G.K. Chesterton and the Religion of Detection
Lecture themes

• Contextualise Chesterton as a writer of detective fiction. Patriot, political progressive, and a Roman Catholic apologist

• Theology and Detection (form, imagery, language)

• Religion in Crime Fiction
“Do you promise that your detectives shall well and truly detect the crimes presented to them using those wits which it may please you to bestow upon them and not placing reliance on nor making use of Divine Revelation, Feminine Intuition, Mumbo Jumbo, Jiggery-Pokery, Coincidence, or Act of God?”

The Detection Club meeting in 1932, when G. K. Chesterton was its President
Knox’s “Ten Commandments of Detective Fiction”

1. The criminal must be mentioned in the early part of the story, but must not be anyone whose thoughts the reader has been allowed to follow.

2. All supernatural or prenatural agencies are ruled out as a matter of course.

3. Not more than one secret room or passage is allowable.

4. No hitherto undiscovered poison may be used, nor any appliance which will need a long and scientific explanation at the end.

5. No Chinaman must figure in the story.

6. No accident must ever help the detective, nor must he have an unaccountable situation which proves to be right.

7. The detective himself must not commit the crime.

8. The detective is bound to declare any clues upon which he may happen to light.

9. The stupid friend of the detective, the Watson, must not conceal from the reader any thoughts which pass through his mind; his intelligence must be slightly, but very slightly, below that of the average reader.

10. Twin brothers, and doubles generally, must not appear unless we have been duly prepared for them.
“In ‘A Defence of Detective Stories’ (1902) Chesterton lamented the sensational components that he felt stigmatised detective fiction, which for him ‘should be regarded as the modern equivalent of epic literature and the detective as knight-errant actually embodies a principle of order’ part of a ‘benevolent conspiracy to support civilisation against the disruptive activities of criminals’

(Ascari, 2007, 159)

“The first and fundamental principle is that the aim of a mystery story, as of every other story, is not darkness but light. The story is written for the moment when the reader does understand... The misunderstanding is only meant as a dark outline of cloud to out the brightness of that instant of intelligibility”

“The secret may appear complex, but it must be simple; and in this it is a symbol of higher mysteries”

G.K. Chesterton “How to Write a Detective Story”, G.K.’s Weekly, 17th October 1925
"He put his hand on the shoulder of an ordinary passing postman." (see page 150).

"The Earl of Glenadyne," said Brown, sadly, and looked down heavily at the skull." (see page 205).
Chesterton’s “importance as a political “myth-maker,” a teller of persuasive stories at the center of which was the English nation.”

(Stapleton, 2009, 63)

“despite England’s racial and national prejudices, some of which [Chesterton] shared, he was also extremely critical of the British establishment”

“although his stories exhibit a hierarchical and traditionalist view of nature, they endorse a democratic view of society.”

Father Brown: “both the defender of traditional order and critical of the prevailing social establishment in the name of that traditional order. So he believes in the cosmology of faith and the theological assumptions on which it was founded, but he is critical of those features of British society or of British imperialism due to religious or philosophical influences outside Catholicism.” [emphasis added]

Moral Theology and Detection

“Both parables [...] and detective fiction depend on the interpretation of the reader to complete them in a quest for truth and the triumph of good over evil”

(Alison Jack, 2019, p.31)

“detective fiction mirrors the effect of the parable; both use the convention of plain storytelling to relay meaning by textual revelation”

(Michael Cook, 2011, 64)

Paradox used to: “drive us out of our comfortable habits and acquiescence to convention and routine, to puncture our crusted forms and habitual complaisance in perception, to provoke uncertainty and questions and let in the light of wonder.”

(Blackwell, 2018, 35)
The Metaphysical Detective Story

“A metaphysical detective story is a text that parodies or subverts traditional detective-story conventions – such as narrative closure and the detective's role as surrogate reader – with the intention, or at least the effect, of asking questions about mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot.”

(Merivale and Sweeney, 1998, 2)

Although both Holmes and Brown “employ observation and deductive reasoning, the priest has no use for the magnifying glass, for analysing footprints and tobacco ash, or any other of the scientific techniques employed by Holmes, or to an even greater degree by later British sleuths such as Dr Thorndyke. The main secret of the priest’s success is intuition.”

(Martin Gardner, 1998, 8)

“The obsessively anti-clerical Valentin embodies the dangers inherent in atheism” and “sheds a sinister light on positivist detection” of Holmes

(Ascari, 2007,161)
“his concern for justice is no less clear for him than it is for the police” but “Where the latter look for conviction Father Brown looks for confessions and conversion; while the police are concerned about crime, Father Brown is concerned about sin.”

(Robert Paul, 1991, 73)

“religion had much to do with development of the detective canon, which somehow came to replace the traditional biblical canon within a society that was increasingly secularised. At a time when traditional values – concerning both metaphysics and the human being – were questioned, detective fiction reinstate truth and justice as the basic coordinates of its system of meaning.”

(Ascari, 2007, 158)
"You have prepared me for my exposure, and I thank you for that too. Is there anything that you require of me? Is there any claim that I can release or any charge or trouble that I can spare my husband in obtaining HIS release by certifying to the exactness of your discovery? **I will write anything, here and now, that you will dictate.** I am ready to do it."

And she would do it, thinks the lawyer, watchful of the **firm hand with which she takes the pen!**

"I will not trouble you, Lady Dedlock. Pray spare yourself."

