, Dupin has admittedly romantic and illogical notions, like sitting in the dark when listening to the details of potential cases. Dupin believes that "If it is any point requiring reflection," then they can "examine it to better purpose in the dark." The Prefect says this is one of Dupin's "odd notions," something that Dupin freely admits is "very true."

The Prefect cannot comprehend why somebody would choose illogical, artistic ideas over purely rational methods, and in fact disdains all things that are creative. The Prefect indicates that although the Minister is "not *altogether* a fool," "he is a poet, which I take to be only one remove from a fool." However, Dupin, who the Prefect respects, admits his own poetic side, saying, "I have been guilty of certain doggerel myself." In fact, it is precisely Dupin's ability to merge both the rational and the creative mindsets that allows him to solve the crime. As Stephen Marlowe notes in the Introduction to *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Stories*, "[y]et for all his skill as a logician, Dupin is proof that success in detection needs the inspiration of a poet as well."

In Poe's view, both qualities are needed to make an effective criminal, too. Like Dupin, the Minister is both creative and analytical, something that neither the narrator nor the Prefect realizes. Says the narrator, "The Minister I believe has written learnedly on the Differential Calculus. He is a mathematician, and no poet." The Prefect is equally as stumped as to the true nature of the Minister, focusing only on his mathematical side when trying to determine how and where the Minister might hide the letter. As Vincent Buranelli notes in *Twayne's United States Authors Series Online*, "The thief . . . successfully hides the letter from the police because he is both a poet and a mathematician." George Colton agrees, noting in *The American Review* that the Minister "identifies his own intellect with that of his opponents, and consequently understands what will be the course they will pursue in ferreting out the place where the letter is concealed." Only Dupin is aware of the truth, and he lets the narrator know of the Minister that "as poet *and* mathematician, he would reason well," and that "my measures were adapted to his capacity."

While Dupin and the Minister engage in their intellectual battle, employing both their analytical and creative powers against their opponent, the Prefect and the narrator are out of the fight altogether. Both men attempt to rely on purely rational thought. The Prefect is logical to a fault, and assumes that the letter can be found by logical methods alone. Says Dupin, "He never once thought it probable, or possible, that the minister had deposited the letter immediately beneath the nose of the whole world." The Prefect cannot comprehend why someone would want to hide something in plain view, so the letter becomes invisible to him.

The narrator is not much better off. Even though Dupin says that the Prefect's searching measures were "the best of their kind," and that they were "carried out to absolute perfection," he lets his friend know that this was not enough. "Had the letter been deposited within the range of their search, these fellows would, beyond a question, have found it." The narrator laughs at this statement, which flies in the face of the rational thought to which he is accustomed. If the Prefect's methods were perfect, then how could they not have found the letter? The narrator at first thinks that Dupin is joking, but soon realizes that Dupin "seemed quite serious in all that he said," and so listens some more. Dupin continues to explain that the defect in the search methods "lay in their being inapplicable to the case and to the man."

The narrator suffers, like the Prefect, from a tendency to rely totally on established systems of thought and past experience. The narrator is unaware of this, even though he had described this quality in the Prefect earlier in the story, when he noted that the Prefect "had the fashion of calling everything 'odd' that was beyond his comprehension, and thus lived amid an absolute legion of 'oddities.'" The narrator, too, is blinded to the possibilities of these "oddities," and so is unable to make the analogies that Dupin makes to solve the case. As Buranelli notes, "Dupin thinks by analogy when he solves the mystery . . . by inferring the behavior of the criminal from a knowledge of how human psychology operates." It is this duality of imagination and reason that places Dupin and the Minister ahead of the other two men.

The way in which dialogue is expressed in the story also helps to illustrate the duality of emotion and rationality. However, in this case, the model is flipped. Whereas in a person's thought processes, a touch of imagination and emotion affected reason in a good way, when dialogue becomes emotional, Poe shows it to be inferior. This is most notable in the dialogue of the Prefect and Dupin. Although the Prefect attempts to remain completely rational and unemotional in his thought processes, he uses emotional language at times. "Oh, good heavens! who ever heard of such an idea?" the Prefect says in response to Dupin's suggestion that the mystery may be too plain. This outburst shows the Prefect's tendency to get emotional in his speech, as well as his tendency, once again, to rule out any possibility that does not match his past experiences. In another instance, when Dupin asks the Prefect if he can describe what the letter looks like, the Prefect says, "Oh, yes!" and immediately pulls out a memo book with the description. His over-eagerness in providing information to Dupin reflects his eagerness in his misguided search for the letter.

