The art of framing lies: analyzing detective fiction

Sarah Cauthen

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THE ART OF FRAMING LIES: ANALYZING DETECTIVE FICTION

Sarah Cauthen

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in
English
to
The Graduate School
of
The University of Alabama in Huntsville
December 2023

Approved by:

Dr. Joseph Conway, Research Advisor
Dr. Colleen Noletto, Committee Member
Professor Anna Weber, Committee Member
Dr. Chad Thomas, Department Chair
Dr. Sean Lane, College Dean
Abstract

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In this thesis, I trace the historical timeline of detective fiction and how it has progressed since its introduction. I show how certain authors, such as Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, Dashiell Hammett, and Raymond Chandler, have shaped the way mysteries are represented to readers, as well as what each writer has left behind through their works’ legacies. I argue that the plot’s framework in detective stories is molded based on “the art of framing lies,” a phrase introduced by Dorothy L. Sayers. In doing this, the mystery author doesn’t directly lie to the reader, but deceives them by telling the story in such a way that the reader is unable to see the truth until the story’s denouement. What Sayers’ phrase reveals about detective fiction is that nothing is quite what it seems, which makes the genre all the more enjoyable.
Acknowledgements

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I also want to thank both Dr. Colleen Noletto and Anna Weber for agreeing to be on my thesis committee and for their helpful advice.

I am so grateful for all of them, as this paper has been a difficult struggle to reach its final draft, but it is a struggle I would gladly take on again and again.
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Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1. Introduction

It should not come as a surprise that detective fiction is a popular genre because it entices us to uncover the truth and reveal the guilty person. There is a little bit of a detective in all of us as we play the game the authors of mystery and thrills share with us. It is important to keep in mind, though, that the authors of detective fiction are not going to play fairly; after all, they are the ones making up the rules. As the title of this thesis claims, there is an art to writing good detective stories, and it comes from how the writer lays out their plot in such a way that there are two threads of information being relayed: the truth of the matter and the lie that conceals it. Simply put, the real joy of reading detective stories comes from using skills of observation and our own inductive reasoning as we track down clues and work alongside the fictional sleuths; even when we are surprised, or frustrated, by the plot twist, there is a feeling of excitement for the next opportunity.

Now, to explain what the art of framing lies means, I have to go back to the writer who first acknowledged this concept; in her essay, “Aristotle on Detective Fiction,” Dorothy L. Sayers, the creator of the Lord Peter Wimsey mysteries, analyzes how Aristotle’s ideas on the structure of tragedy relate to how a writer of detective fiction creates the formula for their story. There are common links found within every fictional form and genre; however, what differentiates detective fiction is how to frame the storyline like a magic trick. The essence of the story is to keep the audience’s attention
engaged on one point, A, while another point, B, is working under the radar; in other words, do not pay attention to what may be going on behind the curtain. Sayers explains framing the lie to fellow writers:

From beginning to end of your book, it is your whole aim and object to lead the reader up the garden; to induce him to believe a lie…to believe, in short, anything and everything but the truth.

The art of framing lies—but mark! of framing lies in the right way. There is the crux. Any fool can tell a lie, and any fool can believe it; but the right method is to tell the truth in such a way that the intelligent reader is seduced into telling the lie for himself. (174-175)

There is the key in how to frame the lie; to do it in the right way, the writer has to tell the lie by presenting it in a manner that contains a seed of reliability. Take for instance, Agatha Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*; Christie presents her unnamed narrator as a reliable source for information because he is the good doctor, much in the same way that Dr. Watson is in the Sherlock Holmes stories. For those who are familiar with the Holmes and Watson duo, they are shown another pair through Hercule Poirot and the unnamed narrator. Thus, since Dr. Watson is a good man and accurately tells the truth of his adventures with Holmes, the reader of Christie’s novel may assume that her narrator is the same. In other words, there is enough truth in the lie to make the lie believable, and enough suspicion pointed elsewhere that the entirety of the truth is concealed until the denouement. When it turns out that the so-called narrator is actually the murderer, there is a sense of bewilderment and anger, because he is, in truth, a fraud and unreliable witness to the events he has described to the readers. Yet, readers cannot be angry at Christie for
leading them up this particular garden path, because she never told an outright lie. The narrator did, but why should he have been believed in the first place? Since he resembles the familiar figure of Dr. Watson and is in fact the one telling what happens, readers assume he is their eyes and ears, the one that they are directly connected to in the story. Therefore, “the intelligent reader is seduced into telling the lie for himself”—that the person who is just one of the many narrators whom we have believed in the past is someone of integrity and trust. It almost makes one wonder how reliably Dr. Watson should be taken; after all, who’s to say that there is not a skeleton buried somewhere in his closet? Despite how well we might think we have the mystery figured out, there is always an unexpected twist just around the corner, which is why detective fiction maintains such popular appeal.

In analyzing detective fiction, there is a feeling of respect for the writers who successfully frame the lie. In the cases where the plot falls into a cliché, there is nostalgia because the cliché, like in the instance of the locked-room mystery, is a narrative technique that has been tried and true. In this study of the genre, I analyze some of the great detective stories and why they have remained such classic examples for their form and techniques in framing lies. There is a reason why people today continue to read and write detective stories; it is because they appeal to our intellect and curiosity, and provide us comfort in an attempt to understand the nature of evil by restoring order out of the disorder in society.

Detective fiction is a popular escapist genre, because it encourages the reader to step into a world much like their own, but viewing it from within an enclosed arena where ordinary people are trapped together with a murder thrown in to enhance the
emotional turmoil of hidden guilt. In this sense, the reader is forced to acknowledge their own guilty conscience, even if it is benign compared to the murderer’s; through the detective’s interference, the characters and reader can relieve themselves of their guilt and return to a state of innocence. In his essay, “The Guilty Vicarage,” W.H. Auden takes this idea from Aristotle’s view on tragedy and applies it to detective fiction:

The interest in the detective story is the dialectic of innocence and guilt.

As in the Aristotelian description of tragedy, there is Concealment (the innocent seem guilty and the guilty seem innocent) and Manifestation (the real guilt is brought to consciousness)...The formula may be diagrammed as follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Peaceful state before murder</th>
<th>False innocence</th>
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<tr>
<td>False clues, secondary murder, etc.</td>
<td>False location of guilt</td>
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<tr>
<td>Solution</td>
<td>Location of real guilt</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arrest of murderer</td>
<td>Catharsis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peaceful state after arrest</td>
<td>True innocence (Auden 11-12)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

The deception that the writer of the detective story pulls over on the readers is to make them believe the trail of false clues, so that when the detective arrives at the truth in the denouement, there is a feeling of awe for the success of the enigmatic crime. Yet, there is
another deception at work, as shown in Auden’s diagram where innocence and guilt are the underlying factors of the framed lie and concealed truth. What the detective story does is frame a lie that will bring forward the truth, and the characters are forced to restore order through the interruption of a tragedy, i.e., the murder, by slowly chipping away at the truth’s concealment. By doing this, the characters face revelations of guilt that they have kept hidden deep down in their subconscious; it is only through the detective’s inquiry that the characters can acknowledge their guilt, and experience catharsis and enter into a renewed innocence when they relieve their burden to the detective. Just as there is a restored order within the closed society once the murderer is unmasked, there is another balance re-established when each character goes through the process of acting as a suspect and exposing the concealed lie(s) that they have laid out for the detective to unravel. Readers can also experience this process by viewing what the characters go through, thereby accounting for their own concealed guilt, and cathartically remove it through the assistance of the detective.

In each chapter of this thesis, I show the progression of how the detective story develops from an analytical mind (Poe’s detective C. Auguste Dupin) to a dynamic duo of eccentric and ordinary men (Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes and Dr. John Watson) to the enigmatic plot framework of Agatha Christie and her development of the everyday sleuth (Miss Jane Marple), and finally to the American hard-boiled detectives in Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler’s works. In reviewing the chronology of detective stories, there is not a very long line to trace, but there is something to be said about how far this genre has come since Edgar Allan Poe’s introduction in 1841. Critics may either praise or oppose the tactics of some writers like those responsible for the
Golden Age cozies; however, without the vast array of areas like the intellectual puzzlers and eccentric sleuths (from Poe to Christie) to the hard-boiled private eyes (Hammett and Chandler), detective fiction would not have been able to grow and meet with the changing times in history. Yet, there always remains the classic tropes that Poe established because these tools of framing the lie work for a reason. As Roger Callois argues in his essay, “The Detective Novel as Game” the plot’s framework “must be enigmatic…The ingenuity of the author is demonstrated in the preparation of such a situation and in its simple and surprising resolution. He triumphs by explaining the impossible” (3). Without the challenge to the mind, readers wouldn’t become as engrossed in the detective story, because the challenge to solve the mystery actively engages the reader with the story rather than has them view it from the sidelines. Any writer of detective fiction can provide a story of a murder, but what turns them into a great writer is their ability to twist the story to their advantage and keep the readers on their toes.

There is a lot to be said for detective stories in how they not only challenge the mind through enigmatic problems, but also uphold moralistic ideals. Yet, as the genre dictates, there is always going to be a body on the floor somewhere, whether the room is locked or not. The ideal for society to remain in a state of innocence is just that, an ideal; the reality is that murder is a concrete dilemma because it is a consequence of human nature. These types of stories address the question of violence and why it occurs, oftentimes for no apparent reason at all; however, in their attempt to understand violence, they give a peace of mind that good shall prevail—that there is, and always will be, a hero walking down “these mean streets” (Chandler, “The Simple Art of Murder” 20). The
fictional detective may not be someone within our own frame of reality; however, he does a service for us in that he calms the fears within our minds, which everyone tries to escape from, and with great difficulty, quiet enough that we can go about our daily lives without worrying too much. Through the fictional world of detective fiction, readers can escape to the English villages and manors, or explore the seedy corners of a big city without fear, knowing that there is a detective leading the way and that he has our backs when blood begins to spill.

1.2. From Poe to Hammett: The Timeline of the Detective Story

The origins of detective fiction do not go as far back along the timeline of literature’s history because there is one essential element necessary for the genre to be formed: the detective. The first official London police force was created by Sir Robert Peel in 1829, so naturally, it would take a while before the fictional detective arrived on the scene. In their study of the history of detective fiction, Ellery Queen notes: “Mark well the date—April, 1841—for upon this date the first detective story the world had ever known was thrust before its astonished nose” (Queen vi). It is upon this date that the Father of Detective Fiction, Edgar Allan Poe, published his story, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” changing how the mystery genre is developed in an entirely gratifying new way. As examined in chapter two of this thesis, Poe’s creation of the amateur detective, C. Auguste Dupin, shows how one can establish a keen understanding of the nature of violence through problem-solving and deductive reasoning. For Poe, the importance lies within the intellectual brain that can break down facts and clues and find a common link within the puzzle of the crime. The ability to see clearly what others cannot is what makes Dupin an outcast from his professional peers, but it places him at a higher
standard, because it is his extraordinary gifts that bring forward the truth. It is because of Poe’s contribution that the tropes shown throughout the history of detective stories have become such iconic components of the genre: the amateur detective whose skills and wit successfully restore order; the locked-room that makes the mystery all the more challenging; the faithful companion who chronicles the adventures of the detective; and the quintessential plot twist that leaves readers astounded. Without any of these tropes, detective fiction would most likely never have gone as far as it has, and it is through the writers who honed these techniques that they are able to perfect the framework of constructing the lie.

There is another important moment in the world of detective fiction that occurred in 1887. Its author describes a scene of a meeting between two men:

‘How are you?’ he said cordially, gripping my hand with a strength for which I should hardly have given him credit. ‘You have been in Afghanistan, I perceive.’

‘How on earth did you know that?’ I asked in astonishment.

‘Never mind,’ said he, chuckling to himself…

‘We came here on business,’ said Stamford, sitting down…‘My friend here wants to take diggings; and as you were complaining that you could get no one to go halves with you, I thought that I had better bring you together.’

…I have my eye on a suite in Baker Street,’ he said, ‘which would suit us down to the ground. You do not mind the smell of strong tobacco, I hope?’

‘I always smoke ‘ship’s’ myself,’ I answered.

‘That’s good enough. I generally have chemicals about, and occasionally do experiments. Would that annoy you?’
‘By no means.’

…‘I think we may consider the thing as settled…’

We left him working among his chemicals, and we walked together towards my hotel.

‘By the way,’ I asked suddenly, stopping and turning upon Stamford, ‘how the deuce did he know that I had come from Afghanistan?’

My companion smiled an enigmatical smile. ‘That’s just his little peculiarity,’ he said. ‘A good many people have wanted to know how he finds things out.’

‘Oh! a mystery is it?’ I cried, rubbing my hands. ‘This is very piquant. I am much obliged to you for bringing us together. ‘The proper study of mankind is man,’ you know.’

‘You must study him then,’ Stamford said, as he bade me good-bye.

‘You’ll find him a knotty problem, though. I’ll wager he learns more about you than you about him. Good-bye.’

‘Good-bye,’ I answered, and strolled on to my hotel, considerably interested in my new acquaintance. (Conan Doyle, A Study in Scarlet 10-12)

Even if one has never read Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s novella, A Study in Scarlet, the introduction between Sherlock Holmes and Dr. John Watson is an historical moment, because it is the beginning of the dynamic duo who immortalized detective fiction, and who are the subject of chapter three. Holmes and Watson are recognizable throughout the margins of literature not only because of their many adaptations on page and screen, but because they represent the classic persona of the eccentric amateur sleuth and his loyal
companion. Holmes may be a great detective on his own; however, without Watson, he may have been just one of the many amateur sleuths during the literary craze when writers were submitting detective stories for magazines. Not that Sherlock Holmes would have lacked flair and popularity if Doyle had decided to write him as a solo detective; but there is something about the duality between the two men, Holmes and Watson, that stand out from all the rest. It is their differences in how they interact in society and with each other that make them a formidable team, because they balance each other out. Holmes is the analytical intellect who can notice the small details of a case and deduce how everything comes together to a successful conclusion; yet, he lacks the social graces needed to help him understand the human factors of the crime. Watson is an everyday man, ordinary and simple when it comes to trying to understand the scientific and analytical aspects of a crime; however, it is his loyalty and friendship that helps Holmes stay on track when he is depressed and taking supplements to calm his mind. It takes both an analytical mind and empathetic spirit to understand the complexities of human nature, and together, Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson show how this is done through their friendship and work to restore justice to victims.

