



Murder and Manners: The Formal Detective Novel

Author(s): George Grella

Source: *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Autumn, 1970), pp. 30-48

Published by: [Duke University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1345250>

Accessed: 16/06/2014 05:56

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Duke University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Murder and Manners: The Formal Detective Novel

GEORGE GRELLA

The formal detective novel, the so called “pure puzzle” or “whodunit,” is the most firmly established and easily recognized version of the thriller. Sharing sources with the novel proper, boasting a tradition dating from Poe, and listing among its practitioners a number of distinguished men of letters, the detective novel has enjoyed a long, though slightly illicit, relationship with serious literature. As with literary study, historians and bibliographers of the form, discovering incunabula, repudiating apocrypha, and tracing sources and lineage, have published their findings in a multitude of books and essays, in somewhat learned journals and parascholarly periodicals. And almost since its inception, critics have been denouncing the rise and announcing the demise of the whodunit. But the detective novel has survived the vicissitudes of literary taste and the sometimes suffocating paraphernalia of scholarship; though it attained its greatest heights of production and consumption in the 1920’s and 1930’s—the so called Golden Age of the detective story—the best examples of the type retain a remarkable longevity. The whodunit, in fact, has become a kind of classic in the field of popular fiction.

One commentator has rather loosely defined the detective story as “a tale in which the primary interest lies in the methodical discovery, by rational means, of the exact circumstances of a mysterious event or series of events,”¹ which could describe a number of literary works, including *Oedipus Rex*, *Hamlet*, *Tom Jones*, and *Absalom, Absalom!*. In reality the form, in Raymond Chandler’s words, has “learned nothing and forgotten nothing.”² It subscribes to a rigidly uniform, virtually changeless combination of characters, setting, and events familiar to every reader in the English speaking world. The typical detective story presents a group of people assembled at an isolated place—usually an English country house—who discover that one of their number has been murdered. They summon the local constabulary, who are completely baffled; they find either no clues or entirely too many, everyone or no one has had the means, motive, and opportunity to commit the crime, and nobody seems to be telling the truth. To the rescue comes an eccentric, intelligent, unofficial investigator who reviews the evidence, questions the suspects, constructs a fabric of proof, and in a dramatic final scene, names the culprit. This sequence describes almost every formal detective novel, the best as well as

¹ A. E. Murch, *The Development of the Detective Novel* (London, 1958), p. 11.

² “The Simple Art of Murder,” *The Art of the Mystery Story*, ed. Howard Haycraft (New York, 1947), p. 230.

the worst; whatever the variations, the form remains, as Chandler says,

*. . . Fundamentally . . . the same careful grouping of suspects, the same utterly incomprehensible trick of how somebody stabbed Mrs. Pottington Postlethwaite III with the solid platinum poniard just as she flatted on the top note of the "Bell Song" from Lakmé in the presence of fifteen ill-assorted guests; the same ingénue in fur-trimmed pajamas screaming in the night to make the company pop in and out of doors and ball up the timetable; the same moody silence the next day as they sit around sipping Singapore slings and sneering at each other, while the flatfeet crawl to and fro under the Persian rugs, with their derby hats on.*³

It is one of the curiosities of literature that an endlessly reduplicated form, employing sterile formulas, stock characters, and innumerable clichés of method and construction, should prosper in the two decades between the World Wars and continue to amuse even in the present day. More curious still, this unoriginal and predictable kind of entertainment appealed to a wide and varied audience, attracting not only the usual public for popular fiction but also a number of educated readers; it became known, in Phillip Guedalla's famous phrase, as "the normal recreation of noble minds." This dual appeal raises an obvious question: why should both ordinary and sophisticated readers enjoy a hackneyed and formula-ridden fiction devoid of sensation or titillation, and frequently without significant literary distinction?

Most readers and writers of detective fiction claim that the central puzzle provides the form's chief appeal. Every reasoning man, they say, enjoys matching his intellect against the detective's, and will quite happily suspend his disbelief in order to play the game of wits. Accordingly, detective novelists have drawn up regulations for their craft forbidding unsportsmanlike conduct of any kind; all relevant facts must be revealed to the reader and, though misdirection is allowed, fair play must be observed at all times. Adherents of the puzzle theory assume that the average reader conscientiously catalogues the alibis, checks the timetables, sifts through the clues, and concludes with the detective that only one person could have caught the 4:17 from Stoke Pogis in time to put the cyanide in the crumpets, maladjust the hands of the grandfather clock, incriminate the nice young gentleman who quite innocently left a 12EEE footprint in the rose garden, and arrive home just in time for high tea. That person is the murderer, no matter how guiltless he may have seemed.

In fact, though many readers discover the murderer—usually that old standby, the Least Likely Person—they do so by guesswork or intuition rather than by following the detective's frequently improbable methods. Because the reader seldom possesses the detective's exotic knowledge and superior reason, the important clues often mean little to him. Since he doesn't know the killing distance of a South American blowgun, the rate at which curare is absorbed into the bloodstream, or the effects of an English summer on the process of *rigor mortis*, he cannot duplicate the sleuth's conclusions.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

The writers of the Ellery Queen stories (Frederick Dannay and Manfred B. Lee) so firmly accepted the puzzle theory that at one time they inserted near the end of their books a "challenge to the reader," who now possessed all the information necessary to solve the case himself. Since the Queen novels presented some of the most abstruse problems in detective fiction, few readers, if any, rose to the challenge. (The writers have not used the device for more than twenty years.) In *The Chinese Orange Mystery*, for example, one must figure out why a murderer would turn his victim's clothes back-to-front and how a room could be locked from the outside by a complicated arrangement of weights, strings, and thumbtacks. Similarly, few would arrive at Hercule Poirot's dazzling conclusion, in Agatha Christie's *Murder in the Calais Coach*, that since no single person on a train could have committed a murder, all the passengers must have done it together. "Only a halfwit could guess it," commented Raymond Chandler. The fanciful methods and incredible ingenuity of most fictional murderers elude everyone but the detective. Only he is granted the power to arrive at the correct deduction from the most tenuous or ambiguous evidence; thus, the box of spilled pins in John Dickson Carr's *Till Death Do Us Part* immediately suggests to Gideon Fell yet another method of relocking a room, while to the reader it suggests nothing at all extraordinary. Fell solves another difficult case in *Death Turns the Tables* because he happens to know that Canadian taxidermists stuff mooseheads with red sand, a fact unlikely to be known by the reader and equally unlikely to be thought important.

