Teaching "The Purloined Letter" and Lacan's Seminar: Introducing Students to Psychoanalysis through Poe

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In April 1955, Jacques Lacan presented a seminar on Poe’s “The Purloined Letter” as part of his year-long seminar on the meaning of repetition and memory in Sigmund Freud’s Beyond the Pleasure Principle. The essay was apparently so significant to Lacan that he chose to publish it in his collection The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book II: The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954–1955. Freud had also famously based a number of his central psychoanalytic theories on literary texts (e.g., Oedipus, Hoffman’s Sandman, Jensen’s Gradiva, fairy tales, King Lear), and in his Interpretation of Dreams he identified condensation and displacement as the key indications of unconscious material in texts as well as dreams. Lacan was to some extent following in Freud’s footsteps by analyzing Poe’s short story, and certainly literary critics with a psychoanalytic bent were attracted to Poe long before Marie Bonaparte’s famous biography put his so-called mother fixation on public display. They have also, however, acknowledged that following the siren’s song of psychoanalysis and sailing into Poe biographical-psychological territory can leave one on the rocks of confusion, not to mention potential pedagogical disaster.

This essay charts one approach I have taken to teaching Poe through the psychoanalytic theories of Freud as filtered through Lacan. I teach “The Purloined Letter” and Lacan’s “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’” in a course titled Literature and Psychology, and the students enrolled in the course are about evenly split between upper-level English and psychology majors. Even so, their knowledge of psychoanalysis is minimal when the course begins. I mention this at the outset because I have learned that undergraduates often find reading Freud’s essays, not to mention Lacan’s works, difficult. I will make a case here for claiming that teaching Poe’s short story in relation to Lacan’s essay allows an instructor to interrogate not only Poe’s literary techniques but also the method and intentions of psychoanalysis as an interpretive tool. Earlier in the course, students read E. T. A. Hoffman’s “The Sandman” in conjunction with Freud’s analysis of the story, “The Uncanny,” so they understand that psychoanalysts have often used literary texts as psychological case studies, reading the symptoms of literary characters as if they were real clients with psychological histories and problems who had found their ways to Freud’s couch. Other pairings that have been successful in demonstrating this method are Poe’s “William Wilson” alongside Otto Rank’s “The Double” or Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Black Cat” alongside Freud’s essay “A Child Is Being Beaten.”
To introduce Lacan, I inform students that Lacan is generally regarded as a modernizer of Freud. Instead of relying on Freud’s tendency to ferret out hidden meanings from the unconscious mind, Lacan focuses on how the mind’s processes can be read through the use of language. Using the theories of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, Lacan’s approach centers on those moments of slippage or the gaps that occur between our understanding of the sign (the physical object) and the signifier (the word or the abstract representation of an object). In the class, I begin with the premise that all literary texts convey more on the implicit level than they do on the explicit, and yet it is necessary to place these two levels of meaning into a dialogue with each other in order to demonstrate how the textual unconscious reveals itself. By putting literary texts to the psychoanalytic question, so to speak, we are teasing out symptoms and traces of the author, the characters, and finally the reader.

To begin, I state that Poe’s “Purloined Letter” presents us with three primary formalistic literary devices that I will emphasize in my teaching of the tale: repetitive actions involving substitutions, interconnecting subjects, and symbolism. Lacan’s post-Freudian approach to the story builds on these literary devices but transforms each of them into a psychoanalytic approach: repetition becomes understood through metonymy and metaphor; interconnected subjects become condensed and displaced as the oedipal triangle; and the symbolism of the letter, the queen, and the curse at the conclusion of the story become the moments at which signification and desire erupt in the text. I routinely use the blackboard in all my classes to outline how interpretive strategies can be applied to the literary text under study. With these two texts I list “Poe: Literary Formalist Devices” on the left side of the board and then, parallel to that column, I list “Lacan/Freud: Psychoanalytic Approaches.” By keeping the two lists running parallel to each other throughout the class discussion, I have seen students anticipate connections and participate actively.

