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Abstract

Overview of the detective or mystery story, particularly its development as a genre during the Golden Age between the wars when Williams wrote reviews, and when other close professional, familial, philosophical, or Oxonian ties existed between the Inklings and British mystery writers of this time. Relates the comedic anagnorisis of the resoluti on of the mystery to Tolkien's concept of eucatastrophe and concludes that mystery can be seen as "a form of mythic comedy, as presenting the myth of deliverance."

Keywords

Eucatastrophe in mystery fiction; Mysteries—Mythopoeic themes; Mystery fiction; Williams, Charles—As mystery critic; Williams, Charles—As mystery writer

DETECTIVE FICTION AS MYTHIC COMEDY

Jared Lobdell

In histories of detective fiction, or of mystery fiction, there is usually an unexplained gap between Poe, who is deemed to have invented the genre (if that is what it is), and Doyle, who is deemed to have brought it very nearly to perfection. But it has recently been suggested -- and in my view largely demonstrated -- that this gap has its origin in improper categorization, and that the genre we should have been looking at all along is what the Victorians called sensation or sensational fiction. This and much else can be found in Mr R. F. Stewart's wise and diligent study, . . . And Always A Detective (David & Charles, 1980). I shall use it as my starting point for a consideration of the detective or mystery story, of Charles Williams as critic of those stories, and of Charles Williams as writer of "theological thrillers" that may descend, in the right line, from the shilling shocker.

At the outset it would perhaps be wise to define roughly (if no more) what it is we mean by genre. Perhaps the best way to put it is to say that (in the words of a recent handbook on genre) established genres "carry with them a whole series of prescriptions and restrictions, some codified in the pronouncements of rhetoricians and others less officially but no less forcefully established by previous writers" -- and that the writer in the genre must always be making a declaration of indebtedness to or a conscious declaration of independence from his predecessors -- or hers (Heather Dubrow, Genre, Methuen 1982, pp. 9ff). Our expectations, and thus our understanding of the work, are keyed by our knowledge of its (stated or intended) genre.

Now I have called this paper "Detective Fiction as Mythic Comedy" -- after considering and rejecting the phrase "Redemptive Comedy" -- in part because, in my view, the great detective stories (like Doyle's) are mythopoetic, and in part because I wanted the title to catch at least an echo of Nprthrop Frye's mythos of comedy. You will all recall Frye's four great mythoi, springtime's comedy, summer's romance, autumn's tragedy, winter's irony, with their contrapuntal motion: I wish to suggest here that while science fiction is ironic and hivernal (no credit to me -- James Blish said it long ago), detective fiction is comedic and, if you like, vernal. (The place of "fantasy" in this formulation is a matter I have dealt with elsewhere and doubtless will again.) I would suggest, moreover, that we are here dealing with a particular kind of comedic movement.

This may seem a roundabout way of getting at the work of Charles Williams, but we shall make up on the swings what we lose on the roundabouts, and it is in any case

as well to set our groundwork firmly before trying to catch that elusive and mercurial author in our generic bounds. The point to which I am leading up, as those familiar with Professor Frye's The Myth of Deliverance will already have recognized, is that sensation fiction, and particularly detective fiction, fulfils the same function and demands the same responses for and from the reading public in Victorian England as the popular plays -- I mean the popular comedic plays -- fulfilled and demanded in Shakespeare's day. Here is Professor Frye:

"In a famous chapter of the Poetics (xi), Aristotle speaks of reversal and recognition (peripeteia and anagnorisis) as characteristic of what he calls complex plots . . . Sometimes the effect" (of what Frye calls the "and hence" story, as opposed to the "and then" story) "seems to reverse the direction of the action up to that point, and when it does we are normally very close to the end. Hence a reversal of the action often forms a part of an anagnorisis, a word that can be translated either 'discovery' or 'recognition', depending on how much of a surprise it is. Thus in a detective story the identifying of the murderer is a 'discovery' in the sense that we realize he is a murderer for the first time: it is a 'recognition' in the sense that, if the normal conventions of the detective story are being preserved, he is already a well known and established character." (Myth of Deliverance, p. 4.)

This anagnorisis is in fact a staple of Victorian popular fiction as well as of Shakesperean comedy: one need only think of the stolen or runaway child motif in -- for example -- G. A. Henty, or indeed the whole matter of Lady Audley's Secret, or (to come into Edwardian times) the double anagnorisis of the first of the Father Brown stories. It could even be said that the anagnorisis is the sensation of the sensation fiction. But how does this tie in with Frye's myth of deliverance?