The puzzle theory demands some credence, if only because so many readers and writers espouse it. It seems clear, however, that although the puzzle is central to the detective novel, it does not in fact provide the chief source of appeal; the reader generally cannot solve it by the detective's means, and thus derives his chief pleasure not from duplicating but from observing the mastermind's work. The novels do not so much challenge human ingenuity as display it to its furthest limits. The reader does not share the detective's ability, rather he marvels at it.

Other, more subtle readers of detective fiction reject the puzzle theory for a psychological and literary explanation. Edmund Wilson argues that in the 1920's and '30's the world was "ridden by an all-pervasive feeling of guilt and by a fear of impending disaster,"⁴ which led to the production and enjoyment of detective fiction: everyone sought release from anxiety in the identification of the scapegoat-criminal, who "is not, after all, a person like you and me." W. H. Auden carries Wilson's thesis a step further, suggesting a literary basis for the whodunit's chief appeal. In his penetrating essay, "The Guilty Vicarage," Auden finds a timelessness in the detective story, derived from its resemblance to Greek tragedy. Its interest, he claims, lies "in the dialectic of innocence and guilt." He identifies as "demonic pride" the murderer's belief that his own intelligence will permit him to elude the punishment of a just universe. Since the murderer's action has implicated a whole society, the detective's task is to locate and expel the particular cause of a general guilt. The expulsion has a cathartic effect, liberating the reader's own

⁴ "Why Do People Read Detective Stories?" *The New Yorker* (October 14, 1944), p. 76.

latent *hubris* and guilty desires. Auden concludes that “the typical reader of detective stories is, like myself, a person who suffers from a sense of sin.”

Both critics, though persuasive, fail to account for the peculiar elements of the detective novel. Wilson does not consider the fact that though the whodunits of the Golden Age remain popular, they no longer dominate light fiction, or that very few classic detective novels are currently written. In the present era, haunted by memories of global conflict and menaced by the spectre of nuclear holocaust, man may well labor under the greatest burden of guilt and anxiety since the Fall; logically, the detective novel should now be enjoying unprecedented popularity, but this is not the case. Wilson carelessly identifies the typical villain of the novels as a criminal (“known to the trade as George Gruesome”). Even a casual reader of detective fiction will recognize Wilson’s error: the typical villain is not a criminal but an ordinary and superficially acceptable citizen, “a person like you and me,” which, in Wilson’s terms, would imply condemnation rather than exculpation of the society. Wilson also fails to account for the peculiar nonviolence of the form. It is not, as he implies, a manhunt, but rather an exploration of a posh and stylized milieu; further, the final accusation is less an attempt to fix guilt than a means of expelling a social offender.

Perhaps because he is a confessed “addict” of detective fiction, Auden comes closer to the truth in recognizing the relevance of the novel’s society, but errs in identifying its structure and significance as tragic. Since the reader never learns the murderer’s identity until he is revealed, and since the criminal’s method is described through an intellectual reconstruction, there is no opportunity to identify with him or sympathize with whatever *hubris*, fear, remorse, or guilt he may suffer. Though the detective novel deals in the materials of human disaster, it steadfastly avoids presenting them in emotional terms, and thus prevents the characteristically emotional engagement of tragedy. It presents no violent disruptions of the social fabric, no sense of universal culpability, but rather a calm and virtually unruffled world, where everything turns out, after all, for the best. With the intellectualization of potentially sensational matters, without any direct involvement, knowledge of the murderer’s character, or sense of doom, the reader neither experiences complicity nor requires catharsis. A closer examination of the nature of the detective novel reveals something far different from the conclusions of Wilson and Auden.

As Auden implies, the detective novel’s true appeal is literary. Neither a picture of actual crime, a pure game of wits, nor a popular but degenerate version of tragedy, it is a comedy. More specifically, it remains one of the last outposts of the comedy of manners in fiction. Once the comic nature of the detective story is revealed, then all of its most important characteristics betray a comic function. The central puzzle provides the usual complication, which the detective hero must remove; and its difficulty insures a typically comic engagement of the intellect. The whodunit’s plot, full of deceptions, red herrings, clues real and fabricated, parallels the usually intricate plots of comedy, which often depend upon mistaken motives, confusion, and dissembling; it also supports the familiar romantic subplot. And the upper class setting of the detective story places it even more precisely in

the tradition of the comedy of manners. Like the fiction of Jane Austen, George Meredith, and Henry James, the detective novel presents the necessary "stable and numerous society . . . in which the moral code can in some way be externalized in the more or less predictable details of daily life."⁵ The *haut monde* of the whodunit provides not only the accepted subject of the comedy of manners, but also furnishes the perfect place for the observable variations of human behavior to be translated into the significant clues of criminal investigation. The detective thriller maintains the necessary equivalence between the social and the moral code: a minute flaw in breeding, taste, or behavior—the wrong tie, the wrong accent, "bad form" of any sort—translates as a violation of an accepted ethical system and provides grounds for expulsion or condemnation. Because of this system the unofficial investigator succeeds where the police fail. They are ordinary, bourgeois citizens who intrude into a closed, aristocratic society; unable to comprehend the complex and delicate social code, they are invariably stymied. The amateur detective, conversely, always is socially acceptable and comprehends the code of the society he investigates—he can question with delicacy, notice "bad form," or understand lying like a gentleman to the police; therefore, he always triumphs over the mundane ways of the official forces of law and order. In fact, although the most frequent types of detective hero derive superficially from the brilliant eccentrics of nineteenth century detective stories, in reality they owe more to the archetypal heroes of comedy. There is more of Shakespeare, Congreve, and Sheridan than Poe, Conan Doyle, and Chesterton in their creation. Even the characters who dwell in the usual settings of detective fiction share close relationships with the humors characters of literary comedy, which may be why they are so often criticized as mere puppets and stereotypes. Finally, in theme, value, and structure, the formal detective novel displays a close alliance with some of the great works of comic literature of the past; both its peculiar, often-criticized nature and its great popularity result from the attributes and attractions of a particular, stylized, and aristocratic type. Consequently, it would be more appropriate to call the detective novel the "thriller of manners."

