

# Dupin, the Purloiner of the Purloined Letter: A Hero? Or A Plagiarist?

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## Abstract

“The Purloined Letter” is the third of the three Dupin stories that Edgar A. Poe wrote and published in 1844. Contrary to being a typical example of detective fiction which usually involves an investigation to find out what is being kept hidden, “The Purloined Letter” is rather concerned with finding out what is being kept in plain sight. Dupin’s familiarity with logic, math and physics enables him to look at the matter at hand from an exceptionally distinct perspective. Unlike the chief police officer of the Paris Police Department, Dupin firmly believes that the purloined letter has never been concealed at all. To prove his point, he emphasizes the ability to identify with the opponent and draws an analogy from a game of guessing in which one player is expected to make a correct guess about what the other player is thinking of. Dupin also makes a philosophical point regarding the failure of human mind to notice the obvious, which is a result of its tendency to believe that it can find the obvious in minute details. Dupin also believes that the only way to obtain the letter is to purloin it back from the robber who purloined it. And hence he purloins the letter in almost the same way as it was first purloined. The purloining of the letter is mirrored in the re-purloining of it. In the light of all this, this paper aims to discuss and resolve the moral ambiguity which surrounds Dupin’s identification of himself with the robber and his consequent purloining of the letter in exactly the same way as the robber has previously done in order to recover the purloined letter from the hands of the robber.

**Keywords:** Dupin, Poe, purloined letter, mirroring, recursiveness

ÇALINAN MEKTUBU ÇALAN KİŞİ, DUPIN: BİR DAHİ Mİ? YOKSA BİR MÜNTEHİL Mİ?

## Öz

“The Purloined Letter” Edgar A. Poe’nun 1844 yılında yazıp yayımladığı üç Dupin hikayesinden üçüncü olanıdır. Genellikle saklı tutulanı ortaya çıkarmak üzere yapılan bir soruşturmayı konu edinen dedektif yazınının tipik bir örneği olmanın tersine, “The Purloined Letter” daha ziyade görünürde tutulanı ortaya çıkarmayla ilgilidir. Dupin’in mantık, matematik ve fizik ile olan aşinalığı onun eldeki meseleye bambaşka bir perspektiften bakabilmesini mümkün kılmaktadır. Paris Polis Departmanının en üst düzeydeki yetkilisinin aksine, Dupin çalınan mektubun hiçbir şekilde saklanmadığına sıkıca inanmaktadır. Bu iddiasını kanıtlamak için rakiple kendini özdeşleştirme yeteneğini vurgular ve bir oyuncunun diğer oyuncunun zihninden geçenleri doğru bir şekilde tahmin etmesinin gerektiği bir oyundan örnek verir. Keza, insan zihninin ayan-

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beyan olanı küçük detaylarda bulabileceği yönündeki yanlış inanın bir sonucu olarak insan zihninin ayan-beyan olanı fark edememesiyle ilgili felsefi bir tespit de bulunur. Dupin aynı zamanda mektubu ele geçirmenin tek yolunun onu çalan kişiden tekrar çalmak olduğuna inanmaktadır. Ve bu yüzden mektubu ilk çalınma şekliyle hemen hemen aynı olacak şekilde onu çalan kişiden çalar. Böylece, mektubun çalınması, mektubun tekrar çalınmasında aynalanmış olur. Tüm bunların ışığında, bu makalenin amacı, çalınan mektubu hırsızın elinden geri almak için Dupin'in kendisini hırsızla özdeşleştirilmesi ve akabinde hırsızın yaptığı şeklin aynısıyla mektubu hırsızdan çalışını çevreleyen ahlaki belirsizliği tartışmak ve çözüme kavuşturmasıdır.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Dupin, Poe, çalınan mektup, aynalama, yineleme

## INTRODUCTION

**E**dgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter" (1844) is a detective story, though with the difference that its main concern is less with an adventurous investigation into what happened than with an analysis of how it happened. For this reason, it has been described rather as a story of "ratiocination" (Ridel, 1979, p. 134); as a "meta-detective story" (Richard, 1981, p. 2); and as a story of "analytic detective fiction" (Irwin, 1986, p. 1168). This type of qualification chiefly rests on its difference from Poe's other well-known detective stories. The difference lies particularly in the way in which the detective's proficiency in logic, physics and math in this story enables him to guess correctly about how the thief must have stolen the letter in the first place and also whether the thief has concealed it somewhere or not.

