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Write on the following theme in relation to the detective story: Religion

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Detective fiction is a genre for which the defining feature is, arguably, the quest to uncover transgression and eradicate it, therefore restoring order to the society in which the transgression has been occurring. In order to do this effectively, the detective must — according to SS Van Dine — simply be 'rationalistic and scientific' in his hunting down of the criminal, who must then be punished for his or her crimes.[1] The issue when religion becomes part of the story is that, as a theme in detective fiction, it invariably complicates the simplicity of this formula. For the sake of this discussion, Christianity will be the focus of the umbrella term 'religion', as it was the dominant faith of the period most of the texts to be discussed came from. Mary Evans states that 'the ancient Christian dynamic of the naming of sin, followed by judgment and redemption, underpins all crime fiction', and to a certain extent this is true.[2] However, Christianity comes with its own set of rules regarding transgression and order which do not always sit comfortably alongside those imposed by society, particularly when it comes to discussions of redemption and repenting. Arthur Conan-Doyle's Sherlock Holmes is a perfect example of Van Dine's ideal detective, uninterested in anything that isn't scientific or methodical when it comes to crime solving. Religion becomes a complicating factor for G.K Chesterton's Father Brown; as a Catholic priest in an increasingly secular society, he is forced to try and strike a balance between his faith and the law. It is an almost insurmountable issue for Umberto Eco's William of Baskerville in *The Name of the Rose*, who attempts the application of the same methods as Holmes but whose hand is forced by the non-secular age and setting in which he finds himself. The extremes of Doyle's and Eco's work, both offset by Chesterton's, show that religion actually highlights many contradictions in detective fiction that authors such as Van Dine might have missed in their attempt to simplify the genre.

The first point for discussion is the matter of order and where it comes from, and types of transgression. For Sherlock Holmes, as one would expect, order comes from the law, and transgression is anything that happens to go against this law. The role of the law here in defining the difference between the 'good' and 'bad' is clearly defined for Holmes — 'My business is that of every other good citizen — to uphold the law' — and therefore for Conan-Doyle's readers as well.[3] Evans believes that Holmes has 'little appetite for the conventional world',[4] but this seems to be disregarding his steadfast determination to be the self-proclaimed 'good citizen'. Good citizens not only subscribe to the law; Holmes seems to be suggesting that any person who is defined as 'good' actively works to maintain and protect it.

[1] S.S. Van Dine, 'Twenty rules for writing detective stories', *American Magazine* (September, 1928)
[2] Mary Evans, *The Imagination of Evil: Detective Fiction and The Modern World* (London; New York: Continuum, 2009), p. 21
[3] Arthur Conan-Doyle, 'The Adventure of Shoscombe Old Place', in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes.*(London: Vintage Books, 2009), p. 1111
[4] Evans, p. 48

He may well be most interested in crimes that go beyond the usual, such as the bizarre task of copying the encyclopaedia appointed to the victim in *The Red-headed League*, but at the end the result is always the same; he has worked to ensure that the order is maintained and the transgression eradicated. In *The Three Gables* he says, 'I am not the law, but I represent justice so far as my feeble powers go'.[5] Justice on behalf of the law, and therefore on behalf of society, is a key feature of Holmes' endeavours and nothing has a place alongside law on that pedestal, including religion.

Chesterton's Father Brown is also trying to operate in this world of secular laws but doing it whilst being a non-secular persona. To the credit of the character, this is a task that he performs very well; in many of the cases that he attends to, the criminal is caught, from Flambeau in his very first appearance in *The Blue Cross* to Wilfred Bohun in *The Hammer of God*. He functions as Van Dine's detective is supposed to function, solving crimes in much the same way as Holmes. He is the familiar amateur detective. The complication for the character comes when his Christian faith becomes a part of the story in the form of the disdain other people seem to have for the lifestyle he has chosen. His authority as the detective fighting to uphold the law comes under scrutiny and is often mocked. In *The Queer Feet*, one of the twelve is particularly blunt in dismissing the faith of the detective, '"Oh I say — repented!" cried young Chester, with a sort of crow of laughter'.[6] Whilst Father Brown has discovered the criminal and righted the transgression in taking the silver back from him, in the eyes of Chester part of the formula is missing; the criminal has not been punished for what he has done despite Father Brown believing that he has been. Stephen Knight says that 'Chesterton settles into a morally…focused world',[7] and it is clear that this moral order has some distinctive differences to the order of law that seem, in the eyes of characters such as Chester, to make Father Brown ineffective as a detective.

