

The Two Letters: Understanding Jacques Lacan's Notion of Repetition Compulsion through a Comparative Reading of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter* and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*

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Abstract

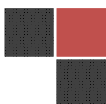
My paper aims to explain Jacques Lacan's notion of 'repetition compulsion' by exploring how this theory works at large within two different literary texts, namely *The Purloined Letter* by Edgar Allan Poe and *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Lacan himself used Poe's text as a tool for explaining this concept. Taking cue from Lacan's discourse, the paper seeks to examine the psychological underpinnings which help to understand the course of events within literature, as well as within the society, by positing Hawthorne's text alongside Poe's. Lacan elaborates his theory by showing how the unconscious works simultaneously with language through the order of the symbolic, which constantly shifts position with a corresponding displacement of a central signifier. The paper charts out two different patterns of this symbolic order, one, of a similar triadic structure existing within both the texts, and another linear pattern within Hawthorne's text which explains a lack and the consequent unconscious desire of a subject for the concerned signifier.

Keywords: Lacan, repetition compulsion, letter, signifier, order of the symbolic.

Sigmund Freud, in his 1920 essay titled *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, elaborately discusses for the first time, the notion of ‘repetition compulsion’. This concept does away with his previous psychoanalytic theory of the ‘Pleasure Principle’, which locates satisfaction of the libidinal desires at the very root of human behavioural patterns. According to Freud, the human psyche is governed by a compulsion to endlessly repeat their past traumatic experiences like “some ‘daemonic’ power”, in a simulated set-up usually without the subject’s awareness of the repetition as well as its origin (Freud, 604). The manifestation of this unconscious urge occurs in dreams as well as in real-life situations. Freud terms this compulsive urge to repeat prior experiences as ‘repetition compulsion’. It is from this position that Jacques Lacan begins his analysis of the unconscious through the notion of ‘repetition compulsion’. In this paper I would like to examine how Lacan’s idea of repetition compulsion can analyse and / or be understood by taking a literary text, which Lacan himself used to justify his theory – *The Purloined Letter* by Edgar Allan Poe – and make a comparative study of this text with Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel *The Scarlet Letter*.

Jacques Lacan, in his “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’”, uses Freudian psychoanalysis, especially the concept of ‘repetition compulsion’, and places it within the vortex of Linguistics. He explores the workings of the unconscious desire through language. He says that the “unconscious is structured like a language” (Homer, 68). In order to explain this process he borrows from Ferdinand de Saussure the notion of ‘signifier’ and ‘signified’ and focuses on how the arbitrariness of their relationship leads to the repetitive action of the signifier, in shifting its position in search of a fixed meaning or signified, in order to fill the gap. Whenever an apparent signified is found, it passes under another signifier, and this leads to a repetitive chain of signifiers without a fixed end. According to the Lacanian notion, there exists a constant unconscious desire for the signifier by a subject or character, which can be understood through the order of the symbolic. The order of the symbolic constitutes a structure representing the symbolic displacement of the signifier through space and time, along a consistent signifying chain, where a combination of subject positions in the structure and their relationships with one another remain constant, but the identity of the subjects is constantly constructed and subsequently deconstructed with every single time the signifier is symbolically displaced and its surrounding structure automatically repeated (Homer, 43-48). This phenomenon is regarded as ‘repetition automatism’ or ‘repetition compulsion’ since the process of repetition is compulsive and unending, and it indicates a return of the repressed unconscious which is represented through its desire for the symbolic signifier. Lacan uses Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Purloined Letter* to explain this theory of ‘repetition compulsion’. However, this theory can be analysed through the psychological dimensions at work within other literary texts like Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*.

In both *The Purloined Letter* and *The Scarlet Letter* it is a ‘letter’ which acts as the signifier, the centre around which the structure, or the symbolic order, is created. While, in *The Purloined Letter*, the ‘letter’ is a written document meant for communicating particular information, in *The Scarlet Letter* the ‘letter’ is the English alphabet ‘A’. In Poe’s text, the letter is displaced physically from the possession of one individual to another, which results in a change of inter subjective relationships, or the power relations at play between the characters of the text (Lacan, 10). A similar change

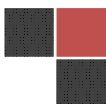


through the compulsive repetition of the structure in Hawthorne's text is driven by a change in the symbolic connotation of the letter 'A' in the course of the novel.

