

Anatomy of Murder: Mystery, Detective, and Crime Fiction

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1. *The Scene of the Crime*

When the devotees of “murder fiction” enter a bookstore, make their way to the appropriate shelves, and begin to browse, they find themselves sorting through a wide variety of very different types of novels—classic mystery novels, hardboiled detective novels, police procedural novels, spy novels, and crime novels, sometimes even thrillers. What most of these fictions have in common is crime and its detection, but given the fact that these fictions posit varied worlds, address various audiences, and offer a variety of reading challenges and satisfactions, it’s actually rather surprising that they are all lumped together and held in one place. There is, after all, much more than alphabetic distance and shelf space between the fictions of Agatha Christie and those of Jim Thompson. This essay identifies three basic forms of murder fiction—which we term mystery, detective, and crime—and seeks to express their interrelations and to define their differences. More important, it seeks to account for these differences, to explain why these subgenres take the forms they do.

A number of literary theorists have indicated that this kind of fiction deserves special attention. Tzvetan Todorov singles out the “whodunit,” with its double stories, the story of the crime and the story of the investigation, as unique in its treatment of *fabula* (story) and *sujet* (plot): “detective fiction manages to make both of them present, to put them side by side” (46). According to Peter Brooks, Todorov “makes the detective story the narrative of narratives, its classical structure a laying bare of the structure of all narrative” (25). Brooks goes on to argue that the detective story overtly displays the “double logic” that reading for the plot entails; he explicates Doyle’s “The Musgrave Ritual” to explore that double logic (23-29). Michael Holquist has argued that detective fiction occupies a privileged position in relation to postmodernist fiction, claiming that “what the structural presuppositions of myth and depth psychology were to modernism..., the detective story is to postmodernism” (150).

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A recent anthology of essays on detective fiction and contemporary literary theory speculates that critical interest in detective fiction might be a function of a number of factors, including "the primacy (and relative simplicity) of formal pattern in the genre, its adaptability to other forms and modes, its usefulness as a gauge of popular tastes or of key ideological shifts, or its susceptibility to psychoanalytic speculation about displaced aggression and other latent forces" (Walker and Frazer ii). In narratological terms, we can say that this fiction merits systematic study because it highlights certain aspects of genre theory, such as the relation between fiction and reality, because it dramatizes certain plot functions, such as relationships between *fabula* and *sujet* or between hermeneutic and proairetic codes, and because it foregrounds and interrogates different forms of readerly investment in narrative.

2. *Murder Fiction and the Real World*

Hammett gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse; and with the means at hand, not with hand-wrought duelling pistols, curare, and tropical fish. He put these people down on paper as they are, and he made them talk and think in the language they customarily used for those purposes.

Raymond Chandler, "The Simple Art of Murder"

In "The Simple Art of Murder" (1944), Raymond Chandler issues a wholesale indictment of what he calls the "classic detective story" (230), by which he intends the primarily British tradition celebrated by Howard Haycraft in *Murder for Pleasure* (1941). This narrative form, Chandler claims, is cranked out by the "cool-headed constructionist" who is unable to provide, among other things, "lively characters, sharp dialogue, a sense of pace, and an acute use of observed detail" (225). The murders in these stories are implausibly motivated, the plots completely contrived, and the characters pathetically two-dimensional, "puppets and cardboard lovers and papier maché villains and detectives of exquisite and impossible gentility" (232). These works inevitably adhere to "arid" formulas having to do with "problems of iogic and deduction" (232). The authors of this fiction are hopelessly outdated, "living psychologically in the age of the hooped skirt" (225). They are, in short, ignorant of the "facts of life" (228), "too little aware of what goes on in the real world" (231).

As the last quotes make clear, what Chandler is accusing the writers of Haycraft's "Golden Age" of is a lack of verisimilitude, a failure to be true to the "real world"; "if the writers of this fiction wrote about the

kind of murders that happen," he says, "they would also have to write about the authentic flavor of life as it is lived" (231). Chandler singles out Hammett as the person who revitalized the genre by bringing it back to the real world; Hammett "took murder out of the Venetian vase and dropped it into the alley" (234). In promoting Hammett's "realism," Chandler falls back on the most traditional of literary arguments. As Roman Jakobson has remarked,

classicists, sentimentalists, the romanticists to a certain extent, even the "realists" of the nineteenth century, the modernists to a large degree, and, finally, the futurists, expressionists and their like have more than once steadfastly proclaimed faithfulness to reality, maximum verisimilitude—in other words, realism—as the guiding motto of their artistic program. (39)

Given fiction's intimate complicity with the "real," novelists in particular have justified themselves by insisting upon the artificiality of the previous generation and upon the verisimilitude and "truth value" of their own narrative forms.

Such an argument is not only one-sided and partisan, but also naive. One of the key lessons of poststructuralist literary theory is that "reality" is always already mediated, always framed. "Realism," no matter how defined, is inevitably a matter of conventions. Returning to Chandler, we can say that his views reflect a naive faith that certain forms of writing can apprehend reality in a more or less satisfactory way. At the same time, those views necessarily presuppose a true insight into the nature of reality itself, privileged access to the "real reality." Hammett's novels are realistic, Chandler argues, because they reflect or copy the chaos and contingency, the indeterminacy and messiness, of real life in the twentieth century. Hammett is "realistic" because he has a hard-headed, "modern" view of reality,¹ one that does "justice to a chaotic, viscously contingent reality" (Kermode 145).

