

Expos 20: “The Game’s Afoot!” English Detective Fiction (252, 253)



What are the staple elements of classic detective fiction? What happens when authors break the rules of “fair play” to shock their readers—and is fair play even their goal? Does a story’s narrative style conceal or reveal important clues? How does the constraint of a “locked room” setting lead a writer to create interesting new angles and what other innovative narrative devices should we note? Are victims and culprits sometimes difficult to distinguish from one another? Might a work of fiction be classified as a mystery story, a Gothic ghost story, or a tale of psychological horror all at the same time?

We begin with classic “tales of ratiocination” and sleuth out the rise of the detective figure, starting with Edgar Allan Poe’s amateur Dupin and Arthur Conan Doyle’s private consulting detective Sherlock Holmes, the most famous “man who never lived and will never die.” Then we turn to the “clue puzzles” and “whodunnits” from the Golden Age of English mystery fiction, from Hercule Poirot’s novel attention to the psychology of suspects in notorious page-turners such as Agatha Christie’s *Murder on the Orient Express*, and, in later weeks, to stories focused on more non-traditional detective characters, ranging from female sleuth/ village spinster Miss Marple and the troubled governess in Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw* to the barrister/lawyer Mr. Mayherne or the full cast of investigators in *And Then There Were None*. In the course’s final weeks, reading the tale of Oedipus marks a more abstract turn, with our selections leaving it to readers to decide whether a crime has even been committed—and by whom? Critical readings paired with our tales frame our discussions of a literary genre, extending our analysis to detective fiction’s commentary on social class, colonialism, real crime, and gender and ageism, to name a few.

Over the semester, we also explore some important subgenres of mystery detective fiction—gothic, revenge, and “fantastic” tales—as well as consider how our literary narratives shift when they are translated visually, reworked for contemporary film and televised series (e.g., the BBC’s *Sherlock*, etc.). As we seek to define the conventions and innovations of the mystery fiction genre, we also examine what constitutes the “perfect crime” and fitting punishment according to our detective characters and whether readers agree that appropriate justice has been rendered—or ever can be.

Writing assignments grow out of our readings and ask you to think with agility, creativity, and flexibility, considering fictional works from a nearly inexhaustible series of interpretive viewpoints, and to write with increasing clarity, precision, and nuance. Fiction on our syllabus is enhanced by secondary critical readings that help to expand, direct, and frame the reach of our discussions. For each of our 3 units, we focus on a different theme to practice creating interpretive, analytical claims and then fully fledged arguments about the myriad of important things that you want readers to notice about these stories. As we go along, the range of texts you engage and the stakes of the discussion increase, from initially more defined papers on an already specified theme (you always choose the stories or material) to a research paper for which you decide the focus by working with additional critical sources and readings you track down, becoming investigators yourselves.

NB: This draft syllabus is largely representative of course content; the final version may vary slightly.

Required Texts

- Required PDF readings, links to free film steams (w/commercials; \$ alternatives available): posted on our course site, Canvas > Modules.
- Christie, Agatha. Titles TBA, always readily available as used/new copies (**not** an online or e-book)
- James, Henry. *The Turn of the Screw*, **2nd ed.** [not 3rd] Ed. Peter Beidler, Bedford/St Martin's, ISBN #978-0312406912. It must be this edition: see the picture in the header of this document for the correct edition w/the blue cover, or this sample Amazon link, <https://www.amazon.com/Turn-Screw-Bedford-History-Culture/dp/0312406916>. Book should be less than \$10.

Units overview

Unit 1 – The Classic Detective Figure

- Essay 1/LP#1: Themed comparison paper on choice of 2 primary readings (4-5pp)
- Writing skills: Asking analytical questions about primary and secondary readings; construction of an interpretive claim/thesis about primary readings; using evidence to support argument.
- Asking many probing, analytical questions about Poe's and Conan Doyle's classic detective fiction occupies us during Unit 1's class discussion, focused on specific kinds of animal characters. We pair the reading of primary texts or stories with classic critical essays to help us consider whether our fictional works offer a satisfying outcome to the mystery or case for the detective investigator and/or for us as readers. Some questions that help us develop an interpretive claim or thesis about your choice of two stories might be, for instance, whether an animal character is necessarily an antagonist or is it a victim (or both)? What character or identities are animals in these stories given, implicitly and explicitly? What is the role of animals vs. their human counterparts' greater or lesser culpability? What do animal characters tell us or show us about crime, murderers, heroism, the "natural," anthropomorphism, social behaviors, nation, innocence vs. guilt, constructions of race and the British Empire, etc.; about the characters and/or about us, the readers; and what informs the detective figure's view of an appropriate form of justice concerning any of these things? We'll practice developing a complex argument that embeds evidence from primary works to support your claims, first by writing a short response paper (SRP#1) and then drafting a thesis paragraph before you write the longer paper draft and Essay 1 (LP#1).

Unit 2 – Unconventional Detectives, part 1

- Essay 2/LP#2: Themed comparison paper on choice of several primary and secondary readings (6-7pp)
- Writing skills: Asking analytical questions about primary and secondary readings; construction of an interpretive claim/thesis about multiple readings; expanding/revising a complex thesis; using evidence from primary and secondary (a modified "lens") readings to support argument.
- Moving from Unit 1's focus on traditional detective figures, Unit 2 challenges us to expand our notion of the established conventions of detective fiction now to include "un/conventional" investigators, "culprits," "antagonists," etc., and to focus on investigators/characters who make errors or lose their cases (or win them using unconventional means). Our fictional plots might now

focus on the least likely detectives, such as the elderly spinster Miss Marple and her “armchair” method of crime-solving. Is Mr. Mayherne, the solicitor “investigator,” an unwitting accomplice in a crime because of his professional bias? How does the detective/investigator’s identity, method, investigation, the challenge s/he faces, his/her confirmation bias, etc., inform the cases we’re analyzing? As in Unit 1, we practice developing a complex argument that embeds evidence to support your claims now using both primary and secondary readings, first by writing a short response paper (SRP #2) and then by drafting an expanded thesis paragraph before you write the longer paper draft and Essay 2 (LP#2).

Unit 3—Unconventional Detectives, part 2

- Essay 3: Research essay on a central primary work and multiple secondary readings (8-10pp)
- Writing skills: Intervening/participating in a longstanding literary debate; expanding/revising complex thesis; researching, assessing, and incorporating multiple secondary readings to support argument.
- Having been thinking outside the box about types of mystery stories and detective figures in Unit 2, in Unit 3 we look very closely at an important and controversial piece of fiction, *The Turn of the Screw*, and evaluate for ourselves what the central, animating myster(ies) of or crime(s) committed at the conclusion of this novella might even be. Our questions may become very abstract: what kind of mystery or detective shapes the narrative, and if our “case” ends with a crime, who (or what social force) can be said to commit it? What works read in Unit 2 can also inform your present thinking? To help you decide on a research question for the final paper, we do preliminary research into what questions have been posed about *ToS*, guided first by exploring the story’s long critical history and reading several essays that are models of Marxist/class-based, material culture, psychoanalytic, and other theoretical perspectives; we situate *ToS*/detective fiction within these other critical perspectives to expand our purview of what mystery stories engage with and encompass. First you’ll write a short response paper (SRP#3) on *ToS*. Everyone then does some independent investigation into a specific question or idea that you develop with help from new sources (you will incorporate this into an annotated bibliography), which grows into the argument of the longer research paper draft and Essay 3 (LP#3).