The repetitive symbolic structure in Lacan's reading of *The Purloined Letter* may be best described in the terms of John P. Muller and William J. Richardson :

... the essentials of the pattern consist in an interplay between three subjective positions: one subject sees nothing, hence is "blind" to the situation in which he finds himself; a second subject "sees" that the first subject sees nothing but "deludes himself as to the secrecy" of what he hides, that is, is unaware of being "seen" in turn; a third subject sees the first two subjects leave "what should be hidden exposed to whomever would seize it" and capitalizes on this fact. (Muller and Richardson, 59)

In the first situation in *The Purloined Letter* when the letter is in possession of the Queen, the King takes the first subjective position mentioned above, the Queen herself the second, and the Minister the third. Similarly, in the first scaffold scene of *The Scarlet Letter*, the Puritan Law and the New England society comprise the first "blind" position, Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale together constitute the second subject position, and Roger Chillingworth the third. In the first case, the letter in Poe's text is present in front of the King, but the latter is blind to its presence. Similarly in Hawthorne, although both the sinners, Arthur and Hester, who together represent the alphabet 'A' on Hester's dress are publicly present, the society is blind to the other identity of Dimmesdale as Hester's lover, and therefore the idea of adultery as well as the adulterers, although present in their totality, is only partially visible to the Puritan law and society. In the second case, while the Queen is the possessor of the letter in Poe's text, Hester and Arthur are the possessors of the scarlet letter in Hawthorne's novel, as they have committed the adultery and therefore what represents this adultery, the scarlet letter 'A', actually belongs to both of them. In the third case, both the Minister and Roger Chillingworth are aware of the entire situation. The Minister, knowing full well about the Queen's helplessness, craftily displaces the letter right in front of her eyes. Similarly, in *The Scarlet Letter*, Roger Chillingworth is aware of the helplessness of Hester, and therefore signals her to remain quiet, because it would serve his dual vindictive purpose of tormenting Hester through her public shaming, and his own secretive search and subsequent infliction of torture upon the illicit lover, that is Dimmesdale.



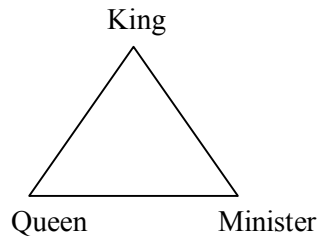
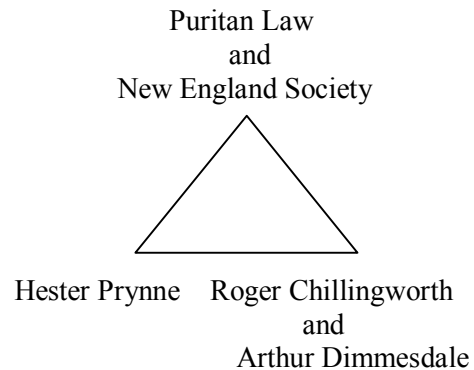
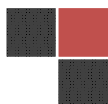
THE PURLOINED LETTER***THE SCARLET LETTER***

Fig. 1

In the next situation the central signifiers have changed their positions – the purloined letter in case of Poe, is now in the Minister’s house, while Hawthorne’s scarlet letter undergoes a change in position along the semantic field, the symbolic connotation being transferred from the negative to the positive, from an object of ridicule, a mark of shame to an object of beauty, a sign of Hester’s artistry in embroidery and her ability as a caregiver. This shift in position of the signifiers leads to a change in position of the subjects around the same structural form, which is the order of the symbolic. Thus, the relationship of the characters or the subjects with the signifier undergoes change, but not the idea of the structure. This is one of the determining markers of Lacan’s notion of ‘repetition compulsion’. The positions within the structure, which are meant to be occupied by the subjects or characters, remain constant, while every time the signifier shifts position along with the symbolic structure around it, the subjects move from one position to another, with a corresponding change in their relationship with the signifier. Thus the image or idea of the structure, that is the structural form, when repeated, remains the same, but not the real structure, because the centre of that structure has shifted its position. The centre shifts through time and space, but the order around that centre does not change. Therefore with every single shift in the position of the signifier, what we get is a virtual image of the previous structure.

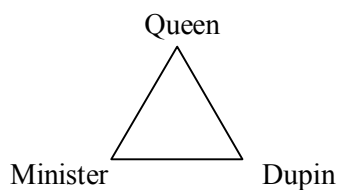
In *The Purloined Letter* the Prefect, who represents the Queen, now takes the role of the King in the earlier situation, as both are blind to the presence of the letter. The Prefect of the Police searches all the possible corners and yet fails to find the letter. Therefore, abiding by the conventional law, the letter could not be found, since, much like the Queen in the earlier situation, the Minister had hidden the letter in an unconventional place – above the mantelpiece, right in front of everyone, where the Prefect is least likely to notice. Finally, the letter was discovered and silently retrieved by the detective C. Auguste Dupin, who being a scholar, could recognize the unconventional schemes of the Minister, who was also a scholar, and whose activities could not be assessed by simple mathematical calculations (Lacan 22).

