Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism

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Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism

Topics Volume

Criticism of Various Topics in Nineteenth-Century Literature, including Literary and Critical Movements, Prominent Themes and Genres, Anniversary Celebrations, and Surveys of National Literatures

Russel Whitaker
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Preface

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Every fourth volume of *NCLC* is devoted to literary topics that cannot be covered under the author approach used in the rest of the series. Such topics include literary movements, prominent themes in nineteenth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

NCLC continues the survey of criticism of world literature begun by Thomson Gale's *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (*CLC*) and *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (*TCLC*).

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An *NCLC* entry consists of the following elements:

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the list will focus primarily on twentieth-century translations, selecting

those works most commonly considered the best by critics. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication. Lists of **Representative Works** by different authors appear with topic entries.

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- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.

- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.

- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Thomson Gale.

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Contents

Detective Fiction

The following entry provides critical commentary on major themes, authors, and works associated with the detective fiction genre during the nineteenth century. For further discussion of detective fiction, see *NCLC,* Volume 36.

INTRODUCTION

Crime and detection have been common elements in world literature, as exemplified in the biblical stories of Cain and Abel and Susanna and the Elders, as well as in works by Sophocles, William Shakespeare, and Voltaire. Despite the long history of crime and detection in literature, detective fiction as a full-fledged genre first appeared in the mid-nineteenth century in the detective stories of Edgar Allan Poe. In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," first published in *Graham's Magazine* in 1841, and several subsequent "tales of ratiocination," Poe created the archetypal pattern for stories of detection: a bizarre crime is committed, a brilliant, seemingly omniscient, detective investigates, solves the puzzle with the aid of superior logical reasoning, and the perpetrator is unmasked. The protagonist of Poe's stories, the perspicacious but eccentric C. Auguste Dupin, inspired generations of subsequent sleuths.

Particular political, social, and ideological forces unique to the nineteenth century are often cited by critics as factors contributing to the emergence of the detective fiction genre during this era. With the advent of bourgeois societies, criminals, who in autocratic societies enjoyed, in the popular imagination, the reputation of heroic rebels, eventually became viewed as a menace by a social class interested in safeguarding its property. At the same time the police, regarded in the eighteenth century as an organization dedicated to protecting autocrats, rose in popular esteem. Once maligned as agents of corrupt kings, members of the police force were now valued for the protection they provided, and the figure of the law enforcement officer became an acceptable protagonist in literature. In the intellectual realm, the Enlightenment brought about a profound respect for the power of reasoning, as well as an overwhelming faith in the ability of science to solve social problems. This paved the way for the development of a new literary hero, the detective-scientist. These protagonists were often gentlemen possessed of such admired traits as scientific knowledge and superior intellect, and they elicited much enthusiasm among nineteenth-century readers.

While Poe's tales of ratiocination were relatively unknown in his own country during his lifetime, they strongly influenced the development of detective prose, and literature in general, in France and England during the 1850s and 1860s. Although not exclusively concerned with crime detection, novels by Emile Gaboriau, Charles Dickens, and Wilkie Collins featured, among other elements, the efforts of policemen to solve crimes in much the same manner as Poe's Dupin. The policeman-hero introduced by these writers inspired the growth of the French *roman policier* and the American police novel, branches of detective fiction that have flourished in the twentieth century. Other novelists of the time—Mary Elizabeth Braddon in England and Anna Katharine Green in America, for example—created the domestic detective novel in which crime investigation is combined with realistic representations of everyday life, a form of detective fiction that further developed in the twentieth century. By the 1890s, the short story form had eclipsed the novel's popularity, and a number of short works established a new standard for detective prose. The Sherlock Holmes stories of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, which feature the deductive powers of an eccentric amateur detective, are the best known examples of these. Having crystallized and popularized certain elements of Poe's stories, Doyle established a narrative form that exerted considerable influence on later detective prose.

