

# Early Twentieth-Century Fiction

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October 23, 2017. Sayers (1).

## the field of cultural production

The field of production per se owes its own structure to the opposition between the *field of restricted production* as a system producing cultural goods objectively destined for a public of producers of cultural goods, and the *field of large-scale cultural production*, specifically organized with a view to the production of cultural goods destined for non-producers of cultural goods, “the public at large.”

Pierre Bourdieu, “The Market of Symbolic Goods,” *Poetics* 14, no. 1 (April 1985): 17.

## the brows

A novel received with unqualified enthusiasm in a lowbrow paper will be coolly treated by the middlebrow and contemptuously dismissed if mentioned at all by the highbrow Press; the kind of book that the middlebrow Press will admire wholeheartedly the highbrow reviewer will diagnose as pernicious; each has a following that forms a different level of public.

Q.D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932; London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), 20–21.

<i>large-scale</i>	→	<i>restricted</i>
entertainment		seriousness
ease		difficulty
escape	realism	experiment
genre		singularity
ephemerality		permanence
popularity	general renown	specialist renown
heteronomy		autonomy
low symbolic capital	→	high symbolic capital

## (no) mystery

Under the head of “mental relaxation” may be included detective stories, the enormous popularity of which (like the passion for solving cross-word puzzles) seems to show that for the reader of to-day a not unpleasurable way of relaxing is to exercise the ratiocinative faculties on a minor non-personal problem. (Leavis, 50)

## where the money is

“Writers have to consider their readers, if any, y’see.”  
(Sayers, 105)

I do hope something will come of Lord Peter! I really feel that if an agent is really keen upon him it must mean that he HAS monetary possibilities....I’m sure writing is much more my job than office work or teaching.  
(Dorothy Sayers, letter of 1922)

## genre

Genre...is a set of conventional and highly organised constraints on the production and interpretation of meaning.

Genres are always complex structures which must be defined in terms of all three of these dimensions: the formal, the rhetorical, and the thematic.

John Frow, *Genre* (London: Routledge, 2006), 10, 76.

## thematic

The detective positions himself at the watershed point between singularity and crime, precisely where the two are still indistinguishable, that is, at the point where it is impossible to tell the difference between normality and legality.

Luc Boltanski, *Mysteries and Conspiracies: Detective Stories, Spy Novels and the Making of Modern Societies*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity, 2014), 49.

“As far as I have heard, it is impossible for me to say whether the present case is an instance of crime or not, but the course of events is certainly among the most singular that I have ever listened to.” (“Red-Headed League,” 22)

The story has, I believe, been told more than once in the newspapers, but, like all such narratives, its effects is much less **striking** when set forth *en bloc* in a single half-column of print than when the facts slowly evolve before your own eyes, and the mystery clears gradually away as each new discovery furnishes a step which leads on to the complete truth. (“Engineer’s Thumb,” 153)

## formal

At the base of the whodunit we find a duality, and it is this duality which will guide our description. This novel contains not one but two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation.

Tzvetan Todorov, “The Typology of Detective Fiction,” in *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 44.

**text** the narrative discourse, as delivered by a particular narrator, to an addressee

**sjuzhet** (Ru. сюжет) a particular organization or arrangement of fictional events

**fabula** (Ru. фабула) a series of logically related events caused or experienced by actors, proceeding forward in time

“You see, Watson,” he explained in the early hours of the morning, as we sat over a glass of whisky-and-soda in Baker Street, “it was perfectly obvious...” (“Red-Headed,” 39)

We both sat in silence for some little time after listening to this extraordinary narrative. (“Engineer’s Thumb,” 167)

“My Dear Mr. Sherlock Holmes,—You really did it very well.” (“Scandal,” 19)

## rhetorical

With such displays of Holmesian sophistry, he [Sherlock Holmes] reveals himself not so much as the modern scientific detective he purports to be, but as the mythical figure he is: a beneficent wizard from the world of the medieval romance disguised as a charismatic late-Victorian genius bearing a reassuring message. With this hero at its centre, the saga represented an appealing literary rejoinder to what was seen to be the morbid pessimism of the avant-garde Realists, and, indeed, to the corrosive scepticism of emergent modernists, like Conrad, who figured the world as an “unreadable sea.”

Peter D. McDonald, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice, 1880–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 169.

“My dear Holmes,” said I, “this is too much. You would certainly have been burned had you lived a few centuries ago.” (“Scandal,” 2)

“Why did you beat the pavement?”

“My dear Doctor, this is a time for observation, not talk.” (“Red-Headed,” 33)

“This is my point,” he placed his finger on the centre of the circle. “This is where we shall find them.” (“Engineer’s Thumb,” 168)

## who's in charge?

“Now it was clear to me that our lady of to-day had nothing in the house more precious to her than what we are in quest of.” (“Scandal,” 17)

“Male costume is nothing new to me. I often take advantage of the freedom which it gives.” (“Scandal,” 19; qtd. by “DS”)

# Dorothy L. Sayers

1893 b. Oxford

1909 boarding school in Salisbury

1915 1st-class honors in French at  
Oxford, but no degree

1920 BA, MA (Oxon; among first)

1922–1931 ad writer in London

1923 *Whose Body?*

1925–1936 more Wimsey

1938 friends with C.S. Lewis,  
Charles Williams, the Inklings

1944–57† Dante trans. for Penguin



## what kind of book?

“Enter Sherlock Holmes, disguised as a walking gentleman.” (4; qtd. by “CG”, “JSH”, and F.K.)

- ▶ How does *Whose Body?* operate work with detective-story conventions in its opening chapters? Where does it reverse or modify expectations?

## self-consciousness

“Worse things happen in war. This is only a blink’ old shillin’ shocker. But I’ll tell you what, Parker, we’re up against a criminal—the criminal—the real artist and blighter with imagination—real, artistic, finished stuff. I’m enjoyin’ this, Parker.” (20)

“I crawl, I grovel, my name is Watson.” (30; qtd. by “JC”)

“He’s [Sugg is] like a detective in a novel.” (13; qtd. by “Broom”)

literariness?

\*This is the first Florence edition, 1481, by Niccolo di Lorenzo. (3)

## the science of detection

The three men stared at the photographs. (30)

“Of course, if this were a detective story, there’d have been a convenient shower exactly an hour before the crime and a beautiful set of marks which could only have come there between two and three in the morning.” (29; qtd. by “LL”)

“Following the methods inculcated at that University of which I have the honour to be a member, we will now examine severally the various suggestions afforded by Possibility No. 2.” (50–51)

next

- ▶ finish Sayers