

“More Like a Real Person Walking on a Thin Line” —On the Characterizational Shift of C. Auguste Dupin in Edgar Allan Poe’s Detective Stories*

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This paper aims to examine the characterizational shift of C. Auguste Dupin in Edgar Allan Poe’s detective stories. First, Poe’s detective stories were written when the Enlightenment, which emphasizes Reason, was being embedded in the fabric of American culture. Meanwhile, beneath the Enlightenment was also an undercurrent of irrationality. In Poe’s “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt,” Dupin typifies a flat character standing for Reason/Good. However, in Poe’s “The Purloined Letter,” Dupin has been depicted as a round character; not only is he characterized a lot more vividly but also he bears striking resemblance to his opponent, Minister D. Namely, the dichotomous relationship between them has been erased, and Dupin has been portrayed more like a real person walking on the thin line between Good and Evil. Speaking of dissecting this characterizational shift of Dupin, I believe the key lies in the fact that Poe actually has taken an attitude of openness about Reason and Unreason, and that he has a way with opposing elements. In “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt,” Poe intends for Reason, represented by Dupin, to keep under control Unreason, represented by the criminals. In such a case, Dupin only needs to be a flat character representing Good/Reason. But in “The Purloined Letter,” Poe intends for Reason/Good and Unreason/Evil to be merged. Under such circumstances, Dupin will conveniently evolve into a round character.

Keywords: (C. Auguste) Dupin, (Edgar Allan) Poe, the characterization(al shift), detective stories

Through his investigations the detective retrieves the hidden story of the crime so that he is finally able to mediate it
in his detailed narrative discourse.
(Peter Hühn, “The Politics of Secrecy and Publicity”)

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The novelist, whoever he is and whenever he is writing, is giving form to a story, giving form to his moral and metaphysical views, and giving form to his particular sensations, people, places, and society.
(Barbara Hardy, *The Appropriate Form: an Essay on the Novel 1*)

You [Holmes] are a living, breathing man. You have a life, a past.
(*Sherlock: The Abominable Bride* (2016), *italics mine*)

Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe has long been reputed to be “the father of detection” in consequence of his three short detective stories featuring a detective figure, C. Auguste Dupin, : “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841), “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” (1842), and “The Purloined Letter” (1845) (Symons, 1985, p. 35)¹. That is, Poe, in his three detective stories, has created a paradigmatic character of a detective, Dupin, who is clearly modeled after the well-known French police detective, Eugène François Vidocq (1775-1857). Clearly, the character of Dupin demonstrates “how rational analysis combined with imagination can solve mysteries” (Worthington, 2010, p. 22).

On the other hand, among Poe’s three detective stories, “The Purloined Letter” has captured the most critical attention. The main reason is that “The Purloined Letter,” as we know, has occupied a focal position in the theorizations of Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan. The former uses this story to argue for “true difference as assuring dissemination, multiplications, fragmentations” (Woodward, 1989, p. 41), while the latter emphasizes on how this story can help “elaborate on the object a, the object of desire,” and above all, his so-called compulsive repetition (Woodward, 1989, p. 39). In this paper, however, I do not intend to approach Poe’s “The Purloined Letter” from a Derridean or Lacanian perspective. Instead, my treatment is mainly about Poe’s literary craftsmanship; to be more exact, I will focus on the characterizational complexities of Dupin in Poe’s “The Purloined Letter.”

The Characterizational Complexities of Dupin in “The Purloined Letter”: Starting with the Historical Background

Before I delve into the characterizational complexities of Dupin in Poe’s “The Purloined Letter,” I should start with the historical background of Poe’s detective stories. First, David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper have observed how the European Enlightenment managed to take its root in America:

The massive Western intellectual reorientation known as the Enlightenment that began to emerge in the middle of the seventeenth century rested principally on two revolutionary ideas: that it was possible to understand the universe through the use of human faculties and that such understanding could be put to use to make society more rational and humane. In America a moderate version of the first of these ideas gradually entered the intellectual mainstream with little overt opposition. (*The American Intellectual Tradition Vol. I*, 95)

That is, the Enlightenment features the use of human faculties, especially the Reason, to understand the universe. With such thinking gradually rooted in the American intellectual mainstream, the American education was also

¹ In his Ph.D. dissertation, Billy Bin Feng Huang has thoroughly researched the background of the detective fiction genre and given a precise definition of a detective story. Then, he has concluded, “Poe was not the first detective story writer but definitely the progenitor of the detective genre. This is Poe’s place in the history of the detective genre.” See Billy Bin Feng Huang, “Say the unsaid, repair the fractures—On the narrative ruptures in Edgar Allan Poe’s detective stories”, Ph.D. Dissertation, National Chengchi University in Taiwan (R.O.C.), 2016.

