Reading the Criminal Mind: Psychological Inference in Poe's *The Purloined Letter* and Christie's the Murder of Roger Ackroyd

Swarnika

Assistant Professor Department of English Zakir Husain Delhi College University of Delhi

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ABSTRACT

This research examines how criminal intention is concealed and subsequently reconstructed in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter* (1844) and Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926). Although the texts concern different offences, both give considerable importance to the offender's ability to anticipate how others will interpret available evidence. Psychological inference consequently emerges as a struggle between competing interpretations, shaped by the criminal's calculated use of expectations and the detective's willingness to question apparently credible explanations.

In Poe's story, the thief's identity is already known; the difficulty lies in understanding the method of concealment. Dupin's discussion of a schoolboy's guessing game establishes the significance of imaginative identification with an opponent's reasoning. The police search remains unsuccessful because its thoroughness operates within familiar assumptions about hiding. Christie relocates this difficulty within the narration itself. Dr Sheppard's professional standing, selective disclosures and carefully phrased account establish credibility while concealing criminal involvement. Poirot's investigation exposes discrepancies between the narrated account, material circumstances and observed behaviour, demonstrating how accurate details can coexist with deliberate deception.

Through comparative close reading, informed by Wayne C. Booth's discussion of unreliable narration in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, the paper explores the relationship between criminal calculation, narrative authority and readerly trust. Particular attention is given to the distinction between Poe's retrospective explanation of Dupin's reasoning and Christie's placement of the reader within an account controlled by the offender. The comparison suggests that concealment succeeds through the manipulation of interpretive habits as much as through the withholding of evidence. Reading the criminal mind, therefore, involves tracing how believable appearances are constructed and how psychological inference makes those appearances open to question.

Keywords- Criminal Psychology, Psychological Inference, Detective Fiction, Criminal Intention, Concealment, Unreliable Narration, Readerly Trust

The Mind Behind the Evidence

A stolen letter can remain undiscovered despite an exhaustive search; a murderer can recount an investigation without appearing to stand outside its circle of trust. These situations bring Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter* and Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* into a productive relationship. In both texts, concealment depends upon the offender's understanding of how other people interpret available information. The criminal anticipates scrutiny and creates circumstances in which that scrutiny will be misdirected. Detection consequently requires more than the accumulation of clues. It involves recognising the expectations that give those clues their apparent meaning and considering how such expectations might have been deliberately exploited. The psychological interest of these narratives lies partly in this encounter between an offender who prepares to be interpreted and a detective who must reconstruct the reasoning behind that preparation.

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The phrase "criminal mind" requires some precision within this discussion. A literary representation of criminal behaviour does not provide unmediated access to an offender's mental life. Thoughts become available through speech, action, narration and the explanations offered by other characters. Criminal psychology, as approached in this paper, concerns the representation of intention, calculation, self-preservation and anticipated response. Psychological inference describes the interpretive process through which a detective proposes an explanation for conduct that cannot be understood through its outward appearance alone. Motive forms one part of this process, but identifying a reason for committing an offence does not establish how the offender expected to avoid discovery. The distinction matters because both selected texts give considerable attention to the management of suspicion. Their criminals possess an understanding of other people's habits of judgment, and their schemes depend upon putting that understanding to use.

The relationship between psychology and detective fiction already has an established critical history. David Cohen's *Inspecting Psychology: How the Rise of Psychological Ideas Influenced the Development of Detective Fiction* places crime writing in relation to changing psychological movements, including developments associated with Poe and Christie. Samantha Walton's *Guilty But Insane: Mind and Law in Golden Age Detective Fiction* examines the genre's engagement with understandings of guilt, responsibility and mental life in the interwar period. These studies provide grounds for treating psychological questions as integral to detective fiction's intellectual and historical concerns. They also caution against assuming that literary representations of criminality belong to a single, unchanging understanding of the mind. The present comparison therefore concentrates on the particular forms of reasoning dramatised in the two texts, without assigning modern diagnostic categories to their offenders.

Poe's *The Purloined Letter*, first published in 1844, establishes an unusual investigative problem because the thief's identity is known from the beginning. Minister D—— has taken a politically sensitive letter, and its recovery depends upon discovering how possession has been maintained despite police intervention. The problem separates knowledge of the offender from knowledge of the offender's strategy. Dupin's explanation of psychological identification, illustrated through a schoolboy's success at guessing whether an opponent holds an odd or even number of marbles, addresses this distinction directly. Successful reasoning requires an assessment of the particular adversary, including the possibility that the adversary has already anticipated the investigator's next move. The Prefect's methods fail because their meticulous application leaves their underlying assumptions intact (Poe).

Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) makes the interpretation of criminal intention difficult through the position occupied by Dr Sheppard. His involvement in the investigation appears to place him among those helping to establish the truth. His position as a doctor and his role as narrator reinforce that apparent credibility. The final revelation exposes the extent to which an account can remain persuasive through carefully chosen disclosures. In the concluding chapter, Sheppard takes satisfaction in his "judicious use of words," acknowledging the calculated relationship between what has been stated and what has been left unexplained (Christie, ch. 27). The admission makes his narration relevant to criminal psychology: the account records events while also revealing, retrospectively, an attempt to control their interpretation.

The difference between these investigative situations is central to the comparison. Dupin considers the concealment practices of an identified adversary, whereas Poirot must determine which person's actions can account for the murder and its misleading circumstances. The texts nevertheless share a concern with the distinction between evidence and the explanation attached to it. An investigator may observe accurately and still infer incorrectly. Equally, a statement may contain accurate information while encouraging an interpretation favourable to its speaker. Such possibilities complicate any easy separation between fact and deception. The offender's advantage can depend upon allowing information to circulate under conditions that make its significance difficult to recognise. The question becomes how a detective identifies those conditions and develops an alternative explanation without simply replacing one unsupported assumption with another.

Narrative scholarship offers a useful framework for examining this problem. In "Detection and Literary Fiction," Laura Marcus discusses the genre's double narrative: the story of the crime is gradually reconstructed through the story of its investigation. Her account places the organisation of knowledge at the centre of the form, drawing

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attention to the relationship between events and their subsequent disclosure. This distinction is especially productive for the present study because the reconstruction concerns intention as well as action. The final explanation establishes a sequence of events and assigns purpose to arrangements that previously appeared incidental. Psychological inference participates in that movement by connecting observable circumstances with a proposed account of why they were produced (Marcus).

Wayne C. Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* supplies a further point of reference through its treatment of narrative authority and unreliable narration. This framework is particularly relevant to Christie's placement of the offender within the role responsible for presenting the investigation. Applied to Sheppard's account, it allows the analysis to distinguish the narrator's apparent competence from the reliability of the interpretation being offered. It also makes possible a comparison with Poe's unnamed narrator, whose access to Dupin's reasoning is limited without reproducing Sheppard's criminal involvement. The two narrative positions create different relationships between knowledge and trust. Their comparison requires attention to the grounds on which a reader accepts an account, including the speaker's apparent role, the arrangement of information and the authority granted to the eventual explanation (Booth).

Psychological interpretation must also be considered alongside the practical work of detection. Poirot's final reconstruction attends to a discrepancy in the time taken for a journey and includes his testing of the actions that could fit within that interval. His account of intention is thus connected to questions of opportunity and physical possibility (Christie, ch. 26). Such details prevent the criminal mind from becoming a convenient explanation detached from evidence. The detective's reasoning acquires force when it can account for the circumstances of the offence and withstand comparison with them. At the same time, the narrative's presentation of a successful solution should not make every earlier inference appear equally secure. The movement from suspicion to verification deserves attention in its own right.

The present study develops its argument through comparative close reading of concealment, investigative reasoning and narrative trust. Its scope remains confined to the two selected works; their comparison does not presume an identical method or establish direct literary influence. Instead, it considers a shared difficulty across distinct narrative situations: criminal intention becomes legible through information that the offender has helped arrange. The central argument is that both texts make psychological inference dependent upon questioning familiar habits of interpretation. Criminal calculation draws strength from those habits, while detection exposes the distance between a convincing appearance and an adequate explanation. Reading the criminal mind consequently entails reconstructing the offender's understanding of the people expected to observe, investigate and believe.

Concealment and the Management of Attention

The Minister's theft in *The Purloined Letter* begins with an accurate reading of another person's predicament. The royal recipient cannot protect the letter without drawing attention to the secret it contains. The Minister recognises this constraint and takes advantage of it. The theft occurs within her sight, but the presence of another person makes protest dangerous. Poe therefore introduces criminal calculation through an encounter in which visibility offers no protection. The victim knows what is happening and still cannot intervene. The Minister's advantage consists in understanding the difference between possessing knowledge and being free to act upon it. His subsequent concealment of the document develops this initial strategy: other people's responses become circumstances that can be anticipated and used (Poe).

Secrecy in this story is consequently distributed unevenly. The Minister knows the contents of the letter, the recipient knows that it has been stolen, and the police know the identity of the thief. None of these forms of knowledge is sufficient to end his power. Georg Simmel's "The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies" offers a useful framework here through its consideration of how social relationships depend upon different degrees of knowledge and concealment. Simmel distinguishes direct lying from other practices through which knowledge of another person is restricted (448–49). Applied to Poe, this distinction draws attention to the Minister's control over the conditions of disclosure. His power depends upon the continued possibility of

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revealing the document, while the recipient's efforts to recover it must remain discreet. Secrecy organises the relationship between them even though the theft itself is no longer a mystery.

