

“The Purloined Letter” (1844)

A Short-Story by E.A. Poe

Original Text of the Short-Story, “The Purloined Letter” by E.A. Poe

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Nil sapientiae odiosius acumine nimio.

-Seneca.

At Paris, just after dark one gusty evening in the autumn of 18-, I was enjoying the twofold luxury of meditation and a meerschaum, in company with my friend C. Auguste Dupin, in his little back library, or book-closet, au troisième, No. 33, Rue Dunôt, Faubourg St. Germain. For one hour at least we had maintained a profound silence; while each, to any casual observer, might have seemed intently and exclusively occupied with the curling eddies of smoke that oppressed the atmosphere of the chamber. For myself, however, I was mentally discussing certain topics which had formed matter for conversation between us at an earlier period of the evening; I mean the affair of the Rue Morgue, and the mystery attending the murder of Marie Rogêt. I looked upon it, therefore, as something of a coincidence, when the door of our apartment was thrown open and admitted our old acquaintance, Monsieur G--, the Prefect of the Parisian police.

We gave him a hearty welcome; for there was nearly half as much of the entertaining as of the contemptible about the man, and we had not seen him for several years. We had been sitting in the dark, and Dupin now arose for the purpose of lighting a lamp, but sat down again, without doing so, upon G.'s saying that he had called to consult us, or rather to ask the opinion of my friend, about some official business which had occasioned a great deal of trouble.

"If it is any point requiring reflection," observed Dupin, as he forebore to enkindle the wick, "we shall examine it to better purpose in the dark."

"That is another of your odd notions," said the Prefect, who had a fashion of calling every thing "odd" that was beyond his comprehension, and thus lived amid an absolute legion of "oddities."

"Very true," said Dupin, as he supplied his visiter with a pipe, and rolled towards him a comfortable chair.

"And what is the difficulty now?" I asked. "Nothing more in the assassination way, I hope?"

"Oh no; nothing of that nature. The fact is, the business is very simple indeed, and I make no doubt that we can manage it sufficiently well ourselves; but then I thought Dupin would like to hear the details of it, because it is so excessively odd."

"Simple and odd," said Dupin.

"Why, yes; and not exactly that, either. The fact is, we have all been a good deal puzzled because the affair is so simple, and yet baffles us altogether."

"Perhaps it is the very simplicity of the thing which puts you at fault," said my friend.

"What nonsense you do talk!" replied the Prefect, laughing heartily.

"Perhaps the mystery is a little too plain," said Dupin.

"Oh, good heavens! who ever heard of such an idea?"

"A little too self-evident."

"Ha! ha! ha--ha! ha! ha!--ho! ho! ho!" roared our visiter, profoundly amused, "oh, Dupin, you will be the death of me yet!"

"And what, after all, is the matter on hand?" I asked.

"Why, I will tell you," replied the Prefect, as he gave a long, steady and contemplative puff, and settled himself in his chair. "I will tell you in a few words; but, before I begin, let me caution you that this is an affair demanding the greatest secrecy, and that I should most probably lose the position I now hold, were it known that I confided it to any one."

"Proceed," said I.

"Or not," said Dupin.

"Well, then; I have received personal information, from a very high quarter, that a certain document of the last importance, has been purloined from the royal apartments. The individual who purloined it is known; this beyond a doubt; he was seen to take it. It is known, also, that it still remains in his possession."

"How is this known?" asked Dupin.

"It is clearly inferred," replied the Prefect, "from the nature of the document, and from the non-appearance of certain results which would at once arise from its passing out of the robber's possession; that is to say, from his employing it as he must design in the end to employ it."

"Be a little more explicit," I said.

"Well, 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." The Prefect was fond of the cant of diplomacy.

"Still I do not quite understand," said Dupin.

"No? Well; the disclosure of the document to a third person, who shall be nameless, would bring in question the honor of a personage of most exalted station; and this fact gives the holder of the document an ascendancy over the illustrious personage whose honor and peace are so jeopardized."

"But this ascendancy," I interposed, "would depend upon the robber's knowledge of the loser's knowledge of the robber. Who would dare--"

"The thief," said G., "is the Minister D--, who dares all things, those unbecoming as well as those becoming a man. The method of the theft was not less ingenious than bold. The document in question--a letter, to be frank--had been received by the personage robbed while alone in the royal boudoir. During its perusal she was suddenly interrupted by the entrance of the other exalted personage from whom especially it was her wish to conceal it. After a hurried and vain endeavor to thrust it in a drawer, she was forced to place it, open as it was, upon a table. The address, however, was uppermost, and, the contents thus unexposed, the letter escaped notice. At this juncture enters the Minister D--. His lynx eye immediately perceives the paper, recognises the handwriting of the address, observes the confusion of the personage addressed, and fathoms her secret. After some business transactions, hurried through in his ordinary manner, he produces a letter somewhat similar to the

one in question, opens it, pretends to read it, and then places it in close juxtaposition to the other. Again he converses, for some fifteen minutes, upon the public affairs. At length, in taking leave, he takes also from the table the letter to which he had no claim. Its rightful owner saw, but, of course, dared not call attention to the act, in the presence of the third personage who stood at her elbow. The minister decamped; leaving his own letter--one of no importance--upon the table."

