

A little background on Futrelle and Chesterton

And detective fiction as a
distinctively “modern” genre

Futrelle

“The Problem of Cell 13”

Chesterton

The “modern”

NOT avant-garde

And yet...

A defender of the new middle

Influence

Counter-experimental 20th century
types

Influence

Not postmodern, but after-modern

What are detective stories for?

4 great preoccupations of the modernist novel (Bradbury and McFarlane 1976)

- The complexities of its own form
- The representation of inward states of consciousness
- Nihilistic disorder behind the ordered surface of life and reality
- Freeing narrative art from the determination of an onerous plot

Detective fiction: an escape from these preoccupations?

- “Soothing” (Stein 1937), orderly, contained
- World is rational and knowable
- Order is imposed on temporary, apparent disorder of life, reality
- Plot is pre-eminent, highly determined

Puzzles and solutions

The *problem* of cell 13: a case
without a crime

“Let's suppose a case”

Reasoning, certainly

The Thinking Machine

- That electric wire, he reasoned, must come down the side of the building not a great distance from his cell. That might be worth knowing.
- The rats must therefore come from that direction. If they came a part of the way, I reasoned that they came all the way, because it was extremely unlikely that a solid iron or lead pipe would have any hole in it except at the exit.
- I reasoned that the natural fright of the rodent would make him run until he was outside the pipe and then out on earth he would probably stop to gnaw off the linen and money.

A cute inversion of the relationship
between detective and mystery

What are the *puzzles* here, and who
is solving them?

What are detective stories for?

From D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (1988)

How detective stories valorize and reinforce social control:

Insistently, the novel shows disciplinary power... The demonstration [of social control] is carried in the trifling detail that is suddenly invested with immense significance. Based on an egregious disproportion between its assumed banality and the weight of revelation it comes to bear, the "significant trifle" is typically meant to surprise, even frighten. For in the same process where the detail is charged with meaning, it is invested with a power already capitalizing on that meaning. The process finds its most programmatic embodiment in detective fiction, where the detail literally incriminates.

... In the detective story, meaningfulness may not always be comforting when what it appropriates are objects and events whose "natural" banality and irrelevance had been taken for granted... what had seemed natural and commonplace comes all at once under a malicious inspection, and what could be taken for granted now requires an explanation, even an alibi.

From Chesterton's "A Defense of Detective Stories" (1902)

The first essential value of the detective story lies in this, that it is the earliest and only form of popular literature in which is expressed some sense of the poetry of modern life. Men lived among mighty mountains and eternal forests for ages before they realized that they were poetical; it may reasonably be inferred that some of our descendants may see the chimney-pots as rich a purple as the mountain-peaks, and find the lamp-posts as old and natural as the trees. Of this realization of a great city itself as something wild and obvious the detective story is certainly the "Iliad." No one can have failed to notice that in these stories the hero or the investigator crosses London with something of the loneliness and liberty of a prince in a tale of elfland...

A city is, properly speaking, more poetic even than a countryside, for while Nature is a chaos of unconscious forces, a city is a chaos of conscious ones. The crest of the flower or the pattern of the lichen may or may not be significant symbols. But there is no stone in the street and no brick in the wall that is not actually a deliberate symbol—a message from some man, as much as if it were a telegram or a post-card. The narrowest street possesses, in every crook and twist of its intention, the soul of the man who built it, perhaps long in his grave. Anything which tends, even under the fantastic form of the minutiae of Sherlock Holmes, to assert this romance of detail in civilization, to emphasize this unfathomably human character in flints and tiles, is a good thing.

Reason *versus* method

And the apparently unreasonable

Things to note

- This (Valentin) is a detective who is in tune with a romantic idea of being or pursuing the unreasonable
- “He was not ‘a thinking machine’”
- The reveal that everything WAS to a purpose makes not just a logical but a theological point

In both of these stories

Where is the reader's perspective
located?

What does it mean to *detect*?

Slightly more complex story
structures

Rationality and humanism

A “thinking machine” and an
Aquinian priest