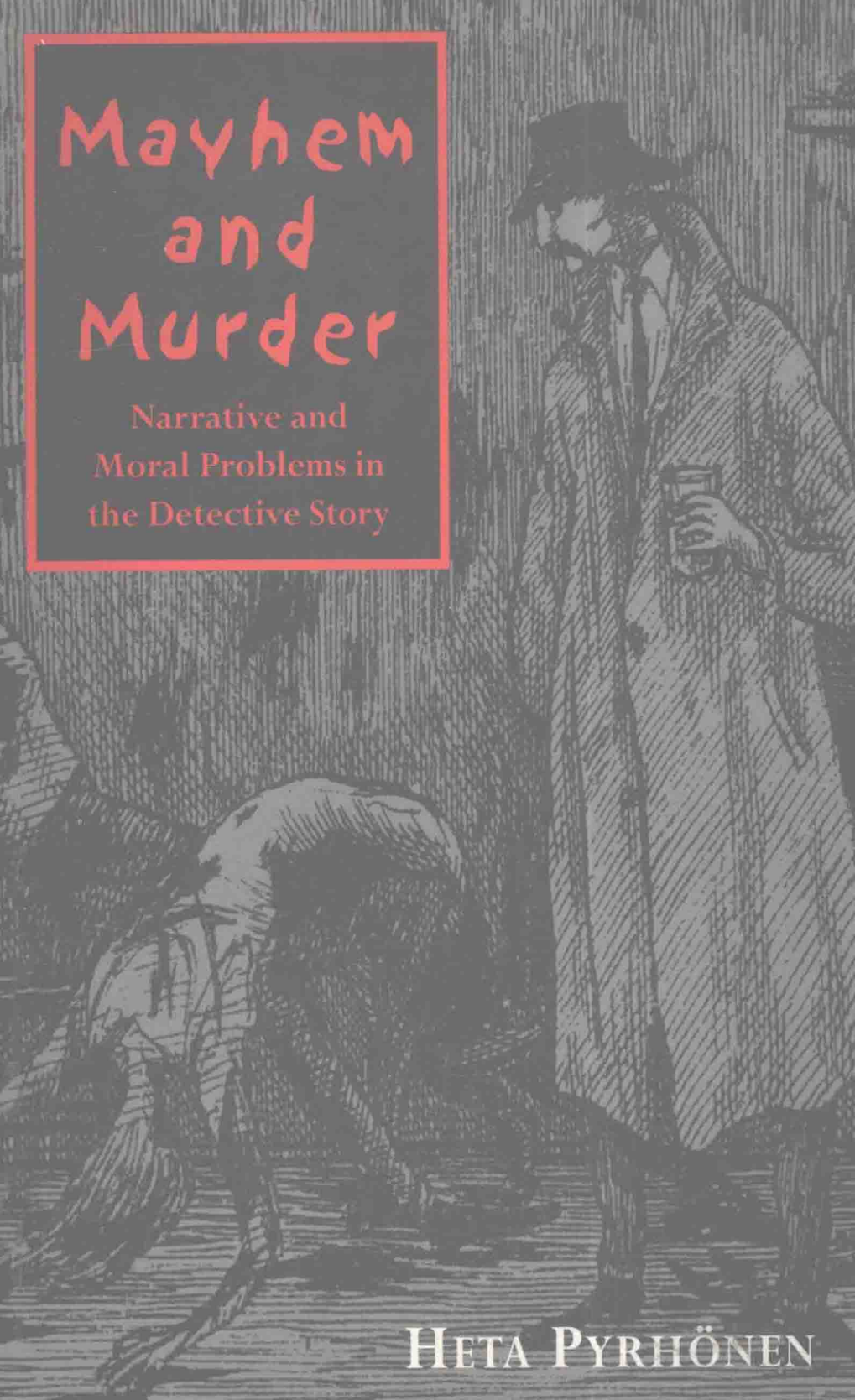
Mayhem and Murder

Narrative and Moral Problems in the Detective Story



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MAYHEM AND MURDER: NARRATIVE AND MORAL PROBLEMS IN THE DETECTIVE STORY

