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# Issue Editors' Notes
# Introduction to *Hybridization and Generic Experiments in Crime Narratives*

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This issue has grown out of the desire to contribute to the ongoing discussion about the status, genealogy, and criticism of crime fiction, foregrounding the genre's hybridity and intertextual playfulness through generic experimentation to deconstruct long-standing reductive views that have prioritized crime fiction's adherence to rules and strict narrative patterns. The new millennium has produced a heightened interest in the revision of the genre, and a number of acclaimed academics, such as Gill Plain,[1] Maurizio Ascari,[2] Andrew Pepper,[3] Alistair Rolls, Stewart King, or Jesper Gulddal,[4] have drawn attention to the critical shortcomings of the previous decades. These include the insistence on the rigorous boundaries between literary and genre fiction, the definitional problems due to the critical oblivion, the entanglement of various forms, styles, and genres—which result in a great diversity of crime narratives—as well as crime fiction's flexibility to address pressing local and global historical, political, and cultural concerns. Added to these is the recognition that crime fiction is not exclusively a Western European—British or French—and American product, but "has always been a resolutely transnational genre" (Allan et al. 1).

The accumulation of critical voices to advance a paradigm shift in the scholarship of crime fiction in the past two decades ultimately led to the publication of the edited volume *The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction* in 2020, which undoubtedly highlights this critical turn. The editors, Janice Allan, Jesper Gulddal, Stewart King, and Andrew Pepper emphasize that their volume is dedicated to discussing, first and foremost, "some of the new developments in crime fiction itself, particularly its hybridisation of forms, its engagement with digital technologies and social media, its interventions in the major political issues of our time, its transnationality and, perhaps most strikingly, its global circulation." Second, it addresses the latest theoretical approaches to the genre which they "consider to be [contributions to] an ongoing dual paradigm shift in recent crime fiction studies" (1), bringing to the fore the complexities of individual texts as well as crime fiction's interaction with and departure from established narrative patterns within national literary traditions (1).

Despite this breakthrough in academia, only few international academic conferences have been organized in the past few years dedicated to hybridity and generic experiments in crime narratives. The scarcity of international academic platforms to explore crime fiction's potential in the twenty-first century, especially the vivid interest in liberating the scholarship from the rather limiting, often paralyzing critical perspectives on narrative styles, forms and techniques, triggered the organization of the *Eleventh Captivating Criminality: Hybridization and Generic Experiments* international conference, held at Eszterházy Károly Catholic University in Eger (Hungary) between June 27 and 29, 2024, and co-organized with the International Crime Fiction Association. The three-day conference hosted scholars of crime fiction from around the world who were committed to critically re-reading crime narratives, ranging from classic texts—such as the nineteenth-century locked-room mysteries, the whodunit, or the hard-boiled—to more contemporary representatives of the genre, such as the postmodern, ecological, historical, or ethnic crime fiction. The conference participants' shared aim was to broaden the horizons of genre criticism by demonstrating how individual texts escape typologies and definitions as a result of their active interaction with other literary forms, styles, and genres. This ambition definitely calls for open-mindedness and goes against the orthodox critical views of the previous century, handling this huge field as a homogenous collection of texts, and, as Jesper Gulddal and Stewart King argue, "emphasi[zing] the stability and prescriptiveness of genre norms." Therefore, as the authors continue, "the first shift involves a re-description of crime fiction as a motley and spacious genre defined by hybridity and mobility rather than adherence to rules" (13), and the second shift ensues as a result of "the internationalization of the crime fiction universe," which sheds light on the transformations and unique blends of crime fiction tropes and patterns outside Anglophone literary traditions (13).

The present volume consists of a selection of articles expanding on the papers presented at the *Eleventh Captivating Criminality* conference. They demonstrate how the focus on the idiosyncrasies of individual texts—from different historical epochs—and their unique blending of forms, styles, and genres can (re-)vitalize critical approaches and raise awareness to crime fiction "as a field in flux where mutation, contamination and innovation take precedence over the purity of canonical forms" (Gulddal and King16). The term "hybridization" can aptly grasp the continuous process by which modes of crime fiction writing can be characterized since the genre's appearance as an established narrative form. While genre hybridity has

always been a recognized trait of crime fiction, Heather Duerre Humann points out that "the major expansion of the genre's boundaries" accelerated with postmodernism and globalization (58) "with its overt rejection of fixity, purity and authority in favor of pluralism and indeterminacy" (59). Although a general overview of the evolution of crime fiction reinforces this claim, the arrangement of the papers in this volume does not prioritize the chronological approach but follows the thematic connections between the articles. They, in turn, focus on genre hybridity in individual texts from the turn of the nineteenth century to the contemporary period to illustrate not only the dynamic amalgamation of literary genres but also how their unique blends comment on cultural and intercultural practices.

Ruth Heholt's opening study, "The Folk Horror and Crime Fiction Hybrid in *Heart of Darkness*," sheds new light on Joseph Conrad's essential contribution to the English modernist canon and the literary representation of colonization from the perspective of generic hybridity: it discusses Conrad's novella as a mixture of literary and genre fiction, specifically crime fiction and folk horror. The article identifies *Heart of Darkness* (1899), retrospectively and for the first time in its critical reception, as a folk horror text, thus contextualizing it through a generic term coined only recently and originally applied to post-1960s films. By meticulously tracing the four essential tropes of folk horror in Conrad's text, Heholt convincingly demonstrates the relevance of the generic label to *Heart of Darkness*, and thereby the necessity to extend the genre's history well beyond its established timeframe and medium. Just as importantly, her scrutiny of generic hybridity contributes to the discussion of Conrad's imperialism—featuring landmark texts by Chinua Achebe, Edward Said, and Benita Parry, to name only a few—by highlighting how Conrad's fundamental critique of colonization is partly formulated with the help of nuanced but all the more significant deviations from the classic folk horror patterns.

Remaining within the (post)colonial context, the second article by Ágnes Zsófia Kovács shows the other side of the coin by demonstrating how generic hybridity is utilized in the critique of racism in recent African-American crime fiction. "Hard-boiled Reinvestigations of African American History in Barbara Neely's *Blanche on the Lam* (1992) and *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* (1994)" discusses the intermingling of crime fiction—the female hard-boiled detective story—and the neo-slave narrative in the two eponymous novels to investigate how they rewrite racial history at the interface of the two seemingly incompatible approaches of unrelenting skepticism and hopeful optimism, which define the two genres, respectively.

Kovács argues that in *Blanche on the Lam* the eponymous protagonist of the four-volume series succeeds as an amateur detective through consciously exploiting the Mammy stereotype and using it as a cover in a narrative that fundamentally restages the captivity and liberation scenario of slave narratives in a contemporary environment of interracial racism. Yet, Blanche's limited opportunity to seek justice reflects the inherent skepticism of hard-boiled fiction rather than the hope for regeneration associated with neo-slave narratives. *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* is, if possible, even more skeptical in bringing to the limelight intraracial racism among the African-American elite of US society and tracing it back historically to W. E. B. Du Bois's highly influential notion targeted at promoting the social upward mobility and political representation of African-Americans. It is this historical arch that, Kovács demonstrates, qualifies the novel as a neo-slave narrative, though one that is nevertheless fully devoid of the genre's hope for healing and regeneration.

The third article, Michael Pronko's "'Just how dangerous is he?'—Cormac McCarthy's Hybridized Crime Fiction," remains within the context of specifically American genres to tackle comprehensive concerns of hybridization in crime fiction, such as the search for novelty, the melting of literary and genre fiction to address a wide audience, and the interrogation of social evils—wars, for instance—beyond the rationale of the actual "petty" crimes committed in a given narrative. Pronko demonstrates how generic hybridity is created and consistently maintained in McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* (2005) through narrative technique: the novel is an amalgam of three narratives told from the perspectives of three characters—Chigurh, Moss, and Sherriff Bell—who are distinctly rooted in three genres: horror, thriller, and the Western, respectively. For Pronko, the emergent generic hybrid is a blatant example of the "cross-pollination" between literary and genre fictions, which blurs the always permeable boundaries of the two in an artistically fruitful manner; in fact, blending the three genres and yet denying the narrative the conventional straightforward resolution of most crime fiction is, Pronko argues, key to McCarthy's artistic achievement. He fully exploits, Pronko adds, the tensions inherent in generic hybrids to create a postmodern crime novel. Though the article does not provide a systematic comparative analysis of McCarthy's novel and its 2007 film adaptation, it does rely on the evidence of the Coen brothers' inspired interpretation to substantiate its claims about generic hybridity.

The fourth article, Renáta Zsámba's "Wartime Knitting in Agatha Christie's *N or M?*" links to the previous discussion of generic hybridity in

crime fiction through the theme of war, and presents a perfect counterpoint to it by introducing the feminine tradition of Golden Age crime fiction, with a pronounced focus on the domestic sphere and female agency. As the author highlights, Christie's spy novel of 1941—just like her other Tommy and Tuppence narratives—suffers from both critical neglect and hostility. To counter the offhand dismissal of *N or M?* as "jingoistic" war propaganda, Zsámba offers a meticulous analysis of the knitting motif to argue that this spy novel—by definition a generic mixture of the adventure tale, detective, and espionage fiction—provides a platform for making sense of the inexplicable experience of the war from a feminine perspective. That goes hand in hand with addressing concerns of wartime xenophobia, spy fever, and misogyny, as well as subverting the propagandistic images of patriotic femininity through an exemplary representation of female agency. The article provides a nuanced discussion of the novel's multifaceted subversions through an inspired interpretation of *knitting magenta* against the backdrop of cultural history and historical semiotics to demonstrate that hybrid crime fiction can and does gesture beyond the actual crime structuring its plot to tackle highly complex social and political issues in an aptly complex manner.

Continuing the discussion of Golden Age crime fiction, the fourth article, co-authored by Jiří Jelínek and Jana Jelínková, provides a comparative analysis of another Christie novel—incidentally published in the same year, 1941, but featuring Poirot and thus being a core item of the Golden Age canon—with a focus on the motif of the sea. Evoking both cultural historical and myth critical contexts to underpin their analysis, the authors of "Turning Tides, Changing Times: Sea in *Evil Under the Sun* and *Journey to the South*" juxtapose Christie's canonical text with a twenty-first-century Czech postmodern novel to highlight how the detective genre contributes to the generic hybrid represented by the latter. At the same time, they draw attention to the manner in which the postmodern anti-detective story as literary fiction renegotiates the conventional connotations of the sea motif in genre fiction, exemplified by Christie's text, in accordance with the philosophical underpinnings and poetics of postmodernism. More specifically, they treat the two novels as representative of the two different worldviews, whose dissimilarities are brought into relief by the diametrical opposition of the two novels' respective treatment of the sea motif in shaping a (crime) narrative.

"Between Genre, Parody, and Criticism: Gilbert Adair's *The Act of Roger Murgatroyd*," the fifth article of the collection, resonates closely with

Jelínek and Jelínková's approach in comparing a Golden Age crime novel with a postmodern metafiction. A major and significant difference between the two studies results from the fact that, in contrast to the relatively loose intertextual connections between *Journey to the South* and *Evil Under the Sun*, *The Act of Roger Murgatroyd* (2006) is, as Felicitas Mayer emphasizes, a highly self-conscious parody of crime fiction, with countless echoes of specific Golden Age whodunits. As Mayer explains, consistently working with the conventions of the whodunit in his intricately intertextual postmodern metafiction, Adair retrospectively highlights the germs of these features in Golden Age crime fiction proper, thereby confirming the relevance of the genre in a postmodern context. In fact, Adair's exaggerated and therefore parodic use of generic conventions does not simply blur the boundaries between "fact" and "fiction" to call attention to the artificiality of the former, Mayer contends, but by doing so asserts an awareness of the same artificiality in Golden Age crime fiction.

While these two studies focus on how Golden Age crime fiction blends into and informs readers' understanding of hybrid postmodern texts, the sixth article of the collection returns to a mode of writing that has been a permanent component in the hybrid texts *per se* of crime fiction from its birth: the Gothic. Yet Šárka Dvořáková's "Peter May's *The Lewis Man* and Rebecca Wait's *Our Fathers:* A Scottish Gothic Reading of Island-Set Crime Fiction" neatly ties in with the previous articles by addressing contemporary fiction—Scottish novels from 2012 and 2020, respectively—and focusing on a definitive aspect of their sea-bound setting: the island. Dvořáková's argument is premised on a special feature of contemporary Scottish Gothic, namely the fact that the island has become its frequent setting, regardless of the location's wide-ranging associations with other modes of writing and genres, such as utopia/dystopia or the Robinsonade. Drawing on the implication that the island setting is an indicator of Gothic undertones in Scottish crime fiction, Dvořáková sets out to meticulously disentangle the connotations of this motif as well as other typically Scottish Gothic tropes in the two representative novels of her choice. Their interpretation both confirms the hybrid nature of the two novels discussed and suggests that it is through their Gothic components that the novels seem to comply with the demand to address complex social issues—in this case, the legacy of the colonial past and the intricacies of Scottish national identity—posed to crime fiction.

The next article, Emily Alice Farmer's "In True Crime We Trust: The Artifactuality of John Douglas and Mark Olshaker's *Mindhunter: Inside*

*the FBI Elite Serial Crime Unit* (2017) and Netflix's *Mindhunter* (2017)" continues the discussion of contemporary crime fiction by problematizing in a case study the very nature of a hybridized subgenre *per se*: true crime exists, as Farmer points out, at the interface of fiction and non-fiction. Hence arises the problem of consumption, which resides, the article claims, in the widely acknowledged fact that many readers/viewers process true crime narratives uncritically, without taking into consideration their fictionalized and mediated nature, their artifactuality. Farmer goes on to demonstrate through analyzing both the book and television series versions of *Mindhunter*, how true crime's marketing actually encourages such passive, unthinking consumption, that is, interpreting the narratives as entirely factual and unmediated. Her findings inspire Farmer to call for a generally critical attitude to the true crime genre as such instead of an automatic acceptance of its authenticity.

The ninth and closing article in the thematic block discusses the television series based on a parody of the true crime genre: the Coen brothers' *Fargo* (1996). As Angelika Reichmann's "Postmodern Genre-Bending on Mainstream TV: A Case Study of *Fargo* Season 5" demonstrates, although this season of the eponymous series retains the Coens' paraphernalia of true crime, it does not even bother to pretend to verisimilitude. After the conspicuously artistic and artificial first shots, as Reichmann highlights, a perplexing generic hybrid ensues. It offers an apparently incongruous mixture of the realistic and the fantastic through evoking a wide array of genres, including, again, myth, the Gothic, and the Western, to name only the ones connecting this article with previous discussions of hybridity in the present volume. Reichmann contextualizes this versatility of genres by evoking the motive forces behind hybridization, on the one hand. On the other hand, she provides an interpretation of their incongruity through identifying their respective roles in conveying the highly political, (post)feminist message of the series—a protest against domestic violence—in an ambiguous and complex manner, which addresses both mainstream audiences and fulfills the more sophisticated intellectual and artistic demands posed to high-end television drama. Hybridization, Reichmann argues, is key to the series' ability to comply with manifold market pressures, and yet attract much critical acclaim.

The last article of the issue is unrelated to generic hybridity and the crime genre but with a focus on encounters between humans and animals, it extends *HJEAS*'s dedication to explore anthropocentrism and ecological dilemmas, and the growing engagement of the humanities with

environmental issues. Jessica Murray's "Snakes on a Page: Re-reading Monstrosity and Vulnerability in Selected Contemporary Fiction" uses Literary Animal Studies, Critical Animal Studies, Vegan Studies, and Monster Studies as a theoretical framework to investigate three recently published novels, *Stay and Fight* (2019) by Madeline Ffitch, *Reptile Memoirs* (2022) by Silje Ulstein, and *Blue Skies* (2023) by T. C. Boyle. All three novels depict violent confrontations between children and snakes, the reptile enjoying a prominent position in Western (literary) imagination and whose representation endorses mainly negative stereotypes in the anthropocentric paradigm of animal representations. Murray's close textual readings convincingly argue that the three authors urge their readers to reconsider problematic and naturalized sociocultural assumptions about animals, the role they play in our lives, and the boundaries they are never supposed to transgress. The stories analyzed in the article relate critically to contemporary ethical engagement with the natural world and contain multiple examples of humanity's ever-expanding levels of self-delusional behavior. One shared motif is the antithetical arrangement of human vulnerability and animal monstrosity, a logic refuted by the authors who portray snakes attacking children as forms of monstrosity that implicate their owners or unfold in a framework of interspecies misunderstanding they created. By introducing a more-than-human gaze, Murray asserts, the novels destabilize and reverse the anthropocentric arrangement and propose a new one, that of human monstrosity and animal vulnerability.

The issue draws to a close with some stimulating reviews, John McLeod's perceptive commentaries on an edited collection of essays by Florian Stadler, contextualizing Salman Ruhdie's life and works, followed by Mária Kurdi's notes on Salomé Paul's *Marina Carr and Greek Tragedy: Feminist Myths of Monstrosity*, an insightful study on the best-known contemporary Irish woman playwright. Especially dear to *HJEAS* is Nina Lykke's review of *Symbiotic Posthumanist Ecologies in Western Literature, Philosophy and Art. Towards Theory and Practice*, edited by Peggy Karpouzou and Nikoleta Zampaki, two scholars who guest-edited the 2024/2 issue of this journal as a continuation of their research in the field of posthumanism. The review section concludes with Tibor Glant's informative assessment of *The Memory of Architecture in Edith Wharton's Travel Writing*, "a thought provoking contribution to both travel writing and Wharton studies as well as to American intellectual history" by Ágnes Zsófia Kovács, also a contributor to the present thematic block.

As Associate Editor of HJEAS, I wish to express my deepest gratitude to Angelika Reichmann and Renáta Zsámba of Eszterházy Károly Catholic University for bringing a truly international band of scholars together and guest-editing this book-length thematic block on generic experimentation and hybridity in crime narratives. Let me extend my gratitude to colleagues in the academia who accepted our request to review essays, to fellow editors, and Donald Morse, Editor-in-Chief, for helping us complete the issue.

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## Notes

1. Gill Plain's *Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (2001) was a crucial step in the re-reading of twentieth-century crime fiction with a critical approach to gender triggered by the oversimplification of the typologies of established subgenres, such as classical and hard-boiled, focusing on the detectives. Plain's book dismisses the historical overview of the literary traditions of detective fiction in favor of exploring "the complexity of popular fiction representations" (5) of the socio-cultural constructions of gender, sexuality and the body, which leads her to the recognition that the "corporeal landscape" closely examined in individual texts also reflects the adaptability of the form (6).

2. Maurizio Ascari's *A Counter-History of Crime Fiction. Supernatural, Gothic, Sensational* (2007) is probably the most significant book in its revision of the canon and twentieth-century criticism of crime fiction. Not only does he survey the early development of crime fiction, but he also discards the classic typologies designating the sharp boundaries between crime fiction and other genres. He is interested in "those hybrid zones where its [crime fiction's] conventions mingle with those of sensation fiction and the ghost story, or else are conflated with the discourses of pseudo-sciences" (Introduction xii). Re-reading texts either known too well or often discarded as falling outside the traditionally established borders of crime fiction (xi), used synonymously with detective fiction and associated with rationality and the quest for solution for decades ("Revising" 8–9), illuminates the fluidity of the genre and offers new insights into its development.

3. Andrew Pepper and David Schmidt's edited volume *Globalization and the State in Contemporary Crime Fiction* (2016) raises awareness to "the proliferation of crime fiction

cultures" and builds on Stewart King's argument that contemporary criticism needs to consider crime fiction "as an example of world literature to gain greater insights into the global reach of the genre" and to explore "international connections between works" (King qtd. in Pepper and Schmidt 10). Not only does this foreground crime fiction as a transnational field, but it also re-describes and broadens critical perspectives on how it can or should be viewed in the twenty-first century.

4. Jesper Gulddal, Stewart King, and Alistair Rolls's *Criminal Moves. Modes of Mobility in Crime Fiction*, published in 2019, is an edited collection of papers expanding on recent criticisms preparing the ground for a paradigm shift in crime fiction scholarship. The editors urge a serious re-consideration of earlier critical stances about "genre norms and conventions" (1) that prevent the engagement with what they "regard as the inherent *mobility* of crime fiction" (1, emphasis in original). They argue that crime fiction "must be seen as a genre constantly violating its own boundaries" (1) and can best be explored through its transnational circulation as well as the analysis of individual texts previously demonstrated by Gill Plain, Lee Horsley or Merja Makinen in the early 2000s. Finally, in 2022, Gulddal, King, and Rolls published their edited volume *The Cambridge Companion to World Crime Fiction* to bring together and reach beyond the critical findings of the past two decades with a special focus on the status and generic features of crime fiction as a global phenomenon (1). As the title of the volume promises, the collection moves beyond the exploration of Western crime fiction writing and attempts to identify its roots and literary antecedents in other cultures, not to mention the role of translations, which also helped establish local crime fiction cultures. The editors also point out that global adaptations of crime fiction formulas illuminate formal hybridizations resulting in local versions of crime writing (1).

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# The Folk Horror and Crime Fiction Hybrid in *Heart of Darkness*

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***HJEAS***

**ABSTRACT**

This article explores hybridization and generic experiments within the crossovers and intersections between crime fiction and folk horror in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Published in 1899, this novella is a beautiful, grimly bleak look at colonialism. Chinua Achebe identifies *Heart of Darkness* racism and scathingly calls it "'permanent' literature," which is, he explains, "read and taught and constantly evaluated by serious academics" (15). This article applies genre fiction to this revered canonical novella, retrospectively identifying it as a folk horror text. *Heart of Darkness* has been categorized as a crime/detective narrative before (see Brooks 238–63), but I will argue that examining *Heart of Darkness* as a hybrid of crime fiction and folk horror allows us to look askance at a text that has engendered so much scholarship and criticism. Mapping the narrative trajectory through, in particular, a folk horror lens, can deepen our understanding of the nuances and contradictions present in the text. (RH)

**KEYWORDS**: *Heart of Darkness;* colonialism; folk horror; crime

## Introduction

This article explores hybridization and generic experiments within the crossovers and intersections between crime fiction and folk horror in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Published in 1899, this novella is a beautiful, grimly bleak look at colonialism. Chinua Achebe scathingly calls it "'permanent' literature," which is, he explains, "read and taught and constantly evaluated by serious academics" (15). There is no doubt that in Anglophone countries Conrad's text has a lofty place in the canon of English literature and that it is taught in countries as far apart as Italy and Hong Kong. This article applies genre fiction to this revered canonical novella, and provides a retrospective identification of the text as a folk horror text. *Heart of Darkness* has been identified as a crime/detective narrative (see Brooks 238–63) but I will argue that looking at it as a hybrid, a blend of crime fiction and folk horror allows us to look askance at a text that has engendered so much scholarship and criticism. Mapping the

narrative trajectory through, in particular, a folk horror lens, can deepen our understanding of the nuances and contradictions present in the text. Folk horror texts are very often also crime fiction texts and crime fiction itself has a rich seam of folk horror running through it. There are true hybrids to explore and an application of genre fiction and theory to a literary text highlights some unexpected connections and illuminates some subtleties that may have been hidden before.

The term *folk horror* was popularized by Mark Gatiss, who coined it in relation to films in 2010 during his television documentary on the history of horror. The identification of the folk horror genre coalesced more coherently with Adam Scovell's important 2017 book *Hours Dreadful and Things Strange,* in which Scovell clarifies what he calls the "Folk Horror Chain" (15–19) and he identifies four main tropes of folk horror texts. The first is *landscape,* most often a rural, ancient landscape—or rather, eerie palimpsests of landscapes that seem vast and inhuman. The second is *isolation*, that is, the sense of being "out of the world"—perhaps a tiny community or people cut off from what could be seen as "civilization." The third comes from these communities: *skewed belief systems and morality*. The sense of an isolated world or community where ordinary beliefs and "common sense" morality do not exist. Instead, ancient pagan beliefs continue and flourish, as Scovell puts it, "away from Modern eyes" (18). And in these isolated communities, what we might see as crime is often not viewed as criminal. The final trope, *a summoning or a happening* (19), leads to the dénouement. Something (usually evil) appears—sometimes accidentally, sometimes it is invited. Ancient entities rear their heads, or isolated communities do their worst.

From this we can see that it is inevitable that folk horror and crime fiction will have an affinity: folk horror and crime fiction are often inextricably linked. In very many folk horror texts the concept of law and order is important. Law and lore mix and meld and the focus of many folk horror texts are the unacceptable beliefs and practices such as ritual murder and blood sacrifice. Law and order of any conventional sort break down entirely into a carnivalesque reversal.

*Heart of Darkness* has been peripherally identified as crime fiction and never as folk horror. Although Joseph Conrad's famous novella follows in the footsteps of the popular imperial adventure stories of H. Rider Haggard and Rudyard Kipling, it is a literary text and there can be a snobbery about genre labels such as crime fiction and folk horror. This article attempts to deconstruct this genre snobbery and argue that the depth evidenced in *Heart*

*of Darkness* comes, at least in part, from its generic experiments and brushes with crime and folk horror. Critics have often likened the text to crime fiction. Owen Knowles claims that *Heart of Darkness* "often works—like a detective investigation . . .—through symptomatic clues, ciphers, witnesses, and testimonies" (82), while J. Paccaud calls Marlow an "unwilling detective" (42). Conrad's text exemplifies an über text of crime that is infiltrated with folk horror. In this way I will retrospectively identify *Heart of Darkness* as folk horror in order to strengthen the history of the genre and to back-up the claim of the text's anti-imperial "heart."

Anyone studying *Heart of Darkness* is aware of Chinua Achebe's stark statement made in 1977 that "Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist" (21). He claims, "*Heart of Darkness* projects the 'Image of Africa' as other world, the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where a man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality" (15). This view was seen as quite shocking at the time, particularly as it is such a canonical and revered text. Achebe's words, however, provided a good wake up call. The raging question of whether or not the text is racist has continued to provoke heated debate, but it has become more nuanced over the years, with the consensus seeming to rest with an acknowledgement of a "double vision" within the text, whereby Conrad offers a scathing critique of imperialism but only within the ideological/imperialist/racist discourse that he was able to both think and write in. This is what Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism* terms Conrad's "two visions" (20). Whichever way you look at the text though, racism is ever present in one form or another throughout the novella, whether through Conrad's own culturally-bound views, or through the depiction of racism as critique.

Although most readers will be familiar with the text, it is worth just briefly recapping the very basic story. Employed to travel up the Congo River to bring back the legendary Mr. Kurtz, Charles Marlow encounters cruelty, criminal futility, greed, waste, and murder. Hired by a Belgian imperial company (like the East India Company), Marlow and a small group of both white and native people travel up the river into the jungle. For Marlow, his journey into this vast wilderness is a journey of detection, leading him to Kurtz. The deeper he penetrates into the jungle, the more he learns about Kurtz. Witnessing terrible violence and folly, Marlow acts like an investigator as he follows his winding, dangerous path. Kurtz is, we hear, an "exceptional" man who has a station way up the river (32). He has brought down more ivory to the main stations than any other agent.

However, he may now be dying and his methods have become "unsound" (89). In the article "Witness to Death," Sung Ryol Kim states that "perhaps of all Conrad's works of fiction, *Heart of Darkness* is the bloodiest in terms of the images of violence and death" (59). Kim continues, "Conrad exposes the radical disjunction between the reality and the ideal of the European colonizing mission in Africa, and this reality is a horrifying one in which natives are being murdered" (69). Along his journey Marlow sees a gang of chained native people who are designated "criminals," he states:

> I've seen the devil of violence, and the devil of greed, and the devil of hot desire; but, by all the stars! There were strong, lusty, red-eyed devils, that swayed and drove men—men, I tell you. But as I stood on this hillside, I foresaw that in the blinding sunshine of that land I would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly. (23)

This "flabby, . . . pitiless folly" of the "weak eyed" white colonizers saturates the book. And the concept of crimes—of who are the criminals and who are not—is turned on its head.

The main story of *Heart of Darkness* starts with a murder, which is how Marlow gets his position. This murder is futile and stupid. In Marlow's words, "the original quarrel arose from a misunderstanding about some hens. Yes, two black hens" (13). Captain Fresleven, "the gentlest, quietest creature that ever walked on two legs" beat the chief of the village so badly that his son stepped in and, "in desperation . . . made a tentative jab with a spear at the white man and killed him on the spot" (13). This is a pointless, worthless crime that sets the tone of the novella, that of senseless violence and almost accidental viciousness. But, as Marlow contends, "out there there were no external checks" (32). As he travels on, Marlow comes upon a small group of white treasure hunters calling themselves the "Eldorado Exploring Expedition." This, he laments, is just a criminal enterprise: "[t]o tear the treasure out of the bowels of the land was their desire, with no more moral purpose at the back of it than there is in burglars breaking into a safe" (44). As Kim explains, "[t]he real criminals are of course the Europeans who participate in the imperial project, their viciousness taking the form of organized violence. The African corpses that Marlow stumbles upon bear the mark of this organized criminality" (69). Here we have the intersections and hybridizations of literary fiction and crime fiction. There is theft, organized violence, murder, and other crimes. One of the great crimes

in *Heart of Darkness* comes with rapacious and blind greed. Marlow notes, "The word 'ivory' rang in the air, was whispered, was sighed. You would think they were praying to it. A taint of imbecile rapacity blew through it all, like a whiff from some corpse." (33) Greed has taken over from God. There is a taint of imbecility and death here. And it is the outsiders who are committing the crimes. The overweening, hubristic, rapacious, violent, and racist nationalism of the European countries involved in imperialism thrust themselves into the isolated communities they destroy and plunder.

**Backwards into pre-history: Nature and folk horror**

The frame narrative of the novella does not begin in Africa but aboard a ship called the *Nellie*, where our protagonist Marlow and his fellow seamen are waiting quietly on the Thames in London for the tide to turn. There is a complicated palimpsest of narrative layers. Both folk horror and crime fiction narratives consist of multiple layers that question truth, origin, and narrative perspectives. There is a reading backwards. Michael Cook calls this "one of the cornerstones of the classic detective narrative: the backward progression of the logic from effect to cause" (19). In folk horror, this reading backwards tends to look backwards to questions of origin (which will never be found)—origins of folk communities, objects, cults, or the horrifying and the supernatural. There is often a deep sense of the past in folk horror texts—beginnings and truth shrouded in the mists of what James Thurgill has called "deep time" in relation to folk horror (47).

In *Heart of Darkness* Marlow retells the story of his journey in a retrospective narrative. In the colonial view, there is an inevitability of reading backwards as they travel further into the "empty" places on the map. In folk horror, this is often a teleological reading back—unearthing, reviving, re-living the past. Matthew Cheeseman states that "Folk Horror relies on a sense of, if not the prehistorical, then the ahistorical, or atemporal. It draws its anger and strength from being before or aside history" (406). In *Heart of Darkness* Marlow's journey takes him back to the prehistorical. In his description:

> Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. . . .
>
> The broadening waters flowed through a mob of wooded islands; you lost your way on that river as you would in a desert, . . . till you thought yourself bewitched and cut off for ever from everything you had known

> once—somewhere—far away—in another existence perhaps. . . . And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect. (48–49)

Going up the river is traveling back in time. Thurgill advances the idea that folk horror texts present what he calls a "*topophobia* of rural landscapes as *a priori*, suggesting that pastoral spaces are conceived of in the popular geographic imagination as inherently threatening. This suggests that, at their core, 'countryside' geographies are read as problematic spaces due to their perceived isolation and *backwardness*." (34) Marlow and his crew are on a journey towards what were seen as the old ways, the primitive, the un-civilized. And they are traveling in extreme isolation.

Nature itself is threatening. As Thurgill says: "[t]here is a tangible anxiety or discomfort with landscape present throughout folk horror—a framing of rural landscapes as simultaneously innocuous yet malign, a sense that, underneath the superficial solitude of the pastoral, malevolent forces are working to promote acts of unspeakable violence" (49). The landscape has agency and is malign. The land has an "inscrutable intention" and a "vengeful aspect" (49). It is brooding, waiting, watching. The wilderness is massive and ancient:

> We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness. It was very quiet there . . . . We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance . . . .
>
> We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings . . . . We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember because we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign—and no memories. (50)

They have gone too far. And they have gone past comprehension. They can hear, but not see people in the jungle wilderness: "[t]he prehistoric man was cursing us, praying to us, welcoming us—who could tell?" (50). Marlow sees prehistory, which is, of course, one of the centuries-old stereotypes/myths/inaccurate Western views of Africa: it is not just still prehistoric but that it has no history at all. No progress, no movement. In this colonial view there is an inevitability of reading backwards as they travel further into the empty places on the map.

In many folk horror texts, there is a sense of traveling away from civilization and there is very often a sense of nostalgia. There have been criticisms of this, of course; as Dawn Keetley says, "the regressive nostalgic impulses of folk horror's landscapes . . . mirror (and even perpetuate) tendencies toward an insular nationalism" (8). The imperial adventure stories of Kipling and Rider Hagard have been identified as brimming with what Renato Rosaldo terms "imperialist nostalgia," a concept translatable to folk horror texts whereby "people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed" (69). In folk horror works this nostalgia manifests itself as an undoubted pull towards what is seen as the primitive, the un-civilized. In one of the most famous and most often quoted passages in *Heart of Darkness* Marlow muses on this attraction:

> The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if you were man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of that noise, a dim suspicion of there being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend. (52)

There is kinship and an attraction towards the "monstrous and free." There is authenticity, "frankness," and truth here, a call from that "night of first ages." Marlow declares: "Principles won't do. Acquisitions, clothes, pretty rags—rags that would fly off at the first good shake" (52). Civilization means nothing and will fly off at any "good shake." Marlow, the white, supposedly civilized colonial man sees kinship and common humanity. And it terrifies him, this "faintest trace" of a response to the native people. It is, he suggests, "ugly" but true. It is particularly in relation to this passage that Achebe calls Conrad a racist. But this is Marlow speaking, not necessarily Conrad. And Marlow feels a kinship between the Africans and himself, albeit that this is expressed in racist language and conceptions of the Black other. He feels the pull from what he calls "monstrous freedom." But there is still recognition and a harkening backwards to that "night of first ages."

*Heart of Darkness* does not deal with an isolated community such as those often seen in folk horror texts. And although Marlow and his fellow travelers might stumble unwittingly into what folk horror would see as an isolated community, that community belongs rightfully to its inhabitants. Marlow might see kinship in the "howling, leaping, spinning" natives with their dances, songs, and drumming, but in this place it is not they who are the monsters. As he travels towards Kurtz, Marlow sees a boat "paddled by black fellows":

> They shouted, sang; their bodies streamed with perspiration; they had faces like grotesque masks . . . but they had bone, muscle, a wild vitality, an intense energy of movement, that was as natural and true as the surf along their coast. They wanted no excuse for being there. They were a great comfort to look at. (20)

Undoubtedly racist from Marlow's narrative, but there is a recognition that these people belong in this landscape: it is theirs. As outsiders, there is a strong sense that these white men should not be here. It is not their place, and it is dangerous for everyone that they have come. Keetley argues that the folk horror plot has a

> permeable boundary between "normality" and the "monster"—[it] is driven, in fact, by a kind of doubled "othering" and thus a doubled "normality." The seeming protagonists, avatars of "normality," are never completely "normal," and the apparently monstrous antagonists that threaten them are never completely "monstrous." In other words, both the protagonists and the antagonists—typically the "outsiders" and the community they stumble into—are each simultaneously "normal" and "other." The extent of the ambiguity pervading this central divide of horror, the extent of the ambiguity surrounding "normality" and the "monster," is one of the most distinctive traits of folk horror. (19–20)

Who is the monster in *Heart of Darkness*? Marlow and his group are undoubtedly the outsiders, representatives, one would suppose, of European "normality." But for the white colonizing men, the wilderness, this land where they do not belong and from which they want to steal, is extremely dangerous and poses an existential threat. However, they too pose a threat and one that is perhaps even greater.

Talking about isolation in folk horror texts, Scovell caims:

> The landscape must in some way isolate a key body of characters, whether it be just a handful of individuals or a small-scale community. Creatures are "banished" to this landscape but the implication is actually that it is an inhospitable place because it is in some way different from general society as a whole and not simply because of a harsher topography. Isolation in a specific Folk Horror context is even more extreme. (17)

It is both Marlow and Kurtz, who are banished here—neither belongs. And this land is vastly different to where either of them come from. In true folk horror fashion, they are moving further away from what they see as civilization and out into the isolated wilderness.

Commenting on landscape and isolation, Scovell highlights that "[t]he landscape is essentially the first link, where elements within its topography have adverse effects on the social and moral identity of its inhabitants" (17). In *Heart of Darkness*, it is the morality of Kurtz that is at question in the most extreme way. To quote Achebe, the moral seems to be: "[k]eep away from Africa, or else!" (25). Marlow sees the danger. He says at one point of the journey: "The forest, the creek, the mud, the river—seemed to beckon with a dishonouring flourish before the sunlit face of the land a treacherous appeal to the lurking death, to the hidden evil, to the profound darkness at its heart" (48). But throughout the book there is a sense that the wilderness can get you. Marlow resists often through a sense of duty and by applying himself to small, practical tasks. Kurtz does not resist. The isolation, the wilderness gets inside him. As the seamen sit on board the *Nellie* on the Thames, Marlow tells them:

> The wilderness had patted him on the head, and, behold, it was like a ball—an ivory ball; it had caressed him, and—lo!—he had withered; it had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some devilish initiation. . . .
>
> You should have heard him say, "My ivory." Oh, yes, I heard him. "My Intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my—" everything belonged to him. It made me hold my breath in expectation of hearing the wilderness burst into a prodigious peal of laughter that would shake the fixed stars in their places. (70)

Kurtz displays hubris in the face of the awful wilderness. Yet it has overtaken him, consumed him. He has sold his soul to it.

**Cult fiction**

In colonial times there was a fear of British men out in the colonies "going native," but Kurtz has gone far beyond that. What Marlow discovers is that Kurtz has set himself up as a God and created a tribe of his own. Or perhaps he stole a tribe. Keetley "would argue that the monstrous 'tribe' is one of the most definitive characteristics of folk horror" (10–11). Marlow has gone up-river to find Kurtz—instead, he finds the cult. As the sole white person, a Russian, they find in Kurtz's compound tells Marlow: "They adored him" (81). Kurtz has gathered natives around him. Marlow says,

> The thing was to know what he belonged to, how many powers of darkness claimed him for their own. That was the reflection that made you creepy all over. It was impossible—it was not good for one either—trying to imagine. He had taken a high seat amongst the devils of the land—I mean literally. You can't understand. How could you? . . . [H]ow can you imagine what particular region of the first ages a man's untrammelled feet may take him into by the way of solitude—utter solitude . . . —by the way of silence—utter silence. (70–71)

Kurtz has given in to temptation and he has no limits. He has given in to the "powers of darkness." The isolation, the solitude, the silence have eaten him up as a civilized man and spewed him out as a devil. And it is Kurtz who has created the monstrous tribe. And he is the criminal.

In the colonial imagination there is a fear of what Stephen D. Arata calls "reverse colonisation" (621), where the threatening otherness from the colonies might slip back into the mother country. The darkness from what is seen as "over there" might invade Britain: it might come home. *Heart of Darkness,* however, does something different. The contagion comes from the white man; it is he who is the demon, it is he who brings corruption to the wilderness. There is, as we know, a section of true crime texts that deal with cults: with the creation of tribes clustering around a charismatic leader. As Robert Snow explains in *Deadly Cults*,

> History has shown over and over that these groups are usually founded by charismatic, and always self-appointed leaders who often attribute divine qualities to themselves. . . . Most cult leaders claim to have some type of supernatural or superhuman powers or abilities, or claim to have exclusive access to some universal truth or knowledge unknown to anyone else in the world. Because of this, cult leaders often feel that they are not bound by normal social, legal, or moral limitations of conduct. (5)

This is what Kurtz has become. The Harlequin Russian says to Marlow that Kurtz spoke to him "of everything! . . . I forgot there was such a thing as sleep. The night did not seem to last an hour. . . . He made me see things—things" (79). The tribes people "adore" Kurtz. The Russian Harlequin worships him. Kurtz has no limits and has set himself up as a God. He has gone too far and slipped from exceptional into horrific. As Marlow says of him, "his—let us say—nerves, went wrong, and caused him to preside at certain midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites, which—as far as I reluctantly gathered from what I heard at various times—were offered up to him—do you understand?—to Mr. Kurtz himself" (72). Kurtz has turned himself into a horrific cult leader presiding over "unspeakable rites" in his honor. In *The Routledge Companion to Folk Horror,* Miranda Corcoran, in a chapter on cults highlights that "[s]trange or anomalous beliefs are often framed in Folk Horror texts as the product of alienation. Individuals or communities severed from social progress invariably cultivate unusual, even abhorrent, moral and religious systems" (65). The whole of the racist colonial project identifies that superstitions, terrible rituals, abhorrent religions belong to "other" races in the imperial imagination. Here, however, it is Kurtz who is that terrible "other."

When Marlow docks at Kurtz's compound, he finds the somewhat crazed Russian, many silent natives and what he at first thinks are ornamental knobs on sticks adorning the landscape. Although, looking closer, this is not what they are. Marlow says, "there was nothing exactly profitable in these heads being there. They only showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him—some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence." (83) Something wanting. Something missing. A lack of restraint. Marlow asks the Russian how this happened:

> "To speak plainly, he raided the country," I said. He nodded. "Not alone, surely!" He muttered something about the villages round that lake. "Kurtz got the tribe to follow him, did he?" I suggested. . . ."They adored him," he said. . . . "What can you expect?" he burst out; "he came to them with thunder and lightning, you know—and they had never seen anything like it—and very terrible. He could be very terrible. You can't judge Mr. Kurtz as you would an ordinary man. No, no, no!" (81)

Kurtz has exploited the native people. He arrived with "thunder and lightning." He brought himself, a self that knows no bounds, and which overweened itself into madness and complete amorality. We have moved beyond Scovell's skewed beliefs, into his summoning of Kurtz as an absolute monster. The clear suggestion is that these appalling acts of violence and the abomination of the rites and displays are not the usual behavior for these lake tribes. All these have been done at the instigation of Kurtz. The Harlequin Russian tells Marlow of Kurtz:

> His ascendancy was extraordinary. The camps of these people surrounded the place, and the chiefs came every day to see him. They would crawl . . . "I don't want to know anything of the ceremonies used when approaching Mr. Kurtz," I shouted. Curious, this feeling that came over me that such details would be more intolerable than those heads drying on the stakes under Mr. Kurtz's windows. After all, that was only a savage sight, while I seemed at one bound to have been transported into some lightless region of subtle horrors, where pure, uncomplicated savagery was a positive relief, being something that had a right to exist—obviously—in the sunshine. (84, ellipsis in the original)

It has been pointed out that the displaying of heads was, if not common, still a practice of some colonial powers: severed heads and sometimes hands displayed to indicate absolute power and invoke terror. This is different and, Marlow feels, more terrible, as the soul itself is at stake. Marlow sees the adoration of the Harlequin to Kurtz as part of this "lightless region of subtle horrors": "I did not envy him his devotion to Kurtz, though. He had not meditated over it. It came to him, and he accepted it with a sort of eager fatalism. I must say that to me it appeared about the most dangerous thing in every way he had come upon so far." (80) Kurtz is the danger. Kurtz is the perpetrator. Kurtz is the diabolical criminal. And it is Kurtz who has corrupted the tribes, it is not, as is more usual in folk horror, the tribes who have corrupted the outsider. Marlow says of Kurtz:

> the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance for the fantastic invasion. I think it had whispered to him things about himself which he did not know, things of which he had no conception till he took counsel with this great solitude—and the whisper had proved irresistibly fascinating. (83–84)

Whose is this "fantastic invasion"—Kurtz's or the entire empire's? The land, the space, the place, the wilderness have taken vengeance.

Marlow has arrived at the end of Kurtz's life. As Kurtz is dying, the native people carry him out of his house:

> Suddenly round the corner of the house a group of men appeared, as though they had come up from the ground. They waded waist-deep in the grass, in a compact body, bearing an improvised stretcher in their midst. Instantly, in the emptiness of the landscape, a cry arose whose shrillness pierced the still air like a sharp arrow flying straight to the very heart of the land; and, as if by enchantment, streams of human beings—of naked human beings—with spears in their hands, with bows, with shields, with wild glances and savage movements, were poured into the clearing by the dark-faced and pensive forest. The bushes shook, the grass swayed for a time, and then everything stood still in attentive immobility. (85–86)

This is a pure folk horror summoning or happening. Yet, in classic folk horror it would be the tribe who would represent the terrible ones—the monsters. In *Heart of Darkness* they have been corrupted by Kurtz. In contemporary filmic texts like *The Wicker Man*, *The Ritual* or *Midsommer*, the tribe was already there waiting for unwitting, naïve outsiders to merrily trip into their landscapes and too often end up as the sacrifice. This is not the case in Conrad's novella, where it is Kurtz who is the true outsider. *Heart of Darkness* represents a reflection of an already perverted colonial system. As Shuting Sun writes, "insofar as Kurtz represents the heart of darkness it is only insofar as he holds a mirror up to the imperialist ideology itself" (65). Yes, he has gone too far in his immoral and criminal activities, but Kurtz and his new religious, criminal cult are, it could be argued, at the liminal, marginal, extreme edge of the colonial system. His ivory. His natives. His wilderness.

**Conclusion**

Achebe accuses Conrad of using "Africa as setting and backdrop which eliminates the African as human factor. Africa as metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril" (21). There is certainly peril for the European traveling into the wilderness. However, there is an argument to say that the African folk are given humanity. The appalling racist language masks the idea that the tribes *belong* in this place. Jeffrey Tolbert states that "[t]he idea of the anachronistic folk is central to folk horror" ("Frightening Folk" 31).

Yet are the tribes people anachronistic? It is Marlow who plants all the seeds of the ideas of going back in time; of the idea of prehistory; going back to the "night of first ages"; of the anachronistic. Tolbert talks about modern folk horror film texts trading "in images of 'backwards' rural folk mindlessly preserving violent traditions" ("Frightening Folk" 32). And if we follow Marlow, it seems as if we have entered what could be seen as quite a straightforward folk horror text. However, looking at *Heart of Darkness* through the lens of folk horror and crime fiction actually allows us to penetrate Marlow's narrative. What we see is a shift of the usual folk horror trope of the outsider stumbling into the threatening, backward, isolated community. Achebe reproaches Conrad for failing "to hint clearly and adequately at an alternative frame of reference by which we may judge the actions and opinions of his characters" (21). However, by interrogating the text as folk horror, we might be able to see an alternative frame of reference. Through this lens we do not find a backward looking, savage, anachronistic community that threatens those who unwittingly come across them. We do not see traditions, we do not see the old ways. We do not, in the "symbiotic relationship between Kurtz and his acolytes," see as Benita Parry insists, "enactments of rituals that are native to Africa" (29). Instead, we see what Tolbert terms the "folkloresque" which connotes and creates "invented folklore" ("Deadly Discipline" 126). And although this is a retrospective narrative, in the text we find an exploited group of indigenous folk who were here-already: tribes people who are being corrupted in the present. In *Heart of Darkness*, despite the rhetoric, the violence is new, current, and present. Kurtz's unholy rites and rituals are new, created by himself: these are his rites and unspeakable rituals, not old traditions. He has created folklore and new abominable rites—he has committed the crimes and he has created folk horror. Kurtz, as a white outsider, has not stumbled into a backwards wilderness, he has penetrated into the heart of darkness with intention. And it is he who has created the horror, not the indigenous population.

Conrad, through the genres of crime fiction and folk horror, holds up a mirror that is a blinding reflection of imperialism. So, in the end perhaps Kurtz is not the extreme but the logical endpoint of imperialism and colonization, "a figure existing at the far end of the colonial continuum," as Parry puts it (28). Marlow predicts that "[h]e won't be forgotten. Whatever he was, he was not common. He had the power to charm or frighten rudimentary souls into an aggravated witch-dance in his honour" (Conrad 73). Kurtz has taken the colonial project to its perverted

extreme: his rites, his rituals, his corruption and exploitation of the local people in the pursuit of his monstrous appetites and his vast hubristic ego. Yet perhaps it is Kurtz who is sacrificed in the end. When he returns to Europe, Marlow conceals the truth about him as it would have been "too dark—too dark altogether" (111). And what does "too dark" mean? The clue may be in the title, which places Kurtz, the criminal, murdering, folk horror monster, at the heart of the imperial darkness.

There is a strain of folk horror that has been associated with fascism, along with the danger that its focus on the old ways and intransigent folk can be appropriated for ultra-nationalist rhetoric (Paciorek). This article has argued that it is both possible and fruitful to see *Heart of Darkness* as a folk horror text while using the genre reading as a way of agreeing with the critical consensus that Conrad's text is of an anti-imperial nature. However, there is undoubtedly racism threaded through the novella and a doubling of vision (imperial/racist and, at the same time, scathingly critical), which is part of what Said has called Conrad's "tragic limitation" (34). Thus folk horror too can be seen as paradoxical, sometimes in similar ways to those identified by Cedric Watts in 1996:

> Civilization can be barbaric. It is both a hypocritical veneer and a valuable achievement.
>
> Society saves us from corruption, yet society is corrupt. . .
>
> Morality is a sham. Without it, human beings become sham humans. . . .
>
> A person who sells his [*sic*] soul does at least have a soul to sell. (47)

These paradoxes echo key concerns in folk horror and viewing *Heart of Darkness* as folk horror gives us access to these contradictions. Folk horror can be seen (and used) as either fascist or radical and resistant in the same way in which *Heart of Darkness* has been read through both lenses over the years. In fact, the genre has a double vision similar to that seen in Conrad's imaginary. Thus, Said's "two visions" mooted for the novella also work for folk horror narratives. And it is in this way that we arrive at the final "summoning" of Kurtz and the revelations of what he has done to the tribe. It is not the folk in *Heart of Darkness* who commit the worst violence or who engender the horror. In contrast to the generic possibilities of fascism and racism present in the folk horror form, it also presents a radical undermining of these tropes and ideologies. As Keetley explains, folk horror "can serve both politically progressive and conservative ends" (9).

For the most part, though, folk horror is adept at critiquing the nationalistic in a similar way in which *Heart of Darkness* both recreates and savagely exposes nationalism/racism and imperialism. Reading, re-reading, and (re-)identifying the text as folk horror doubles and mirrors the text and the genre. A retrospective reading of *Heart of Darkness* helps to show the literary history of the genre as well as illuminating the folklore and folkloresque elements in the novella. At the same time, such a reading shores up the contemporary reading of the text as anti-imperial through a tracing of the genre's forms and their paradoxical double visions. Using folk horror as a model through which to examine Conrad's text helps to bring to light some of the more nuanced and contested readings of *Heart of Darkness*. By looking at the text through the lens of both crime fiction and folk horror, it becomes even clearer that it is the imperial project and Kurtz himself who provide, as Kurtz exclaims with his last words, "The horror! The horror!"

