



Open Library of Humanities



Part of the Ubiquity
Partner Network



Open Library of Humanities

Literature, Law and Psychoanalysis

How to Cite: Saunders, S 2019 'It is Introspective, and I Want to Introspect': Detection, Isolation, and Neurotypicality in Crime Fiction, c. 1891–1940. *Open Library of Humanities*, 5(1): 52, pp. 1–24. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.461>

Published: 06 September 2019

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *Open Library of Humanities*, which is a journal published by the Open Library of Humanities.

Copyright:

© 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Open Access:

Open Library of Humanities is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

Digital Preservation:

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

LITERATURE, LAW AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

'It is Introspective, and I Want to Introspect': Detection, Isolation, and Neurotypicality in Crime Fiction, c. 1891–1940

Samuel Saunders

University Centre Shrewsbury, University of Chester, GB
sjsaunders1989@outlook.com

A variety of psychoanalytic readings of late-Victorian and early-twentieth century crime fiction often place the detective at the centre of their analysis, depicting them as a conduit through which readings of *other* aspects of the genre can be articulated. Samantha Walton, for example, explores the idea that the 'the detective [acts as the] diagnostician of the self', and goes on to argue that '[t]he central place of psychological discourses in the golden age novel both incites and responds to specific cultural anxieties about selfhood' (2015: 275). Consequently, however, the psychological effects of *performing* the role of 'detective' remain under-examined. Arthur Conan Doyle's famous Sherlock Holmes performs his detection under constant scrutiny from those around him who fail to understand his mental processes. In the early twentieth century, Dorothy L. Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey struggles to reconcile the tension between his position as 'aristocrat' and 'detective', and also has difficulty with disassociating his activities as a detective with his experiences in the First World War. Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot's 'othered' position as of a different nationality to most other characters psychologically isolates him, whilst his compunction for the domestic does not mesh with his activities as an externally-othered figure. This article performs a reading of Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey, and Christie's Hercule Poirot and offers a tentative exploration of how these classic 'detectives' are often physically, socially, narratively and psychologically isolated by performing their role.

Introduction

In her monograph *Guilty but Insane: Mind and Law in Golden Age Detective Fiction* (2015), Samantha Walton performs an excellent analysis of the significance of psychology in golden age¹ detective fiction and makes a compelling argument regarding the role of the detective with regard to psychoanalytic readings of the genre. She suggests that 'psychological knowledge is interwoven with the golden age form' and that:

[t]he central place of psychological discourses in the golden age detective novel both incites and responds to specific cultural anxieties about selfhood: the limits of autonomy, the threat of unconscious deviance, and doubts about biological versus self-determination. Depictions of the detective as diagnostician of the self speak to these fears (Walton, 2015: 58, 275).

Walton's image of 'the detective as diagnostician', of the self and of social deviance in others, suggests that detectives act as conduits through which psychological examinations of various forms of criminality can be articulated. She also argues that this can challenge some of the conventions of crime fiction itself and that performing psychological analysis of some of these characters can change the way that we see the genre:

[T]he detective figure [...] often introduces the group to new ways of thinking about crime and motivation that confront their prejudices and lead to reappraisals of the golden age form (Walton, 2015: 274–75).

Walton's argument is accurate, yet it indirectly highlights an under-examined space between psychology and popular detective fiction: the various psychological effects which stem from performing the role of detective. This, therefore, is the purpose of this article, which performs an initial exploration of the performance of the role of

¹ 'Golden age': Julian Symons defines this as the period 'between the wars' (1972: 4), although it is often quite a loosely applied term. Indeed, if one considers the golden-age genre as a form, rather than as a chronological era, it is in actual fact still being produced today. This article considers the 'golden age' to be the 1920s and 1930s.

'detective' in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century popular detective fiction and examines its varying effects on characters who occupy this 'character-space' (Woloch, 2003: 12).

This idea of 'performance' of a specific role in genre fiction is important, though difficult, to define, and this article uses Alex Woloch's study *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Protagonist in the Novel* (2003) to help clarify it. Woloch explores tensions between individual characters and their limited and relative positions in their respective narratives, and defines the intersection between 'implied person' and their position in the narrative as a 'character-space':

The character space marks the *intersection* of an implied human personality [...] with the definitively circumscribed form of a narrative. [...] In this perspective the implied person behind any character is never directly reflected in the literary text but only partially inflected: each individual portrait has a radically contingent position within the story as a whole; our sense of the human figure (*as implied person*) is inseparable from the space that he or she occupies within the narrative totality [original italics] (2003: 13).

It is the 'protagonist' who is often afforded the most space in a narrative and thus the tension between 'implied human' and 'occupied narrative space' distorts external views of the character who occupies each role. As external observers, we are unable to see a character without simultaneously seeing their position in the narrative, and this idea may be applied to detective fiction. In genre fiction more broadly, literary positions are often ascribed specific labels and in detective fiction the protagonist is, more often than not, a 'detective'. Thus, Woloch's argument applies, as the distinction between the position of the narrative's 'detective' and the 'implied human' who occupies this role, affects how other characters – each with their own character-space, such as the sidekick, villain, accomplice, witness or, indeed, the reader – views them. It is here that this article's idea of 'performing' the role of 'detective' lies, in that the literary role of the protagonist is intertwined with the person who occupies it, and this affects external perceptions of the character.