In his study of literary formulas and popular fiction, John Cawelti has theorized the relations between order and disorder and fiction and reality in the following way. Each work of art, he says, contains both "mimetic" and "formulaic" elements:

The mimetic element in literature confronts us with the world as we know it, while the formulaic element reflects the construction of an ideal world without the disorder, the ambiguity, the uncertainty, and the limitations of the world of our experience. (13)

Basic to Cawelti's formulation is the assumption that reality is itself unruly, disorderly, formless. Mimetic elements are more lifelike in that

they depict the chaos and contingency, the “grittiness,” of everyday life in the modern world. Formulaic elements are, by contrast, not true to life; they offer us the consolations and satisfactions of structure, pattern, harmony, form. Cawelti overlooks the fact that both types of elements are finally conventional (in his terms, “formulaic”). Such elements (e.g., the well-made plot, the red herring, the telling or extraneous detail) are the function of a certain set of novelistic techniques or conventions that are predicated upon and reflect basic assumptions about the way of the world and the nature of reality. We would argue that the “real world” is both orderly and disorderly, shapely and shapeless, plotted and plotless. Generic conventions act as an optic that selects one view or the other and makes it pertinent, renders it visible.

3. *Anatomy of Murder*

Detective novels are still called mystery stories in English.

Richard Alewyn, “The Origin of the Detective Novel”

Turning back to Chandler’s treatment of detective fiction, we can say that his essay highlights two different fictional forms dealing with murder and detection. There is the “whodunit” school, what George Grella calls the “formal detective novel,” which we term mystery fiction (e.g., the novels of Christie). And there is the “mean streets” school, what Grella calls the “hardboiled detective novel,” which we term detective fiction. Both forms make reality claims but are highly conventional nonetheless.² Insofar as both forms feature investigators or detectives as central protagonists, such usage may be confusing at first, but we hope to show that these terms reflect the forms’ respective narrative dominants.

3.1. *Mystery Fiction*

“There’s not a cause for every effect,” Otto said. “Life’s a crap game.”
 “Partner,” said Sidney Blackpool, “you have to *make believe* there’s cause and effect at work or you’ll never solve a whodunit.”

Joseph Wambaugh, *The Secrets of Harry Bright*

Chandler’s emphasis upon the fictional worlds of Christie and Hammett provides a starting place for our analysis of the differences between mystery and detective fiction. In general, the respective worlds of mystery and detective fiction are entirely conventional: the great landed estates of mystery fiction over and against the “mean streets”

(Chandler 237) of detective fiction. These topographies are mutually exclusive; they occupy separate fictional universes. If we want to know why Sam Spade can never come to Styles, we need to examine the deep-structural assumptions informing their respective fictional worlds.

An essential difference between the worlds of mystery and detective fiction can be expressed in the notion of centeredness: mystery fiction presupposes a centered world; detective fiction, a decentered world.³ Centeredness entails a number of predicates; a centered world is at once orderly, stable, resistant to change, and relatively free of contingency. This world exists apart from the "modern" world, isolated from the inroads of time. As detective writer Ross Macdonald disparagingly notes, "neither wars nor the dissolution of governments and societies interrupt that long weekend in the country house which is often, with more or less unconscious symbolism, cut off by a failure of communication from the outside world" (181). Mystery presupposes an essentially static world, in which neither social order nor human nature is subject to radical change. Indeed, this guarantee of continuity and permanence is one of the real consolations of the form.

Centeredness is itself, we would argue, at bottom a function of *motivation*, which thus serves as the basic principle of mystery fiction. The worlds of mystery are fully motivated. By this, we of course mean that the crimes that initiate mystery stories are transparently motivated, the product of a limited number of self-evident motives. In the words of Adam Dalgliesh, P. D. James's detective, "Love, Lust, Loathing, Lucre," these are "the four Ls of murder" (129). At the heart of a mystery novel lies an almost religious faith in a "benevolent and knowable universe" (Grella, "Formal" 101), the belief that human beings order their affairs in a rational manner and that therefore the reasons for their behavior are accessible to other people. In mystery, Cawelti notes, "the problem always has a desirable and rational solution, for this is the underlying moral fantasy" of the form (42-43).