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# Hard-Boiled Reinvestigations of African American History in Barbara Neely's *Blanche on the Lam* (1992) and *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* (1994)

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**ABSTRACT**

Barbara Neely's first two hard-boiled novels manifest features of contemporary narratives of slavery. The paper investigates the hybrid and seemingly ambiguous co-presence of two generic traditions in Neely: the hard-boiled crime novel's lonely detective hero and scepticism are contrasted to the neo-slave narrative's trickster protagonist and hopeful stance. The paper demonstrates that the hybrid presence of the two generic traditions withstands a binary logic of social scepticism versus hope. Neely's novels trace a personal strategy of social resistance performed by Blanche White, Neely's black female detective, who fights institutional racism via individual acts of speaking out and producing alternative knowledge. (ÁZSK)

**KEYWORDS**: African American detective fiction, hard-boiled crime novel, neo-slave narrative, African American history, Mammy stereotype, talented tenth

## Introduction

Contemporary African American women's historical fiction rewrites mainstream accounts of African American history from the perspective of African Americans. These rewritings offer alternative descriptions of historically experienced social injustice. Among many fictional forms and genres, it is particularly the classical slave narrative that is revisited. In a classical slave narrative a runaway slave recounts their escape from the South and travels to the North; liberation is achieved geographically, psychologically, and spiritually. From the 1970s to the early 1990s, African American authors were engaged in reshaping antebellum slave narratives in the form of neo-slave narratives with the aim to fill in some gaps in historical accounts available about the psychological, emotional, and bodily experiences of enslaved African Americans. Within this, bodily and affective experiences of enslaved women are often targeted, as in Octavia Butler's

*Kindred* (1979), Shirley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), and Ishmael Reed's satiric *Flight to Canada* (1976).[1]

This paper investigates hybrid intersections of African American crime fiction and the neo-slave narrative in the 1990s. Instead of well-known texts, the investigation of hybridity relies on the example of Barbara Neely's hard-boiled crime novels and their treatment of African American racial history. Social activist and author Barbara Neely published four detective novels featuring the African American professional maid and amateur detective Blanche White. These novels survey specific issues and locations of African American history in the framework of the female hard-boiled detective story. *Blanche on the Lam* (1992) addresses white supremacy in the rural South. *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* (1994) investigates intraracial racism in the Northeast in the 1980s, while *Blanche Cleans Up* (1998) focuses on environmental racism in metropolitan areas. The last book, *Blanche Passes Go* (2000), returns to the South and looks into the sexual abuse of Black women in the 1990s.

Neely's novels are normally discussed as female hard-boiled crime novels[2] but they manifest additional generic features. In an excellent essay about Neely's first novel, Rosemary V. Hathaway (2005) stated that three generic traditions intersect in Neely: the slave narrative, the crime novel, and the novel of passing (321). Hathaway added that with "its contemporary setting, *Blanche on the Lam* is clearly not a slave narrative in the strict sense, I view it as a sort of neo-slave narrative" (322), but she did not elaborate. As a follow-up to Hathaway's idea, the present paper explores how neo-slave features permeate *Blanche on the Lam* and its sequel, *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*. Neely's Colored female detective investigates cases that are related to long histories of racial discrimination, and the detection process targets gaps of knowledge about the racial past, which makes Neely's detective investigations of racial history very similar to the neo-slave narratives of the eighties. Drawing on Hathaway's investigations on *Lam*, the paper explores a basic incompatibility between the neo-slave narrative and the hard-boiled crime novel. Hathaway found a duality not only of genres, but also of approaches in Neely's representation of African American characters in *Blanche on the Lam*, when in her conclusion she located an ongoing "blend of optimism of the slave narrative and the skepticism of the hard-boiled detective who knows that 'justice' is not a specific destination but an ongoing and deeply personal project" (331) in the novel.[3]

Hathaway's insistence on the blend of optimism and skepticism in crime fiction can be read in the context of the criticism of neo-slave narratives. Since the 1990s, much of the reception of neo-slave narratives has largely focused on the regenerative, healing, communally fortifying aspects of narratives of the painful racial past. As a case in point, Ashraf. H. Rushdy's magisterial essay on *Beloved* describes how two daughters of a traumatized slave mother process their legacy differently—how the regenerative approach serves survival better than that of spiteful revenge ("Daughters" 581). Similarly, Dorothea Fischer-Hornung and Monika Mueller view the relationship between the hard-boiled tradition and ethnic literature as a turn towards positive endings: they claim that in ethnic detective stories, the ethnic communal part tends to dominate the sleuthing (12). In contrast to such an approach, Hathaway's documentation of slave narrative-related hope and hard-boiled fiction-related skepticism in Neely's books targets a scenario with a need for regeneration where the processing fails to take place. At this point, two questions emerge: when the neo-slave narrative meets the hard-boiled crime novel in Neely, how do hopes for processing the painful past mix with skeptical reflections on an incorrigible social order; and how does it impact the regeneration process?

The paper examines the blend of neo-slave hope and hard-boiled skepticism in Neely's *Blanche on the Lam* and *Blanche and the Talented Tenth*. In the first, the stereotype of the Mammy character is shown from a new perspective. In the second, W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of the "Talented Tenth," the basic progressive idea that education is the way out of slavery and racial discrimination, is scrutinized and put into a new historical perspective. The intersection of the neo-slave narrative tradition and the hard-boiled tradition in these two volumes offers little hope for processing the past.

**Defining the hard-boiled crime novel and the neo-slave narrative**

As is known, the hard-boiled detective story is focused on character representation rather than plot twists. It centers on the figure of the independent private investigator with his idiosyncratic code of honor enmeshed in a valueless society. The hero of "realistic mystery fiction" (Chandler 13–14) searches for "a hidden truth" and his attitude and actions are more interesting than his ways of thinking (18). A private detective is also a person who balances between the criminal world and the world of official institutions of justice, and criticizes the injustices of a violent world in an ironic tone, the gutter talk of decrepit metropolitan settings.

Commenting on the hard-boiled dick's attitude, actions, and language, Sean McCann states that this vision performs a critique of liberalism in that it "displace[s] the centrality of the individual with an emphasis on the significance of the state and the problems of 'social control' that the state exemplified" (18–19). Or, as Daylanne English puts it, "[i]n the hard-boiled crime novel, the detective offers sceptical reflections on a social scenario in which modern democracy breaks down" (774).

How does this relate to African American hard-boiled stories? McCann states that "the traditional preoccupation" of the hard-boiled genre with legal failures and injustices offered "a perfect means to dramatize the intimate relations between racism and American democracy" (252).[4] In particular, Chester Himes used the hard-boiled frame in the 1940s and 50s, his detectives roamed the streets of Harlem. Thirty years later, Walter Mosley wrote historical hard-boiled stories, his war veteran private eye stalked Los Angeles in the 1950s–60s like Chandler's Marlowe prowled downtown LA in the 1930s–40s—but Mosley's mean streets are located in the African American neighborhood of Watts. In the 1990s, several Black women writers like Eleanor Taylor Bland, Barbara Neely, Valerie Wilson Wesley, and Nikki Baker relied on the hard-boiled formula to criticize the racial and gender bias of the US legal system (Reddy 41–42). A consensus has emerged that "much ethnic detective fiction has imbedded in it strategies for exposing the social and economic disparities that ethnic Americans face" (Goeller 149).

Neo-slave narratives from the 1970s–1990s rewrite pre-civil war classical slave narratives imaginatively. Classical slave narratives presented autobiographical accounts of the tribulations of lives under slavery and achieving freedom in the form of "residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom" (Bell, *Afro-American Novel* 289). In slave narratives, the critical commentary of the peculiar institution and the white owners happened more on the level of documentation than explicit commentary. As Toni Morrison famously put it, "proceedings too terrible to relate" are missing from or are left unexplained in the classical slave narratives (91). In contrast, late twentieth-century neo-slave narratives aim to explicate exactly these emotional and psychological gaps: they counterbalance "the absence of interior life, the deliberate excising of it from the records that the slave themselves told" (90) and tell about the interior life of enslaved people who strive for freedom. Ashraf H. Rushdy defined neo-slave narratives as first-person accounts of historical journeys to freedom, which use the format of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century

slave narratives to articulate cultural and political questions of the Civil Rights era (*Neo-Slave Narratives* 6). Arlene R. Keizer used the term "contemporary narratives of slavery" because she extended the notion to include not only historical novels, but also novels about the present that are related to racial history or address the social aftermath of slavery today (11). Keizer argued that these novels use stories of slavery to theorize Black subjectivity: they both problematize the relation of Black subjectivity to resistance and question a progressive notion of African American history that disregards the effects slavery still has on the present.[5]

The intersection of the neo-slave narrative and the hard-boiled crime novel creates a liminal textual space between the two genres in which the criminal investigation aims at ripping the veil from the mystery of historical gaps of knowledge that are related to the continued effect of slavery on the social performances of African American subjectivities today.

**The reinterpretation of the Mammy type in Neely's *Blanche on the Lam***

Neo-slave narratives repurpose many racial stereotypes, one of which is the character of the Mammy, the dark-skinned, middle-aged, overweight (stout), faithful house servant of a Southern white family, who organizes the life of the generations she serves.[6] The Mammy figure has come down from nineteenth-century fiction, most notably from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), and has been preserved by Margaret Mitchell's Mammy in *Gone with the Wind* (1936), and William Faulkner's Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929)—in works by white authors. The Mammy type has been reinterpreted by African American authors: contemporary representations give Mammy a name, allow her to tell her story, and even share her emotions. For instance, in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, the Mammy character, Sarah (the cook), voices her bitterness and anger over her former sexual exploitation and the selling of her children. She has only one child left, a deaf-and-dumb—and thus not marketable—daughter.

The traditional Mammy character of the slave narrative is recycled in Barbara Neely's first hard-boiled detective novel, *Blanche on the Lam*.[7] In the case of this hybrid revision of the Mammy, the first question is how Blanche the female back detective twists the stereotype; second, what healing or subversive potential the Mammy disguise may have for her. The Mammy role seems to offer social invisibility for Blanche to do her

detective work, which eventually enables her to turn the power relations between Black and white characters upside down.

**Blanche's ironic version of Mammy**

Neely's *Blanche on the Lam* retains many features of the traditional slave narrative. It is about Blanche's fleeing from an unjust court sentence, and her days as a domestic worker at a wealthy family in the country (who are ex-plantation and ex-slave owners). She hopes to escape but deceives her employers to make them believe she wants to stay. In the end, she flees by bus to Boston. Blanche White is a professional hired help in the 1990s; the Mammy type fits her race (Black), class (working-class), gender (female), age (forty-plus), body (stout), and job (domestic work). Her wealthy employers expect her to behave entirely in terms of the type, and she is happy to act out Mammy for them while she remains invisible as a person. As a result, her employers cannot see her because they see Mammy, the type she self-consciously stands for.

However, as her doubly white name ironically attests, the jet-Black Blanche does not conform to social expectations, especially not to those of the Mammy stereotype. Although Blanche often assists employers by hiding behind the Mammy type, her actions define her as distinctly un-Mammy-like. Blanche resorts to the Mammy appearance by acting clueless in situations she does not wish to engage in. She does not play along when an employer comes to the kitchen with "Mammy save me eyes," that is, seeking advice (Neely, *Lam* 35). Neither is she smitten by what she calls "Darkies' Disease" (42), an emotional attachment to a white employer many domestic workers suffer from. Instead of getting emotionally involved, Blanche strives to keep her position by reading other characters and sizing up situations. She does this by constantly using analogies—she observes and tries to place what she notices in existing frames. As she sees it, her livelihood and her employment depend on her ability to read people.

Blanche even thinks that she is her own boss since she is free from a direct boss or a watching colleague to answer to, thus needs to be self-reliant. Moreover, she brings order into her employers' lives. Her presence ensures a daily routine of meals, a plan about menus, frequent changes of bedding, regular laundering and ironing, daily dustings and ordering, and extra preparations for entertainment. So, she maintains order in many senses of the term: she not only scrubs the floors or does the rooms but, more importantly, she also oversees the family's arrangement of time, household actions, and domestic spaces.

Her relation to domestic space is quite revealing in this regard. Houses speak to Blanche as if they had personalities. Rooms tell about their inhabitants' character; small objects provide information (13–4). Early in the story, she observes an ambiguity between what rooms tell about family members and what they want to tell about themselves. The wife's room is painstakingly tidy (77), while the wife acts awkwardly and helplessly. The husband's room looks like the mess of a slob (74), while he acts like a well-groomed gentleman. Only the nephew's room is in sync with the public behavior of its inhabitant: it is the room of a giant child that smells of chocolate and machine oil (73).

Ordering the life of her employers includes tricking or fooling them without them noticing. Blanche reads characters and situations to turn them to her advantage. She gauges her reaction appropriately for the given situation and provides the expected answers and prompts. Her reactions are always calculated and purposeful: in many cases, she extracts information from her employers without them knowing about it. Another game she plays is being polite with rude employers: she gives herself points for being extra gracious in response to most unkind prompts.

In her job, Blanche hides as Mammy while she acts as her own boss without her employers' knowledge. In other words, she plays on a racial stereotype consciously to turn the white–Black power dynamics upside-down, and much of the irony of the narration results from free indirect comments on this situation. Blanche becomes an all-seeing, all-feeling neo-Mammy character, who plays with the traditional racist use of the stereotype to her advantage.

**Mammy Blanche detects**

*Blanche on the Lam* bears several features of the hard-boiled detective story, not least because it relies on simple, slangy language use, and desolate settings. Blanche's daily job of invisibility escalates into a job of detection when she becomes dissatisfied with the work of the police. As a Black woman detective, she gets involved in the case emotionally, and eventually, she must defend her own life from the criminal.

There is a reason behind Blanche's dissatisfaction with law enforcement agencies. She flees from a racially biased jurisdiction in the first place when she runs from her unjust prison sentence (1–3). She remembers her time in NYC and police brutality there (79). She recalls the case when the murder of a Black boy by a white one became a police case of Black

aggression (144). On top of that, she thinks all Southern policemen are descendants of overseers and paddyrollers (79).

At her domestic hiding place, Blanche's detective activity is triggered by the uninvestigated murder of a fellow African American, the gardener, Nate. They have formerly got on well, Blanche has noticed how exquisitely Nate performs the Uncle Tom stereotype, while Nate has noted how exquisitely Blanche performs the Mammy type (82), and they share their joy over their satire of the one-dimensional types (Mickle 78). Yet Nate warns Blanche not to notice or try to understand what is happening in the house: an idea Blanche cannot take seriously. Blanche's wish to know what she is not being told intensifies because Nate is silenced by the second murder in the case.

Blanche utilizes her social invisibility as the stereotypical Mammy in her detective work. She not only disappears behind the stereotype, but also acts as a Night Girl, a role she learnt as a child. Blanche learnt to disappear into the night thanks to her coal-Black skin, and during her nighttime wanderings, she got informed about neighborhood issues so well that even her mother thought she had second sight (53). Together with her invisibility as Night Girl, she relies on her excellent information processing skills: she observes, draws analogies, conducts room searches, and extracts information personally. In addition, she relies on African American alternative news sources: her old friend's, Miz Minnie's network of African American informants and their unrecorded evidence.

The solution she finds proves to be dangerous. First, the villain, Grace, tries to kill her to silence her, trying to butcher her. Then, when Grace's violent attempts at silencing Blanche fail because Blanche manages to knock her out—the family lawyer-cousin Archibald calls the district attorney, a family relation, to prevent the investigation of the case and the previous incidents, which he hushes successfully. At this point, it would still be dangerous for Blanche personally to let on her knowledge about Grace's murderous actions.

**The neo-slave element: Using invisibility for newly forged racial identification**

So far, it has been argued that while Blanche's social invisibility allows for the investigation of murder cases, it equally results in the acquisition of unwanted knowledge silenced by her employers' elite white family members. I want to suggest that despite the recurrent scenes of invisibility and silencing, there are two elements of the story in which the

possibility of interracial visibility and communication emerges against all odds.

The first chance is Blanche's connection to cousin Mumsfield who suffers from Mosaicism. This is a genetic disorder in which two or more groups of cells in a person possess a different genetic makeup ("What is Mosaicism?"). In Mumsfield, it results in mosaic Down's syndrome: intellectual delays and disabilities accompanied by weak muscles and a flat facial structure. The illness is visible and makes Mumsfield recognizably different, which leads to his social exclusion: being laughed at, ignored, or subjected to fake interest. Blanche realizes that his condition makes Mumsfield as socially invisible as she is because of her skin color and profession (91). At the same time, Mumsfield excels at activities he is attuned to: he is an excellent driver and can fix any broken-down machine. He is sensitive and observant, can mimic others expertly, and is always full of impressions. Blanche understands that Mumsfield sees things with fresh eyes and takes delight in the simple aspects of life. Blanche would have liked to see the world the way he saw it (93). They develop a connection quickly as they begin to appreciate each other.

Mumsfield is the only one in Blanche's white employers' family who can see her as a person. Yet she is startled by their budding familiarity and affection. She can feel Mumsfield's presence physically, the way she can feel her family members, and she disapproves of this (111). Whatever the case, Mumsfield is white and male, therefore he has nothing to do with Blanche's inner familiar circle. In addition, Blanche herself is repulsed by the idea that she has a white male upper-class friend as she has a "constitutional distaste for being a white man's Mammy" (192) and she cannot tolerate emotional proximity to Mumsfield. She wonders at herself feeling close to him: "Had the slavers stamped mammyism into her genes when they raped her great grandmothers? If they had, she was determined to prove the power of will over blood" (161). Blanche thinks it is her duty not to be emotionally attached to Mumsfield because of his race, class, and gender, despite his medical condition and social outsider position. Therefore, Blanche resists the emerging interracial affective connection rationally.[8]

The second chance to overcome invisibility occurs with family lawyer-cousin Archibald. He used to be a Civil Rights lawyer in the 60s but this does not stop him from treating African Americans as invisible, or from placing the reputation of the family beyond the value of administering justice. Blanche decides to subject Archibald to a procedure she calls the de-jackassing process, which comes in short and long versions. Take a jackass,

a racist white male, upper-class or redneck, who overdoes the stereotyping, for instance calls the ageing woman "girl" or pretends the colored person understands nothing they can hear. There is a need for teaching a lesson, to start de-jackassing. The short version includes a quick humiliation, for instance threatening to shrivel the penis of the delivery boy by African magic. The long version involves repeated sessions of logical speech, for instance with Archibald, with whom Blanche needs to negotiate business, making him realize that Blanche can think logically (187).

The de-jackassed Archibald offers Blanche a deal. Blanche is to stay with Mumsfield for good money in exchange for remaining silent about the identity of the murderer. Blanche asks for a good salary, for a minimum of ten years, as she needs to secure the education of her kids. She also wants social security, and she even asks for a pension plan. Archibald agrees to all her conditions, but Blanche does not accept the terms eventually because she sees the money as hush money. Instead, she steps down for much less and thus has the chance to talk about her findings to an Atlanta journalist before she flees to Boston.

Invisibility makes Blanche able to act as a detective and find out about a crime that would otherwise never come to light. She even reveals a secret criminal history when she glimpses a line of earlier crimes committed by Grace, which were never revealed. In other words, Blanche can produce knowledge about her white employers that would be socially censored under normal circumstances. Yet it is difficult for her to tell her story and make it heard. Instead of official jurisdiction, she must resort to the media to ensure the criminal is punished or at least not allowed to roam free. By relying on an alternative route to administering justice, Blanche turns the traditional Black criminal–white detective pair into the less likely Black detective–white criminal combination.

Is there a chance of healing or regeneration offered by this turn? Not in the sense of healing as the absence of illness. There is very little chance for reconciliation with white men like Archibald and Mumsfield, which Blanche rejects. After solving and surviving the case, she feels battered but also strengthened. The limited choice of action she has is used to the maximum when she ensures that Grace remains in a mental institution through publicizing the solution to the crime and she willingly escapes to the North to save her skin afterwards. Yet, at the end of the day, she is left in the same precarious position she started with at the beginning of the story and begins from scratch in the next book. From the perspective of the blending of neo-slave narrative hope and hard-boiled skepticism, this

suggests that the hopeful healing neo-slave narratives offer remains limited at the hybrid intersection of the two genres *Blanche on the Lam* provides.

**Detecting racial mysteries in *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth***

*Blanche and the Talented Tenth* is Neely's second novel which focuses on issues of intraracial racism, the relation of race and class, and racial education. The novel criticizes W. E. B. Du Bois's progressive idea of the "Talented Tenth," and shows its connection to intraracial racism in a historical context. The detective in this case investigates the life mysteries of members of the elite group of African Americans who belong to the "Talented Tenth," and disentangles their secret personal histories in the past decades. The neo-slave narrative elements of the book target questions of racial history and become inseparably entangled with the detective story that evolves in the present: the present mystery can only be unraveled by understanding the racial history of the past differently.

The hard-boiled aspect of the novel develops through a complicated mystery that involves three deaths at an elite and secluded holiday resort for African Americans on the shores of Maine. Blanche White gets involved in the case when a guest is killed and soon after that, her new friend's, Mattie's, godson commits suicide, which arouses the suspicion that he might have been the perpetrator. When Mattie asks Blanche to investigate the matter to prove the godson was not implicated in the murder, Blanche's curiosity and detective instincts are aroused, and she sets out to find out connections. As she checks the guests, she notes a very strong color prejudice among members of the wealthy and educated group of African Americans. She also finds that practically every member of the local set has something to hide from their privileged friends.

Mattie, Blanche's new friend and benefactor, also turns out different from the placid self-reliant front she presents. She is a celebrated African American woman intellectual who writes about the needed self-respect of African American women. Yet Blanche learns that in her actual life, she had many a good reason for little self-respect: she made numerous degrading compromises with the white world throughout her life. One of these is related to her white husband, who was extremely wealthy and treated her to an expensive upper-class lifestyle. In exchange, he preyed on her ideas and included her arguments in his books without reference. Also, she allowed her sons to be brought up by their white grandparents and grow distant from her. As part of the deal, Mattie was also allowed to have a secret, Colored lover, with whom she even had a baby. The child was passed off as

the son of one of Mattie's friends, so Mattie's maternity remained undisclosed until Blanche's detection.

Blanche gets involved in the case personally. Not only does she dislike the all-pervading color prejudice that seems to permeate all aspects of the mystery, but she is also physically implicated when the criminal knocks her over in a fight for an important piece of evidence. Blanche nurses her wound and she grows afraid, and from this point on she needs to locate the culprit to defend her own personal safety, too. She relies on a network of acquaintances to help her do historical research and finds the culprit: the secret stepbrother of Mattie's secret son, a member of the holiday set. When he realizes he has been found out, the man commits suicide by sailing out to sea and drowning himself there. He does not wait for official justice to reach him.

**Freedom to fill the gaps in racial history**

The historical gap-filling task in the book is related not only to the characters' lives, but also to W. E. B. Du Bois's theory of social uplift. Du Bois's famous concept of the "Talented Tenth" comes from his 1903 essay published in *The Negro Problem*, in which Du Bois delineates his idea of racial advancement. He thought the African American community needed educated people in leadership positions. These leaders, he claimed, should be college-educated persons with a classical education: they could represent the African American race politically and initiate social change as well, a feat that manual laborers can never achieve (43). The social uplift of African Americans generally could only be performed by this college-educated segment, with trained living human souls (59), who could represent the other 90% democratically to achieve the political interests of African Americans.

Du Bois's notion of the social mission of the "Talented Tenth" for the betterment of their community contrasted starkly with B. T. Washington's idea of racial compromise in his Atlanta Address in 1895. Washington propagated practical or industrial education for African Americans, and he offered a social compromise: he proposed no political or social aims for the African American community in exchange for material advancement or "the commercial world" (Washington 220). In contrast to the politically motivated Du Bois, Washington's method for uplift was focused on economic success, a gradual economic strengthening for African Americans in the present that may trigger social change in the future.

In Neely's novel, the term "Talented Tenth" refers to the elite group of light-skinned African Americans who populate the elegant holiday resort in the 1990s. The members of this set are extremely Color-conscious and wealthy; in most cases, their privileges are inherited from their parents—and even from their runaway ancestors, who crossed to Canada for safety before the Civil War and returned after. The present elite are educated and intelligent but represent nobody politically, they do not give up their interests for the sake of the community; they would rather live with their petty or tragic secrets than see those leaking out. For instance, African American Feminist Mattie hides her secret maternity, which was the result of her unhappy marriage. Mattie never thought that the events of her secret compromise, which she wanted to conceal forever, would be uncovered by the private investigation. When Blanche finds out about the compromising details, she challenges Mattie face-to-face, and the two friends become arch enemies. Mattie uses Blanche as a practical tool, as a private investigator, and drops her when the findings become too personal and hurting.

The question of the benefits of a good education comes up in connection with Blanche's adopted children as well. The children go to an elite Boston private school Blanche pays for from the proceeds of her first investigation. However, Blanche dislikes the way her children learn to socialize in school. Her eleven-year-old daughter puts on airs: she wants straightened hair, she looks down on poor and dark-skinned people. Blanche White, being jet Black and poor, finds it a hard pill to swallow that good education brings with it this plethora of color prejudice. After the case, she moves her kids to a different school following the summer in Maine, the third book reveals.

*Talented Tenth* displays hybrid intersections of the hard-boiled crime novel and the neo-slave narrative. On the one hand, Blanche acts as the perfect African American hard-boiled detective: she is called in privately, she gets involved, she needs to perform as a trickster, and she is unable to secure an official status to her solution, the case is solved by private arrangement and remains open publicly. On the other hand, the neo-slave narrative is present as well, not so much as a contemporary narrative of slavery but rather through revealing gaps of historical knowledge related to racial prejudice. The detection unraveled stories of compromised race relations and showed that education does not help solve racial prejudice but may even make it worse—as exemplified by the story of Mattie and her sons.

From the perspective of potential healing, the privately arranged solution in *Talented Tenth* does not offer a racially rewarding or empowering solution to a crime motivated by intraracial prejudice. Blanche finds the solution to the crime that no one wished to hear, least of all the privileged, light-skinned, and wealthy members of the contemporary "Talented Tenth." In this scenario, Blanche's possible actions are limited to her personal responses: she falls out with Mattie's set and moves her kids to a state school to shield them from the intraracial bias of public schools.

**Conclusion**

Barbara Neely's detective novels help reconsider the history of the African American past from the perspective of African Americans. In particular, the stereotypical notion of the Mammy character and the "Talented Tenth" are reinterpreted in the first two books of her Blanche White-series. This paper has explored how crime novels rely on the neo-slave narrative genre and what healing or subversive potential the investigations of Neely's black female hard-boiled detective carry. Blanche's social invisibility and her perspective on elite education are targeted throughout her race-, gender-, class-, and age-related investigations.

First and foremost, the paper demonstrated the presence of the neo-slave narrative in Neely's detective novels. The two novels feature investigations in the present concerning the effects of slavery today, as Keizer's category of contemporary narratives of slavery defines it. Perhaps more importantly, the study explored an assumed ambiguity between skepticism and hope in Neely's hybrid texts: it set out to find out whether the detective novels retained the skepticism of hard-boiled stories or the hope element of neo-slave narratives in connection with the problem of historical racism. Initially, this issue was posed as an either-or question, but a thorough analysis of the books suggested that skepticism and hope do not function as mutually exclusive qualities in Neely's first two books. Indeed, these function side by side in *Blanche on the Lam* and *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth,* even if on different levels. Social institutions such as schools, hospitals, or the police preserve race prejudice—in the face of these, one is helpless. Yet, on the level of individual action, one can redress racial bias. In the case of Blanche's investigations, there is no official solution in either case but a private settling of the criminal problem by agreement or suicide. In *Blanche on the Lam*, the detective experiences racial invisibility as a modern runaway Mammy, and relies on her invisibility in detection. Her findings are officially ignored but she finds an alternative way to make them public in

the media. This means she does not accept the status quo and must save her skin again: she refuses the chance of a well-paying long-term job and flees to Boston instead. In *Talented Tenth* Blanche's analytical skills are invisible to members of her race, who belong to the Talented Tenth, and look down on her working-class existence. Despite expectations of failure, she solves the case by unraveling long histories of racial strife, but again, she is expected not to make all her findings public. In response to this, she moves her kids from the private school that represents the continuity of the legacy of the Talented Tenth and the colorism that comes with it. In other words, Blanche solves the problem of intraracial racism on a personal level, as she cannot handle it otherwise.

Barbara Neely's first two novels perform a hybrid fusion of the hard-boiled detective story and the neo-slave narrative tradition, in which the chances for a hopeful resolution of racially motivated social conflict remain very low. In this regard, Neely's ethnic detective stories do not disclose a focus on the positive healing potential of ethnic storytelling (12), as Fischer-Hornung and Mueller found, but rather, function as ironic personal commentaries on structural racism in society at large. If they allow for regenerative action, it is only on the level of the individual detective's personal decisions of resistance within the scope of her family relations, not so much in communal action.

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## Notes

1. Recently a new wave of neo-slave narratives has appeared in contemporary African American fiction. The neo-slave narrative has arguably returned in generically mixed ways: this hybridity can be thought of as including genres and styles of writing in a broad sense. The hybrid use of the neo-slave narrative culminated in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016), in which a sentimental strategy of writing the slave narrative is rewritten through conventions of a realist strategy of narrating the slave past (Friedman, "Unsentimental" 118; Li 22–23). Following the strategy of the sentimental approach, Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Water Dancer* (2019) integrates magical elements into its narrative about an escape from slavery, and so does Jesmyn Ward's *Let Us Descend* (2023), which combines the neo-slave narrative with an epic, Dantean descent to hell.

2. Bernard W. Bell refers to extremely popular African American sci-fi, detective and romance novels as contemporary "paraliterature" (*The Contemporary African American Novel* 333), borrowing the term from Samuel Delany.

3. Social activist and author Barbara Neely published four detective novels featuring the African American professional maid and amateur detective Blanche White. Neely's further two detective novels could not be included in this discussion due to limited space, but they also offer explorations of race and history relevant to the intersection of crime fiction and historical reinterpretation. *Blanche Cleans Up* (1998) maps versions of African American masculinity and historical forms of prejudice against these. At the same time, *Blanche Passes Go* (2000) reveals Blanche's own personal and family history via her investigation of her rape by a rich white man. These novelistic investigations perform further generic hybridity and eventually provide local personal solutions to social issues.

4. According to the first book on African American detective fiction, the African American detective performs acts of deception and mocking similar to those of the vernacular trickster figure of African American novels (33). Andrew Pepper complicates Soitos's celebration of subversion when he writes that African American crime stories "might simultaneously give voice to the socially and politically marginalized and yet also re-inscribe a reactionary politics" ("Black" 212).

5. A famous case of a contemporary rewriting of African American history in the form of a repurposed autobiography of a slave is Toni Morrison's *A Mercy,* in which the seventeenth-century US origins narrative is complicated by the story of emerging slavery (see Kovács 17; Babb 147; Friedman, "Wilderness" 313).

6. There are a handful of basic racist fictional stereotypes about African Americans: firstly, the stereotype of Uncle Tom, the grown male, who is benevolent, religious, and loyal to his white master. Also, there is Sambo, the younger African male, who is incapable of performing complex tasks, or the Mandingo, the sexually insatiable male. Stereotypes about African American women include Jezebel, the alluring promiscuous woman. Another recurring figure is Mammy, the house servant, who is loyal to the family she works for.

7. "On the lam" means "on the run" (*OED*).

8. Subsequent references to Neely's texts use bracketed location identifiers from the 2014 Kindle edition of her collected novels.

9. Andrew Pepper considers Blanche's frayed connection to Mumsfield a case of double-consciousness that relates this incident not only to African American detective authors, but also to the African American literary tradition in general (*Contemporary* 86). To my mind, it is a sad incident that displays a lack of openness on Blanche's part.

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# "Just how dangerous is he?" Cormac McCarthy's Hybridized Crime Fiction

Michael Pronko



**ABSTRACT**

In *No Country for Old Men*, McCarthy draws on and incorporates genres into his narrative with the effect of expanding the overall possibilities of crime fiction, pushing the boundaries of what narrative structures it can include, and testing the limitations of hybridization. By contrasting three main characters of very different character types associated with very different genres, McCarthy creates the forward energy of the narrative, a characteristic of crime fiction, while presenting a complex and nuanced set of subtexts and motifs more common to literary fiction. Each genre in the narrative offers a different view of key elements of traditional crime fiction: death, knowledge, moral values, character choice, and narrative closure. At the same time, McCarthy disrupts the expectations of those genres, even while relying on various generic elements to heighten the tensions. McCarthy borrows heavily from genre techniques and tropes to expand and intensify his narrative. Genre elements enhance the effect of crime fiction's notable inclusion of fear, death, and point of view without disrupting the elements of literary fiction. (MP)

**KEYWORDS:** postmodern crime fiction, crime genre, Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men*, hybrid fiction

In Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* (2005), thriller, horror, and western genres mix with other subgenres and generic tropes to create a richly blended and deeply layered example of crime fiction. This paper will not investigate whether the novel fits perfectly into the crime fiction genre, nor whether "crime fiction" might arguably be an umbrella term under which multiple genres and subgenres always fall. Nor will it take up the endless argument over the borderline between genre fiction and literary fiction. Instead, this paper will focus on how McCarthy draws on and incorporates genres into his narrative to expand the conception of how crime fiction works, what narrative structures it can include, and the strengths and limitations of hybridization. *No Country for Old Men* (hereafter

*NCFOM*) offers a particularly rich example of how literary fiction borrows from genre fiction to assimilate genre techniques into the broader thematic and moral aims of fiction in general.

David Bordwell argues in his final work, *Perplexing Plots*, that fiction categorized and marketed as literary fiction has, since at least the time of Charles Dickens, been greatly reliant on the conventions and techniques of works of genre fiction. He concludes succinctly by saying that "popular narrative can sponsor its own research projects" (411). He goes on to say that "[p]opular storytelling is, within self-imposed limits, an adventure in testing how artistic form and style can expand an art form and affect an audience" (412). Notably, for a final work from such a sharp and insightful film critic, Bordwell seems to be acknowledging that popular generic storytelling and high art literary storytelling share more similarities than differences. *NCFOM* is an excellent example of that argument, and in that sense is an experiment in the hybrid use of multiple genres.

Crime fiction can be singularly generic, but it rarely is. In terms of character, thematics, and structures, hybridization is more the rule than the exception, and multiplying genres amplifies intensity. What can also be seen in *NCFOM* is the way in which genres emerge into a hybridized form that obscures most, if not all, of the boundary issues between genre fiction and literary fiction. The genres blend and create a new combination that can be picked apart but functions as a unit. As Dan Sinykin notes in his study of the publishing industry and American Literature, *Big Fiction*, McCarthy manages to write "by absorbing genre techniques into literary fiction" (188), as many "literary" writers have done, but also in some ways he writes, "from within genre with the stylistic sophistication of literary fiction" (188). The cross-pollination works in both ways, and Sinykin goes on to assert that McCarthy not only "adopted genre techniques that would persist in his work" (121) but that his career can be seen as a "refuge from, and then participation in, the conglomerate era" (121). That is not to say McCarthy, much less crime fiction writers, aim at sales, but only that they adopt techniques that do not distract from engaging with a broader slice of readers.

In his final work, *Perplexing Plots,* Bordwell describes this cross-pollination between genres and forms of fiction as being

> driven by the search for novelty, even within narrow bounds. The search often proceeds according to the variorum principle, the pressure to saturate the ecological niche with fine differences that are recognized by

> fans. All genres court slight variation . . . and readers' awareness of nuances not just in setting and character but also in structure and narration. (396)

The term "variorum" fits well here, giving fuller insight into how the genres with which readers and film viewers are steeped in a variety of ways of reading. A novel like *NCFOM* would be more challenging to read and interpret if readers did not already have a facility with the wide variety of genres it incorporates. Bordwell argues for the importance of popular storytelling techniques and presents a helpful way of examining how genre becomes another site of exchange, with crime fiction being the very hub of that exchange.

I would argue further that this exchange is not just about setting, character, structure, and narration, as Bordwell points out, but also about thematics. The lack of such traditional crime fiction closure at the end of the novel pushes the reader to focus on the themes of American decline, the American drug trade, and American wars abroad. The more prominent theme of "crime" can emerge from the complex blend of genres because there is no sure reference to what crime is or what its resolution could be. By referencing the Vietnam War through the character of Moss, a Vietnam veteran, World War II through the character of Bell, a WWII veteran, and Chigurh, a central and current "soldier" in the war on drugs, perhaps, like drugs, a composite image of death emerges that has no resolution.

Of course, in most classic works of crime fiction, the "small" crimes also open up to the "large" crimes of society, history, and economic issues. Crime fiction can employ multiple genres and their attendant tropes, structures, and expectations to pull away the curtain to reveal the crimes evident in historical events, oppressive social conditions, and unfair economic hierarchies. Allen Josephs takes this longer view by arguing that in McCarthy's works, "the specific focus on crime and evil has become strong enough that I have come to consider his novels like chapters in a very long book, all part and parcel of the same great story—about crime and about evil" (281).

In that sense, McCarthy's novel works within the framework dilemmas of all crime fiction—juxtaposing the need to protect versus the need to punish, the need to know versus the fear of knowing, accepting the status quo or restoring it, and the hopelessness but continued hope of change for the better. McCarthy leaves us with an ambiguous conclusion in the dreams of Sheriff Bell. However, those dreams show that the mystery of

the human scramble for meanings of mind and body, of happenings and understanding, can enlighten us through the complex tensions and universal affiliations of crime fiction, a promise that all narrative extends, but crime fiction especially so.

**Genre and point of view**

McCarthy's *NCFOM* employs its generic conventions by rotating the narrative point of view through three characters: Chigurh, the antagonist; Bell, the protagonist; and Moss, a character lost between decision and indecision. Chigurh is allied to the horror genre, Bell to the Western genre, and Moss to the thriller genre. That is not to say they are limited to those conventions, but rather that the predominance of Western tropes for Bell, for example, provides the primary generic framing for his sections. The narrative remains, like most crime fiction, a combined set of narratives that overlap at distinct nodal points.

The novel rejects the typical or expected solution to the distance between the differently genred narratives, and indeed, the three main characters never meet. The tripartite braided narrative rotating between these three central characters and their accompanying tropes is a large part of what gives the novel its power even while denying the full resolution of most crime fiction. The way those three main genres combine and work—without fully integrating—under the broader umbrella of crime fiction is a large part of McCarthy's achievement. He uses the expectations and conventions of crime fiction, but he is not writing from within the full expectations of the crime fiction genre—instead, he uses its conventions to create tension between expectations and his own narrative structure.

This rotation is further complicated because Bell is a character in the narrative in two distinct ways: as an occasional first-person point of view and as a character acting in the events. His first-person, non-diegetic commentary serves as a Greek chorus commenting on the actions, even while in other sections, Bell plays an active role in events. He is both actant and commentator, which further blends the different genres and melds them into a style that aptly fits within the umbrella term of crime fiction. McCarthy keeps those two aspects of Bell's character entirely separate. Those two functions are further delineated by having Bell's first-person commentary entirely in italics and placed at the beginning of each chapter. The positioning emphasizes the separateness of the different genres embodied by the characters but also helps to blend them.

Jacques Derrida notes that the blending of genres is a characteristic of almost all texts:

> Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text: there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging. And not because of an abundant overflowing or a free, anarchic, and unclassifiable productivity, but because of the trait of participation itself, because of the effect of the code and the generic mark. (230)

In other words, reading requires recognizing the genre and recognizing what is not the genre. That might be a simple task for some texts, but McCarthy employs a complex blend of genres, which are primarily expressed through the different points of view of the three main characters.

Genre is contained within the different points of view of the three main characters not so much structurally as effectually. Generic tropes and conventions accent and amplify the meanings created by the characters. To understand how the novel does that, it is easiest to examine the three primary characters one by one. This separate analysis brings to mind one of the essential components of crime fiction pointed out by Peter Hühn, who reminds us that "[t]he stories that are narrated in detective novels can profitably be described as stories of writing and reading insofar as they are concerned with authoring and deciphering 'plots'" (451). Including multiple genres, especially the many different genres that McCarthy employs, complicates both of those endeavors. *NCFOM* seems to have three plots distributed among the three main characters.

The first character, Llewelyn Moss, acts in the narrative primarily through the thriller genre. A close variant of that genre, the action and anti-hero subgenres are also essential to his tripartite third of the novel. The events are set in action and established as thriller-like by Moss's initial missed shot when hunting antelope. In his analysis of the philosophy of the Coen Brothers' film adaptation of *NCFOM*, Richard Gilmore ties this missed shot to the term *hamartia*, the fatal flaw that forms a core element of Greek tragedy. Gilmore notes, "*[h]amartia* is a term derived from archery and literally means 'off the mark'" (62). The chase, a standard trope in thrillers, begins and provides the primary tension in the novel as Moss shifts from hunter to hunted. The mixing of genres transposes to the visuals of the film just as thoroughly as in the original novel. That is, the Coen

brothers' adaptation employs hybridization just as masterfully as the novel; hybridization is essential to the story in both narrative forms.

Moss's genres also include the action genre. As the action hero, or more specifically, anti-hero, he is a savvy Vietnam veteran, skilled as a marksman and hunter, and has a clever (though not clever enough) approach to keeping the money he finds. The classic tropes of discovering dirty money, in this case, drug money, trying to keep it, and protecting a loved one, his wife, are the prime drivers of the plot. One bad shot at the antelope, plus his good tracking skills as a hunter, put him in the position of being on the run with two million dollars of drug money. Sheriff Bell speaks with Moss's wife in a moment of contemplation of what is essentially a Hitchcockian "McGuffin":

> These people will kill him, Carla Jean. They won't quit.
>
> He won't neither. He never has.
>
> I wish I could say that was in his favor. But I have to say I don't think it is.
>
> Well, she said, he's who he is and he always will be. That's why I married him. (McCarthy 127)

Sheriff Ed Tom Bell establishes his voice as the ethical center by pursuing Moss more as a protective Sheriff than an investigative detective. He is positioned as the detective with a procedural approach, but he often eschews or gives up on procedure. He has experience, character, and fearlessness, which fits Raymond Chandler's well-known description of the classic view of the genre-based character of the investigator:

> But down these mean streets, a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero; he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor—by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world. (59)

In one sense, Bell's character fits that description quite neatly. In another sense, though, the character upends that classic definition by disrupting it with a nihilistic commentary. He primarily fits that definition of the classic detective not by ticking the boxes off on police procedural conventions but instead by adhering to the conventions of the Western genre. Nostalgia is

basic to the Western genre and Western themes that permeate *NCFOM*. They also decenter the temporal setting by bringing in reminiscences, in first person, of past sheriffs and of the land's importance to all who live there. Sheriff Bell adheres to the Western genre not only by riding horses, using a bolt action rifle, wearing a revolver, and engaging in shoot-outs. He carries the attitudes of the Western by inserting nostalgic comments such as "[t]his country has got a strange kind of history and a damned bloody one too" (McCarthy 284). When they talk, his uncle reminds him that "this country will kill you in a heartbeat, and still people love it" (284). The classic attitudes of the Western genre, the reverence for freedom, movement, and self-reliance, pervade the novel but never overtake the central crime fiction. The genres are blended carefully and complexly.

Thus, the character of Bell becomes central in the italicized passages written in first person from Bell's point of view. These first-person passages, inserted at the beginning of each of the thirteen chapters and the end of the novel, act as reflective, critical, and ethical commentary on the events. Bell is capable of seeing beyond the limitations of genre to the more significant meanings of what is transpiring as the drug trade changes America, leaving so many victims and so many crimes that he is ambivalent at best and despairing at worst about the hope of pursuing any of them. As the evil of those crimes is foregrounded throughout the novel, he notes that evil is encapsulated in a single man, the antagonist, Chigurh, whose name he does not even know. Bell describes the situation and the man in this way:

> But there is another view of the world out there and other eyes to see it, and that's where this is goin. It had done brought me to a place in my life I would not of thought I'd of come to. Somewhere out there is a true and living prophet of destruction and I don't want to confront him. I know he's real. (4)

Bell postpones his detective role of finding the killer through numerous delays, misdirections, and finally, by retiring. However, by embracing Chandler's ideal of "the detective hero" in thought, if not in action, he manages to at least offer insight into the nature of the bad guy and what he represents. In other words, Bell incorporates genres into the narrative but also blurs the lines to consider thematic problems more expansively. He follows the genre tropes in most of his actions but breaks them through his reflective commentary. He is less a detective than a sheriff. He does not solve crimes so much as protects the people in his

county. He expresses the conservative values of the Western, preserving safety, respecting the past, and maintaining the status quo. He never even meets, much less subdues, the "prophet of destruction," Anton Chigurh.

"Antagonist" is perhaps not the correct description of Anton Chigurh's role in the story, since he contributes much more than a foil against the other two main characters. The killings he commits all through the novel are brutal. The primary genres connected to Chigurh are horror and what could be considered a sub-genre of horror, that of monster. The horror genre is one that is expansive, but here focusing on the type of horror that involves a monster character is most fitting. The monster can be thought of as an especially powerful character, which often propels the narrative in horror stories, and one who acts particularly violently, unempathetically, and cruelly. The character of the monster, Chigurh, has supra-human qualities that inspire fear and terror in the reader, but also in the characters like Bell, who learn what he does. Moss refuses to see Chigurh's monstrous actions for what they will bring—his own death. He also brings in elements of the gangster genre. It is interesting to note that horror is also essential to the kind of crime story created by directors such as Alfred Hitchcock, where the murderer is led further into unstoppable, calculated actions of violence and cruelty. The horror genre seems to mirror the detective fiction, where the monster ranges freely or is never held to account. That is certainly the case with Chigurh, who seemingly cannot be contained. He is more than a criminal; his brutal crimes extend beyond the legal framework of much detective fiction.

However, McCarthy aims for something less human and more abstract than the typical Hitchcockian monster. He keeps Chigurh within the limits of realism as well. In one scene, the only person in the novel who has survived seeing Chigurh up to that point, Wells, is an investigator who more accurately fits the role of hired private detective. When asked by the drug kingpin who is hiring him, Wells says of Chigurh,

> Nobody's invincible.
>
> Somebody is.
>
> Why do you say that?
>
> Somewhere in the world is the most invincible man. Just as somewhere is the most vulnerable.
>
> That's a belief that you have?
>
> No. It's called statistics. Just how dangerous is he?

> Wells shrugged. Compared to what? The bubonic plague? He's bad enough that you called me. He's a psychopathic killer but so what? There's plenty of them around. (141)

McCarthy's strategy to incorporate genre dynamics and overcome genre limitations is evident in this exchange. Chigurh is discussed at several levels: killer, invincible man, bubonic plague, and in the imaginary timeframe of being the last man who survives everything and everyone. The extreme violence also contains generic implications. As Stephen Knight notes in his comprehensive book on two hundred years of crime fiction, "in the last two decades, some writers have made violence so central a feature of their texts that it appears to have taken on a generic force" (198). While extreme violence has always been an element of crime fiction and is essential to McCarthy's works, such as *Blood Meridian* (1985) or *Child of God* (1973), the hybridization of genres is again amplified by the generic violence. The mixing of horror into the crime fiction genre has a long history stretching back to the first writers who could be considered writing crime fiction: Charles Dickens, Edgar Allan Poe, and Wilkie Collins.

In a revealing scene, the depiction of Chigurh is given another generic twist when Chigurh performs surgery on himself, cleaning, stitching, and healing a bullet wound. That self-surgery recalls the creation of the Frankenstein monster, a body constructed from multiple bodies. He has a sort of analgesia that adds a further dimension of horror to his character and actions. In an insightful analysis of evil characters in films conducted by a team of psychiatrists, they gave Chigurh a diagnosis as, "active, primary, idiopathic psychopathy, incapacity for love, absence of shame or remorse, lack of psychological insight, inability to learn from past experience, cold-blooded attitude, ruthlessness, total determination, and lack of empathy. He seems to be affectively invulnerable and resistant to any form of emotion or humanity" (Leistedt and Linkowski 172). In short, he was viewed as one of the worst characters in fiction.

The film adaptation of *NCFOM* offers a compelling view of a complex human mind that seems to be transgressing the scientific designation "psychopath" and entering into the fictional designation "monster." Rather than remove or downplay the generic conventions McCarthy uses throughout his novel, the Coen brothers enhance those conventions and, one might argue, sharpen them through visual and cinematic techniques. The line between the two forms the tension between the realistic and fantasied aspects in both the film and the novel. Crime

fiction, at its most compelling, pushes toward that line in the major works of the genre.

With all these competing genres flooding the central crime narrative of a drug deal in the desert, the novel seems to exemplify Derrida's law of genre as "a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy, . . . a sort of participation without belonging—a taking part in without being part of, without having membership in a set" (56). However, McCarthy uses tropes, conventions, and characters from multiple genres to expand and empower the central crime narrative. By creating a complex set of genre dynamics in the novel, tension is increased, suspense is enhanced, and the fear of consequences is deepened.

The primary tensions are those between the Western and detective genres on the one hand, and the horror and monster genres on the other. This divide creates the tension between the ratiocination of a detective solving a mystery and the horror of the physical reality of the crimes. Laura Marcus explains how this fundamental tension is essential in all detective stories. The connection she makes between the practice of the detective story and the structuralist theory is relevant to how hybridization works in all narratives, but particularly in narratives that rely on the tension between what is being told and how the narrative tells the story. Exploring the typology of detective fiction by referring to the work of Tzvetan Todorov, she claims that

> the two orders of story, inquest, and crime, as equivalents to the Russian formalist distinction between *s jużet* and *fabula* (often translated as "discourse" and "story"' respectively) makes the detective story, as Peter Brooks writes, "the narrative of narratives," its classical structure a laying bare of the structure of all narrative in that it dramatizes the role of *s jużet* and *fabula* and the nature of their relation. (245)

In that sense, McCarthy employs other genres to give weight to both the inquest and the crime, the mental deciphering and the symbolic display of bodily death. The genres are not added just for weight or complexity but to accentuate the tensions and deepen the thematic elements of the work. The interplay of genres creates tension and dynamism on top of the inherent tension between *s jużet* and *fabula*, discourse, and story, which, as Marcus reminds us, remains one of the defining characteristics of crime fiction.

What is intriguing to note, as it might be left out of a strictly structuralist analysis of genre, is that McCarthy, like many classic crime

fiction authors, also includes a third element—commentary. Of course, it might be easiest to include commentary from detectives in the discourse/*sjuzet* side of the text. Indeed, it is one of the ways in which many authors expand the detecting narrative. However, McCarthy's marking of the first-person commentary from Bell as distinct from the discursive reconstruction of the crime and the story of interconnected events suggests that it stands apart as a different kind of structure, or rather as another distinct genre-based technique incorporated into the narrative. McCarthy takes the first-person narration, which is a classic technique in detective fiction, and tailors it to his own purposes. In *NCFOM*, the two-way pull of tensions in the narrative found in nearly all crime fiction becomes triangulated. The first-person voices of classic detectives serve the same function but are usually more fully integrated into the *sjuzet*/discourse. However, McCarthy removes the disembodied first-person narration from that central function and lets it stand on its own at the beginning of every chapter, and at the beginning and ending of the novel.

**Genre and death**

The other consequences of the hybrid use of multiple genres highlight other elements of crime fiction, particularly the issue of death as the theme and closure of the narrative. In *NCFOM*, the crime story side, with its focus on the bodily elements and the mental inquest, with its emphasis on the discovery and detection of the crime based on knowledge and character, is again inflected by genre. On the inquest side are the Western and detective genres, both of which have a coherent set of values, practical procedures, and desire for truth, as well as their own moral codes. All these are expressed in the sections from Bell's perspective. The genres of horror and monsters emphasizing transcendence, power, chance, and death are channeled through the character of Chigurh. Running through the middle of the two are the thriller and action genres aligned with Moss. Whichever of those narrative threads one chooses to emphasize, a very different thematic reading would result.