The most important personage in any comedy, of course, is the hero, who may not necessarily involve himself, except as a problem solver, in the chief romantic plot, but usually deserves credit for clearing up the obstacles to happiness which comedy traditionally presents. Characters like Prospero, Brainworm, and Tony Lumpkin, for example, are the problem-solvers of their plays, but do not share the romantic hero's rewards. The comic hero of the detective story is the sleuth, often distinctive and prepossessing enough to earn the title of Great Detective, who initially develops from the Poe-Conan Doyle tradition, which may at first seem an unlikely beginning for the comedy of manners.

Poe, it is generally agreed, invented the detective story and established its basic conventions—the murky atmosphere, the insoluble problem, the *outré* method, the incredible deductions, the adoring Boswell, and the gifted being who unravels

⁵ John Williams, "The 'Western': Definition of a Myth," *The Popular Arts*, ed. Irving and Harriet A. Deer (New York, 1967), p. 102.

the most difficult crimes.⁶ His prototypical detective, C. Auguste Dupin, possesses a dual temperament, “both creative and . . . resolute,” combining the intuition of the poet with the analytical ability of the mathematician; the fusion gives him extraordinary deductive powers, enabling him, for example, to reconstruct his companion’s chain of thought from a few penetrating physical observations (“The Murders in the Rue Morgue”). “Enamored of the Night,” he shares unusual tastes with his deferential narrator-stooge—they dwell in a “time-eaten and grotesque mansion” which suits “the rather fantastic gloom of [their] common temper.” Not at all a comic figure, Dupin exhibits the striking characteristics of intellectual brilliance and personal eccentricity which indelibly mark all later detective heroes.

From Dupin, with some slight influence from Gaboriau and Wilkie Collins,⁷ springs Sherlock Holmes, the most important and beloved sleuth in literature, whose creator took the Poe character and formula, condensed the pompous essays on the ratiocinative faculties, added a more concrete sense of life, dispelled the romantic gloom and substituted a lovingly detailed picture of late Victorian England. Like Dupin, Holmes displays extraordinary deductive powers, inferring an entire life history from the most trivial items (a hat in “The Blue Carbuncle,” a watch in *The Sign of Four*, a pipe in “The Yellow Face”). Though endowed with the Dupinesque dual temperament—Wilson calls Holmes a “romantic personality possessed by the scientific spirit”—Holmes is considerably less morbid and more endearing than his prototype; his foibles are the understandable eccentricities of a man of genius. He lives in a state of Bohemian disorder, smokes foul tobacco, relieves his chronic melancholia by playing the violin or taking cocaine, and even shoots a patriotic V. R. on his walls with a heavy calibre pistol. Conan Doyle developed Poe’s inventions further, giving his detective varied abilities and wide and exotic interests, especially in the sciences of criminology. (Holmes, for example, is the author of a pamphlet on the one hundred and forty varieties of tobacco ash and of a “trifling monograph” analyzing one hundred and sixty separate ciphers.) He established the convention of singular knowledge symbolizing great knowledge: the unusual, with a certain sleight of hand, passed for the universal. Conan Doyle also expressed in conversational, epigrammatic form his detective’s peculiar personality and superior intellect: Holmes caps one solution, for example, with “There were twenty-three other deductions which would be of more interest to experts than to you” (“The Reigate Puzzle”). He compresses into one sentence the principle of all fictional detectives: “Eliminate all other factors, and the one which remains must be the truth” (*The Sign of Four*). Holmes also displays a penchant for memorable phrases which influence the speech patterns of later detectives: “The game’s afoot,” “You know my methods, Watson,” “These are deep waters, Watson,” or, in reply to an exclamation of wonder, “Elementary, my dear

⁶ This is the consensus of an overwhelming majority of historians, critics, writers, and readers. For pre-Poe detective themes and types (known to initiates as the incunabula) see Miss Murch’s book, note 1.

⁷ For detailed accounts of this development, see Murch, *op. cit.*, *Haycraft, Murder for Pleasure* (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1941) and *The Art of the Mystery Story*, and Julian Symons, *The Detective Story in Britain* (London: Longmans, Green, 1962).

Watson." He is given to pointing out a subtle and apparently irrelevant clue and deducing an unusual conclusion from it, all in a witty form of dialogue known as the "Sherlockism." The most often quoted of these occurs in "The Silver Blaze." Holmes calls a character's attention

"... to the curious incident of the dog in the night-time."

"The dog did nothing in the night-time," [is the reply.]

"That was the curious incident."

Whatever their individual differences, all other fictional detectives derive from the Dupin-Holmes tradition. Though many later sleuths may seem eminently un-Sherlockian in appearance, methods, and personality, they all exhibit the primary qualities of the Great Detective. They generally possess a physical appearance as distinctive as Holmes's hawklike profile—they may be either very tall or very short, very fat or very thin, or they may affect unusual attire. They are usually pronounced eccentrics, enjoying odd hobbies, interests, or life styles, and frequently overindulging in what Auden calls the "solitary oral vices" of eating, drinking, smoking, and boasting. Above all, whatever his particular method of detection the sleuth is blessed with a penetrating observation, highly developed logical powers, wide knowledge, and a brilliantly synthetic imagination: the detective story, unlike most kinds of popular literature, prizes intellectual gifts above all others.

But to change the Great Detective of short fiction to the comic hero of the novel required more than the Dupin-Holmes tradition. The antisocial bachelor with cranky and exotic interests could not adapt well to the large and complex world of the longer form. The detective of the novel demanded a fuller personal background, a greater cast of characters, a more gradual and intricate development of his investigation than the short story provided. The book that effectively transformed the short detective story into the novel of detection is E. C. Bentley's *Trent's Last Case*, published in 1913, while Sherlock Holmes was still practicing at 221B Baker Street. It is probably the most important work of detective fiction since Conan Doyle began writing in 1887, and has been much praised by critics and practitioners as a nearly perfect example of its type. In her historical study, *The Development of the Detective Novel*, A. E. Murch states the usual view of the book:

Trent's Last Case, a novel written at a period when the short detective story was still the most popular form of the genre, brought to fiction of this kind a more spacious atmosphere, time to consider and reconsider the implications of the evidence, and a new literary excellence.

More important, *Trent's Last Case* is the most influential source for the comedy of manners which came to dominate the formal detective novel. It introduced that favorite English detective, the gentleman amateur, in the person of Philip Trent—artist, popular journalist, lover of poetry, and dabbler in crime—the progenitor of all the insouciant dilettantes who breeze gracefully through detective fiction for the next thirty years. Because Trent is an obvious gentleman—immediately appar-

ent by his whimsical speech and shaggy tweeds—he can succeed where the official police cannot: the characters accept him socially, and his accomplishments (an artist's keen eye, well-bred sympathy, the ability to interrogate the French maid in her native tongue) give him greater mobility. Most important, he understands the social code of the world he investigates; in a significant exchange with the secretary of a murdered millionaire, Trent points the direction of later detective fiction:

"Apropos of nothing in particular . . . were you at Oxford?"