"Here, then," said Dupin to me, "you have precisely what you demand to make the ascendancy complete--the robber's knowledge of the loser's knowledge of the robber."

"Yes," replied the Prefect; "and the power thus attained has, for some months past, been wielded, for political purposes, to a very dangerous extent. The personage robbed is more thoroughly convinced, every day, of the necessity of reclaiming her letter. But this, of course, cannot be done openly. In fine, driven to despair, she has committed the matter to me."

"Than whom," said Dupin, amid a perfect whirlwind of smoke, "no more sagacious agent could, I suppose, be desired, or even imagined."

"You flatter me," replied the Prefect; "but it is possible that some such opinion may have been entertained."

"It is clear," said I, "as you observe, that the letter is still in possession of the minister; since it is this possession, and not any employment of the letter, which bestows the power. With the employment the power departs."

"True," said G.; "and upon this conviction I proceeded. My first care was to make thorough search of the minister's hotel; and here my chief embarrassment lay in the necessity of searching without his knowledge. Beyond all things, I have been warned of the danger which would result from giving him reason to suspect our design."

"But," said I, "you are quite au fait in these investigations. The Parisian police have done this thing often before."

"O yes; and for this reason I did not despair. The habits of the minister gave me, too, a great advantage. He is frequently absent from home all night. His servants are by no means numerous. They sleep at a distance from their master's apartment, and, being chiefly Neapolitans, are readily made drunk. I have keys, as you know, with which I can open any chamber or cabinet in Paris. For three months a night has not passed, during the greater part of which I have not been engaged, personally, in ransacking the D-- Hotel. My honor is interested, and, to mention a great secret, the reward is enormous. So I did not abandon the search until I had become fully satisfied that the thief is a more astute man than myself. I fancy that I have investigated every nook and corner of the premises in which it is possible that the paper can be concealed."

"But is it not possible," I suggested, "that although the letter may be in possession of the minister, as it unquestionably is, he may have concealed it elsewhere than upon his own premises?"

"This is barely possible," said Dupin. "The present peculiar condition of affairs at court, and especially of those intrigues in which D-- is known to be involved, would render the instant availability of the document--its susceptibility of being produced at a moment's notice--a point of nearly equal importance with its possession."

"Its susceptibility of being produced?" said I.

"That is to say, of being destroyed," said Dupin.

"True," I observed; "the paper is clearly then upon the premises. As for its being upon the person of the minister, we may consider that as out of the question."

"Entirely," said the Prefect. "He has been twice waylaid, as if by footpads, and his person rigorously searched under my own inspection."

"You might have spared yourself this trouble," said Dupin. "D--, I presume, is not altogether a fool, and, if not, must have anticipated these waylayings, as a matter of course."

"Not altogether a fool," said G., "but then he's a poet, which I take to be only one remove from a fool."

"True," said Dupin, after a long and thoughtful whiff from

his meerschaum, "although I have been guilty of certain doggrel myself."

"Suppose you detail," said I, "the particulars of your search."

"Why the fact is, we took our time, and we searched every where. I have had long experience in these affairs. I took the entire building, room by room; devoting the nights of a whole week to each. We examined, first, the furniture of each apartment. We opened every possible drawer; and I presume you know that, to a properly trained police agent, such a thing as a secret drawer is impossible. Any man is a dolt who permits a 'secret' drawer to escape him in a search of this kind. The thing is so plain. 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. After the cabinets we took the chairs. The cushions we probed with the fine long needles you have seen me employ. From the tables we removed the tops."

"Why so?"

"Sometimes the top of a table, or other similarly arranged piece of furniture, is removed by the person wishing to conceal an article; then the leg is excavated, the article deposited within the cavity, and the top replaced. The bottoms and tops of bedposts are employed in the same way."

"But could not the cavity be detected by sounding?" I asked.

"By no means, if, when the article is deposited, a sufficient wadding of cotton be placed around it. Besides, in our case, we were obliged to proceed without noise."

"But you could not have removed--you could not have taken to pieces all articles of furniture in which it would have been possible to make a deposit in the manner you mention. A letter may be compressed into a thin spiral roll, not differing much in shape or bulk from a large knitting-needle, and in this form it might be inserted into the rung of a chair, for example. You did not take to pieces all the chairs?"

"Certainly not; but we did better--we examined the rungs of every chair in the hotel, and, indeed the jointings of every description of furniture, by the aid of a most powerful microscope. Had there been any traces of recent disturbance we should not have failed to detect it instantly. A single grain of gimlet-dust, for example, would have been as obvious as an apple. Any disorder in the glueing--any unusual gaping in the joints--would have sufficed to insure detection."

"I presume you looked to the mirrors, between the boards and the plates, and you probed the beds and the bed-clothes, as well as the curtains and carpets."

"That of course; and when we had absolutely completed every particle of the furniture in this way, then we examined the house itself. We divided its entire surface into compartments, which we numbered, so that none might be missed; then we scrutinized each individual square inch throughout the premises, including the two houses immediately adjoining, with the microscope, as before."