Those are not hard and fast divisions, as the monster figure of Chigurh, who gradually appears to be an incarnation or personification of death, has his principles. The erstwhile detective Bell says about Chigurh: "You cant make a deal with him . . .. He's a peculiar man. You could even say that he has principles. Principles that transcend money or drugs or anything like that" (McCarthy 153). However, those principles are far outside the other moral, ethical, legal, and extra-legal systems. Gilmore

states it clearly when he says that Chigurh's "function is to undo or to make irrelevant everyone's rules" (65). Since crime fiction explores the boundaries of rules, the novel fits into the crime fiction genre quite succinctly.

Chigurh pushes the boundaries of humanness, not only through his cruelty and seeming pleasure in looking into the eyes of those he has killed but by incorporating the aleatory in the scenes where he flips a coin to decide a potential victim's fate. Chigurh even carries a scythe-like tool, which has long been one of the images associated with traditional personifications of death, in the cattle punch he uses on several victims and to enter locked spaces. His metaphoric scythe allows him to transgress the boundaries of spaces, police offices, highways, homes, and office buildings, as well as the boundaries of bodies.

Different genres handle death differently, but by bringing in the monster genre, Chigurh focuses the narrative on death, with nearly too many deaths to count in the three-hundred-twenty-nine-page novel. Gill Plain eloquently analyzes this approach to death and the body in her *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body,* in the afterword to which, quoting Julia Kristeva, she notes that "[c]rime fiction depends upon an illusion: it categorically states that death can be confronted and explained. But such a premise is impossible. It assumes that the corpse, 'the ultimate in abjection' and a 'border that has encroached upon everything,' will know—and stay in—its place" (245). Chigurh not only transcends the borders to death; he revels in doing so, staring into the eyes of those he has killed. He is a serial killer who upends issues of safety by making the outside world seem to be a slaughterhouse by carrying a cattle gun wherever he goes. He establishes his meanings for death, as in this exchange with Wells, right before he kills the only man capable of tracking him down:

> You think you're outside of everything, Wells said. But you're not.
> Not everything. No.
> You're not outside of death.
> It doesn't mean to me what it does to you.
> You think I'm afraid to die?
> Yes. (177)

Most crime fiction is an exploration of the concept of death, but Chigurh, as an incarnation of death, serves to complicate the idea of death in myriad ways. Death appears as a random act of chance in the scenes where he tosses a coin to decide whether to kill a gas station attendant.

Death is presented as a promise when Chigurh talks to Moss's wife, Carla Jean, before killing her. After Carla Jean says, "[y]ou've no cause to hurt me" (255), Chigurh tells her, "I know. But I gave my word" (255). Death is presented as the act of a crazy person when Wells tells Chigurh, "[d]o you have any notion of how goddamned crazy you are?" (175) and Carla Jean responds, "I knowed you was crazy when I saw you sittin there" (257). Furthermore, death is presented as both a matter of choice and as a deterministic inevitability in the interchange between Wells and Chigurh: "We dont have to do this" (173). Carla Jean is also trying to convince him, "[y]ou don't have to do this" (257). Their last hope is that choice remains inside Chigurh. So, as the victims cling to the hope of choice, Chigurh falls into a more deterministic view of death when he explains the murder he is about to commit: "I had no say in the matter. Every moment in your life is a turning and every one a choosing. Somewhere you made a choice. All followed to this. The accounting is scrupulous" (259). Then, mocking even that view of death, he says, "[i]t was bad luck" (257). However one resolves these divergent views of death, and it seems difficult to do so, the novel enlarges the contemplation of death that permeates most crime fiction. Death is examined from multiple points of view, different in each genre, but without any unifying trope to give a coherent sense of uniform understanding. That inability to draw conclusions is part of the lack of closure, which is so disturbing in the novel.

**Genre and fear**

If it is true that, as John Truby argues in his comprehensive examination of story forms, *The Anatomy of Genres*, "[d]etective fiction highlights the brilliance of the mind while [h]orror emphasizes its flaws" (26), then *NCFOM* explores the epistemology of crime—the primary drive to know what happened and why. As the bodies pile up in the novel, so does curiosity. However, simple explanations are denied. As with death, the sheer number of possibilities refuses resolution. Through the character of Sheriff Bell, the push to find out is denied as the crime and its motivations are covered with larger metaphysical issues. Sheriff Bell says he could go and track down the killer, Chigurh, even though he thinks it will lead to his death, but he does not want to "put his soul at Hazard" (McCarthy 4). Bell contemplates what would be involved in learning about Chigurh, confronting him, and trying to capture him in the traditional manner, and he decides he will not attempt to do so. Bell notes, importantly, that it is not his fear of death that holds him back: "[i]t ain't just bein older. I wish that it

was. I cant say that it's even what you are willin to do. Because I always knew that you had to be willin to die to even do this job. . . . I think it is more like what you are willin to become. And I think a man would have to put his soul at hazard. And I wont do that. I think now that maybe I never would" (4). Bell does not learn about the crime or the criminal, but he does learn about himself and his engagement with what he describes as "the true and living prophet of destruction" (4). It is here that hybridization includes an almost Biblical presentation of the stakes of engagement. Bell's decision is not that of a by-the-book detective, but rather of a character caught in the pressure of forces greater than what most detectives encounter. His decision to not go further after Chigurh is where the detective mystery genre is subverted. He does not push to know everything, but backs off to save his soul.

This push to know, an essential part of all crime fiction, has been elevated to the level of a test of one's soul. It is not just legal proof. Ironically, perhaps, for Bell, not knowing becomes a way of protecting himself. In traditional crime fiction, what a detective learns from cases often makes his character cynical, derisive, ironic, or misanthropic. That danger may be the ultimate end for all hard-boiled detectives, or at least it serves as a source of irony for detectives who preserve their essential, if not always cheery, nature despite the horrible things they have witnessed and learned. When Chigurh and Moss talk on the phone, Chigurh tells him very clearly what the ending will be. However, it is more than that; it is about acceptance, understanding, and the deeper issues of the human soul, just as it is for Bell.

> It doesn't make any difference where they are.
>
> So what are you goin up there for.
>
> You know how this is going to turn out, don't you?
>
> No. Do you?
>
> Yes. I do. I think you do too. You just havent accepted it yet. (184)

Chigurh disrupts the drive toward knowing from knowing to the acceptance of what is known. In most crime novels there is a moment when discovery leads to disbelief and denial. That moment is then followed by a moment of acceptance and another of taking action.

In this way, McCarthy expands the relation between death and character and presents a set of three distinct approaches to this theme. Bell knows how the story will end, and Chigurh knows it too. It is only Moss

who does not know or he willfully refuses to accept what he knows and, as a result, he loses his life. That hard-boiled attitude gives the novel, as well as the film, a traditional crime fiction feeling.

The refusal to allow narrative closure makes that attitude even more hard-boiled. The novel disrupts crime and detective genres not simply by creating a hybrid of multiple genres but by projecting an attitude of fear that continues after the official inquest is closed without finding out who Chigurh actually was. Chigurh is hit by a car but walks away with his broken arm in a sling. We know from the scene where he doctors his own gunshot leg that he will survive this final violence against himself. The instability established by presenting various reasons for Chigurh's killing makes his walking away in the penultimate scene an explicit denial of closure. There is no Western showdown, no thriller final chase, no scene of a detective arresting the criminal, or even seeing them dead. The bad guy walks away.

The lack of a confrontation scene also denies closure. Moss has been killed, but Bell and Chigurh never even meet. Bell returns to the scene of Moss's death, but Chigurh stays out of the way and remains hidden. The scene is written by obscuring Chigurh's presence and it ends with Bell calling for backup. Chigurh remains, as the phrase has it, as silent as death. The ease with which he enters and exits spaces lingers, though, and Sheriff Bell does not even bother taking the investigation to the next step.

> I tried to see if I could get his fingerprints off the FBI database but they just drew a blank. Wanted to know what his name was and what he'd done and all such as that. You end up lookin like a fool. He's a ghost. But he's out there. You wouldn't think it would be possible to just come and go thataway. I keep waiting to hear somethin else. Maybe I will yet. (248)

While the criminal gets away in some crime fiction, McCarthy has presented Chigurh as particularly transgressive. The lack of compensation for his trials, combined with the lack of moral resolution, leaves the narrative with the body's power in action over the mind's power of detection. In the most nihilistic way possible, the criminal succeeds, while the detective's inquest fails. The novel ends with the dream-like musings of Sheriff Bell, his retirement, and his voice as he searches for meaning and coherence up until the very end.

*NCFOM* can be categorized as postmodern crime fiction, where, as Stephen Knight argues, "coincidence, overlapping accounts, and indeterminacy are the plot motifs and parody, irony, and inconsequence are

technical tools to dislodge the idea of a single knowing and moralising subject" (195). *NCFOM* fits that postmodern categorization, but not perfectly. That subject, *NCFOM* suggests, can only be found in the overlap of a mixture of genres that reveal how that subject thinks, feels, and acts within the tensions and pressures of the story. In that sense, popular and literary storytelling both search for the concept of a subject with at least enough stability to offer a moralizing counterpoint to knowing the power of fear and death. Bell's musing, moralizing, and nostalgizing the past show that something more than nihilism is possible, that perhaps all that remains after such violence is the known and moralizing subject.

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# Wartime Knitting in Agatha Christie's *N or M?*

Renáta Zsámba



**ABSTRACT**

Agatha Christie's *N or M?* (1941) has received scarce critical attention despite the increasing academic discussion about the British Queens of Golden Age crime fiction. This, as Phyllis Lassner or Gill Plain argue, is a major lapse in the criticism of the genre, because the war novels by Golden Age female writers can demonstrate both the experimentation of the narrative form and the genre's applicability to negotiate wartime concerns. *N or M?* focuses on the increasing paranoia about fifth columnists and the impact of WWII on everyday realities. To foreground the entanglement of the domestic and covert state operations through the counter-espionage mission of the Beresfords, Christie experiments with the fusion of spy fiction and the whodunit to subvert the traditional portrait of the spy by making Tuppence, a middle-aged housewife by now, but camouflaged as a knitting widow, the superior one. The novel also interrogates stereotypical assumptions about marginalized groups and negotiates new forms of patriotism by deconstructing propagandistic ideals of patriotic femininity. Therefore, this paper contends that Tuppence's knitting provides insights into the competing discourses about women and their agency while also underscoring their contribution to the meaning making of the banal and the insignificant, eventually flaunted in the heroic power of the color magenta. (RZS)

**KEYWORDS**: Golden Age crime fiction, Second World War, knitting, magenta, female agency

## Introduction: Patriotic femininity and Christie's revision of the female spy

Agatha Christie's third Tommy and Tuppence novel, *N or M?* was published in 1941—the same year as Margery Allingham's *Traitor's Purse*. Both books depict wartime conflicts, the threat of Nazi Germany, fifth columnists,[1] the pervading spy fever, xenophobia, the crisis of national identity, and patriotism. While Allingham produced two other novels, *Black Plumes* (1940) and *Coroner's Pidgin* (1945), in which the detective spy needs to track down

the enemy within, *N or M?* is Christie's "only thriller dealing explicitly with the conflict" (Mills and Bernthal 1). Despite Allingham's solid position among the Queens of Golden Age crime fiction, and an increasing academic acclaim, she has never achieved the same popularity or critical recognition as Christie. Nevertheless, the Tommy and Tuppence series in Christie's oeuvre has also suffered from as much critical neglect as Allingham's war novels, and it has only been in the last few years that prominent female authors' crime novels of the Second World War have become the focus of academic discussion.[2] The increasing number of critical revisions has also targeted the writers' unrecognized contribution to the experimentation of the narrative forms of crime fiction and their applicability to negotiate wartime concerns. Phyllis Lassner is among the first critics whose gripping analysis of Allingham's and Helen MacInnes's detective spy novels foregrounds the literary value and critical potential residing in the hybridity of the form. According to Lassner, "[c]ombining complex weaves of narrative forms with political and cultural concerns, these novels provide new criteria that challenge any doubts about the legitimacy of these literary genres" (113–14). Lassner further argues that this hybrid form allows the protagonists to assume the dual role of the spy and detective when there is a strong demand for "multiple forms of intelligence gathering to unmask the disguised enemy" (114), which further reinforces the need for creativity and inventiveness in times of crisis, such as the Nazi threat during Second World War. Christie's *N or M?* also offers a fertile ground to explore this intricate relation between the narrative form, wartime anxieties and her protagonists' investigative agency in a counter-espionage mission in the early phase—the spring of 1940—of the Second World War. The novel is also an attempt to discuss the everyday experience of the crisis on the home front by focusing on women's contribution to the war effort with an emphasis on their domestic duties, which, traditionally regarded as passive or insignificant, "was thus reinterpreted as their patriotic duty to the home front" (Morgan and Evans 58). Given that the book prioritizes the middle-aged Tuppence Beresford's involvement and investigative strategies—camouflaged as a knitting widow—Christie's narrative form successfully interweaves large-scale political and cultural concerns with the banal and the insignificant, which calls for a revision of women's domestic knowledge and engagement in the war. While Judy Suh, Merja Makinen, and Gill Plain have published valuable insights about patriotism, femininity, motherhood, and war propaganda in *N or M?*, no

analysis has been dedicated to the entanglement of knitting and its (militaristic) metaphors, which the book offers for reconsideration.

Given its counter-espionage plot, *N or M?* calls for interpretation in the context of the spy novel, which emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century and its formal origins "lay hazily within an amalgamation of the imperial adventure tale and the detective novel" (Bloom 1). Clive Bloom points out that while both of these genres were a response to social pressure in the second half of the nineteenth century, "[t]he spy thriller . . . (in its fully-developed form) was, more than both its predecessors, *the* genre tied to *international* political and social tensions. Indeed, more than any other form the spy thriller responded to a need to represent *covert* activity by state organisations" (1, emphasis in original). Allingham's and Christie's detective spy novels written during the 1940s borrow elements from both genres, but most importantly, they experiment with the fusion of "guilt within the context of a home or family" (Hepburn 25), adopted from detective fiction, and "guilt within the context of statecraft and diplomacy" (Hepburn 26), taken from espionage fiction. Lassner claims that although the war novels of Allingham and MacInnes are "deeply concerned with disturbances in the domestic social order, [they] underscore the terror of total conquest, ranging from suspicions of collaboration and betrayal to the destruction of British culture and identity" (114). These hybrid texts then, as Lassner suggests, are important milestones in women's crime writing during the war and "invite literary historical analysis that links the cultural ideologies of Britain's war against Nazism to the literary value of detective and spy fiction" (113). Her claim is also intriguing because Golden Age detective fiction, or the classic whodunit, which Christie and Allingham are categorically associated with, has often been accused of escapism due to its nostalgic tendency to create an artificial world, immune to its social reality. This critical hostility, however, loses sight of the complexity of the term itself: Gill Plain argues that it is through these wartime narratives that a revision of the genre's escapist element is indispensable, especially because the violation of society brought about by "the crime of murder can be seen as analogous to the more comprehensive transgression of war" (*Women's Fiction* 17). Despite the somber tone and the anxieties around a possible Nazi invasion, these texts provide "a fantasy of wartime survival" (17) through the intervention of the "courage and intelligence of the individual detective" (17). These novels, Plain asserts, offer a "fantasy of control and agency" (17), but more importantly, they contribute to the "process of

'making sense' of war" by "uncover[ing] the fear and confusion that lay beneath these strategies for survival" (18).

Nonetheless, Stephen Knight dismisses the Tommy and Tuppence series, labeling them "simplistic and jingoistic mystery adventures" (93), whose potential is ruined "by the obviousness of the plotting and characterisation and the political naivety of the ideas" (93). Knight's hasty judgment, especially pertaining to *N or M*?, apparently fails to take into consideration the narrative form's capacity to reflect on and make sense of the large-scale crisis threatening the whole of Europe. His unappreciative approach might stem from a strong focus on the hopeful tone justified by the Beresfords' success in their counter-espionage mission, yet it disregards the impact of the crisis on the meaning-making process in the domestic sphere, one of the main concerns of the book. Makinen points out that critics "have rightly called the novel patriotic propaganda" ("Taking on Hitler" 68), but it is not at all "jingoistic" (93) as Knight calls it, as instead of painting Nazism "as black as night" (68), it offers a more nuanced interpretation of the term itself. Undoubtedly, *N or M?* heavily reflects on the hatred of Hitler and Nazi Germany, xenophobia, racism, the pervading spy fever, and the increasing misogyny, but by presenting various perspectives on these matters, it also challenges the legitimacy of the dominant discourses while, as Makinen argues, it "interrogates the term patriotism in a number of ways" (68).

Indeed, Christie's innovative narrative technique widens the scope and thematic preoccupation of conventional spy fiction not only to undermine orthodox ideas about patriotism and women's agency, but also to subvert its generic elements by making Tuppence, already a middle-aged housewife and a knitter, the "superior spy" (Suh 141) of the two, and her husband, Tommy, "a dim-witted sidekick" (Makinen, *Investigating Femininity* 32). While Tommy could qualify as the British gentleman, "the incorruptible and upright British agent . . . a 'symbol of stability' in a changing world" (Trotter 31–32), typical of early British spy novels, his position is not only weakened by his wife being the brainier, but also by the fact that he spends almost half of the narrative in the captivity of N, one of the Nazi spies. According to Bruce Merry, female spies in generic spy fiction are opposed to the gentlemanly male ideal, since "they must be young and attractive" (127) or—if they are the hero's girlfriend—they can easily get into trouble and need the hero's intervention to escape (180). Tuppence as an unemployed middle-aged wife and mother is delineated as the absolute antithesis of the generic female spy. Yet, it is exactly this subverted portrait

of the type that allows for a critical observation of propaganda's impact on women's role on the home front, intricately connected to the increasing misogyny, the anxiety surrounding motherhood and images of patriotic femininity. Phil Goodman uses the term "patriotic femininity" in her article about women's and men's morale to describe the contradictory images that women were exposed to during the war. Her major claim about patriotic femininity includes that, while the war disrupted traditional notions of femininity, as women were required to make their contribution to Britain's war efforts, their role and place were still heavily influenced by pre-war stereotypes connected to their looks and domestic duties. Following up on this claim, Jennifer Purcell asserts that along with the idealization of these opposing and almost unattainable images of what woman should be like—doing masculine work while taking care of her family and staying attractive—propaganda also raises the status of housewifery: "Wartime messages were just as insistent that housewives had an integral part to play in the war. *Good Housekeeping*, for example, reminded housewives of the gravity of their own participation in the war-effort, 'The smallest scrap YOU rescue may mean the turning point of the war'" (154). A significant part of women's contribution on the home front targeted charity work with much emphasis on knitting for the army, which, as Richard Rutt points out, "was more highly organized than it had been during the First World War" (149). Rutt also remarks that "[i]n the second war the British government was much concerned about morale at home. Rationing was successfully managed, not least for clothing. A system of coupons for cloth and clothing included knitting wool" (149). Knitting was the signifier of feminine morale and patriotism was meant to be raised to the level of paid employment so that women did not so much regard themselves as "citizen housewives" but rather "domestic soldiers" (Purcell 154). Nevertheless, as Purcell observes, among the records of Mass-Observation (M-O),[3] housewives' experience of unpaid domestic work did not generally reflect pride or satisfaction, and many did not consider their efforts "vital war work. Indeed, guilt at not participating in some paid occupation underlined many of the responses" (157).

Viewed against this backdrop, Christie's *N or M?* effectively negotiates the ambiguities surrounding the domestic sphere by foregrounding the couple's despair at their own situation, but the novel concerns itself more with the aging housewife's futile efforts to do something meaningful. Tuppence, who appears as a devoted knitter in the opening scene, hints at and immediately questions various meanings of

knitting, which deconstructs stereotypical ideas about women's (useless) domestic activities on the one hand, and destabilizes masculine hegemony along with the narrative form, on the other. Tuppence's ambition to participate in the counter-espionage mission—which only accounts for a man's, in fact, her husband's, intervention—and go undercover as a certain Mrs. Blenkensop in a boarding house on the southern coast, both maintains and undermines the respectable image of the decent middle-class housewife. Or, as Plain argues, it asserts "both her loyalty and disloyalty to the patriarchy" (*Twentieth-Century* 49). Building on Plain's argument, Suh contends that Tuppence "capitalizes on her ability to perform, and more importantly, her ability to read the culture's contradictory representation of women in wartime" (153). Knitting as a performative act of femininity but also a tool for spying and investigating signals Tuppence's inventiveness to connect the war and the home, and illustrates how the domestic, the ordinary, and the banal can signify their very opposite to validate their contribution to the war effort. Nevertheless, the women's presence and performance were all the more unappreciated due to the growing anxiety over their talk, which became the target of the Allied propaganda that "spoke directly about and to servicemen's fear of their women's betrayal. Posters enjoining silence as a protection against spies implied that women's talk would kill fighting men. . . . English cartoons and posters pictured women as irresponsible in their garrulity or sinister in their silence" (Gubar 240). Christie's detective spy fiction exaggerates these fears to the point of ridicule by not only enhancing stereotypes about women in general, but also by arguing explicitly that categorical thinking about groups conventionally associated with potential danger or weakness—foreigners, the Irish, elderly ladies, or mothers—can be fatal in a large-scale crisis. The fact, however, that Tuppence fulfills the mission without threatening male competence or territories could undermine the novel's potential to seriously revise woman's place and role.[4] Thus, instead of offering a radical feminist agenda, *N or M?* provides insights into the competing discourses about women and their agency, while also underscoring their contribution to the meaning-making process and coping strategies in the domestic sphere during the threat of a Nazi invasion in the Second World War. After all, what emerges is an alternative narrative of the war achieved through the subversion of generic strategies of spy fiction as well as images of patriotic femininity to contain the story of the female other.

**Knitting something *magenta***

The opening scene of *N or M?* exposes the act of knitting and its figurative interpretations to explore the intricate connection between the war and women on the home front. This scene epitomizes the subversion of patriotic femininity by the (aging) woman's knitting, which turns this fairly innocent, passive, and insignificant occupation into an active, visible, and meaningful action.

The story starts in the spring of 1940 when Britain is facing the Blitz after the German invasion of France and Belgium. Tommy and Tuppence, both middle-aged, feel frustrated about having to spend their days unemployed in their London flat despite their several attempts to contribute to the war effort. The opening scene is fairly depressing and foregrounds the importance of mental health and some occupation for the aging population on the home front: sitting in the living-room, Tuppence is knitting a Balaclava helmet[5] in khaki wool, when Tommy enters the room with "a resolute smile" (1). Just by giving him "a quick glance," she realizes that Tommy has failed again in his search for a job, so she "then busied herself by knitting at a furious rate" (1). In their mid-forties with two adult children working for the British army, they feel as if their great adventures and many successful missions in their youth had never happened: "'It's bad enough having a war,' said Tuppence, 'but not being allowed to do anything in it just puts the lid on.' . . . Tuppence gave a snort of rage, tossed her glossy dark head, and sent her ball of khaki wool spinning from her lap.. . . 'Us! You and me! Despised, unwanted Mr. and Mrs. Beresford'" (3–4). Ruminating a little about things past and their present disappointment, Tommy remarks that women at least can knit, or do up parcels, and other charity work but "it is worse for a man" (4). Tuppence immediately reproaches him, clearly stating that a woman at her age, still ambitious and energetic, cannot be content with that: "I can do all that twenty years from now" (5). Here, their conversation is interrupted by the arrival of the mysterious Mr. Grant, who offers Tommy a job in intelligence services to go undercover as a certain Mr. Meadows, an ex-military widower, to track down two Nazi spies, N and M, in a boarding house, ironically called Sans Souci—meaning "no worries"—in Leahampton. Mr. Grant is determined to exclude Tuppence from the mission and makes up a cover-story about Tommy's new job; yet, being smarter than her husband, she finds out about the plan and also leaves for Leahampton. Upon her arrival at the boarding house, Tuppence starts her role-playing as Mrs. Blenkensop, a decent widow with three sons from two different husbands, and an enthusiastic

knitter. When Tommy arrives, he finds Tuppence there, eagerly knitting a Balaclava helmet.

The scene at the end of the first chapter is crucial in the development of the plot, while it also indicates semantic shifts in women's knitting. Plotwise, it points towards the forthcoming actions and the unfolding of the events guided by the rhythm of Tuppence's spy-knitting. Semantically, it refers backwards, to the opening scene, where Tuppence is knitting the same helmet. Soon after Grant leaves, Tommy, feeling guilty about the whole project, especially having to go alone this time, returns to the thread of their earlier conversation to relieve his remorse:

> "After all,'" said Tommy feebly, "you can knit, you know."
>
> "Knit?" said Tuppence. "*Knit?*" Seizing her Balaclava helmet she flung it on the ground. "I hate khaki wool," said Tuppence, "*and* Navy wool *and* Air Force blue, I should like to knit something *magenta*!
>
> "It has a fine military sound," said Tommy. "Almost a suggestion of Blitzkrieg." (14, emphasis in original)

This exchange between the two illustrates the tension between the myths about women and their real experience of the domestic in the war. According to Rutt, knitting in the First World War was "a war activity for the lonely and worried women, and at the same time an expression of love . . . . All ages of women in Britain were knitting for dear life in something like a national addiction" (139–40). Although knitting was less obsessive and more focused on morale in the Second World War, Tuppence's sudden emotional reaction demonstrated through flinging her knitting on the ground seems to be a rejection of taking on the role of the sad, lonely, but devoted woman. Kathy Rees highlights that knitting in literature invariably functioned as a barometer of female emotions: "the act of letting the knitting fall into the lap conveyed shock and horror, the needless unwinding of worsted betrayed indignation, and the jerking of stitches imparted scorn and disdain" (n.p.). Tuppence's emphasis on the second "knit" justifies a mixture of feelings from annoyance to shock, all of which are finally sublimated in the symbolism of the color *magenta*.

This symbolism can be brought into relief by considering the conventional colors of wartime knitting. Rutt points out that "[k]nitting for the armed forces in the Second World War could be done in three colours, for 'Air Force blue' had been added to navy blue and army khaki" (149). Tuppence's hatred of these colors might be taken as a refusal of the

dreariness of the world with the prescribed and uninspiring color scheme to choose from, the type of ordinary heroism as an ideal of the British common man in a time of crisis. Plain explains that J. B. Priestley's *Postscripts*, broadcast throughout 1940 and 1941, "depicted a conflict in which heroism was the province of the 'ordinary British folk.' He spoke of the everyday and commonplace, the comfortable and the familiar; seemingly mundane topics but their very ordinariness was the key to success" (Priestley qtd. in Plain, *Women's Fiction* 7). Related to this widespread ideology during the war, David Morgan and Mary Evans add that "[t]he idea of heroism was no longer limited to the singular courageous act; it became a generalised quality of all those who endured the deprivations and dangers of both combat and the home front". As a result, the traits associated with heroism and courage "had become de-militarised and, to a certain extent, de-mythologised" (16). Considering the wartime ideal embodied by the unchanged image of the "little man" (Plain, *Women's Fiction* 5), the simplicity and the anti-heroism of everyday practices, Tuppence's Spartan cry to knit something *magenta* calls for further interpretation, especially because the appellation of the color *magenta* is deeply connected to bloody fights as well as heroic triumphs. The fusion of something seemingly innocent and ordinary with something heroic changes terms of reference and qualifies as a radical form of storytelling with an emphasis on everyday reality and the destabilization of the symbolic order. It is not at all accidental that Tommy immediately associates the name of the color with a "fine military sound" and "Blitzkrieg" (14), or total annihilation. He seems to suggest a parallel between the present threat of Nazi invasion and the Battle of Magenta, in Northern Italy, where in 1859 the Austrians were defeated by the French and Sardinians in the Franco-Piedmontese War (see Wright 359). Despite the fact that Tuppence's statement is an implicit sign of her knowledge of and potential involvement in Tommy's secret mission, her avoidance of reflecting on her husband's remarks leaves the chain of signification open. Commenting on the collapse of the signifying process and the quest for meaning in narratives of crisis, Plain concludes that "constituted through language, the subject is placed in a critical situation through that language's inability to contain or express the experience of a war . . .. This disruption challenges the strategies through which the subject makes sense of the world . . . and the ever present gap between signifier and signified is uncomfortably revealed" (*Women's Fiction* 19). Tuppence's enigmatic words destabilize the ordinary operation of intelligence activity to save the nation

in favor of offering alternative readings of the woman's scenario for survival by knitting in *magenta*.

**Readings of the color *magenta* in *N or M?***

Decoding the meanings of *magenta* tangible in the novel requires an exploration of not only the semantic shifts in the dye's name itself, but also an insight into the cultural history tightly related to it. Apart from the Battle of Magenta, there are at least three more intriguing facts about the production of the new color relevant to this analysis.

*Magenta* emerged as a new color in the mid-nineteenth century, whose name, as Laura Wright points out, had undergone several semantic shifts in the 1850s—from *fuchsine* through *mauve* to *rosein*—before it started to be marketed as *magenta* in reference to the eponymous battle (359) and "introduced in 1860 in the newly-invented chemical dye industry" (341). She also asserts that "[d]ictionaries suggest that the name *magenta* was given either in reference to the soldiers' bright red uniforms or in reference to the bloodshed in battle; however, neither were coloured magenta, and the fact that *solferino* was also used as a dye-name suggests that the choice was merely a topical reference" (360–61). Tommy's natural reaction to the military sound of the color could foreshadow the success of their mission, as well as a total destruction of Nazi Germany with Hitler on top, whose Austrian origin may be implied through the association of the color and the defeated Austrian army in 1859.

Furthermore, Tuppence's wish to knit something *magenta* suggests a new form of patriotism, one that can connect rather than separate the people in her country. Wright explains that the history of the birth of the new hue goes back to Sir William Henry Perkin, who "invented aniline dye in 1856 and changed the appearance of Victorian fabric" (356). When Perkin was fifteen, he started to attend the lectures of August Wilhelm von Hofmann, the most acclaimed German chemist in the nineteenth century, and at the age of seventeen, he was appointed Hofmann's assistant (356). Their exchange of ideas and collaboration introduced ground-breaking scientific innovations into British industry and culture. Drawing upon this historical fact, the novel also plays with the possibility of such a co-operation between the English and the Germans through the friendship between Tuppence and Carl von Deinim, whose professional expertise of chemistry may not be a mere accident in the book. Tuppence's fondness of and sympathy towards Carl, a German refugee working in a chemical research laboratory, demonstrates a humane approach to individuals who

are systematically rejected based on the preconceptions about the group they represent.[6] During one of their conversations, Tuppence expresses her views on this matter:

> I hate the Germans myself. . . . But when I think of individual Germans, mothers sitting anxiously waiting for news of their sons, and boys leaving home to fight . . . and some of the nice kindly German people I know, I feel quite different. I know then they are just human beings and that we're all feeling alike. That's the real thing. The other is just the war mask that you put on. (98)

Nevertheless, her appreciation of the young man also stems from the fact that Carl is working for the British and his expertise, thus, will serve higher goals: "But in the meantime, you're doing useful work—or so I've heard. Useful not only to England but to humanity. You're working on decontamination problems, aren't you?" (97). From this perspective, patriotism has a more practical side for Tuppence, one that goes beyond exclusivity or propagandistic standards in favor of inclusivity and individual merits for the interest of her own nation, and thus, even if highly idealistic, the higher good of mankind. In this regard, Tuppence and Carl are secret sharers, as both suffer from discrimination and are excluded from power: Tuppence's skills go unrecognized for being a middle-aged woman and those of Carl for being a German and a refugee.

Tuppence's inquiry about Carl's "decontamination experiments" (48), referring to the immunization of certain gases, draws attention to the poisonous effects of the new color, which carry far-reaching implications in the novel. Wright's discussion of the history of the color *magenta* also reflects on the havoc that Perkin's aniline magenta dye caused after its introduction in 1860. She says that "his original formulation had to be abandoned as it contained mercury which poisoned his workers" (361). Despite these concerns, "aniline magenta dye was tremendously successful, particularly for underwear. However, it was becoming known by the late nineteenth century that aniline dyes were not entirely harmless" (361). Many people wearing items of aniline magenta developed symptoms of arsenic poisoning, but in the mid-1860s "a wallpaper with a thick green pattern of foliage had [also] become very popular which, when heated up in hot weather or if rubbed, discharged particles of arsenic, affecting the lips, eyelids and throat of anyone inhaling." Yet, Wright goes on to explain that nothing was done despite the "publication of letters of protest" because it

was in the dye-companies' interests to keep producing aniline dyes (361). Poisonous gases as war weapons were a real threat and left a deeply shocking memory of the First World War—Nazi extermination by gas was not yet in force at the time of the book's publication. Yet Tuppence's attention is more drawn to locating and identifying the invisible poison as a component of the color *magenta*, a metaphorical reference to the fear of fifth columnists, who—similarly to the invisible poison eating away the body—emerge as parasites destroying the nation. This idea is illustrated by a dialogue between Tommy and Mr. Grant:

> "But there are those for whom we've neither respect nor liking—and those are the traitors within our own ranks—the men who are willing to betray their country and accept office and promotion from the foreigner who has conquered it."
>
> Tommy said with feeling: "My God, I'm with you, sir." . . . "And there really are these—these swine?"
>
> "Everywhere. As I told you." (48)

The Beresfords are desperate to track down the secret enemy and eradicate the spread of poisonous Nazi ideology in their country, but the emphasis on the enemy's invisibility allows Tuppence more efficient maneuvers through her spy-knitting. Being invisible herself as a knitting widow, she can easily familiarize herself with the other, fairly uninteresting residents in Sans Souci. At the same time, the color *magenta* signifies both a serious danger that she exposes herself to and a test of her own capacity to discern the "invisible ink" (Christie 235) behind the color.

Apart from the concerns of visibility and invisibility, the narrator's hints at the identity of one of the spies, whose "usually red face" (160) turns purple as a sign of anger, highlight the need for precise definition of colors and shades. Wright explains that *magenta* is not red: "*OED* is clear that *magenta* denotes a pink-mauve hue but also registers the red component in its nomenclature: 'A purple-pink aniline dye, fuchsin; the colour of this dye. Originally more fully Magenta red'" (361). Based on this definition, *magenta* cannot fully be identified as one particular color, but rather as an amalgamation of rosy tints from red to purple. The color denotes corporeal signs in the novel and the ability to recognize the purplish complexion of the face means the success of the Beresfords' mission. Yet, the emphasis on the reddish hue of the face is ironic at the same time and can function as a red herring, given that two male characters, Commander Haydock and Mr.

Grant, both have red faces, but Major Bletchley's face also turns red as a sign of excitement or shock. Therefore, the recognition of the *magenta* hue is necessary, as the one whose facial complexion indicates negative emotions by turning purple proves to be the Nazi spy, N. With reference to the previous note about the invisible, poisonous nature of the dye, the real challenge for Tuppence is to hunt down M, N's partner, whose strategies to hide her real identity resemble those of Tuppence. Unlike the identification of *magenta* red, a strong and passionate color, its secret and mortal component requires more complex and intuitive feminine skills, those that can be explored through Tuppence's knitting.

**Making sense of the lady detective's wartime knitting**

The figure of the knitting woman in literature was not a new phenomenon by the time Christie started to write her detective stories, but the lady detective as a knitter became a popular trope in the interwar era thanks to the increasing success of classic whodunits.[7] Christie's Miss Marple and Patricia Wentworth's Miss Silver are probably the best known knitting ladies, for whom this handicraft is a strategic exercise "to camouflage their surveillance of criminals" (Rees n.p.). Furthermore, as Berkem Sağlam argues, the act of knitting also contributes to these spinster detectives' role-playing to assume the image of the helpless and unthreatening woman: "In the Miss Marple books, more often than not, knitting serves as a motif that constructs character, and helps to establish Miss Marple as a quite harmless, soft, and genial person" (319). Nevertheless, Sağlam also points out that the word "spinster" is derived from the act of spinning, referring to needlework as a common activity performed by "women above a certain age who have never been married" (320). Beyond this explicit link between the activity of spinning and gender, she also draws attention to the figurative meaning of "the acts of spinning and weaving, [which] have been linked in language to the creative act of writing and storytelling, as is clearly suggested in the expressions 'spinning a tale,' 'weaving magic,' and 'telling a yarn'" (320).

While both elderly spinster detectives are shrewd and cunning, their quiet pose and passive form of inquiry through knitting is an anachronistic image of the woman in the interwar era, when the descendant of the fin-de-siècle New Woman, who despises Victorian morals, becomes more and more common. Rees contends, however, that the portrait of the knitting detective, as a less threatening figure for male authority, is a feature of the conservative inclinations of the genre in general (n.p.). Yet, it would be a

mistake to rush to such conclusions based on this single example. Makinen's thorough analysis of Christie's female characters in her *Agatha Christie: Investigating Femininity* (2006) would suggest otherwise, but in terms of the established power structures, it is true that Miss Marple's knitting to investigate can be seen as a moderate step for the recognition of women's skills and expertise in criminal investigations. Unlike the Miss Marple stories of the interwar era, Tuppence's spy-knitting in *N or M?* reaches beyond the mere investigation of a single murder case due to the novel's engagement with the increasing paranoia and anxiety over fifth columnists in Britain. She applies knitting too, as a strategy to dissolve suspicion, but more importantly to highlight the dangers of the critical blindness to the politically conditioned ideological concepts about foreigners, motherhood, or aging women during the war. Her knitting also demonstrates new forms of patriotism by undermining the propagandistic function of patriotic femininity to tell the woman's story expressed not in uniform colors but in the vibrating hues of *magenta*.

In *N or M?*, the true nature of the war is not portrayed through sheer violence or death, but it is to be interpreted through more sophisticated signs, the meaning of which subvert and haunt everyday reality as floating signifiers. Victoria Stewart argues that "[d]etective fiction might have traditionally served as a means of encompassing or controlling the apparently uncontrollable—violence, death—but in wartime, this function becomes both more urgent and more difficult" (93). Therefore, making sense of banal rituals in the novel might be the key to success, and this presumes the applicability of the power of observation, which at the same time is easily supported by a pretentious physical occupation, such as knitting. Soon after getting to Sans Souci, Tuppence quickly gets acquainted with the female residents by simply pretending to be an inexperienced knitter, one who has never really done any knitting "before this dreadful war" (Christie 36). This establishes the pattern of role-playing, typical of Christie's crime novels, to shed light on the terrifying trait epitomized by the ordinary. According to Susan Rowland, "Christie's fascination with masks and social types embodies an aesthetic of 'the menace behind ordinariness' of traditional social structures, not at all dissipated by the neat endings" (168). Not long after her arrival, Tuppence asks for the guidance of Miss Minton, an excellent knitter, because "she could only do simple things like Balaclava helmets but even now she was afraid she had gone wrong somewhere" (35) and "Mrs. Blenkensop was so stupid, she wasn't really very good at knitting, not following the patterns, that was to say" (35).

The guests' identity at Sans Souci is investigated through their acts, words, and movements to the degree of paranoia. This is a typical scenario after an eruption of crisis, which, as Matthew Seeger and Timothy Sellnow explain, is characterized by "a radical departure from the status quo and a violation of general assumptions and expectations," which considerably "limit[s] the ability to anticipate and predict" (n.p.). In order to find clues, everyday rituals such as knitting, a morning walk, street encounters, or an invitation must be observed with a heightened interest. Christopher Yiannitsaros says that in the Miss Marple novels, the elderly sleuth is not *a* panoptic force but *the* panoptic force: "She plays the role of surveillance agent and her ruthlessly dissecting gaze is internalized by her neighbors, affecting their conduct" (83, emphasis in the original). Tuppence has no such luck, as all the other guests are observing one another to find out their secrets. For example, Mrs. O'Rourke, an Irish woman with an intimidating smile, who usually sits by the window, claims to be "terribly interested in all [her] fellow creatures, that's why [she] sit[s] in this chair as often as [she] can. You see who goes in and who goes out and who's on the veranda and what goes on in the garden" (56). Bloom points out that detective fiction shares the attitude to secrecy with the spy thriller, but while "the original owner of the secret (the criminal) must remain in hiding" in the former, "the central question in spy writing is the ownership of the secret and this involves a struggle for power played out at the level of thrills" (3). While Miss Marple's panoptic force is vital in justice-making, in *N or M?* it proves to be ineffective. When one evening the cast sits down to have dinner, the conversation turns to "the absorbing subject of spies. . . . It was a very normal conversation of the kind that may be heard almost every day, nevertheless, Tuppence watched keenly the faces and demeanour of the people as they talked, striving to catch some tell-tale expression or word. But there was nothing" (58). The more they observe each other, the more everyone hides their true identity.

The success of the Beresfords' mission is highly dependent on Tuppence's ability to maintain the image of Mrs. Blenkensop, a pathetic, knitting widow, which not only moves the plot forward towards the resolution, but also unravels the ultimate mystery figuratively identified with the invisible poison—that is, with the female double agent—infecting the nation's body through the corruption of motherhood. Consequently, Tuppence has to be alert not to step out of her role while interacting with the others. Following Miss Minton's advice on knitting, she completely forgets about her role-playing and gets in the center of attention due to Mrs.

O'Rourke's sharp eyes: "'You're getting along fine with that helmet, Mrs. Blenkensop,' said Mrs. O'Rourke, suddenly turning her attention to Tuppence. 'You've been racing along. I thought Miss Minton said that you were an inexperienced knitter.' Tuppence flushed faintly" (57). The incident, which might have ruined "an easy approach to intimacy and good relations" and could have blown her cover of "an indifferent knitter asking for guidance" (91), reminds her to be vigilant at all times. The knitting scenes, though appearing insignificant, must be paid more attention to, especially the skills that knitting might signify: speed, pattern, concentration, creativity, routine, and perseverance. All of these determine the process of investigation, the struggle for finding out the secret and the rhythm of the plot: first Tuppence knits slowly, a clumsy, indifferent knitter in the observation phase, then speeds up to engage in lively conversations for a faster exchange of information, then strikes a medium course, "not so clumsy as she had been at first—but not so rapid as she could be" (91). Being an excellent knitter, she exactly knows how to follow the patterns, where she needs to go back and pick up the stitches, when to slow down or speed up. Yet, Christie plays with the meaning of the word "pattern" and demonstrates how traditional meanings collapse during the war. Probably, the most worrying disruption surrounds the trope of motherhood, or as Plain argues, the ability to recognize the "authentic mother" (*Twentieth-Century* 46) in order to preserve the stability of the nation. Plain uses the word "authenticity" as a synonym for "fixity, stability and by extension, loyalty." Tuppence, who is "herself an authentic mother" (46), confronts with her own weakness of reading the contradictory signs of motherhood along established standards. All of the characters are misled by Mrs. Sprot, whose identity is never questioned: she is unconditionally accepted as a mother and Betty as her child. They are both protected and supported by the other guests, who like to occupy themselves with the little girl, especially Tuppence, who reads her nursery rhymes. Understanding that a crisis heightens the desire to maintain everyday routines, the mother and child's presence comes to signify a cozy domestic atmosphere, underlying the total lack of suspicion and the real threat behind the invisibility of motherhood. Mrs. Sprot, who turns out to be M, is an English woman acting as a mother to the toddler Betty, whom she kidnapped from her real mother, a Polish woman called Vanda Polonska. In fact, as Suh points out, Tuppence's role-playing as a widow demonstrates her "ability to read and anticipate cultural gender logic and perform normative femininity, [which] is the same logic enacted by M in her espionage as Mrs. Sprot" (153). Not until she is

threatened by being shot by a lunatic woman, Anna, who lost her son in the previous war, does Tuppence realize the distorted pattern of motherhood that Mrs. Sprot performs to engage in the Nazi creed. Anna's obsession with her lost son reminds Tuppence of Vanda Polonska's face and her determination to get the child back and leads her to the recognition of the authentic, "unrelenting" mother (Christie 224). Mrs. Sprot, the false mother and Nazi spy, turns out to be the most monstrous double agent, the invisible poison, threatening the innocent body of the nation.

The dénouement of the plot heavily relies on Tuppence's intuition to finally "knit" and bring to light the toxic threads foreshadowed by the indiscernible and lethal component of the color *magenta*. The missing link is closely related to the corruption of nursery rhymes. Alison Light argues that

> Many of Christie's titles remind us of both the terrors and the magic of the nursery: *Hickory Dickory Dock, Five Little Pigs, One, Two, Buckle My Shoe, Crooked House, A Pocketful of Rye* . . . —all use the suspense that lies in the nursery rhyme, and remind us of how the mounting excitement of their repetition depends on that unsteady boundary between the homely and the malevolent. (81)

Betty, who "had taken a great fancy to Tuppence" (Christie 90), is really fond of a tattered picture-book with nursery rhymes in it and enjoys Tuppence reading them to her, especially *Goosey, Goosey, Gander*. However, when Betty asks her to read her a story for the second time, she refuses to touch the shabby book Tuppence takes from the cupboard and tells her that it is bad, nasty, and dirty: "She seized the book from Tuppence and replaced it in the line, then tugged out an identical book from the other end of the shelf, announcing with a beaming smile: 'K-k-klean ni-t i ce Jackorner!'" (Christie 111). At first, she does not regard the child's obsession with the shabby book as anything particular, but still "the words of the nursery rhyme seemed to mock at her" (91) until she is trapped by N, Commander Haydock. It is more out of impulse or intuition than rational thinking that Tuppence responds to Haydock's threatening words about a new Europe, with the title of the nursery rhyme: "Tuppence looked at him and searched her mind for a telling phrase. She was only able to find one that was both childish and rude. *Goosey, goosey gander!* said Tuppence . . .. The effect was so magical that she was quite taken aback. Haydock jumped to his feet, his face went dark purple with rage, and in a second all likeness to a hearty British sailor had vanished" (223). In the resolution, Tuppence finds

out about the significance of Betty's tattered picture-book from Mr. Grant: "that book contains written in invisible ink a full list of all prominent personages who are pledged to assist an invasion of this country" (235). Thus, Tuppence has not only identified the invisible poison embodied by Mrs. Sprot, but has also succeeded in knitting a decontaminated shade of *magenta* to prevent the destruction of her nation's body.

**Conclusion**

*N or M?* brings the female experience to the fore by blending the narrative form of detective and spy fiction to question propagandistic images of feminine ideals in the Second World War. The analysis has explored how Christie's hybrid narrative form allows the re-evaluation of women's agency and performance in the war effort through depicting their rather mundane, even invisible domestic activities, like knitting. Tuppence's role-playing as a knitting widow in the counter-espionage mission deconstructs the traditional image of the female spy and, knitting, applied as a tool for surveillance and investigation, completely undermines orthodox ideas about patriotic femininity. Tuppence's spy-knitting does not only show the real danger contained in the domestic but also interrogates the legitimacy of hegemonic discourse directed at marginalized groups as well as the efficiency of patriotism built on those discourses. The floating signifiers of Tuppence's desire to knit something *magenta* finally find their signifieds in the identity and poisonous collaboration of the two Nazi spies, but beyond these concrete references, they also highlight the efficiency of women's contribution to the war effort and, more idealistically, the rescue of mankind. Even if the book could not but advertise wishful thinking at the time of its publication, it still offers an engaging scenario for survival through its experimentation with spy fiction's capacity to merge with the classic whodunit and critically revise contemporary political, cultural, and gender ideologies to contain the female other.

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## Notes

1. Harris Mylonas and Scott Radnitz give the following definition of the term: "We understand 'fifth columns' as domestic actors who work to undermine the national interest, in cooperation with external rivals of the state." They also point out that "[t]he first documented use of the term 'fifth column' is uncertain, but most sources suggest that it was originally coined in the context of the Spanish Civil War by William P. Carney in a 1936 article published in the *New York Times*. He used the term in English as the translation of the Spanish *quinta columna*, used to describe the Nationalist supporters that were sent ahead to Madrid to assist, from within, the four columns of troops led by Nationalist rebel general Emilio Mola Vidal against the loyalist Republicans" (3–4). With reference to the Second World War, Judy Suh argues that the term "'Fifth Column' . . . took on a greater significance when Norway fell to Germany in 1940." (141) Referring to Peter Fleming, she also remarks that "[a]ccounts of 'preconditioned traitors' who aided the Nazis there were 'easy to believe and impossible to disprove,' and thus fueled the conspiratorial imagination" (Fleming qtd. in Suh 141).

2. See Rebecca Mills and Jamie C. Bernthal's *Agatha Christie Goes to War* (2020), or Phyllis Lassner's *Espionage and Exile Fascism and Anti-Fascism in British Spy Fiction and Film* (2016).

3. A social research group that began in 1937 (Purcell 155).

4. While loosely related to female authors of Golden Age detective fiction at first sight, it is intriguing to consider the female protagonist, Emily St. Aubert in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) by Anne Radcliffe, whose "transgressive reading experiences," as Angelika Reichmann argues, lead her to see through "the schemes of patriarchal reason," yet "without openly transgressing the rules of patriarchal order" (191). Despite the fact that Tuppence's agency is far from being suppressed, she is very much aware of the constraints of the status quo, which makes her operate according to the same cultural logic as the one the fictional heroines of the previous centuries resorted to.

5. Richard Rutt explains that the Crimean War of 1854–1856 "was the first war in which [British] people knitted at home for their armies overseas. The amount of knitting done during the war has been exaggerated" (134). He also points out that the three words, balaclava helmet, cardigan and raglan, usually associated with knitting, all have their origins in this war. He explains that "[s]ince the 1880s 'balaclava helmet' has meant a knitted helmet covering the head, ears, and neck, with an opening for the face." He further argues that while the garment itself had been known before—it was patented by James Martin of Walworth as 'The Protector' in 1848—the name Balaclava first appeared in print only in 1881, seventeen years after the battle of Balaclava on 25 October 1864, but "[h]ow the name came to be applied is unknown" (135). Building on this historical fact, one can argue that the name Balaclava helmet itself originates in the intricate connection between knitting and the war.

6. Tuppence admits that the other residents find it really hard to accept that she likes a German so much: "How very unfortunate that the person I like best in this place should be a German. It makes everything cock-eyed!" (Christie 98).

7. Knitting women also appeared in Victorian literature, the most famous of whom is probably Madame Defarge, the menacing female figure in Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), who "famously knitted shrouds encrypted with the names of

aristocrats doomed to the guillotine, and who pointed her knitting-needle 'as if it were the finger of Fate"' (Rees n.p.).

