

## **The Theory of “Bi-part Soul” and its Application in Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Purloined Letter”**

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### **Abstract**

*Modern mystery writers are indebted to Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849). Although he is primarily known for his horror stories, Poe also wrote a series of what he called, “tales of ratiocination,” which helped define the conventions used in Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes detective stories, and which helped influence the development of the modern mystery. One of Poe’s most popular detective stories is “The Purloined Letter” (1844). As with the other stories that feature C. Auguste Dupin, Poe’s famous detective protagonist, “The Purloined Letter” emphasizes the use of deductive reasoning – a specific type of logic that examines all factors in a case objectively – to solve mysteries that have stumped others. In the following essay, an attempt has been made to discuss Poe’s theory of the “bi-part soul” and its application in his “The Purloined Letter”.*

**Key Words:** Edgar Allan Poe, “The Purloined Letter”, “Bi-part” soul, logic, imagination, reason.

Modern mystery writers owe a debt of gratitude to Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849). Although he is primarily known for his horror stories, Poe also wrote a series of what he called, “tales of ratiocination,” which helped define the conventions used in Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes detective stories, and which helped influence the development of the modern mystery. One of Poe’s most popular detective stories is “The Purloined Letter” (1844). Originally published in *The Gift: A Christmas and New Year’s Present for 1844*, an annual magazine, the story was reproduced in Poe’s *Tales by Edgar A. Poe* the following year.

As with the other stories that feature C. Auguste Dupin, Poe’s famous detective protagonist, “The Purloined Letter” emphasizes the use of deductive reasoning – a specific

type of logic that examines all factors in a case objectively – to solve mysteries that have stumped others.

In this story, as in other Poe detective stories, among the people stumped are the members of the French police force, who attempt to find a stolen letter which is being used for political blackmail. The police launch a series of scientific and precise, but misguided, investigations by using logical methods that are based solely on past experience and established systems of thought. Their investigative methods reflect the types of rational thought prevalent in the mid-nineteenth century. In the end, the police are unsuccessful in finding the letter because the thief has hidden it in the most unexpected place – right under their noses. Dupin figures this out and recovers the letter, turning the political tables on the thief.

C. Auguste Dupin is the detective in the story, whom the Prefect has called upon in past Poe stories to solve mysteries. In “The Purloined Letter,” the Prefect visits Dupin to get help in finding a purloined – or stolen – letter.

With the help of prompting questions and statements, largely from the narrator –who is a friend of Dupin – the Prefect provides Dupin with the details of the case. The letter has been stolen from the Queen, in her presence, by the Minister D--- , a known political opponent. However, due to the sensitive nature of the letter’s contents, the Queen and her allies, including the Prefect, cannot seize the letter openly, and so have tried to search the Minister’s home in private. Dupin asks questions about the Prefect’s search methods to determine if the search has been handled correctly. Dupin says that the Minister has conducted a good search, yet he encourages the Prefect to make a thorough search of the premises. The Prefect is confused, but takes his advice. However, a month later, when the Prefect returns to Dupin’s home, he has still found nothing. On this second visit, Dupin asks the Prefect about the reward for finding the letter, and the Prefect says that it is fifty thousand francs. Dupin has the Prefect make out the check, then produces the letter.

Later, Dupin explains to the narrator the methods of deductive reasoning that he used to figure out where the Minister was hiding the letter. He notes that the Parisian police have done the best that they could, because they and the Prefect are operating on a faulty assumption: they assume that the Minister would try to hide the letter in some “secret” compartment, and thus, all of their efforts are concentrated on searching in hidden places. Dupin explains how, by knowing details about a person’s behaviour and background, one can figure out his actions. In this case, Dupin knows that the Minister is aware of the police’s searches, and knows that the police will look in the most hidden spots, but will ignore any area that is in plain view.

Under the pretense of a social visit, Dupin visits the Minister and almost immediately locates the purloined letter in a letter rack on the wall. On a second visit, Dupin creates a diversion, during which time he grabs the stolen letter, replacing it with a fake copy.

Many critics agree that with tales of ratiocination like “The Purloined Letter,” Poe earned the title of father of the modern detective story. Three of C. Auguste Dupin’s characteristics in particular – his mysterious nature, his civilian position, and his deductive reasoning – influenced the detectives found in both literature and film.

