

## Detective Fiction

The course is intended to give students an overview of a single, manageable genre. We will focus upon one text each week, each text being chronologically subsequent in order to demonstrate the various stages of development of the genre up to the present day. Part of the intention is to permit the students to observe and analyse the formation and tacit agreement of formal rules pertaining to one specific genre, with a view to development of the skills and methods proper to analysis of *any* generic fiction; we will however be more concerned with generic definitions and relations, and with the status of detective fiction within Realism. It is expected that students will, in this context, question the relation of genre fictions to the notion of canonical literature.

The first section of the course introduces the authors widely considered to represent the 'Golden Age' of detective fiction, from the late Victorian period to the Thirties. We will examine the social significance of the various modes of discourse to be found within the genre, most particularly with reference to English notions of class structure. The primacy of the deductive method, and the rôle it plays in the moral ratification of modern scientific ideas about causality will be considered; in the latter part of the course we will see such assumptions of moral and epistemic certainty questioned. Particular stress will be laid upon the manner in which moral conclusions are contrived, distorted or suggested by the social and technological milieu of these novels: scientific developments such as fingerprinting, chemical analysis, the Tesla/Edison debate over alternating current and the general spread of electricity, and the advent of the motor car will be scrutinized.

Throughout the course our technical attention will be focussed upon the structural and narratorial innovations peculiar and not so peculiar to the genre: narrative range, 'voice', shifts in diegetic level, ambiguate 'strategies', and so forth. The predilection for arcane material and settings, such as Conan Doyle's interest in spiritualism, will be questioned, with care taken to analyse its relation to the modern scientific milieu. The dependence upon such enigma, as well as upon more rational puzzles as in Oulipopo), will be related to postmodern 'game-playing' tropes in which the traditional rôles of author and reader are problematized. Methods of narrative closure will be examined as methods of dis-closure of the secret within the text, and this 'doubling' of technique will lead us to examine detective fiction as a 'desecratory' form of literature, in which the crime and its resolution may exchange identities, or degrade in their ontological certainty. The use of disguises and ciphers will be related to the mythic prototypes of the genre (principally *Oedipus Rex* and the grail quest motif), and will serve to illumine the notions of identity and social outlook expressed in such texts and by such 'masking' techniques. Reference to such mythic origins will provide us with a useful opportunity to consider the effect of psychoanalytic techniques on the development of the genre, with the course split firmly into pre- and post- Freudian analysis.

Whilst use of traditional literary criticism and theory will be encouraged, students may also find it satisfying to take an interdisciplinary approach, making more diverse use of Oxford's resources. A supplementary reading list will direct students to, amongst other things, sociological studies of criminological ideology and legal definitions of deviance, and modern studies of the expansion of psychological methods in crime detection.

### **Texts chosen from:**

#### **Classic & Golden Age**

Conan Doyle, Arthur, *The Sign of Four*  
Sayers, Dorothy L., *The Nine Tailors*  
Margery Allingham, *The Tiger in the Smoke / Look To The Lady*  
Christie, Agatha, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*  
Williams, Charles, *War in Heaven*  
Crispin, Edmund, *The Moving Toyshop*  
Innes, Michael, *Hamlet, Revenge! / Lament for a Maker*

#### **Noir**

Chandler, Raymond, *The Big Sleep / The Lady in the Lake*  
Davidson, Lionel, *The Chelsea Murders*

Hammett, Dashiell, *The Maltese Falcon*

**Postmodern**

Auster, Paul, *The New York Trilogy*

Ballard, J.G., *Running Wild*

- *Super-Cannes*

- 'The Index', 'The Object of the Attack' in *The Collected Short Stories*

Borges, Jorge Luis, 'Death and the Compass' in *Labyrinths*

Dear, William, *The Dungeon Master: the disappearance of James Dallas Egbert III*

Dibdin, Michael, *The Dying of the Light*

Eco, Umberto, *The Name of the Rose*

Pynchon, Thomas, *The Crying of Lot 49*

Stein, Gertrude, *Blood on the Dining Room Floor*

Tey, Josephine, *The Daughter of Time*

**Cyberpunk**

Dick, Philip K., *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*

Gibson, William, *Neuromancer*

Fforde, Jasper, *The Eyre Affair*

Hamilton, Peter F., *A Quantum Murder*

Rucker, Rudy, *White Light*

**Current /recent**

Colin Dexter, *The Wench is Dead*

Michael Dibdin, *Cosi Fan Tutti*

Bartholomew Gill, *Death of a Joyce Scholar*

Adam Hall, *Quiller's Run* (strictly speaking, a thriller – but related in terms of style)

P. D. James, *Death in Holy Orders*

Michael Marshall, *The Straw Men*

Also look at:

Chesterton, G. K., *Father Brown: Selected Stories*

Conan Doyle, Arthur, 'The Adventure of the Final Problem', 'The Adventure of the Empty House' in  
*Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Facsimile Edition*

Dostoevsky, Fyodor, *The Double*

Godwin, William, *Caleb Williams*

Hoffmann, E. T. A., 'Mademoiselle de Scudéry' in *Tales of Hoffmann*

Kafka, Franz, *The Trial, Metamorphosis*

Poe, Edgar Allan, 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue', 'The Mystery of Marie Roget', 'The Purloined  
Letter', 'William Wilson' in *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*

Davies, David Stuart, ed., *The Shadows of Sherlock Holmes*