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The golden age

The golden age of crime fiction is usually taken as the period between the two world wars,[1] though some start it earlier, with the publication of E. C. Bentley's *Trent's Last Case* in 1913,[2] and the first critic to use the term dated it from 1918 to 1930, followed by 'the Moderns'[3]; major texts in 'golden age' style were also produced after 1940, both by new writers and by figures from the earlier period. The term 'golden age' has been criticised as being unduly homogenous[4] and seen as inappropriately 'replete with romantic associations'[5]: in fact the types of crime fiction produced in this period were far from uniform – the psychothriller and the procedural began, there was a wide range of practice in the mystery and the stories do regularly represent types of social and personal unease which would contradict a notion of an idyllic 'golden' period.

However, while recognising variety in the period, as well as the relative uncertainty of its borders, it is still possible to identify a coherent set of practices which were shared, to a greater or lesser extent, by most of the writers then at work. Elements that were randomly present in earlier crime fiction suddenly become a norm, like multiple suspects, and some earlier tendencies largely disappear, notably the use of coincidence and historical explanations. A genre of crime fiction, best named for its central mechanism as the clue-puzzle and epitomised by Agatha Christie and 'S. S. Van Dine', clearly forms a recognisable entity by the mid-1920s.

Murder is now essential as the central crime, as is confirmed in titles: by the 1920s the words 'murder' 'death' and 'blood', rarely seen before, seem compulsory, especially in the USA where euphemistic English titles often became more sanguinary.

The setting of the crime is enclosed in some way. G. K. Chesterton's concept from 1902 that the detective story is the romance of the modern city[6] does not prove true; though more stories were set in the city than is often realised, it would still be in a sequestered area, an apartment or at most a few streets, and the archetypal setting of the English novels (unlike most

of the American ones) was a more or less secluded country house – indeed Raymond Williams sees the detective novel as an evolution of the country-house literary tradition, though a house based on capital riches, not landed wealth.[7]

The story is also socially enclosed: lower classes, especially professional criminals, play very minor roles. The criminal comes from among the social circle of the victim, and servants are very rarely guilty – and if so will usually be in some form of social disguise. The master-villains who were so popular in the early twentieth century[8] and who survive to the present in thrillers are not found in the clue-puzzle.

The wider politics of the context are ignored: as Julian Symons observed for Christie's characters 1926 was not the year of the General Strike.[9] The elements of capitalist malpractice that dominate the first chapter of *Trent's Last Case* and provide the motive for murder in Mary Roberts Rinehart's *The Circular Staircase* (1908) are rarely represented in the classic clue-puzzle.

The victim will be a man or (quite often) a woman of some importance and wealth, though that position is rarely of long-standing or antique respectability: instability is constant. The victim is also a person of little emotive value; he or she is not mourned, nor is the real pain and degradation of violent death represented.

Detection is rational rather than active or intuitional, a method which fits with the unemotional presentation of the crime. It will be undertaken by someone, usually a man, who is either an amateur or, especially later in the period, a police official who is distinguished (usually on a class basis) from the run-of-the-mill police. But even the amateur often has a friend or relative who is himself a high-ranking police official, such as Ellery Queen's father or Peter Wimsey's eventual brother-in-law.

The rational and at most semi-official detection will focus strongly on circumstantial evidence and will eventually ratify it, properly interpreted, as a means of identifying the criminal. Sometimes there will be a gesture towards 'psychology' – as in Christie and Van Dine – but this is almost always merely a matter of human types and likely motives, not depth analysis.

The writing style will usually match the rational circumstantial detection in being decidedly plain, expressing what Dennis Porter calls a sense of 'social conformity, circumspection, and sobriety',[10] with neither authorial voice nor characters given any elaboration. Even when there is more detail in the detective's persona it will tend to be two-dimensional as with learning (Philo Vance, Peter Wimsey), eccentricity (Nero Wolfe, Hercule Poirot), or apparent folly (Reggie Fortune, Peter Wimsey again). More elaborate writing and depth characterisation appear in writers who move towards the psychothriller like Dorothy L. Sayers or A. B. Cox.

There will be a range of suspects, all of whom appear capable of the crime and are equipped with motives; this is a development from the earlier period, and may be stimulated by the need for a fuller plot in the novel: largely absent in the nineteenth-century short stories, it is a marked feature of Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868), A. K. Green's *The Leavenworth Case* (1878) and Gaston Leroux's *The Mystery of the Yellow Room* (1908).