In *The Name of the Rose*, the distinction between secular and non-secular law doesn't really exist, and this is particularly so in the closed setting of the abbey. Order in this society is directly related to the order dictated by the strong Christian faith of all the characters. Eco himself said that 'the characters are obliged to act according to the laws of the world in which they live', which means that God is at the top of the order and no one dares to question it.[8] Crimes are committed against members of the abbey but defended by inciting God's will, made most explicit by Jorge when he says 'the Lord will absolve me because He knows I acted for His Glory'.[9] This suggests that any justice William could seek against the criminal, in this case at least, would not make him remorseful. Jorge truly believes that what he was doing was for the best and no one in the mortal world would be able to convince him differently. By acknowledging they submit to a higher authority, the characters leave themselves untouched by any authority that exists around them. William expresses these frustrations succinctly at the end of the story — 'It is hard to accept the idea that there cannot be an order in the universe because it would offend the free Will of God and His omnipotence'.[10] As a detective William fails, but only because there is no hope of identifying a transgression that cannot be attributed to some will of God or establishing a sense of order that does not rely on that same will.

The identification and subsequent punishment of the criminal is a simple way for the author of detective fiction to demonstrate that order has been restored. For Conan-Doyle, it is the usual way for him to end his tales, such as in *The Sign of Four* when the criminal is caught and, after being allowed to tell his story to an interested Holmes, is led away by the

[5] Conan-Doyle, 'The Three Gables', in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes.*(London: Vintage Books, 2009), p. 1032
[6] G.K. Chesterton, 'The Queer Feet', in *Father Brown* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1992), p. 68
[7] Stephen Knight, *Crime Fiction 1800-2000: Detection, Death, Diversity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 76
[8] Umberto Eco, *Reflections on The Name of The Rose* (London: Martin Seeker and Warburg Ltd, 1985), p. 28
[9] Umberto Eco, *The Name of The Rose* (London: Vintage, 2004), p. 471
[10] Ibid, p. 493

police. Holmes allows this, even asks for it, because he interested in the case and, one suspects, because the criminal is already safely captured. Holmes calls his story 'a very remarkable account…a fitting windup to an extremely interesting case'.[11] One suspects that Holmes feels comfortable in doing this, praising the mind of his adversary, and recognising the efforts that went into the crime, because the law is responsible for punishing him and not Holmes himself. Mary Evans points out that 'detective fiction, however, does not…actively encourage revenge and punishment outside the processes of law and order', and when it comes to Conan-Doyle, she is correct.[12] Holmes is allowed to admire the criminal because he is in no position to let this admiration stay his hand in providing the punishment.

However, when this punishment is missing it can feel as though the story has not really ended and Holmes the character is seldom happy when this happens. For example, in *A Scandal in Bohemia*, despite the king proclaiming himself quite content that Irene Adler has no more blackmail material to use against him, Holmes is unable to see past his disappointment that she escaped him and therefore the punishment that she was due.[13] As a reader, one cannot help but feel the same and feel as though, in this story at least, Holmes has failed in his role. The king, as an individual, may be content, but society is suffering in the knowledge that the criminal is still at large and capable of doing such a thing again.