Doyle’s creation of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson cemented detective fiction as a phenomenon for writers and readers from the 19th through the 21st century. After Poe’s introduction, detective fiction became a new sensation, but it is because of writers like Doyle who kept the sensation lasting for as long as it has. Yet, with any popular character, there is the issue of repeating the structure so many times that it becomes a cliché; so, it goes for the eccentric detective. During the Golden Age of Detective Fiction in the early twentieth century (1920-39), writers spewed out detective story after
detective story, and many have now become lost. In chapter four, I show how one English writer escaped falling into obscurity because of her unique talent for creating enigmatic plot twists. She is the Great Dame herself, Agatha Christie, who is outsold only by the Bible and Shakespeare. As mentioned before in my discussion of the art of framing lies, Christie’s framework to have the killer be the narrator of the story in The Murder of Roger Ackroyd demonstrates ingenuity and sheer wickedness towards the readers, which makes her such a legend in detective fiction. It is not just her plots, however, that Christie is known for; her Belgian detective, Hercule Poirot, may have his eccentricities, but it is his ability to decipher clues using his little gray cells that has made him a renowned sleuth in detective fiction. What differentiates him from others such as Dupin and Holmes is that he is more equally balanced in having both an analytical mind and empathetic character. In his stories, Poirot shows this by being haughty in his intelligence, but also earns people’s trust by showing that he has their best interests at heart. One thing that Christie also showcases in her works is the complexity of human nature—how the killer can easily hide behind a persona of innocence, and how the detective can just as easily do so as well. In her creation of Miss Jane Marple, Christie makes an amateur sleuth out of an ordinary, elderly spinster whose ability to solve crime comes from her study of human nature by watching the villagers of her home, St. Mary Mead. Nothing is ever quite as it seems, and yet, by understanding what motivates people, one can gain an insight into a killer’s mind; Miss Marple shows us this by providing simple explanations to the complexities of murder. Despite how renowned her sleuths are, it is Christie’s plots that have made her such a sensational patron to detective
fiction, showing how successfully framing the lie leads to readers wanting to absorb more
in the chance to unravel the knotty problem of the crime.

The knotty problem is oftentimes found in the identity of the murderer; however,
as the writers in the Hard-Boiled School of Detective Fiction, who are the subject of
chapter five, reveal throughout their detective stories is that the detective can be an
enigmatical problem in how he performs his duty. Dashiell Hammett is recognized as the
creator of the hard-boiled thriller in which the detective upholds duty above all else,
which may seem like he has a cold demeanor similar to Holmes; however, Hammett’s
detectives are much more mechanical and pay for their lack of human empathy in the
blood of innocent victims. There is a question of where the detective draws the line
between the law and criminality. However, in showing this struggle, writers like Dashiell
Hammett and Raymond Chandler reveal a complexity within their characters—that they
are more than unique intellectuals, but also ordinary men in the same standing as the
criminal and victim. In these detective stories, the plot is more straightforward, showing
how the detective goes from point A to B in following the murderer’s trail, but there can
still be lies strewn along the way, just in a different manner. As seen in Hammett’s novel,
*Red Harvest*, the framework comes from the detective, the Continental Op, when he
manipulates the situation in the city of Personville by turning the criminals against one
another, thus solving violence with violence. The real truth of the matter in this novel is
seeing how far the detective is willing to cross over into criminality in order that justice is
restored within the city; what this tells us is that the detective is not exactly a criminal,
but neither is he in the boundaries of the law. In her book, *Talking About Detective
Fiction*, P.D. James sums up Hammett’s writing style:
Hammett’s stories are not about restoring the moral order, nor are they set in a world in which the problem of evil can be solved by Poirot’s little grey cells or Miss Marple’s cozy homilies…Hammett knew from traumatic personal experience how precarious is the moral tightrope which the private investigator daily walks in his battle with the criminal. (82-83)

It is this struggle that defines the hard-boiled school because life is a mixture of complex shades, not only black or white, or both, but every kind of gray area that is disorderly. It cannot be solved solely by Doyle or Christie’s puzzle solvers because reason only goes so far; the moral tightrope comes from the heart as it struggles to manage the difficult dilemmas of guilt and innocence. It is this moral question that leads to readers working to understand the complex structure of the characters, rather than just the plot in these detective stories. This shows that the art of framing the lie rests not only in how the writer tells the story, but more importantly in how the characters frame themselves within the story.

1.3. Why We Read: The Critical Debate between the Cozy Murder & the Hard-Boiled Thriller

In Poe and Doyle's creation of their detective heroes, there is an atmosphere of grisly murder that returns to a tranquil state once the killer is brought to justice. Critics of detective fiction debate whether detective stories should be considered literary art or entertaining escapist fiction. The Golden Age mystery is oftentimes dismissed due to its cozy classification as “the atmosphere is designed to give pleasure and comfort,” along with an emphasis on “its well-designed plot, one that posed an intellectual puzzle whose solution turned on the logical principles of deductive reasoning” (Stasio “Murder Least
When looking back over the intellectual puzzle that the writer creates, one may realize that the answer was not something of pure ingenuity and could have been solved using common sense; yet, there is nostalgia to escape inside these stories because everything wraps up to a satisfactory conclusion. In his acceptance speech on winning a literary award in 1999, Anglo-Irish novelist and short story writer, William Trevor, discusses how his reading of detective stories encourages this nostalgia: “All the mysteries will be explained, all the problems solved, and peace and order will return to that mythical village which, despite its above-average homicide rate, never really loses its tranquility or its innocence” (qtd. in James 75). When the Golden Age of detective fiction began, it was between the two world wars, which can explain why there is a lack of gory violence, because people were already facing enough loss of life. The ability to escape inside a cozy mystery where violence is diminished and easily explained by the detective is a necessity for people all over the world who, at the time, struggled to understand the consequences of war. In her critical study, “Guilty but Insane: Mind and Law in Golden Age Detective Fiction,” Samantha Walton acknowledges this escapism: “The persistence of golden age tropes beyond the onset of the Second World War may be criticized as an escapist strategy that comforted readers unwilling to confront the reality of global turmoil” (Walton 8). The world of literature offers outlooks on our history and challenges our perceptions of our society and cultures. Just because the tropes in Golden Age detective fiction are seen as escapist strategies doesn’t mean that they are less than the highly-praised literature of their time. When the world suffers through “global turmoil,” there is a necessity of providing comfort in the mundane, which can be found in the cozy English villages portrayed throughout detective stories. In its glory, the Golden Age of
detective fiction provided intellectual problems that are justifiably solved through
deductive reasoning, which may not seem all that difficult once common sense kicks in;
however, the point of these stories is to restore the environment obstructed by a violent
death back to its tranquility, and in doing so, readers escape from their own dark thoughts
and return to a tranquil state of mind. The deception of the writer to frame the plot as an
enigmatic puzzle doesn’t just trick the intellectual in a game of cat and mouse to uncover
the truth; more importantly the deception is for us to step away from our private thoughts
into a world that can help us understand our fears and dark desires. So, for the critics who
say that detective stories “do not really come off intellectually as problems,
and…artistically as fiction” (Chandler, “The Simple Art of Murder” 12), there is an
argument that these stories are part of escapist fiction, in which escape does a high
service by restoring peace within our minds and spirits.

Veering away from the intellectual scope of detective fiction, some writers in
America escaped from falling into the cliché plots of their British contemporaries by
focusing more so on the consequences of crime rather than creating a tidy resolution.
Despite the hard-boiled school’s style of instigating violence and showcasing tough
detectives, there is still a trope for deceiving the reader that these writers incorporate into
their stories, just not through the intellectual puzzler that their predecessors use. In his
essay, “On Raymond Chandler,” F. R. Jameson observes how the social numbing to
violence is a deception in how it takes away meaning from murder, thus there is no real
resolution in the denouement:

The classical detective story always invests murder with purpose…But in
Chandler the other random violence…has intervened to contaminate the central
murder…Murder comes to seem moreover in its very essence accidental and without meaning…Thus, the reader’s mind has been used as an element in a very complicated esthetic deception: he has been made to expect the solution of an intellectual puzzle…and suddenly, in its place, he is given an evocation of death in all its physicality… (146-147)

With all of the violence strewn throughout the hard-boiled thriller, it becomes difficult to focus on one central murder because the point lies more so in how the characters react to a violent death “in all its physicality” rather than as a problem to be solved. When it is just a body lying in a locked-room, there is an intrigue for how the murder was commenced and the focus is to figure out who the killer is; however, the tragedy itself becomes irrelevant. When violence becomes a natural occurrence, there is a social numbing to it, but it is looked at more for what it is—the tragedy of the loss of human life.

This harsh transition from the cozy English countryside to the corrupt city streets of America is difficult, because it forces the reader to examine violence head-on, but the hard-boiled thriller doesn’t lie about the brutality and dismal outlook of murder; it enhances it, so people take these detective stories more seriously. In his essay, “Literature under the Table: The Detective Novel and its Social Mission,” Ernst Kaemmel explains how the detective novel is a child of capitalism in that it focuses on the hierarchy of social class, i.e., British mysteries during the Golden Age. Kaemmel goes on to argue that if there is socialist version of the detective novel, the “main purpose would then no longer be to pass the time and titillate the nerves” (61), but educate on the corruption of crime. Detective fiction would then attain “a serious literary function” (61). Thus, detective fiction is no longer treated as a game, but as a moral dilemma as the intellectual sleuth
becomes an embittered man long into the job. There is nostalgia for the Golden Age cozy mystery, because its atmosphere provides safety as the reader views the murder’s obstruction into the peaceful society; the knowledge that everything will turn out alright is what makes these stories so enjoyable, but they only give a fluffy version of reality—one that only resides in the world of fiction. What writers such as Hammett and Chandler have accomplished through their gritty outlooks on crime and the detective is that they do not conceive murder in the realist sense, but they do not gloss over it either with a cozy version; they give a version that forces the reader to pause and take into account what the detective actually has to work through, and that is going up against criminals without becoming one in the process. It is this kind of version of the detective story that raises it from the rank of escapist fiction and into the realm of literature.

1.4. The Detective Story as the Human Story

Murder has always been a part of the human story. In their book on detective fiction, Ellery Queen roots the origins of murder in the biblical account of Cain and Abel, but makes the note: “This historic fratricide nevertheless cannot be said to have initiated the literature of detection for the profound reason that the case lacked the essential element—a detective” (Queen, v). Detectives did not enter the social picture until the early nineteenth century, at least in official terms. That doesn’t mean that there weren’t already people playing detectives. In the Old Testament, God may be accounted as playing the first ever detective in history, discovering the truth of a brother’s act of fratricide and carving out justice. It is interesting to note that Genesis depicts how human origins begin with a crime, i.e., Adam and Eve’s eating of the forbidden fruit, followed with a retributive act of expulsion from a place of innocence. When their eldest son, Cain,
murders his younger brother, Abel, there is again an act of expulsion from society, which leads to Cain’s life as an outcast. In his novel, *East of Eden*, John Steinbeck charts the Cain and Abel story as the story of mankind: “I think this is the best-known story in the world because it is everybody’s story. I think it is the symbol story of the human soul” (270). What we take from this story is an examination of why we are drawn to violence because it haunts us—the fact that we try to live within a society held together by law and order, and somehow danger still invades our peace of mind. As the representative for justice, God shows us that despite the spilt blood, there is still a quality of redemption, in the belief that order will be restored and the killer is unmasked for all to see. Because of detective fiction, we can see examples, such as this story, of how the genre expands into other works of fiction and literature, showing that there is an underlying framework: we shape our human story to fit within a tale of good ultimately triumphing over evil, *i.e.*, history as it is written from the winning side; yet, we cannot hide the fact that our history began with a crime and an act of redemption—through a detective’s interference.

Detective fiction doesn’t reside within its own boxed-in category. Its tropes can be seen through a wider lens if we put on our deerstalker caps, grab our magnifying glasses, and go out looking for the hidden intricacies; as Holmes advises us in *A Study in Scarlet*, we must “begin by mastering more elementary problems” (Doyle 17) in order to sharpen “the faculties of observation” (17) and teach “one where to look and what to look for” (17). Only once we have mastered the elementary problems, can we begin to question the difficult aspects of life’s mysteries and why our human story is symbolized by a murder.
Chapter 2. Edgar Allan Poe’s Dupin: The Analytical Automaton

Crime had early claimed his attention. So had puzzles. In Graham’s for April, 1841, he joined them together. The terrified dreamer of “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Fall of the House of Usher” met the analytic solver of cryptograms, the astute completer of Barnaby Rudge, on common soil. The result was a new type of tale.

It was a tale of crime, but it was also a tale of ratiocination. It had a brutal murder for its subject, but it had a paragon of crisp logic for its hero. It was “The Murders of the Rue Morgue.”

It was the world’s first detective story.

Howard Haycraft, Murder for Pleasure

2.1. Historical Background

The origins of the detective story do not go back very far in history since the creation of the genre relies on a key element: the detective. This figure wouldn’t appear until the end of the eighteenth century when state police organizations were newly organized. In his essay, which analyzes the formation of the Metropolitan police in England, J. L. Lyman traces this process:

The eighteenth century witnessed an increase in population and urbanization…Little serious attention was paid to law-enforcement in London. London’s constables and night watchmen were insufficient and inefficient. Public safety and the security of property were dealt with on a makeshift basis…By the mid-eighteenth century, the inability of the police to deal with growing lawlessness and crime caused periodic anxiety. (141)

As more and more people flocked to cities, a perceived threat of criminals running rampant led to people calling for the need of a professional police force. In 1829, the
Metropolitan Police Act revolutionized the methods of law enforcement by introducing the first model of a detective force, which would eventually become Scotland Yard. It would take a little over a decade for a writer to catch on to the idea of using a detective to solve a murder, but in 1841, one finally did. A melancholic figure whose poetry and tales of the grotesque were quickly receiving interest; enter, Edgar Allan Poe.

2.2. Creating the Rules of Detective Fiction

When Edgar Allan Poe wrote his short story, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” there was no formula for him to copy. Writers such as Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie will be the ones to copy Poe’s signature narrative devices like the locked room murder and a figure of ratiocination who uses methods of deduction to solve a murder. As for Poe, he is making up the rules as he goes along, which is why he is often credited as the Father of Detective Fiction. According to experts like Howard Haycraft, the genre of detective fiction has been construed with the following elements: a locked room, which encloses the area of suspicion; strategically placed clues, which create a chain of links to the murderer’s identity; the bumbling police who the detective gains the upper hand of time and time again; the detective’s biographer, also known as his dim-witted sidekick, who takes on the role of being the reader’s eyes and ears; the solution coming out in a series of surprise confessions and plot twists; and of course, the detective, whose powers of analysis and deduction far outrank his peers. Poe is the first detective fiction writer to introduce what Dorothy Sayers described as “the art of framing the lie,” and he does so by elaborating on the clues in the locked room that do not seem to add up to a clear solution. The use of the outré, or outsider, is an essential element in Poe’s story, not only to explain the motives of the murderer, but also the characteristics of his amateur
detective. Basically, Poe is setting the trend for future detective fiction writers by doing what he does best: showing the abnormalities of the human mind (Dupin’s ingenuity and deductive reasoning) and the horror that bombards society, i.e., the atrocity of violence and tragedy of death. The elements that Poe formed in his detective story have become the tried and true devices central to the craft of the detective genre, which is why writers continuously use them 182 years after Poe’s introduction.

