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Finding the Key: Detective Fiction for the Developmental Reader

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When I proposed to create a teaching unit on detective fiction, I suspected that, for the first time in many years, I would have to read several books in order to gain a sense of this unfamiliar genre before I began to teach it to my students. I was dead wrong. I discovered that I would have to read many (oh yes—many many) varied examples of detective fiction. First, those novels served as a foundation for my own growing expertise but that might not be approachable or appropriate for the developmental classroom. Second, there were books that would become classroom reading as a result of my research. The seminar, therefore, became the landscape for my own investigative work. I would first become a student/detective solving an unfolding series of questions about the body of literature and I would then become a guide who would translate this information into the keys that would lead my students to their own individual "puzzling out." The clues that screamed out, "This will be a breeze," were all red herrings, indeed.

After several major metamorphic changes, the unit has become a distillation and extension of my participation in Professor Winks's seminar. First, an attempt will be made to define the importance of the detective fiction genre as a teaching tool in relation to both style and social commentary. Novels that represent certain traditions (the "classics," if you will) will be briefly overviewed, offering any teacher an opportunity to establish a working knowledge of one genre. Then, four specific books will be discussed both as extensions of the definitions and as individual (and teachable) works of fiction.

Finally, a section of classroom activities will serve two parallel purposes. They will include specific passages from the books that are discussed which highlight certain "investigative" skills students need to develop. They will also reinforce recognition of general characteristics of detective fiction that the students can employ as they read other works throughout this section, an informal list of "detective terminology" will emerge that can be used for any work.

Robin W. Winks, seminar leader, detective fiction puzzle-solver and author of (among many others) *Modus Operandi,* defines mystery detective fiction as "the underliterature of our culture." If we do not read it, "In the end, we are missing out on an entire set of clues . . . . which most reveal the modus operandi of modern America." [1]

Delving into the dark side of human nature becomes necessary ingredients in the mystery novel which, "though a puzzle, is primarily an investigation of character in relation to crime as society defines it." [2]

Most inner-city students exist in a world of violence, deprivation, dashed hopes. These same students have strong opinions about right and wrong, crime and criminals, what is just and what is evil. For most, whatever a person can get away with is fair play—as long as no one in his/her own family is hurt or victimized or insulted. Crime, in the abstract, is almost seductive. Beating the system has always been a popular—albeit risky—game.

Without realizing it, these young adults perpetuate what they wish they could leave behind. But where does the cycle begin? Or end? With the individual? his actions? his society? All such questions form the real basis of good detective fiction. If we are lucky, students will begin to notice that the lines are quite fuzzy in what they read. The hunter becomes the hunted; the detective becomes the criminal; the criminal ends up the victim. New lines should emerge that are less reassuring (because they are less definitive) but more realistic. This last part sounds like I believe the good guys (we, teachers) always win in the end. I know better than that; but at least we have to give ourselves a running start.

Our urban society is what the students think they know the best. Much of their self-image is built around talking "street talk" and on being "street wise." Cops and criminals, private eyes and perpetrators—all have mistakenly assumed that outsmarting or outliving each other will lead to success. Good detective fiction makes certain that winning the game does not happen too quickly, if it happens at all (and then, at what price).

The detective novel usually is an author's exercise in formula writing. This limitation is also one of its strong advantages in the developmental classroom. The student's sense of accomplishment is tied to recognizing the expected steps in each work; once he/she understands the how and why of the solved crime, the student knows that he/she has successfully completed the assigned trick. We are not talking miracles here; developmental readers often thrive in a structured environment. The environment offered is the technical landscape of the novels.