"I have long expected this, as you know. I neither wish to spare myself nor to be spared. You can do nothing worse to me than you have done. Do what remains now."

"Lady Dedlock, there is nothing to be done. I will take leave to say a few words when you have finished."

Their need for watching one another should be over now, but they do it all this time, and the stars watch them both through the opened window. Away in the moonlight lie the woodland fields at rest, and the wide house is as quiet as the narrow one. The narrow one! Where are the digger and the spade, this peaceful night, destined to add the last great secret to the many secrets of the Tulkinghorn existence? Is the man born yet, is the spade wrought yet? Curious questions to consider, more curious perhaps not to consider, under the watching stars upon a summer night.

"**Of repentance or remorse or any feeling of mine,**" Lady Dedlock presently proceeds, "I say not a word. If I were not dumb, you would be deaf. Let that go by. It is not for your ears."

*(Bleak House, Chapter XLI)*
“Throughout her long confession she never lifted it; throughout her long confession her voice was never broken by a tear. What she had to tell she told in a cold, hard tone, very much the tone in which some criminal, dogged and sullen to the last, might have confessed to a jail chaplain.”

(CHAPTER XXXIV. MY LADY TELLS THE TRUTH)

“The revelation made by the patient to the physician is . . . as sacred as the confession of a penitent to his priest?”

“physicians and lawyers are the confessors of this prosaic nineteenth century”

“He looked like a man who could have carried, safely locked in his passionless breast, the secrets of a nation, and who would have suffered no inconvenience from the weight of such a burden.”

(XXXCI, Dr MOSGRAVE’S ADVICE)
“Braddon makes Gothic anxiety no longer a foreign but a fundamentally domestic concern. And producing the modern secret as an extension of the superseded yet still fascinating Catholic confessional with all its suggestions of transgressive sexuality and Gothic containments, Lady Audley’s Secret emerges as remarkably symptomatic of the powerful convergence in mid-century England of the social anxieties around both sexual and religious deviance.”

“In both novels [Lady A and WiW], the turn to confession reveals the inadequacy of their dominant epistemological frameworks in uncovering the truth.

[...]

These novels suggest that confession is no simple or straightforward supplement to circumstantial evidence; rather, the confessions of Lady Audley and Count Fosco add ambiguity and mystery to the detectives’ cases. Braddon and Collins seem to recognize that the strongest cases are made, and the strongest narrative resolutions occur, when circumstantial evidence and confession reinforce each other to offer the same story, but in *Lady Audley’s Secret* and *The Woman in White*, circumstantial evidence and confession do not coincide.”

“Why, I was going there,” said Brown heavily; “I must ask him to confess, and all that.”

Driving the unhappy Brown before them like a hostage or sacrifice, they rushed together into the sudden stillness of Valentin’s study.

The great detective sat at his desk apparently too occupied to hear their turbulent entrance. They paused a moment, and then something in the look of that upright and elegant back made the doctor run forward suddenly. A touch and a glance showed him that there was a small box of pills at Valentin’s elbow, and that Valentin was dead in his chair; and on the blind face of the suicide was more than the pride of Cato.

(“The Secret Garden”)

("The Secret Garden")
“...The next step is for you; I shall take no more steps; I will seal this with the seal of confession. If you ask me why, there are many reasons, and only one that concerns you. I leave things to you because you have not yet gone very far wrong, as assassins go. You did not help to fix the crime on the smith when it was easy; or on his wife, when that was easy. You tried to fix it on the imbecile because you knew that he could not suffer. That was one of the gleams that it is my business to find in assassins. And now come down into the village, and go your own way as free as the wind; for I have said my last word.”

They went down the winding stairs in utter silence, and came out into the sunlight by the smithy. Wilfred Bohun carefully unlatched the wooden gate of the yard, and going up to the inspector, said: “I wish to give myself up; I have killed my brother.”

(“The Hammer of God”)

“With what the waiter confessed to Father Brown we are not concerned, for the excellent reason that that cleric kept it to himself”

[…]

“I am a priest, Monsieur Flambeau,” said Brown, “and I am ready to hear your confession.”

The other stood gasping for a few moments, and then staggered back into a chair.

[…]

“I don’t know his real name,” said the priest placidly, “but I know something of his fighting weight, and a great deal about his spiritual difficulties. I formed the physical estimate when he was trying to throttle me, and the moral estimate when he repented.”

“Oh, I say—repented!” cried young Chester, with a sort of crow of laughter.

Father Brown got to his feet, putting his hands behind him. “Odd, isn’t it,” he said, “that a thief and a vagabond should repent, when so many who are rich and secure remain hard and frivolous, and without fruit for God or man? But there, if you will excuse me, you trespass a little upon my province. If you doubt the penitence as a practical fact, there are your knives and forks.

[…]”

“What did you do to him?” cried the colonel, with unusual intensity. “What did he tell you?”

“I beg your pardon,” said the priest immovably, “that is where the story ends.”

“And the interesting story begins,” muttered Pound. “I think I understand his professional trick. But I don’t seem to have got hold of yours.”

(“The Queer Feet”)
WHAT DO WE MEAN BY THE “INNOCENCE” OF FATHER BROWN?

1. Freedom from sin, guilt, or moral wrong in general; the state of being untainted with, or unacquainted with, evil; moral purity.

2. Freedom from specific guilt; the fact of not being guilty of that with which one is charged; guiltlessness.

3. Freedom from cunning or artifice; guilelessness, artlessness, simplicity; hence, want of knowledge or sense, ignorance, silliness.
References


