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Abstract

This paper explores the nature of Golden Age crime narrative, which is taken to refer to the works of writers of detective fiction who produced their oeuvre largely though not exclusively in Britain and in the period between the two World Wars. It argues that the works of these authors are enacted criticism creative acts that are fundamentally

appears as a literary construct. As Appleby views the fantastic death-chamber (22) he reflects how [m]ystery stories were popular in universities and even among the police (22-3). Building on this foundation of stories, he then proceeds consciously to use his knowledge of such stories as the basis for his initial reading of the crime scene. To such an extent does he accept the extraordinary power of the Word (23) that he finds himself half-prepared to accept the artificial, the strikingly *fictive*, as normal

Gill). Not only do they draw on Poe and Conan Doyle, they also place Umpleby's murder in defined moral literary frameworks from the Bible and John Bunyan. This is a death that occurs and is investigated in a self-confessedly literary context.

It is perhaps for this reason that the fictional space of Golden Age crime appears to reside in such a p literary milieu (Knight).

This paper, however, a

The recognisable figure of the detective began to emerge in the Victorian era. Some of these were police detectives – seminal literary creations such

Bleak House) and

Cuff (*The Moonstone*) and a raft of comparable figures in the works of writers such as B.L. Farjeon (father of J.J. Farjeon), Headon Hill and M.

McDonnell Bodkin.

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Secret were amateur sleuths. The female detective also has her roots in the

Victorian era through

The

Woman in White) and Magdalen Vanstone (*No Name*), and in the

anachronistic female detectives of Andrew Forrester (*The Female Detective*)

and William S. Hayward (*Revelations of a Lady Detective*). These early

detective figures – a combination of professionals and amateurs, upper class

and lower class, males and females – demonstrate that from its genesis

detective fiction was founded upon experiment and intertextual dialogue.

Conan Doyle – Sherlock Holmes

these earlier detectives and in their turn provided the bedrock for the writers

Crime narrative, in these terms, ceases to be either a determinant or a determining account and becomes instead a provisional or exploratory space differently proposed and interrogated by the author (writer-teller), the reader (reader-teller) and the detective (reader-writer-

The Golden Age game

It is in the Golden Age novelist

story that part of the appeal of their work lies. Readers are complicit in

more-or-less honest

This is in one sense an acceptable proposition. If the primary interest of the whodunnit is the tale of the murder and the events that precede and follow it, then the second story is indeed, whilst a surface presence, ultimately subservient. However, this is to suppose that it is indeed the crime story that holds the primary interest for the reader – a supposition that many readers of Golden Age crime might challenge. After the (often forgettable) crime narrative has passed away it is the figure of the detective who frequently remains to the fore. As much is suggested by Delamater and Prigozy, who observe that Golden Age detectives are often known more for themselves than for the actual crimes they solve (2). Hühn also deflects importance from the story of Golden Age detective narratives when he observes that classic detective fiction is constituted by the process and problem of story-telling (39) rather than the problem of the story itself.

If, therefore, the pleasure of the detective story lies not only (perhaps not even mainly) in the solution of the crime and lies equally (if not more) in the process of its solving, then the tale dubbed as subservient by Todorov takes on a much greater significance. If it is, indeed, the solving rather than the solution – the detective narrative rather than the murder narrative – that most interests the author and/or the reader, then the burden of interest shifts

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But what if?

understood within the context of conversational implicature. The insertion of a modal auxiliary verb (e.g. *x might commit c'etko gφ*), provides an implicit context for the action. A more complex transformation, however, might be employed in order to suggest a more complex psychological reality (e.g. *x foresees he will commit c'etko gφ*). This process of transformation in the reading and (re-)telling of events is a process that permits

(32)

uncertainty. Through the internalized and the actual dialogues of the text, readers, authors and detectives engage with

Bruner 37). So,

faced with multiple overlapping accounts of a focal event that together need

author,

detective and reader together navigate a plurality of narrative possibilities. It

is through the constant forming, re-forming and transforming of possible

meanings a constant reiteration that the narrative

progresses, and in these constantly shifting sands we can identify the

creation are core to Golden Age positional processes: classic examples such as Carr's *The Hollow Man*, Christie's *The Body in the Library* and Milne's *The Red House Mystery* come to mind. Bayard sees this as one of the ways in which detective writers practice *detournement*.