Romance is rare – though it can occur, both between two suspects and between the detective and a possible suspect. Contemporary commentators were largely against romance in the clue-puzzle, some implying it is hostile to the rational tone, others pointing out that this feature tends to remove people from the suspect list.

The identification of the criminal is usually the end of the story. It is very rare for execution to be included, though suicide or an appropriate accident can intervene; if the police arrest the murderer this is represented without melodrama: as with the victim's death, the tone is cerebral and contained.

The most striking of the clue-puzzle features, setting it clearly apart from its predecessors, are the multiple suspects and the rational analysis of determinedly circumstantial evidence. These standard features mesh strongly with the most widely known and most unusual element of the clue-puzzle form, the fact that the reader is challenged to match the detective's process of identifying the murderer and there should therefore be 'fair play': the reader must be informed of each clue that the detective sees. Some earlier stories, such as Doyle's 'The Golden Pince Nez' (1905) and Chesterton's 'The Blue Cross' (1911) did present clues, but this was not a central or genre-defining practice until the clue-puzzle formed.

Whether readers actually were so closely involved in detection or not, the form insists this is a possibility, and there was widespread critical recognition that the modern crime fiction story had been reshaped along the lines outlined above. An early book on the form appeared in 1913 by Carolyn Wells who, like Mary Roberts Rinehart, wrote early woman-focused mysteries in America. She proposed a classical origin for crime fiction, including Voltaire, outlined many of the clue-puzzle features, especially its 'stirring mental exercise',[11] deprecated servants as murderers as well as elaborate writing, pity for the victim and a range of plot clichés; she recommended a psychological approach and even suggested the murderer might be wrongly exonerated early in the story. The book was not published in Britain (nor were most of her novels), but it is tempting to think Christie read a copy, perhaps through her American relatives.

In the mid-to-late 1920s a whole series of accounts of the form appeared. R. Austin Freeman in 1924 praised its 'mental gymnastics' and 'intellectual satisfaction',[12] while E. M. Wrong, an Oxford historian, insisted in 1926 on

'a code of fair play to the reader',[13] gave a full account of possible classical sources and more probable nineteenth-century ones, recognised Christie as a major figure and disliked psychological sympathy for the criminal.[14] This recognition of the clue-puzzle was shared by Willard Huntington Wright, the real name of S. S. Van Dine, who wrote an introduction to a Scribner's anthology in 1927, the year after his *The Benson Murder Case* appeared with great success. He emphasised 'the category of riddles'[15] and frowned on anything which detracted from the puzzle; he criticised Christie for being artificial (which comes oddly from him) and gave a list of clichés much like that found in Wells. The best-known of these critiques was Dorothy L. Sayers's 1928 anthology introduction: she fully recognised the clue-puzzle and gave it the now familiar ancient genealogy, but also set out a programme for 'a new and less rigid formula . . . linking it more closely to the novel of manners'.[16] While her own practice would later pursue this aim, the pure clue-puzzle was at the time widely recognised and codified: both Van Dine and Ronald Knox (himself the author of some intelligent and entertaining puzzles) produced lists of rules and Knox's formed the basis for the oath of the Detection Club that he set up with Sayers, Chesterton, E. C. Bentley and A. B. Cox among others. Van Dine's list,[17] which was published first, emphasises clarity and unity of technique, as well as fair play, matters which Knox repeats in condensed form,[18] adding advice against plagiarism: individual rights and duties are always central to the form.

In a short period, the clue-puzzle had emerged as a dominant form, a fact charted by A. E. W. Mason's two most successful mysteries. *At the Villa Rose* (1910) has a clever, vain detective, Inspecteur Hanaud, and he solves a murder in a large house. But the murder is done by a gang assisted by a servant, with few clues and no other suspects, and the mystery is resolved two-thirds of the way through: the rest is explanation. In 1924 Mason produced *The House of the Arrow* with the same detective and a similar setting, but this time there are multiple suspects, many fair clues (not quite all of them though), an investigation leading to a dramatically revealing climax, and the illusions – a pen doubling as a poisoned arrow, a clock seen in a mirror – beloved of the clue-puzzle form.