When Poe introduces Dupin, he provides very little information about his background. He and the narrator sit in the dark, smoking their pipes. When the Prefect visits him to talk about the case, Dupin purposely does not light the lamp, saying that “if it is any point requiring reflection.... we shall examine it to better purpose in the dark.”<sup>1</sup> This idea, of the mysterious, silent detective sitting and smoking in the dark while listening to his clients’ cases, is one of the hallmarks of future “private-eye” stories.

Like these private eyes, Dupin is also a civilian. Although he is outside of the law, the Prefect still comes to talk with Dupin any time he has “some official business” that gives him “a great deal of trouble.” In this case, as in many other detective stories, the Prefect gives Dupin privileged information, such as when he is describing the importance of the letter: “I may venture so far as to say that the paper gives its holder a certain power in a certain quarter where such power is immensely valuable.” (329) Although the Prefect tries to keep this information vague, he eventually reveals more sensitive information, including the identity of the thief and the specific nature of the stolen item, “the document in question – a letter, to be frank.” (329)

Using his deductive reasoning, Dupin is able to solve the case with the same information that the police have. The difference is that he examines all of the factors of the case holistically, not depending only on factors consistent with established systems of thought. “I dispute the availability, and thus the value, of that reason which is cultivated in any especial form other than the abstractly logical,” (338) says Dupin to the narrator. For Dupin, traditional systems of scientific logic, which rely on set rules, do not always help when solving cases about humans, who do not always play by these rules. Therefore, the optimal method of logic that can be used to deduce a solution to a mystery is abstract logic, which takes into account other relevant factors in its analysis.

Poe’s stories have not always been criticized for their literary merit alone. As Roger Asselineau notes in his entry on Poe for *American Writers*, “the most contradictory judgments have been passed on Edgar Allan Poe’s character and works.” Asselineau remarks that even Poe’s chosen executor, the Reverend Rufus Griswold, “branded him a perverse

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neurotic, a drunkard and drug addict.”<sup>2</sup> On many occasions, this negative sentiment about Poe’s vices tainted the author’s literary reputation.

Of course, not everybody thought Poe’s writing was degenerate. In 1845, the year “The Purloined Letter” was reprinted in *Tales of Edgar A. Poe*, reviewer George Colton noted of this story and the other tales of ratiocination that “the difference between acumen and cunning, calculation and analysis, are admirably illustrated in these tales.”<sup>3</sup> In fact, favorable response to “The Purloined Letter” was widespread. As Eric W. Carlson notes in his entry for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, the story was “immediately popular,” and “it was among his first translated into French.”<sup>4</sup>

The popularity of the story was still evident three decades later. In 1879, Robert Louis Stevenson noted that, “if anyone wishes to be excited, let him read.... the three stories about C. Auguste Dupin, the philosophical detective.”<sup>5</sup> On a similar note, a year later, Edmund Clarence Stedman noted in *Scribner’s Monthly* that Poe’s “strength is unquestionable in those clever pieces of ratiocination.”<sup>6</sup>

In the twentieth century, the reviews of the story were still largely positive, and many critics, like Vincent Buranelli, noted Poe’s role as the father of the detective story, saying that he was “the only American ever to invent a form of literature”. Buranelli notes that Poe “also perfected it,” and says that “The Purloined Letter” is one of two detective stories – the other being Poe’s “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” – that “may be the best ever written.”<sup>7</sup>

While “The Purloined Letter” was more consistently well-liked than many of Poe’s other works, not everything about the story was approved. G. R. Thompson notes that Dupin’s “role ... is complex and suspect,” and that he is set up as “a godlike omniscience, with the T narrator and the reader playing the role of the dull-witted dupes.” Furthermore, Thompson notes that “Dupin and D ...are moral doubles, each having a talent for duplicity and malice,” and that “Dupin’s interest in the case is morally dubious.”<sup>8</sup>

In spite of the criticism, with detective stories like “The Purloined Letter,” Poe helped to influence many later mystery writers, a fact that is emphasized today by the existence of The Edgar, an annual award presented by the Mystery Writers of America to the best writers of detective stories.

Throughout his career, Poe was fascinated by the idea of a “bi-part” soul, half imagination, half reason – an idea that was expressed in many of his works. As Roger Asselineau noted about Poe in his entry for *American Writers*, “His works reflect this double aspect of his personality: the abandonment of the self-destructive romantic artist and the selfcontrol of the conscious and conscientious craftsman.” At first glance, somebody looking at Poe’s stories may be tempted to label each one as either a horror story – emphasizing imagination – or a detective story, which emphasizes reason. However, with Poe, it is not

always that simple, especially with Poe's detective stories. Kenneth Graham notes in the Introduction to *Selected Tales* that Dupin "is the most famous instance of the fusion of the faculties, in his 'Bi-part soul'."<sup>9</sup> The idea of the bipart soul is especially prevalent in "The Purloined Letter", where Poe uses both characterization and dialogue to emphasize and demonstrate the possibilities of this duality.

