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Why do we read detective stories?

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Roland Barthes asserts that in order to be successful, a text must 'prove' to the reader that it 'desires' him.[1] He asserts that 'in the text, only the reader speaks'[2] and that ideally '[t]here is not, behind the text, someone active (the writer) and out front someone passive (the reader); there is not a subject and an object.'[3]

Barthes next makes a distinction between the *readerly* (any classic text), 'characterized by the pitiless divorce which the literary institution maintains between the [...] producer and user', leaving the reader 'intransitive', and the *writerly*, in which 'the goal is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text'. In this context, to 'read' a text is to merely accept or reject the text, while to 'write' it is to gain access to the 'pleasure of writing'.[4]

This considered, I propose that detective fiction is at its most successful when it is *writerly* on the three counts. Firstly, it must be accessible on a literal level and directed towards the reader, who must be able to read the text easily. As Barthes relates, 'The more a story is told in a well-spoken, straightforward way, in an even tone, the easier it is to [...] read it inside out', which 'wonderfully develops the pleasure of the text'.[5] Secondly, the structure of the text must allow the reader access to it, through being as concise as possible and following the transgression, detection, resolution formula. Similarly, to prevent the narrative from digressing from the central plot, the primary focus of the text must be on detective fiction and other genres or issues must not be intertwined into the narrative. As Barzun points out, the 'something else must remain the junior'.[6] Thirdly, in terms of content, Barthes insists that the *writerly* text is a 'medium of exchange'[7], and opposes the *readerly,* in which everything holds together and where 'discourse scrupulously keeps within a circle of solidarities'.[8] Therefore, detective fiction must break this solidarity and allow the reader to 'write' it intellectually, 'to fill in the chains of causality'[9], to involve himself in the plot, and give him the opportunity to figure out the crime in as fair a manner as possible.

Assuming that these three factors contribute to a pleasurable *writerly* text, I will analyse four detective fiction novels and demonstrate how *readerly* or *writerly* they are. I propose that Dorothy Sayers' *The Nine Tailors* and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's* Secret are *readerly*, whereas Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone* adhere to the *writerly* mode.

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[1] Roland Barthes,*The Pleasure of the Text*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p.6
[2] Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, (Toronto: Collins, 1984), p.151
[3] Barthes ,Pleasure, p.16
[4] Barthes, S/Z, p.4
[5] Barthes, Pleasure, p.26
[6] Jacques Barzun, 'Detection and the Literary Art' in *Fiction: A collection of critical essays*, ed. Robin W. Winks (London: Prentice-Hall, 1980), p.150
[7] Barthes, S/Z, p.90
[8] Ibid., p.156
[9] Ibid., p.181

Both Christie and Collins employ first person narratives in their novels. Christie's Shephard and Collins' array of narrators come from within the plot and their interaction with the reader brings him into the text as if he were part of the action, reading it 'inside out'. Collins' second narrative voice, Betteredge, quickly establishes a relationship between the text and the reader, remarking: 'I don't know how ready your attention is to wander when it's a book that asks for it, instead of a person',[10] clearly appealing to the reader to involve himself in the text and shifting it from the *readerly* to the *writerly*. The narrative voice is straightforward, colloquial and directly describes the views, thoughts and feelings of characters entrenched within the plot. The opening of the novel is paramount in demonstrating to the reader that his presence is 'desired'. In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Shephard commences the narrative with the reader in his home:

> 'It was just a few minutes after nine when I reached my home once more […] I am not going to pretend that at that moment I foresaw the events of the next few weeks […] But my instinct told me that there were stirring times ahead.'[11]

He immediately welcomes the reader into his thoughts, transforming him into what Barthes terms a 'producer of the text', privy first-hand to the 'stirring times' that lie ahead in the narrative. Similarly, *The Moonstone* opens with 'I address these lines - written in India – to my relatives in England' (Collins, 7), and from the offset the reader becomes exposed to all the information that the text's characters are. Betteredge, whose responsibility it is to capture the attention of the reader in the exposition to the text, is self-aware as a writer, and embarks upon narrating the novel with the reader almost over his shoulder. He directly addresses the audience upon realising that he is beginning to digress, remarking in the local vernacular that 'this don't look much like starting the story of the Diamond – does it?' (Collins, 16) and then proceeds with his narrative. The narratives of *The Moonstone* and that of Doctor Shephard continue in the same vein throughout the two novels, reading colloquially and allowing the reader into the text as if a colleague, or what Barthes would term an 'accomplice […] of the discourse', in being on the same level as the narrating character.