under the influence of the Enlightenment. Back then, the Enlightenment-influenced curriculum “stressed the value of knowledge for the individual. Although civic responsibility and moral conduct were of importance, the greater matter for consideration was the student’s ability to think and reason in a rational and independent manner” (Owens, 2011, p. 541). Besides, there has been evidence showing that “these Enlightenment works [then] were by far the most widely read and distributed books at the school; whereas many works of religious nature appear to have been rarely, if ever, used” (Kondayan, 1978, p. 439, *italics mine*). In other words, by the agency of education, the Enlightenment was already inscribed in the fabric of the U. S. society at that time.

In contrast, beneath the calm surface of Reason and Rationality, there was simultaneously an undercurrent of Unreason and Irrationality, which bred the Gothic literature. In his *Literature of Terror*, David Punter states, “Gothic was the archaic, the pagan, that which was prior to, or was opposed to, or resisted the establishment of civilized values and a well-regulated society” (Punter, 1996, p. 5). Catherine Spooner contends that Gothic narratives, at least traditionally, were “representing a barbarous period distanced from the enlightened modernity of their readers” (Spooner, 2010, p. 246). As a resistance against the Enlightenment, Gothic literature thematizes a notion of transgression; its tradition “employs a model of culture and history premised on fear, experienced by a surrealist caricature of a bourgeoisie trembling in their frock coats at each and every deviation from a rigid, but largely mythical, stable middle-class consensus” (Baldick & Minghall, 2000, p. 225). By and large, Gothicism is a fear-and-transgression-based, cultural and historical model which is meant to explode the bourgeoisie myth of the Reason.

Detective fiction has long been deemed as “a child of the Enlightenment” because it aims to “explain reality by methodically collecting and logically ordering facts” (Alewyn, 1983, p. 68). Dupin is often likened to an “analyst” of a therapy, who “enters into an alliance with the ego of the patient to subdue uncontrollable parts of his id...,” as Freud states (1963, p. 253).² Michael Holquist also states:

It was to this powerful impulse toward the irrational that he [Poe] opposed the therefore necessarily potent sense of reason which finds his highest expression in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and “The Purloined Letter.” Against the metaphors for chaos, found in his other tales, he sets, in the Dupin stories, the essential metaphor for order: the detective. (Holquist, 1983, p. 156, *italics mine*)

Holquist then concludes that the detective, Dupin, is an “instrument of pure logic” (Holquist, 1983, p. 156). Representing pure logic and reason, the detective needs to fulfill his task of vanquishing all the irrationalities. In such a case, detective fiction may be parallelized with gothic literature:

Both gothic and detective fiction...share common assumptions: that there is an undisclosed event, a secret from the past; that the secret represents an occurrence or desire antithetical to the principles and position of the house (or family), that to know the secret is to understand the inexplicable and seemingly irrational events that occur in the present. (Skenazy, 1995, p. 114)

² In “Detective Fiction, Psychoanalysis, and the Analytic Sublime,” Shawn Rosenheim notices a possible parallelism between the Freudian studies and detective fiction, “Freudian readers have long been attracted to detective fiction just because the genre’s structure and themes so often echo central psychoanalytic scenarios. What looks like Poe’s eerie anticipation of psychoanalytic motifs may say as much about generic as about psychic structure. Certainly, the literary interest of Freud’s case studies depends in no small part on an essentially cryptographic sense of power over the body.” All in all, Rosenheim informs us of a comparison between a psychoanalyst and a detective, as both of them makes inferences based on their ability to decipher clues. See Shawn Rosenheim, “Detective Fiction, Psychoanalysis, and the Analytic Sublime,” *The American face of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed by Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 168.

In a way, Skenazy has clung to a dichotomy: rational (the house or the family) vs. irrational (the unclosed event). Above all, he has pointed out that such a dichotomy exists in both Gothic and detective fiction: as the case is solved, or the secret is disclosed, rationality has triumphed over irrationality. Of course, it could be regarded as the moral of detective or Gothic fiction, but we have to note that it also mirrors the social reality stated above: there is an undercurrent of disorder beneath the surface of order. Most of all, by no means is the rationality/irrationality or order/disorder distinction hard and fast. In *The Imagination of Evil*, Mary Evans thinks of “the endless re-creation of the Devil” as “part of the hidden dynamic of contemporary western society.” One instance is that “in detective fiction,” there is “a comfortable, and unthreatening brief association with what we uncritically call ‘evil’” (Evans, 2009, pp. 21-22). That is, in detective fiction, Evil/Disorder/Irrationality may briefly trespass upon the territory of Good/Order/Rationality, even in a comfortable and harmless manner.