"The two houses adjoining!" I exclaimed; "you must have had a great deal of trouble."

"We had; but the reward offered is prodigious!"

"You include the grounds about the houses?"

"All the grounds are paved with brick. They gave us comparatively little trouble. We examined the moss between the bricks, and found it undisturbed."

"You looked among D--'s papers, of course, and into the books of the library?"

"Certainly; we opened every package and parcel; we not only opened every book, but we turned over every leaf in each volume, not contenting ourselves with a mere shake, according to the fashion of some of our police officers. We also measured the thickness of every book-cover, with the most accurate admeasurement, and applied to each the most jealous scrutiny of the microscope. Had any of the bindings been recently meddled with, it would have been utterly impossible that the fact should have escaped observation. Some five or six volumes, just from the hands of the binder, we carefully probed, longitudinally, with the needles."

"You explored the floors beneath the carpets?"

"Beyond doubt. We removed every carpet, and examined the boards with the microscope."

"And the paper on the walls?"

"Yes."

"You looked into the cellars?"

"We did."

"Then," I said, "you have been making a miscalculation, and the letter is not upon the premises, as you suppose."

"I fear you are right there," said the Prefect. "And now, Dupin, what would you advise me to do?"

"To make a thorough re-search of the premises."

"That is absolutely needless," replied G--. "I am not more sure that I breathe than I am that the letter is not at the Hotel."

"I have no better advice to give you," said Dupin. "You have, of course, an accurate description of the letter?"

"Oh yes!"--And here the Prefect, producing a memorandum-book proceeded to read aloud a minute account of the internal, and especially of the external appearance of the missing document. Soon after finishing the perusal of this description, he took his departure, more entirely depressed in spirits than I had ever known the good gentleman before. In about a month afterwards he paid us another visit, and found us occupied very nearly as before. He took a pipe and a chair and entered into some ordinary conversation. At length I said,--

"Well, but G--, what of the purloined letter? I presume you have at last made up your mind that there is no such thing as overreaching the Minister?"

"Confound him, say I--yes; I made the re-examination, however, as Dupin suggested--but it was all labor lost, as I knew it would be."

"How much was the reward offered, did you say?" asked Dupin.

"Why, a very great deal--a very liberal reward--I don't like to say how much, precisely; but one thing I will say, that I wouldn't mind giving my individual check for fifty thousand francs to any one who could obtain me that letter. The fact is, it is becoming of more and more importance every day; and the reward has been lately doubled. If it were trebled, however, I could do no more than I have done."

"Why, yes," said Dupin, drawlingly, between the whiffs of his meerschaum, "I really--think, G--, you have not exerted yourself--to the utmost in this matter. You might--do a little more, I think, eh?"

"How?--in what way?"

"Why--puff, puff--you might--puff, puff--employ counsel in the matter, eh?--puff, puff, puff. Do you remember the story they tell of Abernethy?"

"No; hang Abernethy!"

"To be sure! hang him and welcome. But, once upon a time, a certain rich miser conceived the design of spunging upon this Abernethy for a medical opinion. Getting up, for this purpose, an ordinary conversation in a private company, he insinuated his case to the physician, as that of an imaginary individual.

"We will suppose," said the miser, 'that his symptoms are such and such; now, doctor, what would you have directed him to take?'

"Take!" said Abernethy, 'why, take advice, to be sure.'"

"But," said the Prefect, a little discomposed, "I am perfectly willing to take advice, and to pay for it. I would really give fifty thousand francs to any one who would aid me in the matter."

"In that case," replied Dupin, opening a drawer, and producing a check-book, "you may as well fill me up a check for the amount mentioned. When you have signed it, I will hand you the letter."

I was astounded. The Prefect appeared absolutely thunder-stricken. For some minutes he remained speechless and motionless, looking incredulously at my friend with open mouth, and eyes that seemed starting from their sockets; then, apparently recovering himself in some measure, he seized a pen, and after several pauses and vacant stares, finally filled up and signed a check for fifty thousand francs, and handed it across the table to Dupin. The latter examined it carefully and deposited it in his pocket-book; then, unlocking an escritoire, took thence a letter and gave it to the Prefect. This functionary grasped it in a perfect agony of joy, opened it with a trembling hand, cast a rapid glance at its contents, and then, scrambling and struggling to the door, rushed at length unceremoniously from the room and from the house, without having uttered a syllable since Dupin had requested him to fill up the check.

When he had gone, my friend entered into some explanations.

"The Parisian police," he said, "are exceedingly able in their way. They are persevering, ingenious, cunning, and thoroughly versed in the knowledge which their duties seem chiefly to demand. Thus, when G-- detailed to us his mode of searching the premises at the Hotel D--, I felt entire confidence in his having made a satisfactory investigation--so far as his labors extended."

"So far as his labors extended?" said I.

"Yes," said Dupin. "The measures adopted were not only the best of their kind, but carried out to absolute perfection. Had the letter been deposited within the range of their search, these fellows would, beyond a question, have found it."