Partners in Crime in which Tommy and Tuppence Beresford recursively reference and parody the methods of a variety of classic detectives from Father Brown and Sherlock Holmes via John Thorndyke and Richard Sheringham to Hercule Poirot. These

fictional methods are a means by which Tommy and Tuppence by a fictional detectives whose work is simply the stuff of fiction explore not only the fictional crimes they encounter, but also the fictional representation of crime. Christie shapes a narrative that is self-referential, self-perpetuating and self-verifying, spinning it

Berkeley models whose methods they apply. Their final partners in crime are the readers, whose collusion is equally essential if the game is to function.

This is a particularly rich example, but such allusions to other figures from the literary detective canon are to be found almost ubiquitously in Golden Age crime fiction (Rowland). Sherlock Holmes is frequently referenced, as are Auguste Dupin and M. Lecoq *Vt gpwau'Nciw'Ecug*, for example, the eponymous detective reflects on his practices and recalls how in hi

(38). This not merely literary nepotism, however.

In typically humorous style in *Hqwt 'Fc{uø'Y qpf gt'* (155-6) one of A.A.

characters apostrophizes the greats of the detective writing world:

rdy and

Willis, I mean Freeman Wills

One reason for such obsessive literary contextualization is as a means of purporting realism. Any given tale is presented as real by insisting on the fictionality of what happens in other books. Thus, Poirot claims his reality on the basis that he is not Thorndyke; Thorndyke his on the basis that he is not Peter Wimsey; Wimsey his on the grounds that he is not Trent, and so on. The Golden Age detective novel enshrines this circularity of logic and self-definition and in so doing it comically subverts itself, playing with the

(Watson).

Detective stories and their methods of representation are also frequently presented as the means by which one character speaks to another. So, for example, Inspector Wilson in *Quick Curtain* (102) imagines an overheard conversation:

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that Foster had been heard by
so-and-
the way people are always saying things like that in detective novels.

In *The Fourth Wall* (57), A.A. Milne employs similar devices. Jimmy uses the tropes of detective fiction to critique his investigation:

JIMMY: Oh, I don't know. It seems to leave a lot to chance. All right in a story book, but would Uncle Arthur do all the things he was expected to do? And if he didn't, what then?

A few pages later, the same character, an investigative companion, uses detective fiction as a distancing device as a counterfoil to the dramatic situation:

SUSAN: It's silly, but I suppose my nerve's gone suddenly. It was just like working at something in a book before, but now it's - it's getting so close to us. (64)

In *Murder in Piccadilly* (175), Charles Kin

and told him all about it. So she went to Bloomsbury by omnibus,

want so much money.

And in the *Case of the Gilded Fly* (Crispin 64-5), Gervase Fenn even conflates detection and literary criticism:

Detection and literary criticism really come to the same thing:

substantiating it from the text or from the remainder of the

fiction.

his work as a detective are alike

subjunctifying: acts of enacted genre criticism.

Golden Age detective fiction is in constant formalized, stylized dialogue with itself. Having explored these other examples, let us return to Michael Innes, our starting point. Like so many other authors of the Golden Age, it is perhaps not surprising that Symons describes

ry

Bloody Murder, 115).

such, they provide us with an endlessly fictionally ,
and as readers we constantly collude in this process by simultaneously
holding off and embracing the blurring of fiction and reality. The constant
references to the fictionality of the detective form are simultaneously
creative engagement and critical distancing a form of what might be

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