Mystery and detective fiction are more like the puzzles and riddles of childhood than any other form of fiction (no insult implied here). The secret is in the solution—and the comprehension of that solution. The creation of any puzzle begins with its conclusion; the whole is then divided into material that may or may not be rearranged but is always there to be retrieved. The child whose jigsaw puzzle is missing even one small piece has every right to call foul. The dedicated crossword puzzler is also justifiably horrified when a clue is genuinely misleading or an answer incorrectly spelled. No one is demanding straightforwardness in what students read; however, clues should be cleverly mysterious without ever cheating the reader. The underlying and, therefore, controlling factor is fair play: what the reader discovers (at whatever point) must contribute to, not block, the solution. If the student can have confidence that, in each work he reads, the puzzle pieces will eventually fall into place, he will no doubt try his/her hand at the stuff more than once.

Numerous critics have written analysis of the structure of detective fiction. Most argue that the genre is skeletal. What hangs on the outside makes each work unique; the inside process, however, follows a fairly consistent pattern. The construction of most mystery/ detective novels revolves around four basic elements. The author begins with the statement of the problem/crime. Next, he must create/ invent/produce the information (clues) during an inquiry that leads to a solution of the problem. Then the author completes the investigation at the point where the investigator declares that he/she knows the answer. More often than not, the novel will continue into a final phase: proving the accuracy of the declared solution to the reader through a careful explanation of the evidence. [3]

In most detective fiction, the major crime committed is against a person because (a) it more personally engages the fears and sensibilities of the reader, and (b) it naturally produces a general cry for an investigation. Murder is a most useful crime in detective fiction because it destroys the fiction, forcing society (and the reader) to seek the offender and to reconstruct the crime. The act of murder also creates a criminal/villain who is desperately searching for a way out of the web of disaster he/she has produced. The stakes are obviously quite high. Furthermore, in good detective fiction, the deadly game/puzzle is played out by two adversaries who are equally clever, relentless, and seemingly untouchable. In thematic terms, the two players become the symbols of good and evil, morality and immorality, law and lawlessness, in modern society. The villain and detective are linked by the body of evidence that surrounds the crime. They approach that information from opposing positions: "The detective, of his own free will, discovers and reveals what the murderer, of his own free will, tries to conceal." W. H. Auden's essay, "The Guilty Vicarage," establishes a parallel between Aristotle's theory of tragedy and accepted elements of detective fiction. The most important common elements are, "Concealment (the innocent seem guilty and the guilty seem innocent) and Manifestation (the real guilt is brought to consciousness)." Preoccupation with the fine line that exists between guilt and innocence is woven into the fabric of the detective fiction formula. Auden's more formal diagram for the genre follows:

Peaceful state before the murder

False clues, secondary murder, etc . . .

Solution

Arrest of Murderer

Peaceful state after arrest

Here, too, the reader does not know the whole truth until after the detective and criminal have their opportunity for a final confrontation. Before the puzzle is solved, discovery of much of the evidence occurs out of sequence, creating the illusion of incomplete data and uncertain progress. After the solution has been stated, the detective can then calmly recreate the crime logically and efficiently for the eager reader/participant. Emotionally and intellectually, the audience is finally satisfied. [4]

The teacher understands the duality involved in the genre. On one side, there is the dramatic action-filled effect of the story itself that is so attractive to the students. On the flip side, there is the logical problem beneath the narrative that may not have been solved at the same time the solution was revealed. For the developmental reader, the investigator bridges the gap the reader may not understand; the detective is viewed as the hero of the action side of the novel and also as the guide that leads the student to the recognition of how and why the crime happened in the first place. The formula can lead the developmental reader to a real sense of independence because the main character is able to answer those questions that otherwise might have fallen back on the teacher or, more commonly, might have remained unanswered altogether. Puzzle pieces now in place, the student feels (and rightfully so) that he/she has seen the process through to the end.

In our seminar, Professor Winks posed the questions of who and what to read. The first task was to create a common background for the group. We read representative types from the four major schools of detective fiction. Any educator interested in doing a thorough job in the classroom should read examples of each type. (Suggested titles will be included in the bibliography.)

