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Spillikins in the Parlor: Raymond Chandler, Realism and the Golden Age of Detective Fiction

ABSTRACT

This paper reexamines Raymond Chandler's influential critique of British Golden Age detective fiction, which promoted hard-boiled realism against the perceived artifice of Golden Age stories. While acknowledging the impact of Chandler's essay "The Simple Art of Murder", I submit that his critique oversimplifies the complexity and enduring appeal of works by authors such as Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers. Contemporary scholarship reveals that Golden Age detective fiction engaged deeply with social, psychological, and gender issues through sophisticated narratives. By reassessing these works and challenging Chandler's reductive categorization, this paper seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of the literary value and cultural significance of Golden Age detective fiction.

KEYWORDS: Raymond Chandler, Golden Age, detective fiction, realism, literary criticism, British novels, hard-boiled fiction

1. A Brittle Dichotomy

As early as 1944, in his scathing critique of British novels of detection entitled *The Simple Art of Murder*,¹ novelist and screenwriter Raymond Thornton Chandler (1888-1959) challenged what had come to be known as the Golden Age of detective fiction, framed in an idealized British setting between 1920 and 1939. Chandler was far from the only critic of the fashionable genre: multiple voices –

¹ Chandler essay first came out in the December 1944 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*. It later appeared in revised and expanded form in Howard Haycraft's 1946 anthology *The Art of the Mystery Story*, and was reissued in the eponymous 1950 collection of essays *The Simple Art of Murder*. The essay has been widely circulated ever since, as now attested by the multiple copies freely posted online.

both within and without academia – had been raised to question or openly attack the legitimacy and the status of detective story writing as a serious form of literature. Objections to its popularity varied in range and reach.² But Chandler’s views were to have a more enduring effect over later-views on the genre. In the decades following its publication, his essay continued to shape critical perceptions of Golden Age detective fiction and his influence can be traced in the work of several scholars and writers who grappled with the legacy of the Golden Age. Even though critical appreciations for the genre did sporadically appear in the 1950s and, to a broader extent, in the 60s, as scholars began to explore the genre’s societal implications, misgivings persisted. In 1972, Julian Symons still echoed Chandler in his complaint that Golden Age tended to be “wholly artificial” and its characters “de-gutted”, emotionally insulated from serious engagement with the complexities of human nature and society (Symons 1972: 119). Symons argued that the social and political context was often ignored in these stories, which were disconnected from real life and excessively focused on plot at the expense of characterization.

By the 1990s, some critics and scholars began to push back against Chandler’s dichotomy between hard-boiled realism and Golden Age artifice. Discussing Sayers, Carolyn Heilbrun argued that, far from being a mark of escapism or conservatism, the cozy world of Golden Age fiction could be seen as a radical space of female autonomy and agency (Heilbrun 1990). Heilbrun’s essay on detective fiction as “novels of manners” opened up new ways of thinking about the gender politics of Golden Age detective fiction and challenged Chandler’s masculinist assumptions.³ More recently, scholars like Susan Rowland and Gill

² W.H. Auden denigrated the genre’s formulaic nature, arguing that detective fiction lacks the depth and seriousness of high literature (<https://harpers.org/archive/1948/05/the-guilty-vicarage/>). Similar remarks were made by Edmund Wilson in his notorious essay “Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?” (1948), and debate was further fuelled by the rise of literary criticism in the mid-20th century, which championed modernist and realist literature over genre fiction. Detective fiction, in particular, was chastised for his shallowness, against the psychological depth and artistic innovation of the modernist canon. This is the perspective echoed in academic circles, most notably by F.R. Leavis and Q.D. Leavis. Q.D. Leavis lambasted Dorothy Sayers’ fiction as “stale, second hand, hollow” and attacked the genre for lacking the “breath of life” and for its idealised view of old-style academia (Leavis, Q.D. 1937: 336-337). Stephen Brauer provides an insightful assessment of the critical reception of Golden Age fiction (<https://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/thirties/thirties%20brauer.html>).

³ (Heilbrun 1990: 231-243). The essay is part of whole chapter dedicated to detective fiction which also addresses the issue of gender, in Heilbrun’s monograph *Hamlet’s Mother and Other Women*.

Plain have built on Heilbrun's insights, looking at the ways in which Golden Age writers negotiated and subverted the genre's gendered conventions (Rowland 2001 – Plain 2001). And Stephen Knight has added much-needed cultural and historical insight as he noted that “in spite of its general acceptance, Chandler's critique of the English clue-puzzle as mechanistic and trivial overlooks the actual tensions and complexities of the sub-genre and is clearly for him – as for many later American commentators – a way of positioning the American model as being more truth-telling and indeed more masculine” (Knight 2007: 111).

Things are said to have changed more markedly in the current critical landscape: under the liberalizing agenda of cultural studies, the merits of this much maligned popular genre seem, at last, to have been acknowledged widely. Detective fiction is presumably no longer marginalized in the humanities. No justifications need apply when setting up or teaching a course on novels of detection.⁴ Insightful research has been published on their ramifications into highly contentious societal or individual issues to do with race, gender, class, religion, science (to name just the most recognizable few).⁵

Despite such welcome readjustments in perspective, I would argue that a measure of bias persists in studies on detection, all the more subtle perhaps because it rehashes in politically correct terms Chandler's damning – and yet brittle – dichotomy between realism and idealism, between cozy and hard-boiled, between writing that conveys “the authentic flavor of life as it is lived” (Chandler 231) and novels that are instead blithely unaware of “what reality was” (Chandler 232).⁶

The purpose of this paper is to re-read Chandler and to sample British Golden Age stories and novels, to establish whether Chandler's censure still holds, and whether Golden Age fiction deserves more, and more articulate, recognition than

⁴ Oxford and Cambridge offer a range of Detective and Crime Fiction courses. So do Harvard, Yale and Princeton. See for instance: <https://www.balliol.ox.ac.uk/news/2023/march/discovery-programme-year-10-students-begins>; <https://humanities.yale.edu/special-courses/hums-340-detective-story>; <https://english.fas.harvard.edu/sites/hwpi.harvard.edu/files/english/files/liu.pdf?m=1689600504>. Last access July 2024

⁵ By way of example see Martin Edwards, *The Golden Age of Murder: The Mystery of the Writers Who Invented the Modern Detective Story* (London: HarperCollins, 2015); Heather Duerre Humann, ed., *Gender Bending Detective Fiction* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2017); David Lehman, *The Mysterious Romance of Murder* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022); Andrew Pepper, *Crime Fiction* (in *The Cambridge Companion to the Twentieth-Century American Novel and Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2023, 127-141).