Twentieth-century readings of detective fiction revealed the genre's complexity, alerting critics that these texts contained more than brilliant intellectual gymnastics. For example, commentators, particularly scholars analyzing the works of Collins and Dickens, noted a peculiar authorial ambivalence regarding crime. In fact, the shady world of crime came to symbolize a particular shadow in the Victorian psyche: the dark, and often repressed, reality of England's imperialist policies. Crime novels, particularly works by Collins, also shed light on the social problems of Victorian England, including poverty, discrimination, and domestic violence against women. In Collins's works, for example, critics discerned an effort to explain the mechanism whereby social and psychological forces conspire to place women in such desperate situations that crime seems like the only rational solution. Finally, in works such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), commentators saw symptoms of a malaise more profound than the Victorian crisis of conscience: the disintegration of the personality.

Freudian readings, from the earliest critical efforts to the Neo-Freudianism of Jacques Lacan, approached detective prose from a clinical point of view. In fact, critics openly likened the process of criminal detection to psychoanalysis, arguing that the analyst, like the sleuth, searches for the truth. However, since the dominant intellectual paradigms underpinning twentieth-century criticism essentially dispensed with the idea of personal identity, this became a problematic interpretation. While in Freud's construct the ego still retained some relevance, albeit controlled by the id's overwhelming power, in Neo-Freudian thought, as exemplified by Jacques Lacan, there is only a linguistic symbolic order, into which a person is born. According to Lacan, a person's unconscious is totally determined by a symbolic order which is imposed on an individual. Taking a cue from the semantic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure, who divided the semantic universe into "signifiers" (signs, symbols) and "signifieds" (the realities that these signs denote), Lacan posited that signifiers do not denote anything, thus effectively separating the world of signs, as well as the world of psyche, as a self-referential universe. Lacan used Poe's "The Purloined Letter" (1845) to illustrate his theory. According to Lacan, Poe's remarkable story about an ingeniously misplaced letter shows how a signifier (the letter) exerts enormous power over people without referring to anything in particular. Indeed, there are vague hints about the content of the letter throughout the story, but the reader is constantly focused on the object itself, or more specifically, on the absence of it. Thanks to Lacan, and to his detractors, Poe's stories are among the archetypal texts of twentieth and early twenty-first century literary criticism.

Commentary on the importance of nineteenth-century detective fiction has also concentrated on the cultural significance of the hero and the function of the genre in literary history. The detective of this era was viewed, according to critics, as a kind of prophet of logical reasoning who becomes viewed as a sort of savior for his defense of moral order. At the same time, as Elliot L. Gilbert (see Further Reading) points out, the detective's inevitable failures in an increasingly mechanized and godless society reflect late nineteenth-century awareness of the limitations of the reasoning process. Thus, the genre of detective fiction in the nineteenth century is often viewed as a transition between Romantic faith in the perfectibility of the world and Victorian disillusionment with its harsh realities.

REPRESENTATIVE WORKS

Thomas Bailey Aldrich
The Stillwater Tragedy (novel) 1880

Honoré de Balzac
Illusions perdues (novel) 1843 [*Lost Illusions,* 1925]

Mary Elizabeth Braddon
Lady Audley's Secret (novel) 1862
A Strange World (novel) 1875
An Open Verdict (novel) 1878
Just As I Am (novel) 1880
Wyllard's Weird (novel) 1885

Edward Bulwer-Lytton
Pelham; or, the Adventures of a Gentleman (novel) 1828
Eugene Aram: A Tale (novel) 1832
Night and Morning (novel) 1841

Wilkie Collins
The Woman in White (novel) 1860
The Moonstone (novel) 1868
The Law and the Lady (novel) 1875

Charles Dickens
Bleak House (novel) 1852-53
The Mystery of Edwin Drood (novel) 1870

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle
A Study in Scarlet (novel) 1887
The Sign of Four (novel) 1890
The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes (short stories) 1892
The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes (short stories) 1893
The Hound of the Baskervilles (novel) 1901-02
The Return of Sherlock Holmes (short stories) 1905
The Valley of Fear (novel) 1914-15
His Last Bow: Some Reminiscences of Sherlock Holmes (short stories) 1917
The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes (short stories) 1927