It is against this background that Poe’s detective stories were composed. As I’ve mentioned above, Dupin is an “instrument of pure logic.” In “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” Dupin is a character hardly with any personality; at best, we only know that he is man with “a freak of fancy,” “enamored of the night” (Poe, 1944, p. 51). He is featured primarily by his inferential capability:

At such times I could not help remarking and admiring...a peculiar analytic ability in Dupin. He seemed, too, to take an eager delight in its exercise...and did not hesitate to confess the pleasure thus derived. He boasted to me, with a low chuckling laugh, that most men, in respect to himself, wore windows in their bosoms, and was wont to follow up such assertions by direct and very startling proofs of his intimate knowledge of my own. His manner at these moments was frigid and abstract; his eyes were vacant in expression; while his voice, usually a rich tenor, rose into a treble which would have sounded petulant but for the deliberateness and entire distinctness of the enunciation. (Poe, 1944, p. 52)

Here Poe has characterized Dupin very little; the main focus in the quoted passage above is Dupin’s analytical ability. The only personal trait of Dupin is his delight in using this ability. “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” consists mainly of Dupin’s elaborate (perhaps even lengthy) ratiocination, or reasoning processes, which means that there is very little room left for the characterization of Dupin. In the beginning of the story, Poe writes:

When, in an article entitled *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, I endeavored, about a year ago, to depict some very remarkable features in the mental character of my friend, the Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin, it did not occur to me that I should ever resume the subject. This depicting of character constituted my design; and this design was thoroughly fulfilled in the wild train of circumstances brought to instance Dupin’s idiosyncrasy. (Poe, 1944, p. 91)

Here, Poe has informed his readers that Dupin is dominantly characterized by his “mental character;” namely, the so-called “idiosyncrasy” of Dupin’s is his extraordinarily amazing talent for ratiocination or logic reasoning. Above all, there is hardly anything else. Even later in the story, when Prefect G is interviewing him, all we can know is that he seems like “the embodiment of respectful attention” (Poe, 1944, p. 97).

That is, Dupin is depicted as the so-called “flat character” in both the detective stories. A. E. Murch comments on Poe’s characterization of Dupin in such a way:

In complete contrast with Vidocq, Dupin is a man of culture, familiar with the classics and equally at home when discussing chemistry, anthropology or ‘algebraic analysis’ with his anonymous friend.... Poe gave no information about physical appearance; the reader was not to be interested in his looks, but in his thought-processes, his brilliant analytical mind. (Murch, 1958, p. 70)

In brief, Murch asserts that Poe at most characterizes Dupin as a scholarly man with a “brilliant analytical mind.” Murch goes on to argue that it’s even more obvious in “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” because this story is “an impersonal exercise in analytical deduction. There is no action...” (Murch, 1958, p. 73). In conclusion, he thinks Dupin is characterized as “an abstract logician” in both the stories (Murch, 1958, p. 75).

Murch’s observation can lead us in viewing the characterization of Dupin allegorically: in writing “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt,” Poe has clearly characterized Dupin as logic/reason/rationality incarnate, which means that Dupin is indeed typical of a flat character. On the other hand, it is most essential that Poe’s characterization of Dupin should be situated within the dichotomy of Good and Evil mentioned above. In other words, as Dupin embodies logic/reason/rationality, he must also stand for Good/Order; the happenings of the two murders are symbolic of the transgression of Evil/Disorder, or the temporary breach of social order. And when Dupin has solved the two murders with his splendid ratiocinative capability, it simply indicates the eventual prevalence of Good, or the restoration of social order.