But even more important to the form, the real anchor of its centeredness, is the idea that the signs of mystery, its clues, are finally and fully motivated. Mystery unfolds in a pre-Saussurian world in which the relation between signifiers and signifieds is not arbitrary, not subject to the play of *différance*. In the first mystery story, "Murders in the Rue Morgue," Dupin astounds his companion by deducing the latter's exact train of thought from his overt expressions, actions, and gestures. In a subsequent story Dupin rehearses the remarkable claim that one can figure out what an opponent is thinking by imitating the expression on the opponent's face: "I fashion the expression of my face, as accurately as possible, in accordance with the expression of his, and then wait to see

what thoughts or sentiments arise in my mind or heart, as if to match or correspond with the expression" (94). So inevitable are the signs of mystery that copying the signifier gives one access to its necessary signified.⁴

Doyle's Holmes converts the art of deduction into a basic mystery convention with a series of brilliant "readings" that begin in "The Science of Deduction," the second chapter of *A Study in Scarlet*. In that chapter, Watson stumbles across an essay entitled "The Book of Life." The writer of the essay claims "by a momentary expression, a twitch of a muscle or a glance of an eye, to fathom a man's inmost thoughts." "Deceit," according to the author, is "an impossibility in the case of one trained to observation and analysis" (22). To such an observer, the world becomes a Book to be read, one whose meanings are laid open. The author is, of course, Sherlock Holmes. Holmes argues that there is in effect a "natural" relation between signifiers and signifieds and that the evidence speaks if the observer only knows the proper codes.

Of course, it takes a special kind of investigator to master the codes, and his or her hermeneutic activity necessarily stretches out over time. In order to sustain interest, a mystery novel must obscure the relation between signifier and signified and postpone the attachment of signifieds to signifiers. The investigation is invariably "jammed" by contradictory signs and partial, misleading, or false decodings. In the last chapter, however, the investigator restores semantic order by discovering the motivation of signs (their non-arbitrariness), by demonstrating to the gathered company that signifiers (clues) are indissolubly tied to signifieds (meanings). This demonstration serves as the climax of the novel:

[M]ost detective story readers will testify that while they are frequently bored by an unimaginative or too detailed handling of the parade of clues, testimony, and suspects, the explanation, despite its involved and intricate reasoning, is usually a high point of interest. (Cawelti 88)

Cawelti goes on to say that that readerly pleasure comes from "seeing a clear and meaningful order emerge out of what seemed to be random and chaotic events (89); perhaps even more pleasurable is the confirmation that the world's signs are indeed motivated, that there is a correspondence between token and meaning.

Many of mystery fiction's frequently remarked conventions are a function of the non-arbitrariness of the sign in the subgenre. The country house setting, for example, serves to guarantee a stable relation between signifiers and signifieds. Within the well-defined hierarchies of the manorial social system, there is some sort of correspondence between

external appearances and internal realities. The fact that this setting is isolated, cut off from change and history, ensures that there will be few disruptions in the signifying chains; the setting “abstracts the story from the complexity and confusion of the larger social world” (Cawelti 97). The obtuse narrator, compatriot of the investigator, serves as an agent of mystification; he or she supplies obfuscation, jams the process of decoding by misreading or overreading. At the same time, the investigator must be a detached “amateur” so that he or she can approach the narrative’s signs in a disinterested fashion.⁵ An interest in the case would interfere with or skew the process of detection.

Detection—the reading of signs—is the central drama of the sub-genre. As its name suggests, the narrative dominant of mystery fiction lies in an aspect of plot, the investigation and solution of the mystery or mysteries generated by an initial crime. The reader’s interest in characters—victim, criminal, suspects—is downplayed; the narrative holds these characters at arm’s length. Even though the genre features an investigating hero, his “existence is a mere function of the mystery he is solving” (Grossvogel 15). Interest is instead focused on the hermeneutic code, on the answer to a certain set of enigmas. Indeed, we can imagine three possible forms of enigma that the crime which initiates a mystery novel might trigger. The most obvious, and the central question in mystery fiction, is *who*? The answer to this question is a matter of fact; solving the crime thus involves the discovery of Truth. A second set of enigmas deals with the *how* of the crime, the question of Technique. This set of enigmas is foregrounded in locked-room mysteries, in some of which the identity of the criminal is, if not given, at least indicated. The final form of enigma is *why*, the question of Theory. In mystery fiction, this question is finally immaterial; crime is a function of (conventional) motive. The conventions of mystery dictate that its world be pre-eminently rational and its characters psychologically transparent. Novels which foreground the question of motive are character-dominant narratives, case studies (see 3.3).

Todorov has noted that there are two main plots in a mystery novel, the story of the crime and the story of the solution, and that these two stories embody a basic narratological distinction:

We might further characterize these two stories by saying that the first—the story of the crime—tells “what really happened,” whereas the second—the story of the investigation—explains “how the reader (or the narrator) has come to know about it.” But these definitions concern not only the two stories in detective fiction, but also two aspects of every literary work which the Russian Formalists isolated forty years ago. They distinguished, in fact, the *fable* (story)

from the *subject* (plot) of a narrative: the story is what happened in life, the plot is the way the author presents it to us. (45)

Within mystery's double-plot structure, one aspect of the narrative exists merely to serve the other. The plot makes the story visible, brings it to light; the former, Todorov notes, is "present but insignificant"; the latter, "absent but real" (46). The only plot-event that the two narratives share is, of course, the crime itself, which, since it initiates the plot, the story which the readers consume, can be said to occur at zero-time, the *terminus ab quo* of the narrative account. That account takes the reader beyond zero-time to the solution of the crime, the *terminus ad quem* of the narrative. That solution rehearses the series of events which culminated in the crime which occurred at zero-time. The double-plot structure of mystery fiction helps to explain the subgenre's orientation towards the past.⁶ A mystery is inevitably concerned with something over and done with, something in the past. A murder initiates the mystery novel, but the novel is at pains to reconstruct the events leading up to that murder. As one critic says, mystery "is a genre committed to an act of recovery, moving forward in order to move back" (Porter 29). The fact that that narrative invariably ends by bringing readers back to zero-time imparts to the narrative a nostalgic cast; it is finally the past, the time before zero-time, that matters. Return to zero-time marks the restoration of the equilibrium that the originary crime had so drastically disrupted.