The injection of religion into the detective story complicates the simple matter of identifying the criminal and punishing them by introducing the other possible outcome of redemption for the criminal. On the surface, this appears to be an outcome wholly unsatisfying to anyone except the criminal, for how can order be restored when someone who is proven dangerous is allowed to go free on nothing but their own word? This problem is clearest in *The Queer Feet* regarding Flambeau and Father Brown's attitude towards him. Flambeau's confession is important because it means that he is not punished for stealing the silver and, indeed, is allowed to go free. This redemption, taking the place of punishment, is not a satisfying outcome for the other characters in the story or for the reader. It can be argued, without getting too mixed up in Catholic dogma, that the process of redemption started with a confession has other aspects to it that Flambeau would have to do himself, such as performing whatever Father Brown has suggested he should do in order to absolve himself, so some sort of penance would actually have to take place in much the same way as a punishment one would expect from Conan-Doyle. This is difficult to accept though, especially when Father Brown says of Flambeau, 'I mustn't tell you anything of the man's identity, or his own story of course'.[14] Due to the rules imposed by the Catholic Church on the nature of confession, a potentially dangerous man has been released back into society on nothing except his word. Knight says that there is a simplicity to Chesterton, 'satisfied that sin is in the world and can be cast out' but the case of Flambeau, at least in these early stories, makes Father Brown seem more naïve than simple, as the criminal goes on to offend again.[15] In *The Flying Stars* he is responsible for a theft that has the potential to injure an innocent party and only the response of Father Brown stops his hand at the last minute with the ominous 'Your downward steps have begun'.[16] As a detective story read in isolation *The Queer Feet* fails in lacking a punishment that restores some order to society, and read along with the next appearance of Flambeau it lacks even more. Auden says of the criminal that 'if he does not repent society cannot forgive'[17] and it is not until Flambeau has made his reappearance as a model citizen and good detective that he can be forgiven his crime and

[11] Conan-Doyle, 'The Sign of Four', in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes.*(London: Vintage Books, 2009), p. 157
[12] Evans, p. 8
[13] Conan-Doyle, 'A Scandal in Bohemia', in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes.*(London: Vintage Books, 2009), p. 175
[14] Chesterton, 'The Queer Feet', p. 69
[15] Knight, p. 107
[16] G.K. Chesterton, 'The Flying Stars' <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/c/chesterton/gk/c52fb/chapter4.html#chapter4> [accessed 9 January 2013]
[17] W.H. Auden, 'The Guilty Vicarage: Notes on the Detective Story, by an Addict', *Harper's Magazine*, May 1948

Father Brown his apparent indiscretion in letting him go in the first place. Religion here has complicated the reliable detective story formula to an almost unforgiveable extent.

In *The Name of the Rose,* this matter of redemption is so ingrained in to the fabric of the society that it does not exist as an option other than punishment — it seems to be the only option. At the very beginning of his investigation, William says 'When I found someone guilty…he had really committed crimes of such gravity that in all conscience I could hand him over to the secular arm'.[18] This suggests that redemption takes a higher place than secular punishment, with only those entirely beyond the help of God given up for lost. William never names these crimes that he deemed so terrible and so the reader is left slightly unsure of what the investigation is attempting to prove or what will happen when the criminal is discovered. Merivale calls the solution to this story 'meaningless and disordered',[19] a point in fact backed up by Eco himself when he says 'this is a mystery in which very little is discovered and the detective is defeated'.[20] To a modern reader — to be precise, more modern than the time period which is the setting — this inability of the church to recognise the problems associated with allowing criminal behaviour to go unpunished seems a ridiculous one and it is arguably symbolic that the abbey is destroyed as a result of this failing. Adso says, of his visit back to the abbey, 'Of the great and magnificent constructions that once adorned that place, only scattered ruins remained'.[21] These ruins show that religion does not win when it overlooks the punishment of crime and transgression for the sake of redemption. Order is not restored in the same way as if the transgressors had been removed.

Lastly, although it has already been briefly mentioned, the final point of discussion is regarding how religion directly affects the detectives in their attempts to solve the crimes put in front of them, and whether it serves to make them more or less effective at what they are doing. For the point of this section, a more direct comparison between the three would be both necessary and beneficial.