The triumph of the form is so clear and sudden that some contextual forces must be suspected as causing this remarkable development. One cause was that these books were novels. The basic late nineteenth-century mystery was the short story, with a single puzzling event and a single villain, deftly exposed by a detective who reveals few clues before the end. Mystery might well play a role in the longer form of the three-decker novel but only rarely was it elaborated to the length required and then the method was usually a slow development of a single enigma with elaborate setting and characterisation,

as in Mary Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862). But when in the 1890s the three-decker novel collapsed, a sensational mystery plot was one of the viable forms for the newly popular one-volume novels – in George Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891), producing one is recommended to a novelist blocked on his new three-decker. The short story does not die – most of the between-the-wars writers produced stories along with their novels, and there are even curious hybrids, books presented as novels which are really a collection of stories, such as H. C. Bailey's popular *Call Mr Fortune* (1920) – but the novel is the classic form of the clue-puzzle and the multiple suspect plot fills it well, though there may also be other thematic causes for its popularity, as will be discussed later.

Another crucial element in the development of the new form was the gender of its audience. The magazines that carried short stories, *The Strand*, *Pearson's*, *Windsor* and so on, were designed for men, though they often had sections for the family. But lending libraries which, as Colin Watson has outlined,[19] were the basic medium for dissemination of the new clue-puzzle novels had a 75 percent female audience. The tendency towards intellect and observation, rather than heroic action, and the marked limitation of strong masculinity in the detective heroes shape a form which is increasingly read, and written, by women. In 1913 Carolyn Wells listed eight other women crime writers,[20] and the role of major women writers in the classic form is well known.

It was a man, though, who took a major step in de-heroising the detective. In his autobiography E. C. Bentley said that, in turning to crime fiction in *Trent's Last Case* (1913), he was keen to present a detective who was 'recognizable as a human being'[21]: he made his hero Philip Trent fall in (reciprocated) love with the widow of the dead Sigsbee Manderson, and give a basically false interpretation of the evidence. But Bentley did not create the classical clue-puzzle mode of multiple suspects, and most of the final section – before the last twist – is about Trent's love-life. The belated sequel of 1935, *Trent's Own Case* (co-written with H. Warner Allen), follows the clue-puzzle formulae fully: he may have made a crucial step with the detective, but the development of the new form was in other hands.

Christie is the crucial figure: as Symons comments, her work is 'original in the sense that it is a puzzle story which is solely that'[22] and Martin Priestman identifies her as the originator of 'a pattern of extraordinary resilience'.[23] Agatha Christie was a well-bred young woman with almost no formal education – though, revealingly, she would have chosen mathematics, according to Jessica Mann[24] – when in 1916 her elder sister challenged her to write a novel. She later (through Poirot in *The Clocks*, 1963) acknowledged the power of Leroux's *The Mystery of the Yellow Room* and must have read

Doyle and Bentley, probably Rinehart as well, who was widely published in Britain. *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* appeared in 1920 and it gathers together the archetypal features of the clue-puzzle.

From the start Christie's less than heroic detective Hercule Poirot relies on his 'little grey cells', but in fact his method and focus are primarily domestic: a central question is why the spills on the mantelpiece were rearranged. Because the crucial information comes through knowledge associated with a female sphere,[25] the detective model is significantly feminised, though it was not until 1930 in *Murder at the Vicarage* that Christie created her own woman investigator, Miss Marple. The intricate plotting of the early Christie novels could rise to spectacular conclusions: in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), in *And Then There Were None* (1939, originally one of her nursery-rhyme titles, *Ten Little Niggers*) and *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) she staggered the reader with her solutions. Both *The Mystery of the Yellow Room* and Israel Zangwill's *The Big Bow Mystery* (1892) had ended with outrageous surprises, but Christie had the art of making the reader acknowledge, in admiring bafflement, that the final coup was the only possible outcome of her cunning plotting.

Not all her novels were so operatically elaborate, but her energy and variety were consistent. Priestman's account of ten major novels shows a wide range of concerns: the 'central motives are . . . money, fear of exposure and sexual jealousy'[26] and he shows that her focus on women characters included victims, murderers and sympathetic characters.[27] Christie invoked a world of unnerving uncertainty, in which only the fiction of detection brought security.

Some commentators, mostly American, have found the novels little more than meaningless riddles, as in Raymond Chandler's celebrated dismissal of events at 'Cheesecake Manor' as ludicrously artificial.[28] It is certainly true that the novels are restricted in setting, class and behaviour, realising in a mandarin way the patterns of a southern English high bourgeois world (not, as many Americans think, an upper-class world) and insistently euphemising death, passion and politics. Yet as Robert Barnard has shown,[29] there is recurrent conflict in this world, and Alison Light sees uncertainty as a basic pattern.[30] Styles is a nest of jealousy and unease; Roger Ackroyd's house is full of impostures and anxiety. Christie's criminals are traitors to the class and world which is so calmly described, and their identification, through the systems of limited knowledge and essentially domestic inquiry, is a process of exorcising the threats that this society nervously anticipates within its own membership: the multiple suspect structure has special meaning in a competitive individualist world.