Besides being a story of bureaucratic failure in which a group of police officers get stuck in a state of hopelessness while they search for the stolen letter despite their otherwise arduous work to locate it, it is also a logical account by an independent detective for the reasons behind their failure. Although the police consider it to be an excessively simple task to find the letter, they cannot help feeling puzzled by the fact that they cannot find it anywhere despite their repeated searches on the known premises of the thief. They think that the thief must have definitely hidden it elsewhere. The independent detective, however, devises a method of logical identification with the thief and guesses rightly that the letter has not been hidden at all. In other words, this is a story in which "a battle of intellects" ends up with the 'individual' intelligence outwitting its 'institutional' counterpart (Swirski, 1996, p. 75).

In addition to all this, there are symmetrical patterns in the construction of the plot of this story which merit further consideration in detail. The letter is stolen twice in quite similar, if not exactly the same, ways. First, a high-rank official of the government steals it from its original owner; and afterwards an independent detective steals it from the thief in almost the same way. In both cases, a facsimile of the original letter is produced to replace it. And, although this is a story published in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the symmetrical patterns make it appear as though it was written in the post-modernist conventions of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the light of all this, the purpose of this study is both to explain the failure of the police to find the letter by emphasizing the limitations of the institutionalized mind and to explain why the letter returns to its original owner only after it gets double purloined.

## THE 'SYMMETRICAL' PURLOINING OF THE LETTER AND THREE COMMENTARIES UPON IT

"The Purloined Letter" is particularly remarkable for the way in which it is constructed plot-wise. Poe appears to have applied a symmetrical pattern to his story as he constructed its plot.<sup>1</sup> The plot of the story can be divided roughly into two parts, and the symmetrical pattern in each part owes its existence to the "double purloining" of the letter (Bretzius, 1995, p. 685). In fact, "the letter changes hands" as the story develops from its first part to the second (Johnson, 1977, p. 460). While the first part is by and large concerned with the description by Monsieur G. of how Minister D. has stolen the letter from its original owner, the second part provides an account by Dupin of how he has managed to find the letter and subsequently stolen it from Minister D. Both Monsieur G.'s description of how the letter is stolen in the first instance and Dupin's account of how he later steals it from Minister D. point to a fact—the fact that the letter is stolen twice, and each time it is stolen, the act of stealing takes place in almost the same way: a copy of the original is (re-)produced to replace the original letter. So, Poe provides his readers with a total of three letters in his tale—the original letter and the two copies of it.

The symmetrical pattern in question caught the attention of some well-known thinkers as well, including the French thinkers Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Barbara Johnson. It would in fact be more appropriate to put it as follows: it was Lacan among these three thinkers who first came up with a commentary upon "The Purloined Letter," and afterwards Derrida wrote a critique of Lacan's critique of Poe's story – and these three texts later became the subject of analysis in Johnson's critique. A brief mention of these three approaches will be followed by the comparison of Dupin with Monsieur G. with regard to their relation to the purloined letter.

To begin with Lacan's analysis, in his "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'", he remarks that the symmetrical construction of the plot can be taken in psychoanalytical terms and adds that it can be explained by the "repetition automatism"—an expression which originally existed in Freud's writings as *Wiederholungszwang* and has been generally translated into English as the compulsion of repetition (Lacan et al, 1972, p. 39). As Rollason later points out, Lacan opts to view the letter as the signifier which operates at the level of unconsciousness and "inserts them [the fictional characters in the story] into their respective places in the signifying chain of events (1988, p. 5). To explain his proposition, Lacan specifically focuses on the two scenes of robbery—the first one taking place in the Queen's boudoir and the second one taking place in the Minister's hotel. Both occasions, he argues, host a triad of subjects and a triad of respective glances. Lacan associates the first type of glance with the King in the first scene and the police in the second because neither of them could see the letter's content at all. He associates the second type of glance with the Queen and the Minister because they think that the letter's content is safely hidden from the owners of the first type of glance and because the owners of that glance have not seen anything at all. Finally, Lacan draws a parallel between the Minister and Dupin and names it the third type of glance which "sees that the first two glances leave what should be hidden exposed to whomever