"Yes," said the young man. "Why do you ask?"

"I just wondered if I was right in my guess. It's one of the things you can very often tell about a man, isn't it?" (ch. vii).

Trent's sensitivity to those indecipherable things that characterize the Oxford man (by definition a gentleman) emphasizes his own gentlemanly status; moreover, a value system is established—no Oxford man, naturally, could be a murderer. Following Bentley, the detective novel largely abandoned its atmosphere of gloom and menace—a heritage of the Poe influence—and turned to the comic milieu of the traditional English novel. Its favorite detectives, settings, and characters resembled less and less their subliterate models and showed ever closer relationships with the favorite characters and types of traditional comedy. The Great Detective became a comic hero, as well as a transcendent and infallible sleuth; his solution of a difficult problem became the task of releasing a whole world from the bondage of suspicion and distrust. His task allied him with the archetypal problem-solvers of comedy—the tricky slave, the benevolent elf, the Prospero figure.

After *Trent's Last Case* the gentleman amateur dominates the full-length novel of detection. Although this character exhibits the Holmesian conventions of arcane knowledge, personal eccentricity, and idiosyncratic speech, these traits are diluted in the popular conception of the English gentleman. The sardonic savant becomes the witty connoisseur: wide researches are replaced by dilettantism, and the ironic Sherlockian speech is translated into bright and brittle badinage. Some of the best-known examples of this extremely popular detective are H. C. Bailey's Reginald Fortune, A. A. Milne's Antony Gillingham, Phillip MacDonald's Anthony Gethryn, Anthony Berkeley's Roger Sheringham, Margery Allingham's Albert Campion, Nicholas Blake's Nigel Strangeways, and the Oxonian policemen John Appleby and Roderick Alleyn, the creations of Michael Innes and Ngaio Marsh. The only important American versions of the type, which does not travel well, are S. S. Van Dine's Philo Vance and Ellery Queen's Ellery Queen.

The fusion of gentleman and detective reaches its zenith (some think its nadir) in Dorothy L. Sayers' noble sleuth, Lord Peter Wimsey, a full-fledged aristocrat as well as a fop, a bibliophile, and a gourmet.

He was a respectable scholar in five or six languages, a musician of some skill and more understanding, something of an expert in toxicology, a collector of rare editions, an entertaining man-about-town, and a common sensationalist (Clouds of Witness, ch. iv.).

Lord Peter combines the Great Detective with a familiar comic character. His var-

ied abilities, recondite interests, and high intelligence derive of course from the Holmesian genius; but his attire, languid air, and silly-ass speech ally him with the *gracioso* or dandy figure of comedy. Wimsey is partly a version of Jung's archetypal Wonderful Boy (or, as Auden calls him, "the priggish superman"), partly the "tricky slave" of Roman comedy (as Northrop Frye points out), partly the fop of Restoration comedy. As a detective he is, needless to say, a gentleman, a graduate of the proper schools (Eton and Oxford), aware of the subtle code of the thriller of manners. His consistent desire to make things come right—he is always rescuing people from themselves—translates him from the ludicrous dandy figure of satire to the intelligent mechanic of human complications.

Although the gentleman amateur overshadows all other detective heroes, some important sleuths derive from other comic archetypes. Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot, perhaps the most famous detective since Sherlock Holmes, combines something of the Holmesian tradition with that of the dandy, yet stands apart from both. Lacking the formidable personality of the Sherlockian genius and the airy manner of the *gracioso*, Poirot is an elf.

Poirot was an extraordinary looking little man. He was hardly more than five feet, four inches, but carried himself with great dignity. His head was exactly the shape of an egg, and he always perched it a little on one side. His moustache was very stiff and military. The neatness of his attire was almost incredible, I believe a speck of dust would have caused him more pain than a bullet wound (The Mysterious Affair at Styles, ch. ii).

In Poirot individuality of utterance becomes a rather tiresome difficulty with English idioms; his major eccentricity is an overweening faith in his "little gray cells." His short stature, his pomposity, his avuncular goodness, and his foreign, otherworldly air, place him with the kindly elves of the fairytale, as well as with Puck and Ariel. (Miss Christie's elderly spinster detective, Miss Jane Marple, is a kind of universal aunt or fairy godmother, a female Poirot.) Other elf types, of whom Poirot is the major representative, are G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown and Anthony Gilbert's Arthur Crook. Poirot, naturally, always employs his magic for good purposes, insuring that the fabric of society will be repaired after the temporary disruption of murder. It is not surprising that he especially tries to establish or restore conjugal happiness, a symbol of a newly reintegrated society and the traditional goal of all comedy.

Neither a dandy nor an elf, the third major problem-solver is the wizard. The detectives in this category retain the powerful physical presence and the convincing infallibility of the Sherlockian tradition. Rex Stout's curmudgeonly genius, Nero Wolfe, and John Dickson Carr's Sir Henry Merrivale and, above all, Dr. Gideon Fell, are the most successful examples and closest to the Great Detective. A scholar and lexicographer specializing in Satanism and witchcraft, Dr. Fell usually encounters the "impossible" murder, committed in the traditional hermetically sealed room. In addition to his wizardry, he radiates an immense benevolence and a Falstaffian gusto:

There was the doctor, bigger and stouter than ever. He wheezed. His red face shone, and his small eyes twinkled over eyeglasses on a broad black ribbon. There was a grin under his bandit's moustache, and chuckling upheavals animated his several chins. On his head was the inevitable black shovel-hat; his paunch projected from a voluminous black cloak. Filling the stairs in grandeur, he leaned on an ash cane with one hand and flourished another cane with the other. It was like meeting Father Christmas or Old King Cole. Indeed, Dr. Fell had frequently impersonated Old King Cole at garden pageants, and enjoyed the role immensely (The Mad Hatter Mystery, ch. i).

His love for the ancient British virtues and his enormous capacity for beer combine in his magnum opus, *The Drinking Customs of England from the Earliest Days*. When not outwitting evildoers, Dr. Fell assiduously pursues research for this book through all the novels in which he appears. His joviality, his resemblance to the kindly father figures of legend, and his expertise in the supernatural ally him with an archetypal wizard, Jung's Wise Old Man, the good magician or Prospero figure.

