

ENGL 3000  
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30 Jan 2018

THEMATIC INQUIRY 7 - BABENER'S READING OF "THE PURLOINED LETTER"

Due: Thu, 01 Feb

During our first several sessions, we have focused our attention on some basic moves in interpreting a literary work:

1. giving special attention to key features of the literary work (e.g., title, opening, ending, speaker, striking images, symbols, repetitions, progressions); and
2. using the concept of *theme* to begin considering what counts as an adequate statement of interpretation.

We will continue to explore these basic moves by examining an essay on Poe's "The Purloined Letter." Poe's story has been the subject of many critical studies. In fact, it was at the center of a debate between two prominent French intellectuals (Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida), both of whom had considerable influence on American literary studies beginning in the 1980s. That debate along with several other essays is collected in the volume *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida & Psychoanalytic Reading*, ed. John P Muller and William J Richardson (1988). The essay we will read comes from that volume: L. K. Babener's "The Shadow's Shadow: The Motif of the Double in Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Purloined Letter'" (1972). You will find Babener's essay attached.

*The Concept of Motif:* As you can see from the title of her essay, Babener believes that the interpretation of Poe's story should focus on "the motif of the double." The concept of *motif*, like the concept of *theme*, is often used by scholars to talk about the meaning of literary works. So, in preparation for reading Babener's essay, look up the term *motif* in the *Handbook to Literature* (or another handbook). Once you have read Babener's essay, you may want to go back to the *Handbook* entry on *motif* and mark that part of the entry that best captures how Babener used the term.

*How Literary Scholars Write:* In addition to using Babener's essay as a way of becoming better acquainted with *motif* as a term of literary criticism, we will use it to begin looking closely at *how literary scholars write*. That is, since our primary goal is to be taken more seriously as students of literature, we will want to spend some time during the semester examining how real scholars think and write about literature. In other words, in order to become a serious student of literature one needs to learn not only literature but *the ways in which scholars think and write about literature*.

**Written Assignment:** The primary goal of most scholarly articles is *to address a problem* by proposing and arguing for a resolution to that problem, or what we usually refer to as a "thesis." In Babener's essay, her thesis concerns the interpretation of Poe's story. That is, Babener addresses the general question, How should we interpret "The Purloined Letter"? As you read the essay, keep these three questions in mind; then, after you've read the essay, write a 1-page response in which you address these questions:

1. What is Babener's thesis? (Notice that she presents her thesis twice; so, which of the two statements offers the more adequate statement of the story's theme?)
2. What do you think is the strongest argument Babener provides in support of her thesis?
3. Which of Babener's arguments, if any, do you find unconvincing?

Try to be as specific as possible. For example, in answering the first question, identify and quote the passage in which Babener presents her thesis. Also, even though this response is an informal writing assignment, be sure to include page references to the passages you quote.