As this article concerns a re-evaluation of 'detective fiction', it seems logical to focus on perhaps brightest historical moment in the popularity of the genre: the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, beginning with Arthur Conan Doyle's famously popular 'Sherlock Holmes' stories. This period was, as Charles Rzepka argues in *A Companion to Crime Fiction* (2010), both the zenith of the century-long development of crime fiction and the 'alpha of its triumphant march into the golden age of literary detection' (2010: 4).

Fictional Detectives as 'Above the Everyday'

Firstly, it is important to highlight the narrative position of fictional detectives, relative to both other characters and the reader. Popular literary detectives were, and still are, often distinguished from 'everyday' people, and this idea has a long and well-established history, stretching back to what is often seen as the genesis-moment of the modern detective story, Edgar Allan Poe's 'C. August Dupin' short stories from the 1840s. Perhaps most famously, the genre has historically used the 'awestruck sidekick' motif to both represent the baffled reader and mediate between the reader and the detective, and to highlight the detective's supreme sleuthing abilities (Rowland, 2010: 117).²

However, literary detectives are also elevated above both other characters and the reader by particular characteristics or abilities which they alone possess. These can include physical features or disabilities, their social positions and/or practices and psychological traits or neurodiversities which could potentially be classified as mental illnesses or difficulties. These features, I argue, are consistently designed to both elevate detectives above other characters in their narratives and to establish them as the only figure *capable* of solving the mystery. Sherlock Holmes, for example, possesses almost superhuman reasoning abilities obtained through extreme powers

² In 1929, Ronald Knox characterised the sidekick figure in detective fiction as the 'stupid friend' of the main protagonist, present only to remain in awe of their sleuthing ability. This has remained the popular perception of the sidekick. For a broader exploration of the sidekick figure which attempts to challenge this conceptualisation, refer to the forthcoming volume *The Detective's Companion in Crime Fiction: A Study in Sidekicks* (Palgrave, 2021).

of observation, which directly leads to one of Dr. John Watson's more famous exclamations in 'A Scandal in Bohemia' (1891):

[Holmes] 'I think, Watson, that you have put on seven and a half pounds since I saw you.'

'Seven,' I answered.

'Indeed, I should have thought a little more. Just a trifle more, I fancy, Watson. And in practice again, I observe. You did not tell me that you intended to go into harness.'

'Then, how do you know?'

'I see it, I deduce it. How do I know that you have been getting yourself very wet lately, and that you have a most clumsy and careless servant girl?'

'My dear Holmes,' said I, 'this is too much. You would certainly have been burned had you lived a few centuries ago' (Doyle, 1891 (1985): 5).

Watson places Holmes on a pedestal with his reference to historic attitudes towards witchcraft. This elevates Holmes not only in the (incorrect) sense in that the Watson-figure exists simply to accentuate the detective's abilities through their own ignorance, but also through the presence (and recognition) of a super- or extra-humanity which the sidekick does not possess, but which the detective does.

Other literary detectives, from the genre's later 'golden age', also possess these elevating characteristics. Lord Peter Wimsey, for example, is distinguished by his aristocratic social position, which he uses as an excuse to interfere in criminal cases and to penetrate places where others would be ejected. Agatha Christie's Belgian detective Hercule Poirot, meanwhile, is of a nationality which distinguishes him from most others who (more often than not) are English, and attribute his often-eccentric behaviour to this foreignness. Poirot's Belgian status thus has the simultaneous

effect of both 'othering' and elevating him because he exists outside the entrenched prejudices of British society and can therefore see issues inside it to which others are blind.

Thus, fictional detectives from this era are often super-abled through abilities or characteristics and this is a legacy which continues in various detective series today. Examining this can help us better understand the construction and development of detective fiction and can also help to examine hitherto under-explored connections between detective fiction and other forms of popular culture, such as that between crime fiction and the figure of the 'superhero'. Indeed, like detectives, later superheroes also possess unique powers or abilities which elevate them. This connection between 'fictional detective' and 'popular superhero' has already been cursorily examined. Marc Napolitano, for example, argues that it is (particularly) 'Batman [who] stands for the detective as superhero' and that Batman was originally formed of a composite of other literary characters which, crucially, included the famous Sherlock Holmes (2013: 144).

However, as well as detectives being *elevated* above other characters, I suggest that their 'special characteristics' also *isolate* them, and it is this idea which forms the basis of this article. The abilities these three detectives possess serve not only to make them better detectives but also to highlight how performing the role of detective leads to severe professional and social disconnection of the person who occupies this character-space.

