

Owlcation

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An Analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter" From Five Different Literary Perspectives

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Why Are Different Perspectives Important in Literary Analysis?

By applying different approaches to literary theory, readers can analyze works of literature from a variety of different and contrasting perspectives. This allows the reader to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation for a given literary work. Every approach to analyzing literature may give readers vastly different perspectives on a literary work. These diverse perspectives can help the reader to see a story from different points of view and develop multiple plausible interpretations for a story, based on the perspective used to make the analysis. By using these different literary perspectives, a reader may find that the personal meaning they find within a story is completely different from someone else's interpretation. Understanding different approaches to interpreting and analyzing literature adds extra layers of meaning to literary works and greatly enhances the reading experience.

Literary theory has had a profound effect on literary interpretation. Edgar Allan Poe's story *The Purloined Letter* can be understood in a variety of different ways by applying different literary theories and techniques to each reading. As Bertens states in his introduction to *Literary Theory*, "interpretation and theory cannot be separated at all. [...] Whether we are aware of it or not, [...] theory cannot do without interpretation." Some literary theories focus primarily on the meaning behind the text, taking cultural, historical, and biographical context into account, while other focus mainly on form, looking primarily at the structure of the text in the work. Different approaches to literary theory reveal different interpretations when applied to specific literary works (Bertens). These different theories provide the

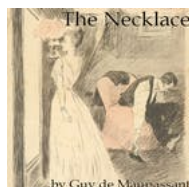
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Purloined Letter

In literary theory, formalism is a critical approach for analyzing and interpreting the inherent features of a text. This approach involves analyzing grammar, syntax, and literary devices. The formalist is less concerned with the historical and cultural contexts of a text than with the features of the text itself. One key technique in analyzing a text using the formalist approach is *defamiliarization*, which is a technique that allows the reader to see the elements of a story that would normally be overlooked in entirely new ways.

One thing I noticed regarding the form of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter* was the use of dashes to redact the year and certain names within the story. By purposefully not revealing this information, it makes it seem as though these facts are unimportant and that the reader doesn't need to pay much attention to them, but in doing so, draws more attention. This technique is seen often in literature from this era to give a sense of realism. Details that normally wouldn't have been given much thought by the reader are brought the reader's attention and can be thought of as a form of "defamiliarization" as it calls attention to normally familiar details.

The story is presented almost entirely through dialogue. The main idea of the story is revealed through the conversation between the characters. The defamiliarization comes from the fact that, unlike most stories' that readers would be familiar with, there is little narration and the plot is revealed through conversation about events that have already taken place rather than a direct look into the action. The story is structured around information being revealed little by little as the characters interact with each other. The crime-solving technique used by the narrator of the story is systematic and allows him to figure out the crime. This can be interpreted by a formalist approach. By defamiliarizing himself from the way the police are going about the investigation, he can gain a new perspective and solve the case.

A Deconstructionist Analysis of The Purloined Letter

Deconstructionism is characterized by analyzing and dismantling text or parts of texts to reveal inconsistencies or contradictions within the text. Deconstructionists argue that a final meaning can never be found within a text, and every text remains "a field of possibilities (Bertens, 115)." Within the story itself, the characters have to "deconstruct" the case in order to solve it. To figure out where the letter is, Dupin had to deconstruct everything they knew about how the minister thinks. By doing this, he figured out that the letter was hidden in plain sight and was able to retrieve it.

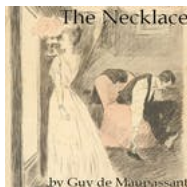
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For deconstructionists, “the text is always unfolding just ahead of the interpreter” (Bertens, 115). In the story, Dupin deconstructed the situation by remaining just ahead of the minister, and the reader experiences the situation along with Dupin. By understanding how the minister would have reacted, Dupin stayed two steps ahead and knew that it would be best to replace the letter with an exact copy, rather than simply take the letter and leave. The reader follows along with this and is forced to interpret Dupin’s motives for not taking the letter right away and scheming to return in order to swap the letter for a fake. The reader is also left to interpret his reason for writing text inside the fake letter that made it obvious who had swapped the letter, after Dupin had gone through all the trouble to swap the letter without being caught. This apparent contradiction of Dupin attempting to cover his tracks when taking the letter, only to leaves clues as to his identity for the minister to find, is obvious during a deconstructionist reading of this story.

A Marxist Analysis of the “Purloined Letter”

Marxist literary theory focuses “on the representation of class conflict as well as the reinforcement of class distinctions” in literary texts (Brewton). While Marxist theory does use traditional literary analysis techniques, it focuses more on the political and social meanings of literary works. Marxist theorists praise works that are sympathetic to the plight of the working class and that challenge economic inequalities of capitalist societies (Brewton).

From a Marxist perspective, in *The Purloined Letter*, the minister could represent the bourgeoisie (the upper class), whereas the owner of the letter could represent the proletariat (the working class). The minister uses the letter as a way of controlling the letter’s owner by way of blackmail. Similarly, in a Marxist theorist could draw parallels between this and the way the bourgeoisie control the wealth in a capitalist society, thereby controlling the proletariat. The minister seeks to exploit and control others for his own personal benefit, much like the upper class of a capitalist society according to Marxist theory. Further, Dupin agrees to take the case for financial gain and revenge, not because he cares about justice for the letter’s owner. This shows, from a Marxist perspective, that greed is the best motivator for people in a capitalist society.

A French Feminist Analysis of “The Purloined Letter”

From the French feminist perspective, masculinity and femininity are presented as binary oppositions in literature. Women are considered passive and inferior, whereas men are considered active and superior. Within these binary oppositions, the feminine is always associated with the “inferior” term. This idea, according to French feminist theorists, is

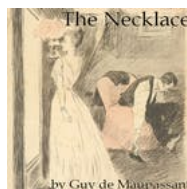
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In *The Purloined Letter*, the owner of the letter, a female, could be seen as representing the oppressed feminine. She is a passive victim. The minister could be seen as a masculine oppressor. He uses his position of privilege to control her and maintain power. Dupin, a male, may also represent the exalted position of males in society. He is the one that is called upon to retrieve the letter and protect the female victim from the minister. Only a male could save a female from another male. Further, the only female character in the story remains mainly a background character. We never learn much about her, other than her status as a victim. We know much more about the male characters, around whom the action of the story revolves. The single female character remains passively in the background.

A Postcolonial Analysis of "The Purloined Letter"

Postcolonial analysis of literary texts explores the common theme of Eurocentrism present in most western literature. Postcolonial criticism emphasizes the tension between European cultures and the cultures that they have colonized, whereas other literary theories ignore these issues. Postcolonial studies focus on the people of cultures who have become victims of Eurocentric thought, whether by racist attitudes, political issues such as military expansion, or economic exploitation (Bertens, 173).

In *The Purloined Letter*, we are not given any indication of the characters' races. Because the story takes place in Paris, the reader assumes that each character is white. From a postcolonial perspective, this whitewashing is indicative of a greater trend of Eurocentricism in literature. Further, the Minister's control over the letter's owner through blackmail could represent the exploitation of colonized cultures through the use of force. In a postcolonial analysis, the fact that Dupin produced the letter once the reward was increased also may represent the economic exploitation of colonized people. He was able to return the letter before the reward increased, but he chose to hold out for a greater financial gain at the expense of others.

Research Sources

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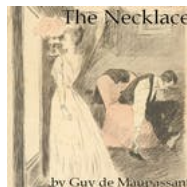
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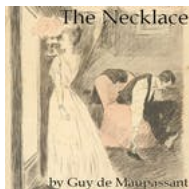
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