Out of the four characters in Poe's "The Purloined Letter", only two of them, Dupin and the Minister, embody the author's idea of the "bi-part soul". Consequently, these two men are the political power brokers in the story, engaged in an intellectual war, while the other two – the narrator and the Prefect – trail along behind, oblivious to what is going on around them.

Dupin is a powerful character, who has a reputation for being able to use his logic to solve mysteries that others cannot. As a result, people like the Prefect seek him out when they have a case that gives them "a great deal of trouble." (327) Still, although the Prefect praises him for his logical abilities, Dupin has admittedly romantic and illogical notions, like sitting in the dark when listening to the details of potential cases. Dupin believes that "If it is any point requiring reflection," then they can "examine it to better purpose in the dark." (327) The Prefect says this is one of Dupin's "odd notions," something that Dupin freely admits is "very true."

The Prefect cannot comprehend why somebody would choose illogical, artistic ideas over purely rational methods, and in fact disdains all things that are creative. The Prefect indicates that although the Minister is "not *altogether* a fool," "he's a poet, which I take to be only one remove from a fool." (331) However, Dupin, who the Prefect respects, admits his own poetic side, saying, "I have been guilty of certain doggerel myself." (331) In fact, it is precisely Dupin's ability to merge both the rational and the creative mindsets that allows him to solve the crime. As Stephen Marlowe notes in the Introduction to *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Stories*, "[y]et for all his skill as a logician, Dupin is proof that success in detection needs the inspiration of a poet as well."<sup>10</sup>

In Poe's view, both qualities are needed to make an effective criminal, too. Like Dupin, the Minister is both creative and analytical, something that neither the narrator nor the Prefect realizes. Says the narrator, "The Minister I believe has written learnedly on the Differential Calculus. He is a mathematician, and no poet." (338) The Prefect is equally as stumped as to the true nature of the Minister, focusing only on his mathematical side when trying to determine how and where the Minister might hide the letter. As Vincent Buranelli notes in *Twayne's United States Authors Series Online*, "The thief ... successfully hides the letter from the police because he is both a poet and a mathematician." George Colton agrees, noting in *The American Review* that the Minister "identifies his own intellect with that of his opponents, and consequently understands what will be the course they will pursue in ferreting

out the place where the letter is concealed.” Only Dupin is aware of the truth, and he lets the narrator know of the Minister that “as poet *and* mathematician, he would reason well,” and that “my measures were adapted to his capacity.”(339)

While Dupin and the Minister engage in their intellectual battle, employing both their analytical and creative powers against their opponent, the Prefect and the narrator are out of the fight altogether. Both men attempt to rely on purely rational thought. The Prefect is logical to a fault, and assumes that the letter can be found by logical methods alone. Says Dupin, “He never once thought it probable, or possible, that the minister had deposited the letter immediately beneath the nose of the whole world.”(341) The Prefect cannot comprehend why someone would want to hide something in plain view, so the letter becomes invisible to him.

The narrator is not much better off. Even though Dupin says that the Prefect’s searching measures were “the best of their kind,” and that they were “carried out to absolute perfection,” he lets his friend know that this was not enough. “Had the letter been deposited within the range of their search, these fellows would, beyond a question, have found it.”(335) The narrator laughs at this statement, which flies in the face of the rational thought to which he is accustomed. If the Prefect’s methods were perfect, then how could they not have found the letter? The narrator at first thinks that Dupin is joking, but soon realizes that Dupin “seemed quite serious in all that he said,” and so listens some more. Dupin continues to explain that the defect in the search methods “lay in their being inapplicable to the case and to the man.”

The narrator suffers, like the Prefect, from a tendency to rely totally on established systems of thought and past experience. The narrator is unaware of this, even though he had described this quality in the Prefect earlier in the story, when he noted that the Prefect “had the fashion of calling everything ‘odd’ that was beyond his comprehension, and thus lived amid an absolute legion of ‘oddities’”. “The narrator, too, is blinded to the possibilities of these “oddities,” and so is unable to make the analogies that Dupin makes to solve the case. As Buranelli notes, “Dupin thinks by analogy when he solves the mystery ... by inferring the behavior of the criminal from a knowledge of how human psychology operates.” It is this duality of imagination and reason that places Dupin and the Minister ahead of the other two men.