Sherlock Holmes, Detection and Isolation

As Sonya Freeman Loftis points out, Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes is often today popularly, but anachronistically, characterised as 'autistic' (2014). This is usually accompanied with an argument that it is the reason why Holmes operates successfully as a detective but, as Loftis also suggests, it is also ill-informed and unfairly-negative, almost always retrospectively applied by neurologically-typical criticism with little understanding about what it actually means to be autistic (2014). Despite its often-problematic ascription, however, Loftis does concede that this contemporary reading of Holmes's character is, at the very least, understandable:

[T]he popular association of Holmes with the autism spectrum is unsurprising as Conan Doyle's character adheres to a plethora of autism stereotypes: Watson perceives Holmes as having intense interests, struggling in the social sphere, and displaying unusual body language. Certainly, Holmes approaches his work with an intense single-mindedness (both crime solving and his chemical experiments) (2014).

The neurotypical perceptions of Holmes's behaviour applied by external figures are my concern, albeit from a different perspective to Loftis. Whilst Loftis suggests that the retrospectively-applied diagnosis of 'autistic' often applied to Holmes today says something about the way that the contemporary public imagine or conceptualise autism, I argue that Holmes's neurological qualities, specifically his intense and obsessive approach to work and his 'struggle[s] in the social sphere', are designed to isolate and thus elevate him from other characters within the narrative as well as from the reader, in both personal and professional terms.

In a professional sense, Holmes's behaviour distances him from both other characters and the reader, who are unable to comprehend his prowess as a detective and who consistently attempt to rationalise his 'powers' through their own filtered and narrow-minded perceptions. As Loftis points out, Watson's lack of understanding of Holmes's abilities leads him to unfairly distance Holmes from what he considers to be typical human behaviour and towards a disconnected, isolated and almost inhuman status, and also to distort the picture the reader receives of Holmes as the narrative is filtered through Watson's neurotypical voice:

[E]ven as his incredible feats of deduction are praised as a work of genius, Holmes is objectified by his beloved Watson, who constantly compares the brilliant sleuth to machines and repeatedly describes him as "inhuman".
[...] Almost all of the reader's perceptions of Holmes are filtered through Watson's narrative voice (2014).

Holmes thus 'performs' his role of a detective publically, whilst others watch and attempt to 'explain' his actions. These others include today's reader, who reads

Holmes almost exclusively through the prejudiced view of Watson's narrative and who applies later-developed diagnoses to the character. It is not solely Watson's voice which distorts the reader's view of Holmes, however; *every* view of Holmes's performance received by others is filtered through an external perception. Even Watson's own introduction to Holmes, for example, is clouded by another person's view. In *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) he is introduced to Holmes by his friend Stamford, who describes him thus:

'I have no idea what he intends to go in for. [...] His studies are very desultory and eccentric, but he has amassed a lot of out-of-the-way knowledge which would astonish his professors. [...] [H]e is not a man that is easy to draw out [...] Holmes is a little too scientific for my tastes—it approaches to cold-bloodedness' (Doyle, 1887 (2009): 10).

Thus, by 'watching' Holmes perform, others twist their perceptions of Holmes's professional abilities to align with their own views of how such feats are possible and attempt to explain them according to their own preconceptions. This behaviour isolates Holmes, who feels the constant tension between others' continuous gaze at his methods, and their inability to understand or replicate them. Holmes consciously wages warfare against others who cannot (or refuse to) understand his processes despite watching them operate: he is therefore always alone at the top. This isolation infuriates Holmes: in *The Sign of Four* (1890), for example, Holmes chastises Watson for his lack of engagement with the reasoning methodologies which he constantly observes (and, indeed, records):

'You will not apply my precept,' he said, shaking his head. 'How often have I said to you that when you have eliminated the impossible whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth? [...] My dear Watson, try a little analysis yourself,' said he, with a touch of impatience. 'You know my methods. Apply them, and it will be instructive to compare results.' (Doyle, 1890 (2009): 76–77).

Not only does Holmes reprimand Watson for refusing to try and reason to a conclusion himself, he also consciously recognises his own professional loneliness, as he suggests that to have a companion who can apply the same reasoning techniques as himself would generate useful discussion, which Watson cannot provide. This frequently occurs in the Sherlock Holmes stories, in which Watson attempts to replicate Holmes's methods, and believes himself to have successfully done so, only to discover he was in error. In 'The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist' (1903), for example, Watson is sent to Surrey on a reconnaissance mission, only to be emphatically told by Holmes after he, too, has investigated, 'You really have done remarkably badly' (Doyle, 1903 (1985): 497). In *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902), Watson is left to his own sleuthing activities for an extended period of time and comes perhaps the closest he ever does to earning Holmes's praise for his activities. However, it also transpires that Holmes made deliberate use of Watson's predictability simply for the fact that it allowed him to be somewhere else:

'My dear fellow, you have been invaluable to me in this as in many other cases, and I beg that you will forgive me if I have seemed to play a trick upon you. [...] Had I been with Sir Henry and you it is evident that my point of view would have been the same as yours, and my presence would have warned our very formidable opponents to be on their guard. [...]' (Doyle, 1902 (2009): 165).