Benjamin Leopold Farjeon
119 Great Porter Square (novel) 1881
The Mystery of M. Felix (novel) 1890

Emile Gaboriau
L'affaire Lerouge (novel) 1866 [*The Widow Lerouge,* 1873]
Le crime d'Orcival (novel) 1867 [*The Mystery of Orcival,* 1871]
Le dossier no. 113 (novel) 1867 [*File No. 133,* 1875]
Monsieur Lecoq (novel) 1869 [*Monsieur Lecoq,* 1880]
Le petit vieux des Batignolles (novella and short stories) 1876 [*The Little Old Man of the Batignolles; or, A Chapter from a Detective's Memoirs,* 1880]

William Godwin
Things As They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams (novel) 1794

Anna Katharine Green
The Leavenworth Case: A Lawyer's Story (novel) 1878
A Strange Disappearance (novel) 1880
The Mill Mystery (novel) 1886
Behind Closed Doors (novel) 1888
The Doctor, His Wife, and the Clock (novel) 1895
That Affair Next Door (novel) 1897
Lost Man's Lane: A Second Episode in the Life of Amelia Butterworth (novel) 1898
The Golden Slipper, and Other Problems for Violet Strange (novel) 1915

E. T. A. Hoffmann
**Nachtstücke, herausgegeben von dem Verfasser der Fantasiestücke in Callots Manier.* 2 vols. (short stories) 1817
†*Die Serapions-Brüder.* 4 vols. (short stories) 1819-21 [*The Serapion Brethren.* 2 vols., 1886-92]
‡*Die letzte Erzählungen von E. T. A. Hoffmann* (short stories) 1825

Victor Hugo
Les Misérables (novel) 1862 [*The Wretched,* 1863]

Fergus Hume
The Mystery of a Hansom Cab (novel) 1888

Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu
Ghost Stories and Tales of Mystery (short stories) 1851
Uncle Silas: A Tale of Bartram-Haugh (novel) 1864
Checkmate (novel) 1871

Arthur Morrison
Martin Hewitt, Investigator (short stories) 1894
Chronicles of Martin Hewitt (short stories) 1895
The Adventures of Martin Hewitt (short stories) 1896

Edgar Allan Poe
§*Tales* (short stories) 1845
‖*Works of Edgar Allan Poe, with Notices of His Life and Genius.* 4 vols. [edited by N. P. Willis, J. R. Lowell, and Rufus Wilmot Griswold] (short stories) 1850-56

Matthew Phipps Shiel
Prince Zaleski (short stories) 1895

Robert Louis Stevenson
The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (novel) 1886
The Wrong Box [with Lloyd Osbourne] (novel) 1889

Eugène Sue
Les mystères de Paris. 10 vols. (novel) 1842-43 [*The Mysteries of Paris,* 1896]

Eugène François Vidocq
Mémoires de Vidocq: chef de la police de sûreté, jusqu'en 1827, aujourd'hui propriétaire et fabricant de papiers à Saint-Mandé. 4 vols. (memoirs) 1828-29 [*Memoirs of Vidocq, Principal Agent of the French Police until 1827,* 1828-29]

Mrs. Henry Wood
East Lynne (novel) 1861

Israel Zangwill
The Big Bow Mystery (novel) 1892

*Contains the short story "Das öde Haus."

†Contains the short story "Das Fräulein von Scuderi."

‡Contains the short story "Die Marquise de la Pivardière."

§Contains the short stories "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt," "The Purloined Letter," and "The Gold-Bug."

‖Contains the short story "Thou Art the Man."

OVERVIEWS

Gerald Gillespie (essay date 1985)

SOURCE: Gillespie, Gerald. "The Romantic Discourse of Detection in Nineteenth-Century Fiction." In *Fiction, Narratologie, Texte, Genre,* edited by Jean Bessière, pp. 203-12. New York: Peter Lang, 1989.