By the myth of deliverance, Frye means (roughly) the story-pattern whose essential drive is toward liberation, "whether of the central character, a pair of lovers, or its whole society" (p. 14). The comedy, or the detective fiction, is a ritual enactment of this pattern of deliverance, highly conventionalized. The point is thus not in the guessing "whodunit?" but in the reader's participation in the denouement, or in the anagnorisis.

But we have been speaking of detective fiction, and it may reasonably be asked, what is the position of the detective in all this. Mr Stewart has suggested a

possible answer, in this wise: the "detective" in the phrase "detective fiction" refers originally not to the character (Dupin or Sergeant Cuff), but to the fact that a process of detection occurs within the story (pp. 71ff.). In other words, early detective fiction had a person or persons engaged in the process of detection - who might therefore be called by the name of detective(s) -- but it did not center on the person of the detective to the same degree that Chesterton did with Father Brown or Doyle (most of the time) with Sherlock Holmes.

But the tendency was there, nonetheless, and this raises an interesting point. It cannot be successfully argued that the increasing tendency toward detective omniscience in detective fiction came about as a result of or even in parallel to an increasing detective omniscience in the "real world" -- No, it seems rather that Sherlock Holmes and his successors are, like the disguised Duke in Measure for Measure or Prospero in The Tempest, stage managers or "deputy dramatists" (Frye's term), whose function is to make sure "everything comes out all right in the end" -- which is to say, to enact the myth of deliverance. As I have elsewhere observed, in Shippey's term (in The Road to Middle Earth), Sherlock Holmes may be taken as a "calque" of the Victorian detective on the White Magician. He is a type risen to the dignity of an archetype.

If all this is true -- and I suggest strongly that it is --, we can see that Miss Sayers and her colleagues in the Detection Club were acting by a just instinct when they formalized (some would say overformalized) the conventions of their genre. This does not mean that the country-house or "Golden Age" English mystery is per se a better thing than the American hard-boiled or Black Mask mystery: both, after all, are conventionalized, and both are (I would argue) in accord with the national myths of deliverance. This, I think, lies behind the dictum of Henry James that the most mysterious of mysteries (he meant the most engrossing, I believe) are those that lie at our own door, so that Lady Audley drives Udolpho from our minds. "What are the Appenines to us or we to the Appenines? Instead of the terrors of Udolpho, we are treated to the terrors of the cheerful country house and the busy London lodgings" (in R. F. Stewart, p. 45).

"Terror" is not, in my view, le mot juste, though it points the way to a possible Aristotelian catharsis and thence at least toward the communal aspects of the deliverance. But what is involved is mystery rather than terror: if it were terror only, no one would reread The Hound of the Baskervilles. The first time I read it I was twelve and terrified (and in a strange

house): I read it differently now, but I read it, and the fact that I know the outcome does not alter my pleasure in the ritual enactment of the myth. But James did have his finger on the importance of tying the story to the world (though admittedly the mythic world) of the reader.

We recall from a page or two ago that genre is conventionalized to permit uses that are either statements of indebtedness or statements of independence. If one looks at the history of the English country-house detective novel, one finds in that group of authors that Julian Symon has called the farceurs simultaneous statements of indebtedness and independence, what we might think of as a fuzzy delineation between action within the genre and commentary on it. And it was not true only of the farceurs, though they (and Edmund Crispin in particular) may be the best examples of it. The earliest Gideon Fells are simultaneously within the locked-room or puzzle sub-genre and are commentaries on it as well as on G. K. Chesterton. In fact, if we look at the timing, it is almost as though the genre awaited only the advent of its most conventionalized, most magician-like, most pattern-bound and most (therefore) purely mythic detective, before its practitioners began their experimentation and independence (or forays into independence) and commentary-within-genre.

The detective I refer to is, of course, Dame Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot, and the importance of the point for our consideration here is that it establishes the years 1930-1935 as a time (in England particularly) in which the use of the genre was unstable and even shifting. We are accustomed to think of the interwar period as the Golden Age of the English detective story and in a way it was, but what a vast congeries is encompassed in that Golden Age. In 1930, the year that Charles Williams began his detective reviews, Conan Doyle had but lately finished with Sherlock Holmes (and at the beginning of the year was, like Holmes, alive in Sussex), Chesterton had Father Brown stories still to go, Trent's Own Case was still in the future, Anthony Ruthven Gethryn was at the heighth of his career, Lord Peter short of his, and Thorndyke and the Humdrums (as Julian Symons called them) were going strong. Monsignor Knox, first of the farceurs, was publishing stories about the Indescribable, but in that he was distinctly avant-garde.