On the other hand, Braddon and Sayers employ third person narratives, which begin in a descriptive manner, fixing the reader into the landscape background. The reader is deemed an outsider looking in rather than an insider looking out through the eyes of the narrator. *The Nine Tailors* commences with a keen emphasis on its literariness, the opening paragraph exploding with alliterative phrases:
'The narrow, hump-backed bridge, blind as an eye-less beggar, spanned the dark drain at right-angles, dropping plumb down upon the narrow road that crested the dyke. Coming a trifle too fast across the bridge, blinded by the bitter easterly snowstorm, he had overshot the road and plunged down the side of the dyke into the deep ditch beyond'.[12]

Wilson argues that Sayers is 'more consciously literary than other detective fiction writers, and thus attracts attention in a "sub literary field"'.[13] In capturing the reader's attention in such a way, the text detracts from its objective as a detective novel, to take the reader on a ride of suspense and mystery. The reader's desire is not to plough through refined literature, yet throughout the novel, the literariness of *The Nine Tailors* pushes the reader away from the text. A key element of detective fiction is to allow the reader into the plot, or as Barthes puts it, to the make the text 'a medium of exchange.' Sayers herself warns

[10] Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone*, (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1999), p.35
[11] Agatha Christie, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, (London: HarperCollins, 2006)
[12] Dorothy. L Sayers, *The Nine Tailors*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2003), p.3
[13] Edmund Wilson, 'Who cares who killed Roger Ackroyd?' in *Fiction: A collection of critical essays*, ed. Robin W. Winks, p.36

that in rambling without direction the 'writer often stretches a plot beyond its capabilities'.[14] Strange then, that at various points in the narrative Sayers devotes several pages to the technicalities of bell-ringing, which is resultantly key to solving the case, for example: 'By taking the movements of one bell and writing the letters of your message in appropriate places and then filling up the places of the other bells with arbitraries [...] Take a plain course of Grandsire Doubles [...] write out the beginning of your plain course, and wherever No. 5 came you would put one letter of your message.' (Sayers, 245)

As well as alienating the reader literally by profoundly exploring an obscure subject, he is given no chance whatsoever to 'fill in the chains of causality' of the crime. It is only the deacon that has the necessary knowledge to be on Wimsey's wavelength, and as such the reader is not only outsmarted by the detective, but outshone by a character not endowed with detective intuition. These arduous, yet important passages leave the reader not wanting to read the text, firstly through boredom, and secondly through frustration, knowing that the information in front of him is of vast importance but unintelligible.

Lady Audley's Secret also opens in the literary mode, zooming in descriptively on the novel's central location, Audley Court:

> It lay low down in a hollow, rich with fine old timber and luxuriant pastures; and you came upon it through an avenue of limes, bordered on either side by meadows, over the high hedges of which the cattle looked inquisitively at you as you passed, wondering, perhaps, what you wanted; for there was no thoroughfare, and unless you were going to the Court you had no business there at all.[15]

Despite addressing the reader as 'you' and reluctantly inviting him into the text, the narrative ominously warns the reader that he has 'no business there', immediately excluding him from participating, and rendering him a mere 'consumer'. It sets the tone for the novel in putting various obstacles between reader and text, namely its literariness and unorthodox structure.

In detective fiction, form is arguably as important as content. Drawing on Aristotle, Sayers comments that all detective fiction should contain a beginning, middle and end.[16] In this way the text remains focussed and the reader is placed alongside the plot, seeing and hearing everything in the order symptomatic of the genre; transgression followed by the detection process and the resolution of the crime.

The Murder of Roger Ackroyd strictly follows this structure. Ackroyd is discovered dead in the fifth chapter, 'Murder', next, Poirot and Shephard investigate, questioning all the suspects and analysing evidence, and then Poirot reveals what happened in the denouement, in the chapters entitled 'The Whole Truth' and 'Nothing but the Truth', tying up loose ends and describing the complete circumstances of Ackroyd's death.