Wilkie Collins began what Gavin Lambert calls the “first map . . . of a country in which the dominate reality is criminal.” [5] Detective fiction began with sensational blends of both good and evil in both hunters and hunted. Collins led to the first traditional mystery school: The English country-house novel where snobbery and manners are mixed with violence. Of course, Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers reign here; however, their works are too remote, both in terms of language and traditions, to be taught to lower level readers. The spy novel, made famous by John Buchan in *The Thirty-Nine Steps* , plunges a hero into a totally foreign environment where he/she must rely on his own resources and no one else to accomplish his mission. Again, the language and the shifting shades of truth make these works too difficult to teach, although Ian Fleming novels are popular because of the Bond films.

The third type, the American hard-boiled mystery, has often been transferred to film. Chandler’s Phillip Marlowe is the classic example of the tough outsider whose only concern is the search for the truth in a landscape that is “populated by real criminals and real policemen, reflecting some of the tensions of the time . . . and imbued with the disenchantment peculiar with postwar American writing.” [6]

Finally, there are the English and American procedural novels that draw heavily on the actual day-to-day police routine that leads the tough cop to his solution. Usually well researched, these novels are overwhelmingly detailed, and, of course, gory. Students may well be attracted to the violence; however, as teachers, we must be careful not to select novels with particularly graphic material that might overshadow all other aspects of the work.

The novels chosen as text for the classroom fall loosely into these categories. The importance for the teacher is not so much the label itself as the tradition behind the label. Not all popular fiction emerged from the typewriters with no sense of literary or cultural history.

What title would fall under the curtain of “the good mystery?” Isn’t after all the child’s hand clutching at a windowsill in Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* both the invitation and the key to the solution of a puzzle? Or the attempted murder of the heroine’s lover, Rochester, in Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* —doesn’t the crime fuel the mystery at the very core of the novel? What could be more necessary, indeed, than the discovery by a king of another king’s murderer? In *Oedipus Rex* isn’t it the solution of a crime that triggers all that occurs? Where am I leading? Ah—follow the all too obvious clues.

There are literally thousands of novels to choose from that would include some form of mystery or detective story. Avoiding the obvious choices (Doyle, Poe, Christie) that students might choose to eventually read on their own, I have concentrated on one “laying down of clues classic” whose investigator is not a detective by trade, and three fairly contemporary novels where the culture will be fairly recognizable to the reader and where one or more crucial characters (victim/detective/suspect) are the same general age of developmental seniors (18-20). Not one of the three would be judged to contain evidence of questionable teaching content. There is virtually no romance, no sex, no drugs. There is plenty of violence on or beneath the surface of all four; we do a disservice if we fail to recognize and confront what is also a major theme in our lives.

The popular detective novel is not a replacement for major works of literature. Detective fiction does offer the opportunity to complete successfully a longer work and then offers hope that a second can be read using skills learned from the first. There is a compromise for the die-hards who want to tread the beaten path once again. Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is an excellent introduction to detective fiction that also adheres to “enduring” literary requirements. Obviously background material on lawyers and members of Parliament in a socially stratified 19th century England will help students. Discussing “nice” streets versus

run-down sections of a city—and how close these two sections will be—will help to clarify the essential element of the setting in the novel. Most important, the trained observations of an amateur detective (and the instinctual observations of a close friend) should help to make the students careful readers. We cannot expect critical judgments from people who have trouble reading complex sentences. We can expect that details will be noted and that opinions will be formed. The first section of *Jekyll and Hyde* should be read, if possible, aloud to the class. True, the teacher colors the interpretation with her/his oral emphases; better too many hints than none at all. Students cannot solve a puzzle if they have not spied the pieces. No one is overlooking another obvious clue to the success of this venture; many students know who Jekyll/Hyde is from movies or television. But, I'll bet that not one of them knows why or how. Knowing some of the answers gives the students confidence. Because they will not feel threatened by total unfamiliarity, the students will be more willing to ask questions and look for answers. Finding the road signs will arm them for their next foray into a landscape of mystery.