The document's placement must be understood within these practical constraints. The letter cannot simply disappear into an inaccessible hiding place because its availability contributes to its usefulness. Dupin's reconstruction attributes to the Minister an awareness of ordinary police procedures, including the likelihood of searches during his absence. Those absences, welcomed by the Prefect as investigative opportunities, become part of the explanation Dupin proposes for the criminal's success. The Minister apparently allows the police to complete their familiar procedures and reach a reassuring conclusion. The search produces confidence precisely because it appears exhaustive (Poe 213–14). Concealment thus includes the management of what failure means to the searcher. An unsuccessful examination may encourage withdrawal if the investigator regards its method as incapable of overlooking the desired object.

The altered letter in the card-rack complicates the familiar description of Poe's solution as hiding something in plain sight. Exposure alone does not account for the deception. The document has been refolded, redirected and resealed; its damaged appearance suggests an item of little importance. The strategy involves changing the features through which the letter would ordinarily be recognised. Its visibility is supported by an apparently ordinary explanation for its presence. A visitor can see a letter without identifying the politically valuable document being sought. The distinction between seeing and recognising gives the Minister's preparation its psychological significance. His scheme depends upon the observer accepting the object's outward identity before considering its possible history (Poe 216–17).

Dupin's account also describes the Minister's languid manner during the visit as a performance inconsistent with his concealed energy. This discrepancy makes self-presentation relevant to the protection of the document. Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* examines how individuals guide the impressions formed of their conduct in social situations. Used as an interpretive framework, rather than as evidence of influence on Poe, Goffman's approach helps explain why the Minister's apparent boredom matters. His manner supplies a context in which the room and its contents can appear unremarkable. Criminal concealment becomes embedded within the management of an encounter: posture, conversation and the appearance of careless possession contribute to the impression available to the visitor. The paper's reading of this scene therefore treats the Minister's conduct and the document's condition as mutually supporting aspects of the same arrangement.

Christie develops a related problem through Sheppard's position within the social world of King's Abbot. His medical role gives him legitimate access to information that others would have difficulty obtaining. Poirot's explanation of the blackmail identifies this access as an enabling condition of the offence: the doctor attending Mr Ferrars was well placed to understand the circumstances of his death. Professional knowledge becomes usable for coercion, while professional credibility helps protect its possessor from suspicion (Christie, ch. 26). The significant issue is the conversion of an accepted relationship into criminal opportunity. Sheppard does not require an entirely fabricated identity. Existing expectations about his work make his presence, inquiries and involvement appear explicable.

That credibility continues after Ackroyd's murder. Sheppard participates in the investigation and records its progress, placing criminal involvement within the apparent activity of assistance. His concealment depends upon maintaining enough consistency between the familiar doctor and the helpful companion for neither role to demand immediate reconsideration. Goffman's account of impression management is useful in interpreting this continuity. A performance can be sustained through conduct that fits an established situation, including conduct that is partly sincere or factually accurate. Sheppard's medical competence and participation do not have to be wholly fictitious to support a misleading impression. Their evidentiary value is the problem: an observer may accept legitimate activity as reassurance about intentions that it cannot independently establish.

Sheppard's manuscript extends this management of appearances into language. In the "Apologia," his satisfaction with the account centres upon the absence of a marked break in the narration of the crucial interval before his departure. The sentences move from the arrival of the letters to his leaving the study without openly announcing that an action of decisive importance has been omitted (Christie, ch. 27). The omission acquires

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protection from continuity. A visible gap might invite a question; smoothly connected statements encourage the interval to be treated as already accounted for. The criminal calculation concerns the reader's likely movement through the passage, although its full effect upon reading belongs to the later discussion of narrative authority. Here, the important point is that Sheppard prepares an account in which the need for further inquiry can pass unnoticed.

His description of looking back into the room has a similar double function. Initially, the gesture can appear to belong to an ordinary departure. After the revelation, the same action becomes an inspection of completed preparations. Sheppard's wording permits the gesture to remain in the account while withholding the purpose that would make it incriminating. This is a particularly economical form of concealment because the action itself does not have to be denied. The criminal supplies an apparently sufficient description and relies upon the distinction between reporting behaviour and explaining intention. An accurate statement about what occurred can therefore participate in deception when the circumstances needed to understand it are deliberately excluded.

The material arrangements behind the murder work through comparable expectations. The dictaphone produces a voice that can be interpreted as evidence of Ackroyd's continued presence, while the displaced chair shields the mechanism from immediate view. The planned telephone call subsequently gives Sheppard an apparently legitimate reason to return and an opportunity to remove the device. Its occurrence is genuine; the misleading element lies in his account of its message (Christie, ch. 26). These preparations distinguish the production of evidence from its interpretation. A sound establishes that something was heard, and a witnessed call establishes that communication occurred. The conclusions attached to those events require further support. Sheppard's scheme depends upon those conclusions being accepted quickly enough for the underlying arrangements to remain unexamined.