The detective story centres on unravelling two questions: whodunit? and who is guilty? In *Mayhem and Murder*, Heta Pyrhönen examines how these questions organize and pattern the genre's formal and thematic structures. Beginning with a semiotic reading of the detective as both code-breaker and sign-reader, Pyrhönen's theoretical analysis then situates the reader and the detective in parallel worlds – both use the detective genre's typical motifs in solving the crime, but do not employ the same narrative interpretations to do so. This difference is examined with the help of the familiar game analogy: while the fictional world of the criminal functions as the detective's antagonist, readers see both the detective and the criminal as the fictional masks behind which their own adversary, the author, is hiding. The reading of detective stories as complex interpretative games reveals how the genre engages the reader's formal imagination and moral judgment.

Discussing a range of detective stories from works by Conan Doyle and Chesterton to Borges and Rendell, and drawing on the work of major critics – including Dennis Porter, Umberto Eco, John T. Irwin, and Slavoj Žižek – Pyrhönen offers a unique, sophisticated, and engagingly lucid analysis of a complex genre.

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I dedicate this study to my spouse, Markku Ollikainen, who has tirelessly listened to me talk about mayhem and murder. From someone who does not particularly like detective stories this certainly is an expression of love, and one which I value above all.

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MAYHEM AND MURDER

Introduction

> Have you ever caught yourself reading? You know, you are sitting in a chair engrossed in a good book, enjoying the story and the author's prose-style, and then suddenly, it's as if you have an out-of-the-body experience and you catch sight of yourself as you really are: not trading wisecracks with Philip Marlowe, or struggling with Moriarty atop the Reichenbach Falls, but as someone sitting alone in a room, with a book open on your lap. (Kerr 1995, 177)

In Philip Kerr's *A Philosophical Investigation* (1995), a serial killer keeps a journal of his murders. He poses this question about reading to the reader he imagines one day perusing his diary. He regards reading as a self-reflexive activity that not only transports readers into a fictional world but also makes them aware of reading itself. For him, this 'rare ability to step in or out of the picture' (177) distinguishes reading. His choice of examples is interesting, for the detective-story authors he refers to – Arthur Conan Doyle and Raymond Chandler – are often cited to support the opposite view of readers as passive consumers of the genre. Thus, for example, Dennis Porter's excellent book *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction* (1981) defines the detective story as a textual 'machine for producing thrills' (108) that evokes in readers pleasurable bodily sensations which they experience as an agreeable state of excitement, associated with either fear or anxiety, and its release (109). Porter analyses the various strategies detective fiction employs in order to promote pleasure, arguing that the pleasure largely derives from the fact that reading is made not only easy and readily intelligible but also inoffensive as regards social and moral values.

The genre's readability is grounded in a relationship of complicity between authors and readers that resembles a game played according to

a set of rules (ibid., 85). The 'fundamental formal rule' in this set, Porter maintains, is embodied in the familiar question 'Whodunit?' and the investigation it provokes, which structures the whole detective narrative. This action sequence encompasses all others, as it opens with the mystery of crime and closes with its solution. The question of 'whodunit' also patterns reading by transforming it into the search for an answer, as the reader, desirous of knowing the outcome, gathers and discards clues (ibid., 86). But Porter's formulation of the 'fundamental formal rule' is incomplete, for in detective fiction the reconstruction of the past includes the analysis of the causal network, made up of human interaction, that leads to crime. As answering the question of 'whodunit' involves putting together a coherent explanation of what happened, this narrative invariably touches on questions of guilt and responsibility. The detective's solving of the crime thus has a marked moral dimension, engaging the reader in moral evaluation as well. Hence there are, in actual fact, *two* generic questions that orient and structure each and any detective narrative: the question 'Whodunit?' is paired with the question 'Who is guilty?'