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<sup>1</sup> The reader is strongly encouraged to see Babener's (1988) detailed demonstration in her article of the symmetry in question with ample evidence from the tale itself, particularly on pages 325, 326 and 327.

seizes it" (Lacan et al, 1972, p. 44). The changes in the ownership of the letter hence result in the respective changes in the relationships between the glances and the owners of those glances.

Rather than concerning himself directly with Poe's story, Derrida develops a critical reading of Lacan's Seminar on "The Purloined Letter" in his "The Purveyor of Truth." That his analysis begins with the presupposition that "let us suppose there is psychoanalysis" should explain the reasons for his engagement in Lacan's reading of the story rather than in the story itself (Derrida et al, 1999, p. 124). Derrida broods over Lacan's argument that the purloining of the letter corresponds to the displacement of the signifier – something which would eventually lead the signifier to become devoid of a "proper meaning" and a "proper content which bears on its trajectory" (1999, p. 134). In his commentary upon Derrida's analysis, Rollason notes that in this story "subjects double subjects and letters letters, and definitive signification is endlessly deferred; any notion of the unitary subject is [...] seen as invalidated by a text which itself has no unitary 'meaning'" (1988, p. 5).

Johnson's analysis of these three texts – Poe's story, Lacan's analysis of it, and Derrida's analysis of Lacan's analysis of Poe's story – addresses the characteristic issue of "digressiveness" which she thinks is shared by all three of them and which will lead "any attempt to follow the path of the purloined letter [to become] automatically purloined from itself" (1977, p. 458). Johnson agrees with Derrida that for Lacan, "the letter acts like a signifier;" yet, she adds that Lacan considers Poe's story as "a kind of allegory of the signifier" (1977, p. 464). She considers Derrida's text, on the other hand, as "structured precisely by its own deferment, its *différance*" (1977, p. 458).

#### **DUPIN, MONSIEUR G., AND MINISTER D.**

"The Purloined Letter" hosts three important characters: the chief police officer Monsieur G.; the minister D.; and the detective Dupin. It is Minister D. who steals the letter from the Queen with the intention of blackmailing her. The letter is highly confidential and must be retrieved without further delay. Monsieur G. and his team are therefore called for conducting a thorough search for it on the premises of the robber; yet they cannot find the letter no matter how hard they search for it. It is Dupin who does solve the issue by using his "faculty of analysis" which he has "developed to a high degree" and gets the purloined letter back from the purloiner by re-purloining it (Priestman, 1991, p. 43).

What unites them together is the fact that they hold professional identities. Yet, there are also things that create a contrast between the three. And the most important distinction between these three personages is related to their attachment to a bureaucratic institution. While Monsieur G. and Minister D. are bureaucratically bound to an institutional post, Dupin is free from such a bond. In this sense, he emerges as "an amateur investigator" (Thoms, 2002, p. 133).

This marked difference between the three is continued with a series of juxtapositions. And the first instance of juxtaposition points to a distinction in their attitudes towards making a choice between light and darkness with which to reflect upon a serious matter. The juxtaposition occurs when Dupin suggests that they remain in darkness during their conversation about the purloined letter. This suggestion prompts Monsieur G. to conclude at once that it is "odd" to do so; it does

not make any sense to his institutional mind, because he has been living “amid an absolute legion of ‘oddities’” as the holder of a high-rank bureaucratic position (Poe, 1946, p. 455). The reason is that his institutional self is conditioned to refuse to comply with anything which looks like a departure from the normal. As Rollason suggests, the Prefect is “a Bureaucrat, unable to handle anything outside the limits of his training and experience” (1988, p. 6). His attachment to a collection of bureaucratic values which excludes the ability to deviate from the official set of standards makes him judge too quickly and too firmly, and erroneously of course.

