

Early Twentieth-Century Fiction
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Prof. Andrew Goldstone (andrew.goldstone@rutgers.edu)
Office hours: Monday 2 p.m., or by appointment

March 11, 2021. Sayers (2).

review: Sayers and the 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
 - ▶ “the sort of books you [Piggott] read yourself—clinking good love stories and detective stories” (189)
 - ▶ Westerns, sea stories, swashbucklers, love stories...
 - ▶ and detective stories
 - ▶ “genre fiction” (not called that until much later)
- ▶ Sayers’s relation to the category
 - ▶ thematic, formal, rhetorical aspects
 - ▶ self-reflexivity
 - ▶ “Writers have to consider their readers, if any, y’see” (190)
- ▶ 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)

literariness and elevation

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

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

the science of detection

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The three men stared at the photographs. (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.” (59)

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]. [JSTOR](#).)

discussion: method

“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...” (96)

- ▶ What is Wimsey's detective method?

historical changes

COSSSSRI

...

SCISSORS (167)

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

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“There’s nothing you can’t prove if your outlook is only sufficiently limited. Look at Sugg.” (88; qtd. by N.P.)

- ▶ What explains why Wimsey’s method is different from Holmes’s “scientific detection”?

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- ▶ What explains why Wimsey’s method is different from Holmes’s “scientific detection”? Historically speaking?

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.” (171)

“Waking poor Bunter up in the middle of the night with scares about Germans, as if that wasn’t all over years ago.” (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.” (156)

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

- ▶ What is *at stake* in the solution of the Battersea mystery? Find a clue.

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.

G.K. Chesterton, "A Defence of Detective Stories," in *The Defendant* (London: Dent, 1901; [HathiTrust](#)), 158, 162.

contradiction

“Why did he call him a Sheeny?” (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.” (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.” (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.” (10–11; qtd. by N.Y.)

next

- ▶ Hammett, *Maltese Falcon*. Try to finish the novel.
- ▶ Commonplacing: group A.
 - ▶ Choose a passage relevant to the novel's moral code,
 - ▶ if any.
- ▶ balance factor: half credit for doing it by Wednesday 3/24.