While Porter's approach conforms to and reinforces standard notions about the typical reading strategies of popular fiction, it disregards the way the genre itself represents reading. The genre repeatedly emphasizes the complexity and difficulty, verging on the impossibility, of unravelling a crime. A character in *A Philosophical Investigation* expresses this idea by pointing out that 'whereas the commission of crime is natural, the task of the detective, like that of the philosopher, is counter-natural, involving the critical analysis of various presuppositions and beliefs, and the questioning of certain assumptions and perceptions. For example, you will seek to test an alibi just as I will aim to test a proposition. It's the same thing, and it involves a quest for clarity ... there exists the common intention of wresting form away from the god of Muddle' (184). This stress on difficulty and complexity suggests another kind of pleasure which Porter downplays: the pleasure of ratiocination and mental agility.

In this book, I take as my starting point the 'fundamental formal rule' of detective fiction, that is, the structuring force of the two (instead of one) generic questions 'Whodunit?' and 'Who is guilty?' The question that I study is this: How do these two generic questions organize and pattern the detective narrative? The terms 'organization' and 'patterning' refer to those formal *and* thematic structures that these two generic questions typically generate. My topic thus partly converges with Porter's, for he too scrutinizes in detail the genre's formal structures in order to theorize about pleasurable reading, though the context of my examina-

tion diverges from his. This difference arises from our respective attitudes towards the sort of self-reflexive musings about the genre's various narrative conventions, and the activities of writing and reading it, exemplified in the two excerpts from Kerr's book. Such deliberations are very typical of the genre. Porter considers them as so many familiar devices strengthening the generic reading contract and facilitating consumption (see his chapter 4). I will, in contrast, interpret them as 'self-focusing appeals' (Eco 1990, 54–5) to the reader to ponder the formal and thematic issues raised by the genre. In effect, I argue that they add a self-conscious dimension to reading.

In order to focus my discussion, I concentrate on the detective: the agent who makes the formal and thematic patterning force of the two generic questions available. Detectives have this function because their work is oriented by the attempt to identify the criminal and to assign guilt. As characters who provide answers to the mystery of crime posed at the beginning, detectives are portrayed in the genre as textually embedded *model readers* whose readerly and interpretive activities mirror the reader's own activity. Therefore, studying the organizing and patterning force of the two generic questions means, in this study, analysing the investigative process of the detective. Given this character's status as a model reader, such an examination will inevitably lead to an analysis of how the representation of the detective's reading affects the reader's own reading process.

The detective's function as a model reader emerges once we realize that the enmity between criminals and detectives largely consists of a series of entangled writing and reading 'contests' triggered by a crime. Indeed, we may say that the detective narrative is about writing and deciphering plots (Hühn 1987). Detective-fiction criminals are artists who 'write' their stories of crime in such a way that the stories are partly hidden, partly distorted, and entirely misleading. By manipulating the clues to a crime, the criminals attempt to convey a sense of a coherent, yet false, sequence of events which is at odds with what really is the case. Thus they 'author' at least two stories about the crime: the authentic one and the false one(s). By making things 'strange,' crime endows the fictional world with a rich potentiality of unsuspected meanings, transforming the world of the novel into a conglomeration of potential signs (ibid., 454). Since the detective must decipher the limits of the criminal's text, the set of signs constituting it, and the code in which this text is written, his or her activities are the same as those of a reader. While 'reading' the clues to a crime, detectives present these

activities in such a manner that they, too, 'author' a text – the story of detection – the purpose of which is to uncover the criminal and substitute for the criminal's text their own version of the events (ibid., 457).

The analogue between detectives and readers becomes apparent when we think of the genre's structures of narration. Usually, neither the stories of crime written by criminals nor the texts of detection written by detectives are directly attainable by readers of detective fiction. Instead, the stories are narrated by uncomprehending 'Watson' figures and narrators who deliberately keep back crucial pieces of information. Readers encounter the same situation as detectives do: an enigmatic signifying surface whose meaning they attempt to find out by reading. Detective-story authors have a double status: they are both deceivers and undeceivers, for they have tied the knot so that they may also stage an investigation which unties it. Hence, in certain ways authors are analogous to criminals and readers to detectives, for one is responsible for the problem, seeking not to get caught, while the other is desirous of the solution, pursuing it through the text (Bennett 1979, 238). Authors use various strategies when omitting important information at strategic points in the plot: devices of fragmenting information and presenting it in an ambiguous manner, techniques of highlighting insignificant-seeming details and using the detective to safeguard the solution to the mystery. Author, detective, and text thus all play a dual role: ostensibly their purpose is to enlighten readers; in fact, much of the time all three aim at delaying their understanding (ibid., 239).

