



Research Paper

Power and Intellect: Exploring the Major Themes of “The Purloined Letter”

Gobinda Banik

(Assistant Professor, Basirhat College, West Bengal State University,
North 24 Parganas, India)

ABSTRACT: The present study explores the major themes in Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Purloined Letter”, including power and authority, the use of secrecy and obscurity, the value of reason and intellect, the pursuit of justice and morality, and the nature of evil. This paper examines each of these crucial areas by carefully reading the story and analysing how Poe’s narrative presents and ultimately resolves each of these issues. The study goes on to evaluate the implications and significance of each of these subjects in more detail, highlighting how the story can be viewed as a reflection of the human experience as a whole and how its portrayal of these concepts might be instructional for contemporary readers. The paper concludes with the message that although “The Purloined Letter” is a fictional work, its lessons are timeless and pertinent to all readers.

KEYWORDS: Authority, Deception, Detective Story, Justice, Poe, Psychoanalysis

Received 20 Feb., 2023; Revised 01 Mar., 2023; Accepted 03 Mar., 2023 © The author(s) 2023.

Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

“Perhaps it is the very simplicity of the thing which puts you at fault”

-Edgar Allan Poe, “The Purloined Letter”

I. INTRODUCTION

Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Purloined Letter” covers a number of issues that are timeless and pertinent to readers today. Amare (2000) suggests that the methods of Dupin’s finding the stolen letter “can be applied to effective professional communication strategies” today. The plot revolves around a mystery involving a stolen letter and the people interested in finding it. “Poe’s novella addresses the singularity of a letter and questions its trajectory as well as its reception” (Alfandary, 2013). Power and authority, secrecy and obscurity, intelligence and reason, the quest for justice, and the essence of evil are just a few of the themes Poe explores throughout the story. These issues all have a tight connection to one another and support in expressing how varied human experience is.

Power and authority are among the story’s major themes. Minister D— is shown by Poe as a powerful individual who can outsmart and control the other characters through a combination of political influence, coercion, and secrecy. The Prefect says to Dupin “The individual who purloined it (the letter) is known; this beyond a doubt; he was seen to take it. It is known, also, that it still remains in his possession” (Poe, 1889, p. 219). Thus others know what the Minister has done. But the Minister has an unsurmountable advantage over the other characters due to his greater standing and expertise as well as his use of intimidation. Dupin, however, also exhibits his intellectual talent, stressing the significance of simple logic in dismantling repressive power systems.

Concealment and obscurity are two key themes that “The Purloined Letter” examines. The Minister’s ability to conceal the stolen letter’s actual significance and keep it out of sight serves as a potent allegory for the ways in which people may influence and dominate others via deceit and secrecy. The Minister’s capacity to hide the letter is a crucial part of his total authority, hence this issue is directly related to the concept of power.

The narrative also highlights the importance of intelligence and reason, as seen in Dupin’s devious strategies and his capacity to outwit the Minister. This shows how critical thinking and intellect are crucial for navigating intricate power structures and discovering the truth.

Another significant subject in "The Purloined Letter" is the pursuit of justice and morality. Dupin is motivated by a desire to uphold moral and just principles, even if it means opposing the influential and dishonest Minister. This subject emphasises the value of moral fortitude and pursuing virtue in the face of injustice and difficulty.

Finally, the novel touches on the idea of the nature of evil, particularly as it relates to the Minister's character. A terrifying warning of the perils of unfettered authority and the corrupting effect of control is provided by the Minister's use of power and manipulation to achieve his objectives.

The story's themes are intricate and multidimensional, pointing to the larger human experience and the numerous difficulties we encounter while negotiating power relationships and achieving justice. This study has offered an examination of each of these significant subjects through a thorough reading of the story, looking at how Poe's narrative presents and finally resolves each issue. The study goes on to analyse each theme's significance in more detail, showing how the story's portrayal of these concepts might be instructional for contemporary readers.

II. POWER AND AUTHORITY

"The Purloined Letter"'s one central theme is power and authority. Barbara Johnson (1977, p. 464) interestingly quotes what Lacan (1966, p.11) thinks about the power of the purloined letter itself "the letter was able to produce its effects within the story: on the actors in the tale, including the narrator, as well as outside the story: on us, the readers, and also on its author, without anyone's ever bothering to worry about what it meant." The Prefect also accepts that "...the paper (the letter) gives its holder a certain power in a certain quarter where such power is immensely valuable." Moreover, when Minister D— is able to examine the letter at the beginning of the narrative without worrying about the consequences, his authority is made clear. The Minister has a lot of influence on the other characters in the narrative, which enables him to outwit the Prefect. D— proves his superiority to people around him by bluffing the Prefect and hiding the letter from him. As Dupin says:

"You will now understand what I meant in suggesting that had the purloined letter been hidden anywhere 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 (Prefect's) 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."

(Poe, 1889, p. 229)

The Minister successfully carries out his threats, giving the upper hand over the other characters in the tale. He also utilises his position of authority to influence them. Minister D— has the authority to compel people to follow his instructions due to his position as a government employee. In addition, the Minister has the capacity to remain anonymous since he is able to conceal the letter in plain view, shielding it from the Prefect's efforts to locate it.