2.3. The Inner Workings of the Locked-Room Murder

When Poe wrote the first detective story, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” he established the rules and tropes that mystery writers continue to use to this day. The arrangement of the murder occurring within a locked room may appear more difficult since it limits the possibilities to one room. It also leaves the question of how the murderer would have escaped without being caught. However, this arrangement can also narrow down probabilities, as in the case of Poe’s story, where the murder takes place on the fourth floor of an apartment building. As Poe’s detective, Le Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin, observes to the narrator of the story:

The police have laid bare the floors, the ceiling, and the masonry of the walls, in every direction. No secret issues could have escaped their vigilance…Both doors leading from the rooms into the passage were securely locked, with the keys inside. Let us turn to the chimneys. These, although of ordinary width for some eight or ten feet above the hearths, will not admit, throughout their extent, the body of a large cat. The impossibility of egress, by means already stated, being thus absolute, we are reduced to the windows. (215)
Since there are no secret ways of escaping the locked room, an empirical analysis of the room indicates that the murderer would have to climb out the window. However, given the height, it would mean that the murderer has to have some acrobatic skill, as Dupin explains when he discusses the framework of the window’s shutters and the lightning rod, which is about “five feet and a half from the casement in question” (217). Climbing the lightning rod and grabbing hold of the shutter is not impossible, but it does take agility. All of this helps Dupin profile the murderer, as each clue is discovered.

The locked room itself is like a Rubik’s cube: there are only so many options for making the colors align on each side. Once each option is eliminated, the answer becomes clearer. With a locked room, a detective’s vision becomes more focused on how he sees the probable solutions to questions that appear baffling, like the means of escape. For Dupin, he not only works out the problems in his head, but he also physically scans the room himself, as a way to prove his theories. The detective’s analytical mind is his most essential tool, but he can only go so far with his powers of interiority. He also has to step outside of himself and take an active role in the crime scene as he observes the surroundings. In this sense, the locked room represents the detective’s mindset; he closes himself off from his professional peers because he sees himself as superior, and yet, he also has to be willing to work with them if he wants to gain admittance into their world of crime solving.

2.4. A Trail of Clues

In “The Murders of the Rue Morgue,” Poe describes the crimes as “‘Extraordinary Murders’” (204), making an emphasis on the peculiarities of what the police and witnesses discover upon entering the scene:
Upon arriving at a large back chamber in the fourth story (the door of which, being found locked, with the key inside, was forced open), a spectacle presented itself which struck every one present not less with horror than with astonishment.

“The apartment was in the wildest disorder—the furniture broken and thrown about in all directions…On a chair lay a razor, besmeared with blood. On the hearth were two or three long and thick tresses of gray human hair, also dabbled with blood, and seeming to have been pulled out by the roots…

“To this horrible mystery there is not as yet, we believe, the slightest clue.” (204-205)

Despite appearances, this extraordinary case of violence reveals everything necessary to solve the mystery. The clues themselves are presented in a unique manner that the police are not familiar with: the locked room; the bodies treated in unusual, seemingly impossible, positions (the daughter shoved upside down in the chimney and the mother thrown outside in the yard); lack of motive (nothing has been stolen); and two voices heard, but no one being discovered—an escape, as if into thin air. Poe’s emphasis on these peculiarities are what establishes him as the creator of the detective genre. He presents a baffling mystery that he carefully formulates in order to surprise his readers, but there is not an impossible solution, just one that is highly improbable.

Poe’s detective, Dupin, reads the newspaper article that presents the facts of the murder, and, along with the unnamed narrator who plays the proto-Watson figure, visits the crime scene to review the details of the case. For Dupin, the answer to the problem is hidden in plain view of the facts’ surface; what it takes to bring the answer into the light is a matter of using logic and deductive reasoning to connect evidence with theory. Take
for instance, the locked room; as discussed earlier, the means of escape could only have occurred through the window, which would take skills of agility due to the height and the structure’s features. The mutilations upon the victims’ bodies indicate a crime of passion, not premeditation, as well as a state of manic frenzy. Dupin explains the daughter’s body to the narrator:

In the manner of thrusting the corpse up the chimney, you will admit that there was something excessively outré—something altogether irreconcilable with our common notions of human action, even when we suppose the actors the most depraved of men. Think, too, how great must have been that strength which could have thrust the body up such an aperture so forcibly that the united vigor of several persons was found barely sufficient to drag it down! (219)

The strength of the murderer would have to be great enough to be capable of hiding the body up the chimney, but why in that location to begin with? As Dupin comments, there is something extremely out of the ordinary about the actions of the murderer, which could be due to insanity; however, Dupin disqualifies that theory. In his essay, “The Origins of the Detective Novel,” Richard Alewyn comments on Poe’s use of the outré murder: “Poe had his detective confess (and many have agreed) that the more exotic the method of murder, the easier its solution. Hence, if it is true that the detective finds out the truth about a reality, this reality is not the usual one and is certainly not the one that obeys the laws of the natural sciences” (69). If the story were about a murder with a dead body found within a room and a killer nowhere in sight, there would, of course, be intrigue; however, Poe goes a step further to embellish a series of horrors and present an unusual case. In detective fiction, writers often present readers with cases that baffle and appear
enigmatic until a simple solution is explained in the denouement; the more emphasis that is placed on the enigmatic problem may make the simple solution go unnoticed in the beginning of the story. Readers, after all, expect a complex puzzle. Poe teases readers by having Dupin point out the little clues that are out of the ordinary without further explaining why these clues are important; in this sense, Poe is testing readers’ observational and analytical skills, and probably feeling a bit of pride in withholding a few key details. Even though Poe would not have known about Dorothy L. Sayers’ coined phrase, “the art of framing lies,” he seems to understand the framework by leading readers down a certain trail of clues, while tripping them up without the readers suspecting that they are being duped. Since Dupin presents us with the idea of “something excessively outré,” our own detective skills rise up to analyze what he wants us to deduce from what we’ve gathered so far from the story and see if there is a clear solution. It could be possible that the murderer had been in such a hurry that they tried to hide the evidence before their escape, but why cover anything up in the first place?
Witnesses and police were already rushing up to the room to try to catch the killer, so there is not really a reason to hide the crime, unless the killer was not hiding the crime from the police, but from someone else. Witness testimony declares that there were “two or more rough voices, in angry contention” (204), which indicates an argument, possibly a falling out between the killer and their accomplice. But if so, why? There is a lot happening within the locked room: the killing of the mother and daughter, the hiding of the bodies, and the running out into the staircase only to turn around and quickly escape out of the window. There is no clear timeline to how long everything takes place between the murders and their discovery, but during that time, the room had been searched and
destroyed, and yet, nothing was ever taken. If the murderer was not there to commit a robbery, or intentionally kill the victims, why were they there, and who were they arguing with? The clue of the two voices heard by witnesses holds the key to unraveling the plot.

2.5. The Complications with Witness Testimony

In crime cases, witness testimonies can be rather helpful because they provide evidence either for or against the criminal, but the problem with witnesses testifying is that they are invariably human. With any group of witnesses, there is the complication of having conflicting testimonies; everyone has a different perspective, even if they see the same event at the same time. Despite witnessing the same thing, it can be hard to agree on just exactly what happened because of the multiple interpretations of detail. In the case of the Rue Morgue murders, the group of witnesses can agree on the point that there were two voices heard arguing before the killers made their escape, and that one voice could be recognized as belonging to a Frenchman. When Dupin and the narrator are discussing the witnesses’ testimonies, Dupin focuses on the peculiarity of the one voice that no one seems to agree on:

The witnesses, as you remark, agreed about the gruff voice; they were unanimous. But in regard to the shrill voice, the peculiarity is—not that they disagreed—but that, while an Italian, an Englishman, a Spaniard, a Hollander, and a Frenchman attempted to describe it, each one spoke of it as that of a foreigner…No words–no sounds resembling words–were by any witness mentioned as distinguishable.

(214)
The shrill voice that the witnesses hear could belong to a person whose nationality is not familiar to them, or it could be the mumblings of a madman, which would make sense given the frenzied actions. Yet, Dupin dismisses these theories, and continues to formulate one in his mind that he keeps to himself. The comments that Dupin makes reveal distinctions that seem unimportant, like how none of the words spoken are distinguishable, but the emphasis placed here raises the question of why he brings it up. Dupin is challenging the narrator, and the readers, to notice details that often go misplaced, but he also seems to be holding a higher regard for the average person’s critical thinking skills that are not on the same level as his own. The key importance that Dupin continually stresses throughout the story is to notice the clues that appear out of place; because once they are lined up together, they begin to form a pattern. The peculiarity of the voice’s lack of distinguishable words, along with the strength and agility, all lead up to the killer’s identification, and it is important to note their extraordinariness because there lies the answer.

2.6. The Plot Twist

In mysteries, there is one trope that always seems to be used, perhaps overused being the better term, and that is the plot twist. In any good story, there are elements of surprise, which are greatly beneficial because they keep readers interested and wanting more. In murder mysteries, the twist usually involves the murderer’s identity—often pointing in the direction of one suspect; then, in the denouement, revealing that it was someone else. In “The Murders of the Rue Morgue,” Poe sets up his denouement as any good mystery writer should, and surprises the readers with a shocking unveiling. The extraordinary murders are committed not by a madman, but by an escaped orangutan.
The peculiarities of the murderer’s actions, skills, and lack of motive are all explained by Dupin as sharing one thing in common: there is not a sense of human thought or action about them. Therefore, with the help of his knowledge of Georges Cuvier’s research, Dupin rationalizes that the murderer must be a killer ape. It is difficult to believe, but it doesn’t lack sensationalism, which is what makes Poe’s story so memorable.

2.7. The Detective as an Analytical Automaton

When Poe took on the murder mystery, he detoured away from the conventions of horror and crime stories by creating his main character as a detective, which was still a new idea at the time of his story. In order to create a new genre of writing, one has to break the mold and do something that has never been done before. In “The Murders of the Rue Morgue,” Poe says something to a similar degree: “In investigations such as we are now pursuing, it should not be so much asked ‘what has occurred,’ as ‘what has occurred that has never occurred before’” (213). Poe maintained some elements of the crime fiction genres, like with the suspense and brutality of the murders. However, his passion for analysis and the machination of how things work provided him with a new playground to showcase the ingenuity of the detective’s mind.

In creating someone like Dupin, Poe creates a mold for literary detectives that will be refined later on by Arthur Conan Doyle’s creation, Sherlock Holmes. However, the eccentricity and ingenuity that make up the iconic detective would not have been possible without Poe’s Dupin. Instead of having a professional detective on the police force, Poe creates Dupin as an amateur sleuth, who uses his skills for the pleasure of it. In “The Murders of the Rue Morgue,” Dupin even comments to the narrator when taking on the case, “‘An inquiry will afford us amusement’” (211). Thus, he shows that he uses his
skills of analysis not for the purpose of helping others, but more so for his own 
enjoyment of the process. Dupin’s mind works itself almost like the inner machinations 
of a computer in how he observes clues then breaks them down to deduce their function 
in the case. Yet, his personality is very much cool around his peers, particularly the 
police, who he sees as competitors. Poe’s detective smugly confides to the narrator about 
the Prefect of Police: “I am satisfied with having defeated him in his own castle” (228). 
Dupin, like Holmes, does have one fellow companion that he likes to take with him on 
his cases. But, even so, there is a sense of boastfulness behind this, as the narrator 
discusses Dupin’s analytical skill in the story’s introduction: “He seemed…to take an 
eager delight in its exercise—if not exactly in its display—and did not hesitate to confess 
the pleasure thus derived” (200). Having a companion to act as a biographer, Dupin can 
showcase his analytical observations, and explain a little of how his process works. For 
him, each case is a puzzle, or game, that he is determined to win, which means that 
despite his quest for the truth, his intentions are not wholly for the sake of good. 

In his essay, “The Simple Art of Murder,” Raymond Chandler argues that 
detectives are heroes who carry out acts of redemption. He maintains they restore order 
out of the disorder brought on by murder. It is important to keep in mind, though, that 
they are still portrayals of human beings, and not always like chivalric heroes of legend. 
In the case of Dupin’s character, his intentions are not exactly the best, but he still plays a 
role in bringing the truth into light, which is only possible because of his skills. Dupin 
relies on ratiocination as a way to explain what is improbable, and seemingly irrational, 
which describes murder to a T. By breaking down clues and observing the small details, 
he is able to rationalize how and why a murder has occurred, which is beneficial in how it
helps people come to terms with tragedy and understanding violence. His emotional
detachment may make him seem inhuman, but it can also be seen as a way to function in
his world where violence and atrocity are a given.

Poe only wrote three short stories involving Dupin, so unfortunately, his character
is not as fleshed out as his counterpart, Sherlock Holmes. However, Dupin does deserve
credit as the first in a long line of amateur sleuths. He may have his little eccentricities
and lacks social graces, but he does have one strength that prevails in each of his cases:
his pursuit for the truth. His mind may work itself like a machine, but it doesn’t break
down, and he is able to observe what others miss. In “The Murders of the Rue Morgue,”
Dupin states to his companion, “Truth is not always in a well. In fact, as regards the more
important knowledge, I do believe that she is invariably superficial. The depth lies in the
valleys where we seek her, and not upon the mountain-tops where she is found” (211).

The problem that Dupin believes his peers deal with is that they look too profoundly into
what is set before them. For Dupin, it is about seeing the details as they are, breaking
them apart until they each reveal a reason for their purpose. The science of detection is
about analysis—how one observes and interprets the observation’s meaning; it is like
looking at the pieces of a puzzle individually until you find a common link. For Poe and
his amateur sleuth, Dupin, use of analysis in crime-solving changes the way the mystery
genre is written into what we now know it as today. The detective takes center stage as a
new literary model for future writers of fiction; as Sherlock Holmes would say, “The
game is afoot.”
Chapter 3. Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes: “The Only Unofficial Detective”

“My mind,” he said, “rebels at stagnation. Give me problems, give me work, give me the most abstruse cryptogram, or the most intricate analysis, and I am in my own proper atmosphere. I can dispense then with artificial stimulants. But I abhor the dull routine of existence. I crave for mental exaltation. That is why I have chosen my own particular profession, or rather created it, for I am the only one in the world.”

“The only unofficial detective?” I said, raising my eyebrows.

“The only unofficial consulting detective,” he answered. “I am the last and highest court of appeal in detection.”

