

# MURDER AND MORALITY: AN INTERPRETATION OF DETECTIVE FICTION

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THE detective story is not literature, though occasionally a piece of literature may also be a 'whodunit'. We may compare *The Moonstone* with *Edwin Drood* as works of art or place Sherlock Holmes with Falstaff and Uncle Toby and Micawber in the great succession of English character creations. But even in so doing we will be made aware of quite other questions which go beyond literary criticism proper. Why did Wilkie Collins' preoccupation with a certain kind of plot-spinning influence Dickens—so much the greater artist—as strongly as it did? Why did Conan Doyle have to stifle his literary conscience because of public demand for what he considered an inferior type of writing? These questions will not be answered by pointing to the purely intellectual appeal of detective fiction and its affinity to the cross-word puzzle's detachment from all but formal considerations. Undoubtedly, the best examples of the craft are those leading to their conclusion with impeccable logic and not sacrificing internal probability for surprise effects. (The classic *Trent's Last Case* is not above censure on this score). The intellectual element is certainly a necessary ingredient. Without it we have, as Dorothy Sayers has pointed out, the very different *genre* of the thriller, which is concerned with action, not with analysis; in the thriller we ask, 'What happens next?' in the detective story, 'What happened last?'. But while these two types of writing differ radically in their form and in the response they demand from the reader, they have real community in their matter. The detective story is by no means isolated from life and insulated from feeling. A tale of adventure may well consist of excitement without perplexity, but the analytic course of detection at its most austere is never without its element of action involving excitement. This is true even of the 'inverted' plot, brilliantly exploited by R. Austin Freeman, where the solution of the mystery is given before the pattern of deduction is exposed. It is not the fact of mental stimulus which makes the detective story. We should ask rather why it is that intellectual pleasure should

be sought in the particular setting of crime and its unveiling. Why the corpse and the sleuth, the suspect and the criminal, the investigation and the conviction? For these, or their effective substitutes, are the essential ingredients, *sine qua non*. Obviously we have here something far removed from the canons of art, something arising out of the social consciousness and conscience of Western civilization.

The historical growth of the detective formula over the past hundred-and-fifty or so years is undeniably closely linked with the society into which it was born and in which it has prospered exceedingly, a society which makes great demands upon the individual and supplies little in the way of corporate beliefs to make these demands appear natural and fitting. An enormous increase in violence has followed a radical denial of all traitorial standards of morality and value. The detective story began on its career when the moral and religious uncertainty was becoming universal. Wilkie Collins' private life was a blatant defiance of Victorian social morality. Conan Doyle reacted against traditional religious orthodoxy in his milder fashion. The stuffiness of the middle-class life may have been one of the attractions of the mystery story. Stevenson's 'What, shall we never draw blood!' may have found a partial response in the baronet lying prone on the library floor, the chase across the moors with bloodhounds, or the nocturnal bicycle ride on the wrong side of the law in company with Hornung's *Raffles*. Similarly, popular awareness of the romance of scientific progress may have found expression in Holmes' amateur laboratory work and in the more systematic and plausible methods of Dr. Thorndyke. On the other hand, it is more likely that the detective story symbolized security rather than prowess and power. In the recent War it was a high favourite of the serviceman on active duty and of the civilian in the London blitz as well as of those for whom the printed page was the only passport to danger. As death and destruction become more familiar in experience, the popularity of the *genre* does not wane. The substitute for action is also a refuge from it.

The explanation of this paradox can only be that the detective story is basically an allegory, expressing and justifying certain fundamental beliefs. Like the Western film, only less obviously and with more deeply persuasive force, it is concerned with law and order from the stand-point of the good and the bad will. It has evolved a formula which, in recognizing ruthlessness, also circumscribes it. Murder is the basic type of re-

volt against society. Discovery of the murderer vindicates the law-abiding majority against the anti-social element. More important, murder is the basic type of the evil will in the human person. Avenging society is only the instrument of justice as ultimate and absolute. Prudential and social categories here give way to a view of the ordering of the universe itself as rational and righteous. The clues which lead to the unmasking of the would-be anonymous face of evil are the empirical embodiment of that order. The vanity of the criminal, which leads him to plan a 'perfect' murder is a form of that *hubris* which leads to *nemesis*. The detective represents pure intelligence, temporarily frustrated by error and deceit, ultimately invincible.