I merely laughed--but he seemed quite serious in all that he said.

"The measures, then," he continued, "were good in their kind, and well executed; their defect lay in their being inapplicable to the case, and to the man. A certain set of highly ingenious resources are, with the Prefect, a sort of Procrustean bed, to which he forcibly adapts his designs. But he perpetually errs by being too deep or too shallow, for the matter in hand; and many a schoolboy is a better reasoner than he. I knew one about eight years of age, whose success at guessing in the game of 'even and odd' attracted universal admiration. This game is simple, and is played with marbles. One player holds in his hand a number of these toys, and demands of another whether that number is even or odd. If the guess is right, the guesser wins one; if wrong, he loses one. The boy to whom I allude won all the marbles of the school. Of course he had some principle of guessing; and this lay in mere observation and admeasurement of the astuteness of his opponents. For example, an arrant simpleton is his opponent, and, holding up his closed hand, asks, 'are they even or odd?' Our schoolboy replies, 'odd,' and loses; but upon the second trial he wins, for he then says to himself, 'the simpleton had them even upon the first trial, and his amount of cunning is just sufficient to make him have them odd upon the second; I will therefore guess odd;'--he guesses odd, and wins. Now, with a simpleton a degree above the first, he would have reasoned thus: 'This fellow finds that in the first instance I guessed odd, and, in the second, he will propose to himself, upon the first impulse, a simple variation from even to odd, as did the first simpleton; but then a second thought will suggest that this is too simple a variation, and finally he will decide upon putting it even as before. I will therefore guess even;'--he guesses even, and wins. Now this mode of reasoning in the schoolboy, whom his fellows termed 'lucky,'--what, in its last analysis, is it?"

"It is merely," I said, "an identification of the reasoner's intellect with that of his opponent."

"It is," said Dupin; "and, upon inquiring, of the boy by what means he effected the thorough identification in which his success consisted, I received answer as follows: 'When I wish to find out how wise, or how stupid, or how good, or how wicked is any one, or what are his thoughts at the moment, I fashion the expression of my face, as accurately as possible, in accordance with the expression of his, and then wait to see what thoughts or sentiments arise in my mind or heart, as if to match or correspond with the expression.' This response of the schoolboy lies at the bottom of all the spurious profundity which has been attributed to Rochefoucault, to La Bougive, to Machiavelli, and to Campanella."

"And the identification," I said, "of the reasoner's intellect with that of his opponent, depends, if I understand you aright, upon the accuracy with which the opponent's intellect is admeasured."

"For its practical value it depends upon this," replied Dupin; "and the Prefect and his cohort fail so frequently, first, by default of this identification, and, secondly, by ill-admeasurement, or rather through non-admeasurement, of the intellect with which they are engaged. They consider only their own ideas of ingenuity; and, in searching for anything hidden, advert only to the modes in which they would have hidden it. They are right in this much--that their own ingenuity is a faithful representative of that of the mass; but when the cunning of the individual felon is diverse in character from their own, the felon foils them, of course. This always happens when it is above their own, and very usually when it is below. They have no variation of principle in their investigations; at best, when urged by some unusual emergency--by some extraordinary reward--they extend or exaggerate their old modes of practice, without touching their principles. What, for example, in this case of D--, has been done to vary the principle of action? What is all this boring, and probing, and sounding, and scrutinizing with the microscope and dividing the surface of the building into registered square inches--what is it all but an exaggeration of the application of the one principle or set of principles of search, which are based upon the one set of notions regarding human ingenuity, to which the Prefect, in the long routine of his duty, has been accustomed? Do you not see he has taken it for granted that all men proceed to conceal a letter,--

not exactly in a gimlet hole bored in a chair-leg--but, at least, in some out-of-the-way hole or corner suggested by the same tenor of thought which would urge a man to secrete a letter in a gimlet-hole bored in a chair-leg? And do you not see also, that such *recherchés* nooks for concealment are adapted only for ordinary occasions, and would be adopted only by ordinary intellects; for, in all cases of concealment, a disposal of the article concealed--a disposal of it in this *recherché* manner,--is, in the very first instance, presumable and presumed; and thus its discovery depends, not at all upon the acumen, but altogether upon the mere care, patience, and determination of the seekers; and where the case is of importance--or, what amounts to the same thing in the policial eyes, when the reward is of magnitude,--the qualities in question have never been known to fail. You will now understand what I meant in suggesting that, had the purloined letter been hidden any where within the limits of the Prefect's examination--in other words, had the principle of its concealment been comprehended within the principles of the Prefect--its discovery would have been a matter altogether beyond question. This functionary, however, has been thoroughly mystified; and the remote source of his defeat lies in the supposition that the Minister is a fool, because he has acquired renown as a poet. All fools are poets; this the Prefect feels; and he is merely guilty of a non *distributio medii* in thence inferring that all poets are fools."

"But is this really the poet?" I asked. "There are two brothers, I know; and both have attained reputation in letters. The Minister I believe has written learnedly on the Differential Calculus. He is a mathematician, and no poet."