The way in which dialogue is expressed in the story also helps to illustrate the duality of emotion and rationality. However, in this case, the model is flipped. Whereas in a person’s thought processes, a touch of imagination and emotion affected reason in a good way, when dialogue becomes emotional, Poe shows it to be inferior. This is most notable in the dialogue of the Prefect and Dupin. Although the Prefect attempts to remain completely rational and

unemotional in his thought processes, he uses emotional language at times. “Oh, good heavens! Who ever heard of such an idea?”(328) the Prefect says in response to Dupin’s suggestion that the mystery may be too plain. This outburst shows the Prefect’s tendency to get emotional in his speech, as well as his tendency, once again, to rule out any possibility that does not match his past experiences. In another instance, when Dupin asks the Prefect if he can describe what the letter looks like, the Prefect says, “Oh, yes!” and immediately pulls out a memo book with the description. His over-eagerness in providing information to Dupin reflects his eagerness in his misguided search for the letter.

Dupin, on the other hand, is completely levelheaded and rational throughout the tale. He remains calm, even indifferent – as when the narrator tells the Prefect to “proceed” in giving them details about the mystery, and Dupin says, “Or not.” This cool behavior is evident throughout the story, as when Dupin gives the Prefect his advice to search again, and the Prefect says that it is not necessary. “I have no better advice to give you,” says Dupin. He continues to keep his level demeanor when he tells the Prefect to make out the check to him: “you may as well fill me up a check for the amount mentioned. When you have signed it, I will hand you the letter.”(334)

Dupin is also rational as he walks the narrator through the lengthy deductive reasoning process that he used to figure out where the letter was, and as he tells the narrator how he recovered the letter, which could have been a potentially dangerous situation. Dupin notes that the Minister has “attendants devoted to his interests,” and that if he had taken the letter outright – as the narrator suggested – Dupin “might never have left the Ministerial presence alive.”(343) In other words, although it is Dupin’s ability to combine imaginative and rational thought processes that allows him to get inside the Minister’s mind and leads to Dupin’s discovery of the letter’s hiding place, it is his purely rational outside demeanor, reflected in his language, that gives him the means to steal it back safely.

In Poe’s “The Purloined Letter,” the author illustrates the concept of the bi-part soul – combining reason and imagination in one person – an idea that dominated many of his works. In the story, Poe depicts two poet/mathematicians, embodiments of the idea of the bi-part soul, as people who are intellectually superior to both friends and foes. These creative and rational hybrids become, within the context of a detective tale, political power brokers who can work the system to their advantage, by operating outside of conventional society’s rational thought and expectations.

**Notes**

1. Edgar Allan Poe, *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. By J. Gerald Kennedy. New York: Penguin, 2006, pp 327-344. All the quotations from the story are taken from this edition. Page numbers in the parentheses have been given in the body of the text.
2. Roger Asselineau, "Edgar Allan Poe," in *American Writers*, Vol. 3, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974, pp. 409-32.
3. George Colton, "Poe's Tales," in the *American Review*, Vol. II, No. iii, September 1845, pp. 306-309.
4. Carlson, Eric W., "Edgar Allan Poe," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 74: *American Short-Story Writers Before 1880*, edited by Bobby Ellen Kimbel and William E. Grant, Gale Research, 1988, pp. 303-22.
5. Robert Louis Stevenson, "Literature: 'The Works of Edgar Allan Poe,'" in the *Academy*, Vol. VII, No. 139, January 2, 1879, pp. 1-2.
6. Edmund Clarence Stedman, "Edgar Allan Poe," in *Scribner's Monthly*, Vol. XX, May-October 1880, pp.107-24.
7. Vincent Buranelli, "Chapter 3: Return to Reality," in *Edgar Allan Poe*, in *Twayne's United States Authors Series Online*, G. K. Hall & Co., 1999.
8. G. R. Thompson, "Edgar Allan Poe," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Volume 3: *Antebellum Writers in New York and the South*, edited by Joel Myerson, Gale Research, 1979, pp. 249-97.
9. Kenneth Graham, Introduction, in *Selected Tales*, Oxford: OUP, 1967, pp. vii-xxii.
10. Stephen Marlowe, Introduction, in *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Tales*, Signet Classic, 1998, p. xii.