Dupin, on the other hand, is completely levelheaded and rational throughout the tale. He remains calm, even indifferent—as when the narrator tells the Prefect to "proceed" in giving them details about the mystery, and Dupin says, "Or not." This cool behavior is evident throughout the story, as when Dupin gives the Prefect his advice to search again, and the Prefect says that it is not necessary. "I have no better advice to give you," says Dupin. He continues to keep his level demeanor when he tells the Prefect to make out the check to him: "you may as well fill me up a check for the amount mentioned. When you have signed it, I will hand you the letter."

Dupin is also rational as he walks the narrator through the lengthy deductive reasoning process that he used to figure out where the letter was, and as he tells the narrator how he recovered the letter, which could have been a potentially dangerous situation. Dupin notes that the Minister has "attendants devoted to his interests," and that if he had taken the letter outright—as the narrator suggested— Dupin "might never have left the Ministerial presence alive." In other words, although it is Dupin's ability to combine imaginative and rational thought processes that allows him to get inside the Minister's mind and leads to Dupin's discovery of the letter's hiding place, it is his purely rational outside demeanor, reflected in his language, that gives him the means to steal it back safely.

In Poe's "The Purloined Letter," the author illustrates the concept of the bi-part soul—combining reason and imagination in one person—an idea that dominated many of his works. In the story, Poe depicts two poet/mathematicians, embodiments of the idea of the bi-part soul, as people who are intellectually superior to both friends and foes. These creative and rational hybrids become, within the context of a detective tale, political power brokers who can work the system to their advantage, by operating outside of conventional society's rational thought and expectations.

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on "The Purloined Letter," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay excerpt, Buranelli examines "The Purloined Letter" within the context of the detective story, comparing it with "The Murders in the Rue Morgue."

Graham's Magazine carried in its issue of April, 1841, a short story entitled "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." Nothing quite like it had ever been seen before. The reading public was accustomed to tales of crime, whether fictional or of real events, and the violent deaths of Madame L'Espanaye and her daughter would not have been a cause of any particular note, except possibly for protests over the shocking details. What *was* of note was the novel manner in which the author treated his subject. With "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" Poe became the only American ever to invent a form of literature. He invented the detective story.

He also perfected it. This first detective story may be the best ever written. Only "The Purloined Letter" challenges it for that accolade, making the two together the high point in the history of crime fiction. The Poe standard slips with "The Mystery of Marie Roget," which is too long and too involved to hold the attention of the reader. "Thou Art the Man" is better, and represents one critical step forward in the handling of psychology in the detective story. "The Gold Bug" is a superior product by any definition: It helps to establish the wider category of the mystery story—the category that will be expanded by Wilkie Collins and Robert Louis Stevenson.

While fashioning the detective story, Poe came to regard it as an exception to the rule that truth is not the object of literary art. He considers it to be a puzzle in which the object is the correct solution, so that it resembles a cryptogram. His argument needs to be qualified. As his own practice reveals, the detective story is much more than a puzzle and is read at least as much for artistic presentation as for the intellectual manipulation of evidence. That is why the great detectives, Sherlock Holmes prominently, have eclipsed their cases. A cryptogram loses its interest when it has been solved, but a good detective story stands re-reading.

According to the classical rules of detective fiction, three elements are necessary for success, the art of the writer being to unite them properly into a coherent and, within the rules of the game, convincing account. These elements are the crime, the detective, and the method of detection. All three are identified and defined by Poe in one sweep of his genius. His practice is so good that it unnecessary to go beyond him to see how a detective story ought to be written.

