The Purloined Letter

* By Edgar Ellen Poe

1. **Long Answers:**
2. **Compare between the personalities of Dupin and Minister D-.**

**OR**

**How are Dupin and Minister D- alike?**

**OR**

**How are C.Auguste Dupin and Minister D- a foil to each other?**

Ans - “The Purloined Letter” is the last of the three earliest detective stories by Edgar Allan Poe. It is prestigious in its sophisticated, insightful plot arrangement and character establishment. The plot is mostly dwelling on the retrieval of the confidential letter of an important person, which is perhaps The Queen. The letter was stolen by the counter-figure Minister D– from the royal boudoir. The police officer, Monsieur G–, exerted to complete this crucial mission by investigating every corner he and his colleagues could, but they ended up finding nothing. In opposition to the dilemma that Perfect G– was confronting, detective Dupin turned out to complete this mission in ease. Dupin took advantage of the situation, which is being paid by the Prefect, for he solved the problem that was disturbing the police officer beyond the level of frustration. The astonishing similarity between Dupin and the suspect, Minister D–, accounts for the clever detective’s success of retrieving the letter of the Queen.

Needless to say, the Prefect is a flawless image and figure of how a skillful, experienced police should behave. Nevertheless, Poe has utilized such condition and added a twist to it. It is the “perfection” of such a well-behaved police officer that confined Monseiur G- in the predicament that he could not break through his own schema of thinking of how a suspect would think and thus take further action. On the other hand, Dupin, an independent detective, not being constrained by the conventional criteria of a decent police, had a rather flexible perception. He thought of how a thief may presumably think and behave. Dupin was able to device how Minister D- would act and successfully retrieve the letter. Perhaps it was because both Dupin and Minister D- possessed a critical thinking and superior intelligence that was similar to one another. The only difference was that while Dupin used it to help the law, Minister D- used it slyly for his own benefit. In accordance, with it could be assumed that there are subtle resemblances between the two seemingly opposing personas.

To start with, according to the depiction in *“*The Purloined letter”*,* both Dupin and Minister D– shared common personal characteristics. To illustrate, D–, the thief, was described as possessing the eyes of a “lynx”, a kind of cat that is known for its keen visual ability. Namely, he was able to distinguish at once that the letter was a confidential, personal property, and for the purpose of concealing a secret. On the other hand, Dupin had a pair of keen eyes as well. He could grasp the target easily, and simultaneously analyze the value and the importance during the mission. Minister D– could comprehend and make proper interpretation at once of what he had seen, and utilized his intelligence as a cunning thief, putting the clues together to form a favorable condition for his own sake– which was astonishingly similar to Dupin’s strategy as well. He was also a figure of possessing keen insight through obscure observations, and was able to group the materials together to meet his own favor. They were both extremely clever and prudent, whereas the Prefect, on the contrary, was too meticulous, clinging to the details that were not relevant.

Secondly, the skillful detective had noticed a decisive value that the police officer overlooked. He knew that Minister D– was aware of how the police would investigate. Hence, he hid the letter in a way that the police would never expect. In order to contend against the Minister, Dupin also altered how he thought–he simply abandoned how a detective was “expected” to think, and put himself in the thief’s position. They share a collective intelligence, for “sympathy” was the core concept of this mental competence. Both Dupin and Minister D– attempted to think the way their fiends might have thought, and the result was that the one who possessed a more superior, flexible thought would win such psychological battle. Ultimately, the Minister was unable to identify that Dupin noticed his strategy of thinking like a police, while the detective was actually using the exact same pattern of thought to subdue him. Dupin and Minister D- were both players in a “psychological game,” and encountering each other with strategic strengths.

Furthermore, both Minister D– and Dupin were actually profit-oriented while making a decision to launch certain deeds. Driven by the desire of acquiring benefits from the Queen, Minister D– decided to steal the letter, in order to serve as a bargaining chip between him and the Queen. It can be deduced that if the letter were nothing than a “letter,” then Minister D– might not have had the drive to commit such a crime. However, under the circumstance that the benefit of suppressing a figure of authority was so tempting that he neglected such risk of the crime and chosen to perform the deed. Likewise, for Dupin, the considerable amount of money the Perfect, Monsieur G-, provided was the drive for him to retrieve the stolen letter. Prior to the pleading of the Prefect, Dupin had perhaps already known the conspiracy of Minister D–, but he decided not to assist Monsieur G–, and reluctant to provide him a minute hint of the retrieval of the letter. It was not until the Prefect signed a check for fifty thousand francs that Dupin decided to give Perfect G– the letter. Dupin’s actions held his own benefit, which was astonishingly similar to Minister D–, who was profit-oriented as well. Both of the figures would prudently evaluate the current situation, accompanied by considering the plausible successive effects. In other words, if they could not perceive any profits in the event, they would choose not to be involved in the incident.