This manipulation differs materially from the Minister's treatment of the letter. Poe's offender protects an existing object by altering its recognisable appearance. Christie's offender arranges events that support a false sequence and then removes the means by which that sequence was manufactured. In both cases, preparation includes a model of the observer. The Minister, as interpreted by Dupin, anticipates a search directed towards concealed spaces. Sheppard anticipates the significance others will assign to a voice, a telephone call and the doctor's return. Their strategies disclose an interest in the practical habits through which people make sense of situations. Criminal psychology becomes legible through these choices without requiring a speculative account of an underlying disorder.

Neither strategy provides unlimited control. Sheppard acknowledges that Parker's attention to the displaced chair exceeded his expectations. The discovery of the body was supposed to absorb the servant's notice, leaving the surrounding arrangement comparatively unobserved. Parker nevertheless registers a detail that can later acquire significance. Sheppard also admits that other people's interventions puzzled him during the investigation (Christie, ch. 27). These admissions qualify the image of a criminal mind directing every response. The offender can prepare for ordinary conduct and still encounter an observation, statement or private concern that the scheme has failed to anticipate. His anxiety emerges partly from the independence of the people whose reactions he needs to manage.

The two texts consequently present concealment as work performed upon relationships between objects, actions and observers. The Minister's altered document invites acceptance of an insignificant outward identity; Sheppard's arrangements invite acceptance of a credible chronology and a trustworthy participant. Their success depends upon explanations that seem sufficient before their foundations have been tested. Attention is managed by giving it somewhere plausible to settle. The criminal's reasoning can therefore be approached through the particular judgments the scheme requires others to make. Once those required judgments are identified, the investigation gains a more precise question: what preparation would be necessary to produce them, and whose conduct could account for that preparation? This question connects concealment to the psychological inference through which Dupin and Poirot begin to reconstruct their adversaries.

Thinking with the Adversary: Dupin and Poirot's Psychological Inference

Dupin's explanation of the schoolboy's guessing game places a demanding condition upon psychological inference: reasoning about an opponent must remain responsive to the opponent's particular capacities. The game appears simple. One player conceals a number of marbles, and another guesses whether the number is odd or even. Yet success depends upon anticipating how the first player will respond to the previous guess. A relatively unsophisticated opponent may make an obvious change; a more reflective opponent may recognise that the change is predictable and decide against it. The schoolboy's achievement rests upon distinguishing these possibilities. Each move acquires meaning within an estimate of how much reasoning the other player is likely to undertake. The example makes anticipation reciprocal. The observer considers an opponent who may already be considering the observer's expectations (Poe 209–10).

This reciprocity helps explain why Dupin's method cannot be reduced to putting himself in the Minister's position. An investigator might imagine what would be sensible under particular circumstances and mistakenly assume that the offender would make the same choice. The schoolboy's procedure requires a further judgment about the person occupying that position. Dupin identifies the Prefect's difficulty as the application of familiar ideas of ingenuity to an adversary whose reasoning differs from them. The police possess effective procedures for detecting certain forms of concealment, but their confidence in those procedures discourages reconsideration of the assumptions beneath them. Dupin's analysis therefore questions the adequacy of the model of criminal conduct directing the search. The Minister's apparent superiority becomes intelligible through the mismatch between his preparation and the kind of preparation the police expect to encounter.

The account of the schoolboy also introduces a tension within psychological identification. His attempt to reproduce an opponent's facial expression and attend to the thoughts or feelings arising from it suggests a bodily, imaginative route towards understanding another person. Nevertheless, the story provides no independent demonstration that this procedure reliably reveals an unfamiliar mind. Its explanatory importance lies in the attention it directs towards differences between opponents. Dupin's later assessment of the Minister depends upon prior acquaintance, knowledge of his intellectual abilities and consideration of his circumstances. The distinction is important for the present argument. Psychological inference gains substance through information about the adversary; imaginative identification supplies a way of arranging that information into a possible account of conduct. It does not remove the possibility of misjudgment.

Dupin's description of the Minister as both poet and mathematician develops this concern with intellectual particularity. The Prefect's dismissal of poetry becomes an obstacle because it reduces an individual to a familiar category. Dupin instead treats the combination of capacities as relevant to the Minister's ability to depart from routine solutions. His accompanying criticism of mathematical reasoning concerns its application beyond the relations for which its methods are appropriate. In discussing motive, he challenges the assumption that distinct motives necessarily combine in a straightforward, additive manner (Poe 212–13). The passage gives psychological inference a contextual character. An explanation of conduct must consider how capacities, interests and circumstances interact, rather than derive an action from a single label attached to its agent.