*Arthur Conan Doyle, The Sign of Four*

3.1. Introduction

After Edgar Allan Poe’s introduction to the literary world of detection, the popularity of the new genre grew, while writers worked to perfect it. In the following years, detective fiction was being nurtured by writers in France, like the criminal turned private detective and memoirist, Francois Eugène Vidocq, and Emile Gaboriau who based his fictional detective, Monsieur Lecoq, on Vidocq. Then England got its hands on detective fiction. When Wilkie Collins wrote *The Moonstone* in 1868, detective stories transformed through novelization. In doing so, the genre changed by lengthening the detective’s process, thereby allowing more time to gather evidence and sift through suspects’ stories. In a short story, the plot is wrapped up in a nice little bow by the ending because there is not time to establish more clues or suspects. By lengthening the plot, there is more development for it to be intricate. This created a key tool for detective fiction, the plot twist. However, the short story format would not die away, and was still
popular among readers, because it was made readily available in newspapers and magazines. When he began his career as a doctor, Arthur Conan Doyle was encouraged to take up writing as a hobby; like many readers, Doyle turned to the comfort of a detective novel. Using Poe’s detective stories for inspiration, Doyle shaped his own amateur sleuth, one whose name would eventually become synonymous with the literary world of detection.

3.2. Analysis of Sherlock Holmes

When Sir Arthur Conan Doyle wrote his first Sherlock Holmes story, *A Study in Scarlet*, he created the paradigm for literary detectives. There can be no denying that Sherlock Holmes represented detection in its highest form whenever he showed off his powers of deduction. However, what makes Holmes a beloved figure in literature are his eccentricities. His lack of social graces and high self-esteem may make him seem unbearable at times. He’s cold and lacks empathy, something explained to Dr. Watson by a mutual acquaintance, Stamford, before being introduced to Holmes:

“Holmes is a little too scientific for my tastes—it approaches to cold-bloodedness. I could imagine his giving a friend a little pinch of the latest vegetable alkaloid, not out of malevolence, you understand, but simply out of a spirit of inquiry in order to have an accurate idea of the effects.” (*A Study in Scarlet* 9)

Holmes’ mind is scientific—at times seeming more like a machine than a man in his focus on tracking down facts. However, Holmes varies from his predecessor, Dupin, who is a mere vessel for the analytical machinery of his brain. Sherlock Holmes—as a human being—is different from a machine in that he knows his limits, despite his obsessive personality. He pursues justice, and even takes the law into his own hands when he
considers it necessary for the sake of the individual’s outcome, as shown in the story, “The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle,” in which Holmes saves a man from going to jail: “I suppose that I am committing a felony, but it is just possible that I am saving a soul...Send him to jail now, and you make him a jail-bird for life” (306). For him, the science of deduction is his living trade; he’s helping people who “are in trouble about something and want a little enlightening” (A Study in Scarlet 18). It is not exactly that he lacks empathy, but more so that he overlooks it, since the tool he relies on is his analytical mind. As W.H. Auden noted on Holmes’ attitude in his essay, “The Guilty Vicarage”:

> If he chooses human beings rather than inanimate matter as his material, it is because investigating the inanimate is unheroically easy since it cannot tell lies, which human beings can and do, so that in dealing with them, observation must be twice as sharp and logic twice as rigorous. (20)

The study of human beings offers up a higher challenge, one in which an intellect like Holmes would have surely preferred above other schools of study. For him, it is about uncovering the seeming improbabilities until they reveal a chain of clues that explain the facts of a person’s motivations. The science of deduction does appeal to the mind and not so much to the heart, but that doesn’t mean that Holmes lacks a moral duty in his line of work.

Despite his cold calculating nature, Holmes is almost never without his companion, Dr. Watson, who faithfully follows him on his adventures. The two help balance each other out, and demonstrate a different interpersonal dynamic than Poe’s Dupin and the unnamed narrator of “Murders in the Rue Morgue.” Holmes teaches
Watson his methods, not just to show off, but for Watson to establish his own deductive skills. For Holmes, Watson provides him with not just an eager pupil in the school of deduction, but also, and more importantly, a link for socializing in everyday society. In her online article from *Novel Suspects*, “The Appeal of Sherlock Holmes,” Emily Martin discusses the friendship between Holmes and Watson: “It doesn’t matter that Holmes might be emotionally distant from most people. We, as readers, are nonetheless given a window into the detective’s inner life through Watson, and that feels especially intimate and special because we know how few people get to see this side of him.” Everything we know about Sherlock Holmes comes from the perspective of his roommate and biographer, Dr. John Watson. Why Holmes makes Watson the exception as a friend may be that the detective knew he needed someone to help keep him in check. Throughout their time together, Holmes lets Watson see his weaknesses like his reliance on drugs and his bouts of melancholy. Despite Watson’s concerns and warnings, Holmes continues to use drugs as stimulants for his overactive mind. As a doctor, Watson sees Holmes as both a patient and a friend, which means that it is difficult for him to help Holmes, because there is a conflict between his professional relationship (doctor-patient) and his wanting to be a part of Holmes’ work as his trusted confidant. Watson’s awe for Holmes’ ingenuity is an important part in their friendship because Holmes enjoys showing off and having someone to share in his observations; Holmes is a great man in his abilities to solve crime, but he almost relies too heavily on the performance of his intellect in front of his professional peers, as seen in the short story, “A Scandal in Bohemia,” when he is shown up by Irene Adler, who is a female counterpart to Holmes. By showing a crack in his character to Watson, Holmes allows there to be a knowledge of his human vice,
which reveals that there is a small bit of humility within the detective’s ego; perhaps knowing that someone as great as Holmes has his vices like any other person is enough for Watson, as Watson’s fascination with his friend is never deterred, regardless of Holmes’ strange and reckless behavior.

Holmes does have his good qualities that are not just within the vicinity of his mind like his sense of humor. In his introduction to a collection of Holmes’ stories, Kyle Freeman states how his humor “goes a long way towards humanizing him, making it easier to feel affection” (xvii). Given the type of occupation Holmes has, it is understandable that there needs to be a feeling of lightheartedness in order to navigate through the muck that crime exuberates. As Freeman suggests, it also gives readers reassurance that they are not dealing with a sociopath, which Holmes could have easily been shaped into. His teasing Watson over the latter's observation skills exemplifies how a less serious side to Holmes exists. Unfortunately for Holmes’ predecessor, Dupin, Poe did not seem to care as much for the detective’s personality as he did for Dupin’s brain. In *A Study in Scarlet*, Holmes even admonishes Watson for comparing him to the literary sleuth: “Now, in my opinion, Dupin was a very inferior fellow…He had some analytical genius, no doubt; but he was by no means such a phenomenon as Poe appeared to imagine” (19). In other words, what Dupin lacked was a genuine sense of grace when showing off his deductive prowess. To Holmes, it is not just a natural talent to deduce a crime, but also studying how the process works. Dupin was good, just not as good, because he did not commit to the study of detection as devoutly as Holmes. For Dupin, it is simply a pastime; for Holmes, it is his way of life.
With Holmes, a great part of his charm lies in his ability to make jokes and combat with Watson over observations. There is no maliciousness or a need to groom his conceitedness when Holmes does so. In *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Holmes tests Watson’s skills of analysis by asking him to describe a client based on a walking stick he left behind. After Watson does so, Holmes criticizes his friend:

“...you have habitually underrated your own abilities. It may be that you are not yourself luminous, but you are a conductor of light. Some people without possessing genius have a remarkable power of stimulating it…”

“Has anything escaped me?” I asked with some self-importance…

“I am afraid, my dear Watson, that most of your conclusions were erroneous. When I said that you stimulated me I meant, to be frank, that in noting your fallacies I was occasionally guided towards the truth. Not that you are entirely wrong in this instance.” (576)

Holmes does appraise him for his analyses, but he also likes to one-up Watson as he explains the details Watson missed. It is something to note, however, that Holmes uses Watson’s observations as a way for his own mind to process facts, showing that perhaps, Holmes is more than a show-off, but also learns from his dutiful friend’s skills. It could also be that Holmes is trying to enlist Watson into his world, so that he doesn’t remain isolated in it. After all, why would Holmes have bothered putting up with a roommate if he did not want someone to discuss his theories with? Even though readers do not see from Holmes’ perspective, there are inferences that indicate that Holmes enjoys sharing his thought process with Watson as shown above. Holmes has explained how he relies on stimulants for his overactive mind; Watson can act as one, providing Holmes with his
own observations, thus in a way sharing the burden. Holmes’ relationship with Watson is also that of a professor and student, but what this relationship reveals is that Holmes understands the inevitably of his own mortality. By passing on his knowledge to Watson, he can leave behind a legacy, not just by having Watson document his cases, but also having someone to carry on Holmes’ line of work. Watson may not have Holmes’ specific skill set, but he manages to hold his own when being asked to share his thoughts. If nothing else, Holmes at least likes to accommodate the good doctor’s self-esteem even if it is provided with a few pedantic remarks.

3.3. Sherlock Holmes’ Mind at Work

On display in four novels and fifty-six short stories, Sherlock Holmes’s mind is something of a wonder. The genius of his deductive reasoning never ceases to amaze as Holmes takes on the complex and bizarre cases that come his way. One such case is perhaps better known due to its supernatural origins—a beast who haunts the moors of Devonshire and a family curse that leads to a string of mysterious deaths. The element that makes The Hound of the Baskervilles such a thrilling read lies in the eerie presence of a mythical creature who is the cause of nearly wiping out the Baskerville name. When the family’s practitioner, Dr. Mortimer, approaches Sherlock Holmes with his problem, there is a feeling of foreboding, which Holmes raises to Watson: “Now is the dramatic moment of fate, Watson, when you hear a step upon the stair which is walking into your life, and you know not whether for good or ill” (578). Fate’s role in the story is significant, showing just how easily a family’s legacy can crumble into dust because of the consequences of wrongful actions. In telling Sir Hugo Baskerville’s story of his family, Dr. Mortimer reveals how the decline began with Hugo’s evil pursuit of a
maiden, releasing his hounds on her when she tried to run from his advances. All of
which results in her death, along with Hugo being torn apart by “a great black-beast,
shaped like a hound, yet larger than any hound that ever mortal eye has rested upon”
(582). After Hugo Baskerville’s demise, the family continues to face a string of
mysterious deaths linked back to the mythical hound, resulting in the latest of Sir Charles
whose death Holmes is to investigate. Symbolism is shown in the novel through the
hound and its representation of justice, punishing the Baskerville heirs. However, as Kyle
Freeman writes, “as symbol [the hound] extends its baleful sphere to all of us. Like Moby
Dick, it is a reminder of an evil that lies at the center of existence, with which humans
must eternally wrestle” (xxxiii). The choices people make can be made with good
intentions and wind up with dire consequences in some cases. People with evil intentions,
though, will always reap what they sow. Retribution is not always given to victims and
their families, and does not show up in the appearance of a fire-breathing hellhound.
Justice can play out under impossible circumstances, but it is important to note that evil
can wind up as the victor over good.

In this case, Holmes may have almost met his match, taking on what seemed to be
impossible odds as he comments, “In a modest way I have combated evil, but to take on
the Father of Evil himself would, perhaps, be too ambitious a task. Yet you must admit
that the footmark is material” (590). Despite the lore of the hound’s legend, the evil
presence after the last heir of Baskerville Hall is very much real and not likely
supernatural as Holmes deduces. The crime’s core lies in the fact that after Sir Charles
death, his wealth and property are up for gain to whichever Baskerville is still alive. The
most likely suspect then would be the mystery heir from America, Henry Baskerville, but
as he too is the next potential victim, the question remains as to who will benefit the most.

In *The Hound of Baskervilles*, readers are led through the text via Watson’s perspective as Holmes assigns him to travel to Devonshire and keep his eyes open for clues. It is interesting to note that Holmes takes a step back and allows Watson a turn at playing detective, even though it turns out that Holmes is secretly watching everything from the sidelines. Still, a part of the novel’s appeal lies in the fact that alongside Watson, readers apply Holmes’ methods and search for the secrets lying hidden within the Devonshire moors. As Watson investigates, he comes across quite a series of characters such as the Stapletons, a brother and sister who are neighbors of the Baskervilles living out on the moor. Reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe’s gothic tale, “The Fall of the House of Usher,” the story of the Stapletons reveals the dark and evil presence haunting the Baskervilles. Holmes and Watson uncover the truth as to how Stapleton turns out to be a mystery heir himself, and along with his wife—not his sister—try to trick Henry Baskerville and the other residents. Stapleton uses his hound and disguises him using phosphorous, and with the help of the atmosphere the foggy moors provides, creates the terror running rampant as described by Watson:

A hound it was, an enormous coal-black hound, but not such a hound as mortal eyes have ever seen. Fire burst from its open mouth, its eyes glowed with a smouldering glare, its muzzle and hackles and dewlap were outlined in flickering flame. Never in the delirious dream of a disordered brain could anything more savage, more appalling, more hellish be conceived than that dark form and savage face which broke upon us out of the wall of fog. (684)
Even with all of his brains and iron bravery, Sherlock Holmes is struck by the appearance of the hound, just as Watson and the detective, Lestrade, are. The three almost let Henry Baskerville get torn apart: “So paralyzed were we by the apparition that we allowed him to pass before we had recovered our nerve” (684). However, once Holmes and Watson start firing their pistols, the fear brought on by the beast is diminished once it becomes clear that it too is only mortal. Even though the beast turns out to be a fake monster, its terror is still very much real, which is what the villain, Stapleton, relied upon in order to obtain his wealth. The impression the beast leaves behind is that fear can come awfully close to trumping intelligence, as its appearance can be quite deceiving. Holmes may have been able to reason and uncover the truth of the matter, but that doesn’t mean that there was not a slight chance of him being beaten by his mind playing tricks on him.

3.4. A Nemesis of Equal Prowess: Holmes vs. Professor Moriarty

Just as Sherlock Holmes and Dr. John Watson’s names famously live on as the dynamic duo of detective fiction, there is one name that will be remembered in the line of infamous villains: Professor Moriarty.

In detective stories, the detective takes on a role like that of a romanticized hero by using his analytical skills to apprehend the criminal. In Conan Doyle’s story, “The Final Problem,” he uses the chivalric hero as a format by having Holmes face off against a villain in a literal epic duel to the death. It is interesting that despite their names being heard together as famous nemeses, Holmes and Moriarty are only ever together in one short story; and even so, Moriarty only has two physical run-ins with Holmes. Why these two men are remembered is the fact that they each play a part in the canon of epic literature, one for the side of the angels and the other for the side of the devils. In his
introduction to a collection of Holmes’ stories, Kyle Freeman notes the two’s representations of good and evil: “It recalls the structure of Shakespearean tragedy, where the expulsion of evil always requires the sacrifice of some human good” (xxxi). From Watson’s introductory lines, readers are told how the story will end, but it is an ending quite fitting for a man such as Holmes. He is more than just an analytical mind; Holmes is a moralist, and he understands that justice is not a guarantee, at least in the confines of humanity’s legal system. Sometimes, one has to play God in order to bring about a higher justice through whatever means necessary. In this story, readers are shown just how capable Holmes is by having him admit his humanity; he is not a machine or a being of higher intelligence. Sherlock Holmes is inevitably human, and he is willing to sacrifice his life if it means that society can rest easy.