Holmes makes use of the fact that Watson cannot see things in the same way he does, placing Watson in the position of the 'typical' while he occupies the external. Thus, Watson's lack of understanding of Holmes's psychological operation professionally isolates Holmes. Watson often watches Holmes expectantly until Holmes generates a solution. It is no coincidence that as soon as Holmes appears in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Watson's sleuthing ends and he is once again reliant on Holmes to solve the remainder of the mystery (although admittedly there is little left to solve by this point). Rather unfairly, however, as soon as the solution is generated in most of the stories, the successful Holmes is often promptly dehumanised for his trouble

when others exclaim their surprise and (particularly) when Watson compares him to machines.³ To put it simply, Watson, along with everyone else who views Holmes through a neurotypical narrative, sees in Holmes a detecting-machine first, and a person second. This tendency recalls Woloch's argument surrounding the tension between the 'implied human' and their relative position in the narrative. Watson's perception of the two Holmeses brushes against this tension, as he repeatedly struggles to separate or distinguish the two.

Holmes is also isolated personally as well as professionally, as his prowess as a detective, combined with the inability of other characters to understand it, removes his ability to forge social relationships. Loftis, again, provides a good summary of this idea by referring to Watson's external perception of Holmes's personality:

Watson, representing the neurotypical reader, is unable to understand or appreciate Holmes's deep interests and perceives them as mysterious. This lack of understanding contributes to the stereotype of autism as a "puzzling" and mysterious phenomenon. Watson describes Holmes as choosing his work over human companionship [and] Watson cannot really tell the reader what Holmes is thinking, again contributing to the stereotype of the autistic mind as mystery (2014).

Whilst the ascription of the label 'autistic' is retrospectively applied here, the point remains that Watson's inability to understand Holmes's mind isolates him personally from others who are neurologically different to him. In fact, Holmes's skill as a consulting detective dominates his personal life as well as his professional one, and his single-minded passion to solve crime extends so far into his personality that even his non-work pursuits gear themselves towards detection. This tendency isolates him socially, leading him to neglect generally-accepted interpersonal behaviour patterns. Indeed, Stamford highlights this before Watson has even met Holmes in *A Study*

³ In *The Sign of Four*, Watson exclaims, 'You really are an automaton – a calculating machine, [...] there is something positively inhuman about you at times.' (Doyle, 1890 (2009): 66).

in *Scarlet*: 'I could imagine his giving a friend a little pinch of the latest vegetable alkaloid,⁴ not out of malevolence, you understand, but simply out of a spirit of inquiry in order to have an accurate idea of the effects' (Doyle, 1887 (2009): 10).

Holmes is aware of this characteristic, conscious of the fact that his personal pursuits revolve around detection and reasoning, and that it prevents him from forging social relationships simply because, again, his skills as a reasoning-machine are projected first. Holmes rebuffs any attempt to face his social isolation by allowing his role as a detective to consume him and to therefore act as a social shield. In 'The Adventure of the *Gloria Scott*', one of the few stories Holmes narrates, he remarks:

'[...] I was never a very sociable fellow, Watson, always rather fond of moping in my rooms and working out my own little methods of thought, so that I never mixed much with the men of my year.' (Doyle, 1893 (2009): 424).

Lord Peter Wimsey

Moving into detective fiction's 'golden age', Dorothy L. Sayers's charming, aristocratic sleuth Lord Peter Wimsey also demonstrates this idea that characters who occupy and perform the role of 'detective' are psychologically isolated. Wimsey is linked with this idea on two fronts: from his experiences in the First World War; and the position he occupies as a minor aristocrat.

Wimsey's position as a Lord, public figure and general gadabout means that he is consistently required to perform his detecting-role publically. As with Holmes, others watch and interpret Wimsey through their own preconceptions – in this case, their preconceptions of the aristocracy. The position of 'aristocrat' is disconnected from the position of 'detective', and others repeatedly fail to comprehend how these two roles can coexist in one figure. In *Whose Body?* (1923), for example, the irksome Inspector Sugg labels Wimsey's efforts as 'unwarrantable interference' from a character who has no reason to be investigating (Sayers, 1923 (2016): 16).

⁴ Alkaloid: an umbrella term given to various organic compounds extracted from plants and animals which have various effects from the minimal to the severely psychotropic.

However, Wimsey's aristocratic, and thus public, position can actually assist him. His social position combined with his eccentric-yet-friendly demeanour is disarming and lulls the suspicions of others. His position also allows him access to restricted areas where the ordinary public would not be able to go; again, in *Whose Body?*, Wimsey gains access to the crime scene, Mr. Thipps's bathroom, simply because the star-struck Thipps nervously-yet-eagerly accommodates him:

'If it would interest your lordship to have a look at it – [...] 'Thanks awfully,' said Lord Peter, 'I'd like to very much, if I'm not puttin' you out.' [...] 'Not at all,' said Mr. Thipps. His manner as he led the way along the passage convinced Lord Peter of two things – first, that, gruesome as his exhibit was, he rejoiced in the importance it reflected upon himself and his flat, and secondly, that Inspector Sugg had forbidden him to exhibit it to anyone (Sayers, 1923 (2016): 9).