The perfected clue-puzzle was the form adopted by the scholarly American art-historian and intellectual journalist Willard Huntington Wright when he entered crime fiction as S. S. Van Dine. *The Benson Murder Case* sold rapidly in 1926 and his intricate, learning-heavy New York puzzles dominated the US market, with twelve novels and eleven films, until the irresistible rise of the private eye thriller in the mid and late 1930s. His detective Philo Vance is an archetypal East Coast American Europhile; Ogden Nash said famously that 'Philo Vance needs a kick in the pance', but it is hard to read the early novels, especially the footnotes, without feeling that Wright was, as Bentley had done with Trent and Christie would with Mrs Oliver, to some extent guying both himself and the form.

His plots locate murder in the social and financial life of New York. With an intricate timetable of visitors and telephone calls Van Dine moves steadily – sometimes turgidly – through a range of suspects and their movements before finding a key physical clue. As in Christie, events are euphemised, even to the point of improbability: in a review of *The Benson Murder Case*, Dashiell Hammett noted that in reality the gun would have knocked the victim halfway across the room, and he thought the major clue was that someone had lifted him back into the chair.[31] But such mundane actuality is not the business of a Van Dine text: it is in part an intricate puzzle, in part an assertion of the conflicted energy of New York social and financial circles, and also a characteristic statement – like those then being made by Hollywood – that whatever Europe might develop, America can do better.

Just as the early American women crime writers have been overlooked, the strength of the American clue-puzzle tends to be disregarded by British commentators and deprecated by the tough-guy preferences of most American academics. S. S. Van Dine was followed by the Ellery Queen novels: T. J. Binyon calls them 'the most artificial of all detective stories' but he also identifies their 'impeccable fairness'.[32] Frederic Dannay and Manfred B. Lee, the two cousins who wrote as 'Ellery Queen' about a detective with the same name, won a publisher's competition with *The Roman Hat Mystery* (1929) and remained both creators and critics of the form: their *Queen's Quorum*[33] is a scholarly and enthusiastic account of the best short crime stories and from 1941 they edited the influential *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*.

Ellery Queen produced the purest clue-puzzles; their early novels include a formal 'Challenge to the Reader', advising that all clues have now been fairly given. The plots are highly intricate, turning on the possibilities of physical data – locked rooms, wrong corpses in the coffin, how many cups of coffee are in a pot. They can feel mechanical – Symons speaks of the 'relentlessly analytical treatment of every possible clue'[34] – but they can

also use melodramatic and improbable detail: *The American Gun Mystery* (1933) depends on a horse keeping a spare gun in its mouth during a New York rodeo event, and in *The Chinese Orange Mystery* (1934) the corpse has all his clothes turned round to conceal the fact that he was a clergyman. Ellery Queen combines the grotesque with the mundane, but not only for excitement: like Van Dine, Queen clearly had a sense of the possible violence of the city, that these luxurious, secure-seeming residences can be penetrated by some yet unidentified force.

Rex Stout, starting with *Fer de Lance* (1934), is another writer who descends from S. S. Van Dine; his detective is also enormously learned, but he is not active like Philo Vance, and solves his cases from his desk, with lengthy periods of relaxation among his orchids. Nero Wolfe is based on Mycroft rather than Sherlock Holmes and his inactivity calls up an unusually energetic Watson figure in Archie Goodwin. Stout writes in a less arch way than Van Dine or Queen and his plotting is not as intense as theirs: he dilutes the mandarin New York mode, which developed an American romance of the city quite different from that of the contemporary and ultimately more influential West Coast thriller.

It was in Britain that the clue-puzzle had its richest development, and not everybody followed Christie. 1920, her first year, saw two other major writers newly at work who had their own patterns and their own influence. Freeman Wills Crofts's *The Cask* was the first of thirty-two novels which combined the rigorous detail of R. Austin Freeman with a down-to-earth detecting method much like the plodding, prolific and popular J. S. Fletcher. Crofts's well-known Inspector French did not emerge until 1925 in what was for Crofts an unusually dramatic title, *Inspector French's Greatest Case*, but all his novels share a meticulous, sometimes mechanical, attention to detail in a world less secluded than Christie's, with an emphasis on public transport, especially railway trains and timetables. Both W. H. Wright and Raymond Chandler admired Croft's craftsmanship,[35] as did W. H. Auden (see below), and his work shows that ordinary lives and plain investigation could be part of 'golden age' crime fiction. He had followers in this demotic mode such as John Rhode and Henry Wade: Symons uses the term 'humdrum' for Crofts and his school, implying a negative judgement, both aesthetic and social, which was not apparent in the bookshops and libraries of the period.

