

Mystery! Detective Fiction in the Twentieth Century: A Notion of Evil

This series examines the enormous popularity of mystery/detective fiction and at the same time provides a highly entertaining platform to consider the nature of a specific literary genre; the evolution of the genre from its roots in Poe and Conan Doyle; and the distinction between so-called "real literature" and "trash." Most importantly, this series allows participants an opportunity to experience how literature grows out of, changes, and is changed by the cultural climate and historical moment from which it springs.

The five texts selected for this series exemplify the evolution of this genre across geographical space - Great Britain (Old World) and United States (New World) - and chronological time - the Victorian era to the present day. While each text furnishes an interesting template or grid to explore plot, including the stock twists and turns and stereotypes employed by detective fiction writers, the purpose for reading each text is not just "to get to the end" or find out "whodunnit": But rather serious attention should focus on how the body of each text depicts the manners, mores and attitudes of the era in which it was written, with particular attention to representations of race, class, gender, and ethnicity. For by attending to these details, participants will receive insight into how evil or its embodiment is viewed by and operates within the confinements of a particular culture.

Among the many fascinating issues and side issues that can be explored through the lenses of detective fiction writers are the following:

1. Setting – How does setting reflect the social values of the period in which the text was written? How does the depiction of landscape differ in British and American fiction?
2. Detectives as Hero – Is the detective a modern day extension of the medieval knight or American frontier cowboy. What are the similarities and differences in the characterization and methodology of each detective? What motivates each? How does each reflect society's attitude towards the law? Towards evil?
3. Villain as Embodiment of Evil – What characteristics does the villain possess? Is there such a thing as a criminal mind? What motivates the villain? How is society damaged by the villain?
4. Stereotypes – How do stereotypical characters based on race, class, ethnicity, or gender serve or damage the text? How do stereotypical characters reflect the social values of the period?
5. Metaphysical Considerations: What accounts for detective fiction's enormous popularity? Does detective fiction serve as a protest against a universé ruled by chance?
6. Stylistic Questions: Does the importance of plot diminish fine characterization? What are the stylistic differences between British (genteel) fiction and American (hard-boiled) fiction? What do these differences reveal about the two societies?

Texts: *Hound of the Baskervilles* by Arthur Conan Doyle
Strong Poison by Dorothy Sayres
The Maltese Falcon by Dashiell Hammett
The Godwulf Manuscript by Robert Parker
"A" is for Alibi by Sue Grafton