All in all, both Dupin and Minister are heroic-like figures in the contemporary reality, for they have had surpassing intelligence, flexible and sympathetic mind, and possess highly sensitive identification between each other. The developments of the two characters were parallel as well, while “theft” and “retrieval of the letter” were both involved. Interestingly, Dupin was not retrieving the letter in order to obtain justice. Rather, they were executing identical deeds, and were fully aware of their remarkable competence of observation and perception towards minute hints in an incident. Even though they noticed that what they were attempting to do was against the moral standards, they seemingly could not ignore the potential profit in the acts. Nevertheless, it is truly extraordinary that Dupin and Minister D– could break away from their social characters as a “thief” or a “detective,” mimicking and sympathizing of how their target characters would think or behave. This built up the core value of The Purloined Letter — reciprocity between the thief and the detective in terms of psychological wrestling.

1. **Explain the game theme in “The Purloined Letter”.**

**OR**

**How is the game metaphor used by Poe in his short story “The Purloined Letter”?**

**Ans –** In the story, the letter is purloined twice. First the Minister purloins it from the Queen, and then Dupin purloins it from the Minister. The Prefect’s description of the first theft is bookended by a claim that is repeated for emphasis. When the Prefect observes that possession of the stolen letter gives the thief ‘power’ over the Queen, the Narrator points out that this power would “depend upon the robber’s knowledge of the loser’s knowledge of the robber”. The open theft of the letter, under the eyes of the Queen, is the first ‘move’ in a screening game. The Queen can respond either by stopping the theft or allowing it. Stopping the theft will draw the attention of the king. An innocent Queen will have nothing to fear if the King sees the letter, but a guilty Queen does. Therefore, an innocent Queen will stop the theft, and a guilty Queen will not. The Minister, anticipating these preferences, can make an open attempt on the letter, which forces the Queen to ‘tell him’ by her actions whether the letter contains guilty information or is entirely innocent.

In ‘The Purloined Letter’ Dupin illustrates his superior methods by describing two games. In one, he speaks of an eight year old schoolboy who was a master of even and odd. He outwits the other player by intuiting their level of thinking and then going one step further. When introducing a hide-and-seek game played by choosing place names on maps, for instance, Dupin explains how an amateur player will choose both to hide and to seek in place names written in the smallest possible font, believing these small names will be invisible to the naïve player, and in response the better player will choose names written in the largest font spread over the whole page.The story is full of such transactions, with the players being Dupin and Minister D-. They both strive to anticipate the thinking of the other party, and then to thwart it. As we will see, Dupin sees himself as being always one step ahead of the Minister, and the Minister one step ahead of everyone else.

“The Purloined Letter” is Dupin’s description of how his schoolboy friend mastered the game of ‘even and odd’. In this game one player takes up a handful of marbles and the other guesses whether the number of marbles is odd or even. The guesser wins one marble for a correct guess, and the holder wins one for an incorrect guess.According to Dupin, his eight year old friend won repeatedly by identifying with, or putting himself in the ‘mental shoes’ of his classmates. He likens the game between the Minister and the Prefect to a round of even and odd, and views the Prefect as an inferior player who fails for two reasons. One reason Dupin says is because the Prefect underestimates the intelligence of the Minister. The second is that the Prefect only searched in the way a policeman would, but not understanding the workings of the mind of a thief. The Prefect has failed to properly identify with, or adopt the perspective of, the Minister. The Minister, on the other hand, has successfully adopted the perspective of the Prefect and so is able to anticipate his moves. The Minister has, thus, upped his game and beaten the Prefect. According to Dupin, the Minister’s intellect is superior to the Prefect’s.Only Dupin can outwit the Minister by adopting the perspective of the Minister.

The stolen letter game played in “The Purloined Letter” is one with two searchers, both of whom have different skills and can individually find only some things, but collectively can find all. Dupin mocks the Prefect’s strategy because it does not directly counter the strategy of the Minister, and believes he alone found the letter. But in fact, both play an equally important role. To avoid the Prefect, the Minister chose to disguise the letter. It is because the Minister needed to hide the letter in a way that the police would not expect, he hid it in the open, thus making Dupin capable of finding the letter. But if the Queen had first called in Dupin rather than the Prefect, the game scenario would have changed. If it was from Dupin that Minister needed to hide the letter, he would do it in a way that Dupin would never find and thus, beat Dupin. The Minister, knowing Dupin was on the case would choose a strategy that Dupin has no skills in, and neither the equipment. Dupin cannot, for example, find a letter hidden in a table leg or under a flagstone. Dupin would be obliged to call on the Prefect, who has all the resources needed to counter that strategy. The Prefect would find the letter, but that discovery would be no less attributable to Dupin than to the Prefect. Thus, all in all, no matter what the scenario, it would no doubt become a game of who could outwit whom and emerge a victor.