In *The Moonstone*, although the narrators recall information from the past, indeed writing their own accounts in retrospect, the information is presented to the reader in chronological order, with Betteredge often reminding us that he is doing his utmost to portray the events as accurately as possible without the interference of hindsight: 'But things must be put down in their places, as things actually happened-and you must please to jog on a little while longer with me [...] we shall be in the thick of the mystery soon, I promise you!' (Collins 26-27) The reader therefore remains on the same level as the narrator and is given just as much opportunity to decipher the puzzle as those present in the narrative. The focus of the narrative is constantly on the moonstone, its origin explained in the opening pages, and

[14] Dorothy L. Sayers, 'Aristotle on Detective Fiction' in *Fiction: A collection of critical essays*, ed. Robin W. Winks p.28

[15] Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p.1

[16] Sayers, p.27

its theft occurring on the opening night of the novel's chronological setting. The ensuing narrative then follows the investigations leading to discovering the whereabouts of the diamond and those who were involved in its theft. In Betteredge's first narrative, Blake's voice immediately outlines the structure of the plot:

> We have certain events to relate [...] the idea is that we should all write the story in turn, as far as our own experience extends and no further. We must begin by showing how the diamond first fell into the hands of my uncle Herncastle [...] [T]he next thing to do is to tell how the Diamond found its way into my aunt's house [...] and how it came to be lost.' (Collins 15-16)

Contrastingly, *Lady Audley's Secret* is structured in the complete opposite way. The narrative is shackled by a 'solidarity' uncommon to the genre; the immediate revelation of the transgressor's identity in the title of the novel, and there is no actual crime to solve, only to prove. Consequently, Braddon employs a complex symmetrical narrative structure in the novel. After Talboys' disappearance, Lady Audley is the obvious culprit. Robert Audley plans to map the life of Lady Audley back to the moment in which she changed identity, and the narrative tediously delays the moment in which this is proven. The reader easily figures this out before Robert Audley is overcome by a 'white change' after having 'removed the upper label from the box' to reveal her deceit (Braddon, 238), and long before he reveals it explicitly in the novel. He then strives to incriminate the transgressor, whose identity has been known all along. It is not chronological, and through a series of confusing flashbacks, the criminal having been identified before the narrative begins, the circumstances in which she transgressed are revealed in the middle of the novel, rather than at the end. If it were to follow the form of detective fiction, despite the novel having been delivered in an unorthodox manner, it would conclude in the moment that the transgression is confirmed, as Lady Audley caves in: 'I will confess anything-everything! […] you have conquered, Mr. Robert Audley. It is a great triumph is it not? A wonderful victory!' (Braddon, 345) However, instead of building to a climax where all is revealed, as successful detective fiction encourages, the novel limps on for more than a hundred pages, and the reader becomes even more 'intransitive'. In ignoring the structure of detective fiction set out by Aristotle and Sayers, Braddon's novel moves away from the genre and is undoubtedly more sensational than detective.

Furthermore, in detective fiction, focus must remain on the central plot, and any sub-plots and characterisation that digress from the detection must have relevance. Winks argues that although detective fiction is often termed 'sensational', it is actually the 'opposite', for 'though the action may be so, the process is to illuminate a special perspective on rationality.'[17] This considered, the inclusion of the relationships between Franklin Blake and Rachel Verinder, and Robert Audley and Clara Talboys, form an important contrast in terms of their contribution to the plot. Franklin and Rachel's relationship is paramount to the resolution of the crime, and her love for him impedes the much earlier discovery of the truth. Contrastingly, Audley and Clara's involvement has no bearing on the resolution of the crime, except as some trivial motivation that makes him further want to solve the mystery, and is included seemingly for the sake of permitting a happy ending.