[*In the following essay, first published in a 1985 French language edition of* Fiction, Narratologie, Texte, Genre, *Gillespie observes that authorial interest in textual interpretation, evident in nineteenth-century detective stories and related genres, anticipated theories of interpretation developed in the twentieth century.*]

My limited purpose in this brief paper is to illustrate only some features of one aspect of the detective story, but an important aspect present in the first clear examples of this new genre which Romanticism bequeathed to the nineteenth century: the linkage between the discourse of detection and the problematics of text interpretation.

Since so many of E. T. A. Hoffmann's works involve us in elaborate labors of interrelated detection and interpretation, I shall reserve wider treatment of his works for another occasion and confine myself here to his seminal novella *Das Fräulein von Scuderi* (1819), subtitled a "tale from the age of Louis XIV" and set in a Paris teeming with dangers and secrets. Speaking in a voice of historical authority, an unidentified narrator relates the dramatic appearance of a youth who seeks en-

try by night into the house of the aged poetess Scuderi (Scudéry) to deliver a box, then flees; and in an excursus the narrator explains the good reasons for the apprehension of her servants, who serve as our initial internal interpreters: The city lives in terror of crime. Two successive conspiratorial rings of poisoners for gain have reached victims up to the highest social levels, and now some gang is stealing jewels and murdering their robbery victims with impunity. The extraordinary measures taken under the king's authority by Desgrais, the chief of police, and La Regnie, the president of the special court, have already created an atmosphere of repression and hysteria. One night, pursuing a suspect from the scene of an attack, Desgrais has rubbed his eyes in disbelief as the figure disappears into a shadow and through a solid stone wall. The circulation of this story as a leaflet with a woodcut of a devil figure reflects the collective interpretative tendency of the popular mind troubled by talk of alchemy and witchcraft.

Fans of the detective story will recognize here, in addition, the Romantic antagonism toward the lower, inadequate, essentially reactionary mentality of the police that becomes a standard generic trait in nineteenth-century detective fictions. Hoffmann's narrator underscores *difference* in interpretative adequacy by relating that the inquisitors have tried to sway the increasingly reluctant king to expand their powers through an anonymous petition-poem which has appealed to his gallantry in the name of the threatened lovers who are attacked going to love trysts. Whereas Louis could elicit only a guarded response from his mistress Maintenon to this clever, but ignoble piece of propaganda, Mlle de Scuderi instantly convinced him of the correct, noble course with two terse lines of her own poetry on the dignity of courage.

This authorial excursus has meanwhile served a double purpose in also keeping us in suspense over the strange nocturnal visit. The sober light of day finds Mlle de Scuderi again forced into the role of interpreter, daring to open the box, "the sealed secret" ("das verschlossene Geheimnis"). It proves to contain a priceless necklace and bracelets, accompanied by a flattering letter of thanks which starts with her same verses the king heard and is signed by the "invisible". That is—as we eventually realize—she holds two reciprocal texts: one a written document in the ambiguously formal first and second-person plural, the other a concretized seventeenth-century Petrarchistic emblem. Relevant for us as readers is that by the time of Hoffmann, because of its use in works by Novalis, Tieck, and other Romantics, jewelry moreover already symbolizes sexuality and dangerous treasures in the unconscious. Worldly wise Maintenon recognizes the sublime touch of the eccentric master jeweler Cardillac on the stones, while from the description of him by the narrator and anecdotes told by Maintenon we recognize the tormented artist so familiar in Hofmannian works. Summoned before the ladies, Cardillac explains that these pieces, made for himself out of pure artistic joy, had mysteriously disappeared. A relieved Scuderi now seeks to return them. Visibly torn by his feelings, Cardillac passionately begs her to keep them as a fated tribute of his respect and devotion—much to the amusement of Maintenon, who correctly sees this bestowal of the emblem as a rite of courtship, whereas the encounter has inspired uncanny premonitions in the more deeply attuned fellow artist Scuderi.