Todorov has noted that the main form of readerly interest in mystery fiction is *curiosity* (47), the desire to see the mysteries engendered in the hermeneutic code solved. The investigator invariably satisfies that desire, usually by identifying *who* in the last sentence of the penultimate chapter and explaining *how* in the denouement that follows. The investigator takes the haphazard and confusing clues of the story of the investigation and invests them with sequence and causality, bringing the story of the murder to light. The investigator secures mystery's dominant sign—Truth—by showing how all the case's seemingly wayward signs bespeak it. By revealing the Truth, he both *solves* the case and *resolves* the conflicts caused by it. It is fitting that Poirot is characterized by an overweening rage for order, that characteristic being simply an index of his function within the world of mystery. He, like other mystery detectives, serves the deity that presides over the motivated worlds of mystery—the god of Order.

3.2. Detective Fiction

And there are still quite a few people around who say that Hammett did not write detective stories at all, merely hard-boiled chronicles of mean streets with

a perfunctory mystery element dropped in like the olive in a martini.

Raymond Chandler, "The Simple Art of Murder"

As Chandler's essay suggests, detective fiction came into existence as an oppositional discourse, a form which finds its identity by breaking with the conventions of the dominant discourse (mystery fiction). In particular, detective fiction breaks with the dominant discourse by presenting readers with the "real" world, a decentered world, defined in terms of its difference from the world of mystery fiction. The decentered world of detective fiction undermines mystery's basic predicates: order, stability, necessity, causality, and resolution. This decenteredness, Fredric Jameson argues, in large part reflects the American reality detective writers are trying to capture. Jameson singles out Los Angeles as a microcosm of that reality: "a new centerless city, in which the various classes have lost touch with each other because each is isolated in his own geographical compartment" (127). But decenteredness is more than just a function of topography; it contaminates the world of detective fiction. The world "implied in Hammett's works, and fully articulated in Chandler and Macdonald," George Grella says, "is an urban chaos, devoid of spiritual and moral values, pervaded by viciousness and random savagery" ("Hard-Boiled" 110). In this world, "a gleaming and deceptive facade" hides "empty modernity, corruption, and death" (Cawelti 141).

To get to the heart of detective fiction's "deceptive facade," we need to turn back to Chandler's characterization of its world:

The realist in murder writes of a world in which gangsters can rule nations and almost rule cities,...in which a screen star can be a fingerman for the mob, and the nice man down the hall is the boss of the numbers racket; a world where a judge with a cellar full of bootleg liquor can send a man to jail for having a pint in his pocket, where the mayor of your town may have condoned murder as an instrument of money-making, where no man can walk down a dark street in safety because law and order are things we talk about but refrain from practicing. (236)

In the "real world" of Hammett's fiction, gangsters wield political power, people are not what they pretend to be, justice is frequently not served, and ordinary citizens keep silent from fear of being permanently silenced. "It is not a very fragrant world," Chandler notes in an understatement, "but it is the world you live in" (236).

In general, the "real world" of detective fiction is characterized by the instability of the sign, a slippage that affects the basic elements of the detective's case:

Everything changes its meaning: the initial mission turns out to be a smoke screen for another, more devious plot; the supposed victim turns out to be the villain; the lover ends up as the murderess and the faithful friend as a rotten betrayer; the police and the district attorney and often even the client keep trying to halt the investigation; and all the seemingly respectable and successful people turn out to be members of the gang. (Cawelti 146)

The name of the game changes, and roles are inverted or subverted, even the detective's. In this world there is no necessary connection between appearance and reality; its operators are all actors who knowingly play parts in order to serve their own ends.⁷ In such a world, basic societal signifiers, such as honesty, justice, law, and order, have started to become detached from their conventional signifieds.

Within this world the whole idea of motivation (for behavior) is problematized, an idea we can demonstrate by looking at the way murder figures in it. In mystery fiction, murder is originary. The ideal mystery, as Todorov points out, using as an exemplum Van Dine's *The "Canary" Murder Case*, announces its murder on the very first page and devotes itself to the solution of that crime; without murder there would be no story. In the detective story, murder is more often incidental, the product of contingent events precipitated by the investigation of a case, and frequently *ad hoc*, committed with the means at hand. At the same time, murder in detective fiction is inevitable, since the seeds of violence inhere in the nature of things. If "murder in the placid English village is read as the sign of a scandalous interruption in a peaceful community," then murder in the mean streets of detective fiction occurs as part of "a secret destiny, a kind of nemesis lurking beneath the surface of hastily acquired fortunes, anarchic city growth, and impermanent private lives" (Jameson 126).