Wimsey's public position can also (ironically) help to keep him hidden. In *Murder Must Advertise* (1933), Wimsey goes undercover as 'Death Bredon' to infiltrate an advertising agency where a murder has occurred. Unfortunately this alter-ego is accused of murder and arrested, and his photograph circulated in the media. To ensure that 'Bredon' is sufficiently distanced from Wimsey, Wimsey allows himself to be photographed in public to ensure that both he and 'Bredon' are seen separately (Sayers, 1933 (2016): 355–56).

However, whilst useful, Wimsey's aristocratic position is again isolating, as it distances him from others who are distracted by his status. Like Holmes, Wimsey's identity is concealed by those labels which are applied to him by others. Whilst others see detective first and person second in Holmes, in Wimsey others see first an aristocrat, then a detective and finally a person. Thus, Woloch's suggestion that the character-space is 'that particular charged encounter between an individual human personality and a determined space and position within the narrative as a whole' can be developed slightly, as it seems to be the case that characters can occupy multiple character-identities simultaneously depending on who is observing them and

from what perspective (2003: 14). Wimsey, for example, cannot act without being scrutinised as either Lord, detective, or both, and thus his actions are constantly filtered through others' perceptions of what it means to be either. Indeed, Wimsey is often forced to rely on others to gather information, simply because he is in the public eye. The formation of 'The Cattery' in *Strong Poison* (1930), a private investigative office managed exclusively by women and presented as a 'typing bureau', highlights how Wimsey takes ownership of the investigative process, but is also simultaneously required to have others do the work for him: 'His lordship was somewhat reticent about this venture of his, but occasionally, when closeted with Chief Inspector Parker or other intimate friends, referred to it as "My Cattery"' (Sayers, 1930 (1984): 47).

In some cases, as in *Unnatural Death* (1927), the head of 'The Cattery', Alexandra Katherine Climpson, performs comprehensive acts of detection alone, reporting back to Wimsey via letters which are reprinted verbatim. Climpson is described by Wimsey as:

'[...] my ears and my tongue,' said Lord Peter, dramatically, 'and especially my nose. She asks questions which a young man could not put without a blush. She is the angel that rushes in where fools get a clump on the head. She can smell a rat in the dark. In fact, she is the cat's whiskers.' (Sayers, 1927 (2016): 31).

From another perspective, it is widely recognised that Wimsey suffers from post-traumatic stress (PTS) from the First World War, which causes violent flashbacks at times of anxiety, particularly when his actions have caused a criminal's execution. This condition is connected to his sleuthing; as Ava Jarvis argues in an informal web post discussing PTS in fiction, it is Wimsey's detection which directly triggers his attacks (2009). Indeed, *Whose Body?* depicts the first of Wimsey's attacks, occurring at the precise moment where his detection has yielded results:

Lord Peter got up and paced the room: 'Good Lord!' he said. 'Good Lord!' [...]'Confirmation!' he groaned. 'As if I needed it!' [...]' Mr Bunter, sleeping

the sleep of the true and faithful servant, was aroused in the small hours by a hoarse whisper, 'Bunter!' [...] '...it's the water,' said Lord Peter [...] 'it's up to their waists down there, poor devils. But listen! Can't you hear it? Tap, tap, tap – they're mining us – but I don't know where – I can't hear – I can't. [...] I can't hear anything for the noise of the guns. Can't they stop the guns?' (Sayers, 1923 (2016): 135–37)

Walton also explores this aspect of Wimsey's character, pragmatically arguing that there is a lack of clarity surrounding the nature of the connection between his PTSD and his detection, which he cannot reconcile (2015: 268). Ariela Freedman echoes this claim, arguing that '[Wimsey] cannot unravel the mystery of his own shell shock [...]' (2010: 365). Freedman subsequently suggests that Wimsey's 'acts of detection' are, in fact, temporary cures for his PTSD, eventually replaced by his marriage to Harriet Vane:

[Wimsey] recovers through his discovery of detective work. It gives him new vigor, purpose, and interest in life, and an accidental hobby develops into vocation. [...] Detective work serves as both disease and cure (2010: 381).

Monica Lott, however, rejects Freedman's argument and suggests that detection is instead an extended treatment which weakens the condition far enough for Vane to take over after she and Wimsey are married: '[D]etection remains [Wimsey's] treatment throughout the stories and his breakdown in the arms of his wife shows that he has been made able to share his weaknesses' (2013: 106).

In truth, the situation is not as simple as either claim, because detection is also a symptom of Wimsey's psychological trauma; a coping mechanism to which he turns to manage his condition. Indeed, the attack-scene from *Whose Body?* quoted above depicts Wimsey at his most isolated, alone with the gruesome knowledge of the solution. The combination of the realisation of crime's horror, the fact that he is the only person who knows it and, crucially, the fact that there is now no more detecting to do, triggers his attack. Consequently, detection does not treat or cure Wimsey's

attacks, but instead highlights the problem, in the same way that a limp is a visual symptom of an injured leg. The act of limping might allow an injured person to walk, but it does not cure the injury and simply draws visual attention to it.