The usual settings of detective fiction serve a comic as well as a functional purpose. The novel invariably presents murder in isolated and luxurious surroundings, combining the necessities of the whodunit with the manners tradition. The setting limits the suspects to a manageable number and establishes an aura of wealth and gentility, the aristocratic atmosphere of high comedy. The ubiquitous English country house, whose attraction is confirmed by a glance at titles—*The Red House Mystery*, *Crooked House*, *Peril at End House*, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, *Scandal at High Chimneys*, *The House at Satan's Elbow*—separates a small, homogeneous, elite group from the rest of the world, performing the same function as the *mise en scène* of writers like Goldsmith, Sheridan, Jane Austen, George Meredith, and Henry James. Other settings serve the same purpose; the charity bazaars, men's clubs, card parties, hunting lodges, university common rooms, and snowbound resort hotels of the detective novel withstand the intrusions of the bourgeois policemen and the tramp who is always initially suspect. This posh and pedigreed society, remote from criminal reality, often irritates detective novel readers, but it offers social forms for the novelist of manners and, within those forms, the observable clues to human behavior by which the detective hero can identify the culprit.

Though basically homogeneous, this society does contain variety. Its members, though roughly equal in social standing, are not of the same class, family background, or profession. Within a limited range they comprise an English microcosm. There is always at least one representative of the squirearchy, one professional man—commonly a doctor, but sometimes a lawyer, professor, or schoolmaster—a cleancut young sporting type, and a military man (never below the rank of major), usually a veteran of colonial service. An English vicar, often a muscular Christian, frequently hovers about, providing a link with the Established Church. Like the vicar, the other characters serve an emblematic function: the beef-witted squire speaks for the rural aristocratic virtues, "huntin', shootin',

and fishin' " the sporting type exemplifies the "Barbarian" graces of good looks, athletic skill, and intellectual deficiency, and the military man stands for the Empire, bluff British honesty, the officer class.

One of the major criticisms of the detective novel is that its characters are merely stereotyped, cardboard constructions, serving the contrivances of a highly artificial method. Though the novelist often creates mere puppets, he errs in good company: his characters generally are modern versions of the humors characters of Roman, Renaissance, and Restoration comedy, people governed by an emblematic function, a single trait, or a necessity of plot. The cast, for example, usually includes a perfectly matched young couple, a "smashing," decent girl (poor, but of good family) and a spirited young man, to provide the traditional romantic plot. The circumstances of the murder frequently implicate the girl, so the young man covers up for her by destroying or manufacturing evidence, providing false alibis, and generally behaving like a gentleman. The detective sympathizes with such actions and avoids embarrassing the pair. In addition, he clears up the obstacle of criminal suspicion so that they can marry: they furnish the objective means by which the detective can benefit society. They are usually a pallid and uninteresting pair who possess little intrinsic appeal, but exist largely to reflect the powers of the comic hero.

Another favorite stock character is the obsessed philosopher or comic pedant, a man defined wholly in terms of his ruling passion, like "my uncle Toby" or Emma Woodhouse's father. He appears as Pastor Venables in Dorothy L. Sayers' *The Nine Tailors*; perhaps the most extreme example of the type, Venables' ruling passion is campanology. Others include the mechanically minded hobbyists of *The Problem of the Wire Cage* and *The Problem of the Green Capsule* (John Dickson Carr) and the physician of Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. Often these hobbyists use their unusual knowledge to fashion infernal machines or strange methods of murder, another example of a respectable comic tradition usefully adapted to functional detective purposes.

The military man owes to his comic archetype, the *miles gloriosus* or braggart soldier, a latent ridiculousness: easily recognizable by his phlegmatic temperament, brusque manner, and peculiar habits of speech, he often provides an object of satire. Sometimes he is used solely for humorous effect, as in Major Blunt's embarrassed wooing in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. His stiff upper lip emphasizes his class and his interests, as Colonel Marchbanks demonstrates while regretting the imprisonment on a murder charge of his host, the Duke of Denver, in Dorothy L. Sayers' *Clouds of Witness*: "'Awfully unpleasant for him, poor chap, and with the birds so good this year' " (ch. ii). Like the obsessed philosopher or the military man, most of the other characters achieve an almost archetypal level themselves, derived both from their frequent appearance in detective stories and their constant use in comedy. Usually they are defined only by their function, e.g., the young man is no more than a suitor or the squire no more than the conventional *senex iratus*. Just as part of the pleasure of comedy results from the author's skillful handling of his stock characters, so too the enjoyment of a mystery comes from the author's tampering with his stereotypes—the reader wonders which of

the perennial group will be the murderer this time.

The comedy of manners generally contains an expulsion of the socially undesirable which insures the continued happiness of those remaining. Similarly, the detective novel features two expulsions of "bad" or socially unfit characters: the victim and the murderer. Because only unlikeable characters are made to suffer permanently in comedy, pains are taken to make the victim worthy of his fate: he must be an exceptionally murderable man. This prevents regret and also insures that all characters have sufficient motive. The favorite victim of the mystery is also the favorite unsympathetic character of comedy—the blocking character, who works against such natural and desirable ends as joining the correctly matched young couple. A frequent victim, therefore, is the negative father or mother (a common comic obstacle) who opposes a marriage, makes an unfair will, or refuses to act his or her age, all actions which cause distress to the young. The squire, being elderly, stupid, and irascible, makes an excellent murderee. His fictional archetype is probably Squire Western, who wouldn't have lasted long if *Tom Jones*, a notable comedy of manners, had also been a detective novel. The victim of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is a *senex iratus* who forces an engagement on his stepson, impeding the path of true love and earning his doom. Old General Fentiman is murdered in Miss Sayers' *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* because he has made a bad will. Sigsbee Manderson in *Trent's Last Case* dies because he is much older than his wife, and a brute besides. The negative mothers, like the gross, evil Mrs. Boynton of Agatha Christie's *Appointment With Death*, also make expendable obstacles: Mrs. Boynton prevents her children from marrying, thus causing her death. Similarly, Mrs. Cavendish of Christie's *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* pays dearly for marrying a man much younger than herself and making an unfair will. All of these victims have hindered the natural course of events, chiefly by obstructing the path of true love. Such obstruction in any form of comedy means eventual defeat or exclusion; and in the exacting code of the detective novel, that exclusion means murder.