**Repetition: Metonymy and Metaphor**

Poe’s “Purloined Letter” begins when an unnamed narrator and C. Auguste Dupin, Poe’s recurring French detective, are sitting around one evening reminiscing about the earlier cases of the murder in the Rue Morgue and the murder of Marie Rogêt (680). The body of this dead woman functions as a metonymy (a substitution of the murdered woman for the queen, the object of the son’s rage), hovering over this later story in an ominous way, reminding Poe’s readers that violence against women lurks in the most civilized of cities. But “The Purloined Letter” is a curiously cerebral story on the surface, with all its threatened violence contained on a letter that passes—and becomes increasingly “soiled”—between the hands of men and over, so to speak, the elided body of the woman. It is necessary to point out to students that the dominant metaphor in the story is the narrative that Dupin tells of the odd and even game
that is played by a cunning child to outwit his slower peers of their money (689). This game and gaming itself stand as a metaphor for the detective game that Dupin plays with Minister D——, for, just as the child is able to place himself in the position of his opponents, so is Dupin able to assume the face of his antagonist (“I fashion the expression of my face, as accurately as possible, in accordance with the expression of his, and then wait to see what thoughts or sentiments arise in my mind or heart, as if to match or correspond with the expression” [690]). By donning green glasses to conceal his scrutiny of Minister D——’s room, Dupin reveals to his audience of one (the narrator) how his system of displaced physiognomy works. By mimicking Minister D——, who was the third party between the king and queen, Dupin has also placed himself in the position of the blinded Oedipus seeking the truth about the mother in another man’s bedroom (locating her defaced “body” in the letter and rescuing her for the rightful and phallic father figure, the king).

The story is also structured around two repeated scenes of theft, the first one related by Monsieur G——, the prefect of the Parisian police (681–82), and the second one by Dupin (696–97). In the first scene, which Lacan refers to as “the primal scene” (34), three people are in the boudoir of the queen, and, although this is only implied, we can infer that these three people are the cuckolded king, the adulterous queen, and the wily thief of the incriminating letter (Minister D——) who steals the letter in plain view of the queen in order to hold political power over her, in effect, to blackmail her. This theft of the letter occurred when the minister quickly substituted one of his own letters, with a similar heading and lettering, in place of the queen’s, which she had hurriedly placed on the top of her table. Although she was able to see exactly what he was doing, she was powerless to draw attention to his act without alerting the king to the contents of the original letter. Later this scene is repeated when Dupin insinuates himself into the minister’s room, locates the soiled and disguised letter in plain view above the fireplace of the minister, and substitutes his own letter, signed with an ominous curse (more on that anon).

While Poe uses these two scenes of theft to structure his story like two sides of a folding panel, with much theoretical discussion of gaming and psychological identification between the two scenes, Lacan does something else with the two thefts. For him, as for Freud, all repetition is a recourse to and reenactment of the death drive (Thanatos), an earlier and ultimately much more powerful impulse than the pleasure principle (Eros) that supposedly motivates human behavior. In their pursuit of the purloined letter, both the police (the patriarchy) and Dupin appear to be caught up in the family romance, with the letter functioning as a displaced substitute for the mother’s body. As Lacan notes, the letter can only be understood as “a pure signifier” (32), although the two theft scenes, in their sheer repetitiveness, have to be understood as part of a sign of “the signifying chain,” which itself is controlled by the “specific laws of . . . foreclosure (Verwerfung), repression (Verdrängung), denial (Verneinung), and displacement (Entstellung)” (29). In placing these two, signifier (letter) and sign
(the thefts), against each other, students can see in much more concrete terms how Lacan defines his own slippery concepts, how they differ, and how psychoanalytic properties like repression enter into Poe's text. But what exactly is being repressed and displaced in this text?

**Interconnected Subjects: The Oedipal Triangle**

Poe's story places the central personages of childhood fantasy, the king and queen, at the center of the action, albeit in a fairly displaced fashion; in fact, protecting the queen's honor and status becomes for Dupin and the police force the focus of all their actions. Although Lacan does not refer to Freud's essay "A Special Type of Choice of Object Made by Men," he clearly seems to suggest that the impetus for locating the letter can be found in what Freud labeled the "rescue fantasy," wherein a man seeks out as a love object a prostitute or sexually compromised woman in order to "rescue" her (recall Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*). Such a fantasy has its origins in repressed oedipal fixations on the mother that occur when the male child first begins to understand the nature of sexuality and his own conception. Such a complex, of course, gives rise to what Freud defined as the "primal-scene phantasy" ("Paths" 459), a situation in which a child or childlike subject position stands as voyeur to the act of parental intercourse, itself a symbol to the viewer of the sexual power of the parents and the viewer's own desire to witness his or her own conception.

When Lacan identifies the first purloining of the letter in the queen's boudoir as something like a primal scene (195), he is situating his own reading of the power of language to circulate and mutate (like the letter) within traditional oedipal Freudian theory. Such a reading makes Minister D—— the child in a nursery drama, caught in a displaced and elided power struggle between two powerful parental figures (the "king" and "queen"). That Minister D—— chooses to threaten to expose the sexually compromised queen recalls Hamlet, or, as Freud would observe, the male child's rage and jealousy that he is forced to share his mother with another, and more powerful, male.