Vane's connection to Wimsey's trauma runs deeper than merely acting as alleviation. I suggest that, in *Vane*, Wimsey recognises a kindred spirit, as she is similarly isolated through prior torment, facing the gallows when charged with the murder of her lover, Philip Boyes. Upon meeting Vane, Wimsey immediately connects with her:

'Not at all, not at all, dash it! I mean to say, I rather enjoy investigating things, if you know what I mean.' [...] 'I know. Being a writer of detective stories, I have naturally studied your career with interest.' [...] She smiled suddenly at him and his heart turned to water. (Sayers, 1930 (1984): 40)

Wimsey recognises himself in Vane, whose name gestures towards vanity – or a mirror. She represents the closest anyone could get to understanding the purpose of Wimsey's sleuthing activities (and how it masks his underlying issues), because she has her own underlying trauma and inhabits an amateur detective world of her own. Thus, the scene at the end of *Busman's Honeymoon* (1937), where Wimsey seeks solace in her, can be read not only as Wimsey finding a cure but also as his recognition of a kindred soul experiences his trauma alongside him:

[Wimsey] 'It's damnable for you too. I'm sorry. I'd forgotten. That sounds idiotic. But I've always been alone.'

[Vane] 'Yes, of course. I'm like that, too. I like to crawl away and hide in a corner. (Sayers, 1937 (2016): 448)

Vane makes a final emotional reassurance to the struggling Peter, which poetically summarises this idea that both characters simultaneously suffer: 'We'll see it out together' (Sayers, 1937 (2016): 451).

Hercule Poirot

Finally, it is worth exploring perhaps the most famous golden age detective: Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot. Like his predecessors, Poirot's detective activities are related to the reader through a highly filtered and often prejudiced narrative, in this case provided by Captain Arthur Hastings (in eight of the novels, including *Curtain*, the final Poirot case published in 1975) or by other characters in other ones.

It is firstly worth noting a curious, though oblique, connection between the Poirot stories and the Sherlock Holmes stories, regarding how the protagonist-detective is aware of their own isolation and uses the companion-sidekick character as a representative of the 'everyday' so that they might discount it. In much the same way as Holmes uses Watson as a sort of 'typical' presence in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Poirot makes similar uses of Hastings. In the opening pages of *Peril at End House* (1932), for example, Poirot wishes that Hastings had been present during a case of a murder on a train (referencing the events of *The Mystery of the Blue Train* (1928)) and pays him a rather underhanded compliment admiring his 'imagination' at coming up with theories that are nowhere near the truth:

'How I wish I had been with you,' I said with deep regret.

'I too,' said Poirot. Your experience would have been invaluable to me.'

I looked at him sideways. As a result of long habit, I distrust his compliments, but he appeared perfectly serious. And after all, why not? I have a very long experience of the methods he employs.

'What I particularly missed was your vivid imagination, Hastings,' he went on, dreamily. 'One needs a certain amount of light relief.' (Christie, 1932 (2000): 7–8).

Here, Poirot gestures towards the idea that Hastings manifests a 'typical' way of thinking, which is naturally different (and deficient) to his own. Hastings also manifests a similarly-expectant external audience to Poirot's detection activities as

Watson. This similarity is perhaps unsurprising, as the relationship between Poirot and Hastings (and detective and narrator) recalls the famous relationship between Holmes and Watson, although as Stephen Knight points out, Poirot himself is 'in name and [in] plump fussy person clearly the reverse of the masculine and English Holmes' (2004: 89–90). Much like Watson, Hastings is incapable of replicating Poirot's methodologies even when he believes he has learned the technique – at which point Poirot exasperatedly informs Hastings of his deficiencies. Also like Watson, Hastings often expectantly waits for Poirot to provide the solution, leading to a similar form of professional isolation experienced by Holmes. In *Murder on the Links* (1923), for example, the following exchange takes place between Hastings and Poirot when the latter receives a letter:

[Poirot] '[...] How did it strike you?'

I considered.

'Clearly he wrote the letter keeping himself well in hand, but at the end his self control snapped and, on the impulse of the moment, he scrawled those four desperate words ['For God's sake, come!].'

But my friend shook his head energetically.

'You are in error. See you not that while the ink of the signature is nearly black, that of the postscript is quite pale?'

'Well?' I said, puzzled.

'*Mon Dieu, mon ami*, but use your little grey cells. Is it not obvious? Mr Renauld wrote his letter. Without blotting it, he re-read it carefully. Then, not on impulse, but deliberately, he added those last words, and blotted the sheet.'

But why?'

'*Parbleu!* so that it should produce the effect upon me that it has upon you.'

'What?'

'*Mais oui* – to make sure of my coming! [...].' (Christie, 1923 (2000): 15).

Poirot therefore suffers from a similar form of professional isolation to Holmes, who also has to contend with external parties simply assuming that he will be able to solve whatever mystery is placed in front of him and waiting for the result to emerge. However, Poirot is also 'othered' by further aspects of the series' narrative structures which serve to distance him from his predecessors, particularly in terms of his nationality. As Jamie Bernthal points out, it is Hastings and his innate Englishness which isolates the eccentric, foreign and occasionally amusing Belgian:

The absolute Englishness of Hastings serves, of course, to highlight Poirot's foreignness, and therefore the role of otherness in detection. In making Hastings' English respectability the butt of several jokes, Christie highlights insularity in the nationalism that others Poirot in the first place (2021: n.p.).