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# Turning Tides, Changing Times: Sea in *Evil Under the Sun* and *Journey to the South*

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**ABSTRACT**

The paper aims to compare two murder mysteries in which the sea plays a key role—the Golden Age mystery *Evil Under the Sun* (1941) by Agatha Christie and the postmodern novel *Journey to the South* (2004, in English 2023) by Michal Ajvaz. It is argued that both novels present the sea/water as an element that incites transgression, yet simultaneously facilitates the solving of the crime, thus tying the image of the sea to the notion of unpredictability and chaos. The paper further shows how, in *Evil Under the Sun*, the twentieth century cultural transformation of the sea is depicted in its early stages, with the penetration of the social type of tourists into a space archaically connected to danger. Meanwhile, Ajvaz already regards this as the default attitude—seeing the sea as a domesticated place of leisure, with evil, dangerous, or even supernatural elements in tense moments of conflict. While *Evil Under the Sun* works with a more traditional struggle between order and chaos, Ajvaz's novel appeals to postmodern thinking by treating the ambiguity, the diverse interpretations of the world, and the chaotic nature of the sea as stimulating. (JJ&JJ)

**KEYWORDS:** Agatha Christie; Evil Under the Sun; Journey to the South; Michal Ajvaz; sea in fiction

## Introduction

Since its conception, murder mystery fiction has made use of almost every possible milieu and place. Some, however, are recurring—be it the old family mansion, the close-knit village community or, indeed, the sea, with stories set on the coast, on an island, or on a ship. The sea, with its pivotal yet complicated position in the history of Western literature and culture, serves not only as a popular backdrop, but also as a potent symbol. In crime fiction, but especially in detective fiction, the presence of the sea often creates tension, representing an indomitable mystery and a power that cannot be tamed by human means and, thus, forming a natural antithesis to crime solving, *ratio*, and deduction. In order to explore possible approaches

to this phenomenon, this paper compares the role of the sea in two seemingly disparate murder mysteries: *Evil Under the Sun* (1941) by Agatha Christie, and *Journey to the South* (2004) by Michal Ajvaz. Even though the texts are not directly connected, save for the fact that Ajvaz admittedly draws his poetics from various established genres, including crime fiction, their comparison offers striking similarities in some areas. As shown further on, these texts not only combine murder investigation with the highly popular sea motif, but also provide commentary on the contemporary art of holidaying and tourism, thrown into sharp relief against the backdrop of danger and violence.

The first of the analyzed novels is *Evil Under the Sun*, a whodunit written by Agatha Christie and first published in 1941. It features a murder on a secluded beach on an island off the Devon coast, with the vacationing Hercule Poirot having to step in to untangle a web of deceit. In many ways, it is the prototypical "technical" mystery of the Golden Age of detective fiction—the crime occurs at an isolated location among a limited pool of suspects; the murder is committed via elaborate body swaps and time shifts; and the perpetrator is ultimately unmasked and brought to justice by the all-knowing Poirot, in line with the Golden Age "world of radical rationality, in which the chaos and senselessness associated with crime are vanquished by the exercise of the investigator's transcendent reason" (Shiloh 12).

Elaborating on the setting, Lee Horsley accentuates the fact that Golden Age narratives take place in a pleasant, well-known environment that is not shattered, but rather reinforced by the murder: "a comfortably recognizable pattern (a highly wrought version of the death-detection-explanation model) is acted out in a familiar domestic setting, with the restoration of reassuring orderliness guaranteed. Readers return compulsively to the intimately known, ultimately reassuring dining rooms and libraries of the detective-story house" (38). In *Evil Under the Sun*, the peaceful seaside hotel with its regular schedule represents a suitable variation of the country house, the signature haven of domesticity in the Golden Age. J. C. Bernthal further notes that the holiday setting of the novel serves as a counterpoint to the ongoing World War, prominently featuring "sunbathers and celebrities" whose glamor is brought out even more in the 1982 movie adaptation (163–64).

The second text, *Journey to the South*, first published in Czech in 2004 as *Cesta na jih* and translated into English in 2023, is a postmodern novel by Czech author Michal Ajvaz. Befitting a work of postmodern literature, it is not an unadulterated mystery story, but rather a novel that combines many

other genres and modes of writing, while "employ[ing] the traditional tropes of the [detective] genre in order to problematize its tacit philosophical assumptions" (Shiloh 34–35). At the heart of the plot lies a puzzling case of two murders: a man named Petr is shot during an opera performance and his half-brother Tomáš's long-dead body is fished from the sea somewhere near Turkey. The sea plays a crucial role in the narrative, beginning with the narrator "watch[ing] the surface of the Libyan Sea" (n.p.), which is referenced throughout and finally deemed the single most fateful entity, "the worst of all the drugs by which [the characters] had been intoxicated on the journey, and . . . the essence from which all the other drugs were made" (n.p.). At the same time, the novel performs an analysis of the very nature of storytelling, serving as a formal experiment with each subsequent part of the text delving into deeper levels of fiction. The story is framed by the meeting of two young men, the unnamed narrator (loosely based on the author's persona) and Martin, who have been independently investigating the cases in a seaside tavern in Greece. Both storytelling and murder are, in the thoughts and dialogues of Martin and the narrator, closely connected to the sea by which they are sitting. Even more importantly, Martin's attempts at solving the murders are linked to an almost mystical journey through Europe to the enigmatically beckoning south, a voyage following the flow of rivers and finally arriving at the seashore.

Although the cases are eventually solved and the murderers identified, the characters and events in *Journey to the South* are constantly presented as ambiguous. Even a seemingly incorrect reading of some of the clues, such as the one connecting the murder to the writings of a Renaissance magician, forces the protagonists to perceive the world in new and different ways, and is therefore as important as the murder mystery itself. John Scaggs ties the postmodern skepticism of "absolute and unquestionable facts and truths of history" to the genre of the anti-detective story, with *The Name of the Rose* (1980) as a prime example (139). *Journey to the South* fits this definition easily, especially because Scaggs also states that "these postmodern anti-detective novels, characterized by the profound questions they raise 'about narrative, interpretation, subjectivity, the nature of reality, and the limits of knowledge,' have also been termed 'metaphysical detective stories'" (Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney qtd. in Scaggs 141). *Journey to the South*, however, does not blindly conform to prevailing trends in postmodern fiction, but strives to justify its choice of writing style. Throughout the novel, the skeptical, playful postmodern approach to the world and to the limited scope of human comprehension

of reality is closely linked to the sea, which is described as the source of tales, an "endless labyrinth" (n.p.), and an originator of a language that "[tells] only of itself," yet "everything that is was created by its play (the regrouping of its letters)" (n.p.).

A direct comparison of *Evil Under the Sun* and *Journey to the South* might provide insight into some of the veiled, less self-evident qualities of the texts, especially in relation to the discourse and ideals of their respective times. Even though both novels comment on the emerging role of the sea and tourism, using similar motifs and imagery, the conclusions that they ultimately draw differ vastly. Through a detailed analysis, the paper aims to prove that while both novels work with the conception of the sea as chaotic and related to criminality, the chaotic nature of the sea is linked to two very distinct worldviews. In *Evil under the Sun*, it is a source of danger to peace, normalcy, and domesticity—the proximity to the sea allows the murder to create a more close-knit circle, and as Alison Light posits, a shared intimacy of the suspects, typical of Christie's settings. The ordinary, domestic experience—usually offering an *intime* crime of quiet domestic life, un-exotic and un-melodramatic, as Poirot famously puts it in *The ABC Murders* (1936)—is turned into its very own uncanny and subverted reflection (Light, *Forever England* 90–92). *Journey to the South* offers a reverse take, in which the sea becomes a source of capricious delight and creativity, setting the characters free and ready to embrace the exotic in the long run.

**The Transformation of the Sea**

To provide a literary and cultural context for the analyzed works, we need to introduce the function of the sea in crime fiction first, shifting from a potential threat into the holiday destination of the postmodern tourist, with murder becoming just one of many experiences. Although the sea has been a seemingly unchanging part of reality, an invariable in human thinking and imagination for thousands of years, with the transformation of society its status has gradually changed (Anderson and Peters 3–4). For pre-modern civilizations, the sea was first and foremost a place of danger and terror, "a quintessential wilderness, a void without community" (Mack 17). In modern times, it began to be seen primarily as a medium of colonization and an opportunity for expansion or trade, "the space of anarchic competition par excellence" (Steinberg 17). During the twentieth century, a further transformation took place: the sea became the ultimate holiday destination, a place of tranquility and recreation. This is not to suggest that perceptions of the sea as a place of danger or opportunity completely disappeared from

human thought. They became more covert and, in the manner of the palimpsest, overlaid and thematized only in certain contexts, such as in tense moments of love, religious ecstasy, or when crime is afoot. The French cultural historian Alain Corbin captured this transformation in *The Lure of the Sea*. He dates the "invention of the beach" to the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, suggesting that by the mid-nineteenth century, English seaside resorts were already being sought out not only by the aristocracy, but also by the working class (277–78). The ideological bedrock of "holidaying" and mass beach tourism can certainly be found in the Victorian era, but the actual mainstreaming and incorporation of the seafront into people's lives is, arguably, of a later date. In the inter-war period, the increasingly crowded beaches still held the promise of adventure, exoticism, and conquest—as Laura Chase puts it, "the [inter-war] beach hut can also be viewed as a little colonial outpost, on the boundary between the manmade and natural worlds" (214). In later years, however, the conceptualization of the beach as a vacationscape gradually "acquired particular dominance" (Richter and Kluwick 14) and the symbolic geographies shifted: from the territorial "center" and coastal "rim," modern society has turned its attention to the seaside, transforming the members of said society into "creatures of the edge" for whom the seaside is a fairly humdrum affair (4).

In *An Autobiography* (1977), Agatha Christie repeatedly brings up the transformation of sea-bathing in the early twentieth century. She describes the "great social change" that came with the shift from gendered beaches and the removal of "bathing machines" when she was about thirteen (145). Later, bathing places were taken by storm by a massive, almost industrial influx of holidayers: beaches were now full of "girls in bikinis," which made one realize "how far one has gone in fifty years" (226). This "great social change" is, more briefly and in slightly different words, captured in the opening paragraphs of *Evil Under the Sun*, as well. When the setting is first introduced, the sea is described, hyperbolically speaking, as going from being the wife of one man to the flirtatious mistress of many. The house near which the crime occurs is the "child" of Captain Angmering, who never married because "the sea was his first and last spouse" (9). After his death, the heirs decided to move with the times and sold the mansion to be converted into a hotel, and the sea is now enjoyed by the bevies of the greater public. This major transformation is accurately dated: "In 1922 when the great cult of the Seaside for Holidays was established and the

coast of Devon and Cornwall was no longer thought to be too hot in summer" (9).

In this respect, *Evil Under the Sun* is not an unusual occurrence among Golden Age whodunits. Analyzing *Have His Carcase* (1932) by Dorothy Sayers, Brigitta Hudácskó pinpoints the sea's "ability to present a group of loosely connected people to enact the classic clue-puzzle mystery," such as in Gladys Mitchell's *The Twenty-Third Man* (1957) but Christie's *A Caribbean Mystery* (1964) could also exemplify this idea. Hudácskó's assessment implicitly presents the seaside both as an escape from chaos, with the holidaying working-class "leaving behind the grime and chaos of their urban neighborhoods," and as a potentially confusing, chaotic place, an "ideal location for the oddest of cases," such as the one in Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Adventure of the Lion's Mane" (50). Wading further into the waters of *Evil Under the Sun*'s contemporaries, comparisons can also be made with Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938), an extremely influential novel combining gothic romance with a crime narrative; it is, as Light puts it, "a tale in two genres" (*Inside History* 21). There, the gothic quality of the sea as a place of danger and tragedy, where Rebecca drowned and another ship ran aground, is somewhat undercut by the presence of tourists spending their summer on the Cornish coast. Some of them observe the stranded ship from the cliffs, others even hire a boat and watch the rescue operation from the sea. Indeed, unlike the anemic modernity of the south, represented by the coast of Monte Carlo and other unnamed places where the couple spend their later summers in the boredom and emptiness of Mediterranean hotels, the sea in Cornwall as featured in *Rebecca* still stands on the brink of two worlds and is distinctly two-faced. While the protagonist enjoys walking on the seashore, finding solace in the domesticated quiet of the sea, at certain points, its voice scares her nearly to tears—this is the loud, primordial sea, expressing a clamorous desire to tell some kind of secret: "I began to understand why some people could not bear the clamour of the sea. It has a mournful harping note sometimes, and the very persistence of it, that eternal roll and thunder and hiss, plays a jagged tune upon the nerves" (134).

One may wonder whether there is any difference—other than quantitative and local—between the tourist enjoyment of the seaside a hundred years ago and today. Tourism has undoubtedly become a large-scale business, a must for the majority of the Western population, and the particular locations, modes of transport and leisure activities that people indulge in have changed; but all this can be seen as an extension of an

existing trend. In the second half of the twentieth century, however, a more fundamental ideological transformation can be observed—above all, in the severing of the bond between people and the environment that they are visiting. Polish postmodern thinker Zykmunt Bauman saw the persona of the unattached tourist as one of the defining and unprecedented personality types of postmodern times:

> The hub of postmodern life strategy is not making identity stand—but avoidance of being fixed. The figure of the tourist is the epitome of such avoidance. Indeed, the tourists worthy their salt are the masters supreme of the art of melting the solids and unfixing the fixed. First and foremost, they perform the feat of not belonging to the place they might be visiting; theirs is the miracle of being in and out of place at the same time. The tourists keep distance, and bar the distance from shrinking into proximity. (89)

In other words, a return to stability and a static world seems to be impossible in postmodern narratives, as, in fact, there is no such situation to revert to. While the hotel in *Evil Under the Sun* provides a kind of temporary, second home for the characters, *Journey to the South* depicts, in a literal sense, a constant journey—from experience to experience, from story to story. Although the denouement and climax of both texts lie in the revelation of the murderers and their motive, *Evil Under the Sun* ends in a return to normalcy and domesticity, with the two lovers "going to live in the country" without paying the sea any further notice (217). Conversely, *Journey to the South* concludes with a yearning for further unraveling, travel, and discovery, with the narrator watching "a small boat . . . just pulling out [of the bay]," while the shine of the sea is so powerful that he has to squint (n.p.). Thus, the novel accommodates the aforementioned postmodern "anti-detective" sentiment, entailing that the protagonist ultimately fails to disclose all of the facts, punish the criminal, or go back to the mundane routine of the ordinary world.

**Pirates and smugglers**

Radical differences in worldview between *Evil Under the Sun* and *Journey to the South* emerge more clearly when we consider the motifs of piracy and smuggling. Their role in both novels, however minor, is no mere coincidence: one only needs to recall how seminal the two motifs are for adventure stories as well as gothic narratives, and how crime fiction has its

roots—as Maurizio Ascari highlights, among others—in the latter (xi–xiv). Corbin calls attention to the "[r]omantic literary figures of the corsair and the pirate," sublimely pictured in paintings of Salvator Rosa or the works of Ann Radcliffe, while he observes that the "powerful figure" of the pirate "made a profound and rich contribution to the imagery of coastal shores and caves, and nourished the reverie of walkers fascinated by the mystery of these exceptional beings, who were both terrible and liberated from the weight of the ambient animality" (228–29). Whereas Christie's novel draws on the romantic sea criminality trope, treating it as nothing more than a backdrop and a red herring, Ajvaz explores both its adventurous and realistic side, emphasizing its ambiguity.

In order to strengthen the holidaying atmosphere, *Evil Under the Sun* presents these elements as relics of the past that are no longer taken seriously, they serve merely as tools of a cheap romance for tourists: the novel takes place on Smugglers' Island, while the hotel where the characters are staying is called the Jolly Roger Hotel, after the pirate flag. One of the characters, sailor Horace Blatt, proclaims that he came to the island because "[i]t sounded *romantic*. Jolly Roger Hotel, Smugglers' Island. That kind of address tickles you up, you know. Makes you think of when you were a boy. Pirates, smuggling, all that" (45, emphasis in the original). However, real criminal interests lie behind Blatt's dismissive statement: he turns out to be a dope smuggler, storing contraband in a semi-secret cave on the island, although his unlawful activities have nothing to do with the murder that occurs nearby.

In *Journey to the South*, the position of the smuggling and piracy motifs is reversed. A lone mention of smugglers appears in one of the nested stories, a narrative detailing the conflict between two fictional countries, North and South Floriana: "Arms were smuggled from neighboring South Floriana, on paths that wound through the jungle or, at night, on fishing boats by sea" (n.p.). Even though smuggling is bound to warfare and grave animosities, it remains safely tucked away in the web of stories and serves as a light-hearted distraction. By contrast, piracy is real—one of the characters in the main storyline is Alexis, a luxury yacht-owner, who has led "a colorful life" and now adroitly protects his ship from criminal attacks: "The luxury yacht attracted robbers, and there had been several attempted break-ins. Once, near the island of Patmos, there had been something resembling a pirates' raid. Alexis did everything himself, sticking to a principle instilled in his youth: Never involve the police" (n.p.). Here, the threat of violence is palpable, overlying the individual cases of

murder investigated in the main storyline. Moreover, the mention of Patmos fills the pirates' raid with the possibility of a higher meaning—as documented by Ian Boxall, this island has for centuries served as a cornerstone of Christian imagination tied to apocalypticism and mysticism (1–2), a transitional place from "ordinary reality" to "transhistorical reality" (16). Cheap "Jolly Roger" romance for tourists is not present in *Journey to the South*—the sea is either described as a soothing, magical force, or acts harsh and cruel in the archaic way.

However, in both texts, "sea criminality" serves more as a distraction from murder than an excuse to imbue the text with an adventurous flavor. In the case of piracy, this is not very surprising—its Romantic, pre-modern form was already a matter of deep past when the novels were written, its golden age having come to an end hundreds of years earlier. The position of smuggling, however, was different during Christie's lifetime. Smuggling had ceased to be an adventurous undertaking and became a nest of profit-driven pragmatism around the 1930s. The works of the popular writer and smuggler Henry de Monfreid, such as *Pearls, Arms and Hashish* (1930) and *Hashish: A Smuggler's Tale* (1935), bear witness to this shift (Harvey 149). In *Evil Under the Sun*, the dichotomy seems to be very much alive: smuggling makes for the "kind of address [that] tickles you up," and yet, Arlena Marshall "could have been killed as a result of her having stumbled on the secret of the dope smuggling" (208)—this being a simple, boring explanation of the crime, a red herring for the police. *Journey to the South*, in contrast, offers a typical postmodern ambiguity. Both piracy and smuggling can be present in people's lives as part of thrilling tales of fictitious countries, but also as part of a cynical and cold reality—and the sea is a space of chaos where reality and fiction gladly couple and fuse.

**Sea, chaos, and secrets**

An even more striking difference between the analyzed texts lies in their disparate approach to the chaotic nature of the sea, seen as danger or as a creative impulse, respectively. The association of the sea with the primordial chaos that needs to be split is well known, especially in the mythologies that shaped European culture. The image of God creating an ordered world by "parting the waters" is familiar to modern Westerners from the Book of Genesis in the Bible; Jewish mythology, in turn, borrowed this notion from Mesopotamian culture. Yet the image of the sea as evil, menacing, and untamed is common to many other archaic

worldviews. In the Sumerian *Enuma Elish*, the primordial goddess Tiamat represents the sea or cosmic waters that have to be divided by Marduk so that the world is created in its orderly form (Clifford 11). Mircea Eliade couples the "victory of the divinity over the marine monster" with Creation, repeated in various cultures through reenactment. This allows him, in turn, to interpret acts such as the symbolic New Year carnival or baptism as equivalents to the deluge, the "abolition of contours, fusion of all forms, return to the formless" (59). While land is perceived as a place of clarity and order, the sea in its chaotic nature always contains all contradictions simultaneously. Bernhard Klein and Gesa Mackenthun perceive this feature as a consequence of earth-centric European modernism and are critical of it, contesting "the cultural myth that the ocean is outside and beyond history, that the interminable, repetitive cycle of the sea obliterates memory and temporality, and that a fully historicized land somehow stands diametrically opposed to an atemporal, 'ahistorical' sea" (2).

In the two novels discussed, the sea represents mystery, not only on a symbolic level, but also on a purely prosaic one. While objects on land provide the possibility to examine their relation and deduce the solution to the crime from their respective positions in space and time, the sea breaks down this rational view of the world, replacing it with chaos. In Christie's novella "Triangle at Rhodes" (1936), Poirot remarks that human beings tend to reproduce "stereotyped patterns" and that nature "repeats herself more than one would imagine"—while the sea, in his view, "has infinitely more variety" (214–15). The unambiguous values of time, place, and identity, which are uncontroversial on land—and, if they are to be used to baffle the detective, the criminal must confound them with considerable effort—are often shattered spontaneously by the sea. Like in *Rebecca*, the sea first allows the crime to be hidden, although in this case not by literally disfiguring the body, and then to be uncovered.

One way to evoke the elusiveness of the sea and its power to escape the analytical methods of detective deduction is by referring to its constant fluidity. In *Evil Under the Sun*, this is exemplified by a conversation between Poirot and the tough, athletic Miss Brewster, who perceives the world around her primarily in its physical sense. She proclaims that "the sea is as calm as a mill pond today" (15), while Poirot, who understands the volatile nature of the sea, disagrees with conviction: "There is no such thing as a really calm sea. Always, always, there is motion" (15). This aspect of inconstancy lies at the heart of the mystery. Although the sea is not an agent of confusion by itself (like in *Rebecca* and other contemporary mystery

novels and gothic romances), it plays the role of a catalyst and source of inspiration for the murder. In one of the opening scenes, Poirot sees the sun-bathing vacationers and scoffs: "Regard them there, lying out in rows. What are they? They are not men and women. There is nothing personal about them. They are just—bodies!" (13) Poirot's remark highlights a potential confusion on which the murderer will count—it occurs not because the body of the victim is mutilated beyond recognition, like in *Rebecca,* but because it turns into a stereotype of tourism, sunbathing, and seaside leisure to the extent that all its human individuality is lost.

Indeed, in Christie's novel the detective and the sea offer two contrasting worldviews, and form natural opposites in how they reflect on the possibility of segmentation and classification. While Poirot embodies order in his stories, and his role is to first categorize the world and then to clearly establish cause and effect relationships, the sea denies this possibility entirely, both on a concrete (or corporeal) and symbolic (or social) level. Throughout the novel, Poirot alludes to his "orderly mind" (135) and repeatedly speaks of segmentation and sorting: "One arranges very methodically the pieces of the puzzle—one sorts the colours" (166). The sea defies this definite order, as epitomized by Poirot's statement, "here at the seaside it is necessary for no one to account for himself" (17). There are also several scenes in which one of the characters explicitly looks out to sea and feels affected by it. In the case of Linda Marshall, the stepdaughter of Arlene Marshall, who is later murdered, the presence of the sea is linked to the temptation to commit a crime—even if it is ultimately committed by someone else: "A big dark burning wave of hatred against Arlena surged up in her mind. She thought: 'I'd like to kill her. Oh! I wish she'd die. . .' She looked out above the mirror onto the sea below" (31). Later on, after the murder, Poirot is looking out to the sea as he discloses his half-formed theories, as if challenging his adversary: "Rosamund flushed. She said: 'That's my theory, for what it is worth. Now tell me yours.' 'Ah,' said Hercule Poirot. He stared down at the sea" (171). At the end of the chapter, when the detective's attention shifts from the hypothetical, as yet unknown murderer to the very specific and physically present female suspect, it is instead emphasized that he is not paying the sea any more heed: "Poirot was no longer looking out to sea. He was looking at Rosamund Darnley's hands as they lay folded in her lap" (173).

In *Journey to the South*, the sea and its ultimately chaotic essence is not only the catalyst of transgression, but also a muse of artistic creation and storytelling. Yet again, it first serves as a means to hide the crime: the body

of the victim is fished out by fishermen days after the murder, and the protagonists trying to solve the case are led astray by the sea's unanticipated displays of randomness. Probably the most peculiar setback happens because of luminous seaworms that light up and preserve only choice letters of the victim's final message, making Martin, the protagonist, incorrectly think that the incomplete text is somehow connected to Pico della Mirandola, a Renaissance magician, kabbalist, and writer. The sea in *Journey to the South* maintains maze-like qualities, both implicitly and explicitly when it is described as "the endless labyrinth of the sea" (n.p.). According to Ilana Shiloh, labyrinths "simultaneously embody order and chaos, clarity and confusion, unity (a structure) and multiplicity (many paths)" (6). Thus, even though the chaos and randomness provided by the sea serve as elements to divert the plot, they are also the main reasons why the protagonists are motivated to hold on and continue with their journey. One of the conclusions Martin draws is that all their attempted readings of the clues—both the misleading and the genuine ones, the magical hints and the investigative evidence—"could exist side by side, passing one through another without intrusion, perhaps even supporting one another" (n.p.). Allowing so many, vastly different, equally true explanations of events would be unthinkable in *Evil Under the Sun*. In *Journey to the South*, however, the postmodern ethos prevails and the sea, hyperbolically speaking, wins. As Martin puts it:

> I'm not saying it doesn't matter whether we read the luminous undersea inscription as a quotation from a Kabbalist of Renaissance times or as a message about a crime. Before he died, Tomáš Kantor wrote about his killing, not magic. Irena's reading of the undersea inscription is obviously correct. But here in Loutro, I've realized that its true meaning is also informed by all earlier interpretations, as these were born out of an interplay of chance and dream, and these are still present in it. (n.p.)

Unlike the world of *Evil Under the Sun*, with its relatively clear-cut distinction between a dangerous sea and orderly land, *Journey to the South* offers an image of the sea that retains its fatefulness only when viewed from a distance. The narrative, based on an almost boundless insertion of more and more stories within stories, is framed by the meeting of Martin and the unnamed narrator at a tavern in the Greek village of Loutro, where Martin recounts his journey from Prague to Greece and all that he has uncovered on the way. The autoreferentiality of narration, practically non-existent in

*Evil Under the Sun*, takes center stage, making the reader interact not only with the characters, but also with the sea itself. The position of the sea as an entity that both acts and speaks is thematized explicitly several times. In the narrator's opening reflection, the sea is the originator of strange and fantastic stories: "The mind also had a tendency to hear in these sounds of stillness the whispering of many stories—here on the shore of the Libyan Sea, it occurred to me that the tales of *One Thousand and One Nights* and all their wonders and marvelous encounters originated in the murmur, buzz, rattle, and rustle of the stillness of the south" (n.p.). While *One Thousand and One Nights* is a staple of postmodern writing, associating it with the sea is relatively rare; comparison could be made with Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990), alluding to the eleventh-century Indian collection *Kathāsaritsāgara* ("Ocean of Rivers of Stories"). In his analysis, Jean-Pierre Durix highlights that Rushdie's text introduces a world where "stories all come from a great sea of material made up of all the literature produced by the previous generations." Durix offers a metaphorical reading, tying the above to the artist's creative process and viewing it as a possible "last by-product of modernism" (348). Even though both the sea imagery and the *Arabian Nights* approach are ancient, their playful combination, as seen in Rushdie and Ajvaz, did not get truly popular until the late twentieth century.

In the pivotal scenes detailing the demise of the exceptionally talented writer Tomáš in *Journey to the South*, the sea becomes the element that brings dark emotions to the surface and allows them to manifest themselves. A group of people find themselves on a remote yacht, and there is no escaping the tension that gradually builds up between Tomáš and the rest of his family. The very setting of the private boat then fulfills all the circumstances a murderer could wish for: there are no outside witnesses, the victim cannot escape, and once the deed is done, the body is simply thrown overboard. In Martin's account of the hunt for the killer of the two half-siblings, the role of the sea is revealed only gradually. The reader learns rather quickly that one of the murders was committed on the seashore or directly at sea, as the body "ended up in a Turkish fishermen's net with thirteen wounds" (n.p.). The investigation itself, however, works its way southwards in stages: from Prague, via Bratislava, Budapest, Ljubljana, Pula, San Benedetto, Rome, Mykon, Chania, and Loutro; the last stop is to be Gavdos, the southernmost point of Europe. Albeit the first few cities are not coastal, the voice of the sea is represented by the rivers that flow through them. The Slovenian Ljubljanica, for example, is said to give off the impression that it is "so immensely deep that a dragon might be sleeping on

its bed" (148), a mythological image typically associated with the sea—to hark back to Eliade, the serpentine monster in the sea is the archetypal adversary of the chaos-vanquishing hero (37–39).

In the embedded stories that dominate in the first part of the novel, the sea and its effects play a very similar role to what they do in the main, crime-centered storyline, where the sea gives birth to stories. For instance, the interest in the sudden re-emergence of the fictitious nation of the Lygds is described thus: "He would listen to debates on the Lygdian question as he would [to] the sound of the sea in the port; sometimes he followed the thoughts the students were expressing, sometimes, he allowed their words to dissolve in the vagueness of noise" (n.p.). The sea in *Journey to the South* becomes more and more thematically related to emptiness, which is viewed as a force present inside every true artist, a force that beckons them to be creative. Martin reflects on this idea as follows: "Actually, though, I think I know what I'll encounter at journey's end. Whatever form it takes, it will probably be the emptiness that appeared to Tomáš Kantor on that winter morning when he started writing *Damp Walls*; the emptiness his work grew out of, as did his death" (n.p.). Crime and art become explicitly entangled, with the sea-chaos-emptiness being the ultimate source of everything complex that is worth living and dying for.

This interpretation, however, also casts new light on the position of the sea in *Evil Under the Sun* and other Golden Age mysteries. Even though the sea is presented as the enemy and the instigating force behind breaking the law and societal taboos, in the grand scheme of things, it also works as a source of the detective story itself. In accordance with the mythical worldview, order is upheld by first being subverted and then, once again, reinstated—not unlike the ruling order being temporarily overturned by carnival festivities, as analyzed by Mikhail Bakhtin (4–12). This carnivalesque reading of crime fiction has already been proposed by scholars such as Christiana Gregoriou: "if crime is seen as the subversion of the bourgeois order, crime novels can be seen as a presentation of an alternative view of the world, reaffirming the supremacy of the dominant order, just like carnivals" (102). This is, of course, a carnival in the figurative sense of the word, close to Frye's concept of romance (186–88). However, as Rob Shields argues, sea-related murder mysteries, both traditional and postmodern, seem to demonstrate its underlying principle quite explicitly, as they associate the criminal transgression with the decentralized place on the margin, which is also seen as carnivalesque, a space of pleasure and liberation from the regimes of normative practices (79–94).

Another difference between the two examined novels can be observed in the handling of certain water-adjacent motifs, such as the "appendages" or "tentacles" of the sea in the form of rivers, streams, or, loosely speaking, bathtubs. In *Evil Under the Sun*, much of the killer's plan rests on bathing: before the murder, Linda Marshall goes dipping into the sea and thus unwittingly provides a fake alibi; after the deed is done, the killer has to go wash off in the bath. Poirot later ponders who and why was running a bath before midday on the day of the murder, and the answer to his questions ultimately yields the solution to the crime. Yet the final piece of the puzzle does not click into place until the suspects are invited on a trip to the mainland and they have to cross a narrow bridge over a stream. Poirot is careful to notice that one particular person, who, for fear of heights, seemingly could not descend the ladder to the beach where the murder was committed, can easily make the crossing. Only the truly acrophobic Emily Brewster is stumped, while "the others [run] across the bridge lightly enough" (191). Thus, time and time again, the culprit's efforts to emulate the sea and its chaotic nature fall short, as they fail to flummox the detective for long. The use of the bathtub as an "imitation of the sea on land" proves insufficient; while cleansing the killer outwardly, the act also leaves behind a stain of suspicion. In the end, water paradoxically helps the detective catch the murderer both on a physical and a symbolic plane, fully in keeping with its chaotic nature, as every one of its qualities and actions may unexpectedly be met with its contradiction.

In *Journey to the South*, this strategy is present less overtly, but in a more nuanced way. On Martin and Kristýna's journey to solve the murders, rivers, especially the Danube and Ljubljanica, play a key role in each city they visit. When describing Ljubljanica in particular, Martin observes:

> How strange it was that this river, like the Danube, exhaled peace. Yet it was a peace imbued with a secret of the swampy deep and a vague threat. I asked myself if the tranquility, charm, and coziness of urban spaces that opened like hospitable halls, protecting us from the sorrow of the distant horizon, were nothing but protection from the dark, swampy breath of the river. (n.p.)

Rivers are seen as something that emerges "from incredible depths, from cracks in the Earth's surface" (n.p.), representing forces of the unknown depths in the struggle between chaos and order—yet, at the same time, they lure Martin and Kristýna to the south and towards untangling the double-

murder mystery. The nature of rivers shifts from the physical to the symbolic, as they flower into beings with agendas or even entities of language and culture.

**Linguistic dreaming**

A noticeable distinction between the two novels lies in the shift from the tangible world of the classic murder mystery with its physical leads, clues, and firm timelines to the textual world of postmodern fiction—permeating even the seemingly rigid rules of murder mysteries. *Journey to the South* seems to be an extreme case in this regard, even for an explicitly postmodern novel—the mystery is approached not through facts and clues, but through stories and seemingly random remarks, trifling observations, or scribbled words that stir the imagination of the protagonists. Indeed, it could be argued that the sea in *Journey to the South* acts not only through rivers, its literal physical appendages, but also through its linguistic appendages. Martin, for example, hears the call of the sea in the name of the city, Pula:

> But before I put this thought into words, I realized that anger wasn't all I was feeling: A quiet, enchanting music had entered my head—and after a moment I understood that it had come to me from the name "Pula." Pula is on the Mediterranean. Suddenly, the prospect of my standing on the seashore seemed more important than any other; more important than the folly of my traveling detective work, than my childish love for Kristýna, than the images that bothered me by whirling around in my head. (n.p.)

This is not to say that *Journey to the South* is completely novel in this regard—a similar type of linguistic dreaming can be found in other texts, with one of the best-known examples being Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1913–1927), where the narrator is also compelled to travel simply by the sound of the names of places that evoke pleasant feelings:

> I need only, to make them reappear, pronounce the names: Balbec, Venice, Florence, within whose syllables had gradually accumulated all the longing inspired in me by the places for which they stood. Even in spring, to come in a book upon the name of Balbec sufficed to awaken in me the desire for storms at sea and for the Norman gothic; even on a stormy day the name of Florence or of Venice would awaken the desire for sunshine, for lilies, for the Palace of the Doges and for Santa Maria del Fiore. (367)

It should be noted that in this case, too, it is the seaside stirring the protagonist's imagination. *In Search of Lost Time*, however, presents a sharp discontinuity between the dreams of childhood and the reality of adulthood: "The narrator's voyage of discovery, which culminates in the imprudent intrusion into a taboo space, repeats the gesture of Pandora and signals an end to the linguistic illusions and beliefs of childhood" (Ellison 73). While *Journey to the South* could also be described as a voyage of discovery, it offers a very different, postmodern take on names associated with the sea. Here, the ideas sparked by hearing seaside names are not dispelled by the journey; rather, they come to life all the more mightily, as the physical visit of dream locations adds further vivid images of old houses, palaces, streets and hidden passageways, leading to thrilling speculations, and breeding stories of adventure and mystery.

It could be argued that by the very end of her career, Agatha Christie partly adopted this mode of writing as well, with novels such as *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* (1968), *Elephants Can Remember* (1972), or *Postern of Fate* (1973). They, too, have their plots start with a random note, picture or phrase—but even then, the imaginative speculation of the protagonist serves simply as a rationale to make the character investigate and find an existing secret from the past, and not to conjure further stories out of the thin air of tales and myths. In *Evil Under the Sun*, a much earlier work, the Proustian take on linguistic dreaming and abstract possibilities is barely present, it merely arouses the reader's imagination with colorful names such as the Jolly Roger Hotel or Pixy's Cave. Every element important to the story, and especially to the murder mystery, is ultimately tangible and physical.

In *Evil Under the Sun*, the case and the story are opened and closed by the sea. Yet there is no place for such a thing as a closed case or story in the postmodern ethos of *Journey to the South*; the idea of a world with a limited number of facts, motivations and characters is completely repressed. The impossibility of getting closure may seem antithetical to the core tenets of the genre. The book, however, works with the assumption that offering several possible explanations is as harmonious for the reader as one definite solution would be.

**Conclusion**

The image of the sea as an agent of chaos seems everlasting, stemming from archaic layers of Western culture, yet it is still revisited and reinvented in modern contexts. Crime fiction narratives, traditionally

depicting the struggle between law and order, on the one hand, and the chaos of trespassing, on the other, are eager to lean into such imagery, and, as shown in the paper, the classic whodunit *Evil Under the Sun* and the postmodern murder mystery *Journey to the South* showcases this approach. Yet while the sea represents chaos in both murder mysteries, the two texts offer rather opposing takes on the nature of chaos itself.

*Evil Under the Sun*, as befits a classic detective story, primarily explores the clash of two equally powerful forces, with the detective ultimately triumphant and order restored. *Journey to the South*, in contrast, is a model postmodern work; and while its main storyline features a double murder investigation, the struggle of the protagonists against the sea does not stand out as strongly. In fact, everything in the fictional world is ultimately linked to the sea and its chaos—which, in line with its ambiguous position in mythical thinking, is never just destructive. To quote Mircea Eliade in *The Sacred and the Profane*: "Water is pre-eminently the slayer; it dissolves, abolishes all form. It is just for this reason that it is so rich in germs, so creative" (135). In *Journey to the South*, it is even seen as a generally positive force, carrying the richness of life and storytelling in its depths and impacting the characters in a very nuanced way.

Thus, where Christie's novel shows a dichotomous world in which the unwelcome forces of chaos stand in the way of order, method, and justice, in Ajvaz, the struggle against chaos morphs into an embrace of the variety and freedom that it inherently brings. The resolution of the two texts echoes this. The sea in *Evil Under the Sun* serves as a less powerful foil to Poirot, and the novel ends with its defeat and a return to domestic values, the coziness of the hotel, and plans for retirement in the country. In *Journey to the South*, the sea plays a central role, ultimately all but engulfing the characters, who go on heeding its call even after the mystery is resolved, traveling and experiencing more and more, thus conforming to Bauman's stereotype of the unattached postmodern tourist; in the last chapter, the narrator observes them crossing the sea on a boat.

Apart from the obvious differences between the texts, the paper has also addressed several unforeseen similarities revealing that while the two texts are not directly connected, both authors likely felt the need to look into similar issues: both novels hint at the imagery of pirates and smugglers, adding to the atmosphere of adventure and menace; both make use of the tension between the archaic, mythic, gothic sea and a modern place of leisure, either switching between these modes or reflecting them both at the same time; both closely associate the sea with other sources of water,

depicting it as ever beckoning, captivating, and fateful; and both employ the sea as an agent of crime *and* retribution, underscoring its unpredictable nature. These numerous analogies seem to bear testimony to an intrinsic, albeit only laboriously traceable quality of the genre that transcends centuries, writing techniques, and national literatures. Nevertheless, the most prominent features of the two works place them firmly in different cultural contexts. One of them an exemplary clue-driven detective story and the other the prototypical chaos-worshipping postmodern anti-detective novel, the two texts epitomize the fine line between seeing the chaotic, criminal potential of the sea as unequivocally perilous or, in turn, as an enchanting possibility to live to the fullest the life of a "postmodern tourist." Postmodern writing, as demonstrated by Ajvaz, thus deftly manages to completely deconstruct the seemingly essential binary of order and chaos, present in Christie's novel. This is a testament to the fact that crime fiction can easily adapt to new and utterly different worldviews, while it can also retain its well-known motifs, images, and tropes, which makes the genre as rich, puzzling, and fluid as the ocean itself.

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# Between Genre, Parody, and Criticism: Gilbert Adair's *The Act of Roger Murgatroyd*

Felicitas Mayer

**ABSTRACT**
With an amateur sleuth who is also a detective novelist and a murderer who turns out to be a parodist of crime fiction, Gilbert Adair's postmodern parody of the British Golden Age whodunit, *The Act of Roger Murgatroyd* (2006), encompasses a critical reflection on the genre in almost every formal and plot-related element. Yet, and this is where Adair's approach differs from that of other postmodern writers, the text never abandons the conventions of the whodunit genre but merely takes up and heightens classic generic elements, among them self-referentiality, metafictionality, intertextuality, and parody. This essay examines the ways in which Adair's exploration of postmodern concerns as to the artificiality not only of fiction but of reality builds and depends on generic structures and conventions rather than on subverting them, thereby demonstrating the potential, relevance, and interest of the Golden Age whodunit for postmodern thought and emphasizing the postmodern qualities which he identifies in the genre in general, and in Agatha Christie's work in particular. (FM)

**KEYWORDS:** British Golden Age whodunit, parody, metafiction, postmodernism, genre

A "celebration-cum-critique-cum-parody"—that is how Gilbert Adair described his novel *The Act of Roger Murgatroyd* (2006), the first installment in his trilogy, featuring detective novelist and amateur sleuth Evadne Mount ("Unusual"). As his description indicates, the text can be read in different ways: it is a locked-room murder mystery in the style of a Golden Age whodunit,[1] and at the same time a highly self-conscious, postmodern parody of the genre—a metafictional, critical reflection on it. Adair, differing in this from other postmodern rewritings of detective fiction such as Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980) or Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy* (1985–1986),[2] unites these different layers in a novel that never abandons the conventions of the whodunit genre. By taking up and merely heightening classic elements of the whodunit instead—among them self-referentiality, metafictionality, intertextuality, and parody—Adair demonstrates the

potential, relevance, and interest of the Golden Age whodunit for postmodern thought and emphasizes the postmodern qualities which he identifies in the genre in general, and in Agatha Christie's work (Adair, "Unusual") in particular. As Martin Edwards has noted, critics of postmodern detective fiction have not paid much attention to Gilbert Adair despite "the fact that he cast new light on the old ways of classic detective novelists" (68) through a postmodern lens.[3] In this article, I will examine the ways in which Adair highlights the continuities between the whodunit and postmodern approaches, focusing especially on the formal aspects of his novel. I want to illustrate that by means of generic elements and the two most important characters in his novel—the detective and the murderer—Adair revisits the whodunit genre to uncover its postmodern awareness of the artificiality not only of fiction, but also of reality, and of the inseparableness of the two.

The set-up and plot of *The Act of Roger Murgatroyd* could not be more like that of a classic whodunit from the British Golden Age of detective fiction. It is the 1930s, and a group of friends assembles for a Christmas celebration at a country manor in Dartmoor, the home of Colonel ffolkes and his wife Mary. Among the guests are detective fiction writer Evadne Mount, actress Cora Rutherford, the local doctor, the vicar, their respective wives, and a young American, arriving with the hosts' daughter from London. It is seemingly only the one uninvited guest who disturbs the peace: gossip columnist Raymond Gentry, who soon turns out to enjoy tormenting each and every one within the group with his knowledge of secrets from their past. Tension inside increases along with the snow falling outside, until the company is snowed in completely. In the early hours of Boxing Day, Raymond Gentry's body is found in the attic, the room locked and the key still inside the door. As one of the characters remarks in the opening line of the novel, "[s]ort of thing you can't imagine happening outside of a book!" (1).

What follows is an investigation featuring a familiar rivalry: mystery novelist Evadne Mount, happy to apply her literary expertise in crime and detection to real life, cannot hold back from the investigation, even as the group recruits the help of Chief-Inspector Trubshawe, a neighboring, retired Scotland Yard detective, who agrees to investigate unofficially until the actual police can be called. And so the questioning of the suspects begins, secrets are revealed, and old friends learn to see each other in a new light. The clues, involving a typewritten note, seem straight out of the Golden Age as well, along with the structure of the plot: as it turns out

eventually, rather than Raymond Gentry's actual murder, it is the failed attempt at the life of the host, Colonel ffolkes, later on the same day that is the key event. The Colonel is shot, although not fatally. In the characters' attitudes, prejudices of 1930s' England surface. Careless displays of racism, homophobia, and antisemitism are just as conspicuous as stereotypical views about the Irish and anyone who is perceived as not English. Yet, although at first glance all these elements might create the impression that readers are encountering a classic English whodunit from the interwar period—as Sergio Angelini has put it, the novel "masquerades as an Agatha Christie-style murder mystery" (113)—upon closer scrutiny unmistakable signs of parody emerge.

These parodic elements include, for instance, the map of the first floor of ffolkes Manor at the beginning of the novel: it will not be of much help in finding out who committed the crime, since it designates each of the guests' rooms simply and identically as "bedroom," rendering them indistinguishable—and the map useless. Upon a closer look, common stereotypes, too, are repeatedly exaggerated, such as when the gardener—who is, in a familiar cliché of a male servant figure, very popular with women—"ran his fingers through his wavy, dreamy, Brylcreemy, jet-black hair" (Adair, *Murgatroyd* 164). The working-class accents of the servants, which in traditional whodunits are often distinguished by such an exaggerated amount of apostrophes that Colin Watson has described them as "painful parodies" (106), are taken to extremes here: "[n]othin' this int'r'stin' as 'appened at ffolkes Manor since I began workin' 'ere" (165). The servants' occasional misuse of words (allergy for allegory, antidote for anecdote) further contributes to the effect of parodic exaggeration.

The seemingly classical cast of characters turns out to consist of numerous tributes to characters in other whodunits: most of the characters' names include allusions, some of them anachronistic. For instance, actress Cora Rutherford's last name refers to Margaret Rutherford, who played Miss Marple in the MGM adaptations of four of Christie's novels in the 1960s, decades after the plot of Adair's novel takes place. Such anachronisms highlight the ironic "trans-contextualization" that Linda Hutcheon describes as one of "the major formal operatives" of parody (*Parody*, 37) and which make such references recognizable as parodies rather than mere allusions. Other names allude to classic Christie novels such as *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), whose narrator Leonard Clement shares his profession and even a part of his name with Vicar Clem Wattis in Adair's novel. These meanings and associations become clear only when

taking into account Adair's target texts, so that in all these instances, we find the "double-voicedness" of parody, due to which, as Tamás Bényei has noted, "[o]ne could indeed argue that parody is by definition always ironical" (116). With its constant allusions to other texts in terms of setting, plot, and characters, which bring to mind primarily but not exclusively novels by Christie, *The Act of Roger Murgatroyd* is written in a mode of irony throughout, in the sense that irony accentuates the fact that "[a]ll words bear traces of previous and other potential uses, and their meaning changes depending on the tone of utterance or the particular context in which they are uttered" (Nicol 13).

The parody of the whodunit genre extends as far as to the typeface of the text. When characters speak with particular emphasis, just as in Christie novels, italics are used. For instance, Evadne Mount explains a crucial realization of hers regarding the murderer's hiding in a hollowed-out armchair saying: "What I venture to suggest happened next is that—if I can phrase it this way—*the armchair suddenly stood up on its hind legs*" (264; emphasis in original). Here too, Adair's technique goes beyond the mere imitation of generic conventions, as he also incorporates a tongue-in-cheek metacommentary on his allusions. This becomes clear as the text continues: "Everybody in the library gasped in unison. It was almost as though she had *spoken* in italics, almost as though they could feel the hairs stand up on the napes of their necks, almost as though those hairs, too, were in italics" (264; emphasis in original). By alerting his readers so emphatically to the use of italics in the genre, Adair insists on just the "critical ironic difference" (Hutcheon, *Parody* 37) that, according to Hutcheon, characterizes parody.

In this essay, I approach Adair's novel as a parody rather than a pastiche in accordance with Hutcheon's definitions of the concepts. For Hutcheon, who describes parody as a practice of "revising, replaying, inverting, and 'trans-contextualizing' previous works of art" (*Parody* 11), the distinction between the terms is that "parody does seek differentiation in its relationship to its model; pastiche operates more by similarity and correspondence" (38). Although she regards them as closely related—"[b]oth are acknowledged borrowings"—and points out that a parody can at the same time be a pastiche (38), in parodic texts, she identifies a clearer focus on dissimilarity with the original text: it is "repetition with difference" (101). Yet even in insisting on this difference, parody simultaneously confirms its target text: "[e]ven in mocking, parody reinforces; in formal terms, it inscribes the mocked conventions onto itself, thereby guaranteeing their continued existence" (75). This aptly describes the double identity of

Adair's novel as both a classic whodunit, never abandoning its conventions, and as being noticeably different from the genre in also constituting an ironic commentary on it—a difference which Adair, as illustrated, emphasizes by means of exaggeration and by providing a different context with the use of anachronisms, among other devices. It is also in line with Hutcheon's concept of parody that the parodic nature of Adair's allusions becomes apparent only in the elements that reveal his critical distance or a changed context—for Hutcheon writes that parody can often be more clearly recognized in its function rather than its form: "While the act and form of parody are those of incorporation, its function is one of separation and contrast. Unlike imitation, quotation, or even allusion, parody requires that critical ironic distance." (34) That the ironic approach of parody is often an expression of admiration as much as a critical consideration has been observed by Adair himself, who writes in the introduction to his collection of essays on postmodernism that "each man parodies the thing he loves" (*Postmodernist* 14). And while Adair's appreciative imitation of a Golden Age whodunit is also a pastiche, it is the novel's characteristics as a parody which I want to examine in the present context.

Adair's ambivalent—that is, celebratory *and* critical—approach to the whodunit can be described as typically postmodern. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon compares the relationship to earlier forms and works of art found in both parodic and postmodern approaches as follows: "[p]arody is a perfect postmodern form, in some senses, for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies" (11). Yet when the Golden Age whodunit is parodied, an additional layer must be recognized, since any parody of this genre is a parody of a parody: Janice MacDonald has elaborated on the many ways in which parody has played a crucial part in British and American detective fiction since its early adopters such as Poe and Collins (71), and has pointed out how deeply embedded parody is in the structure of the genre. Parody, then, is both a key feature of postmodern fiction and of the classic whodunit. Thus Adair's extended use of parody in *The Act of Roger Murgatroyd* is an element that informs his imitation of the genre and at the same time a device he uses to distance himself from it. Many scholars have commented on the fact that the boundaries between "classic" detective fiction and postmodern writing are not clear-cut (see for instance Marcus 252–53; Merivale 308). Angelini, too, emphasizes the abundance of literary devices which are central to postmodern writing, yet also characterize the whodunit of the interwar period:

> Inevitably many of the stories written then and shortly thereafter extended the "rules of engagement" to include parody but such was the sense of "gamesmanship" that knowing postmodern jokes and tropes entered the genre even before the term "postmodern" had come into general use after the end of the Second World War. (125)

In Adair's exploration of these continuities, as I will now illustrate, several other devices besides parody are particularly central, most notably metafiction. It is no coincidence that the two most important characters in Adair's novel, the detective and the murderer, are both writers and critical readers—and one of them even a parodist—of detective fiction.

**A metafictional investigation**

As the highly successful author of novels with such evocative titles as *The Timing of the Stew* and *Murder Murder on the Wall*, amateur detective Evadne Mount is an expert in whodunits. Her comments on the genre create an intertextual field of reference, ranging—just within the field of crime fiction—from Arthur Conan Doyle and G. K. Chesterton to Dashiell Hammett and John Dickson Carr, with Agatha Christie mentioned as a professional rival (6). Evadne Mount herself is characterized in reference to many fictional counterparts: her first name echoes that of Christie's Ariadne Oliver, while the "matelot's tricorne hat which had become her trademark in London's literary world" (202) is reminiscent of Sherlock Holmes, and a remark about her "perhaps not-so-little grey cells" (256) conveys her desire to distinguish herself from Hercule Poirot. A character who writes detective fiction is a familiar figure in the Golden Age whodunit—Ariadne Oliver and Sayers's Harriet Vane being the most prominent but by no means the only examples. Here again, Adair simply takes up and amplifies a generic element by turning a character who is often only a sidekick into the main investigating detective.