There follows in a few months the strange reappearance of the young man who passes a message into Scuderi's coach on the Pont Neuf, warning her for her life to return the jewels to Cardillac under any pretext. Soon after, Scuderi takes the daughter of Cardillac under her protection out of pity when Olivier Brusson, his apprentice, is arrested for murdering him. At the zenith of her renown, Scuderi faces the hardest challenge of her life, and she meets it by becoming what will be called a detective. She sets about verifying the good character of Olivier in the neighborhood and gathering bits of evidence on minute points, because Cardillac's daughter Madelon convinces her that Olivier had returned bearing the mortally wounded father, whom unknown assailants attacked. Scuderi's preliminary analysis yields no probable motif or clue implicating Olivier. La Regnie actually provides her with the key details in the process of trying to recruit her help to wrap up the case, if only someone once properly evaluates them—for example, the supposedly cinching argument that, since the arrest, the jewel thefts have ceased. Scuderi suffers a profound existential crisis upon recognizing that Olivier is the young man from the episode on the Pont Neuf; her humane instinct wavers, until the agonized cries of Madelon rekindle confidence, and she again consents to interviewing Olivier.

Hoffmann portrays her courage in coping with the semiotic challenge as the ability to trust in a largely underground process of associative hunches; that is, as a specialized application of the genuine synthesizing sensibility of the literary artist. But from a twentieth-century perspective, we can say that the poetess proceeds accroding to a variety of Peircean "hypothetic abduction," which in its Victorian "scientific" form characterizes the kind of detection practiced by Sherlock Holmes.

Olivier's story—he turns out to be the son of Scuderi's long dead, beloved surrogate daughter, Anne Guiot—amounts to an interpolated novella in the novella, i.e., the favorite Romantic complicating device of the text within the text. This newest narrative suspension illustratively puts before the reader yet another, fulsome text on which Scuderi can focus her powers of interpretation. It is a version of the happenings that proves to en-

able authentic reconstruction of the crimes, containing as it does, in turn, the interpolated story of Cardillac as told by him to Olivier. Cardillac has been the sole murderer, a tragically obsessed artist who stole back his own creations with demonic cunning. The connection between the jewels and his death-oriented sexuality, we learn, was rooted in the bizarre seduction of Cardillac's mother.

When the problem becomes how to save Olivier without betraying the secret he guards for Madelon's sake, the poetess is tireless in her confidential manoeuvres to obtain legal support. Finally, invaluable corroborating evidence turns up when Count Miossens, learning of her efforts, reveals that he himself began to suspect and to stalk Cardillac and was the officer who fled leaving his dagger, rather than get involved with the feared authorities. Scuderi now gambles all on a confidential visit to the king in the famous episode in which she dresses in black and wears Cardillac's jewels to command attention—a gesture confirming her symbolic marriage and adoptive motherhood. Her action prompts the king into action, and he begins to play the role of the nation's highest detective personally, until the case is discreetly closed and the young couple is redeemed.

Critics have rightly celebrated this novella as Hoffmann's most positive statement about commitment to a human order, as exemplified in the poetess, the elderly maiden who becomes a detective out of interest, in and loving kindness toward, her fellow beings. Scuderi is the elegant ancestress of our latterday Miss Marples. In contrast, the jeweler Cardillac represents the artist as criminal, incarnating the tragic disease and terror of a subjective age, when the individual worships the products of his creative imagination and disregards natural beauty and moral obligation. What is striking is how clearly Hoffmann portrays the detective as a tenacious analyst who keeps studying various "texts," checking versions as a scholar matches pieces of partially overlapping manuscripts; she motivates herself and others to locate the neglected clues much as one retrieves lost memories or philological data. Scuderi's triumph is to construct a superior interpretation that lifts the curse of the secret. Hoffmann senses that, as a countervailing principle to the isolation of countless subjects in the cocoons of their own minds, only ceaseless, dedicated "reading" can reconstruct a sharable intertextuality, the social web. Here Hoffmann's response to the threat implicit in the fragment is to reattach the human endowment of language and text-making to detection and textual criticism.