Another favorite victim is the ineligible mate, whose impending marriage to the decent young girl would interfere with her natural preference for the eligible young man. Since he is young, this victim is burdened with an even more specific sin: under his attractive exterior he conceals the personality of a bounder, a rotter, and a cad. The young victim of Carr's *The Problem of the Wire Cage* reveals his caddishness by taking advantage of a working class girl and cheating at tennis, offenses implicitly equivalent. Philip Boyes of Miss Sayers' *Strong Poison* earns expulsion by espousing free love, writing experimental novels, and making himself "an excrescence and a public nuisance," and (kiss of death) in being "a bit of a cad" (ch. iv). In another Sayers novel, *Clouds of Witness*, the dead man seems at first an inappropriate victim—handsome, dashing, an officer with a distinguished war record. But the coroner's inquest establishes his unfitness: he cheated at cards, which "was regarded as far more shameful than such sins as murder and adultery" (ch. i). Another rotter of the worst sort, Paul Alexis in *Have His Carcase*, meets an untimely end because he is a gigolo who preys on lonely, vulnerable women, a professional cad.

Other common fatal flaws, often indirectly related to the social ethic of the comedy of manners, merit violent exclusion. The victim may be guilty of exploiting the ritual of his society, posing as a gentleman, but hiding a dark, unacceptable secret. Mr. Shaitana of Agatha Christie's *Cards on the Table* exudes evil; in her *Murder in the Calais Coach* the victim is an American kidnapper posing as a philanthropist. The victim in Carr's *The Crooked Hinge* is a false claimant to a considerable country estate, neither a gentleman nor a true squire. Because he may have risen from humble beginnings to achieve the doctor's high status, the professional man—generally the only character who actually works for a living—is also a potential victim. On the rare occasions that a young woman is murdered, she is always revealed as a secret sinner under a respectable facade, like the murdered adulteress in Carr's *The Sleeping Sphinx*. (If she is not an adulteress masquerading as a respectable woman, she will then be an actress, never a very desirable occupation for a woman in English literature.) One other damning trait is a fatal un-Englishness. Foreigners lead dangerous lives in detective novels, and men otherwise exemplary die for merely ethnic reasons. The Mediterraneans of the detective novel never seem true gentlemen, perhaps a result of the Italian villainy of Elizabethan revenge tragedies and Gothic fiction. Anthony Morell is condemned on the fourth page of John Dickson Carr's *Death Turns the Tables*, where the reader is told "you would have taken him for an Italian." Since he is indeed an Italian, a businessman, and a symbol of lower class virility, Morell meets his doom three chapters later. The wealthy peer of *Whose Body?* loses his life because he is a Jew; Paul Alexis of *Have His Carcase* compounds his caddishness by being Russian; and in *Clouds of Witness* Denis Cathcart's French blood explains his inadequacy. (Hercule Poirot is a rare foreigner, tolerated by his society because he is faintly laughable and—like all detectives—represents no sexual threat.)

Virtually all victims, then, suffer their violent expulsion because of some breach of the unwritten social or ethical code of the thriller of manners. Even minute infractions, like ungentlemanliness, incur tremendous penalties. Violations of accepted morality, particularly adultery, are capital crimes; both immoral and ungentlemanly (or unladylike), infidelity usually demands the most rigorous penalty that society can apply. The offense of foreign birth or blood seems too trifling to be murdered for, but Englishmen in general distrust the foreigner, and the comedy of manners, which seems the quintessential representation of a ruling class, follows the prejudices of the society it depicts. The dark, handsome, charming man with gleaming white teeth and glossy black hair (all characteristic of the Latin in the whodunit) is generally marked for murder. Since he attempts also to woo the young girl, he serves a blocking function as well. Murder initiates the action of the detective novel, but its real purpose is to indicate the nature of the society in which it occurs, to provide a complication which requires the abilities of a comic hero, and to exclude a social undesirable.

The murderer, though technically a criminal, is more interesting than his victim and consequently occupies an ambivalent position. On the one hand, he has removed an obstacle, destroyed a rotter posing as a gentleman, or expelled a social

evil. On the other hand, he has committed the gravest human crime, an offense against both society and God, and has placed the other members of his group under suspicion. In short, he has created a complication which demands his own dismissal. Because he is intelligent enough to commit an ingenious crime and elude detection for most of the novel, he earns a certain admiration. However, since “good” (i.e., socially valuable) people cannot permanently suffer in comedy, the murderer must turn out to be somehow undesirable himself. Usually the culprit is a more acceptable person than his victim, because he comprehends the elaborate social ritual well enough to pose as an innocent. This sustained pretense of innocence culminates, however, in the unveiling of the murderer’s true character; the detective exposes him as an impostor, the *alazon*, a familiar comic figure who, Northrop Frye says, “pretends or tries to be something more than he is.” His crime is not the true cause of his defeat, only a symptom of it: like his victim, the murderer has guaranteed his doom by committing some earlier comic, social, or ethical mistake. Occasionally, the murderer’s motive grows from an earlier crime shared with the victim—blackmail or adultery. More frequently, the murderer may be yet another blocking character. Dr. Nick, the amiable psychiatrist of *The Problem of the Wire Cage*, is a villainous father surrogate who murders his young ward, tries to pin the crime on the eligible bachelor, and seeks to marry the ingénue himself. His crime, of course, violates moral laws, but it is his initial comic sin of multiple blocking that condemns him.

The physician, perhaps as a result of the many famous doctor-murderers (including Crippen), is always suspect in the detective novel. Familiar with many means of killing, especially poisons, and sharing the priest’s knowledge of secrets, the doctor occupies a delicate position. Dr. Sheppard, for example, murders Roger Ackroyd to prevent being revealed as a blackmailer; his violation of professional ethics, more than the murder, disrupts his world. Given the orthodox Christian bias of the whodunit, the medical man is often guilty on the additional grounds of favoring science over religion. Dorothy L. Sayers, the most energetic High Church propagandist among detective novelists, condemns two doctor-murderers—Penberthy of *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* and Sir Julian Freke of *Whose Body?*—because both favor an organic interpretation of metaphysics, contending that the soul is merely an outgrowth of inherent glandular and neurological weaknesses.