The Minister has the authority to employ intimidation as well. Because the Prefect is aware that he is unable to oppose D—, he is able to further subdue and silence him through terror. This is clear from the words of the Prefect: "...My first care was to make a 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" (Poe, 1889, pp. 220-221).

Dupin stands out from the other characters due to his superior mental and intellectual abilities. He demonstrates his superior intelligence and cunning by outwitting the Minister through logic and reason. Dupin is a strong foe since he can think many steps ahead of D—.

III. CONCEALMENT AND OBSCURITY

Concealment and obscurity are major themes in "The Purloined Letter". The Minister uses crafty methods to make sure that the letter is not found. He is able to conceal the letter in a place where it is challenging to uncover and safe from prying eyes. By hiding the letter not hiding it, the Minister is able to preserve his secret reasonably and safely. "The central movement of the story is to turn the letter inside out, to turn the hidden, important inner space outward so that it seems trivial" (Holland, 1980, p. 352). Thus the Minister's tactics help him to distract the Prefect from his real objective of finding the letter.

However, because of his greater intellect, Dupin is able to reason more clearly than the Minister, which ultimately results in the identification of the key to the mystery surrounding the placement of the letter. Dupin says,

"At length my eyes, in going the circuit of the room, fell upon a trumpery filigree card-rack of pasteboard that hung dangling by a dirty blue ribbon from a little brass knob just beneath the middle of the mantelpiece. 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—..."

"No sooner had I glanced at this letter than I concluded it to be that of which I was in search."

(Poe, 1889, p. 233-234)

By outwitting the Minister, Dupin is able to prove his superiority in knowledge and cunning. His ability to come up with unique and unexpected solutions to problems displays his ingenuity.

Thus the subject of concealment and secrecy is ultimately a key one in "The Purloined Letter".

IV. INTELLECT AND REASON

In "The Purloined Letter", the subject of intelligence and reason plays a significant role. Derrida (1957, p.66) writes "Not that the letter never arrives at its destination, but part of its structure is that it is always capable of not arriving there. Here dissemination threatens the law of the signifier and of castration as a contract of truth". Dupin is a cut above Minister D— because of his superior intelligence. He is able to outwit the Minister by using his excellent observational skills to find the Purloined Letter's hiding place.

Dupin's intelligence is also demonstrated by his capacity to reason more logically than the Minister. He has the ability to foresee the Minister's movements and devise original and unusual solutions, like understanding the trick of concealing the letter in plain sight. His acts show his humour and creativity. Dupin's discovery of the letter's hiding spot, together with his ability to unravel the puzzle, both demonstrate his exceptional mental prowess:

"... 'When I wish to find out how wise, or how stupid, or how good, or how wicked is anyone, 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 ... lies at the bottom of all the spurious profundity which has been attributed to Rochefoucauld, to La Bruyere, to Machiavelli, and to Campanella."

(Poe, 1889, pp. 227-228)

The Minister's attempts to manipulate and persuade the Prefect are juxtaposed with Dupin's superior intelligence. The Prefect is confused because of the Minister's use of evasive responses, which further demonstrates Dupin's capacity for planning ahead. The Minister may also utilise his higher status to dominate the Prefect, but Dupin can only be forceful because of his better intelligence.

Thus "The Purloined Letter"'s fundamental subject is intelligence and reason, in the end. Dupin outwits the Minister and gets the letter back thanks to his superior mental faculties. He is bright, as seen by his wit and creativity, which stand in sharp contrast to the Minister's intimidating methods. The narrative seeks to highlight the superiority of knowledge and logic over force and authority.

V. JUSTICE AND VIRTUE

Other real themes of "The Purloined Letter" are righteousness and justice. Each character tries to act justly from their own point of view, despite the fact that they all have different goals. Dupin and the Prefect are attempting to do the right thing by searching for the letter while the Minister is trying to preserve it for his own political gain.

Dupin's actions show his sense of fairness. Throughout the entire narrative, he is dedicated to upholding justice, even if it puts him in danger. He is willing to use his superior intelligence to crack the code and retrieve the letter, which ultimately results in the success of his efforts.

The Prefect also acts in a moral and just manner. Although he plainly feels conflicted about it, he is willing to swallow his pride and ask Dupin for help. By accepting Dupin's assistance, he demonstrates his own sense of justice and goodness:

"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 who would aid me in the matter."

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

I was astounded.

(Poe, 1889, p. 226)

Meanwhile, the Minister's intimidation strategies expose his lack of justice and decorum. His attempts to keep the letter for himself and his desire to control and dominate the Prefect and others are strong indications that he has no morality.

At the end of the story, justice triumphs. Each character has a different goal, they are all trying to do what they believe is right. As a reward for Dupin and the Prefect's moral and upright efforts, the letter is returned to its rightful owner. The story's lesson is to appreciate morals and fairness. It shows that even while doing the right thing isn't always easy, it will ultimately pay off. It also affirms the notion that morality and justice need to be promoted at all times and that those who fight for these principles will ultimately be rewarded.

