

The Purloined Letter: Reading Signs and Ciphers

1. "The Purloined Letter" seems like a traditional "locked-room" tale:

- a. introductory exercise
- b. masterful detective
- c. stupid sidekick
- d. blundering police
- e. locked-room convention
- f. red herring
- g. staged ruse
- h. condescending explanation by surprise

The locked-room elements suggest that the story will emphasize the intellectual solving of a problem - but the problem in "The Purloined Letter" will focus on abstractions as opposed to the focus on physical evidence in "Murders in the Rue Morgue" - dead bodies, torn-out hair, razors, money, etc.

2. "The Purloined Letter" emphasizes the importance of reading signs.

- a. A "sign" is any written character that stands for something beyond itself.
 - i. Symbols are created by humans to communicate ideas. They can be totally abstract (alphabet, for example) or representational (visual icons that are meant to resemble physical objects or ideas).
- b. Hieroglyphics are a representational or iconic system of signs: each little picture signifies what it looks like.
 - i. Even iconic or representational signs often depend for their meaning on the consensus of the group. Example: Mexican restroom signs that have an "umbrella" to signify "women" and a "hat" to signify "men."
 - ii. Some other examples of iconic/representational signs: those international symbols that feature a knife and fork to mean "restaurant"; the "x" to stand for "railroad crossing"; the public market signs that feature pictures of vegetables and fruits.
- c. Language is an abstract system of signs: that is, non-representational symbols stand in for concepts
- d. Abstract signs depend on the consensus of the group that "X" means "Y." Signification is arbitrary and must be memorized rote. A further process of memorization is necessary if individuals are going to understand how words "stand in for" or signify cultural customs: consider, for examples, the gas station signs "self" and "full."
 - i. Some other examples of abstract signs: mathematical notation; any kind of nonmetal money (currency)
- e. When we interpret, we "plug in" the meanings signs have been assigned in our culture. For example, when we see someone wearing black, we might assume that their clothing is functioning as a sign: they are dressed for a funeral since in

- our culture the sign “black clothing” often signifies that someone is in mourning..
- f. The chief difficulty in interpretation is that signs are usually **multivalent**: that is, a sign can have more than one meaning.
 - i. For example, black clothing can be worn for a formal occasion, when a person is feeling sexy, because it looks good on the wearer, or because it’s practical and doesn’t show dirt. As a sign, black clothing doesn’t necessarily signify “funeral.”
 - g. The interpreter must always consider the context in which the sign is used. Consequently, interpreters must be aware of a wide variety of contexts and possible meanings of signs.
 - i. For example, if a person is wearing a black outfit and standing with a group of people near a grave, the context suggests that the black clothing may signify a funeral or mourning (rather than a formal occasion or a desire to appear sexy). Yet the other possibilities cannot be ruled out.

3. **Sign-reading is like solving a puzzle.**

- a. When we read or listen to someone speak, we interpret each “sign” that they use individually and in context.
 - i. If someone says “You are a dog,” we can interpret the words - signs they are using in a variety of ways, many of which are dependent on context.
 - (1) If the person is speaking to their pet dog, we can assume this is a simple statement of fact.
 - (2) If the person is speaking to a human friend, we can assume that they are using the sign “dog” figuratively.
 - (a) The word “dog” is being used to attribute dog-like qualities to a human being: qualities like smelliness, loyalty, fierceness, or randiness (as in Elvis Presley’s famous song “Hound Dog.”)
- b. If we confront a situation where several words/signs/clues are missing, we must fill in the blanks, further complicating the process of interpretation.
 - i. If, for example, someone says to us, “I really thought in that case that we should have. . .”, but doesn’t finish the sentence, we have to intuit what the speaker means.
- c. Detective fictions confront us with sign-reading dilemmas on a large scale: not only do we have to interpret utterances, fill in the blanks when people are silent or don’t finish their sentences, but we have to “fill in” signs and interpret existing signs - and we have to hope that we are able to do this accurately.

4. **Literary works require us to interpret signs accurately; detective fiction intensifies this process, and highlights the multivalence of signs.**

- a. In “The Purloined Letter,” there are several missing pieces of information, or unanswered questions. In DF, we’re used to knowing more about the story than Poe gives us here.
 - i. What are the true identities - names - of the characters?
 - ii. What “crime” does the letter imply has taken place?