Similar is the repetition of the structure in *The Scarlet Letter*, where Arthur Dimmesdale, as a member of the society of strict Puritan authorities, now represents the first subject position, and is blind to the machinations of Roger Chillingworth, who befools the law, the society, and Dimmesdale, and secretly carries out his vengeance on



Dimmesdale by gradually tormenting him in the guise of treatment. In this situation, Hester acquires the third subject position. Hester is fully aware of Chillingworth's vengeful motives, although Chillingworth fails to realize how Hester escapes the trauma and social oppression associated with the wearing of the letter 'A' on the bosom of her dress. The shift in position of the signifier 'A' comes along with Hester's embroidery skills and caring attitude, which lead to her social empowerment, precisely what Chillingworth tried to prevent or subvert in the previous situation. Earlier the letter represented 'Adultery', the complete exposure of which was in control of Chillingworth. But as he got busy taking his revenge against Dimmesdale, Roger Chillingworth was unaware of how the signifier 'A' changed its position, and passed from his control to that of Hester's, more so after Dimmesdale publicly proclaimed himself to be Hester's illicit lover right before his death, thereby leaving Hester nothing more to worry about. She was "so kind to the poor, so helpful to the sick, so comfortable to the afflicted", that the letter 'A' on her dress came to be represented as "Able" instead of 'Adultery' (Hawthorne, 106). Therefore, Chillingworth fails to understand how Hester gets the better of him. He is blind to the fact that his intentions of punishing Hester for life get disrupted through her actions, which take place openly in front of everyone's eyes.

THE PURLOINED LETTER



THE SCARLET LETTER

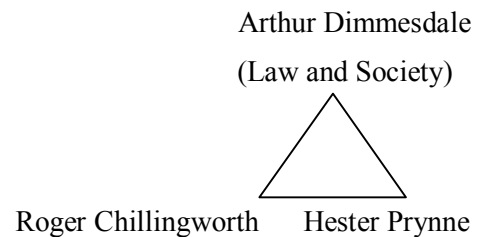
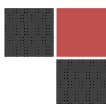


Fig. 2

The compulsive repetition of the order of the symbolic through a constant shift of the signifier, in the course of the narrative of *The Scarlet Letter*, from one apparent signified to another highlight another structural pattern which follows the Lacanian notion of 'repetition compulsion'. The scarlet letter 'A' was initially given to Hester Prynne by the Puritan Law as a symbol of adultery, a legally as well as socially condemnable act which she had committed, thereby punishing her. In Hester's possession, the letter also became a symbol of her love affair with Arthur Dimmesdale. As a symbol of love, its implication was passed from Hester to Dimmesdale, who, in turn, felt tormented by his inability to publicly acknowledge his true feelings, thereby unconsciously substituting it by the repeated placing of his hand over his own chest, as if a hidden letter 'A' was inscribed on his bosom. In chapter fifteen of the novel, Hester's daughter Pearl decorates herself by forming the letter 'A' with sea-weeds. When Hester asks Pearl the meaning of the letter, Pearl replies that its meaning is similar to that minister, Dimmesdale, keeping his hand on his chest (Hawthorne, 116). Therefore for Pearl, the scarlet letter becomes metonymically related to the character of Dimmesdale. This shows how the scarlet letter shifts its position from Dimmesdale to Pearl, for whom



the letter stands for a father figure, which she might have already associated unconsciously with Dimmesdale. For Pearl, it gives a human form to the idea of her own father, thereby fulfilling a gap and strengthening her belief in her own identity as a human being with human parents. This explains why Pearl became afraid near the brook in chapter nineteen and could not recognize her mother, when Hester took off the scarlet letter from her dress (Hawthorne, 134). Therefore, due to her daughter's insistence, Hester had to wear the scarlet letter again. Through this symbolic act, the letter now passes from Pearl to Hester. This time the letter has come to signify Hester's identity as a mother, which she cannot evade by putting away the scarlet letter. Hester's caring attitude extends beyond her relationship with Pearl and acquires universal dimension, whereby she came to be represented as the archetypal image of motherhood due to her ability, especially that of being a caregiver for the poor and the wretched people in her society. This, along with her artistry in embroidery, came to be acknowledged and appreciated by the Puritan society. Within this appreciation there was a desire for the skill which Hester possessed, a desire for the scarlet letter by the society thus being symbolically implied, and therefore the letter now shifts along the symbolic order from Hester to the Puritan society as a symbol of beauty, ability and artistry.