VI. NATURE OF EVIL

In "The Purloined Letter", the nature of evil is a significant issue. The story's adversary, the Minister, is shown to be brilliant and cunning while acting immorally. "The evil genius is Minister D— who, ruthlessly anticipating that the Queen would not dare cry "thief," for fear of betraying the contents of the letter to outsiders, brazenly exploits the situation" (Swirski, 1996). The narrative poses concerns regarding the nature of evil and if it is a matter of intellect or morality by demonstrating his cunning and strategic thinking.

The Minister's actions and motivations reveal his lack of morals when he is not hesitating to use any evil measure necessary to achieve his goals. His use of power and intimidation to subdue others demonstrates his moral depravity, and his steadfast insistence on keeping the letter for himself indicates his disrespect for other people's rights. Does the Minister's intelligence make him more evil? Or does his lack of morals cause him to be evil? The reader is left to draw their own conclusions.

Indeed, the narrative aims to demonstrate the intricacy of evil's nature. It suggests that while intelligence may have a role, moral decay eventually drives people to nowhere. It supports the notion that morality is necessary for real justice to prevail and that knowledge without morals can lead to destruction.

VII. CONCLUSION

Lacan (1972) discusses two main scenes of "The Purloined Letter" that fascinate him. The first one is the initial scene, which is when the letter is stolen for the first time from Queen's room. The second scene takes place in Minister's residence. This time, Dupin steals the letter since he can understand how his opponent thinks (Nas, 2008). Through these scenes, the story explores a number of important issues, including power and authority, secrecy and obscurity, intelligence and reason, justice and morality, and the essence of evil. "This short story has been rightly celebrated for its explicit analysis of strategic reasoning in which players attempt to outwit one another, which involves accounting for how they are all attempting to outwit one another" (Read, 2020, p. 369). The story's moral, which highlights the value of justice, intellect, and wit, and the capacity to outwit one's opponents, is influenced by each of these themes.

The lesson of the story is that doing the right thing will ultimately pay off, highlighting the importance of justice and morality. It also emphasises the value of intelligence and reasoning by demonstrating how one may outwit and outsmart one's opponents. Finally, the story highlights issues regarding the nature of evil, implying that morality and intelligence are both crucial elements in identifying and battling evil.

Finally, the story of "The Purloined Letter" explores the significance of justice, and virtue. It demonstrates that while one cannot always control their opponents, they can always control their own behaviour. It argues for the idea that upholding justice and fairness is always important and there lies the necessity of doing the right thing. Additionally, it supports the fact that genuine justice requires wisdom and that people who are good will ultimately be rewarded.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Alfandary, Isabelle. "The Purloined Letter: de quelques trajectoires de la lettre." *Le Tour critique*, vol.1, 2013, pp. 1-16.
- [2]. Amare, N.E. "Professional Communication and Poe's 'The Purloined Letter.'" *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2000, pp. 206–209. <https://doi.org/10.1109/47.843648>.
- [3]. Derrida, Jacques. "The Purveyor of Truth." trans. Willis Domingo et al., *Yale French Studies*, no. 52, 1975, pp. 31–113. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2929747>.
- [4]. Holland, Norman N. "Re-Covering "The Purloined Letter": Reading as a Personal Transaction". *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, edited by Susan Rubin Suleiman and Inge Crosman, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980, pp. 350-370. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400857111.350>
- [5]. Johnson, Barbara. "The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida." *Yale French Studies*, no. 55/56, 1977, pp. 457–505. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2930445>.
- [6]. Lacan, J. *Ecrits*, trans. Barbara Johnson, Seuil ("Points"), 1966, p. 11.
- [7]. Lacan, Jacques, and Jeffrey Mehlman. "Seminar on "The Purloined Letter."" *Yale French Studies*, no. 48, 1972, pp. 39–72. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2929623>.
- [8]. Nas, Alparslan. "Poe's 'Purloined Letter' and Lacanian Psychoanalytical Criticism – 2." *Cultural Representations*, 25 Nov. 2008. Accessed on 28 Feb. 2023. Retrieved from <https://alparslannas.com/2008/11/25/poes-purloined-letter-and-lacanian-psychoanalytical-criticism-2/#:~:text=The%20letter%20in%20E%20Purloined%20Letter,this%20structure%20as%20triangular%20one.>
- [9]. Poe, Edgar Allan. *The fall of the house of Usher: And other tales and prose writings of Edgar Poe*. vol. 41. W. Scott, 1889.
- [10]. Read, Daniel. "The Five Games of Mr. Edgar Allan Poe: A Study of Strategic Thought in 'the Purloined Letter.'" *Rationality and Society*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2020, pp. 369–401. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1043463120961779>.
- [11]. Swirski, Peter. "Literary Studies and Literary Pragmatics: The Case of 'The Purloined Letter.'" *SubStance*, vol. 25, no. 3, 1996, pp. 69–89. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3684867>.