- iii. Will D- use the letter to blackmail the Exalted Personage?
- iv. **Where is the letter hidden?**
- v. What will the King do if he finds out about the letter?
- vi. Could the letter cause the downfall of the country?

We only find out the answer to *one* of these questions - the rest remain unanswered.

They are possibilities that Dupin must consider but not resolve as he investigates the theft of the letter. These “gaps” are called “ciphers” - empty spaces that constitute puzzles.

- b. The story also highlights the slipperiness of certain concepts, such as “hide,” “secret,” “Exalted Personage,” and even the word “premise” itself, which becomes a pun in the story, signifying both the scene of the crime and the assumptions on which the Prefect bases his search for the missing document.
 - i. These concepts are shown to have many possible meanings, and the Prefect, who assigns only one possible meaning to each word, is shown to be a poor interpreter of signs - and a poor finder of missing letters as a result.

5. **“The Purloined Letter” is a cipher about ciphers.**

- a. The Purloined Letter focuses almost exclusively on what's not there - on the "cipher" in all its senses. A "cipher" is, according to Webster, "(A) a character or symbol denoting the absence of all magnitude or quantity; nought; zero. (B) A method of secret writing that substitutes nonsense characters for the letters intended, or transposes the letters after arranging them in blocks; also a substitution alphabet so used." A cipher then is an ad-hoc sign-system that deliberately scrambles a known sign-system in order to foil readers.
- b. The main players themselves are all ciphers - blanks.
 - i. Their names signify roles rather than personal identities: the Prefect (garbled "perfect"), the Minister, the Exalted Personage, the drama in the "royal apartment."
 - ii. These general signs or labels create an atmosphere of secrecy that stimulates us to wonder about the "real story" behind the generalities.
 - iii. The general labels protect the personages from retaliation and make the story more universal.
 - iv. The extent to which “names” disguise personal identity is exploited by the Minister, who makes the letter invisible by turning it inside out and writing his own address on it.
- c. The letter itself is a cipher; we don't know what's written on it; we can only imagine its content. The story gives us enough information to suspect that it is a love-letter, and that its revelation might cause a national crisis, but we never find out what it is in it. It is both priceless and worthless.
 - i. It has value only if the Minister D- decides to deploy it (blackmailing the Exalted Personage).
 - ii. The letter's valuelessness becomes even more evident when Dupin exchanges a bogus letter, with a seal made of bread, for the real letter that he confiscates from the Minister's apartment.
 - iii. Its primary value is as a puzzle to Dupin: the letter allows him to outwit

- the police and torture the Minister D at the same time.
- iv. If the substance of the letter impugns the Exalted Personage's chastity, we can assume that the signification of her in chastity (the letter itself) is more important than the physical chastity (the behavior) itself.

6. The police show how *not* to read signs.

- a. The Prefect doesn't get Dupin's sarcasm when the detective plays him a mock compliment. He takes words at their face value.
- b. The Parisian police search everywhere for physical evidence, but find none, because the symbols they're looking for are hidden in plain sight. (Dupin invokes the idea of hiding a name on a map by making it large and terribly obvious.) "He perpetually errs by being too deep or too shallow" says Dupin of the Prefect.
- c. The Prefect derides both poets and mathematicians - people who are adept readers and writers of symbolic codes that stand in for real objects; people who are able to imagine a variety of ways of approaching a single physical or intellectual problem.
- d. The Prefect and his associates assume when they see the letter addressed to the Minister that it must be his; they take the address code at its face value.

7. How does Poe present Dupin's superior sign-reading ability?

- a. "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." To understand the signs of a community, understand the values of the community - its context.
 - i. Dupin gets inside the mind of the criminal, in this case the Minister, a famous diplomat and politician.
 - ii. How do diplomats and politicians succeed in having power? By wielding power indirectly over others; by operating through a veil. Consequently Dupin states important truths indirectly and makes sure all his aggressive actions are veiled.
 - iii. The police have failed to do this; they've accosted the Minister physically and ransacked his apartment, actions he was easily able to anticipate and foil.
 - iv. Dupin precisely imitates the Minister's technique for stealing the letter. The Minister found the letter in plain sight and switched it with one of his own; Dupin does the same.
 - v. Dupin follows the Minister's lead, using indirection (disguises) to make himself appear weak and ineffectual, and to draw the Minister's attention away from the letter so that he can switch it with one of his own. Examples of deception/indirection: ruse of staged gunshot outside window, fake eyeglasses, forgotten snuffbox that must be retrieved a day later.