The point is, the games are symbols both of Dupin's methods of detection, and also of a particular attitude toward the world—one that both Dupin and D— seem to hold. In their view, life is a game, but not one of those where everyone wins. It is a deadly serious game of wits which Dupin, in “The Purloined Letter” successfully wins.

1. **Justify the title of the short story “The Purloined Letter”.**

**OR**

**Why the short story is named “The Purloined Letter”?**

**Ans -** “The Purloined Letter” is the last of the three earliest detective stories by Edgar Allan Poe. It is prestigious in its sophisticated, insightful plot arrangement and character establishment. The word “purloin” means to steal and hence as the title of the story suggests, a letter has been stolen. The plot is mostly dwelling on the retrieval of the confidential letter of an important person, which is perhaps the Queen. The letter belongs to an unnamed female. The letter's contents are being used by Minister D to blackmail the woman. The Prefect tells Dupin that he believes that the letter's contents are still a secret because it is being used to exploit the woman and not destroy the woman's reputation. He also believes that Minister D has the letter on his person because it is the only way to protect the letter and utilize it as blackmail. Unfortunately, a thorough search of Minister D's hotel has turned up nothing. Prefect describes the letter, and Dupin commits both the letter's description and all the other pertinent information to memory.

The letter was stolen by the counter-figure Minister D– from the royal household. The entire plot of the short story revolves around the letter and the struggle for its retrieval. The police officer, Monsieur G–, exerted to complete this crucial mission by investigating every corner he and his colleagues could, but they ended up finding nothing. The error in their search is the fact that they only searched in the routine way a policeman would. The police have searched the minister’s rooms from top to bottom, while he’s out, in the hope of locating the letter he stole. They are sure that he would not be carrying it around on his person. Yet the police, despite searching everywhere in the minister’s rooms – behind the mirrors, under the carpets, in the cellars, within his books – have been unable to find the purloined letter. Dupin advises making another thorough search of the premises, but the police Prefect says it would do no good. In opposition to the dilemma that Monsieur G– was confronting, detective Dupin turned out to complete this mission in ease. Dupin thought from the perspective of a thief. He understood how Minister D- would act and hide the letter in a way that would outwit the police. However, he did not readily reveal the information to the Prefect. Dupin took advantage of the situation and made the Prefect pay him for he solved the problem that was disturbing the police officer beyond the level of frustration. In this regard, the astonishing similarity between Dupin and the suspect, Minister D–, accounts for the clever detective’s success of retrieving the letter of the Queen.

Dupin explains to the narrator how he tracked down the letter. He says that the police underestimated Minister D because he writes poetry. In summary, Dupin says that the problem with the police prefect is that he misjudged what kind of man he was dealing with. He wrote off the minister’s intellect because the minister writes poetry and is therefore, in the policeman’s view, a ‘fool’. But Dupin realises that the minister a man of superior, rather than inferior intellect. Armed with this knowledge, Dupin dons a disguise and calls upon the minister at his rooms. He soon finds the purloined letter, turned inside out and stuffed into a different envelope, in plain sight on the mantelpiece in the minister’s rooms. He deliberately leaves his snuff-box on the table, so he’ll have a reason to return the following day to retrieve it, on the pretext that he’d forgotten it.

After discovering the letter in the Minister’s room, Dupin returns to the minister’s room the next day with the excuse of retrieving his snuff box. Having arranged for a paid accomplice to fire a musket in the street so as to cause a diversion, Dupin then goes to the mantelpiece, takes the letter, replaces it with a copy he had prepared at home to resemble the original, and leaves with the purloined letter in his possession. The fake letter that he left included the note – “If such a sinister design isn't worthy of Atreus, it is worthy of Thyestes”. The lines allude to the story from mythology, in which King Atreus of Mycenae. The King was enraged because his brother dared to seduce his wife. This misdeed by his brother led him to act out in violence. In revenge for his brother, Thyestes’ seduction of his wife, he kills Thyestes’ sons and serves them to him in a pie. This cruel act was a twisted sort of justice that he perhaps believed was well deserved. This reference was in a way Dupin’s manner of saying he has discovered the minister’s plan, and also successfully foiled his scheme. Dupin also reveals that he owes the minister some payback after ‘an evil turn’ the minister did to him in Vienna. Like the King got revenge from his brother, Dupin, by spoiling the schemes of the Minister, took revenge for the past injustice that the Minister had committed on him.