The Minister's need to retain access to the document provides a practical constraint upon this interpretation. Dupin reasons from an offender with particular abilities towards a choice compatible with the continuing purpose of the theft. The unsuccessful searches also contribute information, although their significance changes when the assumptions directing them are questioned. Failure can establish the inadequacy of a search without establishing the absence of its object. Dupin's inference develops by combining knowledge of the adversary with the requirements of the situation. His visit then exposes that proposed explanation to observation. The letter's altered exterior, its conspicuous placement and the evidence of reversed folding supply material grounds for identification. Psychological reasoning directs scrutiny towards a possibility that the Prefect has discounted; examination of the paper strengthens that possibility (Poe 216–17).

Charles Sanders Peirce's account of abduction offers a useful vocabulary for distinguishing the formation of such an explanation from its confirmation. Abduction proposes a hypothesis under which an otherwise surprising fact would become intelligible. Its conclusion remains conjectural: the capacity to explain a circumstance

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provides a reason to investigate the hypothesis, rather than sufficient grounds to declare it true (Peirce 5.189). This distinction is relevant to Dupin's interpretation of the failed searches and to Poirot's reconstruction of apparently incompatible evidence. It also has an established place in criticism of detective reasoning, including the inquiries collected in Umberto Eco and Thomas A. Sebeok's edited volume *The Sign of Three: Dupin, Holmes, Peirce*. The framework is used here to examine how explanatory possibilities are developed and tested, without implying that either fictional detective consistently follows a formal philosophical procedure.

Poirot's conversation with Sheppard in "The Goose Quill" makes the distinction between information and justification unusually explicit. The doctor initially regards his own statement as sufficient to establish an event. Poirot asks how the investigator can know that the statement is accurate, introducing both deliberate deception and ordinary error as possibilities. He then considers corroboration from another source. The exchange concerns the conditions under which testimony becomes usable evidence, and its significance extends beyond Sheppard's eventual exposure. Familiarity with a speaker may explain confidence in an account, but confidence cannot establish its accuracy. Poirot's insistence upon examining the grounds of knowledge challenges the social privilege through which the doctor's participation might otherwise protect his statements from scrutiny (Christie, ch. 13).

This investigative distance does not make every omission evidence of murder. Poirot's recognition that the people involved have secrets establishes a more complicated field of interpretation. Concealment may arise from embarrassment, private attachment, financial anxiety or fear of consequences unrelated to the killing. His appeal for fuller disclosure therefore addresses a practical difficulty: information withheld for one reason may distort the reconstruction of an entirely different event (Christie, ch. 12). Psychological inference must distinguish the desire to conceal something from the intention to conceal this crime. Otherwise, the detective risks treating a general sign of unease as a specific indication of guilt. Poirot's attention to private concerns matters because establishing their relevance can prevent incidental secrecy from becoming a misleading explanation of the murder.

The temporal discrepancy associated with Sheppard becomes important within this more selective process. Poirot considers why a journey normally requiring five minutes appears to have taken ten. The interval does not disclose its contents directly. It opens a question about additional activity and gives competing explanations a measurable limit. Poirot's final account considers whether a return through the window to commit the murder would fit the victim's condition and the probable consequences of that entry. He rejects that sequence and reconstructs another, testing its duration through a physical reenactment (Christie, ch. 26). The reasoning moves between anticipated behaviour and practical possibility. An estimate of how an anxious Ackroyd would respond helps evaluate one hypothesis, while the reenactment assesses another through the time available.

The telephone call demonstrates the need to revise an explanation when verification unsettles it. Poirot initially suspects that Sheppard has invented the call. Evidence that it genuinely occurred makes that account insufficient. The relevant distinction then becomes the difference between the occurrence of communication and the content attributed to it. Contact with the ship's steward supplies an independent account of the arrangement (Christie, ch. 26). This movement is especially significant for a study of psychological inference because it limits the authority of a convincing initial suspicion. Poirot's understanding develops through correction. Criminal calculation is reconstructed more accurately when evidence forces the investigator to distinguish components that had previously been treated as a single event.

Poirot's eventual identification of Sheppard brings several requirements together: access, knowledge, mechanical competence, the ability to carry the device and an opportunity to remove it. These requirements narrow the explanation through their conjunction. Each characteristic considered separately could be shared by others or possess an innocent explanation. Their relationship to the proposed sequence makes them consequential (Christie, ch. 25). The reasoning does not depend upon deciding that Sheppard possesses an inherently criminal personality. It concerns the fit between a particular person's available resources and the preparation necessary to produce the observed circumstances. Psychological inference participates by explaining why those resources would have been used in that manner and what responses their use was intended to secure.

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Dupin and Poirot consequently begin from different distributions of knowledge. Dupin has an identified adversary whose method must be reconstructed. Poirot must discover an offender among people whose statements and private concerns complicate the inquiry. Dupin's prior acquaintance with the Minister helps him question a general model of concealment; Poirot's scrutiny of testimony helps him prevent acquaintance from becoming an exemption from investigation. These differences qualify any simple description of both detectives as readers of human nature. Their knowledge becomes useful through distinct acts of selection and verification. The comparison concerns the relationship between understanding a person and explaining an action, rather than the possession of an undifferentiated insight into character.