Throughout the novel, extensive use is made of the ironic metalevel that such a character allows for: almost all of the titles of Evadne Mount's novels hint at other works of fiction, whereas some are references to the publishing industry involved in the production of whodunits. Thus, *The Mystery of the Green Penguin* alludes to the series of crime fiction published by The Bodley Head from 1935 onwards (see Edwards 62). The novel *Faber or Faber*—a reference positively brimming with irony considering the close association of Faber and Faber with modernist writing—nods to Adair's own publishers (see Angelini 119), as well as to the twin motif deprecated—

not to be used "unless we have been duly prepared"—by Ronald A. Knox in his "A Detective Story Decalogue" (196). Consequently, on the one hand, Evadne Mount is a character type familiar enough from the generic tradition to increase the reader's sense of encountering a classic whodunit. On the other hand, she reminds the reader of the fact that detective fiction, including the novel they are reading, is an artificial product, not least in the many instances throughout the novel when she discusses her writing or the Detection Club (Adair, *Murgatroyd* 25, 205–7, 241) with the other characters.

As Bran Nicol has noted, "[s]elf-reference is the literary version of the postmodern ironic attitude" (16), but again, the element of self-reference is already dominant in Golden Age detective fiction, which has been called "the most noticeably self-referential branch of crime fiction" (Bernthal 228). Almost all whodunits explicitly acknowledge genre conventions or other whodunits, and it is in precisely such instances that Malcah Effron locates the self-referentiality of detective fiction as well, that is in moments that "acknowledge the existence of the detective genre, either through explicit statement or through intertextual allusion" (58). Effron establishes three modes of self-referentiality that are common in the genre, all of which are taken up by Adair: "moments that explicitly situate themselves in relation to detective fiction"; "intrageneric intertextual references . . . to generic tropes, iconic fictional detectives, and classic detective writers"; and "detective novels that use a fictional detective writer as the detective protagonist" (61). With examples such as Christie's *The Body in the Library* (1942), in which a character mentions not only other crime writers but also Christie herself, readers of the genre are used to references and allusions that draw attention to the fact that they are encountering a fictional text. Edwards has also commented on the parodies of fellow authors and their fictional detectives included in the works of Golden Age writers (62–63). As he points out, "Adair was, therefore, working in a long-established tradition, but the postmodernist touch that he brought to *The Act of Roger Murgatroyd* supplied an extra dimension for those familiar with 'Golden Age' whodunits" (63–64).

I agree that Adair does not introduce a new element but that it is a matter of the degree to which he makes central his metafictional commentary on and criticism of the genre that creates this "extra dimension," distinguishing his novel from classic whodunits where, as Effron points out, "self-referential statements . . . fulfill a metafictive function in that they interrogate boundaries, both generic and fictive" (42), yet where they merely "create an *impression* rather than an *awareness* of

metafictionality: they never wholly reveal the disjuncture associated with metafiction" (4, emphasis in original). Agreeing with Effron that "a sustained argument" rather than "a brief encounter" with such disjunctures is necessary to establish a text as "overt metafiction" (19f.), I want to illustrate that this is the case for Adair's novel in that—in accordance with Effron's definition of the concept—he seeks to "both interrogate and disintegrate boundaries between reality and fictionality" (19). In Patricia Waugh's words, what metafiction does is "simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction" (6), and Adair's endeavor to do so becomes increasingly prominent as the novel progresses. An intimation of this is, for instance, the common reproach of "cardboard characters" (Adair, *Murgatroyd* 253) that is addressed to Evadne, while she herself dismisses "those utterly pointless ground-plans which some of my rivals insist on having at the beginning of their whodunits and which only the most naïve of readers would ever think of consulting" (256). The genre's focus on upper-middle-class characters is criticized when the gardener reassures the cook that the servants need not be afraid of the murderer: "if we ain't good enough to invite to cocktails we ain't good enough to murder neither" (171). Even some of the scholarship on detective fiction is evoked in the novel, which is reminiscent of other postmodern writers such as Eco (whom Adair admired), who engaged with the genre of detective fiction both creatively and as literary scholars, and who commented on scholarly discourses in their works of fiction. Edmund Wilson's scathing criticism of the genre, voiced in the mid-1940s, is anachronistically acknowledged by Adair when one of the guests declares his disinterest in whodunits, saying, "I mean, who cares who killed—" (251; Wilson 338), before he is broken off. Another anachronism is Evadne Mount's claim that it was the Detection Club that came up with the term *Mayhem Parva* (Adair, *Murgatroyd* 241), referring to the cozy, enclosed setting of the classic whodunit that is "epitomized by the English country village" where "ordered and conservative world views" dominate (Herbert et al. 282). In fact, the term was coined by Colin Watson in 1971 (Watson 169; see also Herbert et al. 282). Also, readers learn that Evadne Mount launched her career with a rewriting of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* (Adair, *Murgatroyd* 227), a play that is often regarded as a founding text for crime narratives in literary criticism. With a character who is both an author and, to a certain extent, a critic of the genre, even scholarship is thus seamlessly incorporated into the discussions of detective fiction in the novel. Yet, rather than acknowledging other postmodern writers in this context, Adair employs

metafiction as a device to emphasize the propensity of the classic whodunit itself for meta-commentary, theoretical reflection on, and criticism of the genre. Evadne Mount mentions, for instance, John Dickson Carr's discussion of the genre in *The Hollow Man*, a novel from 1935 (257). Adair thus demonstrates that while making the elements of self-referentiality and metafictionality particularly central to his novel, he is merely taking up and highlighting aspects of the Golden Age whodunit.

Raymond Gentry's murderer, Roger Farrar, turns out to be just as much steeped in fictional traditions as the amateur detective. The tribute to *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) in the title of Adair's novel already hints at the double identity of the murderer, who is the narrator at the same time. For more than two hundred pages, however, the homodiegetic narrator might escape one easily enough (see Angelini 121), since until he is revealed as the murderer, he never speaks in the first person. It is by means of small clues that the reader is eventually alerted to his presence, for instance when the narrator describes his narratological decisions, observing that "it will make better sense to edit out all extraneous comments" (Adair, *Murgatroyd* 123). Or when he wonders at the opening of a chapter about a remark made by Trubshawe: "[w]ho knows what comment, or whose, prompted so typically cautious a response from him?" (185). Moments like these make readers aware of a personified narrator unnoticed for a long time—and at the same time, these instances serve as clues, since they provide information as to the narrator's presence or, sometimes crucially, his absence. In the passage quoted above, he cannot know the context for Trubshawe's remark because he has just been outside, shooting Colonel ffolkes.

Apart from these small clues, however, the murderer's personality barely makes it onto the page. As the Colonel's secretary, he can be found at the margins of the action, as the recipient of orders and instructions, being only ever addressed by his last name, Farrar. He is perhaps best characterized by Evadne Mount as "[s]omebody who saw and heard everything yet said nothing or next to nothing. Somebody who is among us now yet not among us. Somebody who is present yet almost transparent" (267). This invisibility is due to his backstage role, making sure everything runs smoothly, handing out glasses of water when necessary, and being categorized by the other characters as part of their group or as one of the servants, depending on whatever affiliation is most convenient at the moment. It is exactly this elusiveness, resulting from the other characters' disregard for him, that has enabled him to plan and commit his crimes unnoticed until now: "'You see,' I explained, 'the advantage of my position

in your household was that, if I wasn't upstairs, everyone assumed I must be downstairs, and vice versa. So no one ever really missed me"' (269). The murderer thus hides just as much in the narration as in the role he is assigned in the household and, as indicated by the earlier criticism of the way servants are dismissed in whodunits, in the blind spots of the genre. Significantly, here again Adair takes up themes and narrative techniques which were established by Christie, who not only made the first-person narrator the murderer in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, but also repeatedly had crimes hinge on the invisibility of and disregard for servants, for instance in *Three Act Tragedy* (1935) or *After the Funeral* (1953).

The solution and the motive hinge on the unreliability and performance of identities that are so dominant in the Golden Age whodunit in general and, as R. A. York has observed in an often-quoted remark, shape "Christie's . . . world of theatricality and secrecy" (6) in particular. What none of the other characters realizes is that Farrar only took his post so as to eventually revenge his father, who died after a severe injury when Farrar was a child. He is convinced that what actually led to the death was his father's disappointment when Colonel ffolkes, his best friend in youthful days (and his son's godfather), betrayed him—a backstory which clearly echoes Rex Fortescue's past in Christie's *A Pocket Full of Rye* (1953). With this insight into Farrar's past, we also find out why the title of the novel announces a theatrical performance of some sort: *The Act of Roger Murgatroyd—An Entertainment*. Farrar, in reality the eponymous Roger Murgatroyd, has been putting on an act for the last few years. In fact, so has his intended victim, Colonel ffolkes, who has been living under a false identity, too, since he moved to England from the US as a young man and changed his name. Even more importantly, the discovery of the characters' role-playing in their everyday lives is accompanied by, and increasingly extended towards, the generic roles which they also play. The description of Trubshawe's pipe is a telling example of this:

> [T]he pipe that permanently dangled from his lips was also, so far as anyone could recall, permanently unlit, to the point where you began to wonder if you'd ever actually seen it emitting smoke. Like many a man of his age, he *wore* that pipe rather than smoked it, and it had become as indispensable an accessory to his self-presentation as the Vicar's dog-collar or Cora Rutherford's tonitruous tangle of bangles. (Adair, *Murgatroyd* 185; emphasis in original)

Trubshawe's "permanently unlit" pipe establishes him in the role of the detective because of its associations with Sherlock Holmes. Yet, since it is so rarely in use, it seems less of a personal choice and more of a theatrical prop, signposting his connection to fictional predecessors as well as to the other characters whose "self-presentation" is mentioned as a matter of course.

The narrator, however, provides the clearest link between theatrical performance and the self-conscious reproduction of genre conventions. Growing up, Farrar worked as an actor in the United States and then wrote and published hard-boiled detective stories (278–79). He was able to apply his skills as an actor to a way of writing that required a similar sense of role-playing: he found out he "could imitate just about any style" in his writing. Having been interested in writing a locked-room story once before (279), he has now swapped fiction for reality: "I decided to show you Brits that we Yanks could also commit—what did you call it, Miss Mount? A Mayhem Parva murder? I decided to test my locked-room plot in the real world. I liked the irony of it, his [Colonel ffolkes's] trying so hard to be English all over again" (280). The murder method, then, is itself a parody of this particular whodunit subgenre, and its significance can only be understood when its irony, its reference to the context of Farrar's backstory, is recognized. The manner in which the murder is committed, therefore, represents Adair's own way of relating to the genre he parodies—beneath the surface of generic conventions, the genre is revisited for and in the context of its parodist's own purposes. The indistinguishability of the author's and the murderer's parodic endeavors and the resulting confusion around narrative authority becomes even more apparent when Adair's parodic intent turns out to be only one reason for collecting a group of suspects who seem to be, as Evadne Mount observes, "so classic, so traditional, they could all have come straight out of, or indeed gone straight into, a typical Mayhem Parva whodunit" (256). In fact, it is precisely Evadne Mount's recognition of the "uncanny" resemblance of the murder to those in Golden Age whodunits (242) that alerts her to the parodic activity on the murderer's part. Accordingly, Effron's point that "when the detectives are detective writers, the narratives reveal issues of authorship and control that self-referentially redefine the search for truth in the detective genre" (253), could be expanded to include murderers who are also writers of detective fiction.

Although Farrar's comment—"I am a writer. Or let's say I was a writer." (Adair, *Murgatroyd* 274)—suggests that he has now turned from

fiction to reality, that separation cannot be upheld. It is due to Evadne Mount's theories on the safest way to commit a crime, on which she elaborated during the gathering, that Farrar spontaneously decides to shoot the Colonel outside in the snow, discarding the intricately planned, convoluted and whodunit-inspired murder method that he had intended for him. He uses this method to kill Raymond Gentry merely to create a red herring (283). Again, several layers of parody come together here. To start with, with his parody of a typical whodunit murder Farrar also recreates one of the structural parodies inherent in the genre: as MacDonald has pointed out, red herrings "are parodies of clues" (63), since they are artificially produced, misleading imitations of clues. With this artificial murder, it becomes impossible to distinguish between what is real or original, and what is parody. Evadne Mount explains the two types of murder featuring in the novel:

> One was, as the Chief-Inspector would put it, a "fictional" murder, patently committed by somebody who'd read a lot of whodunits—though not . . . any of mine. And the other was a "real" murder, an attempt at a real murder, the kind of murder which is committed every day in the real world. (Adair, *Murgatroyd* 236)

It is significant that the terms "fictional" and "real" appear in quotation marks. For not only does the "fictional," parodic murder have real consequences in the world of the novel, namely a character's death, but also, even the "real" crime is uncovered in a scene informed by fiction. That is, the murderer is revealed, as the narrator puts it, in a "real-life rehearsal of the last—more accurately, last-but-one—chapter of a classic whodunit" (231), the drawing-room dénouement.

**Detecting the omnipresence of fiction**

In his above-quoted article for *The Guardian*, Adair elaborates on the postmodern qualities he identifies in Christie's writing:

> Like certain postmodern novels to which they otherwise bear no resemblance, Christie's thrillers are honeycombed with authorial insinuations designed to warn her readers that the book in their hands is a product of human artifice. Identical twins invariably give one pause, for instance, as does the proximity, at the scene of the crime, of a clock and a mirror (with the implication that the dial may have been read in reverse) . . . . ("Unusual")

The fact that Evadne Mount makes an extremely similar, partly identical comment about the clock-and-mirror scenario in the novel (Adair, *Murgatroyd* 73) only further illustrates the ways in which critical commentary and fiction are inextricable in *The Act of Roger Murgatroyd* (see Angelini 121). In his essay, Adair argues that because of the well-established tropes that make the reader immediately suspicious, even a casual reader cannot but regard critically the text they are reading, since it constantly makes them aware "that what [they are] dealing with is a literary artefact." Consequently, "like two players hunched over a chessboard, reader and author lock themselves in combat, each openly acknowledging the adversary's existence and skill" ("Unusual"). The contest is decided in the dénouement, the suspense of which, according to Adair—and Evadne Mount (Adair, *Murgatroyd* 261)—stems less from the text itself and instead "resides exclusively in the reader's own mind" ("Unusual") as they prepare for a resolution that might be disappointing or convincing. It is "[t]his curious transference of narrative tension from the text itself to the reader" in which Adair recognizes "that Christie is arguably a more modern writer—even a postmodern writer, as we used to say—than she's ever given credit for" ("Unusual").

It is thus very fitting that at the exact moment when Adair's own whodunit alerts readers to the well-used fictional form of the drawing-room dénouement, which shapes the revelation of "truth" at the end, he makes his point about the genre most clearly. Rather than constructing an anti-detective (or "metaphysical" detective) story, which is often characterized by "the absence or perversion of the traditional 'solution'" (Merivale 308), Adair does let us know "whodunit." In the process of doing so, however, he highlights the postmodern dispositions and the metafictional propensity to question "the way in which we perceive what we designate as real" (Effron 36), which are contained in the very structure of the whodunit. With its strict composition and repetitive patterns, the whodunit is a rehearsal of narrative conventions which are gone through again and again to arrive at the truth of what Todorov calls "the story of the crime" (44). Inherent in this set-up, but playfully brought to light by Adair, is the insight that the truth we arrive at is only available and understandable in narrative patterns. Trubshawe, on first arriving at the house, asks for the events of the morning to be told in "a more coherent version, one with a beginning, a middle and an end in that order" (Adair, *Murgatroyd* 38). Similarly, as long as the story of the crime has not been built into an Aristotelian, linear

narrative, it remains unavailable to readers, present only in the glimpses and clues that make it into the "story of the investigation" (Todorov 45). Adair challenges his readers to recognize this with his whodunit, in which the meta-level and the narrative pattern of the crime must be understood in order to solve the case, so that the investigation of murder becomes an investigation of genre and of the inevitability of the narratives that surround us.

Adair emphasizes his point about "the theme of authorial invisibility" (Angelini 120)—a concern that is also central in the second novel of the trilogy, *A Mysterious Affair of Style* (2007)—by drawing readers' attention to the ways in which the narrative of his own novel frames, shapes, and limits readers' access to the fictional world it presents. When Evadne Mount challenges the murderer to speak up, Farrar finally uses the first person: "It felt good to speak in the first person again. If I'd said so little during the past twelve hours, it wasn't that I'm the taciturn type by nature, just that I'd had to be exceptionally careful not to give myself away" (Adair, *Murgatroyd* 268). The murderer has been hiding in the very text of the novel, and with his discovery, readers also recognize that what they have been thinking of as a fairly neutral account has in fact been a subjective, misleading, and highly selective narrative. The text in which readers have been looking for clues and facts has been shaped by a narrator following his own interests from the beginning. Everything in this novel thus is a testament to the omnipresence of narrative: the murder, the investigation, and even the narration.

Waugh has noted that metafiction "operates through exaggeration of the tensions and oppositions inherent in all novels: of frame and frame-break . . . of construction and deconstruction of illusion" (14). Laying bare the constructions, the illusions and deceptions in his own novel and the whodunit genre with the means of parody, intertextuality, self-referentiality, and metafiction, via the protagonists, the language, typological conventions, plot devices, and narrative technique, Adair makes thorough use of the form and possibilities of the whodunit. He does so to explore some of the most fundamental questions asked by postmodern writers and critics as to the ways in which "narrative is always the result of selection and interpretation" (Nicol 12) and how our access to both life and fiction is shaped by such narratives. Nicol has pointed out that postmodern detective fiction can illustrate the potential of detective fiction "as a genre which is naturally metafictional and which causes us—like all postmodern fiction does, in some way—to meditate on the practices of writing and reading

fiction" (183). It is exactly this recognition that Adair's novel leaves its readers with.

*The Act of Roger Murgatroyd* was published at a time when many metafictional rewritings of crime fiction, often in the form of anti-detective stories, had explored similar issues for a few decades. The final installment of Adair's trilogy, *And Then There Was No One* (2009), has more in common with these works, since Adair subverts many generic conventions there and becomes, similarly to Paul Auster in *City of Glass* (1985), himself a character in the book. In this essay, I have deliberately focused on the example of a text that differs from such anti-detective novels to illustrate the ways in which a return to the very form of the Golden Age whodunit, complete with an amateur detective's brilliant resolution and a clearly identifiable culprit, can still be productive. The novel emphasizes the whodunit genre's own postmodern potential and establishes it as a form *within* which to explore—as opposed to having to subvert its conventions—postmodern concerns regarding the boundaries of reality and fiction and to expose "all narratives as artificial and contextually processed" (Bernthal 233).

The inevitability of fiction and narrative patterns that pervades the novel from the murder to the investigation and the resolution is already signaled in the epigraph to *The Act of Roger Murgatroyd*, which quotes filmmaker Raoul Ruiz: "The real world is nothing but the sum total of paths leading nowhere." It is thus no coincidence that with the very last words of the novel, Adair pays tribute to his character most associated with fiction. The successful detective who uncovers the truth could be none other than the writer of detective fiction who is able to recognize the narrative that constitutes this truth: Evadne Mount is the only one to be well-versed in the generic narrative patterns to notice them and to recognize their significance. On the final page, Farrar is about to take his own life, in an exit and an ending that can be found in many other whodunits. When Evadne Mount, as familiar with this generic convention as she is with others, predicts this outcome, Farrar's reaction encapsulates both the fundamental insight that Adair explores in his novel and the parodic technique that he employs to do so. That is, in an echo of the last sentence of the Miss Marple short story "Death by Drowning"—"Miss Marple had been right again" (Christie 250)—Farrar applauds Evadne Mount for detecting the fiction that shapes our reality: "What a woman. She was right again" (Adair, *Murgatroyd* 286).

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This essay is part of the block *Hybridisation and Generic Experiments in Crime Narratives*.

## Notes

1. I employ the term "Golden Age whodunit" because of its wide use in scholarship despite its problematic implications that have been noted, amongst others, by Stephen Knight (77). Rather than aiming to indicate a specific and limited time frame such as that between the two World Wars as a "Golden Age," I use the term synonymously to what Stephen Knight has described as "the clue-puzzle" (77), which is most prominently characterized by fair play towards the reader, a closed setting, a small circle of suspects, and an investigation via the interpretation of clues.

2. On how Eco's *The Name of the Rose* and Auster's *City of Glass* frustrate readers' endeavors to read the novels in the same manner as "classic" detective fiction, see Nicol (175–83).

3. Yet, the few exceptions include Isabell Große, who examines Adair's Evadne Mount trilogy in her forthcoming PhD thesis *Pastiche and Metafiction in Contemporary British Detective Fiction*. I am grateful to Isabell Große for her literature recommendations on Adair.

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# Peter May's *The Lewis Man* and Rebecca Wait's *Our Fathers:* A Scottish Gothic Reading of Island-Set Crime Fiction

Šárka Dvořáková



**ABSTRACT**

This article examines the intersection of crime fiction, the Gothic, and the Scottish island setting through Rebecca Wait's psychological thriller *Our Fathers* (2020) and Peter May's detective novel *The Lewis Man* (2012). The analysis illustrates how the two novels incorporate selected elements typical of the Scottish Gothic: the taxing process of the construction of identity, the notion of the divided self, the impossibility of forgetting the past, and the ways in which history can be written on and read from the body. In *Our Fathers*, the fictional island of Litta becomes a claustrophobic space that reinforces the protagonist's haunted inheritance and struggle with paternal legacy. In contrast, *The Lewis Man* situates its mystery within the sublime landscapes of the Outer Hebrides, where peat bogs and fragmented memory render personal and national histories simultaneously fragile and recoverable. Ultimately, both texts illustrate how Scottish island-set crime fiction mobilizes Gothic aesthetics to interrogate questions of history, identity, and place. The paper suggests that the island setting not only supports but intensifies Gothic concerns, making the island a particularly productive locus for contemporary Scottish Gothic and crime writing alike. (ŠD)

**KEYWORDS:** Scottish crime fiction, the Gothic, island poetics, divided self, *Our Fathers*, *The Lewis Man*

The affinity between the Gothic mode and crime fiction as a genre has been well documented by Maurizio Ascari and Catherine Spooner, among many others, which demonstrates a new approach in the critical reception of crime fiction introduced at the turn of the twenty-first century.[1] The presence of Gothic elements in, specifically, Scottish crime fiction has likewise been a topic of discussion in recent years, at least since Alan Bissett's introduction to his anthology *Damage Land: New Scottish Gothic Fiction* (2001), in which he notes the prominence of Gothic tropes in the works of best-selling crime fiction author Ian Rankin (5). In 2017, Timothy

C. Baker also commented on this aspect of Rankin's Rebus novels and added a short commentary on Val McDermid's detective novel *The Skeleton Road* (2014), in which, he argues, the author "uses Gothic tropes to reflect on the constitution of both individual and national identity, and the way bodies do and do not speak. The secrets of the past . . . are revealed in the physical body" ("New Frankensteins" 204).

In his 2014 monograph on contemporary Scottish Gothic, Baker devoted an entire chapter to Gothic narratives set on islands and, three years later, Monica Germanà noted that "[t]he island setting [has become] a frequent locus in contemporary Scottish Gothic" (224). A comparable development can be observed in twenty-first-century crime fiction, whose authors also show an increasing tendency to employ islands as the setting for their mysteries. Various Scottish islands, both real and imagined, seem to be a popular choice, especially for Scottish- and English-born writers.

The present paper is devoted to two products of this three-way intersection between crime fiction, the Gothic, and the Scottish island setting: *Our Fathers*, a 2020 psychological thriller by London-based author Rebecca Wait, set on the fictional Inner Hebridean island of Litta, and the Scottish-born (though France-based) author Peter May's 2012 detective novel, *The Lewis Man*, the middle installment of his trilogy set in and around the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides. Acknowledging the fact that the selected texts belong to different subgenres of crime fiction, this article does not aim to provide a comparison of the two novels. Instead, it seeks to illustrate the pervasiveness of what appears to be a trend in contemporary crime fiction with Scottish locations, that is, the consistent use of the island setting as a way of providing a frame which highlights or reinforces the well-established Gothic tropes. Of these, three are of specific interest: the "notion of the 'divided self'" and "the impossibility of forgetting the past," identified by Baker ("New Frankensteins" 204) as the two most typical preoccupations of the contemporary Scottish Gothic, as well as the importance of reading the topography of the body, which Baker pointed out in Val McDermid's *The Skeleton Road* (204). Similarly to McDermid's detective novel, May's *The Lewis Man* offers a physical body which is "read" for evidence during an official postmortem, and this way of reading the body is exactly what Baker had in mind. In the case of *Our Fathers*, however, in which Wait does not present an official investigation by the authorities, it is best to extend Baker's method of reading the body to also include Nicolas Abraham's notions of "mental topography" and the phantom in order to interpret the psychological body of the protagonist (Abraham 173).

The divided self, arguably the most Scottish of all the Gothic tropes, has its antecedents in such classics as James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) and Robert Louis Stevenson's 1886 *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Baker, "New Frankensteins" 200). Both of these, along with some works by Walter Scott and J. M. Barrie, have been discussed at length by David Punter, Angela Wright, or Ian Duncan, who have considered these works to be the cornerstones of Scottish Gothic writing. Various divided selves also occur in crime fiction, often ranking among the most popular albeit very controversial characters, such as Hannibal Lecter or Dexter Morgan.

Carol Margaret Davison and Monica Germanà, Duncan Petrie, and Timothy C. Baker—see his monograph *Contemporary Scottish Gothic* (2014)—also relate the fascination the divided self has for Scottish authors to the "Caledonian Antisyzygy," a phenomenon described over a century ago by G. Gregory Smith, who argues that the Scottish mind is bifurcated due to Scotland's complicated political and religious history (4). Scottish literature, then, reflects this bifurcation by employing "two aspects which appear contradictory" (5) and are pertinent to the present discussion of the connections between crime fiction and the Gothic. On the one hand, there is the desire in Scottish literature for detailed realism, which "leaves nothing to the imagination" (6)—a feature frequently appreciated in or even expected of most subgenres of contemporary crime fiction. On the other hand, Scottish literature has the propensity to depict the fantastic and the marvelous, or, it might be said, to employ the Gothic mode.

The second main theme of contemporary Scottish Gothic is that of "the impossibility of forgetting the past" (Baker, "New Frankensteins" 204), which can likewise be traced back to the nineteenth-century Scottish Gothic classics, including Walter Scott's *The Antiquary* (1816). Scott and other nineteenth-century authors frequently remind the reader that, after the Union of Parliaments in 1707, Scotland's history is "a history that is constantly under the threat of erasure" (Punter 105) as official historical narratives reflect the perspective of those in power. The Scottish Gothic, in other words, voices the desire to set the record straight and tell the story the way it actually happened to the losing side—frequently Scotland as a whole. This concern with recovering silenced histories resonates strongly with postcolonial critiques, particularly in the context of Scotland's historically complex relationship with Britain. One might add that this is another obvious feature the Scottish Gothic shares with crime fiction, the goal of

whose plots is usually to establish how the powerless (that is, the murder victims) came to suffer their fate and to bring the guilty party to justice.

In *Our Fathers*, both the Scottish Gothic tropes mentioned above are linked to the protagonist Tommy Baird. He is described as the "uncanny" double of his father, John, due to their striking physical and apparent psychological resemblance (Wait 30). Tommy is also the seeker of the truth behind John's shooting of his wife and Tommy's mother, Katrina, and Tommy's two siblings, Nicky and Beth. As Tommy gathers information by talking to his uncle and his childhood neighbors, he is forced to realize that what can be read in his mental topography—what he considered to be his memories of the murders—does not correspond to how the others remember the events. Even though in the end Tommy finds inner peace, his recovery of the erased history is not complete. It is only the reader who, through the novel's multiple narrative perspectives, is told the full truth. A crucial piece of information known only to Tommy's deceased parents and the Bairds' neighbor, Fiona McKenzie, remains a secret, since Fiona feels too guilty to confess that Tommy's mother told her about wanting to take the children and leave her tyrannical husband. Fiona, who thought John was a flawless man, deemed Katrina selfish and divulged her plan to John, who then murdered his family out of jealousy.

*The Lewis Man* presents a more straightforward story of an investigation into the identity of a young man murdered over fifty years before the present time of the novel. The seeker of truth is the series protagonist, former police detective Fin Macleod, while the "divided self" is represented by Tormod Macdonald, an old man with dementia, who is proven by DNA to be a relative of the murdered man. Due to his worsening condition, Tormod cannot assist the investigation, except by providing incoherent fragments of a past life which are initially incongruent with the person everyone holds him to be. Since the key to the dead man's identity is hidden in Tormod's disintegrated mind, at first the investigation only relies on what can be read from the dead body itself. That, in turn, is highly readable, thanks to its being preserved in a peat bog. The texts found on the body include the dated metal plate used for the victim's cranioplasty, the tattoo of Elvis Presley on his arm, and the imprint of a peculiar, knitted pattern made right after his death, which is still visible on his skin. After correctly read, these traces allow Fin Macleod to not only piece together the victim's story, but also to discover the true identity of the man who now calls himself Tormod Macdonald. Like Wait's novel, *The Lewis Man* employs

multiple narrative perspectives; however, May makes the full historical truth known to both the investigator and the reader.

### *Our Fathers*: Entrapment and isolation

As far as the island setting is concerned, the covers of numerous Scottish island-set crime fiction novels—for example, works by Mark Douglas-Home, C. L. Taylor, and Susan Hill—promise to take the reader to a "remote Scottish island" and give them a genuine taste of island life by conveying the experiences of boundedness, isolation, fragmentation, and smallness—in other words, the four main features of "islandness" as described by sociologist and Island Studies scholar, Godfrey Baldacchino (xxv). The most common method of creating an impression of islandness in a reader's mind is naturally the visual description of scenery. In the case of the Scottish islands, the sense of isolation is brought about by descriptions of when (or whether) it is possible to see the mainland and how frequent the ferry connection to it is, while boundedness is highlighted by the descriptions of the island's steep cliffs or the strong currents in the surrounding sea. The sea often hides perilous rock formations right under its surface; these can in turn be seen as exemplifying the feature of fragmentation. The reader's final impression of islandness, however, depends most on how the author decides to present the island's smallness. When smallness is perceived through a character's consciousness as extraordinary and refreshing, the visual descriptions, together with the often multi-sensory experience of the windy and stormy weather, convey to the reader the sense of openness and the sublime. Conversely, when smallness is perceived as extreme or unwelcome by a character, the prevailing impression of all the other features of islandness is that of confinement and claustrophobia. As will be shown, both impressions function well as supportive elements, or even amplifiers, of the Gothic tropes.

Litta is a fictional island allowing Wait to create the setting of *Our Fathers* as claustrophobic and unpeopled as she needed. Based on the few geographical references in the text, the island may still be placed on the map, the most likely location being between the two Inner Hebridean isles of Mull and Jura. Measuring only eight by three miles (Wait 52) and with a ferry connection which does not run daily, Litta—whose name perhaps sounds like a mangled version of the word *little*—is constructed as an ideal setting for the domestic Gothic subplot concerning the lives of the Baird family before the murders. As is clear from the first pages of the novel, Fiona McKenzie's unfortunate opinion of John Baird as a flawless husband

and father is in sharp contrast with his true nature. Especially in the chapters focalized through Katrina, the majority of which can be found in Part 2, John is portrayed as nothing short of a Gothic villain and Litta is a stand-in for the castle in which he entraps his naïve newlywed wife.

In studying literary islands, Graziadei et al. suggest that it is crucial to single out for analysis especially the reader's first encounter with the island. They refer to the "precise moment in the narrative in which the island emerges as a specific place or thing" as the island's point of conception, and they also highlight the significance of the narrating or focalizing characters' sensual perceptions (240). Katrina grew up on the mainland and moved to the island with John soon after their first son was born. With an inconsolable newborn and no local friends, and her husband staying over on the mainland on most days due to his job, Katrina's first experience of Litta is that of loneliness and entrapment. "Sometimes," she reflects on the very first page of the novel, "the isolation of the place appalled her. Even on the clearest days, you could not see the mainland, thirty miles distant to the east. To their west, the Atlantic stretched out blankly, nothing but a lighthouse standing between them and Canada" (Wait 1). This short passage focuses heavily on visual imagery of remoteness and isolation. The notion that there is nothing between the island and North America is a common one employed to highlight the status of the island as a lonely outcrop, the last bastion of civilization between the great non-place of the ocean (Cresswell 9) and the civilized place—the mainland—which, however, cannot be seen either. Litta's smallness is presented by Katrina as both extreme and unwelcome from the very beginning of the novel, and in combination with the description of its remoteness and isolation, the island is likely to be conceived of by the reader as a trap throughout the whole novel, even though other characters hold more moderate opinions of it. Against this backdrop of anxiety, Wait lists further examples of both physical and emotional entrapment and isolation.

The house to which John and Katrina move is draughty, does not have central heating and seems utterly unsuitable for a newborn (Wait 244), to which John appears oblivious, spending most of his nights away from home. As a result, Katrina passes her days in solitude until Fiona, the Bairds' only neighbor, reaches out to her, starts bringing her food, and the two women bond over their shared experience as new mothers. Their friendship, however, does not last long past the birth of the Bairds' second son, Tommy. Already during their courtship, John successfully limited Katrina's circle of friends and her other activities, and was not careful

during sexual intercourse, frequently citing superficially charming but ominous reasons such as that "they'd be married soon anyway" (235). He also frequently criticized the way she dressed and demonized the men around her, saying they could easily take advantage of her (239). Therefore, when he found out how much Fiona was doing for Katrina during Tommy's infancy, he demanded she tell Fiona her help was no longer needed because the situation made him look "like he wasn't caring for his wife" (251). Significantly, it was always Katrina who had to end her friendships or change her attitudes to suit her husband's wishes without any explanation to others, and the Littans, thinking that she simply "was not the type to have close friends" (268), soon ceased to show interest in her. As the boys aged, John grew increasingly cruel to her and started moving his things around the house only to blame her for misplacing them, which made Katrina question her very sanity (255). In this way, John manipulated and systematically isolated his wife, starting long before they moved to the island, and continued doing so there until she felt her world visually "contracting and narrowing" (250). When, in the moment of greatest despair, Katrina confided in Fiona about her wish to escape the island, Fiona, still bitter about the unexplained termination of their friendship, betrayed her plans to John, who shot Katrina dead three weeks later.

It is no surprise that observing such behavior at home, Tommy grew up with the impression that "all fathers were like this, that behind closed doors this was how all men treated their wives" (Wait 155). As an adult, he finds himself being intentionally cruel to his girlfriend Caroline, and with no desire to have children of his own, since he fears that they would inherit "[s]ome kind of family *disorder*" (135, emphasis in the original). Tommy is aware of the undesirability of his actions and their consequences but cannot seem to control himself. He blames this on being haunted by the legacy of his father, to whom he bears a visual resemblance, which is described in the novel with the quintessentially Gothic adjective "uncanny" (30). What Tommy experiences resembles the presence of the phantom as theorized by psychoanalyst Nicolas Abraham. Nicholas T. Rand, editor and translator of Nicolas Abraham's essays, points out that "Abraham's theory of the phantom enlarges upon Freud's metapsychology by suggesting that the unsettling disruptions in the psychic life of one person can adversely and unconsciously affect someone else" (166), especially their child (Abraham 172). The phantom's manifestations, Abraham writes, are "periodic and compulsive," working "like a ventriloquist, like a stranger within the subject's own mental topography" (173). Tommy indeed

perceives a foreign presence within his body, likening it to a tapeworm, "coiled up in his guts" (Wait 156), and after he mistreats his girlfriend, he feels sorry but at the same time knows that he feels the compulsion to do it again (157).

From the memories of Tommy's paternal uncle Malcolm, it is clear that this phantom was transmitted across at least two generations. Already Tommy's grandfather is described as a hard-working but unpredictable drunken crofter who would "take out his exhaustion and rage on his wife and children" (Wait 69) by beating them and belittling them, especially his wife, who was "the chief object of his hatred" (70). The physically sturdy, though more sensitive Malcolm was less frequently abused than the slighter but more cold-blooded John. In spite of this, it was John who defended their father's strictness and always took their father's side against their mother, at whose funeral he commented, "She was an old bitch . . .. I'm surprised Dad put up with it" (74). Hearing his uncle's childhood stories, Tommy is convinced that the evil in their family "gets passed on" (147) because it is written in his psyche as well as in his DNA, and that he is doomed to be his father's double, both physically and psychologically.

Tommy begins to be disabused of this notion, however, when one of his strongest childhood memories is proven to be false. It is a memory from the day his family was murdered and one he always used to prove to himself that he was born bad. Crucially, this memory is also strongly connected with the sense of sight and visual isolation which permeates the entire novel. Tommy survived his father's murderous rampage by hiding in a bedroom closet, and he remembers watching through the slats of its door how his older brother ran into the room, as if looking for a place to hide, found none, and so ran back out again seconds before being killed (Wait 205). For over twenty years, Tommy reproached himself for merely watching his brother from safety, for not pulling him in the closet to save his life. According to the written account of the crime scene, however, this could not have happened based on where the bodies were found, and Tommy realizes that the core memory on which he constructed the notion of his inborn badness was merely the product of his survivor's guilt.

The final step in Tommy's recovery from the phantom haunting is his deep pondering over a photograph of his mother—a strong visual stimulus accompanied by next to no verbal information from Malcolm who knew Katrina very little. Because of how much John isolated her in life, Katrina remained a mystery to most Littans, including Malcolm, her brother-in-law, so he is unable to describe her character to Tommy very

well. He does, however, own a couple of photographs of her, which he shows to his nephew. Tommy asks Malcolm to give him the photograph of himself and his brother with their mother, and returns the one featuring their father (Wait 195). He reflects on his childhood love for Katrina which is pictured in the photograph as "[h]is small arm . . . outstretched, reaching for his mother's hair" (194), and he stops blaming her for making his unstable father angry by seemingly always "ma[king] things difficult when she didn't need to" (155). After reliving his early memories of Katrina, Tommy ceases to masochistically identify himself only as his father's double and realizes he does have a choice in what he becomes in life because he also carries the genetic legacy of his mother, whom he adored as a boy "even more than God and Jesus" (85).

Just like the very beginning of the novel, its final pages are devoted to a visual description of the island. Conceived for the reader through the eyes of the entrapped Katrina, it is, in the words of Graziadei et al (240), reconceived by Tommy as he is leaving it on the ferry. Achieving what his mother was never allowed to do, he observes the island recede into the distance, "its ragged moorland rising up in crests and ridges, its cliffs leaning over the sea . . ., its terrible beauty fading" (Lewis 333). Unlike Katrina, Tommy sees the sublime beauty of his birthplace and feels as if he left the phantom of his father behind, on the island.

### *The Lewis Man:* Openness and movement

While like *Our Fathers*, *The Lewis Man* opens with a conception of an island, May's description incorporates more types of sensual perception than Wait's. The first paragraph of the short Prologue is a neutral description of a "storm-lashed island three hours off the north-west coast of Scotland" (May, *Lewis* 1). What follows is focalized by a five-year-old girl called Annag, who does not figure in the rest of the novel. Annag is to witness her first peat-cutting and leaves the house "barefoot, the bog's waters squishing between her toes as she runs ahead over prickly heather" (1). She observes the sky "torn and shredded by the wind," which completely fills her field of vision (1) and hears the distant voices of her relatives carried to her ears on the wind (3). Before it concludes with the discovery of a body in the peat bog, the Prologue creates a sense of the bleak island landscape of the Isle of Lewis which, however, sharply contrasts with the conception of the isle of Litta. While Wait's description focused solely on the island's visual remoteness and isolation, the attention May pays to the clouds opens the island upwards to the sky and Annag's

tactile sensation of the peat bog brings the reader into closer proximity with the physical reality of the island (see Bal 125). Her visual perception of overwhelming openness, of both the "shredded" sky above and the "brown . . . wastes" below (May, *Lewis* 1–2), colors the reader's impression of Lewis as barren yet sublime, which, I would argue, lasts until the very end of the novel: unlike *Our Fathers*, *The Lewis Man* does not re-conceptualize the island in its concluding passage. The sense of openness is highlighted in the plot by the physical mobility of the investigator-protagonist Fin Macleod, whose search for historical truth takes him from Lewis in the north of the Outer Hebrides as far south as Eriskay. He makes with multiple stops on the islands in between, during which he recovers bits and pieces of the history he is trying to set straight.

Like in the rest of the Lewis Trilogy, May creates the sense of Scottish islandness for the reader not only by providing evocative descriptive passages, but also through thematizing different historical and geographical realities of the Outer Hebrides. In fact, using real historical events was a self-confessed goal for May since before he started working on *The Blackhouse* (2009) (May, *Hebrides* 103). The plot of *The Blackhouse*, of which I have written elsewhere (see Dvořáková), is centered around the traditional yearly gannet hunt organized by the Lewismen. In *The Lewis Man*, May explores the religious divide between the Protestant northern Outer Hebrides and the Catholic southern isles, as well as the moving history of the "homers"—orphaned children whose personal histories were overwritten after they were sent from the mainland to the southern islands by the Catholic Church, and simply given away to the locals, who worked them hard on their crofts and often treated them terribly (*Hebrides* 168). Just like he does with the island setting, May employs the three Gothic tropes under discussion in this paper with historical and geographical verisimilitude in mind.

The readable body in *The Lewis Man* is made possible by a peat bog, a typical feature of the Outer Hebridean landscape. The investigators originally suspect the body's age will be impossible to determine, but the uncertainty only lasts until the Elvis Presley tattoo is discovered on its skin. The unknown man's DNA then leads the police to Tormod Macdonald, a living relative, who, even though alive and therefore able to speak, is in many ways more reticent than the dead body because he is losing his ability to make sense of his memories and the world around him due to rapidly progressing dementia. Tormod's sensitive condition makes Fin careful not to upset the old man, and instead of questioning him, Fin decides to recover

Tormod's personal history from the records at the registrar's office, so he travels to Tormod's birthplace in Seilebost on the Isle of Harris. After he is offered a copy of both the birth and death certificates of Tormod Macdonald, deceased at the age of eighteen in 1958 (May, *Lewis* 186), Fin reaches a dead end and is left only with the traces read from the corpse: the dated metal plate, the tattoo, and the knitted pattern imprinted on the skin, which he needs to use to figure out not only the identity of the bog body, but also that of the mysterious man who has been pretending to be Tormod Macdonald for fifty years.

"[T]he impossibility of forgetting the past" (Baker, "New Frankensteins" 204) represented by the sudden emergence of the dead body is battling against the very real "threat of erasure" of history (Punter 105), both personal, taking place in Tormod's mind, and national, taking place across all the islands, mainly due to population decline. The clues the body offers cannot be read by the protagonist without the help of passionate yet amateur record keepers and antiquarians, who protect minute details of the quickly disappearing island history from complete erasure. Finding out that the real Tormod Macdonald is dead, Fin decides to try to at least contact the Macdonald family, who had emigrated to Canada. To find out where exactly they went, he visits a genealogist who collected the traumatic family histories of those who lived in and emigrated from Harris after the nineteenth-century Clearances, and later, due to poverty. "These are our croft histories of Harris," the genealogist Bill Lawson tells Fin. "We do it by village and croft. Who lived there, when and where they went. Everything else changes, but the land itself stays in the same place" (May, *Lewis* 248–49). In other words, the only way to protect these personal histories is for Lawson to capture the moment when they were written on the land before they disappear forever. At the same time, the implication is that the personal histories Lawson keeps are the only written records of the large, abandoned areas of the Outer Hebrides.

Another amateur antiquarian who helps Fin on his quest to uncover the true identity of Tormod Macdonald is a Catholic priest who devoted his old age to documenting the traditional art of knitting on Eriskay. The significance for the novel of this nearly lost island art is a typical example of the minute details of Outer Hebridean culture and history May works with in order to give his setting a rare sense of verisimilitude. Like the gannet hunt in *The Blackhouse*, the Eriskay knitting is an art on the verge of disappearance because the twenty-first century no longer needs it. Hunting gannets used to be essential for the islanders' survival, and so were good

quality knitted clothes, especially for the fishermen. The clothes knitted in this specific way were basically waterproof (May, *Lewis* 266), and because each woman had her own distinct knitting pattern, the clothing could also serve to identify the corpse of a male relative lost at sea and made unrecognizable by the elements (308). The priest is able to compare the photographs of the imprint on the bog body and identify who knitted the blanket which became the body's eloquent shroud.

The "divided self" (Baker, "New Frankensteins" 204) of May's novel, Tormod Macdonald, had been divided, or rather splintered, repeatedly in his life. The most obvious fault line is his rapidly proceeding dementia, which breaks his sense of self to the point he sometimes says nonsense (such as the phrase "Donald Duck") and then, surprised at himself, he attempts a feeble cover-up to save face (May, *Lewis* 9). The memories of his previous life, however, reveal that he had not felt a whole person since very early in his childhood. Aged four, he lost his father in the Second World War, and he was orphaned in his early teens, left to fend for himself and his mentally handicapped brother, Peter in a mainland Protestant orphanage, where they, being Catholics, were far from welcome. From this orphanage, the two McBride brothers were sent by the Catholic Church to Eriskay as "homers." Their adoptive family, the Gillies siblings, showed no interest in their previous lives, unceremoniously demanding they "[f]orget wherever it is [they] came from" and start answering to their new names Donald John and Donald Peter Gillies (207). Becoming Tormod Macdonald was therefore no difficult task for John, barely an adult then, whose final connection with his past was severed by the traumatic death of his brother. After Peter is murdered in front of John's eyes as a punishment for a crime he never committed, John removes his body and buries it in the peat on Lewis in order to buy time for revenge. He later shoots Peter's murderers, but is never caught, and to his own surprise continues living his life under a borrowed name, until Peter's body is rediscovered at a time when John is no longer able to make sense of the difference between his past and present.

**Conclusion**

Unlike *Our Fathers*, which opens with a visual conception of the island and closes with its visual reconception, the closing paragraphs of *The Lewis Man* can be read more as a tactile reconception of Tormod Macdonald as John McBride. After being placed in a home by his wife, who was no longer willing to take care of him, Tormod/John is reunited with his

adolescent love Ceit, a fellow homer, who spent as much time as John living under a fake name. Now an aging woman herself, she offers to take care of her old lover in his final years. Tormod/John gratefully squeezes her hand in the final sentences of the novel, realizing who she is and what she means to him in what seems to be one of the final moments of wholeness when it comes to his half-erased personal history (May, *Lewis* 418).

"Gothic is about breakdown, about terror, about the collapse of territory, structure, order, authority. Gothic does not believe in the unity of the self or in the safety of the flesh," Bissett has written (5). As can be seen from the two novels discussed above, the desire for answers and solutions typical for crime fiction eventually prevails over the Gothic fragmentation and uncertainty. The divided selves of both Tommy Baird and Tormod Macdonald are made whole after Tommy's "mental topography" (Abraham 173) and Peter McBride's corpse—the novels' respective victimized bodies—give their testimonies. The records of personal histories are finally protected from erasure and become sources of either a new identity, as for Tommy, or enablers of a return, even though brief, to a long-lost identity, like in Tormod/John's case. In both novels, the island setting can be said to supplement and amplify the significance of the Gothic tropes they employ, albeit in different ways. In *Our Fathers*, the descriptions of Litta serve to evoke the feelings of entrapment and claustrophobia, which provide a backdrop to the protagonist's quest to heal his internal divisions by probing his own memories and reconciling with them. The barren yet sublime landscapes of the Outer Hebrides in *The Lewis Man*, in contrast, create a sense of temporal and spatial depth, which enables Fin Macleod to recover the histories of John and Peter McBride, as well as the nearly erased pieces of national history represented by the lost art of Eriskay knitting and the homers' stories.

The island setting, whether fictional or real, has a lot to offer to both crime fiction and the Gothic mode. As this paper has hopefully demonstrated, the three-way intersection between crime fiction, the Gothic, and the (Scottish) island setting is an especially intriguing and productive one, undoubtedly worthy of further research.

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# In True Crime We Trust: The Artifactuality of John Douglas and Mark Olshaker's *Mindhunter: Inside the FBI Elite Serial Crime Unit* (2017) and Netflix's *Mindhunter* (2017)

Emily Alice Farmer

***HJEAS***

**ABSTRACT**

Consumers of true crime often take for granted that, as the name suggests, the stories its authors present are wholly true to life. As the following article will demonstrate, however, these consumers are cunningly guided to this fallacious conclusion. Using John Douglas and Mark Olshaker's *Mindhunter: Inside the FBI Elite Serial Crime Unit* (2017) and Netflix's 2017 *Mindhunter* series as case studies, this article will explore how readers' first (and likely their lasting) impression of authenticity is shaped by rhetorical, visual, and aural tactics. To support the discussion, Baudrillard's concepts of consumer society and of simulacra, Derrida's (2002) concept of artifactuality, and Genette's notion of the paratext will be utilized to elucidate the strategies at work in establishing authenticity in true crime. (EAF)

**KEYWORDS:** artifactuality, authenticity, Baudrillard, Derrida, true crime.

## Introduction

True crime is a genre that, thanks to the purported transparency its name offers, is often regarded to belong to the realm of non-fiction. Indeed, it cannot be denied that a true-crime text provides "the story of real events" (Murley 6). Stories whose origins are traceable to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century newspaper reports on murderous criminals and whose use of salacious depictions satisfied the consumers' appetite for death and violence (Murley 7–8). An appetite which, at the time of writing (2024), shows no signs of waning, even though what a true-crime text offers is only a version of the "real events" that have occurred. One of the reasons for the insatiable appetite is that, as Julie B. Wiest discusses in her article on the representations of serial killers in American and British media, "[s]erial murder is deeply embedded in Western cultures, and serial killers have become perverse icons as legendary as other monsters known throughout history in cultural myths" (327). The excitement produced by the glorifying language used to embellish the (grains of) truth associated with any given

serial killer bestows upon them the mythical status Wiest speaks of and encourages consumers of true crime, as scholars such as Jean Murley herself did when first introduced to the genre, to "consume the volumes [of true crime] like candy" (1). If we take Murley's metaphor a step further, it is not difficult to see how consuming true crime can become a mindless activity; the finished product, which purports to be authentic and truthful, overshadows the processes used to make the true-crime text a desirable sweet treat.

While various true-crime scholars such as Murley have noted that true-crime narratives are "shaped by the teller and imbued with his or her values and beliefs about such events" (6), scholars have, overall, paid little attention to the paratexts used by the genre. According to Gérard Genette, a text's paratext "constitutes a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of *transaction*: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public" (2). The idea of the paratext as a strategy is integral to this article because the discussion will explore how paratextual elements are utilized to assure consumers of the proposed authenticity of a true-crime text. As Jonathan Gray observes of the power of paratexts: "paratexts tell us what to expect, and in doing so, they shape the reading strategies that we will take with us 'into' the text" (26). One can see, therefore, how a paratext not only introduces a consumer to their chosen piece of media, but that it also encourages a certain perception of the media to be retained by the consumer.

To demonstrate how impactful first impressions and paratexts can be on the consumer's belief in the authenticity of a true crime narrative, the paper will use John Douglas and Mark Olshaker's *Mindhunter: Inside the FBI Elite Serial Crime Unit* (first published in 1995 and reprinted with an updated introduction in 2017) and Netflix's 2017 *Mindhunter* series as case studies. These two true-crime texts have been selected for this study because their paratextual tactics cleverly obfuscate the artificiality of their narratives. In order to execute this analysis, the book jacket and excerpts from the introduction will be utilized alongside the thumbnail and trailer of Netflix's *Mindhunter*. Select scenes from the first episode that feature in one of the series' trailers will also be discussed to expand on the argument that paratexts incorporating emotional rhetoric encourage a consumer's trust in a text's authenticity.