Jekyll and Hyde can be taught successfully both as a carefully constructed theme piece and as an equally well-crafted investigative work. Mr. Utterson, a disciplined attorney, is well-prepared for the job he is undertaking. Students know, or think they know (aha! another classic tool of the mystery writer) what all lawyers do. Ask them. After the answers about big offices, fancy cars, and large fees (how true) have been cleared away, comments about cross-examination, looking at evidence, pleading with the jury (i.e., the world of the criminal lawyer) will follow. Some may even suggest that a lawyer builds his case by finding evidence as well as by using it. Utterson, then, may not be hard-boiled but he is, most certainly, capable of putting the pieces together. He is both sponge and analyst; so is any good detective.

London may seem like a forbidden city for slow readers. Students often miss the location and think they are in New York or New Haven or Boston. For those of us who are provincial about our cities there is a lesson to be learned from our students. A city is a city. The major rules of good and evil or of crime and detection are the same because the framework of all urban landscapes remains quite similar. Hmm . . . the tables turn. The detail observed about neighborhood conditions (as mentioned above) are clues as well as commentary. Checks, cane handles, clothing—these clues are accessible to our students; through their discoveries they will become more sophisticated and satisfied readers. Jekyll and Hyde is a good beginning.

Any one of the three novels that follow could make up a second half of a four to six week unit in a developmental senior class. Using all four would involve half of a semester assuming that two novels could not be read simultaneously. In each, there is a cop or a detective trained by a cop. Each then spends a lot of time watching. The advantage to all three detectives is that they are not armchair infallibles. They make mistakes; they go over evidence; they each get their man—eventually.

Hillary Waugh's *Last Seen Wearing* begins in a small ivy-league women's college and never goes further than the local police station. At first, a small town may appear to be another foreign landscape for inner-city kids. They do watch "Happy Days" on television. Thanks to its current popularity they are aware of the nature of the preppie. Some additional comments from the "old teachers" who remember (or at least know people who remember . . .) about life on a small campus would, of course, be helpful. Special attention should be paid to the now outdated campus policy of signing in and signing out as well as to the reasonable assumption that everyone in such a confined community would know everything about each other. The lesson to be learned by both fictional detective and student detective is that "almost everything" creates false security because it proves to be an incomplete body of information after all.

Both the detective and the crime in this novel will capture the interest of the student audience. A young

attractive freshman is missing and is fairly quickly presumed dead. Finding the body is only half the puzzle; finding the reason behind the murder (the motive) is equally important if the murderer is to be found—and caught. Clues are everywhere—and nowhere. There are dead ends, wrong turns, tailspins. Enter Chief Ford. Here is a man who would appeal to noncollege bound students. He is clever, abrasive and thorough. Ford is and is not hard-boiled: tough, yes, but he has his not-so-hidden soft spots. Ford is also totally cynical about higher education:. "You college guys with your three-dollar words." Not unlike our students, he shows tremendous ambivalence about the college that looms so near yet remains so out of reach. At the same time, Ford rather neatly identifies the only logical explanation for such a disappearance: "Causes. Bad marks. Not getting along with classmates. Trouble at home. Foul play. Wanting to make their own way in the world. Men. Six reasons. There's your answer." [7] Ford immediately identifies the correct category but "facts" lead him away temporarily. *Last Seen Wearing* is a gem for both teachers and students.

John Ball's *In the Heat of the Night* has one minor and two major advantages. The novel became a tremendously successful film that students may or may not have seen. In any case, they do have a face, Sidney Poitier's, for Mr. Tibbs. The character is somewhat stiff but he is recognizable and, therefore, readily accepted. More important, Tibbs is a good cop. The reader is both amazed by and attempting to catch up to Tibbs's conclusions. This detective sees the same evidence the reader sees but the clues fall together better for him.

Most chapters end with a last knowing word from Virgil Tibbs and the reader is left wondering, "How does he know?" For mainly a black student body, Virgil may be a little too proper, but he is most definitely a BIG hero. Here is the second strong point about the novel:. Virgil Tibbs, a black man caught accidentally in the deep South before Civil Rights legislation has reintegrated restaurants, bathrooms, and train stations, functions at a social disadvantage to which he is unused—AND STILL WINS. A brief history that contrasts pre- and post-1963 conditions in the South should send kids home to their parents with all sorts of questions. They will savor Virgil's victory once they understand the obstacles his environment has created.