Their interventions also show that psychological inference can be used to produce circumstances for further observation. Dupin arranges a disturbance that draws the Minister towards the window and permits the substitution of the letter. The anticipated response becomes part of the recovery procedure. Poirot's questioning similarly seeks information that the existing accounts have obscured. Such interventions make the investigator an active participant in the situation being interpreted. A response obtained under these conditions still requires contextual judgment: pressure can disclose anxiety without identifying its cause, just as distraction can enable an action without proving every earlier inference correct. The detectives' success must be examined through what their interventions actually establish.

Thinking with the adversary thus involves a sequence of judgments whose strengths are not identical. Knowledge of a person suggests possibilities; circumstances restrict them; observation and corroboration determine whether they remain viable. Both texts give psychological reasoning an important role within that sequence while retaining the material demands of investigation. The Minister's anticipated searcher and Sheppard's anticipated witness become intelligible through the arrangements designed for them. Dupin and Poirot reconstruct those expectations by questioning how evidence acquired its apparent meaning. Yet the eventual explanation reaches the reader through a further arrangement of disclosure. The authority granted to that explanation, and the earlier confidence placed in the account of the investigation, introduce another problem of interpretation: how the narrative teaches the reader to trust a particular understanding of the criminal mind.

The Reader within the Deception: Narrative Authority and Trust

The opening of *The Purloined Letter* places the narrator beside Dupin in an atmosphere of familiarity. Earlier investigations already belong to their shared experience, and the arrival of the Prefect introduces another problem into an established relationship. This arrangement gives the narrator access to the detective without granting access to every stage of his reasoning. The distinction becomes decisive when Dupin produces the recovered letter before explaining its recovery. The narrator's astonishment records a gap between companionship and knowledge. Proximity to an investigator does not guarantee participation in the investigation. Poe uses that gap to make the successful result precede the account of the intellectual and practical work behind it (Poe 200–09).

The sequence affects the grounds on which Dupin's explanation is received. Once the document has been returned to the Prefect, the account that follows explains an achievement already demonstrated. The reader encounters the detective's interpretation of the Minister with the outcome in place. This does not make the reasoning immune to examination, but it gives the explanation considerable authority before its individual steps are assessed. Dupin's conjectures appear within a narrative that has established their practical success. Consequently, the account of psychological inference is partly a retrospective arrangement of reasons. The story invites attention to how the solution became possible while limiting access to the uncertainty through which the investigation might have proceeded.

Christie initially offers a relationship that can appear comparably familiar: an investigator is accompanied by a narrator who records events and responds to the detective's behaviour. Sheppard's position, however, makes the restriction of knowledge a criminal resource. His account supplies the medium through which the investigation becomes available, including descriptions of suspects, reported conversations and judgments about apparent relevance. The reader can question people within that account while continuing to rely upon the person presenting it. This separation creates a particular vulnerability. Suspicion may become more active without

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extending to the narrative conditions under which it operates. Sheppard's place beside Poirot makes him available as a character, but his responsibility for telling the story can also encourage his treatment as a source.

Wayne C. Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* provides a framework for distinguishing a narrator's presentation from the larger design through which that presentation is evaluated. Its treatment of reliable and unreliable narrators draws attention to the relationship between a speaking character and the judgments a work makes possible. In Christie, this distinction prevents Sheppard's account from being confused with the novel's complete position. The narrative gives his words authority while also preserving circumstances that can eventually qualify that authority. Booth's framework is therefore useful for examining the coexistence of persuasive narration and evidence against the narrator's interpretation. Reliability becomes a question about the relationship between the account and what the work enables the reader to understand through it (Booth).

James Phelan's "Reliable, Unreliable, and Deficient Narration: A Rhetorical Account" further complicates a simple opposition between trustworthy and untrustworthy telling. His discussion treats reliability and unreliability through differentiated relationships rather than a single binary division. This approach is particularly helpful for Sheppard because many of his observations remain useful after his criminal involvement is exposed. The revelation does not require every description, reported exchange or medical judgment to become false. The problem concerns the account's distribution of accuracy and concealment. A narrator can supply information that supports an investigation while withholding the information that would establish his own responsibility. The critical task is to identify how those different functions coexist, rather than dismiss the entire narrative once its source has been discredited (Phelan).

Christie makes the convention of the detective's recording companion explicit when Sheppard acknowledges having read Hastings's narratives. His manuscript is presented as an attempt to undertake a similar task. This detail matters because the credibility of his narrative role is not established solely through his profession. It also draws upon a recognisable literary activity: the companion preserves an account of the detective's case. Sheppard's explanation makes his writing appear appropriate to the circumstances in which he finds himself. Yet resemblance to an accepted narrative role does not establish equivalent intentions. The manuscript adopts the form of assistance while retaining a purpose that Poirot's investigation will expose (Christie, ch. 23).

