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Scapegoating: Towards a Theory of Detective Fiction

For me, as for many others, the reading of detective stories is an addiction like tobacco or alcohol. The symptoms of this are: first, the intensity of the craving - if I have any work to do, I must be careful not to get hold of a detective story for, once I begin one, I cannot work or sleep till I have finished it. Second, its specificity - the story must conform to certain formulas (I find it very difficult, for example, to read one that is not set in rural England). And thirdly, its immediacy. I forget the story as soon as I have finished it, and have no wish to read it again. If, as sometimes happens, I start reading one and find after a few pages that I have read it before, I cannot go on. Such reactions convince me that, in my case at least, detective fiction has nothing to do with art.

W. H. Auden, "The Guilty Vicarage" (1954)

To detective-story addicts. . . I say, Please do not write me any more letters telling me that I have not read the right books. And to [those who] have thanked me for helping them to liberate themselves from a habit which they recognized as wasteful of time and degrading to the intelligence but into which they had been bullied by convention and the portentously invoked examples of [great writers]. . . I say: Friends, we represent a minority, but Literature is on our side. With so many fine books to be read, so much to be studied or known, there is no need to bore ourselves with this rubbish. And with the paper shortage pressing on all publication and many first-rate writers forced out of print, we shall do well to discourage the squandering of this paper which might be put to better use.

Edmund Wilson, "Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?" (1945)

Detective fiction is often criticized for being excessively formulaic - for depending too much on a series of familiar elements that alter only slightly from text to text. Edmund Wilson speaks for many critics of detective fiction when he spurns the genre as "wasteful of time and degrading to the intelligence," an "addiction" that lures readers away from edifying engagement with Literature with a capital "L." In 1945, Wilson wittily dismissed detective fiction as a passing nuisance:

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Wilson is gone, the war and the paper-shortage are over; detective fiction has outlasted them all. Even first-rate minds like Auden admit that their appetite for detective fiction is serial and insatiable, "an addiction like tobacco or alcohol" characterized by an "intense craving" and satisfied only by a "formula" that submerges readers in blissful oblivion. What experience are these formulaic fictions offering readers, and why do readers find the experience both compelling and addictive?

The characteristic formula of a "whodunit" - a crime, followed by an investigation of both the crime and the community in which it took place, followed by the apprehension and conviction of the perpetrator - has the ancient shape of a religious ritual - a series of ceremonial actions based on traditional rules. The human ritual it most strongly resembles is that of scapegoating. Scapegoating is an ancient, persistent, perhaps universal ritual whose purpose is to allow a collective to purge its

guilt by projecting it onto a victim who is then destroyed, sacrificed, or exiled. With a few exceptions¹ anthropologists have offered a functionalist explanation of scapegoating, arguing that it acts homeostatically to restore order to a culture plagued by unresolved aggressions and divisions. This functionalist rationale for scapegoating is not new, but was recognized early in human history when scapegoating rituals were formalized and enacted using sacrificial animals. The Greek word for the human scapegoat, *pharmakos*, means “healing force.”²

Mystery and detective narratives first gained widespread cultural popularity around the middle of the nineteenth century, coincident with and at least partly in response to industrialization, urbanization, and the creation of police and detective forces in Europe and the United States. Though crimes in most categories did not increase measurably in the nineteenth century, public interest in crime and punishment flourished. As literacy rates increased, the broadside ballads and Newgate Calendars of the eighteenth century faded in favor of the new popular crime narratives known as penny-dreadfuls, shilling shockers, and dime novels. The 1841 publication of Poe’s *Murders in the Rue Morgue* inaugurated a tradition that expanded to include Gaboriau, the mainstream English novelists Collins and Dickens, and flowered fifty years later with the creation of Sherlock Holmes.

The “classic” detective fictions of this early period established the formula still in use today, which Agatha Christie calls an “orthodox detective story”: a crime is committed that reveals the existence of aggression within a community; an outsider detective is charged with extracting information from all members of the community. Ultimately the criminal is identified and punished, restoring a sense of safety and righteousness to the community. This formula flourished, I shall argue, not simply because it was good entertainment and often good art, but because it was right for its time. It continues to appeal to readers because we continue to confront the traces of a faith-based feudal social order that refuses to die.