"You are mistaken; I know him well; he is both. As poet and mathematician, he would reason well; as mere mathematician, he could not have reasoned at all, and thus would have been at the mercy of the Prefect."

"You surprise me," I said, "by these opinions, which have been contradicted by the voice of the world. You do not mean to set at naught the well-digested idea of centuries. The mathematical reason has long been regarded as the reason *par excellence*."

"Il y a à parier," replied Dupin, quoting from Chamfort, "'que toute idée publique, toute convention reçue est une sottise, car elle a convenue au plus grand nombre.'" The mathematicians, I grant you, have done their best to promulgate the popular error to which you allude, and which is none the less an error for its promulgation as truth. With an art worthy a better cause, for example, they have insinuated the term 'analysis' into application to algebra. The French are the originators of this particular deception; but if a term is of any importance--if words derive any value from applicability--then 'analysis' conveys 'algebra' about as much as, in Latin, 'ambitus' implies 'ambition,' 'religio' 'religion,' or 'homines honesti,' a set of honorablemen."

"You have a quarrel on hand, I see," said I, "with some of the algebraists of Paris; but proceed."

"I dispute the availability, and thus the value, of that reason which is cultivated in any especial form other than the abstractly logical. I dispute, in particular, the reason educed by mathematical study. The mathematics are the science of form and quantity; mathematical reasoning is merely logic applied to observation upon form and quantity. The great error lies in supposing that even the truths of what is called pure algebra, are abstract or general truths. And this error is so egregious that I am confounded at the universality with which it has been received. Mathematical axioms are not axioms of general truth. What is true of relation--of form and quantity--is often grossly false in regard to morals, for example. In this latter science it is very usually untrue that the aggregated parts are equal to the whole. In chemistry also the axiom fails. In the consideration of motive it fails; for two motives, each of a given value, have not, necessarily, a value when united, equal to the sum of their values apart. There are numerous other mathematical truths which are only truths within the limits of relation. But the mathematician argues, from his finite truths, through habit, as if they were of an absolutely general applicability--as the world indeed imagines them to be. Bryant, in his very learned 'Mythology,' mentions an analogous source of error, when he says that 'although the Pagan fables are not believed, yet we forget ourselves continually, and make inferences from them as existing realities.' With the algebraists, however, who are Pagans themselves, the 'Pagan fables' are believed, and the inferences are made, not so much through lapse of memory, as through an unaccountable addling of the brains. In short, I never yet encountered the mere mathematician

who could be trusted out of equal roots, or one who did not clandestinely hold it as a point of his faith that x^2+px was absolutely and unconditionally equal to q . Say to one of these gentlemen, by way of experiment, if you please, that you believe occasions may occur where x^2+px is not altogether equal to q , and, having made him understand what you mean, get out of his reach as speedily as convenient, for, beyond doubt, he will endeavor to knock you down.

"I mean to say," continued Dupin, while I merely laughed at his last observations, "that if the Minister had been no more than a mathematician, the Prefect would have been under no necessity of giving me this check. I know him, however, as both mathematician and poet, and my measures were adapted to his capacity, with reference to the circumstances by which he was surrounded. I knew him as a courtier, too, and as a bold intrigant. Such a man, I considered, could not fail to be aware of the ordinary policial modes of action. He could not have failed to anticipate--and events have proved that he did not fail to anticipate--the waylayings to which he was subjected. He must have foreseen, I reflected, the secret investigations of his premises. His frequent absences from home at night, which were hailed by the Prefect as certain aids to his success, I regarded only as ruses, to afford opportunity for thorough search to the police, and thus the sooner to impress them with the conviction to which G--, in fact, did finally arrive--the conviction that the letter was not upon the premises. I felt, also, that the whole train of thought, which I was at some pains in detailing to you just now, concerning the invariable principle of policial action in searches for articles concealed--I felt that this whole train of thought would necessarily pass through the mind of the Minister. It would imperatively lead him to despise all the ordinary nooks of concealment. He could not, I reflected, be so weak as not to see that the most intricate and remote recess of his hotel would be as open as his commonest closets to the eyes, to the probes, to the gimlets, and to the microscopes of the Prefect. I saw, in fine, that he would be driven, as a matter of course, to simplicity, if not deliberately induced to it as a matter of choice. You will remember, perhaps, how desperately the Prefect laughed when I suggested, upon our first interview, that it was just possible this mystery troubled him so much on account of its being so very self-evident."

"Yes," said I, "I remember his merriment well. I really thought he would have fallen into convulsions."

"The material world," continued Dupin, "abounds with very strict analogies to the immaterial; and thus some color of truth has been given to the rhetorical dogma, that metaphor, or simile, may be made to strengthen an argument, as well as to embellish a description. The principle of the *vis inertiae*, for example, seems to be identical in physics and metaphysics. It is not more true in the former, that a large body is with more difficulty set in motion than a smaller one, and that its subsequent momentum is commensurate with this difficulty, than it is, in the latter, that intellects of the vaster capacity, while more forcible, more constant, and more eventful in their movements than those of inferior grade, are yet the less readily moved, and more embarrassed and full of hesitation in the first few steps of their progress. Again: have you ever noticed which of the street signs, over the shop-doors, are the most attractive of attention?"