⁶ Henceforth, all parenthetical citations from Chandler's essay will be given as simple page numbers, which refer to the anthology of detective fiction essays edited by Haycraft (1946).

it already has. More specifically, my working hypothesis is that the long-standing “cozy/hardboiled” binary, and its underlying “superstition/reason” philosophical counterpart, have at the very least served their purpose, and are in fact ill-equipped to tackle what has been long seen as the multifaceted writing of many Golden Age authors. Via a hazardous detour that sets Chandler and Eco side by side in their treacherous quest for realism, I will untangle a few thematic threads which map out the very rough contours of a broader, more nuanced assessment of Golden Age fiction. What I am pursuing here is less a systematic reading of Golden Age texts against Chandler’s pronouncements, than a provisional reappraisal of their relevance and lasting appeal above and beyond such pronouncements.

2. A Hero in Search of Hidden Truth

Chandler’s essay on murder fiction starts with a forceful, multi-pronged attack on the alleged failures of traditional detective stories, which are English rather than American, and somewhat reductively bundled under the category of “the traditional or classic or straight-deductive or logic-and-deduction novel of detection” (225). The best – or possibly most notorious – examples of these are said to belong to the heyday of the British Golden Age (1920s-1930s), which Chandler detests openly as exemplifying the wider “social and emotional hypocrisy” of the contemporary publishing world, built on “indirect snob appeal” and “intellectual pretentiousness” (222-223). In Chandler’s mordant verdict: “It is the ladies and gentlemen of what Mr. Howard Haycraft [...] calls the Golden Age of detective fiction that really get me down” (226). Faults are to be found at all levels, signally in terms of form, content and style. In terms of form, Golden-Age novels are neither new nor old: they inhabit a sort of limbo whose formulaic haziness is nonetheless well suited to a gullible readership or to the ruthless taste of powerful booksellers. For Chandler, the sort of realism most of these novels peddle (if at all) is mere pretense. Their themes and motifs are hackneyed, and their puzzles are both predictable and patently implausible. Even when polished, their style is paradoxically “dull” and their characterisation lacklustre.

Chandler is final in his sweeping indictment: the five British detective fiction writers he mentions in his essay (A.A.Milne, E.C.Bentley, Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, Freeman Wills Crofts) are rather curtly dismissed⁷ against the

⁷ Of the four internationally renowned Queens of Crime from the Golden Age, Chandler only mentions Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957) and Agatha Christie (1890-1976). No

superior realist strain embodied in the works of Dashiell Hammett, the paragon of American hard-boiled fiction. Hammett's *Maltese Falcon* (1930) is to Chandler the quintessential model of a detective story done right, formally, thematically and stylistically. And Sam Spade is the redemptive hero all "realistic mystery fiction" (233) ought to have. Classics of the British Golden Age will come across as stilted and banal against the punchy realism of Hammett's narratives.

Chandler first appears to tread lightly when dealing with individual Golden Age writers. So, for instance, he mentions Dorothy Sayer's talent for characterization, acknowledges Freeman Wills Crofts as "the soundest builder of them all when he doesn't get too fancy" (229) and adds that "the best of them" were well aware of the glaring compromise underlying their stories: unable to convey the authentic flavour of life, such authors knowingly "pretend that what they do is what should be done" (231). Despite such concessions, the final verdict is stark:

There is a very simple statement to be made about all these stories: they do not really come off intellectually as problems, and they do not come off artistically as fiction (231)

For Chandler, the intellectual and artistic failures of Golden Age fiction ultimately derive from their systemic lack of realism, or in other words, from their writers' ignorance as to "what reality was" (232). Chandler's use of the words "cosy" and "cute" in his critique of detective fiction is particularly revealing of his realist agenda and his disdain for what he perceives as the artificiality of the genre. The word "cosy" (or "cozy" in American English) carries connotations of comfort, warmth, and a sense of sheltered intimacy.⁸ In the context of detective fiction, Chandler employs "cosy" to suggest a world that is insulated from the harsh realities of life, a fictional realm where violence and crime are merely puzzles to be solved within the confines of a carefully constructed and ultimately reassuring narrative. This use of "cosy" aligns with Chandler's critique of the genre as a form of escapism, one that fails to engage with the true nature of crime and

mention is made of Margery Louise Allingham (1904-1966) or Ngaio Marsh (1895-1982). A.A. Milne (1882-1956) is taken apart with relish, and E.C. Bentley (1875-1956) is evoked only indirectly via his *Trent's Last Case* (1913). Among the other many unsung heroes of the Golden Age we could mention: C.E. Vulliamy (aka Anthony Rolls 1866-1971), Christopher St John Sprigg (aka Christopher Caudwell 1907-1937), Anthony Berkeley Cox (1893-1971), Ellen Wilkinson (1891-1947). See a comprehensive list of Golden Age writers on this Golden Age of Detection wiki: <http://gadetection.pbworks.com/w/page/7930628/FrontPage>. Last access July 2024.

⁸ The OED traces it back to the Scots Gaelic *còsag* meaning a small hole or cave used for shelter.

its consequences in the real world. However, Chandler's use of "cosy" may also carry a more pointed accusation of political connivance with the *status quo*. The OED lists an additional meaning of "cosy" as "of a transaction or arrangement: beneficial to all those involved and possibly somewhat corrupt." This connotation suggests a certain level of complicity or collusion, a sense that the parties involved are working together to maintain a comfortable and mutually advantageous situation, even if it means turning a blind eye to unethical or illegal practices. By describing detective fiction as "cosy", Chandler may be implying that the genre not only fails to challenge the social and political order but actively collaborates in maintaining it by presenting a sanitized and ultimately reassuring view of crime and its consequences. In this sense, the "cosiness" of detective fiction becomes not just a matter of escapism but a form of ideological complacency, a refusal to engage with the deeper structural problems that give rise to crime and injustice.

Similarly, Chandler's use of the term "cute" suggests a certain triviality and superficiality in the construction of detective stories. The OED indicates that "cute" originated as a shortening of "acute" in the 18th century, initially meaning clever or sharp-witted. However, by the early 20th century, the word had acquired a more negative connotation, suggesting a kind of self-conscious cleverness or affectation. Chandler uses "cute" in his essay to describe the overly contrived and artificial nature of many detective plots, which rely on improbable coincidences and convoluted schemes to create a sense of mystery and suspense. As he puts it, "The boys with their feet on the desks know that the easiest murder case in the world to break is the one somebody tried to get very cute with" (231). For Chandler, this "cuteness" is a mark of the genre's lack of authenticity and its failure to engage with the real world of crime and detection. By using this term, Chandler emphasizes his view that the detective story, as it was commonly practiced in his time, was a form of intellectual game-playing ("spillikins in the parlor" 236) rather than a serious exploration of human nature and the complexities of crime.⁹ It is at that point, however, that Chandler's line of argument begins to waver, suggesting ambivalence and a degree of inconsistency. For one, he must admit at the start