Throughout Poe’s career, he has written three detective stories: “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841), “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” (1842), and “The Purloined Letter” (1845), all of which meet the qualifications of detective fiction. On the other hand, Poe has also composed some other stories that fit only the loosest definition of detective fiction. “The Oblong Box” is a fine example: in this story the unnamed narrator makes educated guesses about the contents of the oblong box Cornelius Wyatt, his college friend, has brought on the ship:

The box in question was, as I say, oblong. It was about six feet in length by two and a half in breadth; I observed it attentively, and like to be precise. Now this shape was PECULIAR; and no sooner had I seen it, than I took credit to myself for the accuracy of my guessing. I had reached the conclusion, it will be remembered, that the extra baggage of my friend, the artist, would prove to be pictures, or at least a picture; for I knew he had been for several weeks in conference with Nicolino:—and now here was a box, which, from its shape, COULD possibly contain nothing in the world but a copy of Leonardo’s “Last Supper;” and a copy of this very “Last Supper,” done by Rubini the younger, at Florence, I had known, for some time, to be in the possession of Nicolino. This point, therefore, I considered as sufficiently settled. I chuckled excessively when I thought of my acumen. (Poe, 1944, p. 171)

Scott Peeples takes notice of the ratiocinative elements, or to be more precise, how the unnamed narrator exercises his inferential acumen in his investigation in “The Oblong Box,” but in the meantime, he also notes that strictly speaking, it is not a detective story because the character of the detective is not emphasized (Peeples, 1998, 123)³. Indeed, detective fiction refers to “a fictional story that deals thematically with a crime as well as how it is solved by a detective or someone like a detective” (Huang, 2016, p. 17). And by this definition, “The Oblong Box” isn’t a detective story because the unnamed narrator shouldn’t be regarded as “a detective or someone like a detective.” He or she has no identity whatsoever; thus, he hardly qualifies as a character. And we have to note that in terms of characterizational depth, Dupin in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” or “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” is only a little bit better than the unnamed narrator. In both the stories, he assumes the identity as an

³ In *Edgar Allan Poe: His Life and Legacy*, Jeffrey Meyers states that the setting of “The Oblong Box” can actually be traced back to Poe’s naval experiences: in writing the story, Poe recalled having been stationed at Fort Moultrie. Therefore, he set the embarking point of the ship as Charleston, South Carolina to New York. In addition, Arthur Hobson Quinn, in *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography*, points out that Poe originally offered “The Oblong Box” to Nathaniel Parker Willis for the *New Mirror*, but Willis suggested it was better suited for the *Opal*, a gift book edited by Sarah Josepha Hale. See Jeffrey Meyers, *Edgar Allan Poe: His Life and Legacy* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 1992), p. 123. Arthur Hobson Quinn, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 417.

excellent detective or the ratiocinator, but aside from that, we barely know anything else about him. No wonder John T. Irwin claims, “As a character, Dupin is as thin as the paper he’s g printed on...” (Irwin, 1994, p. 1).

However, “The Purloined Letter” may be quite a different case. Murch points out, “In The Purloined Letter...His [*Dupin’s*] character is drawn ‘in the round,’ and has come home to life as a person, holding normal, even humorous, conversations with the Prefect...” (Murch, 1958, p. 75, *italics mine*). Indeed, unlike the other two detective stories, a humorous repartee flies back and forth between Dupin and Prefect:

“The fact is, the business is very simple indeed, and I make no doubt that we can manage it sufficiently well ourselves; but then I thought Dupin would like to hear the details of it, because it is so excessively odd.”

“Simple and odd,” said Dupin.

“Why, yes; and not exactly that either. The fact is, we have all been a good deal puzzled because the affair is so simple, and yet baffles us altogether.”

“Perhaps it is the very simplicity of the thing which puts you at fault,” said my friend. “What nonsense you do talk!” replied the Prefect, laughing heartily.

“Perhaps the mystery is a little too plain,” said Dupin.

“Oh, good heavens! Who ever heard of such an idea?”

“A little too self-evident.”

“Ha! Ha! Ha! —ha! ha! ha! —ho! ho! ho!” roared our visitor, profoundly amused, “oh, Dupin, you will be the death of me yet!” (Poe, 1944, p. 155)

In the quoted passage, the vivid characterization of Dupin is plain to see. It doesn’t take a perceptive reader to tell that Dupin in “The Purloined Letter” is depicted as what Murch has called “a man of culture,” or someone who is witty, eloquent, and knowledgeable. Indeed, those reading the quoted passages are readily given the impression that Dupin has apparently evolved from a flat character to a round character (just as the quoted line from the 2016 film, *Sherlock: The Abominable Bride*, Dupin has clearly become a “living, breathing man.”) Later in “The Purloined Letter,” readers can gain an insight into Dupin’s character when he resorts to deception in order to steal the letter:

While thus engaged, however, a loud report, as if of a pistol, was heard immediately beneath the windows of the hotel, and was succeeded by a series of fearful screams, and the shoutings of a terrified mob. D—rushed to a casement, threw it open, and looked out. In the meantime, I stepped to the card-rack, took the letter, put it in my pocket, and replaced it by a *fac-simile*...which I had carefully prepared at my lodgings—imitating the D—cipher, very readily, by means of a seal formed of bread. (Poe, 1944, pp. 175-176)