**SHORT NOTES**

1. **Explain the phrase “If such a sinister design isn't worthy of Atreus, it is worthy of Thyestes”.**

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1. **C. Auguste Dupin:**

Ans - 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.

In opposition to the dilemma that Monsieur G- was confronting, detective Dupin turned out to complete this mission in ease. he found the letter that the Prefect, even after all his efforts, could not find. Dupin thought from the perspective of a thief. He understood how Minister D- would act and hide the letter in a way that would outwit the police. However, he did not readily reveal the information to the Prefect. Dupin took advantage of the situation and made the Prefect pay him for he solved the problem that was disturbing the police officer beyond the level of frustration. In this regard, the astonishing similarity between Dupin and the suspect, Minister D–, accounts for the clever detective’s success of retrieving the letter of the Queen. In “The Purloined Letter” Dupin illustrates his superior methods by describing two games. In one, he speaks of an eight year old schoolboy who was a master of even and odd. He outwits the other player by intuiting their level of thinking and then going one step further. When introducing a hide-and-seek game played by choosing place names on maps, for instance, Dupin explains how an amateur player will choose both to hide and to seek in place names written in the smallest possible font, believing these small names will be invisible to the naïve player, and in response the better player will choose names written in the largest font spread over the whole page.The story is full of such transactions, with the players being Dupin and Minister D-. They both strive to anticipate the thinking of the other party, and then to thwart it. As we will see, Dupin sees himself as being always one step ahead of the Minister, and the Minister one step ahead of everyone else.

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1. **Minister D-**

Ans -Minister D— is a daring political opponent of the French Queen. He steals one of her letters and uses it to blackmail her so that he can achieve his political ends. Although the Queen knows he has stolen it, neither she nor the police Prefect, another one of her allies, can recover the letter openly, for fear of publicizing its contents. The Minister knows this, and he also knows that the police will try to search his home whenever he is away. At one point, he purposefully leaves to let them do this, because he has hidden the letter in an ironically obvious hiding place, where he is certain the police will not look for it. Without the Minister's knowledge, Dupin, the hired detective, deduces that this is exactly what the Minister has done, and on a visit to see the Minister, Dupin notices the letter sitting in a letter rack. On a second visit, the Minister is distracted by a diversion that Dupin has set up, and Dupin secretly switches the purloined letter with a fake letter. Although the Minister's fate is never seen, Dupin tells the narrator that since the Minister does not know about the fake letter, he will try to use it as he has used the real one, and it will backfire in his face, leading to his political downfall.

1. **Prefect or Monsieur G-**

Ans - Monsieur G— is the prefect, or head, of the Paris police. Like Dupin and the narrator, he's in all the three of the Dupin tales of detection. And, like both of them, he's a pretty familiar figure: the doofus policeman who can't match either the detective or criminal. But he's also the winner of the game of the purloined letter, assuming that "winning" means taking the letter—like winning at the game of marbles. At the end of the story, he's the one running off with the envelope to collect the big reward.

The police officer, Monsieur G–, exerted to complete this crucial mission by investigating every corner he and his colleagues could, but they ended up finding nothing. Despite searching everywhere in the minister’s rooms – behind the mirrors, under the carpets, in the cellars, within his books – have been unable to find the purloined letter, the Prefect could not locate the letter. Monsieur G- or the Prefect underestimated the intelligence of the Minister because he was a poet. It was one of the primary reasons for the failure of his mission. Furthermore, they did not think from the perspective of the thief, which is why they failed. Although, Dupin mocks the Prefect’s strategy, both play an equally important role. To avoid the Prefect, the Minister chose to disguise the letter. It is because the Minister needed to hide the letter in a way that the police would not expect, he hid it in the open, thus making Dupin capable of finding the letter. But if the Queen had first called in Dupin rather than the Prefect, the game scenario would have changed. If it was from Dupin that Minister needed to hide the letter, he would do it in a way that Dupin would never find and thus, beat Dupin. The Minister, knowing Dupin was on the case would choose a strategy that Dupin has no skills in, and neither the equipment. Dupin cannot, for example, find a letter hidden in a table leg or under a flagstone. Dupin would be obliged to call on the Prefect, who has all the resources needed to counter that strategy.

It should be noted that Dupin's success is only possible thanks to the ninety days of work by the Prefect. Dupin even admits that he only figured out that the letter was probably out in the open after hearing "decisive evidence" stating everywhere that the letter was not. The point is that both methods of the Prefect as well as Dupin were necessary to solve the crime. Dupin and G— need each other, and G— admits it.