If there are multiple murders in a mystery fiction, they serve to emphasize the urgency of attaching signifiers to signifieds, the need to put an end to the "play" of signification. The proliferation of corpses in the detective fiction, on the other hand, underlines the fact that the play of substitution cannot end, that the corpses will inevitably just keep piling up. "It's only Marlowe, finding another body," Chandler's detective complains. "Murder-a-day Marlowe, they call him. They have a meat wagon following him around to follow up on the business he finds" (*Lady* 68). The multiplying number of bodies, empty signifiers all, tends to problematize the issue of motivation, driving a wedge between murder and motive. Murder becomes less an act than a reaction, undermotivated and incalculable.

In detective fiction, then, the motivation of signs in general becomes problematic; within the sign there is misrepresentation, slippage, dis-

placement, noise. This jamming process ultimately affects the most important signifier of all—Truth. Mystery fiction serves Truth, the solution which provides resolution; in detective fiction the fact that signs are unstable and that signification is problematic undercuts the ultimate disclosure of Truth. The detective usually names the perpetrator, but fails to provide the “whole truth.” Frequently he adlibs his way to an entirely provisional and patently inadequate version of the unfolding events. Much of Hammett’s *The Dain Curse* is taken up with ongoing attempts to put the misadventures of the “cursed” Gabrielle Leggatt Dain into an acceptable explanatory framework. The novel is literally filled with various versions of the story—those of Edgar Dain, Alice Dain, Gabrielle Dain, Mrs. Cotton, Owen Fitzstephan, and the Continental Op—all of which are revealed to be partial, misguided, fraudulent, or just plain wrong. Story gives way to story, because there is “no transcendent true story” to put an end to the play of signification (Hall 113). Even the detective’s final version of the crime is marred by lacunae, contradictions, uncertainties. The murderer may be identified, but Truth is not wholly revealed.⁸

Detective fiction, in other words, documents the erosion of basic mystery signs, such as Truth, Justice, and Resolution. The authors of detective fiction are, however, for the most part uncomfortable with the total unmooring of the sign and seek a “ground,” which they find in its protagonist, whose “lonely questing figure” becomes an “absolute value” (Knight 287). Because conventional definitions no longer obtain in his world, the detective finds himself creating “his own concept of morality and justice” (Cawelti 143). These values reflect the character, the Selfhood, of the detective, which thus becomes the origin of meaning. The detective becomes the last grounded sign, the sole entity present to itself. Detective fiction thus articulates an ethos of the Individual, a fact which helps to explain the form’s popularity in America (cf. Porter 175-79). It confirms a strongly held American view, namely that justice finally depends more on the individual than on society.

In some instances, the adventures of the detective are tied together solely by his person, and the fiction approximates the picaresque (Jameson 127). But Chandler recognized that the form needed a tighter organizing principle and identified the appropriate structure, the quest: “The story [of detective fiction] is [the detective’s] adventure in search of a hidden truth” (237). In order to highlight the quest structure, Chandler converts the detective from a worker (an “operative”) into a knight, a modern Mallory, in so doing contributing to the glamorization of the detective and the establishment of a cult of the private “I.” Since, however, decenteredness dictates that the detective’s search for truth be

at least partially frustrated, detective fiction most often takes the form of an inverted romance: "Though the hero succeeds in his quest for a murderer, his victory is Pyrrhic, costing a great price in the coin of the spirit. The fair maidens turn out to be Loathly Ladies in disguise. And the closer the detective approaches to the Grail, the further away it recedes" (Grella, "Hard-Boiled" 116; cf. Hall).

Detective fiction is thus "more preoccupied with the character of its hero, the society he investigates, and the adventures he encounters, than with the central mystery, which gets pushed aside by individual scenes and situations" (Grella, "Hard-Boiled" 115). The hermeneutic code no longer serves as the narrative dominant, and narrative interest shifts to the other aspect of plot, the proairetic code, the code of Actions. The shift in emphasis from hermeneutic to proairetic codes brings the detective into the foreground.⁹ Although vestiges of the mystery remain, the reader's real interest is invested in the main protagonist, in his character and his fate. The reader wants to know what happens to the detective, how he comes to terms with the decentered world he finds himself in; readerly interest is thus both personal and ethical. It is this foregrounding of the detective that gives the form the name we are using. As Chandler says, the detective story must be about "the gradual elucidation of character" (236); "[the detective] is the hero, he is everything" (237).

One of the most obvious ways to secure the reader's interest in the detective is narrational; the detective narrates his own adventures. First-person narration necessarily entails a degree of identification between reader and protagonist. It also serves to secure and reinforce the Selfhood of the detective, whose enunciation bears his distinctive signature. First-person narration does not spoil the element of mystery because "the hard-boiled detective is usually as befuddled as the reader until the end of the story" (Cawelti 83). In order to preserve the element of mystery and to reinforce the link between the narrator and reader, detective fiction also employs a narrative situation in which "the narrative coincides with the action" (Todorov 47). The act of the enunciation is contemporaneous with the unfolding action. The epic preterite in detective fiction is thus simply a convention, robbed of its indication of pastness; everything happens in the present of the ongoing investigation.