The distinction between the two attitudes is further evidenced in Dupin’s response to Monsieur G.’s expression of bewilderment at the mystery which surrounds the stealing of the letter. The institutional mindset characterized by Monsieur G. and his team assumes that anything which looks easy to figure out should and must be understood with equal ease. However, in the case of the purloined letter, Monsieur G. and his professional team become so perplexed that they can neither explain nor solve the mystery in question despite its seeming simplicity to them. The mindset characterized by the people like Dupin, on the other hand, will detect a logical fallacy in the way of thinking to which Monsieur G. and his team have become accustomed to. This allows Dupin to caution Monsieur G. against taking the simplicity of the mystery at face value and advises him to consider that “perhaps it is the very simplicity of the thing” which has led him and his team of professionals to employ a faulty reasoning (Poe, 1946, p. 455). Monsieur G. dismisses it as being nonsensical, without ever allowing for the possibility that Dupin might in fact be telling the truth.

Dupin admits that the police force in Paris are well trained in their professional skills of searching a particular area thoroughly for a hidden object. In fact, he acknowledges the Parisian police to be “exceedingly able in their way” (Poe, 1946, p. 462). Moreover, he admits that Monsieur G. and his team doubtlessly would have found the letter if it had been really concealed in a particular area where they expected to find it. Yet, Dupin highlights one single error which he argues the Parisian police force went on to making while they were searching for the stolen letter: they were not able to do the type of reasoning that the robber had done when he had stolen the letter in the first place:

“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.” (Poe, 1946, p. 464)

It is important to see that Dupin positions the police at more or less the same level of intellectual capacity of reasoning as the masses, and he sharply distinguishes it from the individual capacity of reasoning freely. Dupin appears to know for sure that acting together for a common purpose requires group obedience to a set of norms from which any attempt to deviate would be

considered a grave sin in both its religious and secular meanings.<sup>2</sup> Despite its modern history and secular nature, bureaucracy resembles religion in this respect. This should be helpful in explaining the reason why a variation of the type hinted at above would not be allowed to take place in a bureaucratic environment such as the Police department.

In contrast, it should come as no surprise to us that Dupin accords the source of creativity to the power of the individual mind which has the capability of reasoning without institutional boundaries.<sup>3</sup> Unlike the Prefect and his team of ‘professional’ police officers, Dupin’s analysis of the case at hand demonstrates his combination of “analytic rigor and specialist knowledge” in matters that require a distinct way of reasoning (Rollason, 1988, p. 6). The way in which he handles the case at hand presents further evidence that he is well informed not only in logic but also in math and physics. It is for this reason that one part of the second half of the story is devoted to an act of reasoning which involves drawing some analogies from a number of games which Dupin uses to explain his method of finding out how the Minister has stolen the letter in the first place. He also makes use of these analogies to prove the reliability of his method. The other part of it is likewise devoted to an act of reasoning and understanding through some further analogies with which Dupin tries to explain and prove the reliability of his conviction that the letter has not been concealed at all. Dupin’s familiarity with physics, for example, allows him to borrow the term *vis inertia* from physics to explain the reluctance of the Police to devise newer methods and thereafter adjust them to their searches. He suggests that it will take a lot more energy to persuade a large number of people who have been brought together for a common purpose to take a newer direction than it does for a single person to do so. The general state of affairs to which they have become accustomed will force them to resist even the slightest temptation for deviation from the accustomed.

Dupin is firmly convinced that despite the contrary assumption of the Parisian Police, the letter is not and has never been concealed at all. The Police officers have become faulty in their assumptions, he believes, and adds that the fault lays with the way of thinking and reasoning to which the Police in Paris have become accustomed. The Police are accustomed to assuming that any lost object must have been concealed in such a way that it would not allow for an easy guess of discovery. In other words, the Police think of it highly unlikely for anything puzzling to get solved with considerable ease. In contrast to the Police, however, Dupin stresses that reason works best if it can see the simplicity hidden behind the seemingly complicated façade of the truth. Dupin believes with firmness that the truth – to speak metaphorically, finding the letter – is just out there and has never been concealed at all: “He [the Prefect] never once thought it probable, or possible, that the minister had deposited the letter immediately beneath the nose of the whole world, by

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<sup>2</sup> In his brilliant analysis of the Dupin stories, Daniel Hoffman also points to the bureaucratic identities of both the Prefect and the Minister. Yet, Hoffman particularly stresses that Dupin keeps a wide distance between himself and any forms of bureaucracy. The reason is that bureaucracy would not allow holders of “intellectual distinction” and “genius” to get involved in its “calculations” (1988, p. 119).