By 1936, when Williams did the last of his reviews, we had left-wing detective writers (Day Lewis and Christopher Caudwell), the Humdrums were beginning to die off, it was the year of Chesterton's death, J. I. M. Stewart was writing as Michael Innes, Gethryn's cre-

ator had crossed the Atlantic to Hollywood, and for two memorable experimental books, Anthony Berkeley had become Francis Iles. Of course, Williams did not only review British authors -- Ellery Queen and John Dickson Carr and Q. Patrick and S. S. Van Dine and Dashiell Hammett all make their appearance. And he did not only review the experimenters -- J. S. Fletcher, John Rhode, R. A. J. Walling, G. D. H. and Margaret Cole, Jefferson Farjeon, Gethryn's Philip Macdonald, all make their multiple appearances.

But for all that, Williams's own perception, and the need to say something intelligent about a book in a paragraph (all he was usually given), make it particularly fortunate that he was writing at this time of shifting genre use. It is my contention that (as I read his commentary) not only was he fully cognizant of the sensation fiction origins of detective fiction, but he was conscious also of the anagnorisis involved (as I hope to show subsequently). And here I would pause to make what may seem to be two digressions, but are really not.

First. I want to shift attention back to my earlier remark on the place of "fantasy" in all this. And I want to suggest that, if we take one highly restrictive definition of fantasy, we can identify the comedic anagnorisis with the eucatastrophe of faerie. Let me remind you of the relevant passage, in Tolkien's essay: "But the 'consolation' of fairy-tales has another aspect than the imaginative satisfaction of ancient desires. Far more important is the Consolation of the Happy Ending. . . . I will call it Eucatastrophe. . . . The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous 'turn'. . . this joy, which is one of the things fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially 'escapist' nor 'fugitive'. In its fairy-tale -- or otherworld -- setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace" ("On Fairy Stories" in The Monsters and the Critics, p. 153).

Second, I wish to call to your attention a curious phenomenon: the detective fiction writers mentioned above have, many of them, fairly close relationships to the writers habitually thought of as mythopoetic. The relationships range from identity (Chesterton and perhaps Miss Sayers) to familial relationships (Philip Macdonald as George Macdonald's grandson), to friendship and influence (Bentley with Chesterton and Tolkien), to possession of the mythopoetic talent (Doyle), to shared Oxford (Stewart, Crispin -- in one of whose books CSL appears as a character --, and of course Day Lewis, who beat CSL out for Professor of Poetry). It cannot be claimed that the world of the interwar de-

tective story moved far apart from the world of the mythopoetic. Or, if you like, from the world of the fantastic.

Nor, given what we have said, and given what Tolkien said about the eucatastrophe, should we expect to find any great distance between. For, in a way, it might be claimed that the vaunted 'intellectualism' of the detective story (or the detective novel) comes down to this, that the authors are fundamentally concerned -- particularly in the time of Williams's reviews -- with a set of patterns, a mythos if you like, involved in deliverance, involving a joyful anagnorisis -- but (and here we follow James) centered on the familiar rather than the strange. That is, the intellectualism consists in the embodiment of intellectual concerns in a 'popular' form. But the concerns are popular as well. I shall return to this point subsequently.

The distinction between the strange and the familiar, which seems simple enough with Burke and Alison in the eighteenth-century context (and even with James in the nineteenth), tends to give way as we press on it in the twentieth. But perhaps we might say that the conventions of detective fiction put it into the realm of familiarity as a genre. In such a way the conventions of the Greek theatre made the action familiar to the playgoers, for all the obvious artificiality of what went on on stage.

We might here draw the contrast between Frye's deputy dramatists and Tolkien's sub-creators. An example may help to clarify the matter. In Thornton Wilder's Our Town, the Stage Manager is clearly the deputy dramatist, but Wilder is the sub-creator. (Similarly, in Henry V, the Prologue speaker is the deputy dramatist, and in Der Dreigroschenoper, the Street Singer: the latter should remind us that its original, Gay's Beggars' Opera, occupies an interesting intermediate position between the expression of the myth of deliverance in comedy and its expression in sensation fiction.)