At this level, morality gives way to religion. An offence against the order of society becomes a sin against order as such—an irrationality which is also an impiety. Blasphemy against divinely ordained truth cannot escape retribution's inevitable recoil. Abel's blood, spilled on the ground, cries out to accuse Cain. Crime serves only to reveal supernatural righteousness: *Against thee, against thee only have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight; that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest and be clear when thou judgest. Evasion is futile: Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I say, surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me. Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee. It is the source of existence itself that decrees: There is nothing covered that shall not be revealed; and hid that shall not be known.*

That the presuppositions of detective fiction are theological principles is not likely to be a conscious thought in the mind of the person choosing a 'good murder' for an idle hour, though it may account for the attraction this class of story has for the theologically minded. Moral values, with their underlying religious sanctions, supply a framework so fundamental that it goes unnoticed. The inexorable closing of the circle of evidence, culminating in the forfeit of a life for a life, would be intolerable if it did not rest on a law written in the heart of man as a responsible being. Suicide or persecution as a constant theme would be degrading. It is a mark of the detective story that, because the over-all framework is accepted by the moral consciousness, moral questions do not arise and the detached intellectual curiosity is given free play. Some of the ingenious novels of Gladys Mitchell lose in interest and credibility because their rather own prominent cult of Freudianism leads to a paralysing moral relativism. Pathological case-histories are no



substitute for sin; and drama flags when subjective preferences replace personal responsibility.

While the integrity of the moral framework is maintained, the ideal and formal level on which the narrative moves is always preserved, however many realistic touches are added to further the illusion that we are being given a slice of life. In fact, the 'escapist' nature of the story is essential—if escapism be the absence of 'realism'. The detective story does not, like Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, posit an actual moral situation in its concreteness. Emotional truth, to which literature aspires, is not required, but rather some sort of stage scenery plausible enough to serve as a setting for an intellectual romp. If the personality of the millionaire who lies sprawled across the table in a country club concerns us at all, it is only as another side of the problem presented us by the ground-plan of the room where he is found. His daughter's grief is nothing to us, except as it impinges on the eccentric behaviour of the butler. Superficially irresponsible, like the nonsense rhyme, this form of recreation affirms, beneath the surface, human and humane values.

There is a lack of opportunity for literary skill in such writing, granted a certain inhibiting of imaginative vision. A measure of artificiality must always be preserved. The deserved pre-eminence of Agatha Christie in this field is enhanced, rather than anything else, by her failure to produce anything more in the way of characters than the most perfunctory of stock types. So when the crime writer's style is more than utilitarian it generally becomes a medium for propaganda—usually cultural propaganda. The professor of English is very evident in Michael Innes' quotation-and-allusion-loaded extravaganzas. Ellery Queen stands for the humanities as opposed to merely technical education. Father Brown is the mouth-piece of his creator's Roman Catholic sentiments. It would be impossible to ignore the fact that a revived interest in the poetry of John Donne co-incided with the public career of Lord Peter Wimsey. Dorothy Sayers' noble detective (very properly a super-human blend of all the qualities the novelist admires) incidentally reveals the danger of allowing realism to invade the parabolic structure of the detective story, when in *Busman's Honeymoon* he is allowed to show human sympathy for the victim of the man-hunt he has successfully concluded. The mills of God ought not to become involved in questioning the ethics of capital punishment—particularly not when reasons of the

heart are invoked. The mystery novel has to walk the knife-edge where impossible probability easily topples over into imaginative truth. If Sherlock Holmes is without peer among the fictional characters of detection, it is rather because he is so triumphantly larger than life—a symbolic figure moving in a legendary land of Weiss-Nicht-Wo—than because he is a possible tenant of a Baker Street flat. Even a too naturalistic treatment of background and characterisation acts as a solvent disintegrating the detective formula. The vivid narratives of Georges Simenon hold a fine balance between artificiality of plot and truth of imaginative realism. But Simenon tends to become tired of pursuing the asses of detection and strays off into the kingdom of creative literature. The detective interest wilts in the presence of too direct a concentration of good writing.