⁹ See OED, entries *cosy*, *cute*. The senses of *cosy* (or *cozy*) listed in the OED chart the main points of Chandler's indictment: Golden Age novels are *cosy* because they eschew graphic violence or brute force, thus "giving a feeling of comfort and warmth" (sense 1). However, their fuzzy attitude is ultimately condescending, complacent (sense 2: "Not seeking or offering challenge or difficulty; complacent:") if not altogether conniving with the status quo, as in (sense 3: "of a transaction or arrangement beneficial to all those involved and possibly somewhat corrupt:a cosy deal"); OED 3rd edition v., *cosy*.

of his essay that notions of realism change in time: what was once realistic may come across as outlandish fancy or parody to us in the present. Yet, he largely neglects his initial proviso once he moves on to critique Golden Age novels. The kind of realism these lack is the realism exemplified instead in Hammett, who, we are told, “wrote at first (and almost to the end) for people with a sharp, aggressive attitude to life” (234):

They were not afraid of the seamy side of things; they lived there. Violence did not dismay them; it was right down their street, Hammett gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse; (234)

Unlike English stories of detection, whose “only reality [...] was the conversational accent of Surbiton and Bognor Regis,” Hammett “had a basis in fact”. Like all writers, he did invent some details, but his narrative “was made up out of real things” (234). Chandler’s praise of “real things” is obviously problematic, unless its broad sense is seen within the restricted scope of this essay. And Chandler is straightforward in this respect. We are soon told that the “real things” belong to the rough world of American life in the first half of the 20th century, of which we are given extended examples and into which the wider global world is telescoped:

The realist in murder writes of a world in which gangsters can rule nations and almost rule cities, in which hotels and apartment houses and celebrated restaurants are owned by men who made their money out of brothels, in which a screen star can be the fingerman for a mob, and the nice man down the hall is a boss of the numbers racket; a world where a judge with a cellar full of bootleg liquor can send a man to jail for having a pint in his pocket, where the mayor of your town may have condoned murder as an instrument of money-making, where no man can walk down a dark street in safety because law and order are things we talk about but refrain from practising; a world where you may witness a hold-up in broad daylight and see who did it, but you will fade quickly back into the crowd rather than tell anyone, because the hold-up men may have friends with long guns, or the police may not like your testimony, and in any case the shyster for the defense will be allowed to abuse and vilify you in open court, before a jury of selected morons, without any but the most perfunctory interference from a political judge. (236)

American *realia* are, then, the foundation and sole ingredient of good mystery fiction. Or are they? Qualifications were in order, apparently, because Chandler had earlier claimed that realism also entails “movement, intrigue, cross-purposes and the gradual elucidation of character, which is all the detective story has any right to be about anyway.” (236) Therefore, realism must also be a writing and

narrative style, essential to the very claims of detective fiction *qua* fiction. It is a set of stylistic skills one may learn and apply effectively or poorly abuse for a variety of reasons, which Chandler keenly identifies and dutifully sets out:

The realistic style is easy to abuse: from haste, from lack of awareness, from inability to bridge the chasm that lies between what a writer would like to be able to say and what he actually knows how to say. It is easy to fake; brutality is not strength, flipness is not wit, edge-of-the-chair writing can be as boring as flat writing; dalliance with promiscuous blondes can be very dull stuff when described by goaty young men with no other purpose in mind than to describe dalliance with promiscuous blondes. There has been so much of this sort of thing that if a character in a detective story says “Yeah,” the author is automatically a Hammett imitator. (235)

Nor is this the whole story. Chandler concludes his essay with an urgent appeal: an appeal for redemption. Against the bleak scenario of extortion and violence outlined above, the writer of detective fiction is morally bound to provide a redeeming figure in the form of a – presumably male – detective/hero, who must be “a relatively poor man”, “a common man”. Someone who “belongs to the world he lives in”, and is endowed with “rude wit, a lively sense of the grotesque” (237):

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. [...] He is a relatively poor man, or he would not be a detective at all. He is a common man or he could not go among common people. He has a sense of character, or he would not know his job. He will take no man’s money dishonestly and no man’s insolence without a due and dispassionate revenge. He is a lonely man and his pride is that you will treat him as a proud man or be very sorry you ever saw him. He talks as the man of his age talks, that is, with rude wit, a lively sense of the grotesque, a disgust for sham, and a contempt for pettiness. The story is his adventure in search of a hidden truth, and it would be no adventure if it did not happen to a man fit for adventure. He has a range of awareness that startles you, but it belongs to him by right, because it belongs to the world he lives in. (237)

That Chandler’s trenchant reading of murder fiction under the banner of realism should end with idealistic statements of this kind is intriguing. Honor, honesty, pride, and common sense will be the attributes of a male/detective/hero who acts, moves, and talks in the thick of history, in accordance with his own times. But such attributes become virtues because, at least to some extent, they will transcend the contingencies and the compromises of history: universally

recognizable qualities which entitle the detective to become “the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world”. Chandler’s ideal detective will possess an instinctive “sense of character”, a strong, presumably historical, identity which strengthens his mettle against the hurdles of society; but he will also show an unexpected, presumably trans-historical “range of awareness”, which in the equivocal terms of his conclusion Chandler praises as the sole product of “the world [the detective] lives in”. If my reading holds, Chandler’s call for unvarnished realism thus morphs into a fervent plea for the time-honoured pattern of the hero’s quest, a search phrased in the “weathered” romanticized vocabulary of “adventures” and “hidden truths”. Once again before concluding, Chandler will insist that “the story is this man’s adventure in search of a hidden truth, and it would be no adventure if it did not happen to a man fit for adventure” (237). If these are the guiding assumptions and final conclusions of Chandler’s essay on the Art of Murder, we need to go back and test them against his specific objections to Golden Age fiction. Chandler’s reading of A.A. Milne is a good starting point.