Throughout most of the nineteenth century, British and American society was rapidly urbanizing and industrializing. The passage of legislation such as the Corn Laws and the emancipation of slaves, together with the influential arguments of the Chartists and writers like Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, Frederick Douglass and Susan Anthony, questioned the political and social hierarchies that had traditionally held people in their places. Urban, educated readers, increasingly alienated from traditional religious doctrine and no longer bound by the social constraints of village life, bought detective fiction because it allowed them to engage in a ritual process in which it was possible to acknowledge their own transgressions while shunting ultimate blame for aggression onto a more culpable individual - the criminal. The detective fiction genre, in short, is a mimetic version of the ancient scapegoating ritual that allows a people systematically to recognize their aggressive impulses and to cleanse themselves of guilt.

In “The Guilty Vicarage,” W. H. Auden compares his reading of detective fictions to an addiction to a mind-altering substance - something that temporarily relieves the pain of consciousness. Like any addiction, it is irresistible when he is under its powers. Auden’s facetious tone may arise from a

¹“René Girard's position is the opposite of the functionalist argument: first social order based on consensus, the scapegoating to reinforce that order. He argues that scapegoating brings about social order and its consensus. His theory of mimetic desire and mimetic rivalry on the psychological level is an alternative to the frustration/aggression argument and is quite specific about the interpersonal conflict that results in collective scapegoating. Finally, he demonstrates how ritualized scapegoating reinforces the extant order and helps to militate against the interpersonal conflict that gave rise to the scapegoating in the first place” (Brown and Stivers 704).

² In ancient Greece, human scapegoats (*pharmakos*) were used to mitigate a plague or other calamity or even to prevent such ills. The Athenians chose a man and woman for the festival of Thargelia. After being feasted, the couple was led around the town, beaten with green twigs, driven out of the city, and possibly even stoned. In this way the city was supposedly protected from ill fortune for another year.

recognition that his desire to read detective fiction is embarrassing because it is a compulsion to consume a debased object. Like Sherlock Holmes with his cocaine syringe, however, Auden admits that he continues to pursue fictional “cases” because of his intense desire for the mental state they impart - a trance that temporarily blinds and deafens him to the rest of his world. Auden spends the rest of “The Guilty Vicarage” defining his “rules” for a good mystery, codifying the ritual that induces “the magical function” he seeks. Of “The Reader,” he notes: “it is the fact that I have [desires] which makes me feel guilty, so that instead of dreaming about indulging my desires, I dream about the removal of the guilt which I feel at their existence.” Yet Auden no sooner acknowledges his guilty desires than he disavows their role:

It is sometimes said that detective stories are read by respectable law-abiding citizens in order to gratify in fantasy the violent or murderous wishes they dare not, or are ashamed to, translate into action. This may be true for the reader of thrillers (which I rarely enjoy), but it is quite false for the reader of detective stories. On the contrary, the magical satisfaction [detective fictions] provide. . . is the illusion of being dissociated from the murderer.

In fact detective fiction is ritually effective precisely because it allows readers *both* to experience their murderous desires *and* to dissociate themselves from the murderer - it induces aggression and then reassigns responsibility for that aggression to a scapegoat. As the narrative exposes the community members’ motives for harming the victim, the reader develops an animus toward the victim, who was either unpleasant, a member of a marginalized group, or both. Second, as community members confess their shortcomings to the detective, the reader, as a snoop and voyeur, begins to develop a guilty solidarity with the evil-wishers. In other words, as the detective’s investigation gradually uncovers the evil qualities of victim and collective alike, the reader’s own aggressive impulses are exposed. Though the reader ostensibly identifies with the detective, who is logical, disinterested, and intellectually superior, the reader actually functions more like one of the aggressive, guilty suspects, who have an intense interest in seeing someone else “convicted” by the detective.

