

# A structural reading of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter*

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## 1. Introduction

At the risk of probably exposing myself to an attack similar to the one that Dupin launched at the mathematicians when he accused them of believing in so-called 'finite truths' that were in fact nothing more than "truths within the limits of *relation*" (1982: 244), I would like, nevertheless, to try to analyse some of the structural relationships in Poe's *The Purloined Letter* to show how a structural reading of a short story may contribute to an understanding of its meaning. In this regard I shall take as my point of departure Genette's (1980) differentiation between the terms *récit* (narrative), *histoire* (story) and *narration* (act of narration or narrating), by means of which the author wishes to indicate that the concrete narrative text is inevitably linked to both its underlying story-content and the means of its production: "... narrative discourse ... constantly implies a study of relationships: on the one hand the relationship between a discourse and the events that it recounts ... on the other hand the relationship between the same discourse and the act that produces it ..." (Genette, 1980: 26-27). In order to clarify the three aspects of 'narrative reality' within the above relationships, Genette (1980: 27) subsequently defines the terms story (*histoire*), narrative (*récit*) and narrating (*narration*): *story* refers to the "signified or narrative content"; *narrative* designates "the signifier, statement, discourse or narrative text itself"; *narrating* is used "for the producing narrative action and, by extension, the whole of the real or fictional situation in which that action takes place."

These Genettian terms may be explained further with reference to Rimmon-Kenan's (1983) synthesis of structural narratological models. *Story* denotes a succession of narrated events abstracted from their actual arrangement in the narrative text and reconstructed in their chronological order. The participants in the series of chronological events on the story-level may usually be distinguished with respect to the various *functions* they fulfil and may accordingly be grouped into different actantial 'roles' (Greimas, 1966) as, for instance, subject, helper, opponent, etc. In the *narrative text*, on the other hand, the events do not necessarily appear in chronological order: the participants are fleshed out as individuals by attributing specific characteristics to them and the narrative content is viewed from a particular perspective by one or more focalisers. Lastly, *narrating* or the *act of narration* concerns the telling of the events by means of one or more narrators.

In the structural reading of a narrative text, then, aspects such as the ordering of events, characterisation and focalisation serve to elucidate the relations between story, narrative and narration: the arrangement of the events and the characterisation of the actants link the narrative text to the underlying story; focalisation, because it is essential to narration, links the narrative text to the act of narration. Apart from such typically Genettian

relationships that are not readily available to the reader but that have to be reconstructed or inferred from the given narrative text, it could in my opinion also be relevant to study relations between corresponding sections or segments in the narrative text itself. These various relationships and their possible significance for an understanding of the narrative message will form the framework for the ensuing structural reading of *The Purloined Letter* – aspects of Lacan's psychoanalytic reading will be incorporated in the course of the discussion where a comparison with a structural reading seems warranted.

## 2. Segmentation of the narrative text

The narrative text under consideration consists of two prolonged scenic presentations in which the mystery of the purloined letter is discussed by the narrator, the Prefect of police and Dupin in the latter's library. The striking correspondences between the setting and the narration of the events in these two scenes suggest that the technique of repetition is not only essential to a psychoanalytic reading of the story as Lacan (1972: 39) explicitly states at the beginning of his seminar, but that it is indeed also a central structural device in Poe's *Purloined letter*. In order to grasp the implications of the structural function of repetition it is, however, necessary that all relevant aspects of the two scenic presentations be analysed instead of mainly concentrating (as Lacan does) on the two scenes *within* these scenic presentations in which the actual purloining of the letter is recounted. In fact, it soon becomes clear that repetition determines all structural relations in the narrative text, creating parallels between the two scenic presentations on the surface level of the narrative text itself, and also directing the comparison of the narrative text with its underlying story-content and its production respectively. The corresponding sections of the two scenic presentations may be indicated as follows:

(1)	<i>Scene 1</i>	<i>Scene 2</i>
	Dupin's library	Dupin's library one month later
	1. Setting – narrator and Dupin with the Prefect of police as visitor (1 page)	1. Setting – narrator and Dupin with the Prefect of police as visitor (1 paragraph)
	2. Conversation between Dupin and the Prefect concerning the nature of the mystery (1 page)	2. Conversation between Dupin and the Prefect concerning the reward offered for solving the mystery (1½ pages)
	3. Description of the scene where the letter was first stolen – the Prefect as spokesman (2 pages)	3. Explanation of how he succeeded in solving the mystery – Dupin as spokesman (8 pages)
	4. Explanation of how he failed to solve the mystery – the Prefect as spokesman (4¾ pages)	4. Description of the scene where the stolen letter was recovered – Dupin as spokesman (3½ pages)

If one considers the arrangement of events on the surface level of the narrative text, it is noticeable that there is a deviation in the second scene. Firstly, we are subjected to Dupin's lengthy explanation (approximately eight pages) of how he applied his superior powers of observation and reasoning to locate the letter, and secondly, only then is the reader offered a brief description (about three pages) of the actual scene in which Dupin finally succeeded in recovering the letter. This deviation serves two purposes: firstly, Dupin's explanation of his superior powers is given prominence in the text, and secondly, suspense is created in that the recounting of the scene in which the letter is eventually recovered is offered as both a climactic solution to the mystery and an 'open' conclusion to the narrative text. The conclusion is 'open' precisely because of its repetitive nature – since the so-called solution involves a repetition of the crime, another sequence is suggested in which the letter has yet again been displaced, thereby activating the same motive for looking for the letter and simultaneously recreating the pretext to tell the story of the baffling mystery and its solution.

This type of repetition in which parallel events are contrasted and actantial roles reversed, is also evident in the other sections distinguished in (1) above, so that the second scene in its entirety serves to put the first in a particular perspective, whilst the first in its turn serves to inform the second in a specific manner. The main spokesmen in the two scenes are the Prefect of police and Dupin, since the primary narrator, Dupin's friend, allows these two characters either to view their opinion in lengthy dialogues or alternatively to give their impression of events and the participants in the events in what could for all practical purposes be termed monologues. This means that some of the main participants, notably the queen and the minister, in what Lacan sees as the two central 'purloining' scenes, are never given an opportunity to state their impressions or meanings but are only presented to the reader as seen through the eyes of either the Prefect of police or Dupin. It also means (as Lacan correctly indicates) that especially the first of these scenes is thereby being telescoped through language. Whereas it is understandable that the first scene – since it belongs to a more distant narrative past – should perhaps of necessity rather be 'narrated' than 'presented', the fact that the second 'purloining' scene – which clearly belongs to the narrative present – is narrated in a similar way, can only be interpreted as a matter of *choice* on the part of the author. Such deliberate telescoping of the focal scenes through language, that is through narration, is clearly revealed when a reconstruction of the events on the underlying story-level is compared to the actual ordering of the events in the narrative text. The chronological sequence of events on the story-level may be paraphrased as follows:

## (2) Story-paraphrase of events

- 1. An incriminating letter is stolen from the Queen in a scene where she, the King and the Minister are present.
2. The Minister uses his possession of the letter to blackmail the Queen and to further his own political interests.
3. The help of the Prefect of police is secured, secrecy sworn and a huge reward offered.
4. The Prefect tries to secure the letter but is forced to admit defeat after three months.

5. The prefect visits the narrator and Dupin to ask Dupin's advice.

- 6. Dupin pays the Minister a visit and locates the letter.
7. Dupin returns the next day and secures the letter, substituting a similar one for it.

8. The Prefect of police receives the letter on a second visit to Dupin after having written out a cheque to the amount of fifty thousand francs.