3. A Rum Business

Chandler’s critique of Milne’s *The Red House Mystery* begins by juxtaposing the “deceptive smoothness” of its *Punch* style against its tenuous plot, which is said to be “light in texture” (227). This 1922 bestseller from the Golden Age is said to offer a flawed puzzle, a spurious “problem of logic and deduction” which upon careful analysis presents a false situation and bears no “elements of truth and plausibility” (227), at least according to the criteria for truth and plausibility implied by Chandler. Chandler duly lists implausibilities about the case that Milne supposedly ignored or turned a blind eye to: the dubious legality of an inquest held by the coroner on a body yet to be legally identified; the uncorroborated evidence of a witness who, being very close to the murder, would be automatically suspect; the gross absence of a thorough investigation by the police on the victim’s former status in the village or his current status in Australia, whence he’s said to have only just arrived; the unbelievable incompetence of the police surgeon in examining the body; the improbable neglect of clues (the victims’ clothes) and of factual knowledge tied to the victim’s community (228). Antony Gillingham, the genial sleuth of Milne’s novel is made to pale against the street-smart tactics of Sam Spade (or indeed Philip Marlowe) : Chandler dismisses him as “an insouciant amateur”, “a nice lad with a cheery eye, a nice little flat in town, and

that airy manner”, whom the “English police endure [...] with their customary stoicism”, “I shudder to think,” Chandler adds with a strident touch of homoerotic machismo, “what the boys down at the Homicide Bureau in my city would do to him” (229). Antony’s characterization as “insouciant”, “airy”, “nice”, “cheery” serve to stigmatize him as an effete male, who, we are expected to deduce, would have no counterpart in real-life sleuthing. Chandler’s implied criterion of gendered realism in the depiction of male detectives is at the very least debatable.¹⁰ It certainly makes us reflect on the scope and the quality of those “facts of life” Chandler laid out as the foundation of proper detective writing. Undoubtedly, Chandler’s critique of Milne is piercing and his objections to plot inconsistencies judicious, that is provided we accept the assumptions that 1) the sole, or primary aim of detective fiction must be to set up a true-to-life, factual situation of mystery for a reader to unveil progressively via clues, logic and deduction; and 2) Golden Age detective stories such as Milne’s are knowingly offered to readers as instances of this underlying investigative model, the rules of which their plots actually fail to abide. The first assumption champions realism – itself, we have seen, an ambivalent, and heavily gendered notion in Chandler – and equates the search for truth with factual verification. Anything short of verifiable facts, we are warned, would be a fraud,¹¹ even though in that case the detective story writer would be “fooling the reader without cheating him” (226). This interpretive yardstick is obviously helpful on occasion, and in a sense works well to bring out the artistic licenses and the factual faults of Milne’s story, which Chandler is eager to expose. However, we know from Chandler’s final remarks that far more than “simple” realism is required of his realist detective. Chandler’s “common man”, animated not solely by the powers of logic, but by a “lively sense of the grotesque, a disgust for sham, and a contempt for pettiness” (237) is also charged with the burden of providing a moral response to simple facts; a response rooted in his own instinctive sense of honour and honesty. These idealistic virtues he is continually asked to exercise in his search for truth, against and beyond the mere ground of

¹⁰ The troubled conflation of masculinity and homoeroticism in Chandler and, more amply, in hardboiled fiction *vis à vis* traditional detective fiction has been amply discussed. An interesting exchange on this subject may be found at <https://www.hoodedutilitarian.com/2012/07/the-detective-and-the-closet/>. See also: Ta-Nehisi Coates, “Raymond Chandler’s Private Dick,” *The Atlantic* (blog), November 26, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/11/raymond-chandlers-private-dick/265589/>. Last access July 2024.

¹¹ “If the impersonation is impossible once the reader is told the conditions it must fulfill, then the whole thing is a fraud.” (227)

procedural consistency or factual evidence. But if this *mélange* of realism and idealism is admissible, there may be more to the *Red House Mystery* than the procedural flaws pointedly itemised by Chandler. For, as Chandler grudgingly admits, Milne's story does work, notwithstanding the flaws, given the sales record and the many editions over sixteen years.

In *The Red House Mystery*, Milne employs a range of narrative strategies that contribute to the novel's undercurrent of rumness and unease. One such strategy is the anthropomorphizing of the house itself, titular protagonist and the very first character introduced in the novel as "taking a siesta" in the "drowsy heat of the summer" (Milne 1922: 1). This sort of dormant state, combined with the charged symbolic characterization of the house as "Red", foreshadows bloody awakenings to come, with the red of the house turning into the site of a killing "much more horrible" than just "hot blooded killing" and "too horrible to be true" (121). The unconvincing idyll of restful peace evoked here at the beginning is redeployed to great effect at the end of chapter II, when Antony approaches the "old red brick house". The impression of calm the house and its surroundings exude are made to "hang on" artificially in the air (as cleverly underlined by suspenseful trailing dots) only to be immediately denied by the unsettling turn of events, the gist of which has to do with claustrophobic scene of a "closed door":

As he came down the drive and approached the old red-brick front of the house, there was a lazy murmur of bees in the flower-borders, a gentle cooing of pigeons in the tops of the elms, and from distant lawns the whirl of a mowing-machine, that most restful of all country sounds. ... And in the hall a man was banging at a locked door, and shouting, "Open the *door*, I say; open the *door*!" "Hallo!" said Antony in amazement. (Milne 1922: 19)

To be sure, in its "delightfully inviting" layout and genteel features, The Red House comes to us first as the embodiment of cosiness itself, its "cream-washed walls and diamond-paned windows, blue-curtained" beckoning guests in to "stay the night" (Milne 1922: 4). It is a cosiness, however, that very quickly turns into a nightmare of confinement, as the rooms, walls, and eventually even the "thick belt of trees" (57) that delimit the house and its park "shutting out the rest of the world" (57) become too close for comfort. The house is repeatedly characterized as a constricted and constricting space: a space of unparalleled comfort to guests, to be sure, but also one of seething, resentful discrimination, a site that guards a secretive "circle", where esoteric pranks were played and unconniving visitors may not be

re-admitted.¹² The narrator warns us that even for Antony, in his role during the inquest, it will become impossible to contemplate a possible solution “from within The Red House” (64). Antony tries to get Bill “right away from the house” or out of the house on multiple occasions. (67; 104)¹³ In a narrative that blends the “haunted house” topos of gothic fiction and the “locked room” formula of detective novels, the house here becomes the embodiment of Mark’s manipulative reach, which extends to the chosen members of “the Red House circle” (85):

Yes. Of course, it’s a delightful house, and there’s plenty to do, and opportunities for every game or sport that’s ever been invented, and, as I say, one gets awfully well done; but with it all, Tony, there’s a faint sort of feeling that – well, that one is on parade, as it were. You’ve got to do as you’re told.” “How do you mean?” “Well, Mark fancies himself rather at arranging things. He arranges things, and it’s understood that the guests fall in with the arrangement. (59)

Later, in a fantasy of claustrophobic role-play, the whole “rum” business of Miss Norris, the actress dressed up as a ghost, carries similarly uncanny undertones (60). And when the body of Robert Ablett is discovered in the study, the narrator lingers on the horror of the scene: not in the stage tones of melodrama, but with an eye on the emotional empathy that such horror evokes: “They turned the body on to its back, nerving themselves to look at it. Robert Ablett had been shot between the eyes. It was not a pleasant sight, and with his horror Antony felt a sudden pity for the man beside him, and a sudden remorse for the careless, easy way in which he had treated the affair.” (22).