To kill off his detective, Conan Doyle fashioned a villain that could only be of equal prowess to Holmes. In creating Moriarty, Conan Doyle used Holmes as a model and inverted the image to create an evil twin effect. Moriarty was everything that Holmes was intellectually, and could have been if Holmes had given into his sociopathic persona. In his article, “Staging the Disappearance of Sherlock Holmes,” Michael Atkinson describes:

So, Moriarty is the living mirror image of Holmes. Mirror images, in reversing the original, can often reveal features scarcely apparent in the accustomed view…Whereas the detective previously took up cases primarily “to drive off ennui” rather than from any moral commitment, here he becomes an ethical champion. (142)
In the Holmes stories, leading up to “The Final Problem,” Conan Doyle shows off his detective’s deductive powers, but here, Holmes’ powers are almost unnecessary, as whatever he does, Moriarty meets him again and again head on. The mirror imagery of the detective and criminal show how easily these two could have changed positions, literally being two sides of the same coin. Despite his cold demeanor, Holmes has enough integrity to know his ethical boundaries, whereas Moriarty hides his “criminal strain” (559) within the shadows of his agents. Except for their different positions, these two men could have easily been a formidable force in the world of detecting crime. Holmes and Moriarty are both masters in their fields; Holmes has enough humility to comment as such to Watson: “He is the Napoleon of crime…You know my powers, my dear Watson, and yet at the end of three months I was forced to confess that I have at last met an antagonist who was my intellectual equal” (559-560). The fact that the egotistical sleuth admits there is actually someone of equal worth reveals his inner fear that perhaps his deductive powers are not enough to stop a great evil. The evil that is Moriarty is not so much in his actions, but lying in the vicinity of his mind, which “only plans” (559) what others will carry out. A mind of such capacity is a dangerous thing because there is no telling how far Moriarty would be willing to go. Therefore, what Holmes has to do to stop Moriarty lies not within his brain power, but in a test of his morals—to be willing to act as the murderer and the victim.

The point of this story is for Holmes to meet his demise, which he goes willingly towards in order to rid the world of Moriarty’s wicked schemes. Now Conan Doyle doesn’t just have the detective and master criminal face each other in a duel, fire their pistols, and kill both of them. There has to be a level of dignity for two such gentlemen
who hold themselves in high esteem, and Conan Doyle gives their deaths a flair of mystery and finesse inspired by his travels to Reichenbach Falls. The setting for such an event is fitting as it harkens back to the story format of a chivalric hero going off to meet his fate. The chase between Holmes and Moriarty ends at the falls as a way to show just how far human beings have come and where they all started from. Humans fell from a state of grace, and have continuously strived to return to it. Good and evil are the one epic battle that all human beings are a part of. Whether or not good triumphs over evil is a matter of free choice—for an agent of good always has to make the sacrifice in order to expel evil. There has to be an equal balance, as Holmes explains in his conversation with Moriarty:

“It has been a duel between you and me, Mr. Holmes. You hope to place me in the dock. I tell you that I will never stand in the dock. You hope to beat me. I tell you that you will never beat me. If you are clever enough to bring destruction upon me, rest assured that I shall do as much to you.’

“‘You have paid me several compliments, Mr. Moriarty,’ said I, ‘Let me pay you one in return when I say that if I were assured of the former eventuality I would, in the interests of the public, cheerfully accept the latter.’ (561)

Throughout “The Final Problem,” there is a lot that Holmes doesn’t say to Watson, at least not straightforwardly. In instances such as his conversation with Moriarty, Holmes reveals his true motives—that his sacrifice is the only way for his plan to work if Moriarty is to be permanently stopped. Holmes cannot just show up and shoot Moriarty and walk away; this time is different because the safety of society’s structure is at stake. If Moriarty and his agents are not apprehended, there will always be a shadow of their
power hanging over society. Could there have been a way out for Holmes that did not involve his death? Yes, which Conan Doyle will go on to prove years later, but this is only because he was forced to upon demand from readers. As he is writing what he plans as the last Holmes story, Conan Doyle sets the ending up, so that there is no doubt as to what happens to the detective and master criminal. It is an elementary problem, one that is simple enough for Watson to discern:

I stood for a minute or two to collect myself, for I was dazed with the horror of the thing. Then I began to think of Holmes’ methods and to try to practice them in reading this tragedy. It was, alas, only too easy to do…Two lines of footmarks were clearly marked along the father end of the path, both leading away from me. There were none returning. A few yards from the end the soil was all ploughed up into a patch of mud, and the brambles and ferns which fringed the chasm were torn and bedraggled. (569)

In the end, Watson has finally managed to master the elementary problems, but there is not a feeling of celebration to go along with his achievement. With the mystery of Holmes and Moriarty thus reaching its conclusion, there are no more deductions from the characters, but that doesn’t stop readers from breaking the case apart in order to figure out exactly what happened on the cliffs of Reichenbach Falls.

The ending of Holmes is bittersweet not only because of all of his accomplishments in bringing order to society, but also because he was such a wonder to behold. Even if Conan Doyle had refused to revive Holmes, he could have carried on Holmes’ legacy through Watson, creating a series of adventures for the good doctor to take up. Even though Watson has learned his friend’s skills and worked on mastering his
level of analysis, the stories would not have reached the same popularity if it was solely Watson detecting crime. Sherlock Holmes’ personality is unique, often too methodological at times, but his flaws are what makes the detective remembered to this day. He is still something of a mystery, as the only things we know about him come from another’s perspective; as P.D. James notes in *Talking About Detective Fiction*, “the core of the man remains elusive” (31). What has made Holmes the paradigm of detective fiction is his air of mystery, his boastfulness and ingenuity, but most of all his friendship with Dr. Watson. Bringing together an extraordinary man and an ordinary one is not something new in the world of literature. However, showing Holmes and Watson’s duality and their reliance on each other reveals a need for balance—either one can work well on their own, but by working together, they are the better for it. Holmes relies on stimulants when he is in between cases because his mind never slows down, but continues working, often leading to bouts of melancholy and erratic behavior. Dr. Watson is a former army surgeon who has recently come home, and is trying to find relaxation after his time in the army, but also secretly misses the action. The two needed each other in order for them to properly function within their roles of society. The reason why readers have loved this dynamic duo since they were first introduced is because of their comraderie—how they push each other and ultimately try to exorcise one another’s demons. Neither Holmes or Watson are perfect, but together, they are quite the pair to do what is needed to restore order out of the disorder in society. For that, their stories provide readers with comfort and a joy in learning the detection of crime.
Chapter 4. The Ingenuity of Agatha Christie, the Queen of Mystery

“Plots come to me at such odd moments; when I am walking along a street, or examining a hat shop with particular interest, suddenly a splendid idea comes into my head, and I think, “Now that would be a neat way of covering up the crime so that nobody would see the point.””

Agatha Christie: An Autobiography

4.1 Introduction

After the emergence of Sherlock Holmes, detective fiction was never quite the same. Before, the genre was something like a novelty; now, it had developed into a sensation. The evolution of literary detectives was accelerated by Conan Doyle by his focusing on their idiosyncrasies—the way their mind functions on a scientific level and how it leads to underdeveloped social skills. In an early scholarly study of the genre, Murder for Pleasure, Howard Haycraft notes this evolution with a grain of salt: “For many an investigator without a complete and assorted set of idiosyncrasies was unthinkable, and in the hands of the inept the style soon degenerated into mere caricature” (230). The popularity of the Holmes stories paved the path for writers to try their hand at creating elaborate puzzles out of words, but the problem lay in how to shape the detective without turning him into a cliché. Haycraft advises, “The safest rule for the novice…is to keep contrived eccentricity at the minimum, remembering that ordinary humanity is never dull if perceived and described with sufficient care” (230). In other words, a writer doesn’t have to make their hero extraordinary; the ordinary person, i.e., the Watson figure, can hold their own, given their level of observation. What makes
detective fiction intriguing, though, is to have a balance of the two personas—the eccentric with the ordinary—but not be shown through a duo as Conan Doyle did. The detective needs to possess his quirks, but not be so eccentric that he is separate from his fellow man.

In Hercule Poirot, Christie depicts a slightly eccentric man whose mind is inherently designed to seek out the truth and notice the odd little clues strewn throughout a case. However, Christie downplays the detective’s ingenuity to solve the crime, as if to say that detective fiction is more than just the brilliant sleuth. In essence, Christie asks, “How necessary is the detective in detective fiction?” Her plots’ emphases on leaving twists around every corner engage the reader in a new way, because it makes a point of having them play the detective, competing with the literary version as the story progresses. The detective is important, nonetheless because he brings forth the resolution of the murder’s imprint on society. However, for Christie, there seems to be a higher regard for the plot’s foundation. Through detectives like Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple, Agatha Christie shows readers that the extraordinary mind can enhance the guessing game played by detectives, but there is more fun when the game is played by everyday people.

4.2. Creating a New Version of Sherlock Holmes

When Agatha Christie was working as a nurse in a dispensary during WWI, she, like Arthur Conan Doyle before her, came up with the idea to write detective stories as a hobby. Given where she worked, it comes as no surprise that she uses poisons for her “intime [inward] murder, owing to the particular way it was done; it would have to be all in the family” (Autobiography 242) because the closed quarters of a familial atmosphere
provide a perfect stage for the locked-room cliché, and poison provides a well-thought-out plan for murder rather than just exhibiting a crime of passion. The tricky part is coming up with a detective—one who is originally unique in his set of skills while still showing hints of a Holmesian persona. “Who could I have? A schoolboy? Rather difficult. A scientist? What did I know of scientists? Then I remembered our Belgian refugees” (Autobiography 243) who were “living in the parish of Tor” (243) during WWI. Once his origins were developed, Christie shapes her little Belgian sleuth into a meticulous, well-dressed man, but one key element still remains: “...he should be very brainy—he should have little grey cells of the mind—that was a good phrase: I must remember that” (244). Thus, Hercule Poirot was born—a detective like Holmes for his sheer brilliance, but more immaculate and gracious within society.

Christie takes after Conan Doyle in that she has her Belgian sleuth, Hercule Poirot, take several cases alongside his friend, Captain Arthur Hastings, who acts as a faithful Watson. In her first Hercule Poirot story, The Mysterious Affair at Styles, Christie sets up the meeting between Hastings and Poirot in a similar manner to Conan Doyle’s A Study in Scarlet: Hastings, a war veteran, is currently recovering at Styles Court where he runs into an old friend, Poirot, and eventually, a murder occurs. Poirot takes on the case, and Hastings provides him with his observations and opinions, much in the same way as Watson does for Holmes. Given that this is her first detective story, it is no surprise that Christie would be inspired by Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories. However, she takes a different approach to her detective’s methods: “Hercule Poirot’s methods are his own. Order and method, and ‘the little grey cells’” (The Big Four 3). Whereas Dupin and Holmes rely on their scientific minds and skills with deduction, Poirot takes a slightly
simpler approach by sitting back in his chair and letting his “little grey cells” draw the clues together. Another key difference is that Poirot is more sociable than either Dupin or Holmes in how he engages with suspects. He acts as a confidant towards them, seeking the truth, but allowing people to come to him rather than grilling them for answers. One such example of this is shown in a conversation between Poirot and Ursula Bourne in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*:

“You do not trust me,” said Poirot gently. “Yet all the same you came here to find me, did you not? Why was that?”

“...I think you are clever, and will find out the truth, And also—”

“Yes?”

“I think you are kind.” (244)

Poirot carries a sort of charm about him, even though it may oftentimes be masked by his massive ego. He manages to set people at ease and give them time to explain themselves, thus allowing him to gather information, acting as a friend more so than as a detective. In this sense, readers are shown a new side of the fictional detective, one who is separate from the police for his brilliance, but still within the realm of his fellow members of society.

However, like Conan Doyle, Christie developed a deep-rooted hatred for her creation’s egotistical performances and boastfulness. As Poirot states in one of his novels: “‘My name is Hercule Poirot…and I am probably the greatest detective in the world’” (*The Mystery of the Blue Train* 145). He knows that his brain is capable of deducing truth from the fallibility of human deceit, which makes him feel superior to others. But his grand boasts are not just a show of vanity on his character; in his essay,
“The Simple Art of Murder,” Raymond Chandler notes on this particular trait in the literary detective: “...it belongs to him by right, because it belongs to the world he lives in” (21). Poirot’s greatness lies in his ability to seek out the truth, so despite his boasting, Poirot’s intentions are purely in the sake of reestablishing order. His ability in his “little grey cells” is given to him by right, because he is one of the few capable of solving crime by deducing clues. Christie, though, eventually grew tired of him claiming, “Hercule Poirot, my Belgian invention, was hanging round my neck, firmly attached there like the old man of the sea” (Autobiography 263). Once Poirot was born, his popularity soon grew with him, which can lead to good results, such as paving the way for more stories to come, but it also meant that there was a limited realm to work in. By restricting herself to Poirot and his faithful Watson, Captain Hastings, Christie might not have been capable of revealing her true ingenuity. However, it did not stop her from showing off when she twisted the admired image of Holmes and Watson in her Poirot novel, The Murder of Roger Ackroyd.

4.3. The Matron of St. Mary Mead: Miss Marple

For Agatha Christie, the detective is not so much an authority figure, but a cut-out figure made for anyone to step in and play the role. Christie often has her private detective, Hercule Poirot, take on cases, but she also breaks away from using professionals and showcases amateur sleuths, the most notable being the little old spinster from St. Mary Mead: Miss Jane Marple. In Miss Marple, Christie depicts a detective whose skills involving the study of human nature often go unnoticed. However, this isn’t necessarily a fault, but an advantage for crime-solving. By listening to and observing those around her, Miss Marple pieces together clues, relying on the human aspect of each
case. Using her common knowledge of everyday life within a village, Miss Marple assembles the details within a case, as she would if she were collecting a piece of gossip around town. Human nature is the same in any environment if one observes it closely enough, and Miss Marple has a way to examine it without being examined herself. In his encyclopedia on Agatha Christie, Matthew Bunson describes Miss Marple as a formidable force within the world of detection:

It was very easy to underestimate Miss Marple. She could appear to be a dotty old spinster asking innocuous questions as she interrogated a suspect. In her daily activities—knitting, gardening, shopping, having tea, and bird-watching—she found the means of divining clues, asking questions, and probing witnesses. Once she had assembled clues, she noted their significance and logically organized them, thus giving herself almost everything she needed to solve the crime. (287)

Due to her appearance, Miss Marple could easily be brushed aside and forgotten, but that is exactly what makes her the perfect detective because no one would ever suspect her of obtaining a hidden motive. Granted, this could also mean that she would make the perfect criminal in disguise, but thankfully, Miss Marple’s sense of justice refutes any criminal strain she might possess. What she does possess, however, is a mind for solving crime, much in the same way as her professional counterpart, Monsieur Poirot, but with a better understanding of the human aspect within a case “because she knew St. Mary Mead” (Bunson 287).

