

The Purloined Letter by E.A. Poe

“The Purloined Letter” by E.A. Poe establishes a new genre of short fiction in American literature: the detective story. Poe considered “The Purloined Letter” his best detective story, and critics have long identified how it redefines the mystery genre—it turns away from action toward intellectual analysis, for example. As opposed to the graphic violence of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” which features bodily mutilation and near decapitation by a wild animal, “The Purloined Letter” focuses more dryly on the relationship between the Paris police and Dupin, between the ineffectual established order and the savvy private eye. When the narrator opens the story by reflecting upon the gruesome murders in the Rue Morgue that Dupin has helped solve, Poe clarifies that the prior story is on his mind. Poe sets up the cool reason for “The Purloined Letter” in opposition to the violence of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” The battered and lacerated bodies of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” are replaced by the bloodless, inanimate stolen letter. However, just as the Paris police cannot solve the gory crime of passion in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” they are similarly unable to solve this simple mystery, in which the solution is hidden in plain sight.

Perhaps the most famous of Edgar Allan Poe's detective stories, "The Purloined Letter" breaks from his usual horror genre to present a detective story free of violence but full of analysis. The first person narrator sits with his friend C. Auguste Dupin in Dupin's library when the Prefect of the Paris police stops by. He decides to tell them about a case he's working on that he can't solve. He explains that a woman of importance had a letter taken away from her by a man who stood right in front of her. She couldn't stop him because a third person was in the room, and the letter had sensitive material in it, so she didn't want to draw attention to it. Therefore, the policeman knows that the Minister has robbed this royal personage and has the letter in his possession, yet the police can't find it.

The policemen describes how he has witnessed several searches of the minister himself, and he clearly is not carrying the letter on him. At night while he is away, they have also ransacked his home quite thoroughly checking inside every piece of furniture, every book, and under every floorboard with no sign of the letter. Despite his thoroughness, Dupin suggests to the Prefect that he check the residence again.

A month later the Prefect returns to speak to the same two gentlemen, having become completely frustrated with the case. He says that he has had no luck in finding the letter, and the reward for it has been raised to such a high sum that he'd be willing to hand over a year's pay to whomever can find the letter for him. Dupin asks him to write a check for his salary, fifty thousand francs, and he will hand over the letter. The policeman skeptically writes him the check, and Dupin immediately produces the missing letter. The policeman is so shocked that he leaves without a word.

Dupin's friend is also stunned and wants to know how he was able to find the letter. Dupin explains that the searches of the police are thorough but too methodical. They always search in

the same manner without considering the thought process of the criminal. Not all people think the same way. It's important to take into consideration the personality and intelligence of the person hiding the evidence. In this case Dupin knew that the Minister is a poet and a mathematician. Usually, mathematicians are known for their logic, but the Minister's poetic side went beyond the logical. The Minister anticipated the methods of the police, and therefore did not hide the letter anywhere he knew they would look. Instead he decided to use subterfuge and hide the letter in plain sight where he knew the police wouldn't see it. He took the letter and folded and crumpled it to such a degree that it looked old and worn. Then he turned it inside out to disguise its contents and seal.

Dupin spotted it in a card holder when he first paid a visit to the Minister, thinking that he would have disguised the letter in such a manner. During this visit, Dupin purposely left his snuffbox behind so that he would have an excuse to return. The next day when he returned to claim the snuffbox, Dupin had arranged for a man to make a commotion outside the window by shooting off a gun, causing people to scream. When the Minister heard the disturbance, he rushed to the window to look out, and Dupin took the opportunity to take the stolen letter and replace it with a fake one that he had created to resemble the first. He then happily reclaimed his snuffbox and left.

Dupin's friend wanted to know why he didn't just accuse the Minister of theft when he first found the letter, but Dupin said he feared for his safety, knowing the contents of the letter were so valuable. He also didn't want to say anything so that the Minister could incriminate himself by trying to use the information against its owner then producing evidence that he would realize he no longer possessed. As a clue to who found him out, Dupin wrote a message inside the replacement letter alluding to a French poem in which one brother gets revenge on the other for a crime, proving that the Minister is getting what he deserves.

In this short story, Poe moves away from violence and action by associating Dupin's intelligence with his reflectiveness and his radical theories about the mind. This tale does not have the constant action of stories like "The Cask of Amontillado" or "The Black Cat." Instead, this tale features the narrator and Dupin sitting in Dupin's library and discussing ideas. The tale's action, relayed by flashbacks, takes place outside the narrative frame. The narrative itself is told through dispassionate analysis. The intrusions of the prefect and his investigations of the Minister's apartment come off as unrefined and unintellectual. Poe portrays the prefect as simultaneously the most active and the most unreflective character in the story. Dupin's most pointed criticisms of the prefect have less to do with a personal attack than with a critique of the mode of investigation employed by the police as a whole. Dupin suggests that the police cannot think outside their standard procedures. They cannot place themselves in the minds of those who commit crimes. Dupin's strategy of solving crimes, on the other hand, involves a process of thinking like someone else. Just as the boy playing "even and odd" enters his opponent's mind, Dupin inhabits the consciousness of the criminal. He does not employ fancy psychological theories but rather imitates the train of thought of his opponent. He succeeds in operating one step ahead of the police because he thinks as the Minister does.

This crime-solving technique of thinking like the criminal suggests that Dupin and the Minister are more doubles than opposites. The revenge aspect of the story, which Dupin promises after the Minister offends him in Vienna, arguably derives from their threatening similarity. Dupin's note inside the phoney letter suggests the rivalry that accompanies brotherly minds. Dupin implies here that Thyestes deserves more punishment than Atreus because he commits the original wrong. In contrast, Atreus's revenge is legitimate because it repays the original offence. Dupin considers his deed to be revenge and thereby morally justified.