Also in 1920 H. C. Bailey, regarded in the period as a major author, produced the sequential story-collection *Call Mr Fortune*. As skilful as Freeman's Dr Thorndyke, Fortune is plump, talkative and as humane as Trent. He affects the disarming foolish manner that would soon be found in Peter Wimsey and Albert Campion, and not unlike Sayers and Allingham, Bailey has a distinctive style, frequently writing with a seemingly casual subtlety

that validates the judgements Fortune makes about people, which can lead to a decision to set them free as Holmes sometimes did or even, in a more radical instance, also in the first book, to throw a villain out of a window to his death.

Bailey seems to have influenced Sayers in the nature of her detective and also the sense that crime stories could have a social and moral edge. Her first novel, *Whose Body?* (1923), is a closely plotted puzzle combining circumstantial detail and sometimes strained events; she gives Peter Wimsey a personality milder than Fortune's and a very wide cultural expertise: many people have found both charming. *Strong Poison* (1930) has a more credible mystery plot with good but not over-stressed characterisation, notably in the women who surround Lord Peter – Miss Climpson, a Marple avatar, Miss Murchison, a young professional woman, and the somewhat ironic self-representation of Harriet Vane, arrested innocent and beloved of Wimsey.

In her quest for 'the novel of manners' Sayers turned towards, as she later said,[36] a more literary mode in the spirit of Collins and Sheridan Lefanu. The balance of mystery and manners was difficult: *The Nine Tailors* (1934) offers a criminal plot both banal and improbable and a wealth of colour – campanology, fen weather and Christian symbolism. John G. Cawelti found the religious subtleties of the book impressive enough to override its criminographical deficiencies, but Edmund Wilson thought it 'one of the dullest books I have ever encountered'.[37] The logic of Sayers's literary approach took her, in *Gaudy Night* (1935), to write a book without a murder, interweaving issues of gender, independence, learning and romance, and responses have ranged from the adulation of fans to rejection, even from an enthusiast like Janet Hitchman, who feels it 'definitely her worst'.[38]

Sayers was not alone in her search for human colour in the crime novel. In 1929 Margery Allingham produced her first Albert Campion mystery, *The Crime at Black Dudley*, and she has remained a major name. Most of her early novels are, as Jessica Mann notes (pp. 189–93), in keeping with her family's literary habits, crime-focused fantasies with nobility, country houses, international gangs and a detective of noble, possibly royal birth. The liveliest of these is *Sweet Danger* (1933) but Allingham's more serious side appeared in *Police at the Funeral* (1931), a dark story of murder and mania outside Cambridge and in the more satirical but also sharp-edged *The Fashion in Shrouds* (1938) which deals with London theatre and the fashion industry and includes Campion's sister, a talented, passionate and troubled woman like Sayers's Vane. Both the Cambridge family and the London set are riven with anxiety and conflict – including a snobbishness shared by the characters and, sometimes, as Symons notes,[39] the author – and Campion is as much confessor to a troubled period as decoder of contradictory evidence.

Another of Sayers's near contemporaries remodelled the clue-puzzle in a more influential way. Anthony Berkeley Cox, a journalist and all-round writer, was early involved in the activities of the Detection Club, and in *The Poisoned Chocolates Case* (1929), he used and mocked the detectives and techniques of his contemporaries (Christie did much the same in the less feted *Partners in Crime*, also in 1929). Starting with *The Layton Court Mystery* (1925) he created an anti-heroic detective in Roger Sheringham, languid and rude as well as percipient, but Cox's main claim to historical standing is in taking more seriously than most the interest in psychology in crime fiction. This had been explored by Americans – Wells and Rinehart, Arthur B. Reeve and C. Daly King (a psychologist who wrote the quite complex 'Obelists' series), mentioned by Christie and Van Dine and explored more fully by Sayers in her troubled characters. But Cox is the first to make psychological use of the 'inverted' story, where the murderer is revealed from the start. Freeman had pioneered this variation to emphasise Dr Thorndyke's explanatory genius, but Cox felt, like Sayers, that 'the detective story is in the process of developing into the novel' and sought to write 'the story of a murder rather than the story of the detection of a murder'.[40]