Of course, as Dupin himself has confessed, “The pretended lunatic was a man in my own pay” (Poe, 1944, p. 176). In addition, Dupin pulls off this scheme for the purpose of devastating Minister D’s political prospect:

For eighteen months the Minister has had her in his power. She has now him in hers—since, being unaware that the letter is not in his possession, he will proceed with (Tales, 176) is exactions as if it was. Thus will he inevitably commit himself, at once, to his political destruction. His downfall, too, will not be more precipitate than awkward. (Poe, 1944, p. 176)

And behind Dupin’s scheme is a revengeful motive:

“Why—it did not seem altogether right to leave the interior blank—that would have been insulting. To be sure, D—, at Vienna once, did me an evil turn, which I told him, quite good-humoredly, that I should remember. So, as I knew he would feel some curiosity in regard to the identity of the person who had outwitted him, I thought it a pity not to give him a clue. He is well acquainted with my MS., and I just copied into the middle of the blank sheet the words

“—Un dessein si funeste,
S’il n’est digne d’Atrée, est digne de Thyeste.
They are to be found in Cr illon’s ‘Atr e.’” (Poe, 1944, p. 176)

Apparently, Poe has taken the characterization of Dupin to a higher level in “The Purloined Letter.” Beneath Dupin’s veneer of scholarliness is his bitter, calculating, sly, and revengeful personality. Above all, Dupin’s past has also come to readers’ attention; readers have become aware of his feud with Minister D (which echoes the quoted line from the 2016 film, *Sherlock: The Abominable Bride*: Dupin has not only become “a living, breathing man” but also a man with “a life, a past.” Also, it is precisely what Peter H hn has called “the hidden story of the crime,” which has indeed been mediated in the story).

Driven by his vindictive motive, Dupin has transgressed the line between Good and Evil, just as Maurice S. Lee argues, “The Purloined Letter” smudges the line between detective and criminal” (Lee, 2010, p. 377). In *The Development of American Romance*, Michael Davitt Bell takes notice of Dupin’s “sympathetic identification,” namely, his ability to identify with the villain. This is how “he identifies the buried motives of phenomena with his own” (Bell, 1980, p. 121). However, Dupin’s identification in “The Purloined Letter” has apparently gone too far. Indeed, stealing back the letter, Dupin not only commits forgery but also resorts to deceptive intrigue. As a consequence, he has overstepped the boundaries of morality.

That is to say, as Dupin has gradually evolved into a round character in “The Purloined Letter,” he has been gravitated towards Minister D on the spectrum of Good and Evil, even to the extent of a merge. To be more exact, there has been more and more striking resemblance between Dupin and Minister D, in terms of the morality of their actions. James R. Guthrie has observed, “In addition to being intellectually ambidextrous, the Minister and the detective resemble each other...” (Blythe & Sweet, 1989, p. 94). Hamidi Ali Serdar and Cenk Tan have focused more on Dupin’s ratiocination, “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” (Serdar & Tan, 2021, p. 625). Liahna K. Babener, on the other hand, has chosen to view Dupin’s action from an ethical perspective:

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

Peter Thoms, as if to echo Babener’s viewpoint, also points out that Dupin definitely “adopts the character and perspective of the ostensible criminal” (Thoms, 2022, p. 142). In other words, what Dupin does with the letter is the same as what Minister D has done with it, either from a technical or an ethical perspective. If so, we are simply drawn to concur with such an observation, “[*Both Dupin and D*] are in some sense mirror images of one another” (Read, 2020, p. 387, *italics mine*).

If Dupin and Minister D are “mirror images,” then the characterizational complexity of Dupin may be perceived: the roundness of the character of Dupin actually lies in his gradual tendency to walk on the thin line between Good and Evil. In “The Purloined Letter,” Dupin is a character with shifting ethical standards. In the beginning of the story, Dupin may seem like a cultured gentleman who upholds the moral code and attempts to ensure that justice can be served. As the story proceeds, however, Dupin’s immorality has begun to manifest itself.

Although what Dupin has done supposedly stands for Good, Dupin, in the later parts of the story, has actually turned into a man who embodies Evil, just like his opponent, Minister D. As the characterizations of Dupin and Minister D have gradually come together, not only does Dupin fit the definition of a round character but also the dichotomy of Good and Evil in “The Purloined Letter” has been dismantled.