9. Dupin indulges in a lengthy explanation of how he had succeeded in solving the mystery and retrieving the letter.

Whereas the events on the story-level took place over approximately eighteen months as this is the period in which the Queen had been in the power of the Minister, the events on the narrative-level took place in one month as this is the period of time that elapsed between the two visits of the Prefect of police to Dupin. Hence, the reader has to distinguish between, on the one hand, events that actually take place in the narrative present and, on the other hand, those that are only recounted or 'filtered' through the perspective of the participants in the narrative text and that belong to a more distant narrative past. In this regard it is noticeable that the two visits of the Prefect of police which constitute the narrative present, are foregrounded because their presentation at the beginning of each scenic presentation creates a deviation from the chronological sequence of events on the story-level. The two visits of the Prefect of police in the narrative present therefore form a frame for the telling or narration of the events that generated these visits. As has already been indicated, the only other deviation in the ordering of events in the narrative text concerns Dupin's explanation of how he solved the mystery as this explanation is presented before the second 'purloining' scene. It is interesting that Lacan, in concentrating on the two scenes in which the letter is purloined, selects the first scene on the story-level and the foregrounded last event in the narrative text. Lacan thus seems to point first to the gist of the deep structure of the narrative, since the first scene generates the actual narration of Poe's *Purloined letter*. At the same time his selection

of the last element in the narrative text enables him to highlight the importance of identification and repetition in the actual telling of the story on the surface level.

### **Comparison of the two scenic presentations comprising the narrative text**

The importance of repetition in presenting the story of the purloining of the letter is highlighted when the surface relations between the corresponding sections of the two scenic presentations comprising the narrative text are compared. Similar events, interchangeable actantial roles and comparable spokesmen or narrators serve to facilitate an understanding of the structural relations between the narrative text and both its underlying content and the means of its production. These various relationships will next jointly be discussed in a comparison of the sections distinguished in (1) above.

That a comparison between the scenic presentations of the two visits is clearly warranted, becomes evident when the narrator at the beginning of the second visit explicitly refers back to the first visit in stating that the Prefect of police found Dupin and himself "occupied very nearly as before" (1982: 238). Hence, it is self-evident that the details outlined in the setting of the first visit would apply to the second visit also. In this regard it is worth noting that two actantial roles are ascribed to the three characters introduced in the setting: the narrator has the function of primary (impartial) *observer* whilst the Prefect of police and Dupin share the function of *protector/defender* of a just cause and thus simultaneously that of *opponent* to evil. It is also worth noting that the conditions favourable to meditation and reflection – a relaxed attitude and darkness respectively – are emphasized, suggesting that mental activity (as opposed to physical engagement) distinguishes Dupin from the Prefect of police although they share the same actantial role. Any distinction between Dupin and the Prefect of police is, of course, intended to offset the former's supposedly superior abilities when compared to the limited resources of the Prefect. In this regard the narrator even indulges in direct characterisation when he described the Prefect as being both 'entertaining' and 'contemptible'.

After thus having used his privileged position as primary observer to cast the Prefect in an unfavourable light, the narrator next favours Dupin in presenting him as the superior in a dialogue between himself and the Prefect of police. As contrasted to the Prefect's verbosity (the narrator assigns the Prefect a total of 160 words as against Dupin's 51 words in the conversation) Dupin replies almost in monosyllables and occasionally in single sentences in which repetition moreover features prominently to drive home a point that the Prefect nevertheless fails to grasp and erroneously evaluates as a mere laughing matter. Dupin very shrewdly interprets the Prefect's remarks to advise the latter (without him realising it of course) that the mystery is 'baffling' precisely because it is 'simple and odd', perhaps a little "too plain" and "a little too self-evident" (1982: 230–231).