Another favorite murderer, as well as favorite victim, is the cad who passes himself off as a gentleman. Though the ordinary detective story reader, for example, may have to wait until the end of Dorothy L. Sayers’ *Have His Carcase* to discover the criminal, the student of literature recognizes him in Chapter XIII:

He stood about five foot eleven—a strongly built, heavyish man with a brick-red all-weather face. Evening dress did not suit him . . . one would expect him to look his best in country tweeds and leggings . . . Wimsey, summing him up with the man of the world’s experienced eye, placed him at once as a gentleman-farmer, who was not quite a gentleman and not much of a farmer.

Because he looks like a boor, behaves like a bounder, and is a False Squire to boot

("not much of a farmer" the murderer arouses Lord Peter's, and thereby society's disapproval, which is tantamount to utter condemnation. Although the rest of the novel is devoted to a number of aimless complications, including a wholly non-functional cipher, the mystery ceases to matter once the murderer has been identified by means of the manners tradition. Another imposter, young Ronald Merrick of Carr's *The Sleeping Sphinx*, appears at first an unlikely murderer, since he conforms to the social ethic. After all, how can a cleancut, athletic public school graduate who wears the approved rustic uniform—disreputable tweeds—be guilty of bad form? But Ronald is a rotter, as his artistic talents indicate and his adulterous affair with his victim confirms. Though his crime rids society of one sinner, normality returns only with his own, obviously well-deserved, removal.

The exclusion of the impostor often can be a relatively bloodless affair, provided certain conditions obtain: the rotter who displays some feeling for the code and the really brilliant murderer who has eliminated an obviously evil person, are often permitted to "do the gentlemanly thing" and commit suicide. Lord Peter provides Penberthy this way out in *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*. The gifted Sir Julian Freke of *Whose Body?* and the murderer of Roger Ackroyd poison themselves. And even Ronald Merrick chooses to kill himself rather than endure a public trial—those disreputable tweeds count for something, after all. Other brilliant, somewhat gentlemanly criminals are even occasionally allowed to escape punishment, provided their victims were inordinately evil, and that they never return to their original society again. This exception, however, applies only to those with a modicum of social awareness who have done their society a great service. Such criminals also help the detective by taking the final action out of his hands and sparing him any possible personal remorse. Such a murderer's ultimate action represents a conscious attempt at benevolence and obviously recommends his moral character more highly than his victim's. And since the detective's major concern lies in establishing the general innocence rather than punishing specific guilt, the actual fate of the criminal matters little, so long as he quits his society.

Once the murderer leaves, the world of the novel begins to approach its former peacefulness. The last chapter resembles the final scene of almost every traditional comedy. The successful sleuth presides over a feast of some kind in an appropriately convivial place and explains his reasoning, to the accompaniment of admiring comments from those assembled. The group usually consists of all the major characters in the novel—minus murderer and victim—who represent their society as it should be, cleansed of guilt, free of complication and obstacles, recreated anew from the shambles of a temporary disorder. They gather around a table in the library, at a pub, a dinner party, or even at a wedding: the rightly matched couple have finally married or made plans to marry, their relationship symbolizing the happy and orderly end toward which the detective has been working. Poirot, for example, manages a happy marriage in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, causing his Watson, Captain Hastings, to comment, "Who on earth but Poirot would have thought of a trial for murder as a restorer of conjugal happiness" (ch. xiii). At this feast the detective also explains red herrings, forgives those who (through the best of motives) have misled him, and offers advice for

the future. The comic hero employs his greatest gifts: he is an engineer of destiny, with the power to recreate a new society from the ruins of the old. Moreover, his acuity and perception, which had enabled him to penetrate both a social code and a complex mystery, now function as abilities even more magical: he presides over a festival of innocence celebrating a return to the usual normative state, and he distributes the miraculous gift of absolution by establishing the essential goodness and worth of the society that survives. As the tricky slave, the benevolent elf, or the Prospero of a particular world, the detective has rearranged human relationships to insure the reintegration and harmony of an entire social order. This conventional ending re-emphasizes the comic structure and function of the formal detective novel.

Often, in fact, the detective novel moves over into purely comic realms. This movement results quite naturally from the whodunit's origins in the manners traditions. In his book on Henry James, *The Expense of Vision*, Laurence Bedwell Holland has remarked of the novel of manners, "That the genre tends toward stylization is suggested by some of the predecessors which on the surface it most resembles: the literature of courtship, Shakespeare's idyllic comedies, Restoration comedy, and the literature of sensibility." As a highly conventionalized version of the thriller and a further stylization of a highly stylized form, the whodunit frequently exhibits a conscious tampering with conventions and becomes sophisticated self-parody. Anthony Berkeley has produced a number of startling variations on the normal whodunit, all of them skillful and individual: in *Trial and Error*, the murderer finds himself forced to prove his own guilt; in *Before the Fact*, the victim helps plan her own demise; in *The Poisoned Chocolates Case*, six different and utterly plausible solutions for one murder are suggested by six different amateur detectives. Agatha Christie has written one book, *Ten Little Indians*, in which all of the characters, including the murderer, are victims. Her best novel, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, serves a number of purposes: it provides the staple attributes of the detective story, satirizes the tiny rural village of King's Abbot, "rich in unmarried ladies and retired military officers . . . whose hobbies and recreations can be summed up in one word, 'gossip' " (ch. ii), and "tricks" the reader by revealing the narrator to be the murderer, a departure from convention that aroused considerable critical controversy.

Dorothy L. Sayers often wholly subordinates her mystery to a purely literary purpose. *The Nine Tailors* is less a detective novel than a nostalgic picture of life in the fen country of East Anglia. In *Gaudy Night* Lord Peter plays Mirabell to Harriet Vane's Millamant against the Oxford landscape of a "straight" academic comedy devoted to a rather repellent intellectual-feminist thesis. Though her *Clouds of Witness* seems at first a very complicated and satisfying novel of detection, it actually serves to vindicate the aristocratic way of life: Lord Peter defends his brother, the Duke of Denver, before the House of Lords, redeems the honor of his family, and selects the right mate for his flighty sister, who has a penchant for unsuitable men. Along the way he excludes the socially unfit—Bohemians, Socialists, "conchies," and cads—while bringing the right people together; the only complete villain in the novel, which has no murderer, is a lout of a farmer

who is conveniently run over by a taxicab. Michael Innes also employs the detective story for comic purposes—a satirical look at academic life in *Seven Suspects*, a humorous picture of the art world in *One Man Show*, a sly Jamesian parody in *Comedy of Terrors*; the highly literate Innes manages to satirize his characters, their world, and the mystery itself, all within the normal framework of the whodunit. Most of these works display not only the usual conditioning exerted by the comedy of manners on the whodunit, but also normal comedy of manners masquerading as the detective novel, further demonstrating the reciprocity between the two forms.