For this project he chose the name Francis Iles (from his own smuggler ancestor[41]) in *Malice Aforethought* (1931) and *Before the Fact* (1932). *Malice Aforethought* focuses inwardly on the neurotic fantasies of a murder with disturbing credibility, while the more complex narrative of *Before the Fact* uses the unreliable viewpoint of the fated woman, to construct, like a clue-puzzle in reverse, an account of her husband's developing criminality. But Cox's view is social as well as personal: the final sequence, and the title, suggest that many people's behaviour may make them accomplices to murder, including their own. Cox's modern standing is partly due to Julian Symons, who made him the climax of his chapter on the 1930s in *Bloody Murder* and apparently saw him as a prior validation of his own fiction in the 1950s and 1960s, but Cox was acknowledged in his time as a major figure and might well have been an influence on Margaret Millar, the powerful American creator of psychothrillers in the 1940s and 1950s.

A major technician of the form, John Dickson Carr, was born in America but long resident in Britain (because of his prolific production he also wrote as Carter Dickson). He started with a French detective, Henri Bencolin, but although *It Walks by Night* (1930) is rich in colour and melodrama, its plot is not particularly ingenious or convincing, nor is that of the hectic action of the American-set, detective-free *Poison in Jest* (1932). But in his later work Carr combines real ingenuity (Symons speaks of his 'astonishing skill'[42]) and rich context with the disbelief-suspending force of a larger-than-life detective. Gideon Fell, modelled on G. K. Chesterton, dominates the talk,

action and detection, though by being fat, sedentary and literary he is still a variant on the heroic model; Sir Henry Merivale, the detective in the Carter Dickson series, is an equally large-scale figure. Carr can be detailed and meticulous, as in Fell's famous 'locked room lecture' in Chapter 17 of *The Hollow Man* (1935; in the USA *The Three Coffins*), but equally impressive is the rich texture of his novels. Fell also says in his lecture that he likes his murders 'frequent, gory and grotesque' and, as S. T. Joshi explains, Carr saw gruesomeness, suggestions of the supernatural and broad caricature as a proper part of the inherently fantastic puzzle form.[43] In the same inherently unrealistic way the crimes and motivations in his story tend towards a readily dismissed derangement rather than the social and financial anxieties which underlie the crime in many of the 'golden age' writers.

Ngaio Marsh followed Sayers and Allingham with a gentleman police detective named Alleyn, after the Elizabethan actor who founded the high-class London school that Chandler attended. Marsh, born in New Zealand and living in 1930s London, produced mysteries with often banal outcomes – in *The Nursing Home Murder* (1935) a well-constructed puzzle is resolved through accident and blamed on madness. Her contextual material, whether to do with theatre, art, or sometimes New Zealand is often interesting and this has for many readers redeemed her limitations in puzzle-construction. Fully located overseas were Arthur Upfield's Australian outback mysteries with the exotic half-Aboriginal detective, bizarrely named Napoleon Bonaparte. But the aura of difference is misleading: Upfield's settings, though geographically enormous, are effectively enclosed, and he offers a standard clue-puzzle pattern of detailed observation, many suspects and red herrings, but his detective now seems a racially patronising fiction, as fits a thoroughly colonial clue-puzzle.

'Michael Innes', actually the Oxford don J. I. M. Stewart, established himself by the late 1930s as a specialist in witty and literary mysteries, with another well-born policeman, Appleby, who eventually inherits a title. As far-fetched and literary as Sayers but without her continuing interest in social and religious forces – Symons calls him a 'farceur'[44] – Stewart was an exotic but popular taste. Nicholas Blake was also highly placed – the pseudonym conceals Cecil Day Lewis, one of the major 1930s poets. Starting with *A Question of Proof* (1935), his detective hero Nigel Strangeways is physically modelled on W. H. Auden. A sense of unease with wealth and leisure comes through the texts, especially the later pre-war ones, and Blake, briefly a member of the Communist Party, can be linked to the small group of leftist crime writers of the period. The better-known, Montagu Slater and Eric Ambler, wrote spy stories, but there were some in mainstream crime fiction, as Andy Croft has noted, like Maurice Richardson.[45]