<sup>3</sup> The reader is strongly advised to look at Stephen Knight’s discussion of the three Dupin stories in his *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (1980) for viewing the relationship between Dupin and individualism from a different perspective—namely, the perspective of alienation. In his discussion, Knight briefly argues that both Dupin and the narrator are intellectually secluded from the society and at the heart of their seclusion lies their bourgeois individualism.

way of best preventing any portion of that world from perceiving it. [...] To conceal this letter, the minister had resorted to the comprehensive and sagacious expedient of not attempting to conceal it at all" (Poe, 1946, p. 468). To put all this in the way Irwin prefers, it can be argued that the letter has indeed been concealed "in plain sight" or "in the open" (1986, p. 1171). This, as Lacan prefers to call it, is "the play of truth" which tricks people into thinking that "it is in hiding that she offers herself to them most truly" (Lacan et al, 1972, p. 51).

Also, for Dupin, the human mind is similarly predisposed to take little—if any—notice of those things which are designed and made to look noticeable. To prove his claim, he draws an analogy between the difficulty to take notice of the truth despite its nakedness and a similar difficulty in marking the posters and signs on the streets or the names of towns or rivers typed in large fonts on a map. It is also interesting to see that Dupin draws a comparison between the perceptual failure to notice the street signs or the town names typed in large sizes and an intellectual failure "to pass unnoticed those considerations which are too obtrusively or too palpably self-evident" (Poe, 1946, p. 468). It is probably much more noteworthy that Dupin considers this type of intellectual failure as an instance of "moral inapprehension" rather than an epistemic one (Poe, 1946, p. 468).

We have observed above that the pattern of repetition permeates the structuring of the plot of "The Purloined Letter." Besides its visibility in the construction of the plot, it manifests itself in one other area in this tale as well—which is related to the way in which Dupin steals the letter from Minister D. The type of reasoning with which Minister D. purloins the letter from the Queen is almost identical to the type of reasoning with which Dupin purloins the letter from Minister D. They are so close to each other in their reasoning that, as Johnson puts it, they can be rightly considered as "doubles of each other" (1977, p. 470). In developing a failsafe way of reasoning to solve the crime, Dupin ungrudgingly "adopts the character and perspective of the ostensible criminal" (Thoms, 2002, p. 142).

Dupin firmly believes that one must find ways of thinking just like the criminal has done if one really wants to solve the crime. He uses some examples to support his belief. In one of these examples, Dupin talks to the narrator about a game of strategy in which one player tries to guess correctly the very next movement the other player thinks of making. The degree to which the chances of making the correct guesses are, Dupin argues, dependent upon the player's capability of reading every possible clue that his opponent displays and using them to identify himself thoroughly with his opponent. This is in fact what Dupin himself does while he solves the puzzle: he models his method of solving on "the radical or doubled thinking of Monsieur D" (Ridel, 1979, p. 136). The main goal of this process is to gain the ability to feel and think just like the other player does, and then to create a copy of the gaming strategy that the opponent player has already created in his mind. To use the phraseology that Rollason employs, the "reconstructing" and "reconstituting" of the other player's thoughts in a game of guessing is synonymous with creating an exact replica of the other player's reasoning (1988, pp. 8-9). So, each of the steps that will be taken in a game of this kind will be a repetition of the mental maneuvering that the opponent player thinks of.