The crime is the reason for the story, the cause of the incidents that follow. If verisimilitude is to claim the reader, persuading him to withhold his disbelief and to enter into the spirit of the story, the crime must not shock his credibility too much. He must be not only convinced that there is a puzzle worth unraveling, but also carried along by the narrative until the explanation is given to him. Puzzle without crime Poe deals with in "The Gold Bug," which concerns the discovery of pirate treasure after the decipherment of an old map by using the cryptography of which Poe was fond. Puzzle with crime

produces the detective story, and Poe is no less credible in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Purloined Letter" than he is in "The Gold Bug."

The discovery that Mme. L'Espanaye and her daughter have been murdered amid mysterious circumstances starts "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" on its way. The crime has happened on the fourth story of a Paris building. The bodies of the women have been fearfully mutilated, that of the mother thrown into the yard, that of the daughter thrust with tremendous force up the chimney. No one saw the murders or murderers, but several witnesses say they heard voices in the apartment. All agree that one was the voice of a Frenchman; but about the second voice they disagree. A French witness thinks the accents were Spanish; a Dutchman thinks they were French; and Englishman, German; a Spaniard, English; an Italian, Russian.

Who could have had the agility to climb a fourth story apartment, the ferocity to attack two women so horribly, the strength to thrust one corpse up the chimney? Who was it that spoke so strangely that everyone within earshot feels sure that he was speaking a strange tongue?

The crime and the circumstances of "The Purloined Letter" are completely different. In it the causal situation is theft, the thief is known, and the problem is to retrieve what he has stolen. The criminal is a minister of the Paris government, who, during a visit to the royal apartments, sees an incriminating letter lying on the table. He takes it, knowing that the lady to whom it is addressed cannot protest because of the presence of a third party from whom the letter must be concealed. The police are ordered to find the letter and get it back without letting the thief know what they are doing. Because the authorities are certain that he keeps it in his possession, possibly on his person, their agents, disguised as thugs, hold him up on the street and search him. Meanwhile crime experts, while he is out of the way, go over his rooms inch by inch, probing the furniture, the walls, and every conceivable hiding place—all to no avail. So the puzzle is this: The letter must be on the premises of the thief; the premises have been ransacked, ceiling to floor, wall to wall; the letter is there—but where is it?

When the crimes of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Purloined Letter" have been described, when the authorities have admitted failure—at this point every detective story fan since Poe's time has known what the next step is. The detective has to be brought into the case. His name is legion: Sherlock Holmes, Philo Vance, Charlie Chan, Father Brown, Ellery Queen, Perry Mason, Inspector Maigret, and so on *ad infinitum*. These are all aliases. His real name is C. Auguste Dupin, who steps forward into modern literature in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." He has been with us ever since.

Dupin is a gentleman of leisure, reduced in circumstances but not so far as to require that he work for a living. He dabbles in literature and even writes poetry. He has his peculiarities, such as a preference for darkness that leads him to shutter his room during the day, and to go out into the city only at night. He smokes a meerschaum. He knows the annals of crime; and, although a recluse who discourages visitors, he has

repeated visits from the highest officials of the police, who reveal to him the facts surrounding certain vexing crimes that have them baffled.

Does it all sound familiar? It should. The more you examine C. Auguste Dupin, the more does the figure of Sherlock Holmes appear in him. Dupin and Holmes even have in common certain minor tricks of their trade: Both, for example, know how to flush out a criminal by means of a newspaper advertisement. We know more about Holmes because Conan Doyle has described him through dozens of stories. Yet Poe has already set the pattern of getting the detective to solve more than one case, and of having him refer back to those that have gone before. Dupin is too strong a character to be held within Poe's limits of the short story, although his personality does not overbear incident as Holmes' does. Literature is full of human types that grew, almost by a natural growth, beyond the intentions of their authors. We know that it happened with Doyle. It seems to have happened with Poe. "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Purloined Letter" are not merely good plots leading up to effective endings. They are notable for characterization too. C. Auguste Dupin is the eternal detective.