Another way in which Milne cultivates an atmosphere of unnerving oddity is through the studied contrast in attitude between Antony able and his young friend Bill. Bill’s frivolous banter – and his repeatedly tactless “What fun” (58, 78, 93) injects the narrative with meta-commentary on the nature of detective fiction and the quality of its “young” readership, problematizing the conventions of the traditional country house mystery:

¹² The whole ghost business involving an actress impersonating a dead Lady which causes fright is a gothic feature that adds to the lurking unease of this morbidly confined space (Milne 1922: 60;73)

¹³ The inside/outside binary is highly functional to the development of the plot and sets up a powerful symbolic undercurrent. Even a whole chapter is aptly entitled OUTSIDE OR INSIDE? (chapter VI). Features like this do call for separate treatment elsewhere, in the form of a deeper analysis of Milne’s beguiling story. Among other features, it was Dorothy Sayers who, in her *Omnibus of Crime* (1928-29) underlined the shifting interplay of multiple viewpoints in Milne’s novel (Haycraft 98).

Bill nodded and walked off in the direction of the pond. This was glorious fun; this was life. The immediate programme could hardly be bettered. [...] People were always doing that sort of thing in books, and he had been filled with a hopeless envy of them; well, now he was actually going to do it himself. What fun! (78)

Bill's eager and naive impersonation of his bookish heroes are counterpoints to Antony's bouts of reflection, which yield deeper insights into the characters' motivations and the societal expectations they navigate. By setting up the gravity of Antony's investigation against Bill's flashes of frivolous humour, Milne creates a sense of meta-reflection and disorientation that mirrors the characters' own struggles to make sense of the baffling crime. Bill slowly comes to the disturbing realisation that "it was not just the hot-blooded killing which any man may come to if he loses control. It was something much more horrible. Too horrible to be true." And even though he desperately looks for truth, "it was all out of focus" (121).

Tonal shifts and inversions of register contribute to the overall impression of the Red House as a space of eerie, almost surreal menace, where the boundaries between the mundane and the malevolent, the rational and the irrational, the material and the spiritual are constantly blurred. Milne's Golden Age narrative establishes the spatial, physical boundaries of the country house setting as a symbolic microcosm for exploring the meanders, diversions, and secret passages of human motivation.

4. *Mysterium Iniquitatis*

I submit that Milne's story works less as a flawed whodunit puzzle than a *howdunit* and *whydunit* tale:¹⁴ as the staging of a deeper epistemological quandary, around the existence of crime itself, its persistence in history and its resistance to fully rationalizing explanations, whatever these may be (historical, sociological,

¹⁴ See the *whodunit*, *howdunit* and *whydunit* entries in *The Oxford Companion to Crime and Mystery Writing* (1999: 495; 228; 498). The classic detective fiction genre, known as the *whodunit*, revolves around a mysterious death, a limited group of suspects, and the step-by-step revelation of a concealed past. This genre prioritizes the puzzle aspect, encouraging readers to solve the mystery alongside the detective. In contrast, the *howdunit*' variant centres on the murder method. Meanwhile, the *whydunit* is a newer evolution in the genre, incorporating psychological complexity, with the detective focusing primarily on uncovering the motive behind the crime. For an extensive treatment of the "whodunit" category see also Malmgren (2001).

biographical, psychological). In this sense, Milne's *Mystery* taps the venerable reservoir of theological and philosophical reflections on the persistence of evil in the history of Western thought, which resurfaces periodically and, in the case of British literature, is dramatized forcefully on the Early Modern stage, in the troubled idealism of Gothic fiction and Romantic poetry and all the way to the fictionalized Sensations and the first identifiable forms of detective fiction of Late Victorianism.¹⁵ A notable instance of this thread is found in handwritten comments left by Samuel Taylor Coleridge on blank pages, inserted between the printed leaves of his *Dramatic Works of William Shakespeare* (1802). Coleridge famously referred to Iago's unfathomable malice as "motiveless Malignity".¹⁶ The Patristic formula of *Mysterium Iniquitatis* (the mystery of iniquity, the unsolvable presence of evil) encapsulates the dispiriting quest for closure shared under different guises but to similar ends in these and many other historical instances. Evil's persistence and reappearance is a "mystery" in the sense that it ultimately baffles understanding, it remains inexplicable, above and beyond society's ability to comprehend it, to break it down into predictable and possibly preventable units of meaning.¹⁷ And mystery of course is uncanny, it is strange. My point here

¹⁵ For a fuller exploration of the rich literary and philosophical lineage prefiguring Golden Age detective fiction's grappling with the problem of evil see Mary Evans' *The Imagination of Evil: Detective Fiction and the Modern World*. London: Continuum, 2009. See also Graham, Jacob, and Tom Sparrow, eds. *True Detective and Philosophy: A Deeper Kind of Darkness*. Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2017; McChesney, Anita. "Detective Fiction in a Post-Truth World: Eva Rossmann's Patrioten." *Humanities* 9, no. 1 (2020); Haliburton, Rachel. *The Ethical Detective: Moral Philosophy and Detective Fiction*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018; Mason Leaver, "The Philosophy of True Detective," *Cinemablography*; Last access July 2024.

¹⁶ The British Library holds the annotated copy of Coleridge's "Coleridge's well-known remarks on Iago are provoked by the villain's final speech of Act 1. Responding to lines 1.3.380 – 404, Coleridge writes:

The last Speech, the motive-hunting of motiveless Malignity – how awful! In itself fiendish – while yet he was allowed to bear the divine image, too fiendish for his own steady View. – A being next to Devil – only not quite Devil – & this Shakespear has attempted – executed – without disgust, without Scandal! The meaning of this note is still debated (especially with regard to Coleridge's special use of the word "motive" which partially overlaps our current understanding of it. Nonetheless, Coleridge seems to be suggesting that Iago's wickedness is without clear provocation within the logic of the play. His villainy lacks a clear motive, but arises from sheer delight in the suffering of others. This makes Iago 'fiendish' like the 'devil', yet disconcertingly human." See also: <https://shakespeare-navigators.ewu.edu/othello/motiveless.html>

¹⁷ *Mysterium iniquitatis*, the "mystery of evil" refers to unresolved theological, philosophical, and pastoral debates over the pervasion of evil and suffering that contradicts a world under the providence of the omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent God of Christianity.