"I have never given the matter a thought," I said.

"There is a game of puzzles," he resumed, "which is played upon a map. One party playing requires another to find a given word--the name of town, river, state or empire--any word, in short, upon the motley and perplexed surface of the chart. A novice in the game generally seeks to embarrass his opponents by giving them the most minutely lettered names; but the adept selects such words as stretch, in large characters, from one end of the chart to the other. These, like the over-largely lettered signs and placards of the street, escape observation by dint of being excessively obvious; and here the physical oversight is precisely analogous with the moral inapprehension by which the intellect suffers to pass unnoticed those considerations which are too obtrusively and too palpably self-evident. But this is a point, it appears, somewhat above or beneath the understanding of the Prefect. He never once thought it probable, or possible, that the Minister had deposited the letter immediately beneath the nose of the whole world, by way of best preventing any portion of that world from perceiving it.

"But the more I reflected upon the daring, dashing, and discriminating ingenuity of D--; upon the fact that the document must always have been at hand, if he intended to use it to good purpose; and upon the decisive evidence, obtained by the Prefect, that it was not hidden within the limits of that dignitary's ordinary search--the more satisfied I became that, to conceal this letter, the Minister had resorted to the comprehensive and sagacious expedient of not attempting to conceal it at all.

"Full of these ideas, I prepared myself with a pair of green spectacles, and called one fine morning, quite by accident, at the Ministerial hotel. I found D-- at home, yawning, lounging, and dawdling, as usual, and pretending to be in the last extremity of ennui. He is, perhaps, the most really energetic human being now alive--but that is only when nobody sees him.

"To be even with him, I complained of my weak eyes, and lamented the necessity of the spectacles, under cover of which I cautiously and thoroughly surveyed the whole apartment, while seemingly intent only upon the conversation of my host.

"I paid especial attention to a large writing-table near which he sat, and upon which lay confusedly, some miscellaneous letters and other papers, with one or two musical instruments and a few books. Here, however, after a long and very deliberate scrutiny, I saw nothing to excite particular suspicion.

"At length my eyes, in going the circuit of the room, fell upon a trumpery fillagree card-rack of pasteboard, that hung dangling by a dirty blue ribbon, from a little brass knob just beneath the middle of the mantel-piece. In this rack, which had three or four compartments, were five or six visiting cards and a solitary letter. This last was much soiled and crumpled. It was torn nearly in two, across the middle--as if a design, in the first instance, to tear it entirely up as worthless, had been altered, or stayed, in the second. It had a large black seal, bearing the D-- cipher very conspicuously, and was addressed, in a diminutive female hand, to D--, the minister, himself. It was thrust carelessly, and even, as it seemed, contemptuously, into one of the uppermost divisions of the rack.

"No sooner had I glanced at this letter, than I concluded it to be that of which I was in search. To be sure, it was, to all appearance, radically different from the one of which the Prefect had read us so minute a description. Here the seal was large and black, with the D-- cipher; there it was small and red, with the ducal arms of the S-- family. Here, the address, to the Minister, diminutive and feminine; there the superscription, to a certain royal personage, was markedly bold and decided; the size alone formed a point of correspondence. But, then, the radicalness of these differences, which was excessive; the dirt; the soiled and torn condition of the paper, so inconsistent with the true methodical habits of D--, and so suggestive of a design to delude the beholder into an idea of the worthlessness of the document; these things, together with the hyper-obtrusive situation of this document, full in the view of every visiter, and thus exactly in accordance with the conclusions to which I had previously arrived; these things, I say, were strongly corroborative of suspicion, in one who came with the intention to suspect.

"I protracted my visit as long as possible, and, while I maintained a most animated discussion with the Minister upon a topic which I knew well had never failed to interest and excite him, I kept my attention really riveted upon the letter. In this examination, I committed to memory its external appearance and arrangement in the rack; and also fell, at length, upon a discovery which set at rest whatever trivial doubt I might have entertained. In scrutinizing the edges of the paper, I observed them to be more chafed than seemed necessary. They presented the broken appearance which is manifested when a stiff paper, having been once folded and pressed with a folder, is refolded in a reversed direction, in the same creases or edges which had formed the original fold. This discovery was sufficient. It was clear to me that the letter had been turned, as a glove, inside out, re-directed, and re-sealed. I bade the Minister good morning, and took my departure at once, leaving a gold snuff-box upon the table.

"The next morning I called for the snuff-box, when we resumed, quite eagerly, the conversation of the preceding day. While thus engaged, however, a loud report, as if of a pistol, was heard immediately beneath the

windows of the hotel, and was succeeded by a series of fearful screams, and the shoutings of a terrified mob. D-- rushed to a casement, threw it open, and looked out. In the meantime, I stepped to the card-rack took the letter, put it in my pocket, and replaced it by a fac-simile, (so far as regards externals,) which I had carefully prepared at my lodgings--imitating the D-- cipher, very readily, by means of a seal formed of bread.