Everything in the detective story depends on the detective, but there are subsidiary interests. Sherlock Holmes must be balanced by Doctor Watson, a fact that Poe was the first to see. Dupin has a companion, the narrator who plays the part of the listener, the man of middling intelligence who must be enlightened about what is happening, and who thereby passes the necessary information on to the reader. He is the link between the detective and the reader, and in his inability to comprehend the meaning of the clues both flatters the reader and shows off more brilliantly the sagacity of the detective. Holmes says to Watson, "You see but you do not observe." He had in mind that passage in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" where Dupin tells the narrator: "The necessary knowledge is of *what* to observe."

Holmes enjoys a special standing with Scotland Yard. Before him Dupin had been related in the same way to the French Sûreté. The reason for this is that the ineffectiveness of ordinary police methods must be shown, from which follows the appeal of the authorities to the detective to help them. Holmes is approached periodically by Inspector Lestrade, who knew how Dupin had been approached by the Paris Prefect.

Ordinary police methods having failed, the question is what method of his own the detective will bring to the solution of the crime. Holmes calls his method "deduction"; Dupin *calls* his "analysis." They are not very different, for each involves an insight into the pattern of the crime and a correct reading of the clues. Holmes, upon inferring Watson's chain of thought, even mentions Dupin's similar achievement as the basis of this blend of logic and psychology. The manner of reading clues was not original with Poe, who knew the passage on "detection" in Voltaire's *Zadig*. Poe's contribution was to raise the method to the level of a regular technique applied by a detective to the solution of a crime.

Dupin wields the imaginative perception of meaningful symmetries that Poe says elsewhere is the key to both science and art. Intuition, acting amid a welter of clues,

sets aside the trivia and fastens on a structure that emerges from putting the essential facts together. Then the intelligence may go to work in a more ordinary way, proving by deduction and induction that the solution thus arrived at is the true one—that the man apprehended is indeed the criminal in the case.

What is needed is the imagination of the poet and the reasoning power of the mathematician. The thief of "The Purloined Letter" successfully hides the letter from the police because he is both a poet and a mathematician. Dupin is able to find it because he too is both a poet and a mathematician. Dupin perceives that such a mind, confronted with the task of fooling the experts who will search his apartments in the most exhaustive way, must arrive at the conclusion that the safest way to hide the letter is to put it in a place so obvious that they will not even consider looking there. Hence Dupin, gaining an entrée, finds the letter just where he expects it to be—in the letter rack.

The horrors of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" fall into place when Dupin realizes that the salient clues—agility, strength, ferocity, and strange gibberish—can only fit an ape. He then deduces from various other clues that the second party probably is a sailor from a Maltese ship, and entices him into coming forward by advertising that a captured orangoutan will be returned to the owner if he claims it. The sailor's confession is the empirical evidence proving Dupin's insight and logic to be sound.

Dupin doubtless was a cryptographer by avocation. Legrand of "The Gold Bug" turns to cryptography in a purse sense when he finds the tattered, weather-beaten pirate map. His method of decoding it would be simply another of Poe's examples of how to break codes except that the Legrand uses it very practically to find the treasure hidden long ago by Captain Kidd. One may wonder whether the discovery really could be made in this way, but there is no dispute about "The Gold Bug" being a rattling good story. It deserved the prize it won from the *Dollar Newspaper* of Philadelphia. One of its offspring is Stevenson's *Treasure Island.*

Another of Poe's detective stories in which Dupin does not appear deserves mention —"Thou Art the Man." This is not one of his best (it is too melodramatic for that), but it advances the detective story in one cardinal way: It makes the villain of the piece, not some glowering thug or admittedly amoral gentleman, but precisely the jolly, frank, professedly aghast, friend of the victim. From there it was but a step to the sophisticated modern crime novels which conceal the criminal because he is indiscernible among the group of ordinary people.

Crime fiction is now so common that we can hardly imagine the literary scene without it. We naturally assume that every year will bring astronomical sales of Conan Doyle, S. S. Van Dine, Dorothy Sayers, Agatha Christie, G. K. Chesterton, Erle Stanley Gardner, Rex Stout, Ellery Queen, Simenon, and the hopeful newcomers who keep invading the mystery field in droves. The fiction writer is rare who has never had the idea cross his mind of doing a detective story. Before Poe, there was none of this. He stands at the head of a genre, a profession, and an industry.