is that Milne's story, like other crime stories especially but not exclusively from the Golden Age of Detective fiction, is built on this unsettling awareness of evil potentially disrupting a precarious order, which Shakespeare, among others, had masterfully dramatized. Literary categories like *whodunit*, *howdunit* or *whydunit* arguably capture different facets, by no means exhaustive in their explanatory attempts, of this lingering concern. The case that *The Red House Mystery* lays before our eyes is described as "rum", an old-fashioned epithet closely associated with the Art-deco style and the setting of Golden Age writing. Etymologically, the term is intriguing because of its probable ties to an ambivalent notion of excellence. By the 1920s, its sense had shifted and very quickly came to mean "strange, bad, spurious, unusual in a strange way"¹⁸ I think Milne's story, like other Golden Age stories that seem at face value formulaic and predictable, draws its enduring appeal from the foregrounding of the "rumness" which, in modes that recalls Freud's uncanny, is very much part and parcel of real life as we know it and experience it. Crime, much like life, is often rum: "unusual in a strange way", implausible, puzzling, unreasonable. If that is the case, narrative implausibility may well be what crime fiction writing calls for: less a flawed stylistic failure than a narrative exploration which strains the limits of credibility and representability to reflect on the ever-perplexing tangle of human motivation in the recurrent, almost mechanical, emergence of crime. And these are themselves contingent – and to some extent containable – manifestations of a deeper, more far-reaching, more pervasive, possibly less containable evil. Chandler seemingly acknowledges the heroism required of an ideal detective to tackle such sweeping undercurrent beyond its manifold actualizations. It must be a redemptive heroism, we have seen, infused with romantic, almost chivalric qualities of honour, honesty and adventurousness; a heroism that in the end trumps the requirements of cool-headed realism, rigorous logic, and even stylistic efficacy initially summoned against Golden Age stories. Chandler may quip that traditional detective stories are "durable as the statues in public parks and just about as dull (223). But even

For a full discussion of the issue see: "The Mystery of Evil and the Hiddenness of God: Understanding Mystery in Christian Theodicy". 2022. *Vanderbilt Undergraduate Research Journal* 12 (1): 9-16. <https://doi.org/10.15695/vurj.v12i1.5294>. Last access July 2024.

¹⁸ The OED 2nd ed. Charts the evolution of the senses from the 16th century canting term, possibly from Romany, meaning "fine, excellent, great" (so the opposite of queer) to the later meaning of "odd, strange, queer" but also "bad, spurious" which became prevalent after 1800. The Collins Cobuild shows trend chart of *rum* shows a slow but steady decline in use from first attestations of the term in the late 18th hundred to the 2000s. See also https://www.etymonline.com/word/rum#etymonline_v_16628. Last access July 2024.

statues (in public parks or elsewhere) may be as dull as we make them; their faded contours may suddenly regain depth and vividness once we set out probing their histories, starting with the artistic or emotional investment that made them possible. To be sure, the formulaic pattern of traditional detective fiction entails very real dangers of a mindless, mechanical application, of which many instances exist. But Chandler's contention is that things are no different for more accomplished writers of the genre, except for minor differences of degree. The flaw seems inherent in the genre itself:

And the strange thing is that this average, more than middling dull, pooped-out piece of utterly unreal and mechanical fiction is really not very different from what are called the masterpieces of the art. It drags on a little more slowly, the dialogue is a shade grayer, the cardboard out of which the characters are cut is a shade thinner, and the cheating is a little more obvious. But it is the same kind of book. Whereas the good novel is not at all the same kind of book as the bad novel. It is about entirely different things. But the good detective story and the bad detective story are about exactly the same things, and they are about them in very much the same way" (Chandler 225)

In fact, hard-boiled fiction, with novel ingredients and slick turns of phrase, may be just as formulaic, if not more so, as attested by the frequency and the ease whereby masters of the hard-oiled genre were adapted and continue to be adapted to the glamorised stylistics of Hollywood noir. Chandler acknowledges as much when he mentions his preference for the dull "English style" of traditional detective stories to the latest Hollywood incarnations (231).

Implausibility is the charge Chandler puts forth, after Milne, to dispose rather summarily of Crofts, Sayers and Christie, other celebrated masters of the Golden Age period. Few words of indirect acknowledgement are spared for their style; more trenchant indictments target the tenuous and mechanical arrangement of plots, cardboard characterization and a deplorable recourse to the unlikely props of coincidence and providence. None of this, in Chandler's view, would be found in writers who are actually aware of reality.

5. Spillikins in the Parlor

Milne's puzzle might be flawed, but this alone may not seal the poor stylistic credentials of all Golden Age fiction, at least not as far as realism is concerned. For one, the "rum" dimension, the "strange, bad, spurious, unusual" tone of his 1922 bestseller is arguably calculated, not merely incidental. If that is the case,

the implausibility that Chandler laments may be less an inadvertent consequence of authorial incompetence than a stylistic mark of deeper engagement with darker questions around evil. We do find grit in Golden Age fiction. Chandler conveniently ignores or minimizes the impact of other popular British writers such as Marie Belloc Lowndes (1868-1947), whose seamy, sordid undertones do not sit well with the effete image of cozies Chandler puts forth.¹⁹ Her novel *The Lodger* from 1913 stands as one example among many in this respect, drawing inspiration directly from real life criminal cases, including the infamous Whitechapel murders. Similar instances of gritty writing may be found in the works of her contemporaries such as Lucy Beatrice Malleson (aka Anne Meredith; Anthony Gilbert) (1899-1973), Ellen Wilkinson (1891-1947) or C.E. Vulliamy, especially once we venture beyond the supposed *sancta* of the Queens of Crime.²⁰ But even within those Golden precincts, things are more twisted than Chandler would have us believe. Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) serves as a prime example of how Golden Age detective fiction can transcend mere puzzle-solving to engage with deeper thematic concerns. The novel's twist—that the narrator, Dr. Sheppard, is the murderer—challenges readers' assumptions about narrative reliability and truth. This subversion is not merely a gimmick but a sophisticated commentary on the nature of deception and trust, both within the narrative and in broader societal contexts. Christie's manipulation of reader expectations and the conventional detective format demonstrates a keen awareness of storytelling mechanics and their implications. Her portrayal of social dynamics and character interactions reflects a nuanced understanding of human psychology, which explores themes of obsession, mental illness, and the impact of societal pressures, thereby adding layers of intricacy to what might initially appear as a straightforward whodunit.²¹ Similarly, Dorothy Sayers' *Strong Poison* (1930) introduces the recurring character of Harriet Vane, whose fraught relationship

¹⁹ Marie Belloc Lowndes' *The Lodger* (1913), inspired by the Jack the Ripper murders, is a key example of a British novel that combines psychological depth with a brusque, realistic portrayal of crime. Vulliamy, writing as Anthony Rolls, produced works like *Scarweather* (1934) and *Family Matters* (1933) that explore the murkier aspects of human nature with a frankness that belies Chandler's characterization of British fiction as either effete or cozy.

²⁰ Malleson is often praised for powerful characterization and for unusually dark undertones, as seen especially in *Death Knocks Three Times* (1949), but also in the earlier *Portrait of a Murderer* (1934). Wilkinson's *The Division Bell Mystery* (1932) features a murdered Member of Parliament and delves into the sordid world of political intrigue.