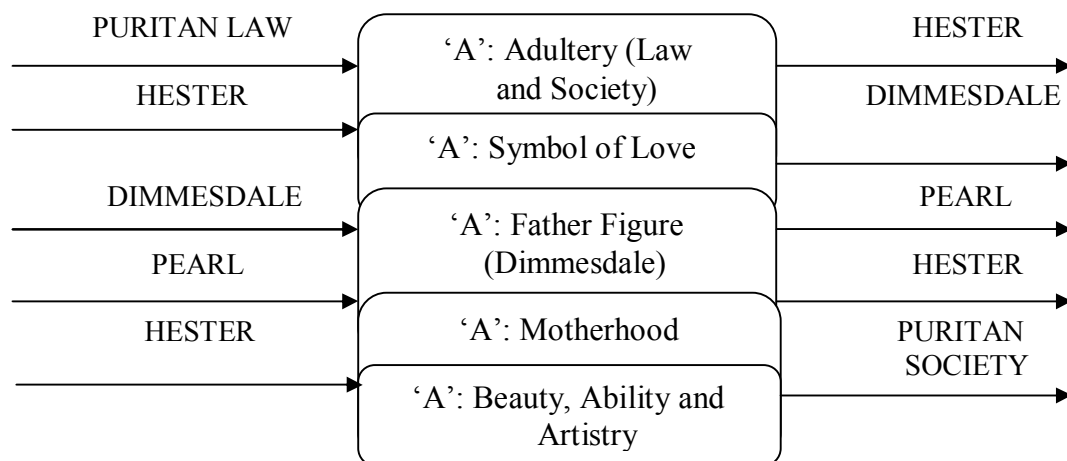
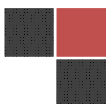


Fig. 3

All the above characters, to whom the scarlet letter is passed, suffer from a lack, which torment them, with or without their being aware about it. As such, the scarlet letter, when passed, represents the very element or quality which the character to whom it is passed lacks, and thereby tries to fulfil the gap. Since she has breached the law, Hester lacks the guidance and protection of law and society. There is a lack of socially acceptable love in Dimmesdale's life. There is a lack of the physical presence of a human father in Pearl's life. By the brook, when Hester had to wear the letter after Pearl's unnatural behaviour, Hester suffers from a lack of freedom from her duty as a mother. It may also be said to represent her lack of freedom from the tag of adultery, since Pearl was born of an adulterous relationship and her very existence was a constant reminder to Hester of her own inescapability from that stigma. In the last case, it is the lack of qualities like beauty, artistry and ability as a caregiver, which the Puritan society suffers from, that has been highlighted. The begetting of the signifier highlights this lack



and an unconscious desire for it, which, in turn, leads to the shifting of the signifiers from one position of the semantic realm to another.

The symbolic structures mentioned above thus continue to repeat themselves ceaselessly with the continuous displacement of the respective letters, with the subjects around them getting replaced with every repetition. The letters are signifiers of the repressed unconscious which has a tendency of returning ceaselessly in a similar repetitive structure, where the signifiers, which belong to the domain of language, work as a “symbolic substitute” of the unconscious, which cannot be read or understood otherwise (Felman 146). Every time the structure gets repeated with a changed intersubjective relationship, it nullifies or represses what it has previously signified, and the process continues endlessly with a constant search for an absolute signified which is never reached.

Therefore, it may be concluded by saying that the discourse on ‘repetition compulsion’ or ‘repetition automatism’, which Jacques Lacan presents through Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Purloined Letter* in order to explain how the unconscious works through a symbolic order of shifting signifiers, can be well applied to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* for a psychoanalytic study of the novel. Conversely, the novel can also be used to have a better understanding of the Lacanian theory. While on one occasion ‘repetition compulsion’ in Hawthorne’s novel follows the very same triadic structure which Lacan has used from Poe’s text, on another occasion the structural form is different, but the principle of compulsive or automatic repetition of the form through an interminable signifying chain remains the same. In the end, I would like to point out that in this paper as well, the signifier ‘letter’ has a dual meaning with respect to the two literary texts under study, which may lead to a continuous signifying chain, thereby opening up possibilities for further analysis of the texts through this paper.

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