Since it will be argued that producers of true crime employ tactics rather than techniques, both Jacques Derrida's concept of "artifactuality," and Jean Baudrillard's thoughts on the mechanics of the consumer society

will be utilized to elucidate this crucial distinction. In *Echographies of Television* (2002, first published in French in 1996), Derrida speaks of "artifactuality," a portmanteau term combining the words "artifact" and "actuality," to discuss the content broadcast by television networks, specifically news programs. Despite Derrida's specific use of the term, artifactuality also more broadly facilitates the recognition that while "there is *actuality*" in true crime, insofar as "the 'facts' that . . . constitute actuality" are presented to the consumer (42), we are also able to recognize that the "facts" represented are choices that are "calculated, constrained, 'formatted,' [and] 'initialized'" (3). To elucidate how the "calculated" use of paratexts evokes promises of authenticity for the consumer of true crime, Baudrillard's *The Consumer Society: Myths & Structures* (1998) will be called upon because his work demonstrates how objects are designed to, as George Ritzer summarizes Baudrillard's thoughts on advertising, "produce a sense of intimacy where, in fact, none exists" (13). A production which ensures that we live, Baudrillard laments, "sheltered by signs, in denial of the real" (*The Consumer Society* 34). To further elucidate this argument, Baudrillard's concept of the simulacrum will also be incorporated as it facilitates an examination of the artifice of true crime in a wider context. Thus, through the application of artifactuality and Baudrillard's thoughts on the effect of the consumer society on our navigation of the world to the use of paratexts in true crime, it will be shown how the genre gives us "not reality but *the dizzying whirl of reality*" (34). That is to say, true crime maintains its promise of authenticity by disorienting its consumers with dizzying waves of paratextual trickery.

Before the artifactual simulation of true crime through the chosen case studies is discussed, it is necessary to contextualize the subsequent study by introducing Douglas and his "mind hunter" profession, using his own words from the book's updated introduction. In the late 1970s, Douglas worked in the Behavioral Science Unit (BSU, which later became the Investigative Support Unit, ISU) of the FBI's National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime at Quantico, Virginia. It was during Douglas's time there that he observed the emergence of a new type of criminal in America: "the serial offender, who often doesn't stop until he is caught or killed, who learns by experience and who tends to get better and better at what he does, constantly perfecting his scenario" (Douglas and Olshaker 19). To counter the devastation wrought by these individuals, Douglas knew a "new weapon in the interpretation of certain types of violent crimes, and the hunting, apprehension, and prosecution of their perpetrators" was needed by law enforcement (14). The "new weapon" was required to take,

Douglas states, "the behavioral approach to criminal-personality profiling, crime analysis, and prosecutorial strategy" (20). This process became known as profiling. Douglas contends that curating serviceable profiles on a serial offender's criminal behavior pattern requires the collation of data extractable from prosecuted violent individuals. Furthermore, Douglas believed that it was only possible to gather this data (motive[s] and modus operandi) from the offenders themselves, so he and other members of the BSU/ISU visited a range of violent offenders and interviewed them about their offences (14–15). In doing so, Douglas posited that the greater the amount of data, the greater the likelihood that the criminal would be caught (20).

From the brief overview given above, it would not be unreasonable for a reader of Douglas's narrative to assume that his behavioral approach to criminal investigations led to the apprehension of all the known serial killers. This eventuality, however, is not the case; Douglas may claim that profiles are used to "*assist* local police in focusing their investigations" (Douglas and Olshaker, 20), but the reality is that the best they can do is hinder an investigation. As David Canter, psychologist and developer of investigative psychology in the United Kingdom, declares: "Speculations about the mind of a criminal have never helped a real-life investigation" (qtd. in Seymour). Canter's criticism certainly ironizes Douglas's own claim that civilians do "more harm than good" in their efforts to help with criminal investigations (Douglas and Olshaker xiii). The "art of profiling" then (229), as Douglas so sincerely calls it, is not as authoritative as he would have us believe.

Regardless of whether Douglas and the development of profiling are of use to law enforcement, it is the packaging of his theories that is of consequence to this study. True crime is a genre that promises to make the horrific violence it depicts safe by capturing and punishing those responsible (Murley 1). Therefore, the authoritative way Douglas speaks of his career and the trajectory of profiling speaks to the authenticity an uninformed consumer may ascribe to other aspects of a true-crime text and provides the incision through which this article will investigate a true-crime text's artifactuality.

**Selling the "truth": The art(ifice) of packaging**

When buying a book, it is fair to say that many of us are guilty of not following through with the purchase because we do not like its visual appearance. For the true-crime text, its cover carries a special significance in

this regard because not only must it be visually appealing to the consumer, but it also needs to be capable of creating a bond of trust between the consumer and the purported authenticity of the narrative. As the adage goes, sometimes less is more, and this is undoubtedly the approach Arrow Books took in their design of Douglas and Olshaker's book, *Mindhunter*; the cover is minimalist, with the large, capitalized, bold title taking center stage to catch the attention of the casual peruser (fig. 1):

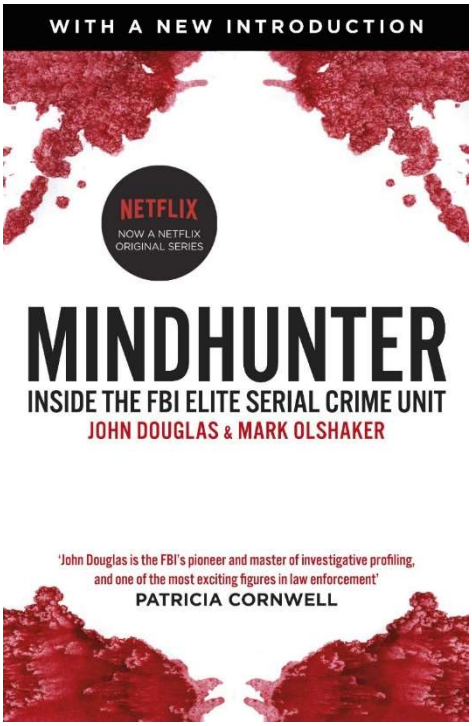


Fig. 1. The front cover of *Mindhunter: Inside the FBI Elite Serial Crime Unit*, 2017 Arrow Books edition.

Here, we see the written text's first instance of a "calculated," in Derrida's terms, production: the title *MINDHUNTER: INSIDE THE FBI ELITE SERIAL CRIME UNIT* implies a neutrality that belies the subjectivity of the account the consumer will receive. Promising the consumer insight into an infamously secretive organization is intended to persuade them that the knowledge they will encounter throughout the book is privileged information reserved only for those willing to trust their narrator(s). Achieving this level of trust is not as difficult as it may appear when it is

considered that many of the genre's narratives are not, as Laura Browder observes, "read for plot, but for [their] detailed description" (125). Many consumers desire the unpalatable details which sensationalize the deaths of the victims as they simultaneously glorify those who murdered them. It is, therefore, significant that blood spatter has been chosen to frame the front cover, as it is a strategic nod toward the gory details given in the narrative. In Maria-Eirini Panagiotidou's exploration of the symbolism associated with the color red, she highlights that "the presence of red functions metonymically to recall the presence of the body and potentially a wound from which it originated" (237). To have such a visceral metonymic symbol occupy *Mindhunter's* front cover prompts the consumer to speculate upon the corporeal consequences of the proposed narrative.

The visual significance of the blood-spattered covers is heightened, furthermore, by their emulation of the forms generated by Swiss psychologist Hermann Rorschach's inkblot test. In *Psychodiagnostics: A Diagnostic Test Based on Perception* (1951, originally published in 1921), psychoanalyst Rorschach describes the inkblot test, an experiment he devised to test "the perceptive power of a subject" (18). The preparation for the experiment, Rorschach insists, is simple: "a few large ink blots are [to be] thrown on a piece of paper, the paper [is then] folded, and the ink spread[s] between the two halves of the sheet" (15). A process Rorschach then repeated until he had created "a suitable series of [ten] figures that is not so simple as might appear at first glance" (15). Rorschach then asked his patients to tell him what they saw when they looked at the inkblots. While many of the responses were "somewhat stereotyped" (15), Rorschach observed that "[n]ormal subjects speak of the 'interpretation' of the figure spontaneously" whereas "[c]ases showing congenital or acquired defects of intelligence want to 'recognize' the pictures" (17). Despite the homogeneity of the patients' responses, Rorschach believed the test "to be of diagnostic value" with "almost unlimited applicability" (183). If a diagnosis of a person's personality were needed, for example, Rorschach pledged that the inkblot test could be relied upon to provide answers (183).

The significance of the blood-spattered front and back covers of *Mindhunter* is twofold: on one level, the inclusion of the inkblot-like form seeks to assure the consumer that the text is undergirded by scientific methods. Methods which are, it must be noted, admissible in a court of law despite the conflicting opinions on the test's validity (Wijdicks 72). On another, the form invites the consumer to invest personally into the narrative by encouraging a contemplation of their own interpretation of the

blood. A contemplation which may lead consumers to wonder whether their interpretation mirrors those given by individuals guilty of violent crimes. Given that the paratexts used by Douglas and Olshaker in their composition of *Mindhunter* frame the narrative as genuine and without artifice, it can be seen how the inkblot reminiscent of blood spatter guides the reader to, as Marcel Danesi observes of the lure of biopic films, "zero in on the serial killer and see him up close" (62). The inclusion of the Rorschach-like blood spatter, therefore, serves as a conduit through which the consumer can be mentally intimate with the interiority of the serial killers while also maintaining a safe distance from them through the vicarious experience of reading.

Therefore, by having the blood spatter frame both the title and subtitle, it is indicated to the consumer that they will receive a detailed narrative of an actuality that can be trusted. It can be trusted because, much like the "shop-window, the advertisement, the manufacturer and the *brand name* . . . impose a coherent, collective vision" (Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society* 27) for a consumer, so too do the paratexts used in the production of true crime. The contents of Douglas and Olshaker's *Mindhunter* are not, in Baudrillard's terms, "a sequence of mere objects, but a chain of *signifiers*" (27). Signifiers that, Baudrillard further elucidates, work together to "signify one another reciprocally as part of a more complex super-object, drawing the consumer into a series of more complex motivations" (27). In the case of true crime, the "complex motivations" that arise from the paratextual "signifiers" are those which generate a vision of authenticity that obfuscates the reality of the narrative, one that has been purposefully constructed to depict this assumed authenticity. As the levels of signification brought about by the title, subtitle, and blood spatter are recognized, it can be seen how these paratexts function as an integral part of the authentication process of true crime. These three introductory paratextual elements provide the initial frame of the text for the consumer; their presence, as Gray highlights of visual "entryway" paratexts, "hold considerable power to direct our initial interpretations, telling us what to expect and establishing genre" (79). Thus, the overall tone and visual framing of the title and subtitle encourage the reader to believe that Douglas and Olshaker's narrative will not hide behind artifice.

The ability of a title to demonstrate to the consumer that the subsequent narrative can be trusted is not to be underestimated. As Wendy Laura Belcher highlights in her discussion of article titles, a title "is the highway billboard" of a piece of work, "[i]t is an announcement meant to

draw readers to your work" (203). However, for true-crime texts, an alluring title such as the one provided by Douglas and Olshaker may not be enough to seduce the consumer. Therefore, further calculated tactics must be employed to demonstrate the authenticity of the classified information offered by the text. In the case of Douglas and Olshaker's work, the purported authenticity of the title is further supported by an endorsement given by Patricia Cornwell, a prolific author of American crime fiction. In her endorsement, Cornwell remarks: "John Douglas is the FBI's pioneer and master of investigative profiling, and one of the most exciting figures in law enforcement" (fig. 1). While Cornwell's endorsement reflects the actuality of Douglas's position in the FBI, the language used to describe his career trajectory is formatted to inform the readers that they can trust the author's narrative. The terms "pioneer" and "master" are not to be taken lightly, but they are especially significant in this instance because they inform the reader that not only does Douglas's narrative detail his establishment of investigative profiling, but also that he is the absolute authority on the matter. Moreover, the direct and authoritative tone of the endorsement establishes the author's purpose—as Caroline Reitz similarly discusses in her paper "Laughing and Crime: Fugitive Tone in Contemporary Female Crime Narratives" for the conference Captivating Criminality 11: Hybridisation and Generic Experiments in Crime Fiction (2024). In this instance, Douglas and Olshaker aim to assure the consumer that their account is trustworthy. At a superficial level, Cornwell's endorsement appears to underpin the authors' purpose. Acquiring a recommendation by a well-known author such as Cornwell is an example of, as publisher at The Friday Project, Scott Pack remarks in an interview with *Independent*, "a wider marketing drive to create a shorthand for readers" (qtd. in Clark). Accordingly, in the case of first impressions, it becomes clear that Cornwell's endorsement is a necessary authenticity assurance tactic in the wider marketing context. It is so because the ever-increasing volume of true crime available to consumers means that a text must be as attractive as possible, and one way to achieve this is to provide a recommendation that one assumes reflects the contents of the book. However, it is a process that often, unfortunately, sees many approached authors respond with "[j]ust say whatever you want,'" or "I haven't got time . . .. Just make it up" (Clark). Thus, consumers are likely to take endorsements such as Cornwell's at face value because they are not privy to the processes by which the support is acquired.

Consequently, the consumer's fleeting interaction with a true-crime text favors the authors because the endorsement gives the narrative an authenticity that many purchasers may not investigate further. To a certain extent, Cornwell's position as a well-known author negates the irony that she is a writer of fiction rather than fact because her extensive oeuvre awards her with the automatic assumption that she is an authority on all things crime, whether fact or fiction. Furthermore, Cornwell's language bolsters this authority: her endorsement lacks qualifiers of certainty; instead, the endorsement is presented as a statement of fact. The front cover's accompanying banner proclaiming a "new introduction" sustains this perception (fig. 1). Including a paratext such as this assures the consumer that they are being kept abreast of all the latest developments; they are not relegated to the dark (recesses of mind). With the application of a Derridean framework, we can see that Cornwell's words and the banner work to assert the neutrality of the "facts" presented in Douglas's text, in the same way that the "facts" are presented on television. "Facts" which are, Derrida warns, confusedly called "information or communication" (3). By this, Derrida means that the "facts" are perceived by consumers as neutral and without artifice. Moreover, if we are to agree with Baudrillard that "[t]he consumer society is also the society of learning to consume, of social training in consumption" (*The Consumer Society* 81), we can see how the rhetoric used in the endorsement trains the consumer to not only invest trust in Cornwell's summation of the veracity of Douglas and Olshaker's narrative, but also the endorsements provided for other true-crime texts they may encounter.

To further support the consumer's perception of *Mindhunter*'s authenticity, the text's back cover also works to gain the trust of the consumer by promising an educational and reassuring experience: "Douglas has looked evil in the eye, and made a vocation of understanding it," reads the first line of the blurb (fig. 2). Following the tone used by Cornwell, the use of "vocation" in the blurb suggests the author's selfless deciphering of evil benefits all: Douglas has done the unthinkable; he has been able to make sense of the senseless. The blurb signals to the consumer that Douglas has been able to transcend the standard capabilities of true crime, which can typically only provide "metaphysical discussions about the nature of evil" (Browder 127). Douglas has been able to achieve this task by personally "understanding" the "individual case histories including those of Jeffrey Dahmer, Charles Manson, [and] Ted Bundy" (fig. 2). Murley argues that these three figures "have become landmarks in the American popular

imagination" (4). Stressing Douglas's knowledge of the individual "case histories" of each "landmark" perpetrator is a deliberate tactic to invite the consumer to invest their trust in Douglas because this communicative style comes with, as noted by Browder, "[an] air of authority enhanced by the journalistic, 'non-literary'" approach (125). In addition, due to their status as "landmarks in the American popular imagination," the names Dahmer, Manson, and Bundy serve as actuality buzzwords in that even those who do not read true crime will more than likely be aware of these persons, and this factor cements their trust in Douglas's authorial position. To spotlight these individuals on the back cover is, therefore, a narrative tactic to place them on a pedestal of authenticity similar to that of Douglas, obscuring the boundary between fact and fiction.

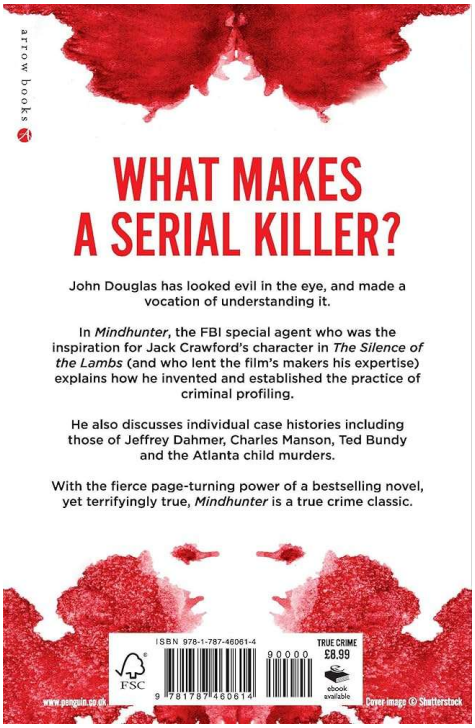

Fig. 2. The back cover *Mindhunter: Inside the FBI Elite Serial Crime Unit*, 2017 Arrow Books edition.

As the consumer comes to the end of *Mindhunter*'s back cover, the final line of the blurb does nothing to clarify the boundary between the fact and fiction of the text. It only serves to shroud it further: "With the fierce

page-turning power of a bestselling novel, yet terrifyingly true, *Mindhunter* is a true crime classic" (fig. 2). The implication that *Mindhunter* is a "fierce" page-turner indirectly suggests a fictionalized account. However, the reader is quickly assured that what they are about to read is "terrifyingly true." If the consumer experiences the *Mindhunter* narrative as the blurb's final line suggests, future encounters with the genre will result in an increased passive readership. Research has demonstrated that, as Marissa Harrison highlights: "typically, the more one is exposed to an alarming stimulus, the less unsettling it becomes over time" (19). Not only will increased exposure to "alarming stimuli" decrease a consumer's sensitivity to acts of cruelty, such as the crimes detailed by Douglas and Olshaker, but it will also contribute to an escalation in insensitivity to the fictionalization of fact in true crime.

**Visuals tell tall tales too**

As has been demonstrated thus far, the book jacket of Douglas and Olshaker's *Mindhunter* creates an "artifactuality" for the consumers of the text using primarily rhetorical devices. Rhetoric is indeed a powerful tactic through which authenticity can be established, but visual and aural tactics are of special importance to the consumer's first impression of the true-crime text's authenticity. The "actuality" of a true-crime text's "artifactuality" is reinforced by the immersive experience of television with its oral and visual devices. As Derrida remarks of his experience with cinema in an interview with Antoine de Baecque and Thierry Jousse: "[it] is completely different from that of reading, which imprints a more present and active memory in me" (24). This notion of presence and activity that cinema can produce, and by extension, the *Mindhunter* series, benefits the created "artifactuality" of its purported authenticity. In moving from telling to showing, we can see how place, space, and characterization become increasingly important for displaying to the consumer that they will receive an "authentic" experience.

To understand the extent to which visual and aural tactics obscure the artifactuality of a true-crime text, it is first pertinent to reflect upon the *Mindhunter* series thumbnail shown on Netflix. The thumbnail demonstrates little of "the facts" in Derrida's phraseology, which Douglas and Olshaker's book purports to possess. Aside from the genre categories describing the series as belonging to "Crime TV Dramas, TV Programmes Based on Books, Mystery Programmes," the viewer does not receive the same forceful assertion that the narrative they will be consuming is entirely truthful, in the sense that if they are not familiar with the book that the

series is based on, they will be unlikely to invest the same level of trust in the narrative's authenticity. From the thumbnail, a clearer sense of artifice is presented to the viewer, yet as the discussion will go on to illustrate, it is soon relegated by the show's trailer.

How, then, does the series establish a strong sense of authenticity for the viewer? The mechanics of Netflix's operating system can be credited for aiding this endeavor: much like a book's title needs to grab the attention of its potential reader, Netflix utilizes a mechanism which auto-plays a show's trailer when the user hovers over the thumbnail to attract their viewers. The distribution of a narrative such as *Mindhunter* through a streaming platform such as Netflix, which enables autoplay, heightens the power of visual and aural tactics employed to purport authenticity. Scholars such as Mark Stephen see "the trailer section [a]s the most valuable section of the preshow commodity" (98). Its significance derives from the insight of the series it provides in a fraction of its run time: the trailer supplies the viewer with tantalizing excerpts designed to entice. The lure of the *Mindhunter* trailer is achieved through increased scene cross-cutting, whereby the viewer is inundated with visual and aural cues. It is important to recognize here that the trailer is the product of a careful editing process which is purposeful in the point of view it is putting across. In the first instance, these cues give the viewer access to various characters, and the plotlines that reference the real perpetrators and their crimes are also interwoven. Furthermore, these introductions are fragments of the "complete" stories consumers believe they will encounter. Moreover, by viewing the trailer as the televisual manifestation of the shop window, the consumer is able to see, in Baudrillard's terms, authenticity "offered there in a glorious *mise-en-scène*, a sacrilizing ostentation" (*The Consumer Society* 166). In the same way that there exists a potential exchange between the window shopper and the object within, there "clearly exists an invitation to real, economic exchange inside the [true crime] shop" (166). Yet for consumers of true crime, the exchange involves the suspension of disbelief for the promise of authenticity proposed by the tailored narrative of the trailer. The *Mindhunter* trailer thus operates as an extradiegetic paratext which, in a similar manner to that of title sequences, "form[s] a contract with the audience and establishes expectations" (Klecker 406). Expectations which are, on the part of the consumer, assumed to be mutually beneficial; the consumer will enjoy an authentic narrative if they buy into the message proposed by the extradiegetic paratext of the trailer and the series benefits

from a larger viewership, resulting in an increased likelihood that the series will be renewed.

In the case of *Mindhunter*, the effectiveness of the "actuality" created by its trailer is further fortified by the precedence given to the serial killers present in the narrative. When Agent Holden Ford is asked (who is Douglas's characterization), "Tell me, who's the one you want more than anything?" by Ted Gunn, the head of BSU, he responds: "Manson" (figs. 3 and 4).


Fig. 3. Trailer for Netflix's *Mindhunter*, season 1 (Penhall 00:23)


Fig. 4. Trailer for Netflix's *Mindhunter*, season 1 (Penhall 00:25)

By foregrounding Manson in the trailer and matching the narrative route taken by Douglas and Olshaker in their book, the show's authenticity is strengthened for the viewer. To a certain extent, Manson was and still is a celebrity figure in the American cultural imagination. As Murley pinpoints, "[p]art of the reason why the American public was both fascinated and horrified with the Manson case was that it offered something for everybody, in that it spoke to and about a multitude of contemporary preoccupations" (67). Manson is used here as a point of commonality between the real yet fictional figure of Ford and the audience to reassure them that their continued fascination with Manson is warranted because if there continues to be representations of this individual, surely there must be more to say. Indeed, more than thirty books have been written on or about Manson since he committed his crimes (Parkinson and Jones). To place Manson at the center of the trailer's narrative, therefore, is to invite the consumer to recall other Manson-focused texts. In turn, the consumer is encouraged to frame their trust of *Mindhunter*'s authenticity through intertextual lenses. This notion becomes especially significant if one does not move on with consuming the whole series. As Gray elucidates: "When we move onward to the film or program, those paratexts help frame our consumption; but when we do not move onward, all we are left with is the paratext" (26). Thus, it is immaterial whether the consumer watches only the trailer or continues on with the whole series; the utilization of Manson as the focal point of the trailer creates a paratext which shores up the series's authenticity regardless of the length of the consumer's engagement with the narrative.

Given the priority ascribed to perpetrators such as Manson in the trailer, it follows that characterization is a valuable tactic for concealing the artifice of the Netflix *Mindhunter* narrative. Indeed, the actors involved with the project have been particularly vocal about the actuality of the events they were tasked with representing. In an interview with Matt Grobar for *Deadline*, Cameron Britton, who plays Edmund Kemper, recalls how he "responded to [Kemper] being a real-life person, being able to see interviews with him. [Britton] found the realism to be a lot scarier, that he's just a regular guy" (Grobar). With Britton's attention to detail in his representation of Kemper, it is no surprise that the artifactuality of his casting engenders the viewer to, in Derridean thinking, "confuse the analogous with the identical" (Derrida 24). A reality which is conceivable when one sees how uncannily alike Britton and Kemper look (fig. 5).

Furthermore, if character names often operate, as Gray asserts, "[as] intertextual 'guides' on how to read a text" (32), it follows that the casting of an individual who bears an uncanny resemblance to a real person, guilty of real crimes, is a paratextual tactic used to "guide" the consumer's belief in the narrative's authenticity. The cast of actors for *Mindhunter* ultimately tells the consumer how the series wishes to be received: as authentic and true. Actors such as Britton, therefore, are chosen to encourage consumers to suspend their disbelief in the artifice of the *Mindhunter* series so that they immerse themselves in its "authenticity" more freely.

Fig. 5. Side by side of actor Cameron Britton and serial killer Edmund Kemper (Smith)

**"We are in this together"**

Drawing on real people allows series such as *Mindhunter* to assure the reader that the stories they are consuming are predominantly based in fact. But, as Derrida reminds us, "[n]o matter how singular, irreducible, stubborn, distressing or tragic the 'reality' to which it refers, 'actuality' comes to us by way of a fictional fashioning" (3). True-crime texts detail distressing and tragic realities; they comprise "depiction[s] of the social contexts and ordinary life details of both victims and killers" (Murley 44). Due to this characteristic of true crime, many consumers tend to focus on the content of the narrative rather than how it is produced and packaged for

them. As Derrida laments, we "are never sensitive enough to the fashioning of realities" (3). As discussed above, casting and characterization play a prominent role in this lack of sensitivity.

However, in terms of the wider conditions that bring about insensitivity toward the fictional fashioning of reality, Baudrillard's notion of the simulacrum provides a persuasive rationale. In *Simulations* (1983), Baudrillard claims that reality is represented to us through a series of images and posits that it takes four successive phases for an image to become a simulacrum: first, "it is the reflection of a basic reality"; second, "it masks and perverts a basic reality"; third, "it masks the *absence* of a basic reality"; and finally, "it bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum" (11). Once the image becomes a simulacrum, Baudrillard states, "[t]here is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity" (*Simulations* 12). By applying Baudrillard's framework to the written and televisual renditions of *Mindhunter*, both narratives are shown to be simulacrums: In the first phase, *Mindhunter* purports to represent the true stories of the crimes committed by individuals such as Bundy, Dahmer, and Manson, and in the second, it is the use of paratexts in the case of this discussion that begin to illuminate the perversion of the represented "basic reality" by *Mindhunter*. Then, as the image of *Mindhunter* transitions into the third phase, it is revealed that the paratexts obfuscate the artifice of the two narratives, culminating in the fourth phase whereby the consumer is enveloped by the simulation. A bind that many, if not all, consumers will be happy to be engulfed by because consumers are comforted by these simulations, as Baudrillard posited in his earlier work, *The Consumer Society*:

> A miraculous security: when we look at the images of the world, who can distinguish this brief irruption of reality from the profound pleasure of not being there? The image, the sign, the message—all these things we "consume"—represent our tranquility consecrated by distance from the world, a distance more comforted by the allusion to the real (even where the allusion is violent) than compromised by it. (34)

Consumers thus, as Danesi discusses in his work on the *Dexter* (2006–2013) series, "detach the image [of the serial killer] from the screen" to "generalize it to everyday life, whereby [they] start a process of confabulation that involves the image at its center" (72). The consumers' primary means of engagement with the world becomes "image-driven" (Danesi 72), and

results in the "collapsing into a mindset where fiction and reality are perceived as a simulacrum with one informing the other" (Danesi 72). While true crime as an image is incapable of encapsulating the reality of the true stories of the crimes detailed in the written and televisual renditions of *Mindhunter*, the extent to which the paratexts indicate toward an authentic representation is, as this final section will go on to discuss, enough to make the consumer willing to accept the simulation by inviting them to be complicit in the blurring of fact and fiction.

Concerning Douglas and Olshaker's narrative, the authors directly address the readers with this enticing proposition in the updated introduction: "we invite you once again to embark upon the hunt with us" (xxviii). As the final line of the introduction suggests, the phrasing assures the reader of the text's tone: they will take part in the "hunt" for the interiority of serial killers. Furthermore, by viewing the introduction as a paratext, remembering that Genette sees them as "threshold[s]" (1), it can be seen that the introduction operates here as a bridge between the promise of the consumer's involvement and the actuality that the authors see the consumer as central to the propulsion of the narrative. Positioning the reader as working alongside the author(s) of any given true-crime text is a tactic that, Murley observes, creates "a great deal of tension between emotional identification with and distancing from the killer" (5). Creating such a "relationship" between the reader and perpetrator(s) is particularly consequential for Douglas and Olshaker because it strengthens the bonds of authenticity in the "artifactuality" they are seeking to create. By convincing their reader of their insider status, the writer, as Murley identifies, "attains credibility not by showing himself with the killer, . . . but because the reader is allowed more intimate and immediate access to the story" (57). Douglas's involvement of the reader in the "hunt" for serial killers clouds their ability to distinguish between fact and fiction because they are positioned as collaborators in the narrative.

The consumers' sense of intimacy and collaboration with Douglas and Olshaker's text is further reinforced by the authors' deployment of emotional identification. The authors do this by calling on the metaphor of the serial killer as a predator hunting its prey, resulting in a narrative that marries verifiable facts with seductive but ultimately fictitious representations. Invoking such mental images for their readers enables Douglas and Olshaker to make it difficult for the consumer to see past the artifice because the "hunt" for "evil" overwhelms their ability to see past the artifice of the narrative. Of course, as the discussion has repeatedly

drawn attention to, drawing on real stories allows narratives such as *Mindhunter* to compound the promise of devastating fact over curated artifice. Douglas and Olshaker are, therefore, guilty of capitalizing on the vulnerability of the "distressing" and "tragic" events to engender empathy in the readers. In continually inviting readers to identify with the subjects of a true-crime text through emotive rhetoric, the consumer's ability to see past the artifice of narrative is steadily decreased by their strengthening identification.

With this thread of thought in mind, it is important to demonstrate the translation of consumer identification into the visual form. In the same way that Douglas and Olshaker, as writers, can address the reader directly, so too can a visual form such as Netflix's *Mindhunter*. In *Mindhunter*'s first episode, during Road School, Agents Ford and Bill Tench discuss their lack of unity with the police forces they are "teaching." Ford muses, "What do we have in common? What unites us? What keeps us all awake at night?" (figs. 6, 7, and 8). The use of "we," "us," and the fact that the viewer is directed to meet Ford's gaze through the shot positioning constitutes the viewer as allies of both Ford and the police. While thinking about the framing of this particular scene, it is appropriate to consider Derrida's thoughts on the use of the teleprompter: "What are we to make of the interposition of this text that someone reads while pretending to look straight into the eye of a viewer whom he or she can't see?" (43). The questions asked by Ford do not manifest "naturally," just as they do not for the reader of the teleprompter; the writer of the series has constructed them, but the perceived immediacy of television masks the "artifactuality" of the interaction.

Fig. 6. Agent Ford in *Mindhunter*, season 1, episode 1 (00:46:50–59)

Fig. 7. Agent Tench in *Mindhunter*, season 1, episode 1 (00:46:50–59)

Fig. 8. Ford's gaze in *Mindhunter*, season 1, episode 1 (00:46:50–59)

The implied objectivity of Netflix's *Mindhunter* is further reinforced by the scene that follows Ford's verbal introspection. While introducing the concept of profiling serial killers to the police force of Fairfield, Iowa, Ford projects the real-life mugshot of Manson and remarks: "Monster, right?" (fig. 9).

Fig. 9. Charles Manson in *Mindhunter*, season 1, episode 1 (00:47:03)

In the visual rendition of Douglas's "vocation," the camera replaces the writer and directs the consumer's attention through seemingly detached and neutral narration. In doing so, the camera induces the viewer to regard Ford's characterization of Manson as objective and indisputable. As referenced earlier, Manson fascinates the American public, and while the same concerns do not plague the twenty-first-century audience, the horrors of his legacy have lived on. Manson continues to be present in the American psyche because, as Danesi remarks of serial killer fiction more widely, "the serial killer books [and shows] are part scary narrative, part cautionary tale. They have allowed us as a culture to imagine the serial killer as a collage of images, from modern-day monster to suave bad boy" (26). Representations of serial killers by texts such as *Mindhunter* thus become simulacrums that replace the reality of the individual and their acts.

The immediate introduction of Manson to the viewers through detached narration is significant, furthermore, because it, as Murley observes, "imbues true crime with a sense of timelessness[;] . . . events are fixed in the everhappening present moment" (57). A situation which guarantees that the consumer continues to be disoriented by, as Baudrillard observes of our interactions with "live reporting, the newsflash, the high-impact photo, [and] the eye-witness report" (*The Consumer Society* 34), "the dizzy sense of a total presence at the event" (34). The allusion of the consumer's "total presence" at the true crime event is further bolstered by the representation of criminals through the televisual form: the living image of figures such as Manson will be kept alive and thus serve as an ever-

present reminder of the actuality created by the series; "true crime on the small screen affords visual intimacy, as murder is literally brought into the home" (Murley 110). Derrida's view on television further supports this notion; "[it] will convey what will continue to stay alive, or rather, the immediate image, the living image of the living: the timbre of our voices, our appearance, our gaze, the movement of our hands" (38). Moreover, as the consumers continue to allow themselves to be cast adrift in the whirls of simulated reality, their awareness of the artifice of this "living image," as Derrida calls it, is depleted. Thus, the analysis of figure 9 shows that with the character of Ford appearing to meet the viewer's gaze, there is an invitation for them to enter the simulation and agree with his labeling of Manson as "monster." Furthermore, the lack of the indefinite article "a" demonstrates the desire to categorize Manson as the ultimate representation of "evil," a choice which aligns with many people's views of his "living image."

One calculated tactic particularly significant for the escalation of trust in the presentation of Manson's "living image" in Netflix's *Mindhunter* is the use of lighting or lack thereof. As the set designer of *Mindhunter* Steve Arnold describes, "many scenes are shot with minimal amount of light, [and] the sets themselves are for the most part fairly light in value and color, allowing for the opportunity to silhouette the actors" (78). Admittedly, the viewer is not shown Manson in his corporeal form. However, this does not negate the fact that the scene's lighting provides a solid basis for authenticity when it is considered in conjunction with the recognition that Manson's actual mugshot takes center stage (fig. 9). Consequently, the viewer is compelled to focus on the image of Manson and the "monster" narrative created for him by both the subjective viewpoint of Ford and the assumed objective camera perspective. Focusing on this detail of the narrative demonstrates how the deliberate decisions made to construct an engaging narrative undergo a process of perceptive erasure, which culminates in the consumer trusting the narrative's veracity. The scene has succeeded in establishing what Baudrillard would call "a reality, [an] image, [an] echo, [an] appearance" (*Simulations* 95). Thus, with the consumers' increasing engagement with such simulacra, the paratextual tactics used to produce them, unfortunately, work toward minimizing the consumer's sensitivity to the "fictional fashioning" of the artifactualities presented to us through mediums such as true crime.

**Conclusion**

Shortly after the second season of Netflix's *Mindhunter* aired in 2019, Canter unapologetically remarked that "Douglas's writings should be in the fiction section" (qtd. in Seymour). As the discussion has demonstrated, however, both iterations of Douglas's narrative have been designed in such a way as to make it challenging for the consumer of true crime to accept Canter's statement. The paratexts and other tactics, such as identification, used by Douglas and Olshaker and Netflix's *Mindhunter*, obscure the artifice at the heart of the narratives. Derrida's framework of artifactuality has provided a helpful lens with which to realize the duplicity of the "information" given by Douglas and Olshaker and shown by its serial counterpart. Baudrillard has been particularly useful for homing in on the ways in which consumers relate to this assumed "information." "Few objects today," writes Baudrillard, "are offered alone, without a context of objects which 'speaks' them" (*The Consumer Society* 27). True crime is not offered to consumers alone; there are many other simulations that collaborate to produce the final simulacrum, one which supersedes the actuality of the real story.

Furthermore, both media's consumers are often guilty of passively receiving the information given to them as they trust the medium's authority. By calling on both Baudrillard and Derrida then, not only are we able to recognize the paratextual tactics and not techniques used to establish a consumer's trust in a true-crime text's authenticity, but also that, as Derrida reminds us, "[w]hat is 'transmitted' 'live' on a television channel is *produced before being transmitted*. The 'image' is not a faithful and integral reproduction of what it is thought to reproduce" (40). Therefore, we must keep a critical eye on narratives that describe themselves as true crime, especially regarding their artifactuality.

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# Postmodern Genre-Bending on Mainstream TV: A Case Study of *Fargo* Season 5

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***HJEAS***

**ABSTRACT**

Regardless of its complexity and bleakness, *Fargo*, the Coen brothers' classic postmodern neo-*noir* from 1996 has been adapted to the small screen, producing a show that has run five seasons (2014–). Since such a transfer to a mainstream popular medium might raise skepticism about artistic quality, the present study turns to recently aired Season 5 (2023–2024) to scrutinize how—returning to the Coens' original plotline—scriptwriter Noah Hawley renegotiates the clichéd comic character of the female victim to promote a feminist political agenda, while carefully balancing between market pressures and the demand of complexity posed to high-end television drama. The study argues that the season's generic hybridity—akin to developments in contemporary crime fiction—is a key factor in the artistically and commercially successful innovation that *Fargo* Season 5 represents. The series creates a self-reflexive postmodern blend of the realistic and the fantastic, melodrama and comedy, (true) crime drama and myth, to name only a few relevant modes and genres. With the help of that blend, the season both revises the representation of the female victim in the Coens' movie to target mainstream audiences, and subtly maintains a critical distance from its own all too utopian resolutions through the fantastic. (AR)

**KEYWORDS:** neo-*noir*, hybridization, high-end television drama, domestic violence, feminisms

*Fargo*, the Coen brothers' critically acclaimed midcult neo-*noir* from 1996 was, somewhat surprisingly, a popular success, and has become a modern classic by now. Surprisingly, because—as David Sterritt highlights—*Fargo* fits perfectly into its makers' well-known "genre revisionism," it evokes and parodies the "small-town comedy," the "true crime docudrama," the "film *noir,*" and the "neo-*noir*" (16). All that, as for instance Steven Carter argues, in the spirit of a "quintessentially postmodern film" (244). Regardless of its complexity and bleakness, the movie has been adapted to the small screen in the form of a mini-series (2014–), producing a show that has run five

seasons, each with a separate time- and story-line. Such a transfer to a mainstream popular medium might raise some skepticism about artistic quality, yet the series has fared well with both critics and audiences, regardless of its maintaining, to a great extent, the Coen brothers' all-encompassing irony and resistance to "binary logic" (Lee 75). After some dwindling of quality and popularity by Season 4, recently aired Season 5 (2023–24) made a spectacular comeback. It returned to the Coens' original plotline and reworked its one component which scriptwriter Noah Hawley had hardly touched before: the female victim. Refocused on the theme of domestic violence, the season nevertheless has an apparently much brighter look and a more unequivocally happy-ending than any of the previous serial story-lines—let alone the Coens' feature film. Have artistic concerns been finally sacrificed to commercial ones? In my view, a closer scrutiny on the season's generic contexts indicates the opposite: similarly to developments in contemporary crime fiction, hybridization has facilitated both artistically and commercially successful innovation on television in *Fargo* Season 5. Just like the Coens' film, it creates a self-reflexive postmodern blend of the realistic and the fantastic, melodrama, and comedy, as well as (true) crime drama and myth, with the addition of several more genres, including the fairy tale, the animal fable, the puppet show, the Gothic romance, and the sensation novel. With the help of that blend, the season manages to retain the ambiguous and perplexing quality that comes with its *noir* legacy. It revises the clichéd representation of the female victim in the Coens' movie to convey up-to-date messages about gender roles, which clearly target mainstream audiences, yet it also maintains a subtle critical distance from its own all too utopian resolution, potentially relegated to the realm of the fantastic.

**Contexts: Hybridization, film *noir* and high-end television drama**

Highly eclectic, popular culture studies have traditionally provided the textual analysis of both literary and visual narratives with the help of literary critical paradigms (Burns 6; Riley 32–42), among others. Indeed, crime fiction studies, with its recent focus on hybridization, offers a convenient vantage point for the analysis of hybrid cinematic and televised crime narratives, since it directs attention to the crime genre's quick and increasingly complex reaction to current cultural, social, and political issues. That said, the fundamental generic contexts of film *noir* and neo-*noir*, established by the Coens' movie and consistently employed in the creation of its televised adaptation, could hardly be ignored in any attempt at

understanding the complexities and artistic pretensions of the *Fargo* series. Equally important for this purpose is a brief look at the phenomenon of high-end television drama, of which the series is a specimen. It is against that backdrop that, always bearing in mind the Coens' *Fargo* as a fundamental intertext of the series but not aiming to provide a comprehensive comparison of the two, I will discuss the reinterpretation of the female victim in *Fargo* Season 5.

Recent insights in crime fiction studies suggest that hybridity is a definitive feature of the genre and is key to both its adaptability and its ability to reflect with increasing complexity on current cultural phenomena. In their introduction to the 2020 *Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction*, Janice Allan, Jesper Gulddal, Stewart King, and Andrew Pepper highlight hybridization as one of the "new developments" (1) in crime fiction, yet also emphasize that hybridity has always been a definitive feature of the genre (5), producing "narratives in which two or more forms are present to such a degree that neither dominates" (Humann 57). In fact, Gulddal and King view crime fiction as a heterogeneous "field" rather than a genre, defined—if by anything at all—"by hybridity and mobility rather than adherence to rules" (13). Therefore, having briefly surveyed the historically offered two major types of crime fiction definitions, labeled *ludic* and *formula fiction* understandings (14–15), they quickly move on to elaborate their *interface* account of the genre. In doing so, they conceptualize crime fiction as "a narrative vector for exploring a range of wider social, political, cultural or philosophical issues that do not necessarily have anything to do with crime in themselves, yet are significantly implicated and framed by the criminal/ investigative plot" (15). In other words, crime fiction is prominently structured by crime, but it is not *about* crime. Gulddal and King offer this new approach because they find that the discussions of crime fiction inspired by the *ludic* and *formula fiction* definitions—visions of the genre as a proliferation of subgenres, each established by a canonical author and each having its own "prescriptive model"—are no longer able to account for the heterogeneous nature of individual narratives. That, in turn, results from the conscious play with generic conventions and concomitant hybridization (16), featuring, for instance, "generic intertextuality" (Allan et al. 5), which became "a central norm of crime fiction" in the post-war period (Gulddal and King 16), substantiating claims about the innovativeness, adaptability, fluidity, and complexity of the genre (Allan et al. 4–5). As Allan et al. also acknowledge, "televised serials have . . . become" the flagships of "formal and thematic innovation," and thereby

"the most significant manifestation of crime fiction" (6), which also calls for discussing *Fargo* Season 5 within the crime fiction studies paradigm of hybridization.

Gulddal and King identify three major motive forces behind the widespread hybridization of crime fiction, each highly relevant to *Fargo* Season 5. These are the commercial demand for novelty, which is instigated by a saturated market; the literary ambition to "avoid"—through the introduction of postmodern playfulness and metafictional awareness (see also Humann 57)—"the stigma of genre fiction"; and the urge to offer complex approaches to "interpersonal relations and social structures" through the blending of genres (16). As for the first, saturation acquires a specific meaning in the context of adapting a feature film in the serial form: adaptation proper sets the task of repeating the original "without replication" (Hutcheon xvi) to avoid audiences' sheer boredom, which becomes increasingly complicated as the scope for novelty is progressively limited with each already existing season. Indeed, by the time *Fargo* Season 5 was created, the first four seasons had more or less exhausted the Coens' definitive characters, plot components, themes, and even motifs to construct their own separate narratives, variations on the feature film *Fargo* as their prioritized intertext (see Leitch 100–04). Season 1 focuses on the horror of ordinary smalltown existence by restaging Jerry Lundegaard as a socially awkward clerk carelessly meddling with criminal, even metaphysical, forces much larger than himself. The faint sense of supernatural evil surrounding Grimsrud in the film becomes explicit in the series through the charismatic, even mesmerizing figure of hitman Lorne Malvo. Seasons 1 and 2 revisit the iconic character of (highly pregnant) female detective Marge Gunderson, providing a critique of patriarchy from the perspective of a woman of profession. Season 3 is both an elaboration of the "struggle for the vehicle" (see Lee passim) and a return to the issue of intertwining organized crime and large capital, already taken up in the previous seasons. In Season 3, this theme is complemented by yet another figure of metaphysical evil, the mysterious V. M. Varga. Season 4 provides a historical panorama of organized crime, focusing on Kansas City turf war spanning over half a century. While doing so, it most prominently interrogates notions of race and supremacy, which feature with varying emphasis in all the seasons. In one way or another, all the narratives are concerned with motherhood, the (Symbolic) Father (see Lee 69), (parentless) children, and the motif of food—most emphatically in V. M. Varga's scenes of abject eating and vomiting in Season 3, and in the

machinations of a poisoner, the murderous quasi-mother Oraetta Mayflower in Season 4. As a result, by 2023 audiences might have had their fill of *Fargo* recycled. This "saturation" must have gestured towards hitherto untouched components of the movie as potential enablers of an adaptation proper. As the list above has hopefully demonstrated, turning the movie's victim figure, Jean Lundegaard, into a central character offered itself by that time as practically the only option for producing the novelty demanded by the market. As later discussion will show, by 2023 it was also high time to reconsider the female victim's less than subtle 1996 representation: interrogating patriarchy as it does, *Fargo* operates with a misogynistic cliché there, which both lacks the complexity that twenty-first-century crime fiction aspires to and proves to be non-PC in the post-#MeToo era.

Refocusing the narrative on a victimized female character and reinterpreting it in an era of intense social activism against all forms of gender discrimination, harassment, and (sexual) violence, logically entails a turn towards female genres, in contrast to the masculine film *noir* tradition.[1] Indeed, with the central figure of Marge Gunderson, the Coens' movie already evidences a feminine appropriation of film *noir*. At least, that much is suggested by applying to the Coens' neo-*noir* Heather Humann's insights that genres are "cultural categories" and hybridization equals moments when a particular genre—a means of expression for one particular group—is appropriated by another one (57). The very definition of neo-*noir* involves such an appropriation, a conscious reuse of film *noir* conventions with a difference:

> The term neo-*noir* describes any film coming after the classic *noir* period that contains *noir* themes and the *noir* sensibility. . . . These later films are likely not shot in black and white and likely do not contain the play of light and shadow that their classic forerunners possessed. They do, however, contain the same alienation, pessimism, moral ambivalence, and disorientation. (Conrad, *Introduction* 2)

What seems to define the makers of neo-*noir* films as a group, as Mark Conrad's definition implies, is their awareness of contributing to the film *noir* tradition, which urges them to consciously employ *noir* features and reinterpret the *noir* legacy (Introduction 2; see also Naremore 24–25, Silver and Ward 398)—repurpose it for more specific groups hitherto excluded from the discourse of film *noir,* one could add. The Coen brothers' *Fargo* is, though for various reasons and to varying extents, consistently associated

with neo-*noir*.[2] Yet, it provides for female audiences a new entry point into the *noir* tradition compared to the genre's accustomed *femme fatale* figures "representative of deep-seated patriarchal anxieties" (Lindop 3) or "demonised" masculine female detective characters (Gates passim): a crossover between an unfeminine cop and a mother. For Christopher Sharrett, for instance, it is actually the highly pregnant female detective with a "bright disposition," this blatant defiance of genre clichés (see Doherty 47; Grace 35), that at first sight seems to define *Fargo* as "a true neo-*noir*" (Sharrett 70), since the maternal and jovial female detective is iconoclastic in the contexts of the highly masculine classic *noir* tradition, largely inspired by hard-boiled fiction. James Naremore, in his Foucauldian approach to describing the "most amorphous" genre of film *noir*, traces back the emergence of its critical discourse to the surrealist and existentialist intellectual milieu of post-war Paris and predominantly associates film *noir* with a European male fascination with otherness, prominent in the high modernist tradition (15). He also emphasizes that by the end of the short film *noir* period (1941–1958), the term came to be applied to "allegories of the white male condition," by then rather clichéd (23).[3] Naremore follows Raymond Borde and Eugene Chaumeton in pointing out that specimens of film *noir*, narrating ambiguously the stories of ambiguous (male) heroes engaged in ambiguous action and representing an ambiguous moral stance, were meant "to disorient the spectator" (qtd. in Naremore 19; see also Conrad, Introduction 2). Though retaining the disorienting ambiguity of the detective figure, the Coens' *Fargo* launches a process of feminine appropriation; its representation of the female victim, nevertheless, leaves ample room for extending that process and including female genres.[4]

The model of complexity and reinterpretation presented by the Coens' postmodern neo-*noir* indicates a pressure on the creators of the mini-series to comply with sophisticated audience demands by avoiding the appearance of cheap entertainment, which is a major driving force behind hybridization. This artistic ambition—as Max Sexton and Dominic Lees's comparative analysis of the *Fargo* movie and television series suggests[5]—resonates with the specific demands of high-end television drama, which in turn tie in with the third potential major motive behind hybridization: the need to provide a subtle and complex interpretation of current affairs. Sexton and Lees classify the series as both "high-end television drama" (347) and specifically Season 1 as "small town *noir* crime thriller" (353). The first of these categories implies a high-budget TV production with cinematic pretensions in terms of style and complexity, as well as actors: a show that

would present "contradictory truths" about an "unknowable and unpredictable world" with the help of first-rate movie actors and taking full advantage of the longer screen time the mini-series form offers (354). The second category suggests, as Sexton and Lees's consistent comparison confirms, that the television series adapts the world of the Coen's film to the small screen to continue the same generic tradition and to recreate signature features of the Coens' style (349–53). This, in turn, is a risky affair that pay cable channels have been able to afford only for a decade or so—a new development which, Sexton and Lees highlight, has reshaped the mini-series into a complex and artistic television genre (344). This means that all three factors promoting hybridization in crime fiction—a search for novelty out of market concerns, artistic ambition, and the need to provide a complex vision—seem to be in full force in the case of *Fargo* Season 5.