²¹ On this issue, see Susan Rowland's discussion of crime fiction and psychoanalysis with regard to Christie's *The Hollow* (1946) especially pages 98-99.

with Lord Peter Wimsey evolves across several novels. Their interactions and mutual respect challenge traditional gender roles and highlight the potential for equality and partnership in both personal and professional realms (Rowland 2001: 53). Sayers' *Gaudy Night* (1935) is another pivotal work that enriches the Golden Age canon with its exploration of gender politics and academic life. Set in an all-female college at Oxford, the novel follows Harriet Vane as she investigates a series of malicious pranks that threaten the institution's stability. Sayers uses this mystery framework to delve into issues of female autonomy, intellectual freedom, and the societal expectations placed upon women.²² Sayers' narrative does not merely present a puzzle to be solved but interrogates the nature of women's roles in society and academia. The character of Harriet Vane, who struggles with her identity as both a scholar and a woman, embodies the tensions between personal desires and societal obligations. Through Harriet's journey, Sayers critiques the limited opportunities available to women and champions the importance of intellectual and emotional independence (Plain 2001: 102). Both Christie and Sayers exhibit a mastery of characterization that often surpasses the superficial depictions Chandler attributes to Golden Age fiction. For instance, in Christie's *And Then There Were None* (1939), the diverse cast of characters, each with their own secrets and motivations, reflects a microcosm of society. The novel's exploration of guilt, justice, and retribution forces readers to confront the moral ambiguities inherent in human behaviour.

Chandler's critique, while influential, represents only one perspective on the multifaceted world of detective fiction. The works of Christie, Sayers, and their contemporaries offer rich narratives that engage with social, psychological, and philosophical issues.

6. Chandler's razor

Chandler's contrast between hard-boiled American style and genteel British Golden Age tradition reveals the limitations of his own "realism." The idealized British setting that Chandler inveighs against is a convenient rhetorical target, whose lack of engagement with the realities of life is assumed rather than conclusively demonstrated. His dismissal of Golden Age fiction as mere smoking-room games overlooks the ways these novels also interrogate the boundaries of the genre and the

²² See Heilbrun 1990: 239-241 and McClellan 2004.

nature of reality itself. Admittedly, this tendency towards oversimplification is not unique to Chandler, but rather a common pitfall in literary criticism.

Umberto Eco's celebrated novel *The Name of the Rose* provides an interesting foil to test unspoken assumptions which motivate Chandler's juxtaposition of a realistic, hard-boiled model against a presumably inferior, less *engagé*, British Golden Age version.²³ In Eco's model of detection (or nearly postmodern anti-detection, as some critics would have it),²⁴ sleuths perform a debunking role which uncovers and questions orthodox notions of "Truth" in favour of provisional, expedient "truths." This tension is evident, for instance, in William of Baskerville's cynical warning to Adso:

Fear prophets, Adso, and those prepared to die for the truth, for as a rule they make many others die with them, often before them, at times instead of them. Jorge did a diabolical thing because he loved his truth so lowly that he dared anything in order to destroy falsehood (Eco 1983: 549).

Along this path, a detective story becomes, above all, a narrative of progressive demystification: a successful teasing out and piecing together of meaning from mysterious events whose mystery is ultimately bogus. Despite obvious divergences in context, style method, and historical reach, Eco's heroic characterization of William as a rational, empirically-minded detective who ultimately triumphs over the superstitions and dogmas of the medieval world sounds like a biased form of "Occam razoring"; the debunking strategy that underlies Chandler's critique.²⁵

²³ This is not to say that Chandler's critique is entirely without merit, but rather that his division between realism and romance, hard-boiled and cozy, may be more porous than he acknowledges. A more nuanced approach might recognize elements of both in the best examples of each tradition.

²⁴ This understanding of detection as a provisional, meaning-making act accords with some philosophical approaches to the genre. See for instance Josef Hoffmann's *Philosophies of Crime Fiction* (2013) for discussions of how detective stories engage with epistemological questions.

²⁵ Differences in reach and emphasis between Eco and Chandler are undeniable. Eco's latter day, Occamistic detective emerges as a consummate debunker in a story that seems written precisely as a critique of the kind of nostalgia-tinged moralizing which Chandler's ideal detective hero appears to be saddled with. A wider treatment of this issue lies beyond the scope of this paper. To an extent, William's role as a debunker who cuts through the fog of religious myths and superstitions in the novel reflects Eco's own Enlightenment-infused bias. By presenting William as a kind of proto-Sherlock Holmes figure who can neatly separate fact from fiction, Eco may be superimposing a rationalist perspective on a historical period that is in fact far more nuanced and multifaceted than such perspective affords.

The reference to Occam's razor here is apt, because it highlights a tendency in both Chandler and Eco to seek the most trenchant, compelling, no-nonsense explanation for the emergence of crime against "cute" or "cosy" accounts. In its popular (and questionable) formulation, Occam's razor holds that "the simplest solution is most likely the right one". Both Chandler and Eco seemingly subscribe to the idea, for their attitudes to detective fiction as both writers and critics champion reductive, rational and "gritty" parsimony over nuance and ambiguity, the latter curtly dismissed by Chandler as stilted efforts to "get cute" with the real facts of crime.²⁶ Eco's tendency to uphold empirical observation and logical deduction over other forms of knowledge is, in many ways, the flip side of Chandler's insistence on a narrow definition of "realism" in detective fiction. Both perspectives, in their own ways, risk reducing the fraught experience of crime to a set of simplistic binaries: reason vs. superstition, fact vs. fiction, realism vs. artifice.

Works of Christie, Sayers, and other Golden Age writers suggest, instead, that world of detective fiction is rarely so clear-cut, and the most satisfying mysteries are often those that linger on the "rumness" of reality in all its meandering, convoluted forms and manifestations. The best detective stories, from Christie's exploration of the limits of narrative reliability in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* to Sayers' interrogation of gender roles and academic politics in *Gaudy Night*, resist purely realistic assumptions.