Again, much like his predecessors and counterparts, Poirot is distinguished by the fact that others around him gaze externally at his performance through highly-filtered, pre-emptively applied lenses – in this case, his innate foreignness. As Bernthal also argues, Poirot's personality, mannerisms and eccentric appearance mean that he simply cannot pass 'unnoticed', and that 'other characters are inclined to mock [him], [and thus] he is able to operate under a radar, despite his memorable profile' (2016: 78). Thus, the fact that Poirot's mannerisms are typically 'un-English' serves to distinguish, as well as other, him. However, this is made even more complicated by the fact that Poirot is 'twice an outsider' (Bernthal, 2016: 87) because he is Belgian, not French, which leads to both misunderstanding and (consequently) isolation, as a significant number of other characters assume he is French, before Poirot himself corrects them (Bernthal, 2016: 87). In a similar fashion to his predecessors, therefore,

other characters observe the more visible aspects of the detective character before they see him as an actual person – in this case, they see Poirot as French first, Belgian second, a detective third and finally a person fourth.

Poirot actually embraces his isolation caused by visible foreignness, taking pride in acting as, as Bernthal puts it, 'a threat to masculine certainty' and delighting in correcting those who mistake his nationality (Bernthal, 2021: n.p.). In *Three Act Tragedy* (1934), Poirot argues that he deliberately uses English exceptionalism to his advantage, to infiltrate, question and probe – or in other words, to detect:

[...] It is true that I can speak the exact, the idiomatic English. But, my friend, to speak the broken English is an enormous asset. It leads people to despise you. They say – a foreigner – he can't even speak English properly. It is not my policy to terrify people – instead I invite their gentle ridicule. Also, I boast! An Englishman he says often, "a fellow who thinks as much of himself as that cannot be worth much." That is the English point of view. It is not at all true. And so, you see, "I put people off their guard." (Christie, 1934 (2000): 205)

Finally, Poirot's compunction for orderliness and neatness gestures towards a latent desire for comfortable domesticity which he can never fully achieve. As Knight points out, Poirot's abilities as a detective largely stem from the domestic – a trait which Knight characterises as 'classically, and stereotypically, female' (2004: 91). Poirot consistently (and famously) notices disarrangement and oddity in the domestic space, which often leads to his successful solving of a case where the patriarchal structures of official detection had failed to notice 'feminine' details. As a, perhaps, 'domestically-minded' detective, Poirot clearly enjoys his home comforts. However, this aspect of his character is not compatible with his isolated nature as a detective, because he actively embraces his outsider status and is thus required to maintain it. In short, Poirot can never achieve true domestic comfort if he chooses to remain an outsider from the very society in which he is attempting to domesticate himself, and thus he consistently returns to his isolated, lonely role as an outsider detective. At

the beginning of *The A. B. C. Murders* (1936), for example, Poirot actively comments on his repeated attempts to retire:

'I am like the prima donna who makes positively the farewell performance! That farewell performance, it repeats itself an indefinite number of times! [...] In truth, it has been very like that. Each time I say: this is the end. But no! Something else arises!' (Christie, 1936 (2000): 11)

Poirot's attempts to retire demonstrate a latent longing for domesticity, which he sadly can never achieve. His wish prominently appears at the beginning of *Peril at End House*, when Hastings attempts to convince Poirot to return to detecting. Poirot flatly refuses, as he is apparently comfortable with his domestic lifestyle:

[Hastings] 'Tell me Poirot,' I said. 'Are you never tempted to renew your activities? This passive life –.'

'Suits me admirably my friend. To sit in the sun what could be more charming? To step from the pedestal at the zenith of your fame – what could be a grander gesture? [...]' (Christie, 1932 (2000): 8).

Poirot's insistence that his detecting days are over is short lived, however, as he can escape neither his own ego nor his external status as a detective, and within a chapter he back detecting again (Christie, 1932 (2000): 7–18. Indeed, Poirot's actual and formal retirement in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) is perhaps the most famous example of this short-lived attempt at retirement, where he retires to the country to 'grow vegetable marrows' (Christie, 1926: 19). Inevitably, a murder occurs and Poirot is drawn in to solve it. However, the moment in this novel which summarises the idea most accurately here comes not from Poirot, but from Dr. James Sheppard, the perpetrator of the crime. The final line of the story is given to him, and accurately summarises that Poirot never retires from detecting, even when he retires from detecting: 'But I wish Hercule Poirot had never retired from work and come here to grow vegetable marrows' (Christie, 1926: 224).