Although the craft has become more sophisticated in many ways, Poe scarcely seems old-fashioned in his methods. The "fair play" doctrine is, fully enunciated, a relatively recent addition to the rules of the game—the idea that the author must set out the clues in such a way as to give the reader as good a chance as the detective to solve the mystery. Entertaining stories have been written without regard to this rule, which is unknown in the best of two old masters, Wilkie Collins (*The Moonstone*) and Conan Doyle (*A Study in Scarlet*).

Poe obeyed the fair doctrine in "The Purloined Letter," not deliberately but by a kind of instinct for what was fitting. The reader knows as much as Dupin and can, if mentally alert, reach the solution just as quickly. Poe puts the two necessary clues in their hands at the same time. The first clue is that the best way to hide an object is to leave it in the most obvious place. The second clue is that the missing object is a letter. If the reader joins the two clues as he should, he knows where the letter is.

Numerous *i*'s have been dotted and t's crossed in the past century. Clues are scattered more artfully; criminals have become more cunning than they were; detectives in self-defense have become more acute. Criminals and detectives come from all the human types. Methods of murder include technical scientific discoveries from nuclear radiation to lethal microscopic organisms, and writers play with combinations of countless new factors available to them. A few of the later forms would have been beyond Poe. Not even he could have imagined the hardboiled detective story of which Dashiell Hammett was the master—it is too much a product of twentieth century, post-World War I, America. Most of the other refinements would have been within Poe's range, and he might have introduced many of them if he had been writing detective novels. Being confined to the dimensions of the short story, he had to do what he could with the space at his disposal, where there was no possibility of trailing clues at twenty-page intervals. No one has used that amount of space more effectively. If Poe had written as much detective fiction as Conan Doyle, the world's most famous detective would be, not Sherlock Holmes, but C. Auguste Dupin.

The standards set by Poe are still sound. Today's practitioners are all in his debt. The Mystery Writers of America paid only part of the debt when they founded their Edgar Allan Poe Award for the best detective story of the year.

Source: Vincent Buranelli, "Fiction Themes," in *Edgar Allan Poe*, Twayne Publishers, 1977, pp. 65-87.

Adaptations

"The Purloined Letter" was adapted into an audiocassette version in 1986 by Spoken Arts.

"The Purloined Letter" was adapted into a fullcast audiocassette production in *Edgar Allan Poe's Stories & Tales II*, published by Monterey Soundworks in 2000. The audio collection also includes Poe's "The Black Cat," "The System of Dr. Tarr and Professor Fether," and "The Murders in the Rue Morgue."

Topics for Further Study

Research the methods that modern-day criminal psychologists use to create a psychological profile. Using these methods, choose one of history's greatest criminals and write a profile about him or her in the modern style.

Research the methods of investigation used by the French police in the 1830s and 1840s, and write a three-page paper describing how their investigative methods do or do not correspond with the types of methods described by Poe in "The Purloined Letter."

Although Poe was an American, he chose to place his story in France. Research the political, historical, and social climates of both France and America in the 1830s and 1840s, and pose a theory about why Poe may have chosen to set his story in France. Then, write a plot summary for a different version of the story, which takes place in America at the same time.

Compare C. Auguste Dupin to Sam Spade, the famous detective protagonist of Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*. Write a scene where the two men meet in a modern-day setting. How would they react to contemporary issues and ways of thinking?

In the story, the French police use a microscope as an investigative tool. Research the history of the microscope. Besides police investigations, find five other ways that microscopes have been used in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries.

Compare and Contrast

1840s: Samuel Morse, American portrait painter, invents Morse Code, a code of dots and spaces that the United States government uses to keep messages secret from its political enemies.

Today: The United States constructs increasingly more sophisticated methods of keeping messages secret, and employs mathematicians to try to break the codes of other countries.

Early 1840s: Frenchman Louis Daguerre, a scenepainter, invents the daguerreotype, a method that uses a lens and light, along with a chemical reaction, to capture exact images. The first daguerreotypes are used mainly for landscapes— including the first photograph of Paris—and portraits.

Today: Photography comes in many types, including digital, and it is used in many educational, artistic, medical, and scientific applications. Photographs are also used as evidence in many police investigations and criminal trials.