These repetitive remarks are, of course, not only directed to the Prefect of

police but are also emphasised for the benefit of the reader. They are significant for an understanding of the narrative message because they anticipate the means by which Dupin would eventually succeed in unravelling the mystery and retrieving the letter. In the parallel conversation during the second visit of the Prefect to Dupin and the narrator, the above information is not repeated but taken for granted. This second conversation between Dupin and the Prefect therefore functions merely as an explicit confirmation of the underlying 'truths' subtly introduced during the first conversation. In a demonstration of the correctness of Dupin's observations, then, the tables are cruelly turned on the prefect who is shocked into speechlessness when Dupin produces the letter after first having secured a proper payment for his *advice* offered during the first visit but not perceived as such by the Prefect and thus not heeded to his own detriment. In stark contrast to the first visit the Prefect is certainly not laughing at Dupin's 'odd' notions anymore, but he is himself instead turned into a laughing stock, thereby substantiating a previous remark by the narrator that he could be 'entertaining'. That the Prefect was also 'contemptible' in the eyes of Dupin is demonstrated by the latter's deliberate humiliating dismantling of the Prefect's self-esteem in an act of literally shutting him up. This is, of course, a significant structural development in the narration of the story, since the Prefect's function as spokesman is hereafter completely nullified. Dupin thus seemingly emerges at this stage as the superior investigator – be it a rather vindictive one – who is also structurally elevated to the important function of the only reliable spokesman left to explain his clever staging of the second purloining scene. His victory over the prefect also ensures that Dupin's rival in the actantial role of protector is effectively taken care of. In fact, his physical removal from the company of Dupin and the narrator constitutes a deviation from the presentation of the first visit, in that the conversation continues between Dupin and the narrator while the poor Prefect is apparently not even considered to be a worthy listener any more. Thus Dupin's complete victory over the Prefect is structurally expressed in the elimination of the latter's tripartite function as initial spokesman, protector and observer.

The narrator and Dupin's ridicule of the Prefect is, however, not entirely justified, since in the remaining parallel sections – the 'purloining' scenes and their explanations by the Prefect and Dupin respectively – Dupin's success is shown to be largely dependent upon the preliminary physical *and* mental 'groundwork' done by the Prefect. It is significant that the Prefect is assigned the role of main spokesman during the first visit and that it is only in the course of the second dialogic encounter with Dupin that he is forced to yield this function to Dupin. The Prefect's initial role of primary spokesman is, of course, a matter of necessity, since neither the narrator nor Dupin could have had any access to the relevant facts concerning the original theft of the letter by the Minister. This means, then, that they have to rely on the Prefect's knowledge of the events and the participants in the events of the 'primal' purloining scene scrutinized in such detail in Lacan's seminar. Since the Prefect himself was also, however, not an eyewitness to what happened when the Queen's precious letter was taken by the Minister, what Dupin, the

narrator and the reader are subjected to is in fact already the Prefect's *assessment* of the events together with his *analysis* of the behaviour of the participants. In this regard it is significant that the introduction of the two central actantial roles in the first purloining scene is assigned to the Prefect – both the Minister as the villain proper (or robber in the words of the narrator) and the Queen as the primary victim (or loser according to the narrator) are focalised by the Prefect. Describing the theft automatically entails reconstructing the so-called primal scene, where the Minister's observational qualities are emphasized. The Prefect, in fact, becomes quite eloquent when reporting on the Minister's assessment of the situation:

His lynx eye immediately *perceives* the paper, *recognizes* the handwriting of the address, *observes* the confusion of the personage addressed and *fathoms* her secret (1982: 232).

It is made quite clear, then, that the Minister is a worthy opponent whose ingenuity would be difficult to match. It is exactly at this point that *identification* (with one's opponent in this case) becomes important when Dupin explicitly states in the parallel purloining scene that it was essential to get even with the Minister. Apparently getting *even* with a rival – be it protector or villain – is, however, not sufficient for Dupin. Where the Minister needed a *lynx eye* to locate the incriminating letter and perceive its effects on the Queen, Dupin could spot the letter even behind the disguise of green spectacles. Also, where the Minister leaves behind a letter of no consequence, Dupin cannot resist the temptation to impress the Minister with a spiteful note. Getting 'even' with the Minister, however, also entails more than merely fulfilling his actantial role of defender of the wronged party's rights. Dupin's *real* reason for taking on the Minister is to repay the latter for an evil turn he once did to him. Hence, the Prefect and the Minister both have to be properly defeated because they made the mistake of crossing the illustrious investigator – the Prefect laughed at his 'odd' notions and had himself to be turned into an object of ridicule; the Minister harmed him and as a consequence his political downfall had to be engineered when the right opportunity presented itself.