In conclusion, Dupin in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” is a typical flat character symbolizing Reason. Operating within a dichotomous framework of Good and Evil, Dupin pits himself against Evil as he solves the crimes with his ratiocinative skills. But in “The Purloined Letter,” the characterization of Dupin has apparently been a lot more colorful, and he has been a lot more like a real person. Most of all, he has become a round character: from an advocate of Good, he has apparently evolved into someone who has not only “tried to identify with Minister D” but also adopted “the perpetrator’s way of thinking” (Marković & Oklopcic, 2016, pp. 107-108). Judging from Dupin’s glaringly growing likeness of a villain/Minister D, the line between Good and Evil has been blurred. This is the characterizational shift of Dupin in Poe’s three detective stories.

How to Dissect This Characterizational Shift? An Attitudal Issue

Regarding the issue of the characterizational shift of Dupin, different critics have chosen to approach it from different angles. For instance, some argue that unlike the other two detective stories of Poe’s, “The Purloined Letter” can be likened to a guessing game. So the characterizational shift of Dupin may be seen as Dupin’s intention of “reconstructing” and “reconstituting” the other player’s thoughts, namely, what’s on Minister D’s mind (Rollason, 1988, pp. 8-9)⁴. Some argue that it is textually implied in “The Purloined Letter” because that Dupin is actually Minister D’s brother (Read, 2020, p. 387). On the other hand, I intend to dissect this characterizational shift from the stance of authorial positionality, that is, Poe’s attitude towards the mainstream thinking of the era when his three detective stories were composed. As previously mentioned, all the three detective stories of Poe’s were written when the rationality-based Enlightenment prevailed and the undercurrent of irrationality was also surging. If detective fiction is to be seen as “the child of the Enlightenment,” then it is natural to assume that Poe might have had an obstinate preference for Reason, especially when he creating his detective stories. Unfortunately, it is a specious observation. David Ketterer notices that Poe actually distrusted reason and trusted imagination because imagination was “the only avenue to a perception of ideality and reason being largely responsible for man’s state of deception” (Ketterer, 1979, p. 238). However, by no means does it indicate that Reason has no place at all in Poe’s stories. Janice MacDonald argues, “The crux of Poe’s critical stance is that he unites two opposing forces of rationalism and imagination” (MacDonald, 1997, p. 65). She later elaborates on her viewpoint:

Poe...imposed standards of quality onto tales of gothic and sensational horror. No longer could writers indulge in horrific sequences for sensation’s sake alone...By deducing a logical reason for this terrifying action, he challenged

⁴ In “The Five Games of Mr. Edgar Allan Poe: A Study of Strategic Thought in “The Purloined Letter”, Read has similarly viewed this detective story as a game. And he has analyzed it from the perspective of strategic reasoning. Using elementary game theory, Read argues that “The Purloined Letter” actually consists of five games: signaling, screening, negotiation, revenge, and a unique game called the “pincer.” At the end of his paper, Read concludes, ““The Purloined Letter” is striking because it contains more detailed theory than other texts. That theory, in summary, is that success in strategic settings requires that you first deduce what others are thinking about what you are thinking, and then choose the best reply to the actions they would take given what they think you are thinking.” See Read, 373-88.

writers to be responsible for their creative powers...It is important to note that Poe did not dismiss elements of the sensational; by using horror and intrigue to tell a story of rationality, he made it impossible for readers to be satisfied with the old formula. (MacDonald, 1997, p. 65)

If readers are dissatisfied with “the old formula,” it means that Poe must have created “a new formula,” about which MacDonald draws on Victor Erlich’s definition of parody, a “reorganization, i a ‘regrouping of the old elements’” (Erlich, 1965, p. 226). First, it is essential to note that MacDonald here has more or less equated the author’s imagination with the author’s ability to invoke sensational horror or use intrigue, or to be more precise, how the author appeals to irrationalities. Therefore, when she speaks of how Poe unites rationalism and imagination, she is actually discussing how Poe has blurred the line between rationality/order/Good and irrationality/disorder/Evil. Most of all, MacDonald has explained how Poe thinks such a union could be made possible: imagination has to be checked by rationalism; detective fiction (such as Poe’s “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and “The Mystery of Marie Rog â”) may incorporate elements of gothic horror, but it has to be built upon logic reasoning. This is what the “reorganization or the regrouping of the old elements” should be like. Besides, in Poe’s opinion, this is also how writers should “be responsible for their creative powers.”

