

Introduction to Crime Fiction

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Office hours: Wednesdays, 12–1 p.m. or by appointment

February 13, 2023. Sayers (3).

review: all in good fun...?

- ▶ text is insistently jocular: Lord Peter *and* the narrator
 - ▶ gags, allusions, repartee
 - ▶ detection treated as a game (which it is, in a story)
 - ▶ tropes borrowed from farce (bed trick, slapstick)
- ▶ mystery genre conventions treated comically too
 - ▶ “Crimplesham-X”: logic-chopping; the Moriarty
 - ▶ trial burlesqued by Coroner’s inquest with deaf lady
 - ▶ clue-hunting keeps going to dead ends
- ▶ moral seriousness comes as a surprise
 - ▶ a “light” genre tolerates lots of jokes
 - ▶ interpretive puzzle: why not joke right through?

questions of motive

- ▶ What is the motive for the murder in *Whose Body?* Say who the murderer is and why he or she did it. What is the significance of this motive, in terms of interpreting the novel?

tale of ratiocination

At the time when I wrote my book, my original sensual impulse to kill Sir Reuben Levy had already become profoundly modified by my habits of thought. To the animal lust to slay and the primitive human desire for revenge, there was added the rational intention of substantiating my own theories for the satisfaction of myself and the world. (130/233)

or...?

“It isn’t the girl Freke would bother about—it’s having his aristocratic nose put out of joint by a little Jewish nobody.” (113/204)

or...?

“It isn’t the girl Freke would bother about—it’s having his aristocratic nose put out of joint by a little Jewish nobody.” (113/204)

“Why did he call him a Sheeny?” (108/195)

I took off Levy’s head, and started to open up the face. In twenty minutes his own wife could not have recognised him. (139/249)

who is guilty?

“But so sad about poor Sir Reuben. I must write a few lines to Lady Levy; I used to know her quite well, you know, dear....Christine Ford, she was then, and I remember so well the dreadful trouble there was about her marrying a Jew....He was very handsome, then, you know, dear, in a foreign-looking way, but he hadn't any means, and the Fords didn't like his religion. Of course we're all Jews nowadays.” (27/56)

questions of method

“How often have I said to you that when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth?”

n@ A. Conan Doyle, *The Sign of the Four* (New York: William L. Allison, 1890), 61, [HathiTrust](#).

He felt as though he were looking at a complicated riddle, of which he had once been told the answer but had forgotten it and was always on the point of remembering. (Sayers, 89)

- ▶ How does Lord Peter solve the mystery?

COSSSRI

...

SCISSCORS (91/167)

“It’s impossible,” said his reason, feebly; “*credo quia impossibile*,” said his interior certainty with impervious self-satisfaction. (92/169)

COSSSRI

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See Peter Harrison, “‘I believe because it is absurd’: Christianity’s First Meme,” *Aeon*, April 9, 2018, [aeon.co](https://www.aeon.co).

“There’s nothing you can’t prove if your outlook is only sufficiently limited. Look at Sugg.” (46/88)

- ▶ What explains why Wimsey’s method is different from Holmes’s “scientific detection”? Can we explain it historically?

modern detection: the war

“Listen! Oh, my God! I can’t hear—I can’t hear anything for the noise of the guns. Can’t they stop the guns?”

“Oh dear!” said Mr. Bunter to himself. “No, no—it’s all right, Major—don’t you worry.” (93/171)

“Waking poor Bunter up in the middle of the night with scares about Germans, as if that wasn’t all over years ago.” (95/173)

totality

Though pretensions to systematic knowledge may appear more and more far-fetched, the idea of totality does not necessarily need to be abandoned. On the contrary, the existence of a deeply rooted relationship that explains superficial phenomena is confirmed the very moment it is stated that direct knowledge of such a connection is not possible. Though reality may seem to be opaque, there are privileged zones—signs, clues—which allow us to penetrate it....This idea, which is the crux of the conjectural or semiotic paradigm, has made progress in the most varied cognitive circles and has deeply influenced the humane sciences.

n@ Carlo Ginzburg, “Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm,” in *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method* (Baltimore: JHUP, 2013), 123.

discussion: stakes

[Peter:] “If it was all on paper I’d enjoy every bit of it....And I feel as if I oughtn’t ever to find it amusin’. But I do.” (85/156)

[Parker:] “If Sir Reuben has been murdered, is it a game? and is it fair to treat it as a game?” (86/158)

[Freke:] I freely admit now that the game is yours. (129/231)

- ▶ What is *at stake* in the solution of the Battersea mystery?

let's be serious

Of this realization of a great city itself as something wild and obvious the detective story is certainly the Iliad....

The romance of the police force is thus the whole romance of man. It is based on the fact that morality is the most dark and daring of conspiracies. It reminds us that the whole noiseless and unnoticeable police management by which we are ruled and protected is only a successful knight-errantry.

Chesterton, "A Defence of Detective Stories," 119, 123.

the butler did it

Mr. Bunter smiled grimly and led his victim away. (79)

- ▶ What is Bunter's role?

“No, my lord”

“No, Bunter, I pay you £200 a year to keep your thoughts to yourself. Tell me, Bunter, in these democratic days, don't you think that's unfair?”

“No, my lord.” (25/10–11)

next

- ▶ two *Black Mask* stories
 - ▶ Daly, “Knights of the Open Palm”: for next time (print)
 - ▶ Hammett, “Crooked Souls”: focus for next Monday
- ▶ Hammett, “Suggestions”: also for next Monday