Ball's novel does offer, in Virgil Tibbs, a somewhat overstylized character. He is almost too cool, too professional to be truly likable. In the final analysis, he may have no choice. Working in a white Southern community that wants no part of him, Virgil must choose his road carefully. To fight back means to close all doors to a possible solution to the crime. To remain a distant, seemingly accepting detective gives him the ultimate satisfaction of solving the one case that has sent that same narrow-minded community into an uproar. Tibbs holds all the strings.

The most recent novel, P. D. James's *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* , appeared only a decade ago. It is a wonderful novel about a woman detective who has been given her first case. In the opening chapter, Cordelia Gray finds her mentor and partner has slit his own wrists. She inherits office, bills and a gun. Throughout the novel the advice of the dead partner, Bernie Pryde (and Bernie's previous boss, Adam Dagliesh), blend with Cordelia's natural talent for investigative work to create the perfect example of a successful detective's *bildungsroman* .

Cordelia is hired, ostensibly to solve a murder that has been judged a suicide by society. As she becomes deeply involved with characters, both living and dead (the victim is a very real force in the novel), Cordelia learns from her mistakes; she becomes a victim of violence herself because she comes too close to solving more than what she is actually hired to do. In the end, Cordelia pieces the puzzle together and learns that sometimes the rules of society must be circumvented in order to truly achieve justice. Students will love Cordelia Gray and many will envy her exciting adventures because they care about her. They will also fear for

her life.

The landscape is a college town in England but should offer no more difficulty than any of the other novels. Clues usually come from the victim's peers. Close friends exist everywhere; they know each other well and it is therefore logical that Cordelia learns from their intimacy while finding herself attracted to these suspects. Hidden family secrets can also occur anywhere. Suicide—murder—deception—students can see the trees no matter where the forests may be.

Cordelia Gray's decisions in the last several pages should produce some rousing class discussions. Should a murderer ever get away with his crime? Is justice best served in the classroom? Should an individual ever allow himself/herself to become an accomplice? Should some lies remain unrevealed?

These novels always lead back to questions that not only solve the mystery but also mirror concerns of both the character's and the reader's societies. Most students will be, for the first time, comparing their own world to a fictional one; as a result, they will make judgments about society, about values, about living. Fundamentally, that is what teaching literature is all about.

Glossary of Terms Commonly Found in Detective Fiction

Note: Before students begin to read their first mystery novel, a class period should be devoted to learning the following terms. Students will then begin to establish a working vocabulary.

accusation—statement that places blame on a specific person or persons.
alias—an alternate name used to conceal identity.
alibi—an explanation that removes a person from the scene of a crime when it occurred.
angle—specific strategy or way of looking at facts as employed by the detective during an investigation.
autopsy—the medical examination of a corpse to determine cause(s) of death.
booking—the process whereby a suspect is officially arrested and charged with a crime.
case—the investigation of a crime from the time it is reported/ discovered until it is resolved (closed).
charges—specific crime(s) a person is accused of.
circumstantial—indicative but not conclusive.
clue—anything that sheds light on a particular case.
collar—the actual arrest by a police officer.
corpus dilecti—the actual body that proves a murder has been committed.
crime of passion—a crime committed in a rage of anger, hatred,
revenge, etc.
culprit—the "bad guy;" criminal.
D.A.—district attorney; works for the government.
deduction—conclusion reached through a logical progression of steps. defense—the argument made to show the innocence of the accused
person.
evidence—material that will prove innocence or guilt.
eyewitness—someone who actually observes a crime and/or criminal. felony—major crime (i.e., armed robbery, murder, rape).
foil—the detective's "right hand man;" he/she is usually quite different in nature. Ex:

Holmes/Watson; Nero Wolfe/ Archie Goodwin.
frame-up—deliberate trap set to lay blame on an innocent person. habeas corpus—accusor has to produce a body in order to hold a suspect.
homicide—the act of murder.
hunch—guess; instinct.
informer—someone who relays information to police/detective for money (usually).
inquest/inquiry—legal questioning concerning a particular event or action.
lead—something or someone that may help move an investigation toward a solution.
malice aforethought—criminal was already considering a hostile act before the crime occurred.
manslaughter—accidental killing.
misdemeanor—minor offense
modus operandi—method of operation (m.o.) that a criminal employs during his crimes.
morgue—city government building where dead bodies are kept during investigations.
motive—reason for committing a crime.
perpetrator—offender; criminal.
post mortem—the report from an autopsy.
premeditation—deliberate intent to perform a crime before it occurs. private eye—private detective.
prosecutor—attorney working for the District Attorney; person trying to prove guilt in a courtroom.
red herring—a false clue that usually misleads the reader (and often the detective).
set-up—a trap that is designed to catch a criminal or victim.
sleuth—detective.
statement—official document containing information supplied by witness, suspect, or any other person involved in an investigation.
stool pigeon—informer.
surveillance—constant visual or electronic monitoring of a person's activities.
suspect—someone who may have reason to have committed a specific crime.
tank—jail cell.
third degree—intensive questioning of a suspect.
victim—person who is hurt or killed as a result of a criminal act.

Sample Lesson Plans

The following lesson plans fall into two distinct categories. Although each exercise can stand alone, used in sequence the lessons gradually increase the students' awareness of the importance of both careful observation and logical thinking.

The first four sample lessons are designed to spark interest and to develop sustained discipline. The exercises are concrete and focus on students' sensory and mental responses to a variety of stimuli. The final group of lesson plans includes brief excerpts from three of the novels discussed in the narrative portion of this unit. Each stresses a different facet of detective work.

Lesson One—The Frame-Up

Every detail surrounding the introduction of a mystery or detective novel should be carefully orchestrated; the class must begin to vibrate with anticipation long before the book appears. Establishing the right atmosphere can be an essential ingredient in the success or failure of the project. Begin with hints, clues, if you will, about the subject. News clippings of real unsolved crimes should mysteriously appear on the bulletin boards. Book titles and/or juicy oneliners should be scratched across the blackboard and left unexplained. The teacher should casually mention that a different kind of book is rumored to be available . . . .the kind that the teacher would never read when alone in a quiet house. The students will claim that the teacher is corny or bluffing or crazy, but they'll be caught if the bait is lively enough.

Lesson Two—Last Seen Wearing

This exercise is guaranteed to show students how unobservant we all are. It continues to have value when it is repeated at intervals throughout the course of the unit. Students and teacher can measure how much progress the young sleuths are making.

Strategy One: For very slow students

The teacher should wear something quite noticeable to class one day: white socks, loud tie, overly-long skirt, altered hair style. All comments must be ignored. The *following* day, have only one question on an otherwise blank sheet for every student who enters: "What was different about me yesterday?" Students should be given five minutes to answer. The teacher does not respond to questions during this time.

Strategy Two: For more observant students

The teacher wears an outfit that is fairly unfamiliar to students.

The clothes do not have to be particularly distinctive. Again, the following day, sheets are distributed with the question, "What was I wearing yesterday?" Again, a five minute time limit is imposed while the teacher remains mute.

When everyone has completed her/his answer, collect all work and begin to read at random (thus avoiding embarrassment for some students). Discuss the value of carefully observing people and things around us; also point out that the assignment might reappear—for credit!

Lesson Three—Stick to the Facts

If students can begin to think like detectives, they will be more likely to enjoy reading mystery/detective

fiction. Provide folders, paper, and “official pencil” for each student. Explain that, for the next week or two (depending on the level of interest and/or the projected duration of the unit) students will be recording daily changes in the classroom. Successful detectives (amateur or professional) are always looking for the subtlest of changes in their environments.

