

Introduction to Crime Fiction

Prof. Andrew Goldstone

(andrew.goldstone@rutgers.edu)

TA: Anthony Tello (anthony.tello@rutgers.edu)

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- ▶ Please fill out sign-in sheet

course goals

- ▶ read fun crime stories and novels
- ▶ learn to interpret texts in a scholarly way
- ▶ learn to think about literary history
 - ▶ continuity and change
 - ▶ form, theme, context
- ▶ learn to think about popular genre

don't tell your families!

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Under the head of “mental relaxation” may be included detective stories, the enormous popularity of which (like the passion for solving cross-word puzzles) seems to show that for the reader of to-day [1932] a not unpleasurable way of relaxing is to exercise the ratiocinative faculties on a minor non-personal problem.

Q.D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932; London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), 50.

To “improve upon” detective fiction is to write “literature,” not detective fiction. The whodunit par excellence is not the one which transgresses the rules of the genre, but the one which conforms to them.

Tzvetan Todorov, “The Typology of Detective Fiction” (1966), in *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 43.

save my job

- ▶ How might we justify the study of crime fiction intellectually?
What is interesting about this genre for academic purposes?
 - ▶ the point of this exercise is to brainstorm what might be interesting
 - ▶ stereotype all you want, but give examples if you can!

idea no. 1: the themes are important

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.

G.K. Chesterton, "A Defence of Detective Stories," in *The Defendant* (London: R. Brimley Johnson, 1902), 123, [HathiTrust](#).

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The magical satisfaction... [detective stories] provide (which makes them escape literature not works of art) is the illusion of being dissociated from the murderer.... The phantasy, then, which the detective story addict indulges is the phantasy of being restored to the Garden of Eden, to a state of innocence.

W.H. Auden, "The Guilty Vicarage," *Harper's*, May 1, 1948: 411–12, [ProQuest](#).

idea no. 2: it's about challenges to the mind



He tapped his forehead. "These little grey cells. It is 'up to them'—as you say over here."

Agatha Christie, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles: A Detective Story* (London: John Lane, 1930), 226. Image: David Suchet as Hercule Poirot, Wikipedia, s.v. [Hercule Poirot](#).

idea no. 3: it reveals something deep about power

Crime fiction has qualities that make it well-suited to the tasks of critique and protest: it deals with acts of violence, with devious methods of securing the subordination of others, and with the process of subduing them to your will; its plots turn on the revelation of hidden criminality; its protagonists are marginalized, outsiders forced into awareness of the failings of established power structures.

Lee Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 6.

idea no. 4: it's a container for meaning

The message embedded in the crime fiction **medium** can be transformed in numerous ways.

Ibid.

first case: Dick Tracy no. 1

1. Which panel has the crime in it?
2. What kind of thinking does Dick Tracy have to do?

second case: Sherlock Holmes

1. What kind of thinking does Holmes appear to do in the narrative?
2. How does Conan Doyle arrange the narrative to make this possible?

time travel

1. “in practice again, I see”
2. “you have been getting yourself very wet lately”
3. “my eyes tell me that on the inside of your left shoe...”
4. “smelling of iodoform...and a bulge on the side of his top-hat”

third case: Race Williams

1. Where does Race's advantage seem to come from in the scene?
2. How does Daly arrange the narrative to make this possible?

fine literature

But he was speaking my language now—this gun business—and I just stood up and faced him.

“Listen, Dough-head.” And I wasn’t talking for pleasure now.

course overview

- ▶ participation (10%)
- ▶ short exercises (10%)
- ▶ midterm exam (15%)
- ▶ two papers (20%, 25%)
- ▶ short final exam (20%)

reading

- ▶ print is better for study
 - ▶ get the books (buy or borrow)
 - ▶ when readings are in the books, no screens
 - ▶ otherwise, print out if possible
- ▶ reading takes time and practice
 - ▶ so give it time and practice
 - ▶ we will build up from short stories, to a short-ish novel, to a LONG novel
 - ▶ also we'll watch movies

next time

- ▶ Poe, “Murders in the Rue Morgue” (Canvas)
 - ▶ print it out (9 pp double-sided)
 - ▶ some explanatory notes on non-English phrases, etc.: link on Canvas
- ▶ takes a long time to get to the story itself: why?
- ▶ is this a “tale of ratiocination”?