Detective fiction thus retains vestiges of the story of the crime, but subordinates them to the story of the investigation. The identity of the murderer is still a question, but the adventures of the investigating detective occupy the foreground, and, for the reader, "prospection takes the place of retrospection" (Todorov 47). The reader's investment in the narrative is totally different from that in mystery fiction: as Todorov has noted, curiosity drives the mystery story, and suspense propels the detective story.

3.3 Crime Fiction

"There are moments when people love crime," said Alyosha thoughtfully.

"Yes, yes! People love crime. Everybody loves crime, they love it always, not at some 'moments.' You know, it's as though people have made an agreement to lie about it and have lied about it ever since. They say that they all hate evil, but secretly they all love it."

"And are you still reading nasty books?"

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

We have argued that *detective fiction* is the appropriate name for the "hard-boiled" variety of murder fiction just because it specifies the narrative dominant of the form. Detective fiction foregrounds the actions and adventures of the investigating hero: "the one irreducible element is the character of the sleuth" (Lehman 138). In order to "ground" this central character, Chandler heroizes him, turning him into "an utterly romanticized figure, a man with a mission" (Lehman 149). The character of the detective serves as the sole stable sign, and the form in general reinforces bourgeois ideas of the Self as source of meaning and value. In some detective fiction, however, the detective is implicated in the pervasive corruption around him (Cawelti 146). He is an "imperfect agent" whose actions catalyze murder and mayhem, making him "part of the problem" (Most 350, 347). In the long run, of course, the detective perseveres and even triumphs, if only by standing up for a personal standard of morality. But given the ungrounded, foundering world in which he moves, his position is precarious, and it is easy to imagine someone going under. When the protagonist succumbs, the sign of the Self erodes, and the *crime novel* is born.¹⁰

Crime fiction unfolds from the perspective of the criminal or of someone implicated in the crime. The narrative dominant for this form is the character of its central protagonist, the person fingered by crime. In order to establish its dominant, crime fiction foregrounds the central character by using first-person or figural narration. These forms of narration are even more important to crime fiction than to detective fiction because they encourage both writer and reader to identify with the criminal protagonist/narrator, and this process of identification is absolutely necessary to the subgenre's effect.¹¹ Even as it invites readers to identify with its central character, this kind of fiction calls into question his or her integrity, honesty, or stability, thereby undermining the Self as a stable sign.

This erosion of the Self can, it should be noted, take place either in the centered world of mystery fiction or in the decentered world of

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detective fiction. In the former, we get the relatively straightforward case of the “bad seed” or megalomaniac character, a study in social deviance. In Francis Iles’s *Malice Aforethought*, for example, the hen-pecked Dr. Edmund Bickleigh kills his formidable wife Julia and discovers that “in murder he had qualified not only as a fine artist, but as a superman”; he determines to kill anyone else who is “obnoxious” to him (154). Afterwards, Bickleigh feels no remorse; indeed, murder reflects “credit on himself” (141) because he has at last proved himself “captain of his soul” (139).

Agatha Christie’s *Endless Night*, another example, even retains vestiges of the mystery plot, since the narrator does not disclose that he himself has murdered his wife until the penultimate chapter. In the last two chapters he reveals and revels in his psychopathology. He is en route to re-unite with his mistress Greta when he encounters his wife’s ghost who condemns him to “endless night.” At that point he unravels, admits that he had killed two people before his wife, and kills Greta:

I was myself. I was coming into another kind of kingdom to the one I’d dreamed of.

She was afraid. I loved seeing her afraid and I fastened my hands around her neck. Yes, even now when I am sitting here writing down all about myself (which, mind you, is a very happy thing to do)—to write all about yourself and what you’ve been through and what you felt and thought and how you deceived everyone—yes, it’s wonderful to do. Yes, I was wonderfully happy when I killed Greta. (232)

In his murderous madness he comes into his own; he discovers his essential self. In the end, he does not seem all that concerned about the crimes he has committed, putting them all down to “the evil in me” (239).

In this kind of narrative readerly interest shifts from Truth to Justice. Readers want to know how (or if) the criminal protagonist will implicate himself and get caught. For the most part, centeredness insures that guilt must finally attach itself to the perpetrator, that the criminal Self must be punished by Society, that some sort of justice prevails. For one thing, in a centered world, there is usually some kind of connection between appearance and reality. Dr. Bickleigh, the wife-murdering protagonist in *Malice Aforethought*, is only five foot six inches tall and has an inferiority complex, in part because “physical appearance always plays a larger part in the formation of character than is always recognized” (Iles 37). As for *Endless Night*, it turns out that the narrator had been suspected of his wife’s murder all along. The criminal protagonist is in these cases

“seen through,” because signs in a centered world are transparent, and the Self reveals its guilty essence. As Auden remarks, “the interest in the study of a murderer is the observation, by the innocent many, of the sufferings of the guilty one” (16). In mystery’s centered world, crime just doesn’t pay.

More disturbing, more interesting is the crime novel set in a decentered world, the novel which springs from a “kind of *reading* of the American detective genre, a reading guided by alertness to what could be *revised*, thus providing a whole new set of plot opportunities as well as suggesting at least a very different ethos” (Hilfer 55, emphasis in original). This kind of novel takes place in a world of meaninglessness and misrepresentation; it “puts the signification process into doubt or even exploits the gap between socially accepted signification and ultimate reality” (Hilfer 7). In these novels, justice is usually not finally served because it too is a floating sign, unstable and unmoored. As crime novelist Patricia Highsmith says, “I find the public passion for justice quite boring and artificial, for neither life nor nature cares if justice is ever done or not” (*Plotting* 56).