Other writers were admired in the period and still command respect: Patricia Wentworth with her spinster detective Miss Silver in *The Grey Mask* (1928), pre-dating Miss Marple; Josephine Tey with her uneasily veridical novels, starting with *The Man in the Queue* (1929); Georgette Heyer, better known for romances, with clever and socially aware stories like *Death in the Stocks* (1935); Gladys Mitchell, whose formidable detective Mrs (later Dame) Adela Lestrange Bradley was both a psychiatrist and a conscious feminist – *The Saltmarsh Murders* (1932) was a considerable success; Mignon Eberhart who continued the Wells-Rinehart tradition of female evaluative analysis (slightingly called, by Odgen Nash again, the 'Had I But Known' approach), starting with *The Patient in Room 18* (1929); Cyril Hare whose lucid legal mysteries started with *Tenant for Death* (1937); Josephine Bell, whose sequence of realistic, detective-free crime stories, especially *The Port of London Murders* (1938) still seem up to date; even Edgar Wallace, the best-selling thriller writer who started with a puzzle in *The Four Just Men* (1906) and produced crisp detective short stories in *The Mind of Mr J. G. Reeder* (1925).

World-wide in range, intensely popular in Britain and America, having a clear structure and variations, the classic clue-puzzle was a major literary formation. The causes for its development and success have been widely discussed, though not agreed upon. Most analysts recognise one aspect of the form as a puzzle or even, like Jacques Barzun, a riddle,[46] facilitating what Freeman in 1924 called 'mental gymnastics' or what H. R. F. Keating has recently described as 'simple and uncomplicated mental comfort'.[47] Some commentators point to the almost exactly contemporary development of the crossword puzzle, also requiring literary skills, close attention to detail and providing a sense of a problem neatly solved: 'Torquemada', the famous *Observer* crossword creator, reviewed crime fiction in the same pages and E. B. Punshon published *Crossword Mystery* (1934) where a crossword solution was a crucial clue.

Solving the puzzle, however, often has a wider meaning, as the revealed criminal is also exposed as without moral sense and rejecting the practices of normal society. E. M. Wrong made this claim for crime fiction and so, according to Malcolm J. Turnbull, did Cox[48]; Christie herself consistently saw 'evil' as the motivating force in a criminal.[49] George Grella's view that crime fiction is a 'comedy'[50] sees the resolution as restoring order to a threatened social calm, while others saw this function as para-religious: C. Day Lewis, writing under his criminographical pseudonym Nicholas Blake, linked 'the rise of crime fiction with the decline of religion at the end of the Victorian era'[51] and Erik Routley sees the whole motive of the detective story as

essentially 'Puritan', rejecting excess in any form, murderous, sexual, even convivial.[52]

W. H. Auden felt the structure of the 'golden age' story was concerned with the individual and religion, not with social conflict. In his essay 'The Guilty Vicarage' (1948) he sees the conflict of 'innocence and guilt' as central, the reader's sense of personal guilt being consolingly displaced on to the criminal by the 'exceptional individual who is himself in a state of grace'.[53] Although Auden takes Father Brown as an example he also sees this quasi-priestly role at work in plainer mysteries – Freeman Wills Crofts, with Doyle and Chesterton, is one of the only three authors he finds 'completely satisfactory'.[54] Even the inherently hostile Edmund Wilson thought the form drew on 'an all-pervasive feeling of guilt and . . . the fear of impending disaster'.[55]

Another way of decoding the texts in terms of personal guilt is Freudian: Geraldine Pederson-Krag and Charles Rycroft are the best-known interpreters of crime fiction to suggest that the murder stands for the family drama of parental sex, and that the detective's investigations mirror the gaze of the anxious child.[56] This reading of the inner power of the clue-puzzle has not appealed to many – though it is curiously congruent with Auden's sense of the ideal victim being like a father or mother,[57] and this kind of analysis might well deserve reviving in the light of Slavoj Žižek's recent linking of the detective and the psychoanalyst.[58]

Barzun's opinion that crime fiction is essentially a 'tale' connects it implicitly with the ages-long tradition of folk-tale and popular narratives.[59] He stresses a formal element, insisting that the well-shaped quality of the tale is everything. Tsvetan Todorov finds structural power deep in the clue-puzzle through its being two overlapping stories, in which the detective's narrative exposes the true story concealed by the criminal.[60] Grella pursues Barzun's implications in thinking, in the light of Northrop Frye, of the form as a version of 'folk-tale', with implied functions for the folk who create and consume the tales,[61] and this reading is taken further by LeRoy L. Panek in *Watteau's Shepherds*,[62] where he sees the role of the tale as being ludic, that is playful both for relaxation and also to exercise and confirm a whole range of social values, in terms of Johan Huizinga's well-known concept of play as a central human and social mechanism.