Dupin does not have much trouble with reading the mind of his opponent, because just like Minister D., he is also equipped with the talents of both a poetic mind and a mathematical capability of reasoning. Poe appears to advocate his assumption that the combination of a poetic mind with a mathematical capability of reasoning creates the perfect amalgamation. They are able to think of genuine methods to overcome a particular obstacle and to come up with a foolproof analysis of a particular puzzle. Their poetic capabilities to be “creative” and their mathematical faculties to be “resolvent” allow both Dupin and Minister D. to be positioned far above than the Police prefect (Riddell, 1979, p. 135). Although the Police force epitomize the institutionalized reasoning at its highest level, they have the wit and wisdom of neither Dupin nor Minister D. This easily allows Dupin to repeat as well as to find his double in Minister D. because they make up the two “opposing sides of one and the same self” (Kennedy, 1996, p. 547).

### **“THE PURLOINED LETTER” AND THE PURLOINED LETTER**

Irwin draws attention to a correspondence between the turning of the letter inside out within the story which repeatedly occurs as the letter changes its ownership among various personae and the containment and re-containment of the purloined letter within “The Purloined Letter” in a circular form:

“... [T]he interpretive effect produced by a literary text (“The Purloined Letter”) [...] includes within itself a symbolic text (the purloined letter) whose attributes are clearly those of the literary text itself – “The Purloined Letter” presenting the purloined letter which represents in turn “The Purloined Letter” in an endless oscillation of container and contained, of outer and inner.” (1986, p. 1201)

Similarly, Derrida casts light upon the placement of the title within the text as an evidence that the title “names the text, [...] names itself and thus includes itself while pretending to name an object described in the text” (Derrida et al., 1999, p. 194). This circularity is sure to leave the reader in an endless sequence of wavering between “The Purloined Letter” and the purloined letter itself. The existence of the purloined letter necessitates “The Purloined Letter” as much as the existence of “The Purloined Letter” relies on the purloined letter.

The reciprocal relationship between “The Purloined Letter” and the purloined letter is also closely related with the repetition of the same method used to purloin the already purloined letter in the story. It is not only Dupin’s purloining of the letter from Minister D. which runs parallel to Minister D.’s purloining of the letter from the Queen; but it is the story itself – “The Purloined Letter” – that has its parallel concealed elsewhere – to be precise, in the tragedy of *Atrée and Thyestes* by Crébillon:

“What is remarkable about Crébillon’s *Atrée*, when read as the context from which Dupin’s letter to the minister has been purloined, is not simply that it tells the story of revenge as a symmetrical repetition of the original crime, but that it does so precisely by means ... a purloined letter. [...] “The Purloined Letter” as a story of repetition is itself a repetition of the story from which it purloins its last words. [...] The story obeys the very law it conveys; it is framed by its own content. And thus “The Purloined Letter” no

longer simply repeats its own “primal scene”: what it repeats is nothing less than a previous story of repetition.” (Johnson, 1977, p. 487)

In each case, it is evident that the letter is repeatedly purloined, leading each of the stories to center around the purloining of an already purloined letter for purposes of power and revenge. Minister D. purloins the letter to deprive the owner of the letter of her (political) power, whereas Dupin purloins the purloined letter to exact vengeance on Minister D. for what he once did to Dupin in Vienna. More importantly, the replacement of the purloined letter with a facsimile of it leaves the original owner of the letter with the illusion that the letter is still in his/her possession. The owner’s sense of reality therefore gets severely damaged and will remain so up until the moment of a chance realization that the original contents are missing. In fact, this is exactly what the Queen is manipulated into experiencing after Minister D. purloins her letter, just as Minister D. is manipulated into going through the same kind of experience when Dupin purloins his letter.

“The Purloined Letter” can perhaps be best labeled as a story of repetition in which the purloining of the letter repeats itself twice in almost the same way. Yet, this leaves the labeling in question incomplete. There is one more thing which needs to be added to make it complete, and it is the recursiveness of it. The recursiveness of the repetition can be observed in the fact that the robber is robbed by another robber of what he previously robbed from someone else. In fact, the narrator and Dupin exchange words which hint at this recursiveness of the purloining of the letter when they speak about “the robber’s knowledge of the loser’s knowledge of the robber” (Poe, 1946, pp. 456-457). The recursiveness of the purloining of the letter also suggests that “The Purloined Letter” is a story which folds down upon itself. It is utterly significant at this point not to miss the fact that the story which tells the purloining of a letter re-tells the same story, or to put it more accurately, itself. This re-telling (or, re-modelling) of the story by the story itself perhaps forms the most fundamental part of “The Purloined Letter,” since the completion of the story requires the re-telling (or, re-modelling) of it by itself. In this respect, what Dupin does is in fact nothing more than replacing Minister D. in the story which is likewise replaced by the same story itself. All these things – re-telling, re-modelling, and replacing – can be combined into one single term: mirroring. “The Purloined Letter” is a story in which the purloining of ‘the purloined letter’, and thence the story of it, mirrors itself.