It follows from the above that both purloined scenes may in a sense be viewed as studies in characterisation. In the first scene the Prefect as spokesman is intent on laying bare certain characteristics of the Minister. In the parallel scene Dupin is apparently doing the same but inadvertently he is at the same time revealing more about himself to the reader than he is actually saying about the Minister. Contrary to Lacan's emphasis on the letter as master signifier, then, it would seem that the letter is merely a pretext to lay bare human behaviour in critical circumstances. (Self)-characterisation becomes even more important in the two explanatory scenes devoted to the investigations of the Prefect of police and Dupin respectively. The Prefect's account of his meticulous search for the letter is presented in so much exaggerated detail that there can be no question as to the extreme *complexity* of the policial methods. This in spite of the fact that the Prefect himself had

characterised the mystery as baffling, yet *simple*; and that Dupin had stressed the point that the Prefect was unable to succeed precisely because the matter was perhaps too plain and self-evident. Yet, in spite of this unflattering self-characterisation by the Prefect, even this preliminary physical groundwork is necessary for Dupin's success, since he could be sure that the letter was not tucked away into some secret hiding-place and therefore had to be left somewhere in a conspicuous yet unlikely place. Dupin's own explanations of how he could solve the mystery – as opposed to the Prefect's account of his failure to retrieve the letter – serve to highlight the importance of *identification* with one's opponent. Hence, the main reason for the Prefect's failure emerges as his inability to form an astute impression of the Minister's character and to try and outwit him on his own terms.

Dupin, of course, *is* capable of meeting the Minister on his own ground and to thoroughly outwit him. However, the very fact that success depends on the ability to identify with one's adversaries, suggests that Dupin has to share at least some characteristics with the participants he intends portraying in an unfavourable light. This is borne out by the switching of actantial roles, especially in the two purloined scenes commented on by Lacan, where the switching of places in the triangle of different *glances* (that is, different degrees in comprehension in focalising on the same object) intrigues Lacan from a psychoanalytic point of view. In terms of actantial functions the role of victim is assigned to the Queen in the first and the Minister in the second scene; the villain who purloines the letter is first the Minister and later Dupin; the so-called righteous protector of the victim's interests is first the Prefect of police and later Dupin. It is clear that Dupin has two actantial roles to play, that of protector or helper and that of villain. Hence, he has to identify with both the Prefect of police and the Minister. The fact that he insists in outdoing both these participants exposes him to be simultaneously the superior protector *and* the better villain in Poe's story. Even worse, the fact that he effectively *eliminates* the participants sharing the two actantial roles with him, suggests that Dupin emerges as the *only* protector *and* the *only* villain at the conclusion of the narrative text. Structurally, his sole occupation of both roles is expressed in his privileged position of being the only narrator of the last two sections of the second scenic presentation. The subtle irony of Poe's story thus seems to depend on a clever manipulation of narrative voices. Dupin is given all the scope he wishes for in the explanatory section foregrounded by both its length and its deviant position in the ordering of the events to expose himself to the reader as anything but an untainted hero.

If one wishes to ask in conclusion what the narrative message could be it seems to be suggesting something about the true nature of human beings. Success depends on an identification with opponents, which entails the ability to absorb both positive and negative aspects, which means that there is no such thing as either a pure motive or an untainted hero depicted in Poe's story.

However, whether one should assign a psychoanalytic content to the concept of identification as it is presented in Poe's story, is an 'open' question that remains to be determined.



## References

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