"The disturbance in the street had been occasioned by the frantic behavior of a man with a musket. He had fired it among a crowd of women and children. It proved, however, to have been without ball, and the fellow was suffered to go his way as a lunatic or a drunkard. When he had gone, D-- came from the window, whither I had followed him immediately upon securing the object in view. Soon afterwards I bade him farewell. The pretended lunatic was a man in my own pay."

"But what purpose had you," I asked, "in replacing the letter by a fac-simile? Would it not have been better, at the first visit, to have seized it openly, and departed?"

"D--," replied Dupin, "is a desperate man, and a man of nerve. His hotel, too, is not without attendants devoted to his interests. Had I made the wild attempt you suggest, I might never have left the Ministerial presence alive. The good people of Paris might have heard of me no more. But I had an object apart from these considerations. You know my political prepossessions. In this matter, I act as a partisan of the lady concerned. For eighteen months the Minister has had her in his power. She has now him in hers--since, being unaware that the letter is not in his possession, he will proceed with his exactions as if it was. Thus will he inevitably commit himself, at once, to his political destruction. His downfall, too, will not be more precipitate than awkward. It is all very well to talk about the *facilis descensus Avernus*; but in all kinds of climbing, as Catalani said of singing, it is far more easy to get up than to come down. In the present instance I have no sympathy--at least no pity--for him who descends. He is that *monstrum horrendum*, an unprincipled man of genius. I confess, however, that I should like very well to know the precise character of his thoughts, when, being defied by her whom the Prefect terms 'a certain personage' he is reduced to opening the letter which I left for him in the card-rack."

"How? did you put any thing particular in it?"

"Why--it did not seem altogether right to leave the interior blank--that would have been insulting. D--, at Vienna once, did me an evil turn, which I told him, quite good-humoredly, that I should remember. So, as I knew he would feel some curiosity in regard to the identity of the person who had outwitted him, I thought it a pity not to give him a clue. He is well acquainted with my MS., and I just copied into the middle of the blank sheet the words--

""-- Un dessein si funeste, S'il n'est digne d'Atrée, est digne de Thyeste. They are to be found in Crebillon's 'Atrée.'"

Critical Analysis of the Text – *The Purloined Letter*

Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe (1809 – 1849) was born on January 19, 1809, in Boston. After being orphaned at age two, he was taken into the home of a childless couple—John Allan, a successful businessman in Richmond, Va., and his wife. Allan was believed to be Poe's godfather. At age six, Poe went to England with the Allans and was enrolled in schools there. After he returned with the Allans to the U.S. in 1820, he studied at private schools, then attended the University of Virginia and the U.S. Military Academy, but did not complete studies at either school. After beginning his literary career as a poet and prose writer, he married his young cousin, Virginia Clemm. He worked for several magazines and joined the staff of the *New York Mirror* newspaper in 1844. All the while, he was battling a drinking problem. After the *Mirror* published his poem "The Raven" in January 1845, Poe achieved national and international fame. **Besides pioneering the development of the short story, Poe invented the format for the detective story as we know it today.** He also was an outstanding literary critic. Despite the acclaim he received, he was never really happy because of his drinking and because of the deaths of several people close to him, including his wife in 1847. He frequently had trouble paying his debts. It is believed that heavy drinking was a contributing cause of his death in Baltimore on October 7, 1849.

First Three Detective Stories

"The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Mystery of Marie Roget," and "The Purloined letter" set a milestone in literature as the first three detective stories ever written. They are sometimes referred to as tales of ratiocination (the process of using cold, objective logic—including deduction and induction—to solve a problem or a mystery). However, the central character of the stories—the brilliant amateur detective C. Auguste Dupin—relies as much on intuition as on logic. As Richard Wilbur observes, "Dupin, although Poe describes his mental operations as 'analytic' and as based on a psychological calculus of probabilities, is actually representative of a pure poetic intuition bordering on omniscience." Later writers used the detective-story ingredients Poe introduced, including a seemingly insoluble mystery, stymied police, and a superior thinker who solves the mystery and explains in detail how he did it.

Setting

The action takes place in Paris in the early 1840's.

Characters

C. August Dupin: Young gentleman with an exceptional ability to solve problems. He is especially adept at solving mysteries that baffle the police.

Unnamed Narrator: Dupin's friend, who tells the story of one of Dupin's investigations.

Prefect of Police: Policeman who failed to solve a crime involving a stolen letter.

Government Minister: Clever official who stole the letter and is using its contents to blackmail a woman of royal status.

Unnamed Woman of Royal Status: She needs to retrieve the stolen letter because its contents, if made public, would deal a severe blow to her reputation.

Unnamed Man of Royal Status: He is unaware of the contents of the letter. The woman needs to make sure he never sees the letter.

Type of Work and Publication Date

"The Purloined Letter" falls into the general category of short story and the specific category of detective story. It was first published in *The Gift* in January 1845.

Title

Purloined means *stolen*. Hence, the story could have been entitled "The Stolen Letter." However, *purloin* has a connotation that *steal* does not have—that is, to take something by a breach of trust.

Theme

The theme is straightforward and simple: how a superior thinker solves a baffling puzzle. In this short story, as opposed to Poe's stories of terror and the supernatural, there are no hidden messages, no allegories.