## CONCLUSION

The narrator of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” -the first of the Dupin trilogy- identifies Dupin as the type of detective who can only solve crimes committed in his narratives. Scholars also tend to argue jointly that Dupin has his own way of investigating and solving crimes which the police keep failing to uncover. His distinction chiefly lies in his possession of an analytical mind which helps him to read the minds of others in an unusual way (Hoffman, 1998, p. 107). It is perhaps with the following words that the narrator speaks when he describes Dupin as the analyst: he is *the* type of detective who “throws himself into the spirit of his opponent, identifies himself therewith, and not unfrequently sees thus, at a glance, the sole methods (sometimes indeed absurdly simple ones) by which he may seduce into error or hurry into miscalculation” (Poe, 1946,

p. 380). It is obvious from these words that neither is Dupin the type of a typical detective nor is "The Purloined Letter" the type of a typical detective story. Both are distinct from their counterparts in their own spheres of literature. Dupin benefits from his knowledge in the fields of logic, physics, and math when he proposes that the robber would be highly unlikely to be keeping the purloined letter hidden somewhere. He firmly believes that the search for the purloined letter – symbolic of the search for the truth—must begin with the presupposition that things tend to evade easy detection as they get bigger in size, or closer to the eye. This is a result of the fallacy that the human mind tends to apply in reasoning, he argues. The human mind is predisposed to take it for granted that anything which is not where it should be, or which abnormally ends up being out of sight, must inevitably be hidden and it must be sought in between the minutest details. The narrator of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" makes a strong point about this in his proposition that prompts the truth to be sought where it is found, not where it is erroneously looked for: "Truth is not always in a well. In fact, as regards the more important knowledge, I do believe that she is invariably superficial. The depth lies in the valleys where we seek her, and not upon the mountain-tops where she is found" (Poe, 1946, p. 392). Albeit highly trained in their job, the Paris police department cannot avoid falling a victim to this fallacy. This results from the institutionalization that limits them in every possible respect. The narrator of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" comes up with a similar argument when he blames them for pursuing "no method in their proceedings, beyond the method of the moment" (Poe, 1946, p. 392). The fact that Dupin is not bound to an institution by way of, say, bureaucratic devotion to a common goal, however, exempts him from the tides that would otherwise keep him restricted in all manners.

Yet, things are different for Dupin. He was born as a fictional figure into a period in which the transition from agriculture to industry -namely, commercialization- was at its full swing, and in which intellectual labor was beginning to get much worthier than bodily labor. Thus, the connection between Dupin and his decision to sell his knowledge can perhaps be best made through a look at the period when he became a fictional figure. Dupin is a fictional figure who bears resemblance to its author in the way of his response to the financial distress caused by the then emerging "bourgeois market economy" which forced people like Poe to work "without patronage, commissions, [or] subscriptions" (Knight, 1980, p. 50). In the words of March-Russell (2009), Poe was "a jobbing writer who wrote tales of horror and mystery to suit the marketplace" (p. 32-33). Daniel Hoffman similarly remarks that around the time when Poe wrote his Dupin tales, he was writing "with frenetic speed to fill issue after issue of ill-paying magazines" (1988, 115). As his creator has done, Dupin does not repudiate the new economic conditions either; what he does instead is to let his knowledge and private skills as a detective be treated as personal property in return for cash payments (Knight, 1980, p. 62).