In the school of hard-boiled crime fiction, the duality of the extraordinary mind paired with the common man is shown through the city detective’s grittiness, which is fitting given his environment. However, in England, there is a cozy longing for the
village countryside, because some critical viewpoints of the Golden Age cozy mysteries “assume that the interest of the mystery lies in its capacity to explore and reflect the life that is lived in the context of ‘home’” (Samantha Walton, Guilty but Insane 5). Yet, Christie proves that the murder that occurs close to home overturns the social balance, and thus, turns the comfortable setting into a hall of mirrors where nothing is as it appears and secrets are revealed. Crime has a permanent residence in the city; with crowds of people from every walk of life. That is just a given. The little villages, though, project peacefulness, but also carry an air of mystique and hidden danger. Thus, the reason why the English murder mystery grew into popularity. The environment helps shape the personality of its residents; an English village is perfect in doing so for detective fiction, showing a friendly face on the surface, but hiding its intentions within. In one of Agatha Christie’s short stories, “The Thumbmark of St. Peter,” Miss Marple’s nephew, Raymond, points this out:

“God forbid that I should ever regard village life as peaceful and uneventful,” said Raymond with fervor. “Not after the revelations we have heard from you! The cosmopolitan world seems a mild and peaceful place compared with St. Mary Mead.”

“Well, my dear,” said Miss Marple, “human nature is much the same everywhere, and, of course, one has opportunities of observing it at closer quarters in a village.” (72)

Miss Marple makes a good point in how one has greater opportunities to observe human nature in a village due to its small size. With this kind of scaling, it would almost be like living under a microscope; secrets and deceit would have nowhere to hide in such a small
area, especially if the townspeople are prone to gossip. The serenity of a small
town/village gives off a sense of security because the people within the town’s borders
are well-known to one another, so there doesn’t appear to be any danger. However, as
Miss Marple suggests throughout her stories, human nature is the same everywhere; there
is no existing utopia to keep out crime. In close quarters, crime just appears more out of
place when it happens. Villages like Miss Marple’s home, St. Mary Mead, are sought
after for their slow-pace and easy-living, which is understandable given the horrors
people faced during the world wars. Yet, there is something about the mundane that
screams for the intrusion of crime, almost as if to say that there is no such place as a
idea:

Nature should reflect its human inhabitants, i.e., it should be the Great Good
Place; for the more Eden-like it is, the greater the contradiction of murder…The
corpse must shock not only because it is a corpse but also because, even for a
corpse, it is shockingly out of place… (15)

The murder itself is reflected in a grand way, given its atrocity, so that when justice is
restored, order is once again set on its pedestal. Crime has become such a common
occurrence within a city’s limits that justification almost gets swept underneath the rug
because the next crime becomes the new topic of interest. In a small town/village,
though, crime acts as a cataclysm, rocking its peaceful foundation, so that there is a
higher need for justification in order to reinstate the Eden-like innocence. The appeal for
using villages and manor houses in detective fiction comes from this ideal state of
innocence in order to diminish its structure only to restore the ideal—as a way to show an
equilibrium between the forces of good and evil. These settings are also purposeful in showcasing how living in a microscopic atmosphere enhances the repercussions of a crime, but more importantly, shows how little we truly know about one another. Living in a small town/village may seem picturesque, but there is always more than meets the eye, as displayed in the genre of cozy murder mysteries. This area became the playground for Agatha Christie to showcase how society is represented once it becomes enclosed and shaken up.

4.4. A Mind for Murder

It is perhaps no secret that one of the most famous—arguably the most famous—detective fiction writers is Agatha Christie, who is the most widely published author of all time, outsold only by the Bible and Shakespeare. What gives this Dame of the British Empire such a remarkable reputation is her crafty mind in how she manages to frame plot twists like a spider in its web. Her famed Belgian detective, Hercule Poirot, may have had his little gray cells, but Christie has a mind for writing murder mysteries, which takes a skill of ingenuity in what Dorothy L. Sayers describes as “the art of framing lies.” In her essay, “Aristotle on Detective Fiction,” Sayers writes on the detective fiction writer’s skill in “The art of framing lies—but mark! of framing lies in the right way. There is the crux. Any fool can tell a lie, and any fool can believe it; but the right method is to tell the truth in such a way that the intelligent reader is seduced into telling the lie for himself” (175). The right way to frame a lie is to have the reader tell it himself by making him believe in something that is already familiar to him. For example, Christie exploits the reader’s idea of the Watson figure in The Murder of Roger Ackroyd. Once the lie is planted firmly in his head, the truth often goes unnoticed. Christie often imbues her
detective novels with this technique, showing that nothing is ever quite what it seems. Sometimes, the murderer plays the victim, even going as far as faking death (And Then There Were None); sometimes, the murderer is the sweet-looking innocent, despite their age or gender (Crooked House); and sometimes, the murderer is the one telling the story, crafting the lie to prove themselves not guilty. In Christie’s works, everyone is considered a suspect, no matter the circumstances that may say otherwise. Agatha Christie teaches readers how to think like a detective, how to observe our surroundings and the people we come into contact with. As Christie once claimed, “Very few of us are what we seem” (The Man in the Mist), which is almost an understatement.

Studying human nature is what makes a detective who he is; unfortunately, human nature can be quite grisly. However, as P.D. James points out about Christie in her novel on detective fiction:

The last thing we get from a Christie novel is the disturbing presence of evil…All the problems and uncertainties of life are subsumed in the one central problem: the identity of the killer. And we know that, by the end of the book, this will be satisfactorily solved and peace and order restored to that mythical village whose inhabitants, apparently so harmless and familiar, prove so enigmatic, so surprising in their ingenious villainy. (101)

Christie has a knack for surprising her readers with the true villain in each of her novels, but there is always a presence of justice that stops the villain from continuing with his/her crimes. There is more than enough evil in the real world, so escaping into a fictional world just to come across it seems a bit too much. However, as Christie shows her readers time and again, evil is brought down by those who tirelessly fight against it. By
working for the justice of the innocent victims, there is a sign of hope that there will always be those who are morally good and will restore peace within society.

4.5. Framing the Lie: The Plot Thickens

Writing detective stories is not for the faint of heart; not because of the violence and murders, but because of the framework involved with the plot. In any given mystery, the focal point is the unmasking of the murderer’s identity and explaining how they almost got away with their crime(s). Since the denouement is arguably the most essential part in a detective story, the plausible solution for writing the story is to start with the ending. Howard Haycraft notes this in his study on detective fiction:

Structurally speaking, the first thing to know about the detective story is that it is conceived not forward and developmentally as are most types of fiction, but backward. Each tale, whether novel or short story, is conceived solution-foremost in the author’s mind, around a definite central or controlling idea. (228)

By doing this, a writer has accomplished the most important goal first: to have a reasonable solution for the crime before the actual crime commences. Having the solution in mind can be helpful, but so is coming up with the problem. The murder itself typically ends in the same way every time—with a dead body and an unknown variable: the murderer. Yet, the interesting part comes in how the two are conveyed. As shown in Poe’s “Murders in the Rue Morgue,” there is the locked room scenario, which makes the escape of the murderer seemingly impossible. Yet, as Sherlock Holmes shows readers in his stories, once the impossible is eliminated, whatever remains is the truth. For Agatha Christie, it is about coming up with seemingly difficult problems only to wind up with simple solutions; her creativity comes in the form of stepping outside of the story.
structure that Poe created and Conan Doyle perfected. As shown in her novel, *Murder on the Orient Express*, Christie sets up a murder of a man stabbed to death on a train, his room locked from the inside, and with twelve likely suspects who all had good reasons for committing the murder. Instead of having one suspect rooted out as the guilty party, she frames the story so that all of the suspects wind up as the group of murderers—all having done so with good intentions. This pushes Hercule Poirot to take a step back from his lawful obligations and let justice fall within the killers’ hands. The problem of the murder was that everyone had a motive, but the solution was that it meant that they all must have done it. The execution of framing such a plot is one of the reasons why Christie is held in such high esteem for her writing, because she had taken the structure of detective fiction to a new level of ingenuity.

The act of murder may take a level of skill in coming up with ways to go about it undetected, but solving it is an entirely different area of expertise. For the writer, it is a balancing act—walking on a tightrope while juggling balls. They must simultaneously be in the mindset of both the criminal and the detective. In her article, “The Anatomy of Good and Evil in Agatha Christie,” Heta Pyrhonen describes this as the author’s doubling:

They take up both roles in imagination: they think like both detectives and criminals, drawing on both their good and bad side…But this description pertains to readers as well…If the whodunit can be thought of as…the battle between good and bad being waged inside the human being, then perhaps this…can be thought of in terms of ‘self-patrolling,’ where both the author and the reader let their evil
side go, then send their good side to pursue it until the good overcomes and curbs the bad (226).

The detective fiction genre allows the writer and reader to engage with their good and bad sides as a way to examine their inner boundaries against the breach of evil while still being tethered to their conscience. The duality allows the writer to think up ways of exhibiting criminal behavior while at the same time making an argument against such behavior. By self-patrolling, the writer shares society’s appeal for morality, showing how the consequences of one’s actions in a case such as murder is not only an outrage against society’s moral ethics, but also how the ends do not justify the means. For the reader, self-patrolling allows them to engage with their bad emotions and expel them through the conviction of the guilty party. This can be thought of as a form of cathartic remedy, as Aristotle discusses in his Poetics, “the end, or purpose, of tragedy” is the “purgation or cleansing of the emotions of pity and fear” (Brambough 464). What he means by this is that one can be allowed to examine a tragic performance and feel the tense emotions that the characters experience, but by the end, purge these emotions as a way to extract oneself from such feelings. This is why murder mysteries are so attractive: they offer the writer and reader a means to look inside the void of their dark desires and purge their guilt through the detective’s denouement.

The duality for the writer to think like both detective and criminal seems difficult given the details involved with planning the murder and uncovering its solution. However, Agatha Christie manages to do both in stride, perhaps by coming up with new ideas for the layout. In her autobiography, Christie comments on this: “The whole point of a good detective story was that it must be somebody obvious but at the same time, for
some reason, you would then find that it was not obvious, that he could not possibly have done it. Though really, of course, he had done it” (242). Readers stay invested in the detective fiction genre when plots are astounding, but plausible enough that the endings make sense. As Christie noted, the answer to the mystery must be obvious, but not too obvious. Just like any given puzzle, there should be pieces that are easy to trace, like the border, but the inside contains the hidden inconsistencies that only match up when a common link is found. In most mysteries, the writer gives just enough information to piece together a likely suspect in the beginning of the story, but then points the attention away towards another as a way to divert the reader from figuring out who the murderer is too soon. In her novel *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Christie changes the cat-and-mouse game of chasing down the murderer by framing the story in such a way that the reader is fooled from the beginning. Christie doesn’t lie straight out, but she frames the lie through the narrator, Dr. James Sheppard, who represents a Watsonian figure. He feels familiar and safe. Therefore, why would anyone think Watson could be a murderer?

When Poe and Conan Doyle use their narrators to chronicle the adventures of their amateur sleuths, readers can rely on the narrators’ testimonies because they are genuinely awed by their companions. Through someone like Dr. Watson, who represents the everyday man, readers can better relate to him because he is just like everyone else. Poe’s unnamed narrator is similar in that he is in a higher class of society, but still within the realm of ordinary citizens. Both narrators rely on their companions for a break from the mundane; in the case of Christie’s narrator, though, he has already shifted away from the mundane by committing murders. For him, the adventure lies in following the detective, Hercule Poirot, to see if he can get away with his crimes. Even before Dr.
Sheppard begins his testimony, he has already become unreliable because he killed Roger Ackroyd.

In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Christie uses the unreliable narrator as a way to show that what we think we see may not actually be true. Everyone is a suspect in a mystery; no one can be eliminated from the list, even if they could not possibly have done it. From the beginning, readers are given Dr. Sheppard’s perspective, but really, he is only telling the story in the way that he wants to tell it, not giving false information per se, but telling the truth from distorted facts and omissions. In the first chapter, Dr. Sheppard does give himself away as a liar, but in a verbal sleight of hand when he discusses his sister: “As a professional man, I naturally aim at discretion. Therefore I have got into the habit of continually withholding all information possible from my sister. She usually finds out just the same, but I have a moral satisfaction of knowing that I am in no way to blame” (2). If he has taken up the habit to withhold information from his own sister, why should a complete stranger be treated differently? Although confessing to a stranger may be easier given the anonymity, Dr. Sheppard continually withdraws information or makes a statement in such a way that shields him from suspicion.

His intention for writing everything out in his diary is to show how he gains an upper hand on the famous Belgian detective, Hercule Poirot; but he fails through his own hubris. Dr. Sheppard uses his position to his utmost advantage to explain his involvement with the victims and why he is so eager to discover the killer. In the instance of the night of the murder, Dr. Sheppard explains his reason for being in Ackroyd’s home, and why the two of them are left alone in the office. It is the scene when he is preparing to leave Ackroyd in his office that Sheppard reveals himself, but manages to cover his intentions:
“Sheppard, forgive me, but I must read this alone,” he said unsteadily. “It was meant for my eyes and my eyes only.”

He put the letter in the envelope and laid it on the table…

“No,” I cried impulsively, “read it now.”

Ackroyd stared at me in some surprise…

“No, I’d rather wait.”

But for some reason, obscure to myself, I continued to urge him.

“At least, read the name of the man,” I said.

Now Ackroyd is essentially pigheaded. The more you urge him to do a thing, the more determined he is not to do it. All my arguments were in vain.

The letter had been brought in at twenty minutes to nine. It was just ten minutes to nine when I left him, the letter still unread. I hesitated with my hand on the door handle, looking back and wondering if there was anything I had left undone. (43)

The way that Sheppard describes the interaction between himself and Ackroyd leaves some suspicion, like with the question of the letter written to Ackroyd from the first victim before she died. Why would Sheppard be so interested to hear the entirety of the letter’s contents? In this way, he is admitting to the letter’s existence and of his knowledge of it without actually revealing everything he knows, such as everything that happens during the time allotted. Sheppard claims that the letter was brought in twenty minutes to nine and that he leaves Ackroyd ten minutes to nine. However, as Poirot goes on to reveal in the denouement, the reader only has the doctor’s word as to the time he left, which is a key element for uncovering the truth. The doctor claims that he doesn’t
know why he is so determined for Ackroyd to tell him the rest of the letter. Again, this is only to corroborate with the facts in the case of anyone else telling a different story, like in the instance of the butler, Parker, who was the only other person to go in and out of the room, and be close enough at hand to overhear anything. Sheppard is clever enough to think of any potential threats that could spoil his testimony, but at the same time he is cleverly exonerating himself, such in the instance when he states how he wonders if there was anything he had left undone. It is only his word that keeps him from looking like a suspect and Sheppard uses his authority to prove himself as a reliable figurehead of the community.