All of these separate explanations, from simple puzzle to deep play, through various sorts of anxiety and its displacement, are summarised in an essay by Richard Raskin which groups social and psychological functions into four areas: 'Ludic Functions' including riddle, tale and play; 'Wish-fulfilment Functions' which can involve identification with murderer, detective and even victim; 'Tension Reduction Functions' which deal with

displacements of anxiety (including some that may arise from uncontrolled wish-fulfilment) and 'Orienting Functions' which deal with 'social myths' or ideologies.[63] The major clue-puzzles provide rich material in all categories, and Raskin shows in detail how variously potent can be the meanings of the classic clue-puzzle fiction – and other crime fiction genres as well.

Relating to Raskin's third and fourth categories are explanations of the causes and successes of crime fiction which understand it in terms of its period. Some think that in the post-war period, people basically wanted relaxation: Light calls it 'a literature of convalescence'[64] and Priestman names the form 'A Version of Pastoral'.[65] Maxwell Perkins, S. S. Van Dine's editor, felt that behind the success of the form lay 'the anxieties and afflictions of a tragic decade',[66] and the reading of Christie offered by Robert Barnard and Stephen Knight would see the texts as both confronting and also resolving a range of contemporary anxieties: David Trotter sums up his account of English detective fiction by saying that 'it can encompass some fairly major phobias and disruptions'.[67] David I. Grossvogel sees the form as an inherently conservative assertion that 'law, order and property are secure',[68] while Ernest Mandel argues that the detective story is a classic piece of bourgeois culture, shaped to conceal the exploitative reality of class society.[69]

The date of the clue-puzzle must raise the question to what extent it is a version of modernism. Some have thought it was in fact a refuge from modernism: Barzun because of its narrative integrity, and Marjorie Nicolson, an American professor of English writing in 1929, because it established 'a re-belief in a universe governed by cause and effect' and because she was 'weary unto death of introspective and psychological literature'.[70] But it could be argued that the plain flat style, so clear in Christie but common elsewhere, the formal concerns which Barzun applauds, the anonymity of the authorial voice which is so common, and especially the way in which the texts continuously expose identity to be a constructed illusion, are all aspects of modernism. Alison Light sees 'golden age' crime fiction as offering a 'conservative modernism' in much this way,[71] while Priestman sees aspects of 'pre-post-modernism' in the form[72]; it may well be that Sayers and Cox sought a more humanist and character-based form because of the mechanistic modernist structure at the core of the clue-puzzle.

But, like much modernism itself, the texts cannot be seen as fully opposed to humanist individualism. One explanation of the power of the novel as a genre is that it constructs a place for the reader to share the author's intelligence and omniscience: the classic statement of this view is by Catherine Belsey.[73] The clue-puzzle does this directly in inviting the reader to participate, and many of its compulsive features emphasise this function: the need

for 'fair play', the reader-testing obsession with red herrings, the dropping of the intermediary Watson, the flat style and the two-dimensional characterisation all create a space for the reader to encounter the author and construct a writerly self.

Escapist but also displacing real anxieties; enclosed in setting but suggesting that the enclosure in itself contains deep personal threats; clever but always implying that you the reader could be as clever; modernist to some degree but also inherently humanist: the 'golden age' clue-puzzle is a highly complex form combining both consolation and anxiety, tests and treats, for those readers who found the form so compulsive in the period – and may still do today.

NOTES

1 This is the period indicated in Chaps. 7 and 8 of Julian Symons's influential *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel: A History*, 2nd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985); in Rosemary Herbert, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Crime and Mystery* the period is given as 1918–39 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 186.
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8 T. J. Binyon, '*Murder Will Out': The Detective in Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 127–8.
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20 Wells, *Technique of the Mystery Story*, p. 313.
21 E. C. Bentley, *Those Days* (London: Constable, 1940), p. 252.
22 Symons, *Bloody Murder*, p. 92.
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24 Jessica Mann, *Deadlier than the Male: An Investigation into Feminine Crime Writing* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1981), pp. 124–5.
25 This issue is discussed in Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1980), pp. 109–10.
26 Martin Priestman, *Detective Fiction and Literature: The Figure on the Carpet* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 154–60.
27 *Ibid*., p. 155.
28 Raymond Chandler, 'The Simple Art of Murder', (1944), reprinted in Haycraft, ed., *The Art of the Mystery Story*, p. 231.
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48 Wrong, 'Introduction', p. 31 and Turnbull, *Elusion Aforethought*, p. 115.
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70 Marjorie Nicolson, 'The Professor and the Detective' (1929), reprinted in Haycraft, ed., *The Art of the Mystery Story*, pp. 112 and 114.
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