At this point, it’s very easy to pinpoint Poe’s attitude on the Enlightenment and its undercurrent of irrationality: he has chosen to get involved in them both, however contradictory they are. Additionally, he has personally devised a formula for them. In “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and “The Mystery of Marie Rog â,” Poe has decided to place them in a simple dichotomy of Good and Evil and stipulate that Reason/Good shall keep Irrationality/Evil under control. The analysis above helps the flat-character depiction of Dupin in the two stories: as MacDonald has observed, the terrifying criminal actions in Poe’s detective stories should be contained by logic reasoning. So it makes perfect sense that Dupin should be flatly characterized as an embodiment of Reason: as the part and parcel of the two detective stories is how Reason/Good has held Irrationality/Evil in subjection, Dupin merely has to play the part as someone who subdues the irrational crimes. (See Figure 1)

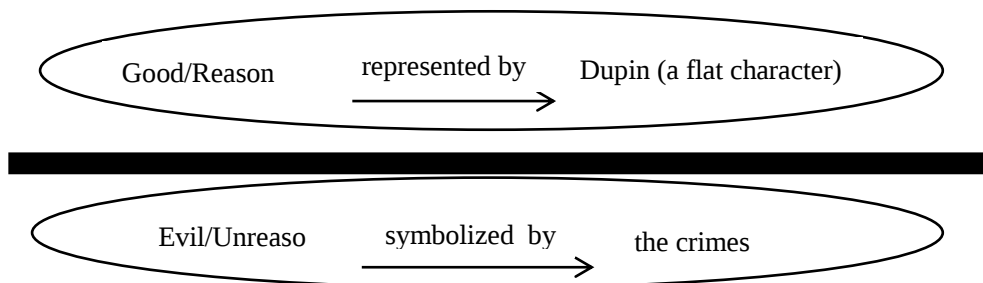


Figure 1. How Good/Reason/Dupin suppresses Evil/Unreason/the crimes in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and “The Mystery of Marie Rog â.”

As a matter of fact, Poe has long been celebrated for his ability to have a way with opposing elements. Rosenheim has argued, “Poe’s analytical sublime contains the seeds of its own doing.” He later explains, “[*His detective stories intensify*] the shock of the narrative by increasing the contrast between the narrative’s ratiocinative calm and the brutality to follow” (Rosenheim, 1995, p. 165, *italics mine*). Rosenheim has noted that in Poe’s detective stories, there are two opposite elements, namely ratiocination and horror. Raymond Immerwahr has classified Poe as “the Romantic Ironist” because “he is likely to mean at the same time both what he seems to be saying and its opposite” (Immerwahr, 1969, p. 665). G. R. Thompson defines the term “the

Romantic Irony" as "a merger," or "a transcendental mastery of the world and oneself through simultaneous detachment and involvement" (Thompson, 2004, p. 23).

Poe's distinct capability of combining and appropriating conflicting elements is instrumental in enabling him to structure the character of Dupin and construct the dichotomy of Good and Evil in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Mystery of Marie Rog  ." Similarly, it can also help to perceive the characterizational shift of Dupin in "The Purloined Letter." First, we have to note that Poe's three detective stories can be looked upon as a series, now that they all share the lead character of Dupin. And some time before its initial publication, Poe wrote to James Russell Lowell that he considered "The Purloined Letter" ... "perhaps the best of ... [my] tales of ratiocination" (Quinn, 1998, p. 421, *italics mine*). If Poe deemed "The Purloined Letter" as the crowning achievement of the Dupin series, then he must have tried something new to make it outshadow the previous two ones, such as a characterizational shift.

In exploring "The Purloined Letter," Sergio L.P. Bellei comments on Poe this way:

He[Poe] is essentially the poet, who, by looking at things with the inward eye, identifies himself with them, and in their apparent diversity sees their unity... The perceiver of that world must necessarily identify himself with it in a process of involvement in order to apprehend its analogical complexity (Woodward, 1989, p. 40, *italics mine*).

Likewise, Read also considers Poe such an observant writer with a penetrating perception of the world:

The author of a narrative[Poe] is an embodied empirical theory of behavior. He or she is an observer of the world and has developed from those observations a theory of how the world works. Some authors, those we find most perceptive and careful in their observations [, *such as Poe*], have developed coherent theories with as much to offer as the theories of great psychologists or economists or philosophers (Read, 2020, p. 389, *italics mine*).