The title of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter* (1844) more directly hints at a general equation between detection and the accurate situating of a specific text in the semiotic complexity that obtains. For nothing less than a document containing a delicate secret has been brazenly taken from the queen's boudoir and is being held by the Minister D. to extort political influence. All the ruses and skills of the Parisian police have been to no avail. Like Hoffmann, Poe contrasts the interpretative adequacy of his sensously alert sleuth Chevalier Dupin and the coarse-minded rationalism of Monsieur G., the Prefect of Police, who finally must swallow his pride and buy Dupin's help in order himself to collect the royal reward. Dupin solves the case by his superior imaginative capacity to project into the ingenious mind of the Minister who is, significantly, a better mathematician than poet and also Dupin's longtime archfoe. That is, instead of the symbiotic metaphor of Scuderi's marriage with her dark artist counterpart, here the metaphor is masculine mimetic rivalry with a perverse *alter ego.*

And in what curiously resembles an inversion of Scuderi's theatrical ostentation of the jewelry to awaken the king, Dupin boldly wears a pair of very Hoffmannian "green spectacles" as a diversion from the fact he is indeed minutely reading the entire setting of the Minister's study under his very nose, just as he reads the flux of signs in the quotidian world at large as semiotic puzzles. All this we learn from Dupin's pre-Watson straightman and companion, our narrator, through whom Poe shifts the tone of neutral authority from the historical realm into a contemporary present. In our transparently duplicitous world, Dupin acts to protect the queen and nation because he distinguishes between malevolent manipulation and the humane, tacitly agreed-on double-standard. Dupin's revenge is to substitute as a double-blind a useless *facsimile* of the doctored document he has found daringly on display in the Minister's study; the Minister, a deceived, will now inevitably precipitate his own ruin in the belief he wields power through the captured text. Paradoxically, by refalsifying the signifiers so as to foil the wicked who seek to abuse the multilayered codes, Dupin liberates the representative intimate text and revalidates the conventional rules that govern public versus secret communication.

The narrator in Poe's *The Gold-Bug* (1843) is slowly and reluctantly drawn as a confidant into the work of detection, while we are drawn by his narration into the surprising mystery which develops around a most unlikely eccentric, William Legrand. This parodic Robinson Crusoe, an impoverished aristoratic naturalist who lives with his manumitted servant Jupiter in a cabin on Sulivan's Island off the coast near Charleston, begins to act in strange ways after the discovery of an unusual beetle with a pattern like a skull on its back. It turns out that the narrator once unknowingly held in his own hand the key text, an old piece of parchment, from which Legrand, however, proceeded to "read" the secrets in the coastal topography and history and to raise the buried pirate treasure of Captain Kidd. Almost the whole second half of the tale consists of the detective

Legrand's explanation of his method. As if in a story by Heinrich von Kleist, a mysterious double of the skull image of the beetle drawn by Legrand appeared, then disappeared, on the reverse side of the parchment. In successive treatments of the document, suspecting it to be written in invisible ink, he gradually brought out the symbols of a death's-head (the pirate symbol) and a goat (an idiosyncratic heraldic sign for Kidd), between which stood enigmatic characters, evidently a cipher. Hypothesizing on historical grounds that the disguised language was likely English, he analyzed orthographical frequencies to derive lexical clusters, then set about discerning syntactical units.

The next problem was to interpret the words of the decoded cipher in philological-positivistic terms for their current applicability. One of the hardest and crucial steps was understanding that the eighteenth-century name "Bishop's Hostel"—now the nineteenth-century "Bessop's Castle"—had been transferred anthropocentrically to a rock formation. In *The Gold-Bug* we have a fascinating juncture where the older belief in a World-Book with its emblematic signatures has given way to a scientific view of the relative readability even of phenomena subject to metamorphosis. Poe's detective is in essence an archaeologist who sees the world as the human estate that has constantly been subjected to language. Although language itself is mutable over time, the structuring principles of language have sufficed to elaborate networks of signs that can be projected onto nature, and we still have a degree of access through weathered signs to the past human moment of their employment. Or in reverse, ages after the heritage of language has become the permanent generic property of mankind, we can decode the perceived patterns of nature as if they are a current language. In this sense, there is no absolute secret of nature or humanity, but only relative concealment. And so the investigation, by leading us in this case to a concentration of wealth, or money as an alternate language of society, leads to crime, human monstrosity: the skeletons of many victims are discovered with the loot. Decoding means that the secrets of money and crime will out. In a kind of reinscription of Romantic irony, the drole Legrand confesses to having practiced some "sober mystification" to "punish" the narrator for an obtuseness that extended to doubting his sanity. Poe drives home the lesson it is "poetic consistency" which really solves the hardest semiotic puzzles, not "common-sense," the comic variety of the latter in the story being Jupiter's low-brow practicality.