In practice this means that an effective detective fiction must do three things: First, it must arouse the reader’s aggressive impulses. Second, it must reveal the universality of aggression among a community of ordinary people. Third, it must assign guilt for acting on these aggressive impulses to a single person, the criminal or scapegoat, reassuring both reader and community that they are “free to go.” One of the most famous golden-age detective fictions, Agatha Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, is a useful proof-text because it both follows the formula closely and questions one of its primary assumptions.

The process of arousal, revelation, and punishment is ritualized in the detective’s investigation of the crime. True to its ritual source, detective fiction must observe certain rules in order to be effective. First, the detective must function as a cleric to mediate the ritual process. The detective is consequently framed as a secular cleric, a celibate who eschews intimate relationships as a condition of detective work. The detective must be an outsider in the community under investigation.. Though the detective may bring along a harmless, dim-witted Boswell, he or she must avoid intimate relationships, especially with members of the community under investigation. As Poirot points out early in *Roger Ackroyd*: “One prefers to remain incognito. I am not anxious for notoriety. I have not even troubled to correct the local version of my name” (23). The detective operates as a priest of reason who, aided by his amanuensis, uses inductive logic rather than supernatural revelation to extract confessions and to make judgments.

Second, the initial crime victim must be revealed to have deserved punishment. Early on, the victim of the crime that precipitates the mystery is represented as innocent - wrongfully dead - but the detective’s investigation invariably reveals that the victim provoked unacceptable emotions of rage, envy, greed, or desire in everyone he or she met. The victim may be rich or poor, handsome or ugly, female or male, noble or common, but will always be framed as deserving of punishment. As the suspects reveal their animus towards the victim, the reader experiences their aggression vicariously and identifies with their desire to see the victim punished.

Third, the suspects, under interrogation by the detective, must gradually reveal their aggressive desires individually and as an aggregate. When Hercule Poirot tells James Sheppard "All cases resemble each other. . . Everyone concerned in them has something to hide," he is quick to add, "I think you have [something to hide]" emphasizing to Sheppard that no community member can be assumed to be without aggression. He later confronts the other suspects, telling them "each one of you has something to hide," and signifying that his task is to elicit their narratives individually and then to coalesce their narratives in his final summation. Each community member eventually confesses to aggressive feelings that could have provided a motive for Roger Ackroyd's murder: a spurned lover, an angry housemaid, a grasping sister-in-law, two greedy heirs, an impecunious secretary, a romantic rival, a professional man crippled by gambling debts, and so on. While the reader may not identify directly with the suspects, in fact feeling superior to their petty compulsions, the reader develops an animus toward the victim who has managed to incur so much polluting aggression. As a contemptible portrait of Roger Ackroyd emerges from the suspects' narratives, which focus only on the victim's shortcomings, it is easy for the reader to dislike him as well - though the reader knows that emotion to be unjust and therefore polluting. When Poirot convenes the suspects to explain his solution, the community's aggression is made flesh as all masks of propriety are stripped away and each suspect alternates between the shame of self-revelation and the fear of conviction.

Theorists of detective fiction sometimes argue that readers identify primarily with the detective, and that they either enjoy assuming the morally detached and superior role of the detective, or that they perceive the fiction as a kind of mimetic crossword puzzle, an elaborate word-problem that can be solved logically. The puzzle aspects of detective fiction are inherently enjoyable for many people, but such theories fail to explain the significance of the concomitant presence of aggression and violence in crime fiction. Why does a sensible, logic-loving reader seek a puzzle that is predicated on death and mayhem? To reduce a murder mystery to the status of a mere puzzle is to ignore the significance of aggression in the work, and to devalue the most aesthetically sophisticated detective fictions, which typically emphasize character development and moral ambiguity as well as logical coherence.