As the town doctor, no one would question how and why Sheppard would be involved in examining the corpse of Roger Ackroyd; but as the murderer, it gives him the opportunity to clear away any potential discrepancies that may uncover his crime. Once Poirot takes on the case, Dr. Sheppard uses the opportunity to keep himself concealed by playing the detective’s trusty Watson. In this sense, readers are shown a deconstructed image of Conan Doyle’s beloved duo while also showcasing an interesting case of the detective and murderer actually working together to solve the murders. When it turns out that Dr. Sheppard is not like the Dr. Watson that fans of Sherlock Holmes fondly remember, there is a feeling of outrage for being duped. However, there cannot be many hard feelings since Christie had told readers everything they needed to know if only they had noticed the common link—that being the involvement of Sheppard himself throughout the case. The art of framing the lie is to have the reader tell it to themselves—that the obvious person cannot possibly be the killer, but somehow he is. Since Sheppard is the
narrator, it is automatically assumed that he knows as much as the reader, or that he will
tell the truth exactly how it happens. As Dorothy Sayers advises:

Remember, however, that the person telling the story is not necessarily the author.
Thus, in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, the story is told by the detective’s *fidus Achates* or (to use the modern term) his Watson. Arguing from the particular to
the general, we may be seduced into concluding that, because the original Dr.
Watson was a good man, all Watsons are good in virtue of their Watsonity. But
this is false reasoning, for moral worth and Watsonity are by no means
inseparable. So, despite the existence of a first innocent Watson, we may yet
admit the possibility of a guilty one; nor, when the Watson in *Roger Ackroyd*
turns out to be the murderer, has the reader any right to feel aggrieved against the
author—for she has vouched only for the man’s Watsonity and not for his moral
worth. (177).

Just because Sheppard is a Watson in this mystery doesn’t mean that he is the same as the
man he is alluded to. Dr. Watson’s moral worth has resonated from the time that Conan
Doyle ended his Sherlock Holmes stories, and for that, people assumed the best in
someone thought to be another Watson, but as Sayers puts it, “this is false reasoning.”
Just as Conan Doyle showed two sides of the same coin through Holmes and Moriarty,
Christie does so through Dr. Watson and Dr. Sheppard. In this sense, Christie carries on
Doyle’s legacy by revealing new possibilities if he had ever considered adding more
depth to the good doctor. Throughout her works, Christie seems to enjoy revealing the
criminal strain within the minds of everyday society, which may be a good way to
develop a lack of trust for our fellow human beings. However, Christie is only showing
us what we try to keep hidden from ourselves—that we do not truly know one another, not wholeheartedly, which is a terrifying thought, but inevitably true. Anyone is capable of murder, however familiar they may be to us; Sherlock Holmes could have been like Moriarty, and Dr. Watson could have been like Dr. Sheppard. What keeps people grounded on the side of justice is that they want to live in a peaceful environment, but a sense of peace cannot last forever. There will always be evil that breaches its way within the borders of society, and it is important to be wary and observant of that fact.

The reason why Dr. Sheppard almost got away with the murders was because he was capable of concealing himself through his own testimony—by only giving just enough of the truth to verify his story, but misconstruing certain key notes that would have tripped him up. He was clever; as Emanuela Gutkowski puts it in her article on Christie’s novel, “In this case, we know that the murder (A) happened before the investigation narrated (B), but presume that it is not well explained only because the narrator does not exactly know how A happened. However, we know in the end, he was the main actor of A” (56). In any story, the reader is told what occurs based on what the writer wants them to know; the deceit lies in the framework, in how what is being told may not be the entire story. Dr. Sheppard gives a rendition of the ten minutes spent in Ackroyd’s office in the beginning of the story then later revises it in the last chapter, “But suppose I had put a row of stars after the first sentence! Would somebody then have wondered what exactly happened in that blank ten minutes?” (284). The answer was always there within the words, but the reader’s faith in the Watsonian figure, learned from reading countless Holmes’ stories, had them believing the lie from the very beginning. Christie may have taken inspiration from Conan Doyle in the relationship between Hercule Poirot and his
good friend, Captain Hastings, but she flipped the image of the Holmes and Watson duo in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, which cemented her name in the genre of detective fiction.
Chapter 5. The Hardboiled Detective—An American Hero

“The boys with their feet on the desk know that the easiest murder case in the world to break is the one somebody tried to get very cute with; the one that really bothers them is the murder somebody only thought of two minutes before he pulled it off. But if the writers of this fiction wrote about the kind of murders that happen, they would also have to write about the authentic flavor of life as it is lived. And since they cannot do that, they pretend that what they do is what should be done.”

Raymond Chandler, “The Simple Art of Murder”

5.1. Introduction

In the genre of detective fiction, the British are known for creating elaborate plots and ingenious sleuths. There is a coziness to their art of murder in that it allows the reader to escape from the horrors of reality, such as the Golden Age writers do during the World Wars. Despite the popular appeal of the Golden Age of detective fiction, there is a shift across the Atlantic in America to bring a realistic approach into the genre—to showcase the real murderers walking within the city crowds and back alleys. In other words, to show murder and crime as it really is, gritty and formidable, and inadvertently human. Dashiell Hammett is credited for creating the hardboiled school of detective fiction, writing about private detectives who diminish the line between the law and criminality. His creations such as Sam Spade and the Continental Op are brusque, crass, and certainly not the most upstanding citizens in general; but they are loyal to their duty as detectives, even when they stray into gray areas. Hammett’s detective novels bring his characters to life in a way that is different from his British contemporaries. Instead of using the detective’s unique intelligence to solve crimes, Hammett shows the detective in action, shaking down suspects and hunting for the truth, not being afraid to get their hands dirty in the process. For Hammett, detective work is not something to be glorified; there is a
bleakness to his words in how the resolution comes to a close with blood and corpses in its wake. Hammett’s personal experience fighting in the world wars and being a part of Pinkerton’s Detective Agency gave him a knowledge of the world that could never belong in the confines of the English village murder mystery.

There is nothing cozy about murder; there is a grave seriousness to it, and Hammett honors that quite well by displaying the hard and questionable choices his detectives must make to reestablish some form of order. Sometimes, those choices mean taking measures beyond the boundaries of the law and thinking in the mindset of the criminal. Hammett’s outlook into the seamy underworld of the city streets is not all bad, as shown through his characters’ bitter sense of humor. It is a tactic much like Sherlock Holmes’ lack of emotion in that the detectives have to form a detachment to be able to do their job. The violence they experience firsthand is not something to be surprised by or taken as a grand tragedy; in the city environment, there is not an emotional uproar in response to violence because there has been a social numbing to it over time given its common occurrence. The real conflict that the detectives face in Hammett’s novels is how to hold onto their own sanity as they navigate through the environment that just wants to pull them under. In some instances, they are not even given much of a chance to remain on the side of good, as shown in Red Harvest when the Continental Op tries to reform the city of Personville: “It is this damned burg. You cannot go straight here. I got myself tangled at the beginning” (143). However, that doesn’t stop the Op from completing the job in the best possible way, even though it doesn’t turn out in the way that he had initially hoped. In the resolution, there is not much of a feeling of triumph, but
more of a somber silence as the last of the bullets are fired, the bodies carried away to rest, and justice is given to the last of the killers.

In many of the cozier stories involving the amateur sleuths, there is no fight scene between the sleuth and criminal, or bullets flying. The denouement typically involves the sleuth’s explanation providing the details of the murder and killer. In the hard-boiled school, there is more of a standoff, almost like a showdown in a Western. The private detective has to use the tools within his wheelhouse, which include not only his brains, but sometimes more importantly, his brawn. He has to be willing to face the criminal and pull the trigger if necessary. In a perfect world, a detective could walk the streets without ever needing to carry a gun. Hammett distrusts the world in which he lived because there is a question of human integrity in his line of work, and he shows his readers that same world in which they too belong. He strays from his genre predecessors in creating stories of crime in which to escape from reality, and makes his own path by writing crime in a harsher light. However, Hammett’s escapism into his idea of the private detective’s gritty environment still has a touch of intrigue and light-heartedness in it, which makes the violence a bit easier to digest. As Raymond Chandler describes Hammett’s work, “...he did not wreck the formal detective story...he demonstrated that the detective story can be important writing” (17). By doing so, the genre shifted into being taken seriously and not just being seen as escape fiction, thus paving a path into the margins of literature.

After Hammett’s introduction of the hard-boiled school, other writers began displaying the gritty city dick (detective) as a new version from the cliched sleuths that Doyle and Christie created. One such writer, Raymond Chandler, reveals through his detective, Philip Marlowe, that despite the rough exterior, there is an unlikely hero who
strives to bring justice to victims. Though it is a job that comes with much sacrifice, not just in the price of human lives, but also in maintaining enough integrity to fight against the criminal and not wind up becoming one. As shown in his novel, *The Big Sleep*, Chandler’s Marlowe is similar to Hammett’s detectives in that he is not afraid to get his hands dirty to protect his clients from harm. However, Marlowe has more of an inner conscience, thus keeping him in check from having a criminal strain. Having a conscience can either be a strength or a weakness in the line of detective work, given how the detective faces evil and the aftermath it leaves behind on a regular basis; in his work, Chandler shows that having one is both a strength and a weakness—that it pushes his detective to the edge of the dark void, and even when he falls off, he accepts that he is “part of the nastiness” (*The Big Sleep* 230). In doing so, Marlowe saves someone else from having blood on their hands. Even with the muck of society coating him, Marlowe continues to be exactly who he is, an honest brute with morals. It is understandable that Hammett’s viewpoint is so bleak because that is the unfortunate world he aligned himself with, which he did not seem able to escape from; he showed his readers a cold outlook of the detective’s world where it is not the little gray cells that solve society’s problems, but answering violence with its own nature. Chandler also displays this hard-beaten world, but uses his detective as the shield from which the innocent can hold onto their purity for a while longer yet.

5.2. Hammett’s New School Tactics in Detective Fiction

In the classic British mysteries, such as those by Agatha Christie, there is an emphasis on the plot’s structure, as the story centers around the murder(s) and its resolution through the discovery of the murderer. In the hard-boiled school, the
murder(s), or crime, is essentially what stirs the plot into motion. However, given the amount of violence shown throughout the story, the emphasis lies more so on the detective and their response to the violence. Violence is a natural occurrence within the city streets of Hammett and Chandler’s worlds; it is not something that shakes the city’s foundation at its core like it would in a small country village. In this new subgenre of detective fiction, Hammett demonstrates a cold outlook for solving crime in that no one is ever innocent, and the detective is not always a good man. His detectives, such as Sam Spade and the Continental Op, are professionals in their line of work, and differ from the amateur sleuths in that they do not see murder as an intricate problem that has to be solved. Justice is not fair, and Hammett’s professionals know this as a fact, and they also know that to achieve justice they have to be willing to play dirty and bend rules when necessary. In this sense, readers are not shown a detective who is heroic, but one who is worn down by the length of the job. They haven’t yet crossed the line into the criminal world, but they do walk with their feet spread out, one on each side.

In the hard-boiled school, there can be a body in the library upon arriving at the scene, but what takes place afterwards is where the real action occurs. There are no lengthy descriptions of background information, which unearths the identity of the killer; there are no drawn out explanations from the detective either. In his work, *The American Roman Noir: Hammett, Cain, and Chandler*, William Marling describes Hammett’s aesthetic:

> The style that Hammett developed in the Op stories and *Red Harvest* is deft but muscular…It falls within Walker Gibson’s well-known definition in *Tough, Sweet, and Stuffy* of tough talk (7), yet it has unique features…In Hammett’s early
work, his sentences average thirteen words in length. Descriptive passages run into flab at seventeen words, and fight scenes are built of sentences averaging eight words each, some only three or four words long. In the narrow columns of the pulp format, these sentences were not only easy to read but also formed their own tiny paragraphs, leaving white space, as in art nouveau, to indicate quickened action. (116-117)

The sparsity of the sentences is similar to Hemingway’s style, but the reason why it works so well for Hammett in his writing is that it emphasizes the action of car chases, guns blazing, and the detective’s fists barreling as he hunts down suspects and criminals. Overly drawn out descriptions are unnecessary because the author is not trying to trick the reader by burying the clues within the details. There can be enough intrigue in the action of the narrative, showing what happens as the detective tracks down information rather than having him be introspective. In this way, there is less of a feeling of deceitfulness as the reader is shown what the detective discovers as he goes along.

Discovering the identity of the killer is not as important in the hard-boiled school as it is to put a stop to his actions. In the British detective stories, the resolution comes when the killer is discovered and answers for their actions, but in the hard-boiled school, the resolution doesn’t magically come through the killer’s identity. In Hammett and Chandler’s fictionalized world of detection, murder cannot be stopped based on Sherlock Holmes or Hercule Poirot’s methods, at least not entirely. Oftentimes, it requires the detective to physically take on the killer. In Hammett’s novel, The Thin Man, he describes the detective’s job: “You find the guy you think did the murder and you slam him in the can and let everybody know you think he’s guilty” (195). From the British
writers, readers are shown amateur detectives like Sherlock Holmes, who works a case based on method and intellect. However, a person with a mind such as Holmes’ is a rare occurrence, and how he works by collecting evidence based on assumptions is not exactly a reliable method when building a case against a criminal. There has to be solid proof, and as is shown in Hammett’s and Chandler’s works, this is not always the case either. Their detectives use blunt force and often hold a suspect at gunpoint in order to receive a confession, which may not exactly be reliable, but it gets the job done quicker and the killer off the city streets.

In the classic murder mysteries of British writers, there is almost a dullness as most of the action takes place within one room or setting. The importance in these detective stories lies in the detective’s introspections as he pieces together the clues. There can be instances of chases as shown in the Holmes stories when he and Watson are gallivanting throughout London’s streets and English countryside while on a case. Yet, the British plots generally end up in the same place with the detective showing off his intellect and unmasking the murderer. For the American private eye, it is not so much how they come up with the solution as to what they go through to reach the conclusion. As P.D. James points out in Talking About Detective Fiction: “The hard-boiled detectives are not introspective; it is through action and dialogue that their story is told” (87). The detective is not necessarily withholding information from the reader because there is not much reason for him to, given that the detective work is just a job in order to be paid. In the instance of Chandler’s Marlowe, his work may become more personalized as he becomes more involved with the client; however, for Hammett’s detectives, it is more about the line of duty. In her novel, P.D. James describes Sam Spade as “capable of
falling in love with a woman but never putting love above the demands of the job” (84). The Op is similar in his relationship with Dinah Brand in Red Harvest when he discovers that she has been murdered and focuses more so on establishing his innocence than seeking justice for her. The detective’s job is to seek the truth and capture the criminals and killers who dismantle the semblance of order. There is a detachment that comes with the job in that the detective’s personal response to the crime acts more as a hindrance rather than as a sign of good faith; in order to successfully continue doing his job, the detective has to push aside his own feelings and personality, otherwise, he may lose heart and fail to be good at what he does. As shown through Poe and Doyle’s detectives, the detective’s functionality as a machine may work for them in how it enhances their observational skills and ability to solve the mystery; however, the lack of sociality and empathy prevents them from understanding human nature. Keeping one’s distance may be a defense tactic for detectives, but it can also be a handicap in that there is nothing keeping the detective tethered to society, thus what reason does he have for maintaining it? In the hard-boiled thriller there is no clean resolution, and sometimes leaves the detective questioning his actions, as the Continental Op does after he finishes the job of trying to restore the city of Personville:

I spent most of my week in Ogden trying to fix up my reports so they would not read as if I had broken as many Agency rules, state laws and human bones as I had…I might just as well have saved the labor and sweat I had put into trying to make my reports harmless. They did not fool the Old Man. He gave me merry hell. (198-199)
Murder is not cozy and there is not a clean way to interact with it once the killer’s actions have been set into motion. The private detective’s story lies in how he responds to the murder and how he goes about interacting with it; it is not something that he can piece together by examining the little clues dispersed throughout the scene as Dupin or Holmes would have done. He has to think as the criminal would and sometimes act in the same way. How long, though, before the detective gets tired of chasing crime and generates it instead?