Herman Melville was born in the year of the publication of *Das Fräulein von Scuderi.* His satirical novel *The Confidence Man* (1857) gives a strange twist to the legacy of Romantic irony, to the presumption of the interpretative superiority of the detective, and to the bipolarism of writing and reading texts. We start out on April 1, the universal festival of fertility and disorder, at a crossroads of all time and peoples, the midpoint of the American continent and American expansion from East to West, as the Mississippi paddle steamer *Fidele,* explicity a "ship of fools," descends from the free North to the slave South, and out of day into darkness. On board are smaller and larger crooks, dodgers, hypocrites, whose fingers are "enveloped in some myth." This medley of American types, while scheming and defrauding, all presume to play detective vis-a-vis other prospective frauds.

Melville challenges us imaginatively to follow the series of disguises of a confidence man who engages his fellow passengers in a continuous "masquerade" that acquires ever more ominous undertones. This protean figure valiantly champions faith in one's fellow beings versus pessimism and misanthropy and, in chapter 24, proclaims he "never could abide irony, something Satanic about irony." However, in the process, everything is called into question in the novel: Certificates of value become suspect, because we learn bogus stock and counterfeit money are being put in circulation, and the markets rigged. Likewise, American philosophy and letters are unmasked, because Melville lets us hear the hollowness of such thinly veiled exemplars as Emerson, "a kind of cross between a Yankee peddler and a Tartar priest," whose mystic hieroglyphics remain inscrutable blanks in chapter 36. Religious mandates and charitable undertakings are slandered as just clever games. The whole rationale for America as a nation is impugned; the new world is a collective expression of greed, mendacity, and folly. The taint touches even the revered Holy Scriptures, because these, too, ultimately mask a divine deception.

In a million lifetimes no detective could possibly uncover more criminality than this book brings to light. Melville exercizes a negative Romantic irony of unremitting deconstruction. He compels us gradually to recognize a frightening presence not adequately "read" by the fools on board: the various roles of the confidence man are avatars of the principle of cosmic undoing. It is the god Shiva of Hindu mythology who emerges more demonstrably in the second half of the novel as the "Cosmopolitan." He has appeared in chapter 1 like the positive hope of Vishnu, a Krishna or Christ or Manco Capac, the figure of a potential savior from the East. But our increasingly more adequate reading—in analogy to intensifying negative revelation of Melville's writing—empties all seemingly rockhard textual systems of their pretended meaning. The psychological truth of the avatar's salvational teachings leads to ruin, while the historical truth of the succession of avatars makes the god's own ruin a joke, and in this sense the god "deceives" men into perdition. One of the funniest and scariest sequences of chapters recounts the unequal contest between the champion, but merely mortal,

bunko artist who goes by the confidence-inspiring name Charles Noble, and the "cosmopolitan," the trickster god himself under the apt label Frank Goodman. Noble's "poetical eulogy of the press" in chapter 30 restates the Rabelaisian equation of the triumph of Humanism (printing press) and of the Christian-Dionysian civilizatory principle (wine press); but the evidence shows both are now distinctly superseded by "the spirit of Wall Street" (money press). The authorial commentary on European civilization as a long-range process of inflation and counterfeiting that must collapse becomes transparent.