Of course, the enduring appeal of detective fiction, whether in its Golden Age or hard-boiled incarnations, lies precisely in its ability to navigate these binaries and explore grey areas in between. After all, Chandler himself suggests that the detective's quest for truth is rarely a straightforward matter. The detective genre's ability to thrive despite, or perhaps because of, these epistemological tensions is a testament to its enduring power and relevance. By grappling with the ambiguities

²⁶ The popular understanding of Occam's razor as a principle of parsimony or simplicity is itself a kind of reductive misreading of William of Ockham's philosophical concept. In its original formulation, the principle of *entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem* ("entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity") was intended as a methodological guideline for choosing between competing hypotheses, not as a blanket assertion that the simplest explanation is always the correct one. The misappropriation of Occam's razor in much contemporary critical discourse could be seen as a symptom of the same debunking bias that underlies Chandler's and Eco's approaches to detective fiction. An early but compelling treatment of the issue may be found in Thurbrun (1918). See also Kat Medium's. "Why Occam's Razor Is the Ultimate Irony." *Interfaith Now* (blog), January 18, 2022. <https://medium.com/interfaith-now/why-occams-razor-is-the-ultimate-irony-dfc6798b2d08>. Last access July 2024.

and contradictions of human experience, detective fiction offers us a way to make sense of a world that is often messy, irrational, and resistant to neat categorization. Chandler's razor, like Eco's "postmodern" critique, may ultimately prove too blunt an instrument to fully capture the richness and depth of this literary tradition. Ultimately, Chandler's distinction between a hard-boiled, realistic American tradition and a romanticized, implausible British Golden Age may say more about culturally situated reading expectations and practices than about any inherent stylistic qualities of the texts themselves. Chandler's essay provides a fascinating glimpse into the cultural anxieties and the debates around literary taste that animate the field of detective fiction especially in the first half of the 20th century. His trenchant attack on British stories bespeaks a two-way movement: on the one hand, an effort to aggrandize the status of a popular American genre by emphasizing its uncompromising realism; on the other, a selective itemization of British novels which sets up Golden Age fiction as a monolithic tradition for the precise purpose of finding it wanting on multiple levels.

In fact, Chandler's forceful indictment may reveal a more fundamental, unspoken unease about the underlying kinship between hard-boiled and Golden Age stories, which his discourse strives to keep apart from his own "hybrid" samples. Chandler's reductive focus on Milne, Christie, Sayers and Crofts is noteworthy in this sense. The stylized realism that Chandler champions relies at least in part on conventional notions of virile masculinity which are taken as a given rather than substantively discussed.²⁷ One may certainly appreciate the emphasis on vernacular style in the hard-boiled tradition; yet this vernacular is heavily gendered and its stylistic merits as a privileged conveyor of truth are assumed rather than conclusively proven. Chandler's championing of realism was entwined with a certain masculine ideal. For Chandler, the hard-boiled detective represented a bastion of rugged individualism and uncompromising integrity in a corrupt world. This notion of masculinity shaped Chandler's literary values, privileging terse, muscular prose and a no-nonsense grappling with the brutal realities of crime and punishment. Golden Age writers, many of whom were women like Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers, had to negotiate these gendered expectations. While adhering to the puzzle-mystery format eschewed by Chandler, they nonetheless found ways to subvert gender stereotypes and

²⁷ Chandler's celebration of the tough, working-class masculinity embodied by his detective heroes has been critiqued by scholars like Jopi Nyman, who argues that this masculine ideal is itself a romanticized construct (Nyman 1997).

infuse their tales with a sly social commentary all their own. Seen in this light, the Golden Age *whodunit* and Chandler's hard-boiled stories represent contrasting but equally vital strands of detective fiction, each grappling in its own way with a world riven by gendered assumptions and expectations. After all, deadly rhythms and the "art of living" are no mean subjects. Confronted with the irreducible "rumness" of existence, with its unaccountable and indelible marks of strange and spurious things, detective fiction may indeed provide an escape; but it is no less serious an undertaking for that, especially if dullness itself is an inescapable feature of how the "art of living" plays out in both fiction and life.²⁸ One could do worse than find solace or redemption, however fleeting or precarious, in "spillikins", once the game is up.

In light of the above, we may well revisit and to some extent complicate Chandler's opening gambit, according to which all fiction "intends" to be realistic. If that is the case, stylistic and thematic choices, conscious or unconscious, will necessarily reflect different understandings of what realism is and what it entails. Far from being a stable or transparent notion, literary realism will vary depending on when and where it is being applied, and by whom; it will depend on individual and collective perceptions, themselves shaped by the tortuous interplay of multiple social, cultural, economic and political factors. In other words, all fiction may well "intend" to be realistic; whether they succeed or fail in this pursuit is a function of cultural expectations around truth and meaning and their troubled mediation in literary form. Maurizio Ascari has rightly pointed out that "realism is only one of the sets of conventions [...] while the realm of fantasy has enabled writers to catalyse and express psychic energies that could hardly find an outlet within the boundaries of verisimilitude". Hence his much-needed focus on the close ties between detective fiction and sensationalism, whose appeal "resides precisely in its hybrid character, combining realism with melodrama" (Ascari 2007: x).

Literary debates and pronouncements such as we find in Chandler, while undeniably fascinating in their own right, are perhaps best taken as symptoms of these wider forces than as definite verdicts on the intrinsic value of different literary outputs. Seen in this light, Golden Age fiction, with its conventionalized reliance on clues, diversions and misdirections, need not be less "literary" or engaged than the hard-boiled school, however forcefully the latter may claim to

²⁸ In this sense, the "dullness" Chandler decries may be less a failure of the genre than an intrinsic part of its engagement with the monotony and banality of everyday life. As Alison Light notes, the "humdrum" quality of much Golden Age fiction reflects "a recognition that the trivial is as much a part of the truth as passion and violence" (Light 1991: 65).

give “murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons” (Chandler 234). Motives and reasons, as Chandler implicitly recognizes in his romantic depiction of the detective as a redemptive hero, remain fluid and elusive, perhaps more so than any one explanatory model, no matter how carefully crafted, can fully account for. By straining the limits of credibility and realism, and insisting on the “rumness” of crime and mystery, Golden Age writers may well provide a salutary reminder of the ultimate inscrutability of human experience, which no amount of ratiocination or grim style can dispel once and for all. They gesture to the necessary provisionality of any attempt to contain, rationalize, or impose meaning on a world that invariably exceeds total comprehension, but is no less worthy of imaginative exploration for that. The contrasting approaches embodied by Golden Age and hard-boiled novels point to detective fiction’s remarkable capacity to interrogate the dense web of human experience from multiple angles.

Ultimately, whether through the Golden Age’s intricate puzzles or hard-boiled fiction’s unflinching engagement with society’s underbelly, detective stories offer something perennially compelling: a space where reason confronts chaos, where—however imperfectly—we might wrest meaning from a world steeped in ambiguity and deception. In Chandler’s incisive realism no less than in Christie’s deftly contrived enigmas, the detective story becomes a vital lens for examining the human condition in its multiple, baffling convolutions. Championing hard-boiled realism by maligning Golden Age conventions would do disservice to both traditions. We will no doubt keep arguing over “spillikins in the parlor” and garrulous gumshoes, even as we delight in their ability to thrill and move us. For, pace Chandler, art is perhaps all we have to make sense of experience. That, at least, is no mean feat.

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