Climax

The climax of "The Purloined Letter" occurs when Dupin announces that he has retrieved the stolen letter.

Summary of the short-story

In a small room in Paris, an unnamed narrator, who also narrates "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," sits quietly with his friend, C. Auguste Dupin. He ponders the murders in the Rue Morgue, which Dupin solved in that story. Monsieur G——, the prefect of the Paris police, arrives, having decided to consult Dupin again. The prefect presents a case that is almost too simple: a letter has been taken from the royal apartments. The police know who has taken it: the Minister D——, an important government official. According to the prefect, a young lady possessed the letter, which contains information that could harm a powerful individual. When the young lady was first reading the letter, the man whom it concerned came into the royal apartments. Not wanting to arouse his suspicion, she put it down on a table next to her. The sinister Minister D—— then walked in and noted the letter's contents. Quickly grasping the seriousness of the situation, he produced a letter of his own that resembled the important letter. He left his own letter next to the original one as he began to talk of Parisian affairs. Finally, as he prepared to leave the apartment, he purposely retrieved the lady's letter in place of his own. Now, the prefect explains, the Minister D—— possesses a great deal of power over the lady.

Dupin asks whether the police have searched the Minister's residence, arguing that since the power of the letter derives from its being readily available, it must be in his apartment. The prefect responds that they have searched the Minister's residence but have not located the letter. He recounts the search procedure, during which the police systematically searched every inch of the hotel. In addition, the letter could not be hidden on the Minister's body because the police have searched him as well. The prefect mentions that he is willing to search long and hard because the reward offered in the case is so generous. Upon Dupin's request, the prefect reads him a physical description of the letter. Dupin suggests that the police search again.

One month later, Dupin and the narrator are again sitting together when the prefect visits. The prefect admits that he cannot find the letter, even though the reward has increased. The prefect says that he will pay 50,000 francs to anyone who obtains the letter for him. Dupin tells him to write a check for that amount on the spot. Upon receipt of the check, Dupin hands over the letter. The prefect rushes off to return it to its rightful owner, and Dupin explains how he obtained the letter.

Dupin admits that the police are skilled investigators according to their own principles. He explains this remark by describing a young boy playing "even and odd." In this game, each player must guess whether the number of things (usually toys) held by another player is even or odd. If the guesser is right, he gets one of the toys. If he is

wrong, he loses a toy of his own. The boy whom Dupin describes plays the game well because he bases his guesses on the knowledge of his opponent. When he faces difficulty, he imitates the facial expression of his opponent, as though to understand what he thinks and feels. With this knowledge, he often guesses correctly. Dupin argues that the Paris police do not use this strategy and therefore could not find the letter: the police think only to look for a letter in places where they themselves might hide it.

Dupin argues that the Minister D—— is intelligent enough not to hide the letter in the nooks and crannies of his apartment—exactly where the police first investigate. He describes to the narrator a game of puzzles in which one player finds a name on a map and tells the other player to find it as well. Amateurs, says Dupin, pick the names with the smallest letters. According to Dupin's logic, the hardest names to find are actually those that stretch broadly across the map because they are so obvious.

With this game in mind, Dupin recounts the visit he made to the Minister's apartment. After surveying the Minister's residence, Dupin notices a group of visiting cards hanging from the mantelpiece. A letter accompanies them. It has a different exterior than that previously described by the prefect, but Dupin also observes that the letter appears to have been folded back on itself. He becomes sure that it is the stolen document. In order to create a reason for returning to the apartment, he purposely leaves behind his snuffbox. When he goes back the next morning to retrieve it, he also arranges for someone to make a commotion outside the window while he is in the apartment. When the Minister rushes to the window to investigate the noise, Dupin replaces the stolen letter with a fake. He justifies his decision to leave behind another letter by predicting that the Minister will embarrass himself when he acts in reliance upon the letter he falsely believes he still possesses. Dupin remarks that the Minister once wronged him in Vienna and that he has pledged not to forget the insult. Inside the fake letter, then, Dupin inscribes, a French poem that translates into English, "So baneful a scheme, if not worthy of Atreus, is worthy of Thyestes."

Critical Analysis of the Short-Story

Along with "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Purloined Letter" 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 the ways in which 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 to solve, Poe makes it clear that the prior story is on his mind. Poe sets up the cool reason of "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 are unable to solve the gory crime of passion in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," they are similarly unable to solve this apparently 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.

Thus, in this short-story the author E.A. Poe moves away from his usual 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 own standard procedures. They are unable to place themselves in the minds of those who actually 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 phony letter, translated "So baneful a scheme, if not worthy of Atreus, is worthy of Thyestes," suggests the rivalry that accompanies brotherly minds. In the French dramatist Crébillon's early-eighteenth-century tragedy *Atrée et Thyeste* (or *Atreus and Thyestes*), Thyestes seduces the wife of his brother, Atreus. In retaliation, Atreus murders the sons of Thyestes and serves them to their father at a feast. 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 offense. Dupin considers his own deed to be revenge and thereby morally justified.