5.3. The Detective’s Moral Dilemma

In the hard-boiled school of detective fiction, the detective must face many questions in regards to toying with the line between the law and criminality. His choices define the kind of man who he is, just as any person’s, but for a detective, those choices often come with more substantial consequences because he is playing with human lives. Dashiell Hammett’s most memorable detectives are Sam Spade and the Continental Op. In the Op, there is anonymity as “Hammett made his Continental Op nameless, without background or significant human relationship. His sloppy physique…and quotidian habits…signal an Everyman” (Marling 107). In this sense, readers are shown a professional detective who resembles the type of character that Doyle used in Dr. Watson—an everyday citizen turned sleuth. However, Hammett showcases the everyday man through the authoritarian figure who resembles the law. In this light, readers are shown a heroic figure in how the private detective goes against the criminals, but there is more of an emphasis on his humanity. This is important to keep in mind given the setting that the Continental Op works in when taking the job of cleaning up the city of Personville, i.e., Poisonville, in Red Harvest. In this novel, power is a key factor in that
whoever holds it runs the city; that person is Elihu Willsson—a man of wealth and prestige who sees the power struggles between the criminal gangs in the city as an imposing threat that has overstayed its welcome: “Elihu Willsson was Personville, and he was almost the whole state” (9). When Elihu Willsson and his son, Donald, seek a way to restore peace within Personville, they end up creating the blood-hued environment rather than cleaning it up. Donald’s murder is just the starting point of casualties in the novel when the Continental Op enters the scene. Sending in the Continental Op is a chance of re-establishing order, but to do so successfully, the Op has to bend his moral code and work with the corrupt system, and even though his hands are technically clean of blood, he still has to answer for instigating the violence. Hammett sets up the novel almost as a way to demolish the heroic image given to detectives as the Op is forced to take the law into his own hands and pit criminal gangs against one another, thus leading to a litter of bodies: “‘This damned burg’s getting me. If I do not get away soon I’ll be going blood-simple like the natives. There’s been what? A dozen and a half murders since I’ve been here…That’s sixteen of them in less than a week, and more coming up” (142). There is so much blood and violence that it is difficult to keep track of just how many expire by the end of the novel, which exemplifies a numbness to the blood and gore. The characters deal with a mad frenzy of trying to clamp down on justice within the city, but ultimately coming out in a losing battle. The title of the novel, Red Harvest, indicates the work accomplished by the Op, showing how even on the side of the law, he is really no better than the criminals he is supposed to capture. Compromise is another important factor within the novel in that there are no clearly defined lines between right and wrong; there is only how one acts in the heat of the moment and making the best choice in each
scenario, not the right or wrong one, just the best way that leaves the least amount of
damage: “I had to swing the job the best way I could. How could I help it if the best way
was bound to lead to a lot of killing?” (143). For the Op, it means he has to withhold
from morals and play the game according to the criminals by fighting violence with
violence. By the end of the novel, he is like a weary gunslinger, wondering just how
clean he turned out from all the carnage. There is no celebration or clear sign of justice
when it was won at the expense of human lives, even if many of those lives weren’t
exemplary to begin with. As the Op put it: “‘Play with murder enough and it gets you one
of two ways. It makes you sick, or you get to like it’” (143). The sickness is just one of
the burdens a detective has to bear in order to continue doing his job. He may not always
be honorable in his actions, but as long as he stays firm in where he stands on the line
between law and criminality without fully crossing, there is a chance for him to be a good
man, and sometimes that is enough.

5.4. Chandler and Marlowe–an Unlikely American Hero

In Raymond Chandler’s creation of Philip Marlowe, readers are shown another
tough city detective, but one who is more aware of the consequences and hard luck that
comes with the job. Chandler is not like Hammett in that his worldview is brighter;
however, he does seem to understand Hammett’s feelings as shown through Marlowe’s
vulnerability that keeps the detective within the boundaries of the law in the lawless
world he inhabits. Hammett’s detectives may be duty-bound and willing to cross lines to
receive some form of justice, but Chandler’s Marlowe plays his role by working for the
victims more so than as a job that has to be fulfilled. In her encyclopedia on crime fiction
and its writers, *Whodunnit*, Rosemary Herbert describes Marlowe as “a complex
character”: “Marlowe is…full of contradictions…He is, at various times, compassionate and sentimental, brutal and indifferent…Unlike many of his lesser imitation, Marlowe is no superhero; he freely acknowledges fallibility and fear” (31). Yet, his ability to freely acknowledge his faults makes him a stronger character than Hammett’s detectives in that he is three-dimensional rather than an anonymity like the Continental Op. There is a better chance for readers to form a bond with someone like Marlowe rather than the Continental Op or Sam Spade because of his compassion for his fellow man. The Continental Op may represent an Everyday Man, but he is not like Dr. Watson, or Poirot’s friend, Captain Hastings, because he doesn’t quite act in accordance with them. In the end of Red Harvest, the Op is weary from fighting against the gangs like Watson is after returning from Afghanistan; however, the choices he made in initiating violence show how willing he is to diminish the lines of upholding the law, and instead use criminal activity as a means to end the reign of terror in Personville. The Op doesn’t excuse his actions, but defends them as a necessity to complete his job of cleaning up the city. Hammett’s detective stories show men who work within the limited means of their role as defenders of the law only to wind up breaking away from the rules and doling out justice in ways that they deem the most fit in each scenario; in this sense, they are no better than the criminals they chase down because they have strayed from the rules keeping them in check. Philip Marlowe is different in that he is willing to fight dirty and act as the tough guy, but he keeps himself in check from taking things too far and not being able to come back to the side of the law. His contradictory nature is fitting because it shows the duality between the detective as a figure of his job and as the real man playing that role.
In his essay, “The Simple Art of Murder,” Raymond Chandler argues for the detective’s character, explaining how despite the rough exterior, there is a heroic figure. Whether the detective is a professional or an amateur, he is the conduit between the reader and the mystery, guiding the way to the truth. Discovering the detective’s identity is perhaps just as important as discovering the murderer’s, because he represents the side of human nature that we all work to uphold; however, the detective’s role forces him to interact and get inside the mindset of deviants who veer crookedly from the line of order. The detective’s standing places him in a precarious position where he can just as easily slip into criminality. It is his own moral code that steers him towards seeking truth and justice for victims, which may not be quite understood by the authorities of the law whose code of honor is based on civic duty. Although the professional police force and the private detective walk along the same line, the detective is nevertheless an outsider; but for that reason, he is more valuable, because he is an everyday man working for the people and therefore has a sense of trust, which enables him to gain more information. The detective is also outside of society’s sphere where he is an unusual man because of his skills to observe the inner workings of crime and his ability to stop it, even if it means spilling blood. The detective is not a hero of myth or a superhero, but he is heroic through his own right in that he serves a duty to society that is not asked of him, but one in which he willfully chooses because of his unique talents. In his essay, “The Simple Art of Murder,” Raymond Chandler describes the detective as a man of honor:

In everything that can be called art there is a quality of redemption. It may be pure tragedy, if it is high tragedy, and it may be pity and irony, and it may be the raucous laughter of the strong man. But down these mean streets a man must go
who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero, he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor, by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world…The story is his adventure in search of a hidden truth, and it would be no adventure if it did not happen to a man fit for adventure. He has a range of awareness that startles you, but it belongs to him by right, because it belongs to the world he lives in. If there were enough like him, I think the world would be a very safe place to live in, and yet not too dull to be worth living in. (20-21)

Chandler is right when he says that the detective “is everything,” because without him, there would be a lack of meaning to the mystery. The detective explains and provides comfort not just to the characters, but more so for the readers, because he acts as the shield between the innocent and the darkness. By being the outsider, he is able to observe the everyday man and the criminal, and walk with both feet on the line of order without crossing over. He walks by his own code of honor, which leaves him clear of mind and without bias. The detective may be rendered down by the violence he regularly observes, but that doesn’t deter him from facing evil; it merely makes him more solid in where he stands against it. He gives us closure by hunting down the truth and exposing the hidden intricacies that may have gone unfounded. He is “the best man in his world” through his ability to see and comprehend the ordinary links within the extraordinary whole of the murder; and because of that, he shows us how the world’s horrors can be rationalized
rather than feared. The detective cannot stop murders from happening, but he can dispel murderers from “these mean streets.” Chandler’s detective, Philip Marlowe may not exactly be a hero in the sense of living by a chivalric code of honor, but there is something to be said for Chandler’s creation: “Chandler seems to have created the culminating American hero: wised up, hopeful, thoughtful, adventurous, sentimental, cynical and rebellious” (Robert B. Parker, *The New York Times Book Review*). Marlowe is an Americanized hero in how he enables himself to walk down the mean streets and dark alleyways, and allows himself to get a little tarnished by the grime of society’s ire without immersing himself completely as Hammett’s detectives do. He remains hopeful that there will remain a semblance of good after he closes a case, but understands disappointment when trouble rules out in the corrupt world he inhabits. Yet, as long as he remains firm in where he stands, he can continue to do his work and strive toward a safer world, one that still has enough trouble where it doesn’t become too dull.
Since the detective genre’s beginnings, there has been a steady development of writers who have shaped and defined the framework through their stories and clever ingenuities. The tropes that Edgar Allan Poe established show no signs of going away. People still continue to read detective fiction because the locked-room scenario works, and everyone loves the eccentric sleuth. Things may change in how writers adapt the art of framing lies, as shown in the sensation of psychological thrillers, but there remains nostalgia for what the predecessors brought in the cozy world of the Golden Age.

Poe may be best known for his grotesque tales and melancholic poem, “The Raven,” but his credit as the Father of Detective Fiction reveals that there is an analytical mind within the tragic figure. Poe’s deductive skills are still shown today, not through his detective, C. Auguste Dupin, but through Poe himself as he plays his own detective in works such as Louis Bayard’s novel, The Pale Blue Eye, as well as in various comic books.

Sherlock Holmes has remained the embodiment of detective fiction since his introduction in 1887 because his eccentricities are part of his complicated human nature—one that shows how a unique individual functions, even through the struggles of his demons. With over 250 adaptations, just in film and tv alone, Sherlock Holmes is considered the “most portrayed literary human character” (Zheng, MovieWeb.com), which goes to show how beloved Doyle’s creation is, quirks and all. His friendship with
Dr. Watson, though, is what makes him a memorable figure; because without the good
doctor, Holmes would never have been dutifully recorded.

Agatha Christie remains the Queen of Mystery, not because she wrote over 80
works of detective fiction, but because her stories continue to baffle us and encourage us
to be our own detectives, searching for the truth within the lie. Throughout the many
screen adaptations of her sleuths, Hercule Poirot and Jane Marple, as well as her other
amateur detectives, people gravitate to the enigmatic plots that showcase the ingenious
mind who first created them. Christie’s works continue to inspire writers today as seen in
Ruth Ware’s clearly designed plots, which have inspired some, such as best-selling
author, David Baldacci, to call her “The Agatha Christie of our generation.”

The gritty, tough-talking, gun-slinging detectives in Dashiell Hammett and
Raymond Chandler’s stories may go against the intellectual stamina of their cozier
predecessors; however, the men, such as the Continental Op, Sam Spade, and Philip
Marlowe, show how there is a complicated interiority to the detective’s character as they
question the moral high ground and what all a detective’s duty entails. Adaptations of
these memorable characters may have helped establish the film noir era in the early to
mid-twentieth century, but these hard-boiled sleuths continue to inspire the character of
the private detective and the world he inhabits through intense, action-packed crime
thrillers on page and on screen.

The appeal of detective fiction has never truly waned, because mystery always
has a way of drawing us in droves to find out just how the body in the locked-room was
configured without a trace, and to solve the problem of the murder’s intrusion to the
peaceful environment. The detective is more than just a figure of an analytical mind or
gritty lawman; he is a hero that guides us through the process of uncovering our own hidden fears and guilt and cathartically releasing them, thereby restoring order to our inner beings. I believe there is something to be said for why people are so drawn into the fictional chaos of murder and violence that gets tidied up with a simple explanation, and it goes back to our origins, as shown in the Biblical account of Cain killing his brother, Abel. John Steinbeck states in his novel, *East of Eden*, that this story symbolizes the human soul. We, like Cain, are marked by our sins, and yet we remain firm in our society of law and order that good shall prevail. We seek comfort within the abnormality of crime and murder because we are searching for the reason why we are attracted to it. There may be a simple answer in the origins of the genre; in his biography on Edgar Allan Poe, Joseph Wood Krutch remarks upon Poe’s struggle with bouts of melancholy and madness:

As the realization that he was as a matter of fact the victim of irrational and uncontrollable emotions...he created the character of Dupin with whom he might imaginatively identify himself...seizing upon the idea of reason an explanation of the mystery of his own character, Poe invented the detective story in order that he might not go mad. (118)

In Dupin, Poe created a being of rational thought who can easily explain away the horrors and traumas that society is dealt. In doing so, he may have been able to keep the inner darkness at bay, and we continue to do so by reading detective stories to this day. There is some comfort in the classic stories of detective fiction because they rationalize and explain why a tragedy occurs when we live in a world that has unthinkable tragedies on a regular basis. By observing violence on a smaller scale in a safe environment, we can
have a better understanding of the horrors that plague our human story, and like the
fictional detective, break them down until a fragment of truth emerges. There is a
deception at work, not just in detective stories, but in our human story as well. By
mastering the elementary problems through attaining skills of observation and deductive
reasoning, we can play our own detectives and attempt to uncover the hidden intricacies
that make up our lives. Only be sure you do not trip along the wrong garden path, as
Dorothy L. Sayers warns us, because the art of framing the lie is in how the reader tells
the lie for himself, not just believing in what is being told to him.
References