As co-detectives or, rather, as the straight-men under Melville's tutelage, we should be hyper-sensitive to the mythological clues under the surface of American discourse by the final eerie chapter, when "The Cosmopolitan Increases in Seriousness" (ch. 45). He rebukes mention of the Apocalypse as distasteful, and his very last act is to extinguish the lamp, leaving us with its stench in the darkness. Melville patterns the "strange boy" who sells fool-proof money belts with a "*Counterfeit Detector*" in this chapter directly after Hindu depictions of a child who appears announcing the destructive phase of Shiva. The old man who broods over the apocryphal books in the Bible is deflected from using the Detector by the cosmopolitan. The latter, like a Dupin, reads his thoughts, but deflects him from them: "[. . .] you hoped you did not distrust the creature [i.e., mankind]; for that would imply distrust of the Creator." Our question, since we hold the either cynical or anguished book *The Confidence Man* in our hands, naturally is whether this perversely doubt-filled text is a Detector from the application of which the beguiling textuality of our world distracts us. The time arrives in our pondering of the "Bible," the book generically, when we notice the oddity of aprocryphal writings, those texts that seem to undercut the authenticity of the authoritative scripture by the very fact they are pushed aside as being of dubious authenticity. The rising positivistic fields of anthropology and comparative religion loom as the mysterious intrusion of alternate revelations and mythological systems that function as disturbing apocrypha.

But instead of leaping from Scuderi's Romantic act of faith to Holmes' Victorian reconfirmation of an order to be upheld, in *The Confidence Man* Melville investigates textuality per se as a guilty shared secret. Even the Gothicism which had furnished Romantic and later detective stories with many of the motifs of a threat of spiritual sickness and evil is transmuted and deglamorized in Melville's novel into the tawdriness of all-too-human folly. Except for the excursus in chapter 44 on truly original characters of world-historical significance like Hamlet or Milton's Satan, only the principle of Shiva remains inscrutable and awesome in this essay-novel in contrast to the the parade of deconstructed fabrications of incommensurate texts. In this respect, Melville resurrects some of the deepest anxieties of the Romantic mind; but he also seems to anticipate the obsession with intertextuality in much of the twentieth century.

Notes

Thomas A. Sebeok has examined the Peircean lineaments of Holmesian detection in two essays, "One, Two, Three Spells UBERTY" and (with Jean Umiker-Sebeok) "'You Know my Method': A Juxtaposition of Charles S. Peirce and Sherlock Holmes," opening the collection by divers hands, *The Sign of Three: Dupin, Holmes, Peirce,* ed. by Umberto Eco and Thomas A. Sebeok (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983).

One of the best expositions of the Hoffmannian problematics of subjectivity, creative imagination, and the resultant perils of interpretation is Peter von Matt, *Die Augen der Automaten: E. T. A. Hoffmanns Imaginationslehre als Prinzip seiner Erzählkunst* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1971).

Following John Schroeder, "Sources and Symbols for Melville's *The Confidence-Man,*" *PMLA,* 66 (1951), 363-80, contemporary appreciation of Melville's cross-referential allusions to diverse mythologies around the globe reached a first major highpoint in H. Bruce Franklin, *The Wake of the Gods* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1963). In accordance with the orthodox, but paradoxical view of Buddha as the ninth avatar of Vishnu, Franklin interprets the putting out of the last lamp as a symbol of Nirvana, or religious atheism as the self-extinguishing of Vishnu and the apocalyptic convergence of opposites, good and evil, life and death (p. 183). On Shiva as the Hindu *mysterium tremendum et fascinosum,* see R. C. Zaehner, *Hinduism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962; rpt. 1968), pp. 80-89.

Ronald R. Thomas (essay date 1991)

SOURCE: Thomas, Ronald R. "Minding the Body Politic: the Romance of Science and the Revision of History in Victorian Detective Fiction." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 19 (1991): 233-54.

[*In the following essay, Thomas suggests that Victorian society's desperate need to distance itself from the world of crime reflects a feeling of collective guilt caused by Britain's imperialist policies.*]

> Once we happened to speak of Conan Doyle and his creation, Sherlock Holmes. I had thought that Freud would have no use for this type of light reading matter, and was surprised to find that this was not at all the case and that Freud had read this author attentively.
>
> (The Wolf-Man, *My Recollections of Sigmund Freud*)