Finally, an appropriate, focussed structure implemented, and the novel being intelligible on the surface, in its words, it is paramount that the reader is given a fair chance to guess the circumstances of the transgression and to identify the culprit. At this stage, it becomes necessary to disregard *Lady Audley's Secret*, because it is not written in a form that

[17] Robin W. Winks, 'Introduction' in *Fiction: A collection of critical essays*, ed. Robin W. Winks, p.5

engages with the reader, and is most certainly *readerly*. For an audience with the very intention of reading a detective novel, it arguably loses purpose. Despite at times being wordy and difficult to engage with, *The Nine Tailors* does adhere to the detective fiction genre structurally, and as in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and *The Moonstone,* the reader may be encouraged to push on, to seek what Barthes terms 'the most erotic portion of a body [,] *where the garment gapes*', being aware that there is an exciting, satisfactory ending in sight, in which he can play a part. As Barthes continues, 'there is no tear, no edges: a gradual unveiling: the entire excitation takes refuge in the *hope* of seeing the sexual organ (the schoolboy's dream) or in knowing the end of the story (novelistic satisfaction).'[18] After all, we do not read detective fiction merely for the sake of completing the novel. The obstacle of actual reading once passed, the novel approaching its conclusion, we expect something rewarding from the text, something that will inspire us to delve more deeply into the genre, to read detective fiction once more. To be *writerly* is one thing, to give pleasure to the reader is another.

All three novels set the scene for this climactic, pleasure-induced ending, taking place in closed communities typical of the genre in which there are limited suspects. The reader is aware that at least one of the family members or servants at the party in *The Moonstone* is responsible for stealing the diamond, the location eliminating any suspicion of outsider involvement. Similarly, a list of those present in the vicinity of the crime is drawn up in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, even if the deceptive narrator Shephard does not explicitly include himself as a suspect, and the reader knows that at least one of the characters described in the narrative is the murderer. Prior to explaining the circumstances of the crime, Poirot reminds the reader of the remaining suspects and gives them a final chance to guess the murderer, declaring that 'I know the murderer is in this room now.' (Christie, 294) In the same manner, the narrative of *The Nine Tailors* casts suspicion among various members of the insular community, and despite the crime having taken place before the time in which the novel begins, the reader is seemingly given an opportunity to decide who the perpetrator is, the eventual net apparently closing around the Thodays and Potty Peake.

All the ingredients are in place for a dramatic denouement where the reader discovers whether his intuition was correct, yet only *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and *The Moonstone* deliver a satisfactory explanation of events. Christie's novel indeed delivers something of a 'bamboozling' solution, the murderer being the narrator, but Sayers defends it, claiming that: 'All the necessary data are given. The reader ought to be able to guess the criminal'.[19] It therefore seems self-defeating that Sayers attributes the death in *The Nine Tailors* to divine intervention through the means of church bells, which results in an anti-climax, and leaves the reader feeling deceived:

> "There have always been [...] legends about Batty Thomas. She has slain two other men in times past, and [...] the bells are said to be jealous of the presence of evil. Perhaps God spoke through those mouths of inarticulate metal. He is a righteous judge, strong and patient, and is provoked every day." (Sayers, 373)

To relocate the 'chains of causality' outside of the text after apparently promising the reader a human transgressor leaves him in dismay and potentially kills his taste for more. To not allow the reader into the text as in *Lady Audley's Secret* is disappointing in itself, but for a *readerly* text to masquerade itself as *writerly*, inviting the reader's presence and desire under false pretences is sacrilegious.

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[18] Barthes, Pleasure, pp.9-10
[19] Dorothy L. Sayers, 'Introduction (ed.) to *The Omnibus of Crime* in *Fiction: A collection of critical essays*, ed. Robin W. Winks, p.74

Contrastingly, the human and explicable resolutions offered in *The Moonstone* and *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* make the reader want more. If indeed he did guess right, then the reader will have fulfilled his desire, and will be eager to read more of the genre to further stimulate his pleasure. If on the other hand he was mistaken in his ratiocination, he will feel deflated, but not deceived, and can still enjoy the text, stand in awe of it, knowing that he *could* have guessed correctly. This feeling of excitement will then induce him to read more detective fiction in the hope of seeing the sexual organ, knowing the end of the story, and even in further defeat, he will remain undeterred, ready to pick up the next novel in anticipation of a climactic victory.

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