Sherlock Holmes is the model of scientific rationality, summing up his own methods for the reader in *The Sign of Four* when he states that 'detection is, or ought to be, an exact science, and should be treated in the same cold and unemotional manner'.[22] It is the bluntness of this manner, it could be theorised, that led Chesterton to create Father Brown as a 'conscious reversal of Sherlock Holmes'.[23] The differences between the two authors is never as clear as when considering the ways in which their most famous characters approach the task of crime solving; Doyle lost his Christian faith, becoming agnostic and increasingly interested in Darwinian theory as he got older[24] whereas Chesterton, according to an essay by Dorothy Sayers 'professed belief in the Resurrection and was called whimsical'.[25] Whilst Holmes is that cold and calculating machine, Father Brown takes a strong stance against the approach — 'What do these men mean…when they say criminology is a science? They mean getting outside a man and studying him as if he were a gigantic insect: in what they would call a dry, impartial light, in what I should call a dead and dehumanised light'[26] and it is clear that Christian compassion is as much a part of his own method as it is a part of his character. This compassion, according to Auden, is Father Brown's 'prime motive…of which the guilty are in greater need than the innocent'.[27] Whilst this sets the character apart from Holmes and,

[18] Eco, *Rose*, p. 30
[19] Patricia Merivale, 'Post Modern and Metaphysical Detection', in *A Companion to Crime Fiction,* eds. Charles J. Rzepka and Lee Horsley (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 308-20; 309
[20] Eco, *Reflections*, p. 54
[21] Eco, *Rose*, p. 499
[22] Conan-Doyle, 'The Sign of Four', p. 90
[23] Knight, p. 75
[24] Frank Lawrence, *Victorian Detective Fiction and the Nature of Evidence* (Gordonsville: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 134
[25] Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Poetry of Search and the Poetry of Statement* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1963), p. 69
[26] Chesterton, 'The Secret of Father Brown' <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/c/chesterton/gk/c52fb/chapter33.html#chapter33> [accessed 9 January 2013]
[27] Auden

indeed, from William of Baskerville, it actually also gives him something in common with them. Compassion means being able to see that someone else is in need, that there is another side to every story, and this is something that all three of the detectives, religious or otherwise, excel at. Interestingly, it is also something that sets them apart from the people surrounding them. As Father Brown is compassionate, Holmes points out that 'one should always look for a possible alternative, and provide against it'.[28] William's compassion is bound by his order and the limitations of his age but he is able to confront Jorge on an equal level at the end of the story — 'I realised, with a shudder, that at this moment these two men, arrayed in a mortal conflict, were admiring each other, as if each had acted only to win the other's applause'[29] — and recognise the genius of the crimes the old man has committed. Here, in regards at least to this seemingly key ability of the detective to see things from a different perspective, religion plays a very small role; it might aid Father Brown and William of Baskerville, but is not necessary for Holmes in order for him to have the same ability. Whereas religion was a dividing factor before, here the very distinct lack of it unites all three detectives against the ordinary.

Religion, therefore, seems to serve chiefly to complicate the simple formulae that can otherwise be applied to detective stories. It provides a different sort of order and creates different kinds of transgression to go against this order, as well as appealing to God as the highest authority over the law of the land in which it is set. It also creates the new possible outcome of redemption for the criminal, an outcome that to many would seem unsatisfactory compared to the clear cut punishment offenders would receive in a Sherlock Holmes story, and therefore undermines the strength of the detective when such an outcome actually occurs. However, it is also a determining factor in helping to unite all three of the detectives discussed here; Father Brown's compassion is quite clearly the same thing as Holmes analytical reasoning and William of Baskerville's near genius, just with a different name to suit the type of man that Father Brown is. Ultimately, it actually seems that religion as a theme doesn't matter to the character of the detective at all; it might affect how they deal with a criminal and it might affect what they do after they have found them, but it does not affect how such a detective goes about applying his method and solving the crime. In this instance, perhaps the one that matters the most, Sherlock Holmes, Father Brown and William of Baskerville all look remarkably alike.

[28] Conan-Doyle,(2009) 'The Adventure of Black Peter' pg. 567
[29] Eco, *Rose* (2004) pg.472

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