**Symbolism and the Moments of Desire in a Text**

Clearly, by this point in our discussion students see that the purloined letter is the central symbol in the story, but they also see that there is no easy equation in what that letter signifies, for its meaning has shifted throughout the course of the story. In Dupin's recovery of the letter, we begin to see how complex and complicated that letter really is. When Dupin enters the sitting room of Minister D——, he quickly scans the surroundings and realizes that his opponent would have counted on the police to ferret out every secret nook and cranny of his rooms, and so he has outwitted them by hiding the letter in plain sight. The
letter is now hanging on a pasteboard rack on the mantelpiece, “soiled and crumpled... nearly torn in two, across the middle” (695). A more symbolic description of the sexually compromised mother could hardly be imagined, but the author actually goes further in his defacement of the female body: it now appears “entirely worthless, had been altered,... [with] a large black seal, bearing the D— cipher very conspicuously, and was addressed, in a diminutive female hand, to D——, the minister himself” (695). So whereas earlier in the story we were led to believe that the motive for stealing the letter was political, now it appears clearly oedipal. The letter has been seized by the son so that he can, through his own fantasy work and calligraphic flourishes, become the queen’s lover himself. He has even gone so far as to imitate her handwriting and conduct an imaginary affair, with himself playing both parts (recall Narcissus). This scene is, I advise the students, the first scene of displaced and substituted desire, with the body of the letter serving as a displacement for the queen’s body.

But a second and perhaps even more bizarre (or “odd” in the rhetoric of the story) moment of desire occurs. Dupin goes home, prepares a substitute letter, and stages an interruption and theft that mimics the minister’s purloining of the original letter. Dupin’s letter is not blank inside, because he claims that the minister at one time “did me an evil turn,” and therefore Dupin is determined to leave him “a clue” as to who had outwitted him. To do this he copies the passage: “—Un dessein si funeste, / S’il n’est digne d’Atreé, est digne de Thyeste... in Crébillon’s ‘Atrée’ ” (698), translated by Mabbott as “so baleful a plan, if unworthy of Atreus, is worthy of Thyestes” (3: 997n27). This intertextual passage, of course, stands as the ultimate moment of desire in the text, revealing that the letter has been passed between the men (the “brothers” Dupin and the minister) just as the bodies of women have been throughout history. In its allusion to the curse of the house of Atreus, the passage fingers the ancient wounds of murder, adultery, fratricide, incest, cannibalism, power, and revenge. Few allusions carry so much freight in such a compact space. Twin sons, Atreus and Thyeste, killed their half-brother Crysippos at the instigation of their mother, Hippodamie, and then began their manic struggle to gain the throne of Mycene. Thyeste seduced his brother’s wife Aerope, and Atreus retaliated by cooking the sons of Thyeste and serving them, as well as their decapitated heads, to their father at a feast. The curse that Thyeste placed on his brother was soon fulfilled when the only one of Thyeste’s surviving sons, Egesthe, the product of incest himself, killed Atreus and thereby restored his father Thyeste to the throne. By placing this passage with its horrific allusions to familial perversions in his own letter, Dupin reveals more about himself than he perhaps realizes. Full of self-righteous anger toward Minister D—— for the theft and dishonor of a “lady,” he repeats in substituted form the same theft of the same letter, thereby placing himself in a chain of signification that allies him to his dark brother, the minister, in an act of displaced incestuous longing. Like the doubles in “William Wilson,” Dupin and the minister shadow each other in...
their actions and pursuit of what Lacan calls “the oddest odor di femina” (48), “the immense female body stretch[ed] out across the Minister’s office” (48), until the reader knows that these two characters are meant to be understood as the split-off manifestations of a single yet bifurcated psyche.

But beyond the pursuit and recovery of the letter as a substituted and displaced quest to regain the unsullied mother, the chain of signification in this story leads, according to Lacan, to an awareness of the inescapability of death: “What are you, figure of the die I turn over in your encounter (tyche) with my fortune? Nothing, if not that presence of death which makes of human life a reprieve obtained from morning to morning in the name of meanings whose sign is your crook” (51). What I finally try to enable students to understand is that in the act of reading about the circulation of a letter of desire written to a desirable woman, we are inserting ourselves into those moments of desire in the text when it speaks the author’s, the characters’, and finally our own desires. Like literary voyeurs, we place ourselves in the boudoir, between figures on a page who are ultimately acting out the fantasies that we read in them.

NOTE

1 The bibliography of secondary sources on the Poe-Lacan connection or on Poe and the vexed question of psychoanalysis as an interpretive tool for reading his fiction is fairly extensive. I prepare a bibliography for students and encourage them to read for their research papers from the following: C. Bloom; Bonaparte; Feldstein, Fink, and Jaanus; Muller and Richardson; Parkin-Gounelas; Rosenheim; L. Williams.

2 All citations to Lacan are from Mehlman’s translation in Purloined Poe.