The point of the contrast between deputy and sub-creator lies in the very rigor of the requirements for sub-creation: if the writer is indeed to make the rare and beautiful blue moon to shine, or to put fire in the belly of the cold worm, then he (or she) had best have managed that elvish craft of enchantment, and there, in that word, is the key. For the quality of fantasy we have the craft of enchantment, the power of the strange and the other-worldly, and the sudden joyous turn, the eucatastrophe. For the genre of detective fiction, we have the conventions of the genre (and the detective process), the power of the familiar and the this-worldly, the magician conventionally on-stage as it were, and then the sudden turn, the anagnorisis. Both promise deliverance, in a way, but what a different way.

And yet, what of Chesterton? Has he not shown, with Father Brown, that the quality of fantasy can inhere within the conventions of detective fiction? Rather as his master Dickens showed that the quality could inhere within the conventions of the English sporting tale? To this I can think of two answers.

First, with the appearance of Sam Weller, the 'angel in gaiters', Dickens and Pickwick begin to burst the bounds of the genre, and the same kind of thing might be said of Chesterton as the Father Brown stories progressed. I shall return to this. And second, there is a distinction between the Mooreeffoc fantasy and "creative" fantasy. Here is Professor Tolkien again:

"Mooreeffoc is a fantastic word, but it could be seen written up in every town in this land. It is Coffee-room, viewed from the inside through a glass door . . . and it was used by Chesterton to denote the queerness of things that have become trite. . . But it has, I think, only a limited power; for the reason that recovery of freshness of vision is its only virtue" (pp. 146-147) -- while creative fantasy, in making something new, promotes delivery not merely from triteness (should I say, from the mundane?) but out of all our sea of troubles. It is the difference between the sometimes wearying Chestertonian paradox and true reversal, of action, of energy, of reality. (But Chestertonian paradox is not to be denigrated on that account.)

I do think the Father Brown stories eventually test the conventions of the genre too severely, and the Mooreeffoc comes too automatically at the denouement, as in "The Vanishing of Vaudrey" for example, but in the best of the early stories -- the very first, with its double anagnorisis, or "The Queer Feet" or even that extravaganza in which a corpse is hung on a hatrack and the murderer a' babbled o' silver bullets -- the detection is real, and the deliverance is real, nonetheless so, indeed more so, for being salvation. For that also is deliverance.

This does not represent an intermingling of genres: though detective fiction is, by our standards, a genre, fantasy (of either kind) is not. It is a craft -- like poetry, perhaps, or goldsmithing. Or at least it used to be, and still was in the days of which we are speaking here. It may be that we now have a "genre" of "Tolkienian" fantasy, as we have a "genre" of "Lovecraftian" horror -- take some vaguely Welsh warriors, an otherworldly quest, a magician, high-sounding names, a never-ending plot that can be run through "trilogy" after "trilogy" and behold! fantasy. But I was speaking of the other kind.

So Chesterton suggests that the quality of fantasy can indeed, if fleetingly, inhere in detective fiction, as also (I would argue) in other mythic genres -- the romance and its sub-genres. But it is not native to it, as some would claim it has been to the romance or the ballad. This discussion may, at present, seem another of my roundabouts, but it has a very definite purpose which will become clearer in my next chapters but which I will summarize here.

Because Tolkien wrote what is generally considered fantasy, and C. S. Lewis wrote children's stories (which are thought of as fantasy) and interplanetary novels (which are thought of as science fiction), and because Charles Williams was their War-time friend and also a writer (and a significant influence on Lewis), there is a tendency to think of him as a "fantastic" writer. Now it happens that I dispute the entire syllogism, but what is important here is that detective fiction, and the sensation fiction from which it comes, be seen as a form of mythic comedy, as presenting the myth of deliverance, but as only possibly -- and then infrequently or fleetingly -- permitting the inherence of the fantastic. And even then, usually, of Mooreeffoc rather than creative fantasy. For if we fail to realize this, we will not make the proper in-genre response to a detective novel that begins in these words:

"The telephone bell was ringing wildly, but without result, since there was no-one in the room but the corpse.

"A few moments later there was. Lionel Rackstraw, strolling back from lunch, heard in the corridor the sound of the bell in his room, and, entering at a run, took up the receiver. He remarked, as he did so, the boots and trousered legs sticking out from the large knee-hole table at which he worked, but the telephone had established the first claim on his attention." (War in Heaven, p. 7.)

Moreover, unless we are familiar with the genre, its conventions, its origins, its purposes, we might find it difficult to accept at face value, or even to understand the reasons for, Charles Williams's unequivocal statement that his novels began in emulation of his friend Arthur Sarsfield Ward, whom we know better as Sax Rohmer, creator of the insidious Dr Fu Manchu. To this asseveration we will turn in the next chapter.