Poirot's response to the manuscript makes that discrepancy available before the final identification. His comments on Sheppard's "modesty" and "reticence" can initially be understood as observations about an unobtrusive chronicler. Within the completed novel, they acquire a more pointed significance. The narrator has kept his own contribution comparatively indistinct, and the quality that might appear to recommend the account becomes grounds for closer attention. Poirot's reading supplies an important distinction between factual detail and explanatory completeness. A record may carefully describe its surrounding world while reducing the visibility of the person responsible for arranging it. The manuscript's apparent lack of self-importance is therefore open to two interpretations: stylistic restraint and strategic withdrawal from scrutiny (Christie, ch. 23).

This scene also places the same document before different kinds of reader. Poirot can compare the manuscript with his observations, inquiries and developing explanation of the crime. The reader of the novel encounters much of that material through Sheppard's presentation. The detective possesses opportunities for corroboration that the narrative audience cannot independently reproduce. This difference qualifies the familiar idea that reader and detective pursue the mystery on equal terms. Their tasks overlap, but their positions are structurally unequal. Poirot reads Sheppard's account as an account produced by a person within the case; the novel encourages its audience to inhabit that account while gradually making its production significant. Recognition of the discrepancy requires a shift in attention from the people described to the person selecting the descriptions.

The omitted interval before Sheppard's departure from Ackroyd's study offers a precise example of that shift. Before the revelation, the passage can be taken as a sufficient account of the visit's ending. Afterward, its continuity becomes the object of scrutiny. The question changes from what the sentences report to what their connection encourages the reader to assume. The sequence does not visibly mark the missing action, and the movement towards departure can carry attention beyond the interval. Rereading exposes the work performed by

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that movement. The passage becomes evidence of how narrative arrangement can protect a criminal act without supplying an explicit denial of it (Christie, ch. 27).

The change does not necessarily mean that a first reading has been careless. Ordinary reading depends upon accepting many transitions without interrogating every unreported moment. A narrative that supplies detailed times, movements and conversations can appear to have already distinguished consequential information from routine activity. Christie makes that practical dependence vulnerable. The same habits that allow a reader to follow the investigation can assist the offender's management of it. Nevertheless, the novel does not compel an identical response from every reader. Suspicion may arise earlier, and familiarity with the solution alters the reading situation entirely. The argument concerns the invitations and protections created by the narrative form, rather than a universal psychological reaction to it.

Poe's narration creates a different demand for retrospective attention. The narrator's questions help articulate difficulties in the Prefect's search and Dupin's explanation, but his surprise does not conceal responsibility for the theft. His limited understanding provides a position from which the solution can be explained. The return to earlier details therefore concerns their revised significance within the Minister's strategy. The elaborate search, initially evidence of investigative thoroughness, becomes evidence of a method constrained by its assumptions. The narrator's inability to see that consequence beforehand is distinguishable from Sheppard's deliberate restriction of another person's understanding. Limited access and criminal concealment may both delay knowledge, but their narrative and psychological functions differ.

Dupin's extended explanation nevertheless deserves scrutiny as a presentation of authority. Much of the Minister's reasoning reaches the reader through an adversary who has successfully defeated him. The letter's recovery establishes the effectiveness of Dupin's procedure; it does not independently confirm every thought attributed to the Minister during that procedure. The distinction is particularly relevant to descriptions of his nightly absences and intellectual capacities. These form part of an explanatory reconstruction, supported to varying degrees by acquaintance, circumstance and observed result. Poe's ending gives that reconstruction persuasive coherence. A close reading can acknowledge its success while retaining the difference between recovering an object and documenting another person's complete mental process.

The concluding disclosure of Dupin's personal grievance adds another reason to distinguish successful detection from neutral narration. The substitute letter carries a message intended to make the defeated Minister recognise the person responsible for his reversal. Dupin's explanation therefore includes an interest in the meaning the Minister will attach to the discovery, as well as an account of the recovery itself (Poe 218). His imagined opponent remains present even after the central task has been completed. The episode does not invalidate his reasoning, but it shows that the authoritative explanation emerges from a situated participant. The detective's account of the criminal mind is shaped by rivalry and the anticipated satisfaction of being recognised as the successful adversary.

Sheppard's final chapter offers a different form of retrospective authority. His exposure permits acknowledgement of preparations concealed earlier, but it does not automatically make his interpretation of his own motives complete or disinterested. His admission that the manuscript had been intended to record one of Poirot's failures discloses an ambition extending beyond immediate escape. Writing would have preserved the deception and given its author a public account of the detective's defeat. The "Apologia" also combines admissions with attempts to qualify intention and responsibility (Christie, ch. 27). Confession consequently changes the available evidence without ending the need to interpret its speaker. Access to a criminal's self-description remains access to a representation shaped by the criminal.

