

Early Twentieth-Century Fiction
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October 30, 2023. Sayers (2).

review: Sayers and genre

- ▶ the polarization of the literary field: restricted vs. large-scale
 - ▶ in parallel with modernism/elevation
 - ▶ emergence of “bestsellers”
 - ▶ big expansion in cheap media, especially periodicals
- ▶ popular fiction: crystallization of stable categories (“genre fiction”)
 - ▶ “the sort of books you [Piggott] read yourself—clinking good love stories and detective stories” (105/189)
 - ▶ Westerns, sea stories, swashbucklers, love stories...and detective stories
- ▶ Sayers’s relation to the category
 - ▶ thematic, formal, rhetorical aspects
 - ▶ playing by the rules...only more so:
 - ▶ two sidekicks
 - ▶ two crimes
 - ▶ an eccentric detective who’s really eccentric
 - ▶ whose body????

genre: theme

The detective positions himself at the watershed point between singularity and crime, precisely where the two are still indistinguishable, that is, at the point where it is impossible to tell the difference between normality and legality.

Luc Boltanski, *Mysteries and Conspiracies: Detective Stories, Spy Novels and the Making of Modern Societies*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2014), 49.

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genre: form

At the base of the whodunit we find a duality, and it is this duality which will guide our description. This novel contains not one but two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation.

Tzvetan Todorov, "The Typology of Detective Fiction," in *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 44.

genre: rhetoric

“Enter Sherlock Holmes, disguised as a walking gentleman.” (4/13)

Dorothy L. Sayers

- 1893 Dorothy Leigh Sayers b. Oxford
- 1909 boarding school in Salisbury
- 1915 first in French, but no degree
- 1920 BA, MA, Oxon; 1st women
- 1922–31 ad writer in London
- 1923 *Whose Body?*
- 1925–36 more Wimsey
- 1929 ed., *Omnibus of Crime*
- 1938 *Inklings* (C.S. Lewis & co.)
- 1944–57 Dante trans. for Penguin
- 1957 d.



Press photograph, Boni & Liveright, 1925, [Wikimedia Commons](#).

the ratchet mechanism

“But I’ll tell you what, Parker, we’re up against a criminal—*the* criminal—the real artist and blighter with imagination—real, artistic, finished stuff. I’m enjoyin’ this, Parker.” (20/42–43)

self-consciousness

“He’s [Sugg is] like a detective in a novel.” (13/29)

“Worse things happen in war. This is only a blink’ old shillin’ shocker. But I’ll tell you what, Parker, we’re up against a criminal—*the* criminal—the real artist and blighter with imagination—real, artistic, finished stuff. I’m enjoyin’ this, Parker.” (20/42–43)

“I crawl, I grovel, my name is Watson.” (30/61)

- ▶ What is the effect of all this generic self-consciousness?

literariness and elevation

*This is the first Florence edition, 1481, by Niccolo di Lorenzo. (3/12)

*Apollonios Rhodios. Lorenzobodi Alopa. Firenze. 1496. (4to.)
(45/88)

A Lorenzo di Alopa Apollonius sold at Christie's for £12,650 in 1999.

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Rivers running into the sand—rivers running underground, very far
down—

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea. (89/164)

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Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Kubla Khan: Or, a Vision in a Dream. A Fragment” (1816). Coleridge claimed that “All the images rose up before him as *things* with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort.” For a text, see [Representative Poetry Online](#).

the science of detection

He laid the body down, picked up the mysterious pince-nez, looked at it, put it on his nose and looked through it, made the same noise again, readjusted the pince-nez upon the nose of the corpse. (8/22, qtd. by “Jane Smith”)

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The three men stared at the photographs. (30/61)

“Of course, if this were a detective story, there’d have been a convenient shower exactly an hour before the crime and a beautiful set of marks which could only have come there between two and three in the morning.” (29/59)

“Following the methods inculcated at that University of which I have the honour to be a member, we will now examine severally the various suggestions afforded by Possibility No. 2.” (50–51/96)

clues?

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

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

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.

Carlo Ginzburg, “Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm,” in *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method* (Baltimore: JHUP, 2013), 123. (Earlier version in *History Workshop* 9 [Spring 1980].)

discussion: method

- ▶ What is Wimsey's detective method?

historical changes

COSSSSRI

...

SCISSCORS (91/167)

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

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See Peter Harrison, “‘I believe because it is absurd’: Christianity’s First Meme,” *Aeon*, April 9, 2018, 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)

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)

- ▶ What is *at stake* in the solution of the Battersea mystery? Find a clue (remember your commonplace-book entries).

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.

contradiction

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

“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)

“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)

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“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

- ▶ Hammett, *Maltese Falcon*, through chap. 13.
- ▶ Commonplacing: group A.
 - ▶ Choose a passage exemplifying Hammett's style in an interesting way.