Fourth, the reader, suspects and detective alike mark the guiltiest or most marginal community member for scapegoating. The detective, who typically locates the perpetrator among the "least likely" of the tainted suspects, assuages the collective's fear that guilt is manifest but increases everyone's tension: if it could be that person, this gesture implies, it could be you. The members of the collective, whose individual and collective aggression has been revealed in a collective "solution by surprise" scene, ease the intolerable tension by transferring their burden of guilt onto a single individual who can then be framed as the source and the ending-point of evil. At the end of the story, both the unattractive murder victim, who aroused the collective's aggression, and the scapegoat, who bore responsibility for that aggression, are successfully eliminated from the collective, which can go forth confident in its own purity.

Readers are often puzzled by the failure, at the close of a detective novel, to try, convict, and punish the perpetrator. The rampaging orang-utan of "Murders in the Rue Morgue" is sentenced to life imprisonment - but in the Paris zoo; Sherlock Holmes frees the murderous lover in "The Abbey Grange" for having rid the world of an evil husband; Poe's "Minister D" is never punished or exposed for having purloined the Exalted Person's famous letter. The ritual nature of detective fiction, I would argue, makes public conviction and punishment redundant. The perpetrator has been singled out and convicted (by the "evidence") in front of the community, who are the beneficiaries of the ritual. Conviction and punishment are ancillary to the process of ritual purification that takes place upon condemnation; when the community and the reader learned that their guilt has been surpassed by the guilt of the perpetrator.

Readers of Christie's novel are usually astonished to find that it is James Sheppard, the Watsonian doctor/narrator, who killed Roger Ackroyd. They are further amazed to find that it was not his first homicide, but inspired by fear that his earlier murder of Ackroyd's lover, Mrs. Ferrars, would be discovered. Ostensibly we're surprised because we expect the sidekick/narrator to remain as detached - and as unquestionably guiltless - as the detective. Sheppard's guilt seems like a

violation of one of the cardinal rules of detective fiction - the rule of the nice narrator. Yet Sheppard's involvement in the community implicates him along with the rest of the suspects. Sheppard's stance as both a "revealing" narrator and a "concealing" or confidential physician should signal his potential involvement in the crime. Poirot acknowledges Sheppard's discrepant status when he says "You wish to see the affair, not as the family doctor sees it, but with the eye of a detective who knows and cares for no one - to whom they are all strangers and equally liable to suspicion" (145). As Ronald Knox famously stated in his codification of the rules of detective fiction, "the criminal. . . must not be anyone whose thoughts the reader has been allowed to follow" (Haycraft 194). Our acceptance of this convention stems from our desire as readers to avoid identifying overtly with a perpetrator. Such identification would foreground the reader's complicity in the guilty collective.³ In *Roger Ackroyd*, however, Christie forces us to question this convention by repeatedly alluding to Sheppard's deep involvement with the citizens of King's Abbot, and his ready access both to incriminating information and to poison. The degree to which the reader has repressed his or her identification with the suspects is revealed in the extent to which the reader is shocked by Sheppard's guilt. We feel betrayed by this turn of events, however, not simply because a convention has been violated, but because we recognize our complicity in the crime. The narrative we have embraced with the pronoun "I" has been a species of our own perjured testimony, not a summary of the novel's events.

Bruno Bettelheim, discussing the therapeutic function of fairy tales, argues that "while the fantasy of the tale is unreal, the good feelings it gives us about ourselves and our future are real, and these good feelings are what we need to sustain us" (126). But the soothing effect of any narrative are ephemeral; the process of arousal, revelation and punishment must be repeated - hence the seriality of the detective genre, where the frame elements of the narrative remain the same and only the particulars change. Our "priest," whether Sherlock Holmes or Nero Wolfe or Kinsey Millhone, remains our guide to a ritual that, as Gail McMurray Gibson has said, "narrate[s] a simultaneous revealing and concealing of the shadows," and allows to glimpse our most atavistic impulses from the cocooning custody of ritual. The only penalty is that the form requires us to return again and again to the scene of the crime.

³Likewise, the narrator/sidekick is traditionally exempted from suspicion because readers want to trust both the priest and the amanuensis - and identify consciously with a character whose lack of genius is compensated by proximity to the priest.