This distinction brings narrative trust directly into the paper's account of psychological inference. Dupin interprets an adversary whose thoughts are reconstructed largely through the detective's explanation; Poirot exposes an adversary whose words have already organised the reader's access to the case. In each work, the criminal mind becomes intelligible through a particular arrangement of voices, disclosures and retrospective judgments. The resolution supplies grounds for revisiting the account, but the value of that return lies in distinguishing what has been established from what has become persuasive. Rereading *The Purloined Letter*

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directs attention towards the assumptions supporting Dupin's account of concealment. Rereading *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* also requires attention to the authority through which the offender made concealment appear to be an account of discovery. Criminal intention and narrative form meet at this point: the reader must assess the evidence while examining how its meaning has been presented.

Reconstructing Intention, Revisiting Evidence

The comparison between *The Purloined Letter* and *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* establishes that concealment depends upon an offender's understanding of the people expected to encounter the crime. The Minister anticipates the procedures through which his premises will be searched. Sheppard anticipates the significance attached to his professional role, his movements and the information he supplies. Their preparations contain an estimate of another person's judgment. Psychological inference becomes necessary because the available circumstances have already been arranged with interpretation in mind. Detection requires an explanation of how that arrangement works, including the expectations upon which its success depends.

The distinction between the offences remains important. Poe begins with an identified thief and an unrecovered document, whereas Christie places the perpetrator's identity within the unresolved circumstances of a murder. Dupin's task centres upon recognising a method of concealment appropriate to a known adversary. Poirot must determine whose access, knowledge and conduct account for the misleading evidence. The comparison therefore extends the study of criminal psychology beyond identifying a motive or assigning a personality type. It locates criminal calculation within decisions about visibility, credibility and anticipated response. An intention becomes analytically significant when it helps explain why a particular arrangement was produced.

The investigations also demonstrate that observations acquire evidentiary force through questions about their origin. An unsuccessful search can encourage the conclusion that an object is absent, although the method may have excluded the possibility of its recognisable presence. A voice or telephone call can support an apparently convincing chronology, although its meaning depends upon circumstances that have yet to be established. The detectives' achievement lies partly in separating what has been observed from what has been inferred. That separation permits a return to information already available and opens it to an explanation that its first presentation had discouraged.

Such reconsideration requires more than suspicion. Dupin's assessment of the Minister directs attention towards an alternative form of concealment, but examination of the document supplies grounds for identifying it. Poirot's account develops through corroboration, reconstruction and the rejection of explanations that fail to accommodate the circumstances. Peirce's distinction between proposing an explanatory hypothesis and establishing its adequacy remains useful here (5.189). Psychological plausibility creates a reason to pursue an explanation; it cannot alone determine guilt. The persuasive force of the detectives' conclusions depends upon the relationship between their estimates of intention and the evidence through which those estimates can be tested.

The limits of that relationship are equally consequential. Neither detective provides direct access to a complete criminal consciousness. Dupin's explanation attributes reasoning to the Minister on the basis of acquaintance, circumstance and successful recovery. Poirot establishes Sheppard's responsibility through a convergence of details, while Sheppard's subsequent account remains a self-presentation requiring interpretation. The exposure of deception does not make every retrospective explanation equally secure. A distinction must remain between identifying the preparation necessary for an offence and claiming exhaustive knowledge of the person responsible for it. Criminal intention becomes legible through particular actions without exhausting the offender's mental life.

Narration further qualifies the knowledge produced by detection. Poe presents Dupin's achievement before the explanation, allowing demonstrated success to support the account that follows. Christie permits the offender's narrative to organise the reader's encounter with the investigation. These arrangements establish different grounds for trust. Poe's narrator lacks access to parts of the detective's activity; Sheppard withholds knowledge of his own involvement. Their restrictions cannot be treated as equivalent, even though both delay understanding.

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Booth's account of narrative authority and Phelan's differentiated approach to reliability help preserve the distinction between limited knowledge, persuasive presentation and calculated concealment.

The revelation consequently changes the purpose of rereading. Earlier passages become available as records of how an interpretation was sustained. Details that appeared ordinary acquire significance through their relationship to preparation, while apparent candour becomes open to scrutiny as selective disclosure. In Christie especially, the return to the narrative requires attention to the connection between accurate statements and misleading completeness. The completed investigation does not make the earlier account unusable. It establishes the need to assess the different functions its details perform, including the protection created by what remains unmarked.

Reading the criminal mind in these works therefore involves a double reconstruction. The detective accounts for the offender's arrangements, and the reader revisits the presentation through which those arrangements became intelligible. The study's contribution lies in connecting these processes while retaining their differences. Concealment succeeds when a plausible explanation allows scrutiny to settle prematurely; detection advances when the grounds of that explanation become questionable. The recovered letter and the exposed narrator each require evidence to be reconsidered in relation to the purposes behind its appearance. Intention emerges through that reconsideration, as a claim supported by the circumstances of the crime and continually qualified by the form of their disclosure.

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