The decentered crime novel methodically interrogates the entity that detective fiction usually represents as the sole remaining grounded sign, the Self. The protagonist in crime fiction experiences a radical split “between the social person playing his social role and the invisible person admitting with horrid resignation that there is no role for it to play” (Cassill 234). Caught up in the confusion of appearance and reality, unable to distinguish between acting and being, the Self can no longer guarantee honesty, integrity, moral standards. Thomas Ripley, the protagonist of a series of Highsmith novels, discovers his selfhood in his lack thereof: “Tom’s strength is in his indeterminacy of identity, in an emptiness of self that allows the superior performance of roles, eventuating in Tom’s finest performance—the role of himself” (Hilfer 134). Ripley discovers that the right false signifier creates the right false signified, that fake appearances create “real” realities: “It was senseless to be despondent, even as Tom Ripley.... Hadn’t he learned something from these last months? If you wanted to be cheerful, or melancholic, or thoughtful, or courteous, you simply had to act those things with every gesture” (Highsmith, *Talented* 165). Lou Ford, the protagonist of Thompson’s *The Killer Inside Me*, says, “I’d pretended so long that I no longer had to” (28). For these characters, reality itself is a form of pretense.

In crime fiction, the Selfhood of the protagonist becomes entirely problematic; it suffers various forms of mental disease—dissociation of sensibility, paranoia, schizophrenia, megalomania. The unstable Self,

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incapable of truth, caught up in duplicity, wracked by mental illness, subsumed by its own vacuity, reflects the world that it inhabits, a shifting world at once perfectly enigmatic and hopelessly corrupt: as Hilfer notes, schizophrenia is a “natural response to a world in which feeling is never consonant with words” (25-6). The primary struggle of this Self is to maintain control—of events, of others, of itself, of its own enunciation. The first person narration of Jim Thompson’s *A Hell of a Woman* bifurcates about midway through the novel, as the narrator tries to counterpoint the sordid story he’s telling with “THE TRUE STORY OF A MAN’S FIGHT AGAINST HIGH ODDS AND LOW WOMEN” (95). By the end, the narration has become hopelessly schizophrenic:

You will notice that I haven’t described her, but I can’t. Because she looked so many different ways. When she went out where anyone else could see her, she always looked the same way: the way she looked that first day I met her. But when we were alone, well, if I hadn’t known it was her sometimes, I wouldn’t have known it was her *a goddamned syphilitic bag*. (179, italics in original)

When Selfhood undergoes its inevitable dissolve, which the narration itself recounts, crime fiction begins to call into question the protagonist’s perceptions: “the everyday world of normal perceptions loses its taken-for-granted status” (Hilfer 34). In extreme cases, the novel undermines its own ontology, and reality becomes problematic. The reader can no longer be sure what is happening or has happened, what is “imaginary” and what is “real.” The fact that the criminal self sometimes narrates its own demise (e.g., Jim Thompson’s *Savage Night*) only adds to the reader’s feeling of unreality. In these narratives, there is no return to normality at the end, a fact which serves to accentuate the final disorder of the world, its unruliness. *A Hell of a Woman* ends with the narrator’s statement that he threw himself out of the window. *Savage Night* ends even more graphically: “Death was there. And he smelled good” (147).

In the crime story, readerly interest shifts ground, from who to why. The enunciation foregrounds the plight of the speaking self, and the narrative explores the protagonist’s psychology, making us figure out or account for his or her behavior. Readers identify with the criminal protagonist and, in so doing, become the narrative’s accomplice; they assume the role of “guilty bystanders,” “maneuvered into various forms of complicity” by the novel’s enunciation (Hilfer 4, 3). They feel anxiety because they identify with the protagonist even as he or she commits criminal actions. It is an uncomfortable, sometimes untenable position. As the number of crimes increases and the readers’ sympathy somehow remains with the perpetrator of the crimes, they feel more and more

ambivalent, more and more guilty. They begin to make invidious distinctions about the difference between "liking" a character and "caring" about him or her (Highsmith, *Plotting* 98). They wonder where (or if) they will draw the line, when (or if) they will turn on the protagonist, when (or if) they will turn him or her in. The text becomes more a subject to be experienced, less an object to be known. In the best crime fiction, that experience is decidedly disturbing, disquieting, even disorienting.