This notion of the detective as a model reader suggests that readers imaginatively adopt the detective's role: they 'play detective' in order to reflect on what they themselves do as they read detective stories. What sets my study apart from previous ones is that I consistently try to explore this idea of readers inserting themselves into the detective's role, for my intention is to show that by 'playing detective' creatively, we gain insight into hitherto undetected aspects of the genre. Therefore, throughout this study I analyse in great detail what various fictional detectives do while solving crimes, elucidating the various steps of their reasoning and the stages of their actions more explicitly than they themselves – or even their authors – do. Obviously, it is not the 'personality' of detectives that interests me in such role playing, but their working methods. Or, to quote Kerr's serial killer, who himself quotes Sherlock Holmes: 'Crime is common. Logic is rare ... Therefore it is upon the logic rather than upon the crime you should dwell' (1995, 309). 'Playing detective' will help us pin down the 'logic' that helps to disentangle the structuring functions of

the two generic questions, offering readers an instructive parallel about what they themselves do.

'No one who is [reading detective] fiction properly,' Porter argues, 'is a professor of literature when he reads, if being a professor means practising detachment' (1981, 230). Others concede that such an academic reading strategy is possible, but claim that it nevertheless remains alien to the genre's nature as popular entertainment (Calinescu 1993; Irwin 1994; Kermode 1983; Rabinowitz 1987; Tani 1984), while still others maintain that the genre always embeds two kinds of model readers; one who reads semantically and the other who reads semiotically (Eco 1979 and 1990; Champigny 1977; Sayers 1988a and 1988b). While my aim is certainly not to construct the 'proper' strategy for reading detective fiction, I will, instead, propose *a* way of reading it which pays heed to the genre's various self-reflexive promptings. Such a foregrounding has in fact a long history in the academic study of this genre, which has a solid tradition of examining the investigation of a crime as a portrayal of the detective story itself as a *self-reflexive textual enigma*.[1] Indeed, many academics have made detective fiction into a semi-allegorical and thematic exploration of *narrative poetics*, demonstrating how it self-consciously mirrors its own form and implies a commentary not only on its own narrativity but also on narrativity in general. Hence, these readers read detective stories as metaliterary stories devoted to their own principles of construction and, by extension, as representations of the basic principles of the art of the novel (e.g., Brooks 1984; Hodgson 1992; Prince 1980; Shklovsky 1990; Steele 1981–2).

Of course, Porter, too, treats the detective story as a 'laboratory' of a more general phenomenon within narrativity by turning it into the paradigm of readability and intelligibility. Yet he never makes the claim which those who study the genre as a self-reflexive textual enigma would make: that the detective narrative is *about* readability and intelligibility and that the genre invites its readers to perceive and ponder the mechanisms that generate the kind of reading Porter discusses. The difference between these approaches draws attention to the fact that detective-story criticism includes two broad conceptualizations of reading the genre: a 'lowbrow' explanation accounting for its appeal to a mass readership, and a 'highbrow' explanation accounting for its appeal to a distinctly academic audience. This dichotomy reproduces, at the level of reading, the typical detective-story distinction between mind and body. With its focus on the emotional side of reading, the lowbrow conceptualization emphasizes suspense, excitement, anxiety, and fear, as well as the effects

that those emotions have on the body. In contrast, by concentrating on the various self-reflexive elements, the highbrow explanation offers a 'cerebral' version of reading, which stresses mental agility requiring attention, intelligence, inferential thought, and inventiveness.