Indeed, just like Season 1, *Fargo* Season 5 confirms the view that "drama has become a key marker of quality in prime time programming" (Sexton and Lees 344). Through its reminiscences of the Coen brothers' plot turns and other filmic devices, episode one firmly locates the series in the comic neo-*noir Fargo* cinematic universe, as well as in the framework of a postmodern parody of true-crime docudrama. Plot-wise, the episode fundamentally replays the crime in the focus of the film: the kidnapping of a Minnesota housewife, who is married to a car salesman, sets a female police officer on the trail of the perpetrators. As it later turns out, the perps are only hired guns and it is the victim's (ex-)husband who commits violence by proxy. This is where the two plot-lines fork: implicitly present in the Coen's film, domestic violence is turned into an explicit central concern in *Fargo* Season 5, which the series promises to tackle with the sensitivity and complexity of the issue and the ambiguity of the *noir* tradition in mind. That is, the first episode, like all the others, is introduced by the updated version of the Coens' time-honored title card: "This is a true story. The following events took place in Minnesota in 2019. At the request of the survivors, the names have been changed. Out of respect for the dead, the rest has been told exactly as it occurred." (S05E01 00:02:44–00:03:03).[6] Yet, by the time these lines appear on the screen, viewers are most likely already suspicious of the realistic—let alone documentary-style—representation of the events, thanks to the linguistic and behavioral ambiguity created by the first intertitle, on the one hand, and to the emphatically non-realistic shooting of the opening scene, on the other. The first intertitle, which actually replaces the Coens' script as the opening frame, is a dictionary definition of the cultural stereotype *Minnesota nice*, explained as "[a]n aggressively pleasant

demeanor, often forced, in which a person is chipper and self-effacing, no matter how bad things get" (S05E01 00:00:31). This summary of inauthentic manners, establishing the sense of ambiguity typical for the *noir* tradition, is immediately both contradicted and maybe corroborated by the first scene: a school meeting gone haywire and turned into a mob fight, artistically choreographed and shot in the pulsating rhythm of alternating slow motion and normal speed. The irresistibly comic sequence is rich in ironies: of all the combatants, it is a fragile, doll-like young mother—Dot Lyon, the protagonist—who is taken into custody, when out of a terrified onlooker she decides to become a rescuer of her own daughter, but accidentally electro-shocks a policeman with a Taser while trying to get out of the fight. The emphatically cinematic nature of this scene is highlighted a couple of minutes later in Dot's metafilmic evocation of popular culture: as she recalls, the math teacher attacked her "like something from a zombie movie" (S05E01 00:04:08). The series, just like the Coens' movie, promises to be a self-reflexive parody of true crime docudrama right from its start, which, regardless of its comic vision, does not shy away from the nuanced representation a highly sensitive issue, domestic violence. Just as importantly, it appears to be targeted at female audiences right from the start.

**From "shrieking windup toy" to "Rambo": The Post-#MeToo female victim and (post)feminist sisterhood**

Seen in this light, *Fargo* Season 5 appears to be a blatant demonstration of how quickly crime narratives react to current social phenomena and how often that reaction takes the form of rewriting generic conventions—in this case, rewriting the residue of gender stereotypes present in the Coen brothers' otherwise highly subversive neo-*noir*. I argue that Season 5 presents a radical counter-narrative to the cliché of the helpless female victim, whom the Coens unfailingly represent as a ridiculous object of business transactions, and thus, as a subhuman caricature. In the light of the fact that the fourth wave of feminism and the #MeToo Movement were already in full swing by the mid-2010s, with a special focus on activism against (sexual) harassment and rape (see Chamberlain 2), such an image appears to be especially untenable today. In the series, its reinterpretation is combined with gender-bending alterations in the Coens' cast—mergers, splits and rewritings of characters—which turn the season into a feminist manifesto and a call for sisterhood, while paradoxically celebrating a postfeminist epitome of domesticity. The focus on female

characters entails a feminine appropriation of the masculine *noir* tradition through hybridization: neo-*noir* is blended with other genres and modes of representation, some of which have a history of providing a platform for expressing women's anxieties and critique of patriarchy. The result is basically a political statement, an instance of activism against domestic violence, which, exactly for that reason, seems to be somewhat simplistic and didactic on the surface and apparently fails its promise of complexity and ambiguity by being a straightforward lesson directed at mainstream audiences.

The almost ten hours of screen time the series offers facilitate the emergence of a more complex generic hybrid than what the movie *Fargo* presents, which creates a platform for the (post)feminist rewriting of the helpless female victim, a cliché widespread in crime fiction and film, and also present in the Coens' movie. The victimization of women in crime fiction, as Adrienne Gavin highlights, is a central concern of both feminist literary criticism and feminist crime fiction itself: "Women are victims: captured, raped, murdered, butchered and in the hands of forensic detectives dissected into evidence" (268). Similarly, audiences are conditioned to expect "spectacularly" victimized female characters in the "thriller, horror, crime and action" genres in the cinema (Stringer 275–76). As Glen Close highlights, the hard-boiled genre introduced into these scenes of violence a tone of "pornographic sensationalism" (9), which allows him to coin the term "necropornographic fantasy" to conceptualize the misogynistic representation of the cadaver—most frequently a female corpse—in mass market crime fiction (3). The Coens' female victim does not become a sexualized dead body: Jean Lundegaard appears to be a plain woman in her mid-thirties, who is kidnapped in her comfortable but most unbecoming home outfit and with disheveled hair, and whose dead body only features on the screen for a split second. Yet she is turned into a spectacle—and a comic one, at that. Depriving her of any sex appeal does not exempt her from the misogynistic objectification implied above; rather, it contributes to her comic image, which almost forbids compassion for her, even in her death. As Pamela Grace recalls, the brief shot of her dead body (01:24:19) is included in such a comic context that it invariably provoked laughter in US cinemas (49). Indeed, Jean is a passive object of financial transactions both in her presumably financially motivated marriage—Jerry is much more concerned with his father-in-law's money than with his wife—and in her capacity of a hostage for ransom in a mock kidnapping orchestrated by her own husband. Devin McKinney's claim that Jean is like

"a shrieking windup toy" (34) resonates with this sense of objectification and, especially, aptly describes Jean in the iconic scene of her futile attempt to escape from her kidnappers. In her slippers, with her hands tied behind her back, blinded by a black hood-like cloth, maybe one of her kidnappers' ski masks covering her head and face, she whines incessantly as she pointlessly tries to run away; she just ends up comically tottering and stumbling around in the snow (00:43:58–44:40). Indeed, she is like a toned down, comic version of the clichéd female victims in horror movies, who have one task to do: to scream (see Clover 201). Or, through the prism of Carter's remark that *Fargo* "makes a statement about inhumanity" with the help of animal motifs (242), this caricature of a female victim recalls the proverbial headless chicken as a summary of the irresistibly comic impression it creates. This spectacle of the suffering of an objectified, passive, and helpless female victim clearly offers fertile ground for rethinking it now, in an era of intense feminist activism.

The presence of two intertwined genres is instrumental to reconsidering the female victim's image in a (post)feminist context in *Fargo* Season 5: both the conventions of the sensation novel—though inverted—and those of female Gothic are prominent in the narrative. These two genres, also feeding into European crime fiction upon its emergence (Pykett 32–37; Knight 19), had from the start endowed women—as criminals, self-liberating victims, and most significantly as writers like Ann Radcliffe, Mary Shelley, Mrs. Henry Wood, or Mary Elizabeth Braddon (Pykett 35)—with agency to a lesser or greater extent. Since these genres often voiced women's anxieties about patriarchy (Wallace and Smith 2), they both gesture towards a feminine appropriation of the masculine *noir* tradition. In the Coens' movie, the mock kidnapping gone wrong leaves the housewife, her father, and one of her kidnappers dead, and lands the villain, Jean's husband, in jail. The modified replay of Jean's kidnapping (S05E01 00:17:46–00:20:15) apparently sets Dot Lyon's narrative on the same trajectory. Yet, the plot turn is repeated with a very significant difference: though Dot is overwhelmed by her two kidnappers in a sequence of slapstick comedy (S05E01 00:17:00–00:23:11), she is anything but helpless. With marvelous ingenuity, she uses all household products she can lay her hands on to fight her kidnappers—most spectacularly, a bottle of spray and a lighter to create a flamethrower (S05E01 00:20:41). Later on, instead of groping around blindly, like Jean in her miserably failed attempt to break free, Dot escapes when the first chance offers itself (S05E01 35:31–36:04), wounds one of her kidnappers and causes the death of the other—this time

with a bag of ice found in the petrol station shop where her pursuers catch up with her. Incidentally, she also saves the life of a male state trooper along the way. All that in jogging pants and a hand-knit cardigan, barefoot, with slightly disheveled hair and both hands tied behind her back, in clear homage to the Coens' film and Jean Lundegaard. This housewife mysteriously turned "Rambo," as State Trooper Witt Farr later calls her (S05E02 00:31:14), or even "a real Comanche" (S05E02 00:32:19), clearly has full agency, in stark contrast to the painfully ridiculous helpless female victim of the Coens. Yet, the kidnapping scene unveils that she also has a past—very much in the sense heroines of nineteenth-century sensation novels, like, for instance, Braddon's Lady Audley, do (see Pykett 34). She lives under an *alias*: originally called Nadine Tillman née Bump, she apparently never divorced her first husband, Roy Tillman, a militant WASP North Dakota sheriff, alive and kicking, out for her blood and responsible for her very real kidnapping. The shadow of the sensation novel plot casts Dot in the role of the bigamist gold digger in the manner of Lady Audley—a view warmly embraced by her mother-in-law, billionaire debt management business shark Mrs. Lyon Sr. This suspicion is quickly dissolved—for viewers, at least, if not for Lorraine Lyon—though not before her mother-in-law commits Dot to a mental institution, with a turn frequent in both sensation novel (Pykett 33) and Gothic plots (Botting 87; Kilgour 82). Dot is then revealed to have escaped from a mentally and physically abusive relationship with Tillman. Her escape from the patriarchal homestead of domestic violence in the past fits the bill perfectly for a female Gothic narrative, which conventionally stages a conflict between a persecuted heroine and a violent sexual predator of a villain, yet is bound to end happily thanks to the active female protagonist's self-reliance (Williams 103; Wallace and Smith 2). This generic allusion is confirmed by both Tillman's character and house, just as well as Dot's breakouts from various forms of imprisonment in the present. Tillman, true to the Bluebeard stereotype of the Gothic villain (see Williams 38–48), has the dead body of his murdered first wife sunk in the cesspool of his ranch, complete with a Gothic mansion-inspired ranch house and subterranean, labyrinthine tunnels. He lives now in yet another abusive relationship with his third wife. Though the gruesome details of Dot's first marriage remain blissfully obscure, the series culminates in her imprisonment and brutalization on that ranch. Yet, as from the mental institution before, she escapes on her own, even gaining a chance to take revenge: it is only the appearance of the police that stops her from killing Tillman, after already having shot him once. If Dot Lyon is a

woman with a past, the series turns that sensation novel cliché in the spirit of the female Gothic into a (post)feminist celebration of the ingenious housewife-*cum*-action-heroine's successful escape from and rebellion against patriarchy in general, and domestic violence in particular.

Although Dot's agency and self-reliance are emphatic throughout the narrative, her story functions as a battle cry for (post)feminist sisterhood, realized apparently all too neatly in the season's resolution: the online activism typically associated with the fourth wave of feminism (Chamberlain 3) is conspicuously absent from the series, yet as a whole it can be interpreted as an act of political activism, risking even didacticism. The protagonist herself is readily associated with postfeminism, while her resistance to victimization urges allegorical figures of the first and second waves of feminism to voluntarily join her fight against patriarchy. It is in order to protect at all costs the domestic idyll of her current marriage and her maternal identity that Dot activates a self, hidden under the most ordinary surface of a complacent housewife, a young, even girly-looking, white, middle-class, heterosexual woman—in short, a product and embodiment of postfeminist sensibilities (see Gwynne and Muller 2–4). In other words, she becomes more militant than any feminist to fight, ironically, for a feminine identity generations of feminists rebelled against: living next to a highly feminine husband, slightly more handsome but on occasion intensely reminiscent of and even more comically idiotic than the Coens' Norm Gunderson, Marge's overfed baby of a spouse. Dot's insistence on domesticity and motherliness is epitomized in her attitudes to food and feeding. For her, providing her beloved with food has an anchoring function in normalcy, which is best exemplified by her hectic biscuit-making in the dead of the night right after the craze of her kidnapping (S05E01 00:50:22). Indeed, food seems to be metonymically identified both with her maternal identity and her beloved, which is indicated by the shots of Dot's intense and prolonged stare at a box of Bisquick at the petrol station before her kidnappers catch up with her in the chase (S05E01 00:35:50–36:08). She looks as if she was collecting the stamina needed to fight her kidnappers from remembering, through food, the reasons worth fighting for, and as if the terror of losing her current identity and family gave her the force to do so. While in the Coens' *Fargo* care and motherly attention, traditionally associated with food (Grace 42–44), is only one of the motif's many potential functions and interpretations (see Carter 243), the series fully shifts focus to these aspects and associates eating and feeding with the preservation of Dot's current domestic idyll.

Her inseparability from food and an apparent simpleton of a husband suggest that this girly, even doll-like, fragile-looking, and innocently attractive woman reimagines in postfeminist terms not only the "quintessential housewife" (Doherty 47) of the Coens' film, but also the uncouth maternal figure of fearless Police Chief Marge Gunderson.

According to Angela McRobbie's often-quoted insight, postfeminism "positively draws on and invokes feminism" (Gwynne and Muller 2). Similarly, Dot's postfeminist figure is assisted in her fight by female characters who verge on allegories of the second and first waves of feminism, respectively. Following the chronology of the series, the first of these is Police Officer Indira Olmstead—a straightforward reimagining of Marge Gunderson, neé Olmstead. She enjoys the achievements of feminism with a vengeance: pursuing a stereotypically male career, she is rewarded with the right to support a himbo for a husband, who neither works nor keeps house, but evokes yet another stereotype—that of the brainless nagging housewife. He is more than a nuisance, though: thanks to his expensive hobbies, Indira finds herself owing huge sums to the bank, which financially imprisons her in a modern evocation of Gothic confinement in patriarchal relationships. No wonder that Indira is associated with second-wave feminism through Judy Brady's famous essay from 1971, "I Want a Wife." The memorable effect of Brady's piece is rooted in the central irony that its speaker is a woman who calls attention to the plight of a working mother and housewife by wanting to imitate how men take advantage of their wives. Fully appropriate to his stereotypical femininity, in the series it is Indira's husband who delivers the monologue (S05E06: 00:04:41–06:16), complaining that Indira does not give him emotional support and does not put him on top of her priorities. Indira's retort—and re-appropriation of the feminist call for equality at home—comes when later she finds her husband in bed with another woman and finally decides to break up with him: "I, too, would like a wife. I'd even settle for a husband" (S05E08: 00:15:37–43). Indira's position as a female officer of color is also tenuous, to say the least, in the patriarchal structures of the police force. Victimized on various levels in these hierarchies, she is quick to feel empathy for Dot and does not fall for her cover-up story about her kidnapping: like most victims of domestic violence, Dot is well-versed in coming up with fictitious narratives to hide the real cause of her injuries, and pretends that the kidnapping never happened at all. Nonetheless, Indira cannot rest until she finds out the truth about Dot and Tillman. She responds to the victim's mute call for help regardless of the fact that—as Indira points out to Mrs.

Lyon Sr.—Dorothy would never identify herself as a victim or accept such a label (S05E06: 00:46:55). The police officer's solidarity for Dot is the starting point of building a sisterhood in the series which is, as Lidia Rodak's survey of this fundamental but contested feminist term suggests, consistent with its reinterpretations in the third and fourth waves of the movement: focused on reciprocal acknowledgement and understanding, contemporary notions of sisterhood allow for diversity and an inclusiveness transcending barriers of age, class, race, and sex (120S-21S; see Siegel 4; Chamberlain 2).

Accordingly, Indira's most important recruit to Dot's cause is Lorraine Lyon, a woman who could hardly be more different from her or Dot. Played by Jennifer Jason Leigh, "the prestige-endowing theatrical talent" (Sexton and Lees 344) of the season, she is a white billionaire, also a ruthless modern militant feminist, a remnant from a century before, so to say, who is transformed from a wicked mother-in-law/stepmother figure into Dot's adoptive mother by her solidarity for a victim of patriarchy. The CEO of her own company, Mrs. Lyon Sr. apparently enjoys all the achievements of feminism. Yet, she has to fight daily to be taken seriously by men as a professional, as is clear from her scene with two bankers, who start their business negotiation by demanding her male representative to be present. Fully empowered, Mrs. Lyon mercilessly humiliates them as men and professionals: they are left speechless and agape by her calm arrogance and self-confidence (S05E05: 00:06:58–09:58). Regardless of her feminine, grand dame appearance, her almost toxic masculinity is clear even without recalling that she is the female equivalent of Jerry Lundegaard's father-in-law, one of the central father figures (Lee 69) in the Coens' movie.[7] She is the agent of the final showdown with Roy Tillman (S05E10 00:21:55–27:28) for a reason: they are each other's equals in power and lack of moral scruples. This is what allows her to turn tables on Tillman and break him by taking care of his victimization through physical violence in the prison—repaying Dot's "debt" to him (see S05E02 00:06:03–27 ) in kind. Mrs. Lyon's support of Dot is equally violent: once Indira shows her photos of the fragile woman's brutalized body, she soon reaches the point of wanting to have Tillman killed and she summons an army for her daughter-in-law's rescue from Tillman's ranch.[8] Finally overcoming her lasting suspicions that Dot married into her family for money, she symbolically adopts her by calling her a "daughter of mine" (S05E09 00:23:32–37), as if in recognition of the organic connection between her militant feminism and Dot's postfeminist stance.

Thus, three waves of (post)feminism seem to unite in solidarity against patriarchy through the mutual assistance these three very different female figures give one another. Dot inspires both Indira and Lorraine to become a better version of themselves by saving her from her violent ex-husband. Indira, specifically, urges Lorraine to use her money and power for the humanitarian purpose of empowering other women, even if they are very different from her. The debt queen, in turn, encourages Indira to have dignity and break the shackles of her marriage, debts, and victimization—also gives her a job that enables her to do so. She becomes a foster-mother to Dot—someone she has needed quite badly—and gains a foster-daughter in return, though their reunion (S05E10 00:18:17–55) suggests that the fully rational and insensitive Lorraine might need considerable time to process the emotional baggage that comes with their new relationship. This sisterhood is called into existence by a form of patriarchy that—regardless of its Gothic overtones—is deeply engrained in American culture and provides a scathing critique of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 832–34) and contemporary American politics. Running for re-election, wife-beater Tillman is the dirty sheriff of the very American genre that celebrates the frontier legacy and a hypermasculine ideal: the Western. The always armed Tillman's middle-aged, portly father figure with his constantly worn Stetson hat, jeans, and boots, as well as his horse-riding, recalls the sheriffs of the genre in general, and one specific sheriff, the iconic John Wayne, in particular. Should that allusion be missed, it is comically highlighted by the name of Dot's second husband, Wayne, who is anything but hypermasculine. As Tillman's "I am the law" soliloquy (S05E02 00:17:00–20:00) evidences, he has almost divine pretentions for power in both the domestic and the public spheres. Yet, instead of protecting the collective, as a sheriff should (see Pronko), he coerces people at gunpoint to follow his orders, runs a private army and finds justification for his actions in the words of the Scripture—which he uses and abuses at will. The figure of the dirty sheriff legitimizing with the Word of God his violent and immoral abuse of power and other people—men as well as women—in both the private and the public, political sphere points towards the ideology and masculine ideal central to the frontier heritage as the root cause of rampant violence in today's US society. Tillman is an anachronism, a remnant of the American past, an allegory of patriarchy which must be defeated, the series suggests, to turn a new leaf in shaping both the private and public spheres: to build families and societies founded on the feminine

principles of compassion, solidarity, and inclusion instead of power, revenge, and victimization.

All in all, a diverse and inclusive sisterhood emerges from the (post)feminist revision of the female victim's crime fiction cliché.[9] The season's unambiguous political statement, indeed, might appear to be alien to the *noir* tradition as well as too didactic, too utopian. But that is only the surface.

**Subverting the fantasy of female utopia**

The (post)feminist utopia implied above apparently acquires mythic dimensions in *Fargo* Season 5 through the reformation of the season's archetypal patriarch, Ole Munch. Yet, it is precisely the prominent inclusion of genres associated with the fantastic that re-establishes balance: regardless of its straightforward and topical political message, the season proves to be a postmodern hybrid that maintains the ambiguities of the neo-*noir* and subverts its own surface messages, presumably targeted at mainstream audiences.

The Gothic, which fundamentally informs the (post)feminist narrative of *Fargo* Season 5, is inseparable from the fantastic (see Botting 39), and implies the potential presence of other related narrative types. To start with, the series intertwines myth and realism to create an interpretive framework for the critique of patriarchy in a manner reminiscent of magical realism, a postcolonial mode of writing that authors like, for instance, Angela Carter or Jeanette Winterson, appropriated and combined with the Gothic tradition to address feminist or queer concerns, respectively (Bényei, *Apokrif* 14–16, 299–311; Bényei, "Rereading" 170). Key to the relevance of magical realism in the series is the inclusion of Ole Munch, a grotesque yet childlike, gruesomely comic Welsh sin eater, who has allegedly rambled the earth for half a millennium and now acts as one of Tillman's hitmen. This archetypal scapegoat and wandering Jew figure (see Botting 70; Punter 42), who also evokes the abject fatherless child of a Gothic monster created by Frankenstein, shatters any semblance of verisimilitude in the story. His outlandish clothes and speech are remarked; yet, just like in magical realist fictional worlds, no character in the series bats an eyelid at the presence of this fantastically immortal, mythical figure (see Bényei, "Rereading" 151–52). Scarred for life by Dot, and cheated of his payment by Tillman, Munch seeks revenge on both, yet intervenes in their battle to aid Dot, apparently in accordance with an ancient code of honor and in respect for her as a noble enemy—the "Tiger," as he calls her (S05E02 00:44:03). Just like

Grimsrud in Scott Lee's interpretation of the Coens' film, this hired gun, an abject figure excluded from humanity and hardly able to navigate the Symbolic realm of language, is both an instance of the Real and a comic double to the powerful archetypal father figure (see 68–69) of Roy Tillman. This doubling is highlighted both by two parallel scenes—their respective (quasi-)soliloquies of power comically delivered from a bathtub, as if from a throne (S05E02 00:17:00–20:00; S05E04 00:34:46–36:40)—and by their childishness: Mrs. Lyon Sr. also calls Tillman a baby at one point (S05E05 00:15:00–15:17). Munch's back story of being a pariah stages a mythical narrative of origins for violent patriarchy in victimization and exclusion, which perpetuates itself, unless—as the closing scene of the series suggests—the vicious cycle is broken by re-embracing the abandoned child into human community through sharing Christian love and food with them. That is, a year after the final shoot-out between Dot and Roy Tillman, Munch's surprise visit to the Lyon household and his demand for a Shakespearian "pound of flesh" (S05E10 00:30:53–31:06) does not lead to bloodshed, but to joint preparations for lunch, the beginning of Munch's re-education, and Dot's miniature sermon at the table. In a scene much reminiscent of the Eucharist, she speaks for both herself and Munch as victims when she preaches inclusion and forgiveness:

> It feels like that. You know, what they do to us. Make us swallow—like it's our fault. Bet you wanna know the cure? You gotta eat something made with love and joy. And be forgiven! (S05E10 00:42:44–43:24)

Through the closing image of the sin-eater's touchingly comic expression of absolute bliss while munching the jointly prepared and shared cookies, the series conveys a strong mythical confirmation of core American values like Christianity, the (heteronormative) family, and the absolute of motherly love. In fact, it suggests that the latter—epitomized in Dot as "mama lion" (S05E01 00:04:13)—is able to embrace and re-form even the primeval dark forces engendering patriarchy, which maintains its power and perpetuates itself through (domestic) violence. A fleeting comparison of this closing scene with its parallel in the Coens' film—the inhumanity of Grimsrud's mute stare in "response" to Marge's miniature sermon about the value of human lives in the police car (1:30:00–31:16)—brings this unambiguous confirmation to even greater relief. In stark contrast to the Coens' inaccessible Father figure, in this absolute female utopia, the maternal

succeeds in reforming the archetypal patriarch and even offers a place for him in an all-inclusive (post)feminist sisterhood.

The fantastic nature and centrality of Ole Munch's character, however, also reveals this smooth, reassuring, and magical closure as a fantasy, which ironically highlights the implausibility of such a resolution for the actual tensions and violence inherent in patriarchy. The metafilmic commentary of further fantastic genres featuring in the series corroborates this subversive effect by laying bare the device and calling attention to the wish-fulfillment fantasies shaping both characters and plot. For a start, resonating with the prominent animal tropes of the Coens' film, the series applies the closely related genres of the fairy tale—also fruitfully appropriated for voicing feminist concerns, for instance, by Angela Carter (see Botting 110)—animal fable, and puppet show to create a mainstream version of the Coens' world of "postmodern simulacra" (Carter 241) by turning characters into dehumanized, comic cartoon figures. The animal fable is evoked both by the names of the central characters—the Lyons; Dot dubbed as the Tiger; Roy as the self-acclaimed ruler of this animal kingdom—and by the zoo metaphor elaborated by Mrs. Lyon. That is, in a poignant critique of consumer society, she explains that "[o]ver 90% percent of American adults are debtors," which metaphorically imprisons, cages them. In other words, the whole US is a giant zoo, in which she, Mrs. Lyon, runner of a debt management business, is the "zoo-keeper" (S05E05 00:29:26). In that, she is yet again a perfect female counterpart to Roy Tillman, who nonetheless is associated with wolf in sheep's clothing, at heart an uncontrollable wild animal. This metaphor is established by Dot's single attempt to wrestle into verbal shape the trauma she suffered at the hand of the Tillmans: the story of her adolescence is that of Little Red Riding Hood, chased by wolves—male sexual predators—until she finds shelter in the Tillmans' house, who appear to be her foster-parents. Yet, Tillman is revealed to be just another persecutor, the fairy-tale wolf pretending to be a loving relative, when he starts to make sexual advances on fifteen-year-old Dot, while routinely beating up his first—current—wife, Linda. When Linda disappears to serve Dot on a plate to her husband and to reveal herself as the archetypal wicked stepmother of fairy tales, as the girl feels then, Tillman and Dot are married. This Gothic fairy-tale narrative of Dot's trauma, presented by her as a puppet show, which even evokes in its closing scene (S05E07: 00:40:00) the widely known story of domestic violence in this genre, the Punch and Judy show, is also blatantly a metadrama of the series.[10] Together with the telling names and the all-

encompassing zoo metaphor, it turns the characters of the season into subhuman figures of children's literature and visual culture. Of those, the cartoon is readily evoked not only because of the fairy-tale and animal fable genres, but also because Dot, for instance, is both all too perfect to be "real" and imperishable, which, as Daniel Goldmark recalls, is a typical feature of cartoon figures suffering impossible violence, like Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's Tom and Jerry (61). Compassion for victimized Dot, together with the secure foreknowledge that she will survive her conflict with however cruel, brutal, and powerful patriarchy, sets the stage for the mixture of melodrama and comedy, a relatively light-hearted and definitely entertaining approach to an issue that is actually a matter of life and death: domestic violence. The happy resolution of the central conflict is undoubtedly facilitated by these generic contexts, but is also relegated to fantasy.

The hybrid of realistic and fantastic genres effectively subverts the season's all too neat happy-ending and its utopia of postfeminist sisterhood: what if it is only possible in myth, cartoons, tales—ultimately, in the imaginary world of fiction? This subversion is brought into relief with another metafilmic component, the episode of Camp Utopia, a community of abused women, allegedly established in the wilderness by Linda, the first Mrs. Tillman, which provides the setting for Dot's puppet-show. The episode both parallels and frames the main story line: it depicts a sisterhood of women, not unlike the one formed by Dot, Indira, and Lorraine, who mutually assist one another in working through the trauma of domestic violence collectively. It is a version of the Gothic Tillman family romance without casualties, in which even victimized Linda is alive and, stepping out of the wicked stepmother role, agrees to help Dot, just like Lorraine Lyon does. This *mise en abyme*, however, ultimately frames the utopia of sisterhood, whether in the camp or the entire narrative of the season, as a dream: at the end of Episode 7 Dot wakes up in a hospital bed to realize with dismay that instead of finding Linda, who *is* dead, she herself has been found by Roy Tillman. If Camp Utopia was a dream, an imaginary place of wish-fulfillment, a fantasy, Dot's story, in which the protagonist's survival at a crucial moment of the final battle (S05E09: 00:40:02–42:15) is dependent on assistance from the fantastic character of an undead sin eater, must equally be so.

**Conclusion**

Exploring *Fargo* Season 5 in the context of hybridization, the analysis has shown that generic hybridity has facilitated a narrative that is interpretable at various levels, and therefore marketable for a wide range of audiences. The incorporation of genres associated with voicing women's anxieties and a critique of patriarchy, such as the sensation novel or female Gothic, has resulted in the appropriation of the traditionally masculine film *noir* tradition for the purposes of expressing women's concerns. These include a range of issues from the representation of female victims to the victimization of women in society: in patriarchal hierarchical structures of politics, workplaces, everyday life, and, as a focal interest of *Fargo* Season 5, in domestic violence. In response to these, the season forms a message loud and clear about the necessity of sisterhood in the sense propagated by third- and fourth-wave feminism, and turns the comic neo-*noir* into a product marketable for a wide variety of female audiences, regardless of age, class, race, or even political stance. That is, with its focus on diversity—ranging from militant feminist to postfeminist sensibilities—inclusion, and a protest against domestic violence, it presents an instance of social activism that effectively targets women viewers in general. Yet, the inclusion of fantastic genres in this hybrid opens up meta levels of interpretation and subverts the apparently boundless optimism of its postfeminist utopia as well as its confirmation of core American values, clearly catering for white, middle-class, heterosexual, Christian mainstream audiences. Its framing in myth, dream, fairy-tale, cartoon, or puppet show contexts promotes distanced and critical understandings of the series' self-irony and subversion, which both align with the postmodern genre-bending of the Coens' *Fargo* and the innovative hybridization of the crime genre as a form of quality assurance for high-end television drama.

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## Notes

1. As James Naremore emphasizes about film *noir*, "nobody is sure whether the films in question constitute a period, a genre, a cycle, a style, or simply a 'phenomenon'" (12). Indeed, Mark Conrad, for instance, speaks of both a "classic *noir* period" (Introduction 1) and the "*noir* style of filmmaking" ("*Reservoir Dogs*" 108). Addressing the issue of whether film *noir* is a genre or not is beyond the scope of the present study. Since scholars do discuss film *noir* and neo-*noir* in terms of a genre (see, for instance, Abrams 9, 19), that strategy is adopted here for the practical purposes of discussing *genre*-bending.

2. In some interpretations, like Pamela Grace's discussion of Marge Gunderson and the maternal, the "neo-*noir* comedy" status of the Coens' film is a premise, treated as critical consensus (33; see Sterritt 16).

3. They were, in their own turn, also "a challenge to Hollywood conventions," since they "used unorthodox narration; . . . resisted sentiment and censorship; . . . reveled in the 'social fantastic'; . . . demonstrated the ambiguity of human motives; and . . . made commodity culture seem like a wasteland" (Naremore 24).

4. While acknowledging the iconoclastic nature of her character, Sharrett goes on to claim that Marge is part and parcel of the film's "comic ambience," a general "silliness" permeating its world (70). In stark contrast, Pamela Grace celebrates the victory of Marge Gunderson, allegedly the film's "moral center" (33), whose figure for her credibly intertwines "law enforcement with innocence and maternal concern" (34). This reading, however, seems to clash with the manifold ambiguities characterizing both film *noir* and the neo-*noir* (see Naremore 19).

5. Their article was published after the release of the first three seasons, but it mainly discusses season 1.

6. Here and in the rest of the article scenes from the *Fargo* television series are cited with timestamps including the number of the relevant episode. Timestamps without an episode number refer to the feature film *Fargo*.

7. Her entry into the season is that of a *prima donna*, complete with a descent on a grand staircase (S05E01 00:10:04).

8. One of her classic lines is produced at this stage: "What's the point of being a billionaire if I can't have someone killed?" (S05E09 00:22:04)

9. The group is actually both bigger and more diverse in terms of class, age, and race, than this sisterhood of three. If all of those who feel solidarity for Dot and act upon it were counted, the sisterhood would also include State Trooper Witt Far, a man of color; Danish Graves, a high-flying elderly male attorney with a white eye-patch; Scotty, Dot's nine-year-old tomboy of a daughter, also a cross-dresser; two FBI agents of indeterminate gender (a comic homage to both *The X Files* and *Men in Black*); and even one of the hitmen, Ole Munch, presumably a *circa* five-hundred-year-old Welsh sin-eater, stubbornly wearing an outlandish and culturally inauthentic kilt.

10. Dot's backstory of utter victimization and suffering, together with her heroic resistance and revenge in the present, add up to a somewhat magical plot of transformation. This, together with other characters' reaction to her—they both admire Dot as a *hero* and feel solidarity for her as a *victim*—interrogates the victim–hero dichotomy that informs the contrast between the Coens' and the series' respective kidnapped housewives, as well as, in Carisa Showden's view, many discussions of (female) agency (x). Due to this ambiguity, Dot's transformation also gestures toward another female Gothic-

related subgenre, the domestic *noir* (Zsámba 118). As Renáta Zsámba points out, in domestic *noir* novels the victimized "female characters recognize and interpret the abusive relationship they live in and fight back . . ., which inescapably overrides their allegedly fixed identity" (120). In other words, these narratives condition the emergence of female agency on "suffering" which "triggers" action: revolt and even "revenge" (120).

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# Snakes on a Page: Re-reading Monstrosity and Vulnerability in Selected Contemporary Fiction

Jessica Murray



**ABSTRACT**

This article offers a radical departure in the reading of monstrosity and vulnerability in selected contemporary fiction. By focusing on the representation of particularly vilified members of the natural world, namely snakes, I expose how the authors destabilize the boundaries between human vulnerability and animal monstrosity. These representational strategies facilitate readers' engagement with the complicity of human characters in the violence that permeates the narrative arcs. More expansive and, I argue, more accurate readings of monstrosity enable us to move towards reckoning with the power of human characters to exert their will in destructive and cruel ways. This is a reckoning that is long overdue, and it is a crucial step towards more respectful engagement with the natural world. The texts that will form the foundation of the rest of the analysis are *Stay and Fight* (2019) by Madeline Ffitch, *Reptile Memoirs* (2022) by Silje Ulstein, and *Blue Skies* (2023) by T. C. Boyle, and I deploy strategically selected strands of Literary Animal Studies, Critical Animal Studies, Vegan Studies, and Monster Studies as the theoretical lens through which to read the novels. (JM)

**KEYWORDS:** vulnerability; monstrosity; snakes; children; contemporary fiction

As a rapidly changing climate and unpredicted, extreme weather events increasingly shape daily lives across the globe, contemporary societies can no longer ignore the impact of anthropogenic activities on the natural world. Literary fiction offers rich imaginary spaces within which authors can interrogate the ways in which humans both navigate their changing worlds and, through their actions or lack thereof, contribute to these changes. Key relationships that characterize our modes of engagement with our worlds are the ones we have with other animals. It is in these relationships that attitudes about ownership, control, and selfish exploitation crystallize clearly, albeit in ways that tend to remain unexamined. Animals feature in

our lives as so-called pets, parts of our diets, "items" on supermarket shelves, entertainment, unpaid emotional support, and other labor types. They are also put to work in our imaginary and representational repertoires, again in ways that often escape critical scrutiny.

This article utilizes an amalgamation of Literary Animal Studies, Critical Animal Studies, Vegan Studies, and Monster Studies as a theoretical framework to read three recently published novels—*Stay and Fight* (2019) by Madeline Ffitch, *Reptile Memoirs* (2022) by Silje Ulstein, and *Blue Skies* (2023) by T. C. Boyle—to expose and interrogate how deeply embedded anthropocentric ontological assumptions continue to distort understandings of our place within larger ecologies of practice. These distortions result in misunderstandings, resentment, and ultimately in violence. Close, critical scrutiny exposes how humans' unwillingness to look beyond our presumed centrality sets the stage for scenarios in which these characters reframe narratives to claim roles of vulnerable victims when their own choices directly, and predictably, result in violence. The human characters' avoidance of responsibility for their own actions is highlighted through the presence of snakes, who are perceived as monstrous animal others. In representational maneuvers that exacerbate the monstrosity of an animal that is already vulnerable to misunderstanding, the authors place snakes in direct conflict with young children. The violent confrontations between the snakes and the children serve as plot devices that challenge readers' expectations. This analysis will focus on interrogating the literary constructions of monstrosity and vulnerability in the selected texts. By re-reading the novels from a more-than-human scholarly perspective, new understandings of monstrosity, vulnerability, and power are allowed to emerge. More expansive and, I argue, more accurate readings of monstrosity enable us to move towards reckoning with the power of humans to exert their will in destructive and cruel ways. This long-overdue reckoning is a crucial step towards a more respectful engagement with the natural world, where the distinctions between who is vulnerable and who is dangerous are no longer taken for granted.

Literary Animal Studies (LAS) serves as a richly generative theoretical lens that facilitates a re-reading of cultural texts and invites the deconstruction of animal signs. It also opens up new ways of thinking about embedded anthropocentric ideologies by engaging substantively with a more-than-human perspective. Roland Borgards explains that LAS "explores literary animals in a way that highlights how deeply aesthetic and literary questions are interwoven with both political and material spheres"

(156). As this analysis will demonstrate, the literary snakes are located within particular contexts, and their representations can most meaningfully be understood when we consider the political and material dynamics that come into play when they appear on the pages of the texts. In his work on literary animals, Robert McKay calls for critical scholarship that "would systematically and conscientiously attend to the representational complexity of cultural imaginings of animals' lives and deaths, and of the manifold encounters with humans that often mark the passage from one to the other" (637). This article contributes to the growing bodies of research that heed McKay's invitation. Like McHugh, I believe that the stakes of such an intellectual exercise are high, as "the textual politics of literary animals . . . suggests a thoroughgoing critique attuned to the traces of species, to markings of potentials for different orders of agency beyond the human subject" (487). Anthropocentric epistemological assumptions about literary animals both reflect and perpetuate discursive constructions that render animals beyond the text vulnerable to violence. Critical Animal Studies (CAS) as a theoretical framework with an activist orientated agenda has obvious potential to add value to an interrogation of the representations of snakes in these novels. However, the addition of key elements from Vegan Studies (VS) and, to a lesser extent, Monster Studies (MS) enriches the analytical lens through which this reading takes place and allows fresh insights to emerge. The overlaps and points of alignment between CAS and MS facilitate a reading that does the unthinkable. It compels a shift from assigning primary vulnerability to children who are hurt to the snakes who hurt them. In addition, it moves the needle in the construction of monstrosity from the snakes to the human characters who wield their anthropocentric power in such cavalierly careless ways that the violence permeates the pages long before the children are attacked. Simon Mittman articulates the role of the monster as follows:

> Monsters do a great deal of cultural work, but they do not do it *nicely*. They not only challenge and question; they trouble, they worry, they haunt. They break and tear and rend cultures, all the while constructing them and propping them up. They swallow up our cultural mores and expectations, and then, becoming what they eat, they reflect back to us our own faces, made disgusting or, perhaps, revealed to always have been so. (1)

When the snakes ingest the children, the reflection reveals the human face as the most destructive stakeholder in all the narrative scenarios, yet this

monstrosity can easily be overlooked when the tragedy involves a child being hurt. It is, however, when we engage with this monstrous human reflection that we are most eager to consider the ruptures in our ontological and symbolic frameworks. The unsettling, disruptive potential of the monster is a theoretically rich tool for, as Ingvil Hellstrand et al. note, "[W]hat or who is considered monster/monstrous is not based on ontologically fixed categorisations but rather something that shifts between objects and bodies, between imaginaries and politics, as part of cultural circulation, and is therefore also open to change" (2). The representations of the humans and the snakes in the selected novels encourage readers to grapple with the instabilities of these constructions. Monstrosity as a discursive construct is an imaginary that can be deployed in complex, multi-faceted ways, and it can manifest physically, socially, culturally, sexually, as mental other, or as villain. While all these deployments emerge in the selected texts, this article will focus primarily on identifying and challenging how monstrosity is represented around snakes.

Engaging with the vulnerability of snakes is already a fraught task, even when they are not being represented as a threat to children. Sue Hall Pyke traces the Western cultural tendency towards "snake vilification" (475) to biblical constructions of snakes as "harbingers of evil" (476). In a comprehensive overview of how snakes tend to be "mischaracterized and vilified" (7), Animesh Manna explores Judeo Christian associations between snakes and humanity's downfall in the Garden of Eden, while also recognizing cultural differences in understandings of snakes. While a more thorough engagement with the rich symbolism around snakes is beyond the scope of this article, I agree with Manna's explanation that "Eastern traditions often embrace snakes as embodiments of wisdom, renewal, and protection, while Western traditions frequently portray them as harbingers of evil and temptation" (4). Notwithstanding this symbolic complexity, the prevalence of "fear-based narratives" (1) related to snakes continue to saturate the Western imagination, and the representational dynamics of this reality are what I seek to interrogate in my analysis. The appearance of snakes also means that they are not likely to elicit a "cute response" which, as Kate Marx explains, involves certain types of features that elicit in human observers an "innate response that made them want to nurture and protect the bearer of those features" (92). While the cute response is far from benign in relation to how people treat animals because it objectifies them (see Harris), the popular perception of snakes as slithery and scary does exacerbate their vulnerability to violence. The global snakeskin trade is just

one example of how snakes are subjected to "spectacular cruelty" (Barkham). Both vulnerability and monstrosity demand new, more nuanced readings, which my selected theoretical frameworks facilitate as I engage with the primary texts in the rest of this article.

CAS demands a radical shift away from some of our most deeply embedded epistemological and ontological assumptions about the centrality of the human animal. Nik Taylor and Richard Twine make terminological choices that resonate with the Mittman quotation above when they note that CAS "attempts to rupture normative understandings" (4) of everything from scholarly and disciplinary conventions to conceptual and theoretical frameworks as they advance an academic activist agenda that seriously engages with the quality of animals' lives and deaths. The critical dimension of CAS is crucial for the purposes of this article, as it allows us to interrogate the representations of snakes as political, discursive maneuvers that reflect problematically anthropocentric sociocultural assumptions even as they reinforce and perpetuate these assumptions. As Steven Best explains, CAS critiques

> the entire social system and complex of oppression and domination, such as has developed throughout the human-established "civilization" of the last ten thousand years, and it seeks a radical political analysis and tactic in response to systemic social and environmental problems. (23)

Best's articulation resonates with my argument as his formulation also invites us to question how we conceptualize "civilization" in contexts of violence against nonhuman animals. This is similar to my argument that we need to rethink how we understand monstrosity.

The images of monsters swallowing up and eating invite a consideration of how Vegan Studies can contribute to the theoretical framework I am proposing for this analysis. Twine makes a case for a "pro-vegan CAS" and he couples this with a reiteration of "the often made point that veganism is more than 'just a diet' and is better seen and practised as a systemic and intersectional mode of critical analysis and a useful lived philosophy counter to anthropocentrism, hierarchy and violence" (19). Systemic critiques and reflecting on how violence emanates from anthropocentrism will prove to be particularly generative in reading against the grain of popular constructions of monstrosity and vulnerability. Vegan Studies also focuses on the disruptive and troubling potential of conventional modes of being, and specifically of eating, in the world. As

Twine argues, vegans "introduce a sense of embodied questioning, a discomfort to the habitual normativity of meat culture" (631). The consumption of animals depends on keeping the referent absent (see Adams) and processes of marginalization, both in terms of where slaughterhouses are located and the type of workers who are typically employed in these spaces, function to perpetuate this invisibility. Twine explains the role of the vegan in challenging these processes as follows: "In a sense the violence that meat culture more or less successfully sequesters to the spatial and class margins of society is brought back into uncomfortable proximity by the presence of the vegan" (631–32). The marginalized status of the human characters in the selected texts do not make them vegan, but it does locate them in positions where they share a vested interest in challenging the status quo. Vegan Studies exposes the flawed assumptions and the strategic power of anthropocentrism that facilitate the continuous human complicity in literally eating violence and the suffering of sentient beings. The representation of snakes using their bodies to consume the bodies of children "reflect back to us our own faces" (Mittman 1), our own complicity, and our own monstrosity. All three of the selected theoretical frameworks contain core tenets that compel us to think differently about how we are in the world, about what props up some of our most naturalized understandings of our place in our worlds, and about what gets exposed when ruptures and rends become impossible to ignore. The fictional confrontations between snakes and children enable us to think through these dynamics in service of considering new imaginaries. New imaginaries are needed to reflect new ontologies as it is impossible to continue pretending that existing frameworks serve the natural world we share with other animals.

The three texts offer layered plot lines with snakes, and specifically the violent confrontation between snakes and young children, serving to move the narratives towards their climactic dénouements. As the plots develop, snakes slither along the margins of the human character arcs, but their mere presence foreshadows the monstrous violence to come. While my analytical focus will be on the authorial choices around the snakes' representations, I will provide a brief overview of each text for contextual purposes. Significantly, the plot outlines will signal the outsider status of the human protagonists, and their own social marginalization will be tied into the discussion of the snakes. In *Stay and Fight,* Helen, Karen, and Lily's paths converge when they move in together in rural Appalachia, after Helen's boyfriend leaves. Karen and Lily are a couple with a young son,

Perley. Much of the novel revolves around the challenges the three women face as they try to carve out a home and a life for themselves off the grid and at the edges of a society that fails to respect their choices and their constructions of a family. Perley is seven years old when the snake attacks him. One of his mothers, Karen, is a trained nurse and she treats his wounds at home but, when the school sees his injuries, child protection services are called in and Perley is removed from the women's care.

I will engage most succinctly with *Stay and Fight* because, while the novel provides an easy access point into the discussion, it represents slightly more innocently anthropocentric human characters who do not cause the confrontation quite so directly as they do not go out and buy "pet" snakes to bring into their home. Throughout the article, I use quotation marks when I use the word "pet" to signal my recognition that this is a loaded and problematic term to use in relation to animals. The construction of vulnerability is also less stark as Perley is older than the babies who are represented in the other two novels and, unlike them, he survives the incident. Karen and Lily are building their home on the outskirts of a society that will "treat Karen like she's just some stranger" (18) rather than Perley's mother, and where they are both marginalized as "dykes" (15). This marginalized outsider status is cast as its own type of monstrosity, and it serves a boundary policing function in the community. In their analysis of constructions of monstrosity in narratives of sexual violence, Anja Emilie Kruse and May-Len Skilbrei explain that the "purging of unwanted or monstrous 'elements' may also be seen as effectuating and strengthening the social bonds of a normative community—those *inside*—at the expense of severing the bonds of the expelled—the *outsiders*" (841). Karen and Lily are very much outsiders here, but the extreme outsider status of the snakes facilitates at least some accommodation of them inside the community. The women are all sharing a bonding moment with their neighbors when the first snake enters the narrative. Karen describes the rare moment of getting along with their neighbors as follows: "It was when we pictured ourselves standing together against outside threats, instead of threatening one another" (59), and this is the point in the narrative when the "black rat snake" slithers onto the page. Significantly, this snake is introduced in the same paragraph where Karen reflects that they "preferred to imagine [them]selves on the right side of things, including history" (59). Her comment relates to a general sense of treating the land and people respectfully, and she is also the character who tries to understand the snake's perspective. My larger argument in this article asserts that our

interactions with other animals, as crystallized in conventional constructions of monstrosity and vulnerability, place us firmly and destructively on the wrong side of history.

Karen is, albeit in a compromised manner, attempting to consider and to teach Perley what it is like to be a snake. I am adapting this formulation from Thomas Nagel's influential essay on an inter-species encounter titled "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" (1974). The snake's presence in the text is immediately represented as a cause for alarm as another child points and, with a raised voice as indicated by the exclamation mark, alerts the group to the snake: "Then one of Frank's daughters pointed down behind the woodstove and said, 'Snake'!" (59). The skewed, anthropocentric power dynamics are signaled by the fact that the child is positioned above the snake and points down to where the snake is seeking concealment behind the stove.

While this article does not allow space to delve into the philosophical intricacies of Nagel's argument, the description of the scene urges the reader to imagine how the snake experiences this moment where a group of people are looking down on the exposed body while numerous children are pointing and shrieking. The reader learns that the "snake froze in place. It grew rigid and crimped up all along its length. It gave off a sulfur-and-onions smell…" (59). Karen tells the children to stop shrieking as they are scaring the snake and that the "kink" is "an anxiety reflex" while the smell is emitted "when they're afraid" (59). She tries to teach Perley to engage with the snake by telling him that the snake is their friend and that "[t]his snake lives here, too." While well-meaning, this is a gross oversimplification of the co-existence of a snake and humans in a shared space, and the result is predictably violent. This encounter starts an extended conflict between the women as Lily fears the consequences of the snake in such close proximity to Perley, and Karen insists that there is no cause for concern. The human characters use the snake as an example in what they consider to be a teachable moment (Karen's explanations of how the snake feels), as a way to exhibit their environmental sensitivity in what amounts to little more than ecological virtue signaling (Karen's references to their shared habitats, 69), a symbolic way of claiming the land on which they are making their home (Karen refers to the snake's presence as a sign that their new house had been chosen and Frank says the snake indicates luck, 59), interesting objects of amusement to spot (the shrieking girls), and as a toy to laugh and lunge at (Perley 60). What they fail to do in any meaningful way is to engage respectfully with the snakes who are trying to

maintain a place to hide and who are mostly represented as reacting to humans in fear and protective modes.

As Perley grows into a toddler, he asserts himself as a "Friend of Snake" (62) and is repeatedly represented as imposing this sense of friendship onto the snakes by grasping, hitting, and hissing at them playfully. The snakes become a pawn in the parenting battles the three women are engaging in, and Perley ends up learning nothing about how to be in the world with other animals. When he gives them "a thwack" (67) because he finds the smell they emit in fear amusing, Lily resists Helen's attempt to course correct his behavior by insisting that "[h]itting is Perley's form of love-petting" (67). The women discuss the intended meaning of his hitting by demonstrating how it feels on each other while completely disregarding that the profound power imbalances between humans and animals would make these experiences completely different for snakes. The snakes keep trying to convey their experiences to the human characters via their fear smell, but they never take this seriously. When the snakes start getting close to Perley's body, the terminological choices signal how little headway these human characters had made in terms of challenging anthropocentric interactions with animals. Lily sees that Perley is "playing with something" (69) she could not see before realizing that he is touching a snake. This brief phrase signals the status of the snake as a thing rather than as someone, and as a toy. When Lily sees the "black snake coiled twice around his arm" (69), she "swiped that snake down Perley's arm like taking off a bracelet" (69). As the simile suggests, these snakes are never more than accessories and, when a human character chooses to do so, they can be violently removed from any habitat that they supposedly "share". While Lily and Karen focus on Perley's safety, the snake who is swiped aside speaks in this short, stark sentence: "Sulfur engulfed us" (69). A close reading reveals fear, violence, power imbalance, and human self-centeredness rather than some idyllic embrace of nature.

When the attack happens, Karen realizes that her actions set the stage for it, but she remains unable to de-center herself from the narrative. Perley is hurt and the snakes end up hunted and killed, but Karen reflects on how she paid for her actions (117). While Perley suffers injuries from which he recovers and they temporarily lose custody of him, the snakes lose their habitat and their lives, so the reader is encouraged to wonder about who really paid for the mistakes: a CAS reading suggests that it was not the human characters, or that any price they paid pales in comparison to what the snakes lose. By the time the snake attacks Perley, the author has

problematized the human behavior to such an extent that it is impossible to read the snake as simply monstrous, even though the violence is represented graphically.