4. Conclusion

Mystery, detective, and crime fiction can be distinguished by their treatment of basic novelistic signs having to do with Self and World. These signs can be categorized as either motivated and thus grounded (+) or unmotivated and thus lacking a ground (-). Using these predicates, we can construct the following schema:

	<u>SELF</u>	<u>WORLD</u>
MYSTERY	+	+
DETECTIVE	+	-
CRIME	-	±

Mystery is a plot-dominant form that foregrounds the hermeneutic code; the signs comprising its world and its characters, however obscure they may seem, are finally grounded and decipherable. Detective fiction sets itself up in opposition to mystery, insisting that the world's signs are not trustworthy or secure at all. Offering the integrity of the investigator, the locus of value and meaning, as compensation, detective fiction finally divides its interest between the heroic detective and the squalid world he or she inhabits. Crime fiction presents itself as a revisionary reading of the other two forms, one based upon the erosion of the Self as stable sign. Foregrounding its criminal protagonist, it calls in question ideas of innate goodness or the essential Self and invites readers to experience vicariously various forms of psychopathology. In general, then, the transformations and revisions that murder fiction works upon basic novelistic signs make for very different narrative forms and reading experiences, all of which helps to explain the popularity that this kind of fiction enjoys.

Notes

¹Scott R. Christianson has examined the connections between detective fiction and the "discourses of modernity," e.g., "[Modernist art and hardboiled detective fiction] both testify to the fragmentation and meaninglessness of the modern condition, and its concomitant disintegration of the self, at the same time that they seek to make sense of that world and the resultant self through the literary text" (144-5).

²Cf. Barzun and Taylor: "There is no warrant for the commonly held belief that the tough detective tale yields greater truth than the gentler classical form and marks a forward step toward the 'real novel'" (9). Barzun and Taylor go on to enumerate (and make fun of) the conventions and motifs of detective fiction (9-11).

³This centeredness is frequently dramatized in the actual number of physical locales that come into play. In mystery fiction, there is usually one significant scene of the crime (estate, village, railway car); in detective fiction, the investigator invariably traverses a variety of physical spaces, interviewing clients, tailing suspects, staking out residences, and so on.

⁴Cf. Chesterton, on the motivated signs of civilization in general: "there is no stone in the street and no brick in the wall that is not actually a deliberate symbol—a message from some man, as much as if it were a telegram or a postcard. The narrowest street possesses, in every crook and twist of its intention, the soul of the man who built it, perhaps long in his grave" ("A Defence of Detective Stories" 4-5). As for "reading" people, Chesterton's Father Brown says that any man can wear a mask, but if that mask is to be convincing, "the mask must be to some extent moulded on the face. What he makes outside him must correspond to something inside him; he can only make his effects out of some of the materials of his soul" (*Incredulity* 145).

⁵Cf. Most, "[I]n the English tradition, every effort is made to keep the detective free of any other participation in the case he is investigating than that necessarily involved in his solution of its perplexities" (346); Cawelti, "The classical detective usually has little personal interest in the crime he is investigating. Instead, he is a detached, gentlemanly amateur" (81).

⁶At a superficial level, we refer to mystery's fascination with crimes committed in the past. In *The Daughter of Time*, Josephine Tey undertakes to solve the mystery of the murder of the Princes in the Tower. Julian Symon's *The Blackheath Poisonings*, subtitled "A Victorian Murder Mystery," deals with a series of murders that took place in the 1890s. Umberto Eco has written a celebrated mystery novel dealing with murder in an Italian abbey in the fourteenth century, and Ellis Peters has set an entire series of novels in twelfth-century England, employing as her sleuth an ex-Crusader monk, Brother Cadfael.

⁷The first sentence of Hammett's "They Can Only Hang You Once" is "Samuel Spade said, 'My name is Ronald Ames'" (462). This sort of misrepresentation is entirely "in character" since everyone else in the story is also acting. It is also entirely gratuitous since no one else in the story knows who Sam Spade is.

⁸Cf. Lehman, "There is, when we 'get' the plot of *The Big Sleep*, a quality of randomness that remains; just who killed whom and why? And couldn't it have happened some other way? Not so much the murders themselves but their apparent randomness—the lack of a motive equal to the enormity of the deed—signifies or confirms a permanent rupture in the moral order" (129); Day, "[Hammett's] Op stories are concerned with 'knowing,' which is to be established through a pattern of loss and recovery. However, all this pattern shows is that nothing can be known. In these and other detective stories, a narrative committed to knowing inevitably obscures the object of knowledge. On this basis even the criminal is a substitute, a signifier pointing to a signified which becomes another signifier; in the detective story there are no real solutions, only clues" (41). See also Rabinowitz.

⁹Cf. Cawelti: "The creation of the hard-boiled pattern involved a shift in the underlying archetype of the detective story from the pattern of mystery to that of heroic adventure" (142). Elsewhere he says that "the true focus of interest in the adventure story is the character of the hero and the nature of the obstacles he has to overcome" (40).

¹⁰Symons uses this name and provides a description for the subgenre in *Bloody Murder* (182-207). Tony Hilfer discusses the thematics of the subgenre in *The Crime Novel: A Deviant Genre*. According to him, some of the basic themes are "the indeterminacy of guilt, the instability of identity, and...the heavily compromised, even reversible binary opposition of deviance and the norm" (124).

¹¹Cf. Patricia Highsmith: "the suspense writer often deals more closely with the criminal mind, because the criminal is usually known throughout the book, and the writer has to describe what is going on in his head. Unless a writer is sympathetic, he cannot do this" (*Plotting* 56). Incidentally, just as he did in the case of mystery, Poe delineated the basic features of crime fiction, in stories such as "Ligeia" and "The Black Cat."

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