Conclusion

Overall, I suggest that the performance of the role of 'detective', and an examination of how this performance impacts on the 'implied human' who occupies the detective's character space, can be used to generate original readings of late-Victorian and golden age detectives. For Sherlock Holmes, it is his neurological make-up, which has been retrospectively read as a form of 'autism', which leads him to act as an effective detective, yet which simultaneously distances him from others in the narrative who do not possess a similar way of thinking or reasoning. This trope of the constant external gaze has the added effect of distancing Holmes from the reader, who receives their picture of the detective through the filtered lens of Watson, who himself unconsciously dehumanises Holmes. In the golden age of crime fiction, the trend of the isolated detective continued in other yet similar ways. For Dorothy L. Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey, the fact that he exists as a public figure actually serves to separate him from others in the narrative who cannot look past that fact; his experiences in the First World War lead him to turn to detection to manage his PTSD. Finally, Hercule Poirot is a complex manifestation of a different number of isolating or 'othering' features, including a similar external position (at which others gaze) to Sherlock Holmes, his nationality as a Belgian working often in Britain and his latent, incompatible desire for domestic comfort.

In short, the continuous performance of the role of detective is, in and of itself, an isolating and lonely experience, and can highlight their psychological, physical, narrative, social and professional isolation from other characters and from the reader who receives information regarding the detective's exploits through an often highly-filtered narrative. The idea that each character also has a unique ability or characteristic, which elevates them yet also draws them away from others in the narrative, also has underexplored generic connections to current popular culture, particularly in the form of the popular-yet-lonely superhero, also isolated by their abilities and their powers to solve and/or fight crime.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

- Bernthal, J** 2016 *Queering Agatha Christie: Revisiting the Golden Age of Detective Fiction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-33533-9>
- Bernthal, J** 2021 'A Look of Doglike Devotion': Hercule Poirot's Stooges and Foils'. In: Andrew, L and Saunders, S (Eds.), *The Detective's Companion in Crime Fiction: A Study in Sidekicks*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Christie, A** 2000 [1923] *Murder on the Links*. London: Planet Three Publishing.
- Christie, A** 2000 [1926] *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. London: Planet Three Publishing.
- Christie, A** 2000 [1932] *Peril at End House*. London: Planet Three Publishing.
- Christie, A** 2000 [1934] *Three Act Tragedy*. London: Planet Three Publishing.
- Christie, A** 2000 [1936] *The A. B. C. Murders*. London: Planet Three Publishing.
- Doyle, A C** 1985 [1891] A Scandal in Bohemia. In: *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Illustrated Short Stories*. London: Chancellor Press. pp. 3–22.
- Doyle, A C** 1985 [1903] 'The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist'. In: *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Illustrated Short Stories*. London: Chancellor Press. pp. 491–507.
- Doyle, A C** 2009 [1887] *A Study in Scarlet*. In: *The Complete Illustrated Sherlock Holmes*. London: CRW Publishing.
- Doyle, A C** 2009 [1890] *The Sign of Four*. In: *The Complete Illustrated Sherlock Holmes*. London: CRW Publishing.
- Doyle, A C** 2009 [1902] *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. In: *The Complete Illustrated Sherlock Holmes*. London: CRW Publishing.
- Freedman, A** 2010 Dorothy Sayers and the Case of the Shell-Shocked Detective. *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, 8(2): 365–387. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/pan.0.0176>
- Freeman Loftis, S** 2014 The Autistic Detective: Sherlock Holmes and his Legacy. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 34(4). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v34i4.3728>
- Jarvis, A** 2009 Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Fiction, Part 4. 11 December. Available at: <https://www.tor.com/2009/12/11/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-in-fiction-part-4/> [Last accessed 21 April 2019].

- Knight, S** 2004 *Crime Fiction 1800–2000: Detection, Death, Diversity*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Knox, R** 1929 *The Best Detective Stories of the Year 1928*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Lott, M** 2013 Dorothy L. Sayers, the Great War, and Shell Shock. *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, 15(1): 103–126. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5325/intelitestud.15.1.0103>
- Napolitano, M** 2013 'Elementary, My Dear Robin!': Batman, Sherlock Holmes and Detective Fiction Fandom. In: Burke, L (Ed.), *Fan Phenomena: Batman*. Bristol: Intellect.
- Rowland, S** 2010 The "Classical" Model of the Golden Age. In: Rzepka, C and Horsley, L (Eds.), *A Companion to Crime Fiction*. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444317916.ch8>
- Rzepka, C** 2010 Introduction: What is Crime Fiction? In: Rzepka, C and Horsley, L (Eds.), *A Companion to Crime Fiction*. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444317916>
- Sayers, D L** 1984 [1930] *Strong Poison*. London: New English Library.
- Sayers, D L** 2016 [1923] *Whose Body?* London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Sayers, D L** 2016 [1927] *Unnatural Death*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Sayers, D L** 2016 [1933] *Murder Must Advertise*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Sayers, D L** 2016 [1937] *Busman's Honeymoon*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Symons, J** 1972 *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Walton, S** 2015 *Guilty But Insane: Mind and Law in Golden Age Detective Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Woloch, A** 2003 *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

How to cite this article: Saunders, S 2019 'It is Introspective, and I Want to Introspect': Detection, Isolation, and Neurotypicality in Crime Fiction, c. 1891–1940. *Open Library of Humanities*, 5(1): 52, pp. 1–24. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.461>

Published: 06 September 2019

Copyright: © 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



Open Library of Humanities is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Open Library of Humanities.

OPEN ACCESS The Open Access icon, which is a stylized padlock with a diagonal slash through it.