Even the detective himself is not immune to the incidental humor of more orthodox comedy. Lord Peter Wimsey, whose earlier novels satirize a wide variety of subjects, begins as a figure of fun before he eventually becomes a priggish superman. An exaggerated aristocrat in everything he does, Wimsey falls into his very best Bertie Wooster Oxonian even when confronting a poisoner:

"I read a book somewhere which said it was all done by leucocytes—those jolly little white corpuscles, don't you know—which sort of got around the stuff and hustled it along so that it couldn't do any harm . . . the point is that if you go on taking arsenic for a good long time . . . you establish a what-not, an immunity, and you can take six or seven grains at a time without so much as a touch of indigestion" (*Strong Poison*, ch. xv).

Less satirized in his later novels, Wimsey declines in humor as he develops in ability and personality (some attribute this decline to the author's gradually becoming too much enamored of her own creation to hold him up to ridicule). In the later books he displays superhuman versatility in addition to his already impressive skills—he shows himself, among other things, an expert bellringer, champion cricketer, successful international diplomat, and adept advertising copywriter. But his early books demonstrate the humorous potential within the detective hero, a potential that only faintly survives in Hercule Poirot's ludicrous appearance and mannerisms and Gideon Fell's Falstaffian presence. The detective never fully realized his intrinsic capacity for laughter, perhaps because the whodunit failed to enter wholly into the genre that inspired it.

The formal detective novel may succeed best in England because of its dependence on the mainstreams of the national literary heritage. Its use of the heroes, the characters, the archetypes and patterns of fictional comedy of manners for its major sources of theme and meaning is fully appropriate to that heritage. English fiction most often avoids and condemns the extremes of violence, disorder, or anti-social action, favoring instead wholeness, harmony, and social integration, the stable virtues of an essentially benevolent and correct society. Firmly in the mainstream of English literature, the detective novel shares a strong affinity with the "great tradition" identified by F. R. Leavis as central to British fiction. Since it also favors rural settings and rural (though upper-class) people, the formal detective novel shares with the novels of Jane Austen, George Eliot, Anthony Trollope, and George Meredith a tinge of the pastoral. This pastoralism explains in part the whodunit's characteristic distance from ordinary life: like the conven-

tional pastorals of Spenser or Sydney, the detective novel should be judged in terms of its form, rather than in reference to the life that teems outside its quiet, genteel world.

Again like other forms of English fiction, the whodunit assumes a benevolent and knowable universe. In part imitating Conan Doyle's ability to illuminate and transform the ordinary details of life, detective novelists liberally sprinkle charts, diagrams, timetables, maps, plans, and other concrete evidence throughout their books, indicating the English tradition of empirical thought. This penchant for the tangible implies a world that can be interpreted by human reason, embodied in the superior intellect of the detective. His penetration of facts and clues shows his power to apprehend particular reality and attach significance to the trivial residue of any human action. Finding a meaning in the tiniest clue enables the detective to know the truth; thus, his universe seems explainable, the typical cosmos of English fiction, unlike the extravagant and grotesque realities of the American novel. Like the Gothic novel, which treats the seemingly irrational and inexplicable, the detective novel always provides a plausible and rational explanation of even the most perplexing chain of events.

Though the whodunit lacks verisimilitude, it practices the specific literary realism of its major tradition, not so much true to all observable life, as true to its stylized segment of life and its own assumed vision. Having confined his vision to a particular complex of conventions, the detective novelist attempts only to meet the requirements of those conventions, with no reference to the realities of criminal behavior. The highly artificial nature of the form, combined with its pastoral tendencies, isolates it from the facts of life—a detective novel of thirty or forty years ago seems only slightly dated, if at all. The detective novels of the Golden Age never mention the tensions and dangers that threatened the precarious stability of the Twenties and Thirties. They say nothing of the Depression, the social, economic, and political unrest of that time, but choose to remain within the genteel luxury of an aristocratic world, suffering the intrusions of the police and the initially suspected nameless vagabond before the detective hero turns suspicion on society. Except for these brief intrusions, themselves conventional, the great concern of the detective novel is centripetal; it is a formal minuet leading to an inescapable conclusion, as mannered and unreal as the masque, the sonnet, or the drawing room farce.

Aside from its interest as a disappearing vestige of the comedy of manners, perhaps the most important question that remains involves the reasons for the form's flourishing at its particular moment in history. Its profoundly English nature and heritage supply one answer: the detective novel demonstrates perhaps the last identifiable place where traditional, genteel, British fashions, assumptions, and methods triumph in the twentieth century novel. Another answer to the enigma of the detective novel has been advanced by John Paterson, who feels the form answered a profound cultural need in the troubled times of the Golden Age:

In the age of the Boom, the Great Depression, flappers and gangsterism, and the Fascist Solution, it recalls the sober gentility and crude optimism of an earlier

*and more complacent generation; it asserts the triumph of a social order and decorum that have all but passed away.*⁸

In that sense, perhaps, the detective novel fulfills not only the functions of comedy, but also the purposes of works like the sonnet or the pastoral eclogue, both of which flourished in an age of violence and rapid change. Just as the Elizabethans often found solace in rigidly conventional, peaceful, and essentially unreal literary forms, so too the twentieth century Briton apparently longed for the aristocratic aura, knowable universe, and unerring truth-teller of the detective novel when poverty threatened the established social order, when the cosmos had lost its infinite meaning, and when the Big Lie drowned out all attempts at truth. Dreaming of luxury, longing for stability, desiring the security of formal rigidity, readers of all classes turned toward the detective story, where significant truth lurked behind the arrangement of cigars in an ashtray, where a timeless society re-established its innocence anew, where nobility triumphed over senility, where a wizard disposed of the bad parent, the impostor, the parvenu, the outsider, and bestowed his magical blessings on decent young women and deserving young men. The twentieth century reader, like the Elizabethan, could turn his back on the ugly reality around him and retreat into the stylized world of literary art. The kind of art that most satisfied him and most fully answered the deepest needs of his nation and time was, not surprisingly, comic.

⁸ "A Cosmic View of the Private Eye," *Saturday Review* (August 22, 1953), p. 7.