To put it in a nutshell, Poe is equipped with an "inward eye" that can facilitate his observations of and identification with the intricate networks of the world. Above all, it is through his careful observation and personal involvement that Poe is able to develop a coherent theory about the world and present it in his story. (In the beginning of the paper is a quote from Barbara Hardy that echoes this point of view; it mainly states that a writer's task is to give form to his moral and metaphysical views as well as his sensations.) As I've mentioned above, Poe has assumed an attitude of unification of rationality and irrationality. With this attitude, if Poe wants "The Purloined Letter" to be rated a notch above the other two detective stories of his, then he has to gain more perceptive insights into both the Enlightenment and its opposing forces, getting involved with them both more intimately. Thus, he can give a more encompassing viewpoint on them. All these can boil down to Poe's adjustment of the formula he's devised for "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Mystery of Marie Rog  ." Namely, Poe would have lent more flexibility to his formula so that Good/Reason and Evil/Unreason aren't so stubbornly contradictory to each other anymore. Instead, a fusion of them can be achieved, even to the degree of making Dupin and Minister D "doubles," as Hal Blythe and Charlie Sweet has called (Blythe & Sweet, 1989, p. 311)⁵. In a way, Poe, by achieving this fusion, has attained a higher level of incorporating antithetical

⁵ However, in their paper Blythe and Sweet actually reject such a reading of "The Purloined Letter." Their central argument is that "Dupin has perpetrated a scam on the narrator/audience." For instance, they believe that Dupin's supposed visits to Minister D's apartment are made-up, which may be evidenced by the fact that "Dupin's vision is extraordinary: from across the room and behind heavy glasses," Dupin is able to see such minute details as Minister's cipher on the letter. They even invoke Daniel Hoffman's speculation that Dupin is both the author of the incriminating letter and the queen's lover. See Blythe and Sweet, 315. Daniel Hoffman, *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe* (New York: Doubleday, 1973), pp. 130-133.

elements. Under such circumstances, Dupin is sure to be portrayed as a round character in “The Purloined Letter.” (See Figure 2)

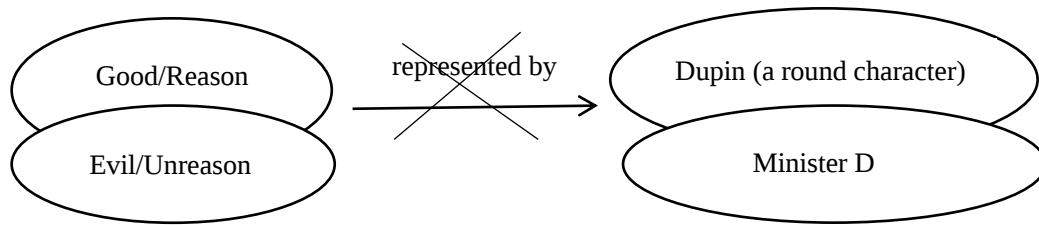


Figure 2. How Good/Reason and Evil/Unreason, Dupin and Minister D are merged into each other in “The Purloined Letter”.

Conclusion

In Poe’s three detective stories, there is an evident characterizational shift of Dupin; that is, he has undergone a transformation from a “flat character” to a “round character.” The former is the character “embodying a “single idea or quality.” “Lacking any complexity, it never surprises....[and] can be summed up in a sentence” (Beckson & Ganz, 1995, p. 91, *italics mine*). That is, in “The Murders in Rue Morgue” and “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt,” the characterization of Dupin is pure and simple: he is Reason incarnate. As for the latter, it “must...be capable of surprising a reader in a convincing way...Complexity of characterization, moreover, must be accompanied by an organization of traits or qualities” (Beckson & Ganz, 1995, p. 91). In “The Purloined Letter,” the characterization of Dupin turns complex not only because of a more vivid portrayal of him but also because of his closeness to the villain, Minister D. This characterizational shift can be explained if we can locate Poe’s stance on the Enlightenment and delve into his writerly qualities. Poe embraces both Reason and Unreason and may be labeled as a writer who possesses the ability to combine opposing forces. With this observation in mind, we may see that the characterizational shift of Dupin is actually due to what Poe has chosen to do with Good/Reason and Evil/Unreason: in “The Murders in Rue Morgue” and “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt,” Poe has Reason contain Unreason in a rigid dichotomy of Good and Evil, rendering the characterization of Dupin as flat as a pancake. In “The Purloined Letter,” however, Poe has erased the line between Good/Reason and Evil/Unreason, which has in turn resulted in the merge of the characters of Dupin and Minister D, in the course of which the characterization of Dupin has doubtless shifted to roundness. Thus, Dupin has been more like a real person walking on a thin line between Good/Reason and Evil/Unreason.

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