In an analysis of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* through rubrics of Monster Theory and CAS, Morgan Armstrong notes that the categories of both monsters and humans are constructions. Armstrong explores how the "process of 'monster-making,' also renders the process of 'human-making' visible, and ironically, somewhat monstrous" (14). Similar dynamics are at play in the imaginary world of Perley and the adults that facilitate the violence. Ffitch's representation of the child being attacked refuses to resort to blaming the snake and, in doing so, she encourages readers to reconsider our own categorizations of monstrosity and to see the permeability of the boundaries between monsters, animals, and humans. Karen, who encouraged the presence of the snakes in the human home, is the one whose narrative point of view is used to describe the violent clash. She makes an ominous distinction between how this specific species of snake bites and eats:

> A black snake's bite is like a slap, there and gone . . . .
>
> But the way a black snake eats is different from the way a black snake bites.
>
> When a black snake eats, its mouth is a conveyer belt. Its back-curved teeth haul the snake forward to engulf its prey. Once attached, it's difficult, as a practical matter, for that snake to let go.
>
> Perley was prey too big to eat whole. He'd rolled onto the snake with the full weight of his sleeping body, trapping it. The snake struck his face, just below his left eye. It couldn't retreat, so it dug in. (Ffitch 117)

Throughout this encounter, the snake is represented as a "panicked creature" (118), and the dissolving boundaries between the panicking women and the snake are further suggested by the merging of their collective fear: "The odor that overtook the room belonged to us all" (118). When the women finally manage to detach the snake from Perley, "bits of its teeth remained" in the child's body with Perley's face "gaping and raw, his horrible open eye vacant above the wound" (118). Perley himself appears monstrously disfigured here, and this further facilitates a reading of the child rather than the snake as the monster, and the snake rather than the child becomes associated with vulnerability.

The snake has nowhere to retreat to, but the human characters do, yet they choose not to do so. Monstrosity shifts to Karen, as she seems to

morph into a mute, mindless being who relishes her violence. Helen describes how "Karen refused to speak to me or to anyone. She didn't sleep. She took the .22 down from the rafters and paced the floor, stalking snakes. In the morning, I swept up exploded skins, scattered mouse meat, split snake hide. She'd grin darkly at the wall" (168). The capacities for speech and rational thinking are core components of propping up constructed divisions between animals and humans, and between humans and monsters. Karen's silence and her irrational violence serve to challenge the readers' assumptions about what is human. By destabilizing the category of the human, the author also prompts a rethinking of the nonhuman and the monstrous, since these categories all take shape in their oppositions to each other. As Armstrong explains via engagement with Foucault's work, "the 'human' identity possesses a genealogical trajectory with 'origins' discursively embedded in what this identity claims *not* to be. In other words, its existence relies on its opposition to the 'nonhuman'" (3). The anthropocentric power of the human to exert our will and our violence discursively and physically is exposed to such an extent that we are forced to ask ourselves who the real monsters are in this scenario.

*Blue Skies* depicts a recognizable American future where climate change's consequences structure all aspects of the characters' day-to-day lives. Ottilie and her husband Frank are an elderly couple, living in California. They have two adult children, Cooper, who is a biologist, and Catherine (Cat), who flits between jobs and moves to Florida with her partner, Todd. Cat spends much of her time day drinking while trying to establish herself on social media as an influencer and she buys a "pet" snake to give her brand an edge. Cat and Todd have twin girls called Tahoe and Sierra. The babies are two months old when Cat's snake attacks Sierra. In this novel, the snake causes the baby's death, and the family is left with accusations of "child endangerment" and the "real possibility of [social services] putting Tahoe in protective custody" (224). The introduction of the snake in *Blue Skies* is represented through a simile that mobilizes imagery of jewelry in a more extended manner than Lily's cursory reference to the bracelet in Ffitch's novel. Boyle uses repetition and he titles the first chapter, which is narrated from Cat's narrative perspective, "They were like jewelry". The first line of the chapter repeats the phrase, and then again, the word: "They were like jewelry, living jewelry, and she could see herself wearing one wrapped around her shoulders . . ." (3). In the rest of the opening paragraph, she thinks about how the wearing of the snake "would make a statement" and she spends some time considering what outfit would

show off this accessory most effectively. It is only on the next page that we learn that the "they" refers to snakes she sees in an exotic pet shop. She discusses her purchase with the owner, R. J., by referring to sizes and coloring, and comparing one's skin to a "design like something you'd see in a print top at Anthropologie" (6), the upmarket clothing and accessory chain. She ends up buying a young Burmese python, a species of snake that R. J. tells her "make great pets, but they do tend to get big" (7). After haggling down the price, she takes the snake and heads to the nearest bar, and she describes the "thrill of carrying it with her like any new purchase" (10). She calls the snake Willie and, despite the act of naming him, she continues her objectification by noting that his body felt "no different from the snakeskin purse she had at home" (13). Cat is in general represented as a rather superficial and contradictory character who is struggling to find her place in the world, but the levels of cognitive dissonance she displays in her engagement with Willie are extreme. With a startling lack of self-reflexivity, she switches between equating Willie to consumer items and referring to a terrarium as "his new home," which "was designed to give the snake a little privacy so that he could feel secure" (19). She goes so far as to wonder whether snakes "even dreamed" (20). These references to Willie's feelings and imagined interiority ring hollow, and Willie is never more than a prop in Cat's attempts to construct some identity that feels meaningful to herself.

Cat's self-centered selfishness is represented in the context of a family whose attempts at ethical engagement with the natural world signal ever-expanding levels of self-delusion that allows the reader to reframe understandings of monstrosity before the snake kills a baby. The "They were like jewelry" chapter is followed by chapter two, titled "Entomophage," which offers Ottilie's perspective as she shares how Cooper's concerns have shaped their diets. Cooper encourages the family to consider the environment and he explicitly centers animals and food in these discussions when he says: "Cows. Pigs. Goats. Jesus, we're chewing ourselves into oblivion" (26). Significantly, while Cooper is the character who is most committed to expanding the gaze to consider seriously the place of other animals, his articulation reveals what he continues to value most highly, namely how the treatment of animals impacts human life on a planet in peril. Our potential "oblivion" is the issue here, rather than the suffering of the cows, pigs, and goats on our plates. Cooper and Ottilie are represented as more clear-headed and sensible than Cat, and they are well aware of the suffering that infuses the food chain. They just do not care enough for this awareness to result in any real change in their behavior.

Ottilie refers to "sparing sentient creatures the horror of the slaughterhouse" as "another argument Cooper had used to soften her up" but, ultimately, the knowledge of these animals' suffering is overridden by the fact that her husband "just isn't into vegetarian" (26). She describes the violence of animals being turned into food in graphic detail but, rather than regarding this as any moral imperative to change, it simply becomes information that she can choose to disregard because of her husband's dietary preferences. This knowing complicity in violent suffering means that the novel introduces various human iterations of monstrosity long before the snake kills the baby.

Dinesh Wadiwel mobilizes the monstrous to understand the animal-industrial complex, which constitutes "a monstrous deployment of technologies of violence and extermination" (283). In his interrogation of the "monstrous scale" on which humans cause the suffering of fish, Wadiwel teases out the epistemic dynamics that render us incapable of understanding "fishing as a system of concentrated violence against sea animals" (204). Significantly, Boyle represents characters who cannot claim ignorance yet persists in making choices that actively contribute to the violence against the animals they eat. Ottilie admits that "yes, she'd seen the films of chickens dangling by their feet on a disassembly line, awaiting the whirring blade to decapitate them, and the steers taking the blow to the head while their knees buckled and the pitched forward in dark avalanches of flesh" (27). Boyle follows these stark images of brutality with Ottilie's admission that "she felt good about herself" for her performative acts of caring as she incorporates insect protein into the family's diets. These descriptions encourage the reader to reframe Ottilie from a sweet grandmother who loses a grandchild to a monster, to a powerful character whose careless complicity in violence makes her a monster, albeit one who takes on a more palatable form than a snake engorged with an infant.

The text never lets the reader forget Cat's complicity in the violence either. When Cat awakes after an alcohol-infused sleep, she realizes that Sierra was silent because she "was wrapped up in some sort of bright shining blanket, which wasn't a blanket at all" (222). The baby is wrapped up in Willie, whom Cat has been insisting she loves (113). She now removes any sentience from him when she notes that his "eyes were dead things" (222) as his "coils tightened" around the child. Cat now morphs into a mindless agent of violence as she finds herself "jerking at his head, pounding him with her fists, screaming herself" and she notes that "she was slashing, she was stabbing" (222). Meera Lee draws on Derrida and explains

that "the term *monstre* typically serves to mark the separation of human beings as a higher form of life from other animal species" (719), but the image of Cat attacking Willie signals the "overlapping boundary between the monster and the human" (720). Cat's selfish, anthropocentric attempts to incorporate Willie into her human world and her own descent into animalistic violence result in a situation where it becomes impossible to maintain clear boundaries between human and monster. The dead baby is collateral damage to Cat's decisions as much as to Willie's attack. If Willie is a monster, at the very least, we need to admit that he is not the only one in this scenario. Cat's lack of self-awareness and responsibility is striking as she swiftly moves to construct herself as the victim. When she is arrested for the "aggravated manslaughter of a child" (255), she notes that Willie was euthanized but that it did not matter to her "because he'd got what was coming to him, and if he'd only stayed where he belonged, which was perfectly adequate, better than adequate, none of this would have happened" (253). She constructs him as ungrateful and betrays no hint of irony when she describes her "pet" home as where he belonged.

In the final novel for this analysis, *Reptile Memoirs*, the narrative switches between chapters narrated by Liv and set in 2003, 2004, and 2005, chapters narrated by Mariam set in 2017, and ones narrated by police officers, Roe and Ronja, in 2017. It emerges that Liv and Mariam are the same person, and that Liv changed her name after surviving a series of tragedies. Liv is a second identity after she shed her previous one, when she was called Sara, after being raped as a child by her brother Patrick. The shedding of her identity is reminiscent of a snake shedding a skin. As an adult, Mariam marries Tor and they raise Mariam's daughter, Iben, together. The central plotline involves the attempts to find Iben after the eleven-year-old disappears from a shopping center in 2017. The snake/child confrontation in this text, however, is from Liv's life in 2004. During this time, Liv shares a flat with two young men, Ingvar and Egil, and she buys a "pet" snake whom she calls Nero. The plot is intricate, and a number of characters' arcs overlap in unexpected ways. Anita, who turns out to be Roe's daughter, and Liv start an affair. After leaving her abusive partner, Anita and her baby daughter, Aurora, move in with Liv. Baby Aurora is still breastfeeding when Nero kills her. Nero's naming after the Roman Emperor signals the introduction of a character who is associated with violence and cruelty, as well as misunderstanding and mythologizing. Significant bodies of scholarship have been devoted to grappling with the complex nature of Emperor Nero, who has been described as a "monster

king" (Draper 1), while also being recognized as a historical figure who was much too complex to be reduced to simple monstrosity. While all three of these novels try to offer some insight into the snakes' perspectives and they all avoid any simplistic representation of the snakes as monstrous others, *Reptile Memoirs* goes further and devotes chapters throughout the novel to Nero's point of view, in much the same way as it switches between the narrative perspectives of the main human protagonists. Like *Blue Skies*, *Reptile Memoirs* opens with a description of a snake's body, which the narrator, Liv, describes as "a paradox" (3) of hardness and softness, heaviness and light, coarseness, and smoothness. The description signals the threatening potential of the snake's body as his "split tongue vibrated slightly in the air, and he moved slowly up along [her] chest, towards [her] throat" (3). Like Cat, she experiences complicated feelings for the snake, and she wonders whether those feelings could best be described as "love" or "maternal affection," but she is convinced that there is "a connection that crossed the boundaries between species" (4). Both Cat and Liv obtain the snakes for whom they pretend to care via the exotic pet trade. This is a trade in which the "exotic pets experience cruelty at every stage of the journey to a lifetime of captivity" (World Animal Protection 2019). The paradox Liv ascribes to the snake's body is all part of her own projections onto that body, and she extends her paradoxical readings of the snake as she describes his "stony dead eyes" (3) but, a mere page later, thinks that the snake looks at her "with trust, even understanding" (4). Liv names him Nero and she insists that she "[w]anted to open [her] mind and understand his language" (26). She also performs her supposed commitment to his wellbeing by wondering whether they could feed him "live mice" because that "must be better for them—more natural" (26). There is, of course, nothing good or natural for either the mice or the snake in a setting where they have become props in Liv's attempt to find connection and meaning in her life. She wonders about the best ways to use these creatures without ever considering that not using them at all would be the best for all concerned.

Her cruelty and violence in service of what is "best" for Nero continue to increase as she fools a woman into letting her take a kitten that she could no longer take care of herself. While the woman thinks she is adopting the kitten, she is taking the animal to feed to Nero. The author emphasizes the vulnerability of the kitten, and the fear as "[i]t screamed" when it noticed Nero, not "a kitten's mewl, but a terrified scream like that of a person, which was immediately silenced by Nero's teeth as they sunk

into the kitten's delicate neck" (64). These descriptions are accompanied by Liv's rationalizations as she convinces herself that her actions are morally justified as the kitten would have been euthanized anyway. As Liv tries to justify the kitten's suffering, she tells herself that her actions and those of Nero are not as bad as those of humans, who "[c]alled [their] prey beef and pretended it had never been alive" (64). While cows are indeed subjected to immense suffering en route to humans' plates, this does not in any way diminish the fear of the kitten or Nero's suffering in his confined space in Liv's home. The abandonment of "pets", the decision to keep a snake as a "pet", the killing of the kitten (a feeding exercise Liv later repeats with a rabbit and a puppy), industrial animal agriculture and Liv are all operating within the same anthropocentric frame. By the time the novel gets to the snake killing the baby, the narrative has become littered with monstrous behavior that extends far beyond just the snake's actions.

In the sections narrated from Nero's perspective, which the author prioritizes by giving the same title as the novel, the snake clearly articulates the sense of confinement and, significantly for the purposes of this analysis, he invokes the image of a monster in how he perceives a human woman. He describes her as a "creature" who was "enormous" and emphasizes her relative power by noting how "[i]t was its height that was most impressive, how the being towered over me" (39). Here, as a human becomes a hulking, threatening thing, Nero also deploys the objectifying pronoun "it" in his references to her.

When Nero recounts killing Aurora, the description makes it clear that his actions are similar to what he did in response to the mice, kitten, and puppy Liv served up to him as food. He describes the encounter with the baby as follows: "Kept control of myself for a split second in order to truly savour the pleasure at having found such fantastic prey, before I darted forth. Sank my teeth into the little neck and felt the sweet, bloody juices run down my throat" (218). The snake has no way of making any moral distinction between the "delicate neck" of the kitten (64) and the baby's "little neck" and he is operating within a framework that is entirely Liv's creation. There is no logical way to ascribe monstrosity to Nero without fundamentally implicating Liv. She notes how she "pictured the scene again and again": "how I had entered the room and seen that it was already too late, that he had killed and suffocated tiny Aurora, and that it was all my fault" (222). Liv takes responsibility in a way that Cat and Karen never do, but that does nothing to diminish the monstrous consequences of her actions.

As the novel nears its end, Nero relates that he recognizes some of the words he hears humans use when they come to look at him. He begins with words that are associated with his objectification as a potential commodity object, such as "skin," "lovely," and "valuable" (332), and he moves on to "Monster" (332), which is what a man calls him after he bites him in response to being touched. Nero's description of the man's hand, which was "dirty and hairy" (332), signals the text's continuous challenging of the boundaries between human and monstrous animal. Detective Roe also contributes to the destabilization of the human/monster binary when he thinks about "Aurora's delicate ribs, broken as if she had been squeezed by something" (336). He decides that the baby's father, "Birk didn't have a motive to kill his own child. A snake, on the other hand, needed no motive. It needed only a devil of a person who brought the hunter to its prey" (336). Liv is the one who orchestrated the crossing of Nero and Aurora's paths, however unwittingly, so the role of devil is one that Roe associates with her rather than with the snake.

This article has demonstrated how selected contemporary novels challenge conventional understandings of monstrosity and vulnerability. In her reading of monstrosity and humanity in South Korean film, Meera Lee explores how a text can "depart radically from the conventional allegorical meaning of the monster" by mobilizing "ambivalence, as marked by the uncanniness or indistinction between humanity and monstrosity" (742). By reading selected texts through the rubrics of specific strands of Literary Animal Studies, Critical Animal Studies, Vegan Studies, and Monster Studies, I also expose how the faces of the human characters that are reflected back from the snakes' gazes are infused with their own monstrosity. These texts refuse any simplistic boundaries between humanity and monstrosity and, when we engage with these blurred boundaries, new constructions of vulnerability are allowed to emerge. Snakes are members of the natural world who are particularly vulnerable to vilification; these textual snakes are representationally poised to be read as the epitome of monstrosity when they harm human children. However, when we engage with the texts from a vantage point that respects the more-than-human gaze, we are able to read their vulnerability and the human characters are revealed as the most powerful and casually complicit agents. We cannot meet the demands of this historical moment without understanding how to care for and engage with the most vulnerable members of our worlds. In order to do so, we need more nuanced and sophisticated tools for reading vulnerability. Through a close, critical analysis of three noveSls, this article

offers ways to expand our reading repertoires in ways that allow us to see monstrosity and vulnerability more realistically.

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**REVIEW**

# Salman Rushdie's Cacophonous Creativity

John McLeod

**Stadtler, Florian, ed. *Salman Rushdie in Context*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2023, pp. xviii + 387. ISBN 9781316514146. Hb. £88.**

It says something about the significance of a writer when a new book of scholarly essays spanning over five decades of their career already appears out of date on the occasion of its publication. Salman Rushdie's fifteenth novel, *Victory City* (2023), appeared in the same year as *Salman Rushdie in Context*, too soon to receive critical attention from the collection's contributors; and as this impressive edited collection went into production, in July 2022 Rushdie suffered the horrendous attack on his life on stage at the Chautauqua Institution, New York. Indeed, few if any writers approaching the age of eighty have remained as busily productive and globally newsworthy as Rushdie. It is a testament both to the quality of his writing and his worldwide renown that he has been regarded as a novelist of international significance since the publication of his landmark second novel, *Midnight's Children* (1981), when its relatively unknown Bombay-born writer was aged but 34. Rushdie's reputation would undoubtedly have been secured by his remarkable literary output alone. Yet his notoriety beyond literary circles worldwide was grimly guaranteed by the *fatwa* issued in the wake of *The Satanic Verses* (1988) that forced him into hiding in fear of his life, and which played a part over thirty years later in Hadi Matar's attempt on his life that blinded Rushdie in one eye and permanently affected his mobility. The photograph taken before the attack that appears on the cover of *Salman Rushdie in Context*—the relaxed author looking at us through smilingly healthy eyes—soberingly underlines how much has changed since 2022. Rushdie's most recent book, *Knife* (2024), tells a grim tale of his near-death experience, while a new collection of stories, *The Eleventh Hour*, is scheduled to appear in November 2025. Pity the poor editor of a fresh publication of Rushdie scholarship—how on earth to keep up?

Postcolonial critics of my generation grew up with Salman Rushdie. I read *The Satanic Verses* not long after its publication, wrote on Rushdie's early novels as a doctoral student, and have followed his career ever since. For some, Rushdie is the postcolonial artist *par excellence*, chronicler of the ugly fortunes of South Asia's post-independence period, ardent enthusiast

of the hybridizing energies kaboomed by migrants in the melting-pot of the metropolis, ebullient champion of the city as crucible of reinvention and newness—nothing less than a veritable "chronicler of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries" (1) as Florian Stadtler describes him in his useful editor's introduction, whose novels, I have no doubt, will be read for decades to come. But for others, Rushdie encapsulates a kind of vulgarity of excess: his rhetorical wizardry and breathless hyperbole leave some cold, as does his representation of women; others decry his bourgeois cosmopolitanism and postmodernist self-referentiality, his breezy, sometimes dismissive rendition of the political and experiential particulars of life's less fortunate as he writes modishly about Bollywood actors, popstars, and photographers. His keen embracing of his post-*fatwa* celebrity, appearing on stage with the rock band U2 or taking a cameo role in the film *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), has also done little to endear him especially to Marxist postcolonialists.

Amidst these cross-currents of critical perception, *Salman Rushdie in Context* mounts a primarily positive engagement with Rushdie and his work, featuring scholarly contributions in the main by Rushdie enthusiasts many of whom—Joel Kuortti, Stephen Morton, Jenni Ramone—have been writing expertly on Rushdie for years. Even those critical approaches where one might expect more skeptical or censorious attitudes tend to bend kindly: Treasa De Loughry's scrupulous reading of three novels in the context of "World-Historical Capitalism" concludes sympathetically when pointing to Rushdie's "growing and forceful articulation that the political instabilities and social inequities of the present are cyclical, and that we would do well to attend to the echoes of the past" (275). Sir Salman Rushdie, millionaire sage of New York's glitterati, enabling a critical consciousness of the unevenness of the contemporary world-system—who knew?

The collection's twenty-seven chapters collectively range across a wide horizon of Rushdie's creative endeavors up to 2022 and deal with one of five headline contextual areas: "Life," "Literary and Creative Contexts," "Historical and Cultural Contexts," "Critical Theoretical Contexts," and "Reception, Criticism, and Adaptation." As such, the book is not arranged chronologically; readers will not find a progressive narrative of Rushdie's writerly evolution readily to hand. Instead, anyone who works through the essays in sequence is constantly sent back and forth across time-periods, texts, incidents, and themes. There are both disadvantages and advantages to this mode of organization. One problem is the repetition of information:

we are told by four separate contributors that Rushdie's debut novel *Grimus* (1975) is influenced by Farid ud-Din Attar's twelfth-century Persian poem known in English as *The Conference of the Birds* (1177). Another is the muting of a more readily holistic sense of the development of Rushdie's writing, from the era-defining 1980s novels to fantastical fables such as *Two Years Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights* (2015) or the Americana of *Fury* (2001), *The Golden House* (2017), and *Quichotte* (2019). On the other hand, in rejecting a more mechanically diachronic approach, *Salman Rushdie in Context* frees the reader to trace connections and synergies between Rushdie's works and across the essays themselves, zig-zagging cheerfully over the tidy borders of time, place, and genre—a characteristically Rushdie-esque endeavor, of course. Indeed, Rushdie's habitually playful, intertextual, often self-referential aesthetic is wittily captured in this collection's design (but also subtly prompts one to wonder if Rushdie's literary vision has changed all that much across the years). For example, Pavan Kumar Malreddy's opening essay, also the first essay in the "Life" section, deals not with Rushdie's biography *per se* but its textualization, as Malreddy articulates the author's life in relation to his life-writing, primarily *Joseph Anton* (2012), and in light of the biographies concocted by others especially in the wake of the *fatwa*. At times the collection's vacillating eclecticism means that new readers of Rushdie may have to work quite hard to get a grip not only on Rushdie's literary milieu but also on the many critical approaches that one might take. But the rewards of this intellectual challenge are several and help make *Salman Rushdie in Context* an introduction-level book which goes beyond the usual remit of introductory materials.

As editor, Stadtler ensures that the expected bases are covered in his assemblage of germane contexts. Individual essays successfully deal with Rushdie in relation to postcolonialism, postmodernism, diasporic identities, history, the city, globalization, secularism, and more besides, and often illuminate their significance by looking closely at a select clutch of texts rather than ranging more generally. Indicatively, Harish Trivedi's fine essay, "Salman Rushdie and Postcolonialism," focuses primarily on the early triumph of *Midnight's Children* while referencing what he calls the other "subcontinental novels" (298) such as *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995) and *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999). This is a wise strategy—encouraged, one presumes, by editorial advice—but at times such selectivity can feel a little like narrowness, given that the contexts invoked are so big (the fact that the essays are usually quite short, around ten pages on average, also plays a part). As these particular contexts have been well-covered in scholarship for

many years, I especially enjoyed those essays which frame Rushdie anew in relation to more recently emerging ones. Robert P. Marzec's "The Anthropocene and Ecological Limits in Rushdie's Works" offers an ingenious exploration of Rushdie's representation of the environment in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* and *Two Years . . ..* Stephen Morton's essay on terrorism in Rushdie's work takes us through *The Satanic Verses*, *Shalimar the Clown* (2005), and *Joseph Anton* with diamond-sharp intelligence and clear-eyed critical acumen.

I also highly valued those essays which situated Rushdie's writing in relation to other art forms, and not least because Rushdie's enthusiasm for the arts more generally (especially the cinema) is as important to his creativity as is his encyclopedic knowledge of world literature. Stadtler contributes a fine essay on Rushdie's cinematic sensibility which ranges across his childhood film-viewing in Bombay, Hollywood cinema, and Victor Fleming's *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). Ana Cristina Mendes straddles cinema and painting in her analysis of visual art and culture in Rushdie's fiction. Meanwhile, the essays which describe Rushdie's particular relations—simultaneously close and displaced—with the cultural specifics of India, South Asia, and faith cultures bring a great deal to the collection, as in Amina Yaqin's essay, "Salman Rushdie and the Urdu Tradition," and Anshuman Mondal's "Salman Rushdie and the Fatwa"—the latter should be required reading for anyone seeking to understand for the first time the so-called *Satanic Verses* affair. For me, the collection's most impressive contribution is Dan O'Gorman's stylish, intellectually vivacious essay concerning Rushdie's sonic sensibility, "Rushdie, Sound, and the Auditory Imagination." In declaring that "Salman Rushdie is a noisy writer" (118), O'Gorman joyfully pursues the significance of music particularly in *The Satanic Verses* and *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* while reminding us that Rushdie's cacophonous creativity may bring less palatable impacts for those "vulnerable communities" (128) prejudicially represented as tin-eared when confronted with music's permissive, pluralizing, composite catchiness.

O'Gorman's essay, like Mondal's and many others, invites readers to think through the problems and weaknesses of Rushdie's literary achievement even as they value the significance and technical accomplishment of his work. This sustaining of a firm critical edge throughout *Salman Rushdie in Context* makes it much more than scholarly fan-mail, and encourages those researching Rushdie for the first time *not* to be taken in or overwhelmed by his many writerly attributes (his command of form, linguistic dexterity, ludic sensibility, delivery of dialogue, artfulness

with history, and so forth). Consequently, this all makes for a big, bright, busy book; but one which also frustrates from time to time. As many of the high-quality essays it contains could be readily expanded and published in major peer-reviewed international journals, there emerges the sense on occasions that one is reading scholarly materials that have been maddeningly abbreviated in order not to transgress the inevitably shorter word-length required by Cambridge University Press's "Literature in Context" book series.

Nonetheless, readers of Rushdie old and new will be quickly persuaded to pursue the many lines of enquiry which this valuable collection opens up with intellectual generosity and rigor; and for this, its editor and contributors must be congratulated.

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**REVIEW**

# Feminist Versions of Greek Tragedy in the Theater of Marina Carr

Mária Kurdi

**Paul, Salomé. *Marina Carr and Greek Tragedy: Feminist Myths of Monstrosity.* New York and London: Routledge, 2024. 203 pages. ISBN 978-1-032-28887-1. Hb. £108.**

Arguably, the internationally most well-known and appreciated woman playwright in contemporary Ireland is Marina Carr. This is also evidenced by the fact that after Cathy Leeney and Anna McMullan's edited collection *The Theatre of Marina Carr: "before rules was made"* (Carysfort Press, 2003), four monographs on her oeuvre were published, including the one under review here. The three previous ones are: Rhona Trench's *Bloody Living: The Loss of Selfhood in the Plays of Marina Carr* (Peter Lang, 2010), *Marina Carr: Pastures of the Unknown* by Melissa Sihra (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), and Dagmara Gizło's *The Art of Experience: The Theatre of Marina Carr* (Cambridge UP, 2021). Two of these, Gizło's and now Paul's, are by non-Anglophone authors, Polish and French respectively, highlighting the international ambition to approach the work of Marina Carr from new angles. The monographs and, beside them, many of the journal articles and essays belonging to the by now extensive amount of critical literature on Carr tend to interrogate the playwright's re-modeling of Greek tragedy but only part of their investigations engages with this theme. Paul's monograph is the first book-length study entirely dedicated to the analysis of the subject, which the author undertakes in a broad historical and cultural context.

To frame her explorations, in the "Introduction" to her monograph Paul describes the strict gender politics of ancient Greek tragedy and suggests that it has particular echoes in a largely conservative modern Ireland. Also, she acknowledges the recently quite fast developing adaptation studies, the distinctive terminology of which, it seems, needs re-definition in each and every case of concrete application. Carr's is a "feminist transposition of classic drama," Paul claims, which diverts classic tragedy "from its initial purpose of endorsing and supporting patriarchy to expose the alienation of women in patriarchal societies" (2). Thus, the author builds on the idea that ancient Greek theater foregrounds male supremacy as a communal force which a woman can question only at the risk of being shown as an unnatural monster. Carr's transpositions of Greek

drama, Paul hypothesizes, represent female monstrosity and tragic destiny as a consequence of patriarchal oppression and the resolute curbing if not severe punishing of women's oppositional views and behaviors. Regarding form, Carr's relevant dramatic texts deconstruct and redesign "the initial purpose of the genre," that of classical tragedy and its political meanings, to achieve the representation of "female subjectivity and agency" (14).

An intrinsic value of the book is that its argument extends from the transposition of *Medea* in *By the Bog of Cats. . .* (1998) and *The Oresteia* in *Ariel* (2002) to the as yet less analyzed, more recent Carr plays such as *Phaedra Backwards* (2011)*, Hecuba* (2015), *iGirl* (2021), and *Girl on the Altar* (2022). In each case, Paul identifies the Greek sources which Carr uses creatively, tending to combine details from more than one ancient work and highlighting certain episodes at the expense of others to serve her purpose of revealing the distorting effects most women suffer due to their subsidiary state in the patriarchal society. The author discusses the plays side by side and in dialogue with each other across four main chapters, which are "From 'Woman' to Women on Stage," "Feminist Resistance to Patriarchal Myths," "Writing Like a Woman," and "Feminist Tragedy." Conspicuously, these titles reflect a strong kinship between the tenets of international feminist discourse and Paul's approach and lens. Her multi-level methodology can be best exemplified by her discussion of Carr's *Hecuba*, which draws on parts of two tragedies by Euripides, *The Trojan Women* and *Hecuba*. Euripides adopts the view of Hecuba, the queen of Troy as a monstrous woman in Greek mythology, criminalized for blinding Polymestor and murdering his sons in revenge for the death of her own children. In Carr's transposition it is the Greeks who perform those horrible and senseless acts and the final lines are given to Cassandra, a chorus-figure about the unjust monsterization of Hecuba by the winners of the war (48–49). Also, Paul points to a detail that Carr revises, namely Hecuba's daughter Polyxena's sacrifice by the Greeks. The young girl's body is bared to the waist before she is stabbed in the drama of Euripides; Carr's version retains the element of nudity, but Agamemnon is to cut the girl's throat, which "sheds light on the voyeuristic sadism of the sacrifice" and the action is reconceived "as a slaughter rather than a ritual" (61–62). The author also notes that unlike in Euripides, Carr's Hecuba is present at the sacrifice, emphasizing the helplessness and distress both she and Polyxena feel when in the violent hands of both the sexist and racist Greeks (79–81).

Paul argues that "a heavy sense of family doom" pervades Carr's transpositions, which is borrowed "from the classical conception of the

tragic flaw" (8). In her intersectional analysis of *By the Bog of Cats. . .*, Paul sets up a conversation involving different critical opinions regarding the interpretation of the marginalized, traveler protagonist Hester Swane's horrifying deed of killing her own daughter. The sense of tragic doom, the scholar claims, pervades not only *By the Bog of Cats. . .,* but the two other plays in the Midlands cycle, *The Mai* (1994) and *Portia Coughlan* (1996) as well as the drama *On Raftery's Hill* (2000) which, though not based on Greek originals, all use classical intertexts (9). However, Paul's tracing these intertextual resonances leads to debatable conclusions at some points. In *Portia Coughlan*, for instance, the scholar discovers another Medea figure because the character confesses to her husband that looking at her children she thinks of terrible accidents, weapons, and mutilations, which may reflect an overanxious person's fears of her own unbridled fantasies. Paul even gets entangled into a contradiction by saying that "[d]espite her hatred for her children, Portia, however, never acts on her murderous urges. This reversal of Medea's features and actions alludes to the process of turning a woman into a monster in the context of modern Ireland" (52–53). Neither does the author sound more convincing when she draws a parallel between Portia and Antigone on account of love for their respective brothers (66). In contrast, a most astute remark about the relationship of Gabriel and Portia occurs later in the book when Paul claims that, having become a wife and a mother confined to the family house, "Portia's longing for her dead twin symbolises a quest for her lost agency" (132).

It is in the fourth chapter, "Feminist Tragedy," that Paul makes conclusions regarding the generic innovations of Carr's transpositions, unique in her estimation. Of the ancient Greek texts, the source of comparison here is Aristotle's *Poetics* and its distinction between the epic and the dramatic. In Paul's view, Carr "explores the overlap of epic and tragedy in her adaptations of Greek tragedies" and creates the genre "epic tragedy," in fact a "feminist genre" (143, 153). According to the scholar, Carr's "hybridisation of classical tragedy through the lens of epic theatre as coined by Brecht" appears in *Hecuba* for the first time (157). Indeed, this play consists of parallel narrations of enactment and dialogue, enabling the presence of multiple perspectives which involve the narrators' comments on their own doings, tellingly demonstrated by the Greek victor, Agamemnon's moralizing and self-justifying remarks. Thus, for Paul, the Brechtian vein of the play consists in the characters becoming spectators of their own actions. However, one wonders if the Irish storytelling tradition has had some influence on the undoubtedly complex technique in *Hecuba.*

The later drama, *iGirl*, is a monologue written for a single performer, a genre forming a new path in Carr's work but not in Irish theater, let me add. Paul describes it as "reminiscent of the genre of classical epic as it is a poetic work of narration," wonderfully played by Olwen Fouéré in the 2021 production of the play by the Abbey Theatre, embodying and voicing human violence and its gendered effects across the centuries (165, 167).

Salomé Paul's *Marina Carr and Greek Tragedy: Feminist Myths of Monstrosity* came out in the year when the playwright turned sixty, being at the zenith of her career, so it deserves to be called a celebratory monograph. It is noteworthy how conscious Paul is of translatability as an oft-ignored problem of adaptations and she can only be praised for having the original Greek texts included side by side with the English-language quotations from Greek drama, testifying also to her impressive classical erudition. Those interested in other modern dramatizations of famous Greek mythical women can find references in the book to the revised portrayal of Hecuba in adaptations by Jean-Paul Sartre and Tony Harrison, both highly politicized, Iphigenia by Edna O'Brien, Electra by Frank McGuinness, Medea by Brendan Kennelly, and the list goes on. All in all, *Marina Carr and Greek Tragedy* is a must for researchers and admirers of Carr for its original insights and density of literary, philosophical, and theatrical references in the analyses as well as for the additional information about productions of the plays, providing actors' and theatre makers' names alongside characteristic details of the performances themselves. The volume is definitely worthy of being placed in the forefront, together with the other three monographs, on both the private and the library bookshelves showcasing Carr's work alongside textual documents of its international reception.

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**REVIEW**

# Symbiosis as a Key World Building Principle

Nina Lykke

**Karpouzou, Peggy and Nikoleta Zampaki, eds. *Symbiotic Posthumanist Ecologies in Western Literature, Philosophy and Art. Towards Theory and Practice*. New York: Peter Lang, 2023. 325 pages. ISBN 978-3-631-84501-1. Hb. €81.75.**

The edited volume *Symbiotic Posthumanist Ecologies in Western Literature, Philosophy and Art* provides a cluster of convincing and thought-provoking arguments for a rethinking and reimagining of the more-than-human world and the planet at large through the lens of symbiosis. In general, symbiosis is understood in a dual sense. First of all, it is linked to the idea that the forming of symbiotic relationships between organisms as well as between biotic and abiotic phenomena, including technologies, is a key ecological and planetary principle. Drawing on this definition, the book is inscribed in and theorizes a "symbiotic turn," which poses an "inescapable relationality" (25) as central to the planet's processes of evolution. The understanding of the "turn" is indebted to biologist Lynn Margulis's ideas of symbiogenesis, evolution through symbiotic merging (Margulis, 1998), with which she radically challenged the Darwinian principles of competition and survival of the fittest as the most fundamental evolutionary forces. Secondly, symbiosis is also understood along the lines of the volume's aim to establish as well as try out theoretical and analytical ways of entangling two schools of thought: environmental humanities and critical posthumanism. While these schools share points of departure in radical transgressions and undoings of human exceptionalism, they also work within the frame of somewhat different accentuations. In the approach to the more-than-human world, environmental humanities gives more priority to issues related to ecologies and ecosystems, while critical posthumanism, in addition to ecological engagements, further leans towards implications of a human merging with technologies and *techné*. The editors, Peggy Karpouzou and Nikoleta Zampaki, have composed the volume so that it cross-cuts these divisions, highlighting both schools' shared focus on the undoing of human exceptionalism. The book reviews theoretical frameworks and explores the ways in which this undoing takes place in contemporary literature and art, as well as in continental philosophy.

The volume is introduced by a substantial and profoundly argued overview chapter. Karpouzou and Zampaki present the genealogies of the concept of symbiosis, and motivate its critical political and ethical importance in the contemporary "era of disastrous human impact on the Earth's systems" (11). They also introduce the main theoretical themes such as cross-species agency, subjectivity, and citizenship, which the focus on symbiosis in contemporary literature, art, and philosophy puts on the agendas. The introduction is followed by three main sections. The first one, *Framing the Symbiotic Posthumanist Ecologies,* includes four chapters which dig into key theoretical frameworks that ground the volume focusing on hybridization, entanglement, and in-betweenness of human and non-human, biological and machinic bodies. The chapter also inquires into the ways in which the incommensurability of different kinds of bodies and their irreducible multiplicity need to be taken into account in a relational and egalitarian approach to the more-than-human world.

The second section, *Symbiotic Posthumanist Ecologies in Literature and Art,* contains five chapters that analyze different literary and artistic explorations of what it means to work aesthetically and ethically *beyond* humanist frameworks that take human exceptionalism as an unquestioned point of departure. These chapters foreground discussions of plants as sentient critters, symbiotic relations between humans and techno-humans, cyberbodies as medium for art-making, and geomancy as an art of tracing "the complex relationalities between the various Earth's energetic bodies and forces" (29).

*Symbiotic Posthumanist Ecologies in Continental Philosophy*, the third section consisting of five chapters, explores the ways in which continental philosophy resonates with posthumanist thought. The section hones in on deconstruction as a posthumanist methodology, Deleuze's cosmopolitanism, and theories of cosmos as based on dynamic processes of differentiation, the posthuman aspects of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, as well as the unreadability of weather, contemplated through the lens of Goethe, Nietzsche, and Freud.

Overall, the volume presents a cornucopia of different theories and analytical approaches. Not all chapters discuss symbiosis directly, nevertheless they are robustly brought to resonate with each other through the introductory overview chapter's framing of symbiosis as a key issue in the rethinking and reimagining of human/more-than-human relationships for which the volume as a whole argues. Let me highlight a couple of cross-cutting themes and discussions.

An important theme that runs through several chapters is the question of the ways in which a focus on symbiosis between humans and other kinds of critters requires that difference be taken ethically into account. Several contributors argue that positioning symbiosis as central in the understanding of multi-species relations, including those between humans and other-than-humans, should *not* lead to an erasure of difference that would imply a return to anthropocentrism. Teresa Heffernan's "Rethinking 'Queer Kin Groups': Cyborgs, Animals and Machines," for instance, offers an engaging critique of the ways in which some of the theorizations of cyborgs that followed in the wake of Donna Haraway's classic *Cyborg Manifesto* (1991) failed to acknowledge the incommensurability between animals and machines, and thereby ended up implicitly re-centering human perspectives. Heffernan emphasizes that machines and animals should not be collapsed into each other. She critically foregrounds the Cartesian tradition of reducing animals to stimulus-machines. She also pinpoints the ways in which the human building of "smart" machines (from robotics to AI) leaves gigantic carbon footprints on the planet and, in so doing, contributes heavily to the anthropogenically induced ecological crises with their ongoing mass extinctions of species and ecosystems.

An emphasis on difference—in this case, horizontal difference between species—is highlighted by Nicole Anderson's "Animal–Human Differences: The Deconstructive Force of Posthumanism." The chapter dissociates the concept of deconstruction from its exclusive relation to poststructuralism, and argues for its use as a key tool for a critical posthumanist undoing of human exceptionalism. Deconstruction is launched as a critique of essentializing tendencies in posthumanist thought. Instead of asking the essentializing question of what posthumanism *is* and how it erases boundaries between entities, for example, human and animal, Anderson argues for critical posthumanist deconstruction as a path to a pursuit of horizontal, bio-egalitarian difference. She pinpoints how such a deconstruction also comes with an ethical requirement: that humans should respect the radical difference of animal others. To underscore the point Anderson tells an extremely beautiful and thought-provoking story about her longstanding relationship with a wild Australian brushtail possum, and the mutual creation of a space of encounter that for Anderson is guided by what she describes as a loving surrender to difference beyond her normative experience of herself as a human "I."

Another important strand of thought, unfolding in several contributions, concerns the inescapable givenness of symbiosis in terms of

the human embeddedness in more-than-human ecologies, which makes ideas about human exceptionalism stand out as ridiculous *hubris*. This theme is, for example, explored productively in analyses of speculative fiction. "Symbiotic Citizenship in Posthuman Ecosystems: Smart Biocities in Speculative Fiction" by Peggy Karpouzou explores *A Flash of Silver Green*, (edited by Maddox, Walker, and Lovejoy 2019), a collection of stories dealing with future cities. Karpouzou uses the collection's exploration of "smart biocities," constructed along the lines of respect for symbiotic entanglements of human and non-human phenomena, as entry point to argue for symbiotic citizenship and symbiotic planetary futures as well as for a dialogue between critical theory and speculative fiction.

Bruce Clarke's "Cracking Open: Ecological Communication in Richard Powers' *The Overstory*" analyzes the theme of symbiosis and human embeddedness in the more-than-human world through the novel's articulations of plant affectivity, plant cognition, and human–plant relationships. In particular, he focuses on the ways in which Powers's novel (2018) imagines a human metamorphosis making one of the characters becoming attuned to the listening to plant communication, and in the end being so transformed that she can receive arboreal enlightenment. Theoretically, Clarke builds on Carla Hustak and Natasha Myers's notion of "involutionary momentum," which describes an important aspect of symbiotic co-becoming: "the very momentum through which organisms reach toward one another and involve themselves in one another's lives" (Hustak and Myers qtd. 137; see also Hustak and Myers, "Involuntary Momentum" 96).

A chapter that touches both on themes of radical difference and the givenness of more-than-human planetary symbiosis is Cassandra Falke's "Eco-Phenomenology in the Dark." Falke takes a point of departure in phenomenology, more particularly in Merleau-Ponty's concept of the chiasmus of touching and being touched, perceiving and being perceived, as well as in Jean-Luc Marion's notion of saturated phenomena, the experience of which exceeds intentionality. Falke activates these phenomenological frameworks as a contribution to a symbiotic, posthumanist planetary ontology, while putting it in conversation with her experiences of a passionate relationship with the Arctic environment in the Northern part of Norway where she lives. She describes convincingly how we (humans), beyond what is circumscribed by our human intentionality, are materially bound into a relation of mutual transformation with the more-than-human critters in the environments we inhabit, and vice versa. Falke argues for an

eco-phenomenology that radically acknowledges the inescapable mutuality, which implies that humans are positioned as just one living thing among others.

There are other excellent chapters in the volume in addition to the ones I have foregrounded here, and plenty of other thematic lines that could be drawn between them. The volume is rich and moves in multiple directions. The kind of multiplicity that characterizes the book is often both the beauty and the problem of edited volumes. Nevertheless, the two editors of *Symbiotic Posthumanist Ecologies,* Karpouzou and Zampaki provide a robust framing of the volume's diversity in their overview chapter as well as through the clustering of the contributions in the three sections. They make the concept of symbiosis and the unfolding of it in conversation with many different artistic, literary, and philosophical approaches key to thinking critically about the current Anthropocene predicament as well as to speculating affirmatively about alternative futures. In this way, they enable readers to dig further into thematic lines of both convergence and divergence between the contributions; and I shall warmly encourage readers to do so. My thematic focus on the more-than-human symbiosis related to the ethical acknowledgement of species difference, on the one hand, and on the ontological givenness of human embeddedness in the more-than-human world, on the other, is meant to illustrate the very rich discussions that can be extracted through a close-reading of the volume.

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**REVIEW**

# Past and Present in Edith Wharton's Travel Writing

Tibor Glant

**Kovács, Ágnes Zsófia. *The Memory of Architecture in Edith Wharton's Travel Writing.* Routledge Research in Women's Literature. New York and London: Routledge, 2025. xiii + 212 pages. ISBN 9781032580265. Hb. £150.**

Published in the Routledge Research in Women's Literature series in 2025, *The Memory of Architecture in Edith Wharton's Travel Writings* is a thought-provoking contribution to both travel writing and Wharton studies as well as to American intellectual history. It was written in response to Gary Totten's 2022 call to Wharton scholars to dig deeper into her travel accounts old and new. And therein lies one of the many strengths of the book: Ágnes Zsófia Kovács discusses Edith Wharton's travel texts published in her own lifetime as well as the ones recently found in archives and made available since the early 1990s. This is important since Wharton lives on in the American literary canon not as a travel writer but primarily as a novelist and social commentator, and, of course, as the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for literature. In *The Memory of Architecture*, Wharton also comes across as a prolific travel writer and art historian, on the basis of publications covering some 50 years of her active life, form the now freely available travel diary of an Aegean trip in 1888 (penned at the age of 26) to her autobiography published in 1934 (three years before her death).

The book itself is composed of an introduction, seven topical chapters, and a conclusion. The introduction first explains the evolution and current state of Wharton scholarship (4–13) and travel writing studies (13–24), then introduces the publication history of the texts covered (24–27). It is here that Kovács makes it clear that we are reading a unique combination of travel accounts and art history theory covering many of the major regions of Western civilization in Europe. For Wharton, a New York aristocrat, Medieval European architecture represents continuity with the past, which she thinks was absent in her own America; but it does so with a twist: architectural restoration and wartime destruction (for instance, that of the Reims cathedral during World War I) break up continuity and, therefore, both are counterproductive. Italy and France are treated to two chapters each, while North Africa, the Aegean, and Spain account for the remaining

three. Each chapter presents the subject matter, explains critical reaction to and contemporary reviews of the texts, recites the publication history of the texts, offers a map of Wharton's travels in the given area, and then elaborates on "the synergies of architecture, cultivated landscapes, and natural landscapes" (203) in correspondence with the various works of John Ruskin, whose books on art history were the go-to texts for American travelers of Wharton's social class.

The two chapters on Italy cover Wharton's *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* (1904) and *Italian Backgrounds* (1905). In the case of the former, travel is but an excuse to produce an academic treatise on Italian architecture and gardens, while in the latter travel is combined with Wharton's preferred means of looking at art. Published a year apart, the two texts are so different, Kovács argues, that they deserve separate treatment. *Villas* was meant to be a semi-academic handbook, while *Backgrounds* is more theoretical. It is here that Wharton challenges Ruskin: she questions his choice of prioritizing Gothic over Baroque and argues for the need to blur "the boundary between real and imagined, present and past" (85). One of the strengths of Kovács's book is that she recounts the story of the publication of each text. Wharton was commissioned to write about Italian villas and gardens by *The Century Magazine* in 1902 but was allowed much less freedom with the texts and illustration than Kennan had enjoyed in the 1880s when writing about the exile system in Siberia for the very same publication. The debates between author and publisher about the texts and the illustrations clearly show that even a woman of Wharton's social standing had to meet certain expectations and had to yield on many of them. Though the book was a strange hybrid (44), it had to be a commercial success because her next project was published within a year. Six of the nine chapters in *Backgrounds* were reprints of articles for *Scribner's Magazine* published between 1895 and 1903, and she added three essays. This time, Kovács tells us, Wharton had her way: one reviewer even complained that her "writing is not that of an American of today, not even of a woman, but merely of the art-antiquarian" (71). When Ruskin did the same thing some 50 years before or when Henry James did it simultaneously with Wharton, it was alright, although Kovács does not say it explicitly, because they were men. But when a woman does it, it somehow becomes dry and boring.

Chapters 3 and 4 analyze Wharton's trips to, and admiration for, France from 1908 and 1915. *A Motor-Flight Through France* from 1908 introduces new means and new experiences of travel (by car), and Kovács elegantly explains why and how this opened up new possibilities for

travelers. *Motor-Flight* unveils Wharton's uncritical admiration for France and French culture, and she reconciles here with Ruskin's "cathedral tour" of mostly Gothic historical sites. *Fighting France* from 1915 is one of her best-known pieces, usually interpreted (correctly) as wartime propaganda. The French government granted Wharton and her companions the privilege to travel to the war zone and report on the destruction (especially of the Reims cathedral) brought by the German invasion. It coincided with another iconic piece of wartime atrocity propaganda, James Bryce's *Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages* (also from 1915), and the two combined to help swing American public opinion towards the Allies in the war. While the *Bryce Report* offered graphic details of alleged German atrocities against Belgian civilians, Wharton presented wartime destruction through the demolition of buildings, which she interpreted as a break in the continuity that architecture represents between past and present.

Wharton visited North Africa on multiple occasions and wrote about these trips in some detail. Here, however, she seems to be out of her depth (although Kovács would never admit this): she comes across as a dreamer in fairyland (Oriental tales and mystique, bazaars, and harems) rather than the art connoisseur on a study trip that she indeed was in Italy and France. Her bias for France is apparent here, too: she represents French colonial administration in North Africa as an exclusively positive civilizing force. The posthumously published diary of an 1888 trip to the Aegean reveals her admiration for Homer, and *Osprey Notes* from 1926 add but little because the text is fragmented. This is where Wharton scholarship is at a loss: with more complete notes from 1926 we could have traced her perception of ancient (and modern) Greece over a period of some 40 years. Her Spanish travel accounts seem to be a mixture of the Ruskinian "cathedral trail" of historical sites from *Motor-Flight in France* and the dreamer in fairyland of the North African accounts, now directly invoking one of Wharton's favorite texts, Washington Irving's *Alhambra* (1832). A tight conclusion and a comprehensive index round out the volume.

So what do we learn about Wharton the travel writer from Kovács? Above all, she was a willing and professional traveler with an academic mindset going on well-researched study trips. She first wrote for magazines and then collected these articles into printed books, sometimes coming across as "unwomanly"—which in turn shows the limits set for a woman author even of her social class. Her admiration for Europe's constructed cultural legacy (primarily architecture) is often contrasted with the provincialism of her native United States. She escapes the East Coast for

Europe, like Hemingway and others of the Lost Generation, like Frederick Faust (also known as Max Brand, one of the most prolific cowboy western writers), who bought a villa in Florence, and like Royall Tyler (a banker, politician, and Byzantine art expert), who bought a home and settled in Burgundy, and whose wife was there at Wharton's death bed in 1937. With her writings on Italy and France, she contributed to the American intellectual tradition of viewing European art and architecture as a key to Western civilization, which would get a new impetus from Columbia University launching an MA in museum studies (requiring multiple field trips to European museums) in the 1920s and which would culminate in the establishment of the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives unit of the US Army in World War II to preserve and protect Europe's material cultural heritage even in the war zone in 1944–1945. This is indeed a thought-provoking book to read and enjoy.

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