Early 1840s: In the absence of any strictly enforced copyright laws, American authors guard their writings to increase the value of their works on first publication, since they are often reproduced by magazines without the author's permission.

Today: With the advent of the Internet and online publishing, it is easier than ever to gain free access to many copyrighted works. As a result, legal cases and debates involving intellectual property issues increase dramatically.

What Do I Read Next?

Poe's detective stories featuring C. Auguste Dupin influenced many later mystery writers, most notably Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, whose Sherlock Holmes eventually eclipsed Poe's Dupin. *The Complete Sherlock Holmes: All Four Novels and 56 Short Stories*, published by Bantam Classic and Loveswept in 1998, demonstrates Doyle's mastery of the genre.

Investigative methods have advanced considerably since the mid-nineteenth century. Greg Fallis's *Just the Facts, Ma'Am: A Writer's Guide to Investigators and Investigation Techniques*, published in 1998 by Writer's Digest Books, details the modern techniques that police use when conducting investigations, as well as the personal traits needed to become a successful investigator today.

In more recent detective fiction, female private investigators have joined the field. One of the most notable is by Sue Grafton, whose alphabet series of mysteries—featuring the gutsy female private investigator, Kinsey Millhone—are some of the most popular. The series starts with *A is for Alibi*, published in 1987 by Crime Line. In this novel, Millhone is hired by a woman who has served time in prison for murdering her husband but who wants Millhone to find the real killer.

Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*, originally published in 1930 and reprinted by Vintage books in 1992, is the author's masterpiece in the genre of hard-boiled fiction, a type of detective literature that he himself created. His stories featured tough private detectives who solved mysteries in gritty, dark, urban backgrounds.

Published in 1984 by The Library of America, *Edgar Allan Poe: Essays and Reviews*, edited by G. R. Thompson, contains three of Poe's essential essays and reviews, including "The Philosophy of Composition." Originally published in 1846, this landmark essay laid out the rules Poe followed when writing his famous poem, "The Raven." These rules were adopted by many other nineteenth-century poets.

The Illustrated Poetry of Edgar Allan Poe, published by Gramercy in 2001, features some of Poe's best-loved poems, accompanied by the romantic illustrations of Edmund Dulac.

Although Poe is generally known for his poetry and his supernatural, horror, and mystery short stories, he also wrote one novel: *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. Referred to by Jorge Luis Borges as "Poe's greatest work," the Gothic novel—which details the fantastic and horrific adventures of a stowaway aboard a whaling ship—was originally published in 1838.

Further Study

Quinn, Arthur Hobson, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1941.

Quinn's massive, 832-page book, reprinted in 1997, is considered by many to be the definitive study in its time of Poe. Quinn, born in 1875, was concerned with defending Poe's reputation, and his examination of Poe's life—unlike many other biographies that relied on guesswork and speculation—was based on thorough research in the Poe family archive.

Silverman, Kenneth, *Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-Ending Remembrance*, HarperPerennial Library, 1992.

Pulitzer-Prize-winning biographer for *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather*, Silverman examines Poe's life in light of the fact that Poe was one of the first generation of professional American writers. The book also includes an exhaustive collection of appendices and notes for further study.

Sova, Dawn B., *Edgar Allan Poe, A to Z: The Essential Reference to His Life and Work*, Literary A to Z Series, Checkmark Books, 2001.

This work is an encyclopedic collection of in-depth entries on all aspects of Poe's life, including the people, places, and publications that influenced the author. It also includes twentieth-century film and musical adaptations, chronologies of Poe's life and works, a list of Poe research collections, and a bibliography.

Walsh, John Evangelist, *Midnight Dreary: The Mysterious Death of Edgar Allan Poe*, St. Martin's Press, 2000.

Poe's death and the circumstances surrounding it remain a mystery, and various theories have been posed as to what the cause of his demise really was. In this book, Walsh reconstructs Poe's last days, incorporating several of the dominant theories regarding his death.

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Whalen, Terence, "Poe and the American Publishing Industry," in *A Historical Guide to Edgar Allan Poe*, edited by J. Gerald Kennedy, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 87.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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