S.E. Sweeney's 'Locked Rooms: Detective Fiction, Narrative Theory, and Self-Reflexivity' (1990) usefully demonstrates how the detective story may be read as a textual enigma which emphasizes basic principles of narrative. As the consequences of a crime are revealed well before the events that led up to it become known, plot is structured backwards: it establishes a linear, chronological sequence of events which will eventually explain its own initial baffling situation. This effect depends on a narrative presentation in which the story of the investigation embeds the story of a crime that supposedly has taken place prior to the beginning of the investigation. The story of the investigation is itself, in turn, often embedded in a story told, for example, by a 'Watson' figure, highlighting the fictitious writing of the text itself. Located at different narrative levels, the hierarchical organization of these three stories creates the sense of time, of anteriority and posteriority. The reader's desire to find out 'whodunit' combined with the suspension of the answer act together as the structuring force of plot. The ambiguously fragmented presence of the crime story causes detective and reader to decode and order clues and events in the light of the questions they are both trying to answer. The 'writing' of a narrative explanation highlights interpretation as the means of doing so, for the story of the crime is never fully present in the text. As the end of the plot coincides with the solution to the crime, explaining the initial mystery, the trajectory of the plot imparts a strong sense of completion and closure. By thus emphasizing narrative sequence, suspense, and closure; by making the hierarchical organization of narrative levels visible; and by reflecting reading, writing, and interpretation, the detective story, Sweeney argues, 'represents narrativity in its purest form' (3).

This neatly self-reflexive hierarchical organization of all the various narrative components and levels of the detective story has, as Sweeney points out, the effect of geometric architecture, which is mirrored in such traditional detective-story settings as the locked room and the labyrinth. I would like to set the particularization of my research task in this architectural context[2] by taking up Porter's objection to the academic cerebral strategy of reading detective fiction. This approach tends to emphasize rationality and order as the primary appeal of the genre, with special notice accorded to the creation of narrative order and cohesion.

Porter draws attention to the fact that the approach regards the detective narrative as a system existing in space. 'Such an attitude,' he writes, 'is an expression of the tendency to deduce from a book's existence as a physical object the conclusion that the novel it contains is itself an artifact available, like a building, for visual inspection' (229). Hence, the explanation of a work's meaning includes its *spatialization*. Porter finds fault with such an approach, because he thinks it fails to do justice to the process of the involved and affective working through that reading which the genre always entails (228–9). I think he is wrong in claiming that the book's existence as a physical object leads to its spatialization; instead, the very narrative structure of the genre creates this effect. Slavoj Žižek (1991) points out that what unites the detective narrative with the modern(ist) novel is their similar focus on the impossibility of telling a story in a linear, consistent way, of rendering the 'realistic' continuity of events. Both replace realistic narration by a diversity of literary techniques breaking up the 'organic' historical totality of narrative. The detective narrative thereby becomes a genre devoted to the effort of telling a coherent, sequentially ordered 'real story' (48–9). And what is typical of modern(ist) literature, Joseph Frank (1963) argues, is its move in the direction of *spatial form:* the self-reflexive organization of the work so that its disparate ideas and emotions are unified into a complex presented spatially in a moment of time (8–9). Such a technique 'undermine[s] the inherent consecutiveness of language, frustrating the reader's normal expectation of a sequence and forcing him to perceive the elements of the [work] as juxtaposed in space rather than in time' (10). When we are dealing with narrative fiction, this technique pertains most obviously to *plot* as a design that, in Frank's phrase, creates 'an indigenous kind of unity that overarches and shapes the constraints of pure temporal linearity.' In this view, plots construct relations of meaning that are detached from pure succession (Frank 1991, 91).[3]

Frank Kermode (1967) and Peter Brooks (1984) regard plot as a basic structure of understanding with whose help human beings give shape to and pattern their temporal existence. Plot structures pure temporal duration and locates within such a structure the meaning of human life. Brooks defines plot as an organizing and 'intentional' structure (in the sense of forward-moving and end-oriented) that locates the reader as if on a map or a graph by means of its shape-giving coordinates (11–12). And the detective-story plot is what Kermode calls a 'concordant structure' (6), for it patterns the narrated material in such a manner that the reader is able to grasp the *relations* of its beginning, middle, and end