The detective story may sometimes be wrecked on the Scylla of pure literature on the one hand, but it is more often sucked into the Charybdis of cheap sensationalism on the other. While the typical English mystery story concedes little to the thriller, except in a light-hearted way, its American counterpart has emphasized action, rather than reflection, and has developed the accepted thriller formula. The attraction here is also—at least in appearance—that of realism, which the detective writer has at once to woo and keep at bay, and the technique is derived directly from the 'dumb-ox' school of realistic fiction, of which Hemingway is the fountain-head. Literary realism is internal, a truth of emotion. The thriller aims at creating fidelity of scene. It purports to draw in accurate detail the stage where, at a certain place and during a certain time, the essentially timeless drama of good and evil is played out. If the centre of interest shifts from deduction to the methods of a particular police system (or its amateur counterpart), from the occasion of crime to the ethos of a particular man-hunt, and from the uncovering of the source of evil to the stages of a particular man-hunt, then the territory of the thriller is reached. This too may be a place where literature is found, for pity and terror, love and wonder, may be discovered here also. More often, though, it leads to a bastard mimicry of literature, to the deification of the squalid, justified by the plea of accurate reporting of 'facts.'

While the basic pattern of the detective story is the trial, based on the weighing of evidence, in which time is unimportant, the thriller finds its special character in the adventure of pursuit-and-escape, where the time factor settles the whole issue. The cinema (that child of modern man's preoccupation with



time) delights in the chase as its most congenial theme, capable of infinite variation, and utilizes every location, from sewer to stratosphere, for its setting. So the screen nearly always bends the detective story in the direction of the thriller. A conspicuous example was the adaptation of Simenon's *Crise de Nerfs*, where a situation dependant upon mental stress was shifted to a spectacular fun-and-games on the Eiffel Tower. But the film is only one aspect of the desire of our age for violent action and of its preference for the external over the internal. The thriller formula has asserted itself very widely as the most characteristic expression of our restless and rootless era. At its best, as in the satisfactory film and less satisfactory book, *Odd Man Out*, it can call our attention to the fact that the visible stress of the man-hunt implies an interior stress upon the human spirit; though it cannot—as this example testifies—take us very far into the interior reality beyond the expression of its pathos. It cannot do so, without changing the formula into something totally different. Graham Greene has achieved this metamorphosis by making the thriller-pattern an allegory of the human conscience. From *The Man Within* to *The Heart of the Matter*, he has traced the man-hunt from the point of view of the hunted in order to show that the true flight-and-pursuit lies in the divided soul itself.

The visual fidelity of the film to externals re-inforces the preoccupations of the normal thriller. The sound of knuckles against jaw, the sprawl of the body on the wet road-surface, guarantees that here is no airy-fairy make believe. This is life. This is the faithfully recorded anatomy of violence. It may be claimed that the latest nihilism of our civilization is being sterilized or purged by being thus displayed. Perhaps a truer diagnosis would be that it is being encouraged by being paraded as being 'true to life'. The pretense of realism may well be a convenient fiction, investing omnipresent violence with a spurious sanction it could not otherwise claim. The conventions of the thriller obviously go far to undermine the moral foundations of the detective story. No longer does the detective represent impersonal intelligence. Instead he is the focus of action, who distributes (and collects) the large bills and small change of violence. Except for his formal status, he is hardly to be distinguished from those he engages with. He is often more executioner than investigator. He serves interest rather than justice and works by 'hunch' rather than by inference. Yet, in the absence of any larger philosophy, the detective is held up

for admiration as an ideal figure. The *mystique* with which Raymond Chandler surrounds this tough and ungracious character shows that the thriller has passed from reportage to full fledged myth.

Commonly, the traditional detective story still holds its own, in rather uneasy combination with the thriller formula. But the gradual elimination of the essential rational and value-regarding features of the *genre* is not a happy prospect. The crime story has its roots in purely sensational reporting, such as is found in the memoirs of Francois Vidocq or of Allan Pinkerton and in the melodramatic novels of Emile Gaboriau. Yet from this shoddy material a very different level was reached, in the manner fore-shadowed by Poe and developed by his successors. It would be a pity indeed if the only result were to be the descent once more to the shocker technique—"Plenty of fast action and a socko finish," as one modern practitioner of the thriller explained to a *Time* reporter, "...all the time working toward the big pay-off." If we abandon all belief in a rational moral order and cling to an ultimate pragmatism, holding that truth is not discovered but proved in action, then the argument of force, with its attendant brutalities, will not come amiss in the reading we choose for our diversion. We have not reached that stage yet. One publisher commends the very delightful books of a notable writer of detective stories to those readers 'who like their nonsense to be distinguished'. Civilizing virtues and discriminating taste certainly ought to inform our pleasures, for those provide the touchstone of cultural progress. Weightier evidence exists, but the fate of the detective story is one not unimportant indication of what is happening to the basic articles of our corporate faith.