It should also be noted that Dupin labels Minister D. as "an unprincipled man of genius," simply because he has done something horrendous in stealing a private letter from a royal personage for the purpose of blackmailing her (Poe, 1946, p. 470). Dupin is not alone in his attack against the Minister; scholars like Daniel Hoffman also describes Minister D. as an "unscrupulous

genius" (Hoffman, 1998, p. 118).<sup>4</sup> I have an objection against their labeling of Minister D. as such; and it finds its source primarily in the observation that Priestman makes when he hints at the "deconstruction of Dupin back into an amoral, personally involved revenger" at the very end of the trilogy (1991, p. 55).

There is no doubt that Dupin is exceptionally adept at finding out easily what others keep failing to unearth, despite their arduous work. However, his exceptional proficiency in detective work lacks both social and moral dimensions for reasons which can be explained as follows. First of all, Dupin recovers the letter only after he "has *exactly duplicated* the crime he has set out to resolve" (Hoffman, 1998, p. 122). His solution only propagates the problem even further. Secondly, it is basically his desire for revenge which immensely motivates him to get the letter back. If the thief had been somebody else with whom Dupin had no former acquaintance, he would most likely choose not to act at all. Besides, his motivation behind the reclaiming of the purloined letter appears to be purely selfish. As Hoffman writes, "in no way does he [Dupin] show any interest toward man in society. *Au contraire*, he pursues his excellences in isolation. He cares not a whistle for the knowledge that benefits mankind, as did Franklin, but devotes all his leisure hours – and they are many – to the knowledge that interests himself" (1998, p. 124). Thirdly, he shows no signs that he acts on the feelings of social responsibility when he takes action to get the letter safely back to its original owner. On the contrary, he shows much less interest in returning the letter safely back to the Queen in the first person than in appropriating the reward for having discovered it alone.

All this shows that Dupin has no ethical concerns whatsoever about committing the crime which he has indeed been asked to investigate. The acuteness with which Dupin uncovers the crime of stealing that somebody else has committed goes parallel with the prudence with which he 'covers' the same crime that he himself commits.<sup>5</sup> After all, the fact remains that Dupin does what Minister D. has already done—the stealing of a letter. Both acts of stealing are stealing and deserve equal moral response. Unscrupulousness is therefore something which equally applies to both Minister D. and Monsieur Dupin. As Babener also points it out in her paper, "the prominent pattern of doubles [in 'The Purloined Letter'] suggests that the protagonist [Dupin] and his foil [Minister D.] are *moral duplicates*" (italics mine) (1988, p. 315-6). Babener also puts forth that, looked at from a moral point of view, Dupin's purloining of the letter cannot be considered as something better or preferable when compared with Minister D.'s purloining of the letter, simply because Dupin has recovered the purloined letter:

Dupin cannot be regarded simplistically as a moral agent whose able solution of the crime represents a triumph for the cause of virtue. Dupin's mode of procedure, while successful, is nevertheless ethically suspicious; he does, after all, imitate D—'s own

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<sup>4</sup> Babener makes a similar point as she argues that critics unanimously agree that the Minister is the villain, yet they are eager to keep Dupin "exempt from moral scrutiny" simply because he "solves crimes for sheer aesthetic pleasure," or regard him "as a representative of the forces of morality" (1988, p. 328).

<sup>5</sup> The words 'acuteness' and 'prudence' are used here in reference to a passage in *The Name of the Rose* (originally published in Italian in 1980) where William of Baskerville, the master, is described by the abbot as "acute in uncovering, and prudent (if necessary) in covering" (Eco, 1998, p. 9).

tactics, which are clearly pernicious. Both men employ ingenious forms of trickery to execute their plans and to deceive their antagonists. (1988, p. 328)

When looked at from a technical point of view, Dupin's achievement of success as a detective in getting the purloined letter back seems to be unquestionable. However, a moral attitude towards the way in which he does get it back will reveal that besides the letter itself, Dupin steals the way of stealing the letter from the robber as well. Dupin's achievement of success as a detective, in fact, rests upon his appropriation of the know-how by which Minister D. purloins the letter in the first place -the know-how which is uniquely a personal property of Minister D. In the light of all this, it can be concluded that Dupin both appropriates and plagiarizes a genuine method of doing something -whether it be for stealing something or recovering something stolen- for the sake of personal gain alone. What we face, at the end of the day, is not a hero but a plagiarist.

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