

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Purloined Letter by Edgar Allan Poe

Book Information

Edgar Allan Poe, The Purloined Letter

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Book Level: 10.4

Interest Level: UG

The brilliant Dupin uses psychological reasoning to deduce the hiding place of a stolen letter.

Topics: Classics, Classics (All); Mysteries, Thefts; Science, Psychology; Series, Creative Short Stories; Short Stories, Short Stories (All)

Main Characters

C. Auguste Dupin a Parisian gentleman respected for his powers of deduction

Monsieur D - a high-ranking French minister who boldly removes a letter from the royal apartments and uses it for political advantage

Monsieur G - the Prefect of the Parisian police, who is thwarted by the thief

The narrator a friend of Dupin who is with him during both of the Prefect's visits to Dupin's library

Vocabulary

cipher a monogram

escritoire a small desk or writing table

gimlet-dust dust created from using a gimlet, a small tool for boring holes

meerschau a smoking pipe made of a white, clay-like mineral

Prefect rank equivalent to chief of police

sagacious wise

Synopsis

The Purloined Letter, a cerebral mystery story, takes place in nineteenth-century Paris. As the story opens, the narrator is sharing a contemplative smoke in the study of his friend, C. Auguste Dupin. The two are visited by Monsieur G-, the Prefect of

the Parisian police, who has come to ask Dupin's advice about a perplexing case on which he is working. The case involves intrigue at the highest levels, as it concerns a "personage of most exalted station" and the theft of her letter from the royal apartments. The perpetrator is known to be Minister D- because the lady saw him remove the letter with her own eyes. Monsieur G- explains that the police have done an exhaustive and detailed search of the Minister's apartments and have turned up nothing. Dupin assesses the situation coolly, agrees with the Prefect that the letter must be in the Minister's hotel, and advises him to search again.

About a month later, the narrator is with Dupin when the Prefect visits again, reporting no progress in his search for the letter. The Minister is using the letter for his own political ends, and the necessity of retrieving the letter is becoming more critical. In frustration, Monsieur G- declares he would give his paycheck of fifty-thousand francs for a clue as to the letter's whereabouts. Dupin then advises him to write out the check, and after Monsieur G- does so, he hands him the letter in question.

After the dumbfounded Prefect leaves Dupin's study, Dupin explains to the narrator that a careful assessment of the thinking abilities of both the Prefect and the perpetrator is what led him to deduce the letter's location. On one hand, the Prefect and his Paris police know the business of careful searching for hidden items. On the other hand, the Minister, being both a mathematician and a poet, could be expected to think in a more sophisticated manner. Knowing that the letter must be in the Minister's hotel and that the police's thorough search methods could not locate it, he deduced that the letter must be "hidden" in plain sight. Indeed, when Dupin visited the Minister on a pretext, he found the letter displayed openly in a most obvious place. He replaced the letter in question with a fac-simile, inside of which was written, "So baneful a plot, if not worthy of Atreus, is worthy of Thyestes."

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Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

At the end of the story, Dupin tells the narrator about the inscription he included on the inside of the fac-simile letter left in the Ministerial hotel. "He knows well my MS," he said. Given that MS refers to handwriting, what did Dupin think would happen after the Minister discovers the letter is a worthless fac-simile?

Dupin implies that the Minister would know his handwriting. Therefore, he would be able to identify Dupin as the one who foiled him, thus settling an old score between the two men.

Literary Analysis

During his first visit to Dupin's library, how does the Prefect show himself to be the simple-minded detective Dupin believes him to be?

Monsieur G- seems unable to maintain his professional discretion, as with each exchange with Dupin he reveals more and more "confidential" information. He seems also not to understand a joke at his own expense when Dupin facetiously calls him "sagacious."

Inferential Comprehension

How does the Prefect's method of problem-solving compare to that of Monsieur Dupin?

The Prefect applies the same techniques for all situations that are similar in his mind. He believes a hidden letter must be found through exhaustive examination of hidden spaces. Dupin's approach to the same problem differs because he first considers the mental capacity and the level of sophistication of the person involved. Before beginning an exhaustive search, he simply assesses the thief's sensibilities and from there determines how that person would conceal the stolen object.

Constructing Meaning

What does the narrator mean when he says the power yielded by the possession of the letter depends upon "the robber's knowledge of the loser's knowledge of the robber"?

The Minister is able to use the letter as an effective tool for blackmail only because he is sure the lady saw him steal it. Had the lady doubted the importance or ownership of the letter, the Minister would have no power over her. As long as the Minister can be sure that the lady believes he possesses her letter, he can assert this power to further his political desires.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Characterization Dupin described the Minister as "that monstrem horrendum, an unprincipled man of genius." Initiate a class discussion in which the students attempt to define the Minister further. Do they feel this description is accurate? Ask them to list any figures in politics, entertainment, history, or literature who would fit a similar description.

Extending Meaning The concept of hiding in plain sight was a major plot element in this story. Students may be familiar with the book series, "I Spy" and "Where's Waldo," in which objects are hidden only by virtue of the setting in which they are presented. As a class project, bring in several such books for the students to review. During class discussion, ask them to analyze what it is about the pictures that make the hidden items difficult to find.

Identifying Reading Strategies Students may be surprised that the word fac-simile, seen so often in conjunction with the modern "fax" machine, is actually a Latin word that was in use in Poe's day. As an exercise in understanding word origins, ask students to translate the word from the Latin. Why did this word likely come into use to describe the product of today's fax machine?

Understanding the Main Idea Dupin inscribed the fac-simile letter with a Latin phrase meaning,

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"Such a baneful plot, if not worthy of Atreus [Atree], is worthy of Thyestes [Thyeste]." As a student research and writing project, assign students to analyze the meaning of this sentence. Who are Atreus and Thyestes, and what is their correlation with the major players in the intrigue described in *The Purloined Letter*?