Step One Students must have a working familiarity with what does belong to that environment. The detective’s log begins with a careful account of the classroom as it usually appears.

> a. Review the room with students, pointing out the importance of identifying which things rarely change without a major reason (for example, the number of desks or the position of the teacher’s closet) and which things are expected to change (notes on the blackboard, announcements to be posted, position of the venetian blinds). Discuss dimensions, colors, detail distinctions (e.g., which desk has carved initials on the top).
> b. Give students time to study the room as they move around for several minutes.
> c. Provide graph paper and rulers and have students draw maps to scale. Simultaneously working at the board, the teacher can create a larger example for those students who fail to understand the directions. All large items can be included in the floor plan.
> d. Direct students to create an inventory of permanent objects. Is there a healthy plant in the window? Do all the light fixtures work? Is there a gun on the file cabinet? Are the books always neatly stored on the shelves?

Note Glance through each log and make suggestions if big chunks of the room remain undocumented.

Step Tw The students are informed that, on most days, one or more things will be added, removed, or in some way altered in the room. The change(s) will not be deliberately misleading and will not include expected changes (e.g., notes on the board). At the beginning of each class, students are to record what they find without helping or revealing their findings to one another. All logs will be kept “under lock and key” by the teacher. Of course, the teacher will keep her/his own record, including specific dates when nothing was changed at all.

Step Three At the end of the project, the teacher should attempt to reconstruct physically each change in sequence. Students should be given the opportunity to correct their own folders. A discussion with the entire group concerning how and why they discovered or failed to uncover the “evidence” should lead logically to the conclusion that even careful observers have to be constantly aware of everything around them.

Lesson Four—Eyewitness Account: Finding the Truth

This exercise requires the assistance of a colleague in the school.

The set-up Students should be busily engaged in recording their observations in their folders

when a fellow teacher barges into the room and begins a heated conversation with the classroom teacher. The classroom teacher reprimands the intruder, stressing that she/he is conducting a class and should not be interrupted. Of course, the intruder doesn't care—and says so—which infuriates the teacher. The argument gets louder and louder until the teacher reaches threateningly toward the unwanted visitor who staggers back. The class-crasher pulls out a shiny unidentified weapon and strikes at the teacher who dramatically collapses as the stabber runs out. The whole event takes roughly sixty seconds. If students run true to form, the majority will remain frozen in their seats with mouths and eyes wide open.

Filing the report The teacher jumps up and tells students to quickly record in writing everything they saw and heard including movements, dialogue, facial expressions. Give students time to check over their statements to make certain they have nothing to add or delete. Students should sign their revised statements before handing them in.

Comparing the accounts Collect the reports and begin to read the discrepancies. There should be many. Allow students time to explain what they wrote and to argue about the differences.

Conclusion Switching from the position of detective to the position of witness teaches students that even what they see and hear can be clouded by what they feel about the people involved or by what they want to believe occurred. The important fact is that truth is not always absolute; the "real" truth often emerges from a composite portrait of a particular event.

Lesson Five—The Two Houses of Jekyll and Hyde:

Reading the Environment

The street was small . . . thriving . . . the inhabitants were all doing we11 . . . Two doors from one corner, the line was broken by a court; and just at that point a certain sinister block of building thrust forward . . . it was two stories high; showed no window, nothing but a door . . . and bore in every feature the marks of neglect.

Round the corner from the [same] by-street there was a square of ancient, handsome houses, now for the most part decayed. One house, however, second from the corner, was still occupied entire . . . [the house] bore a great air of wealth and comfort. [8]

Each of the two partial paragraphs above appear just after the amateur detective, Mr. Utterson, has entered two adjacent streets in the novel *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* . Obviously, Robert Louis Stevenson was drawing parallels between the Jekyll/Hyde dark side/light side and the condition of the two building facades when measured against their immediate environments.

Questions for students after they have read the two passages:

1. What details are repeated in each passage?
2. What are the obvious differences between the two building fronts?
3. What do both buildings have in common? (They are both out of place; students may need help here.)
4. What might be true of these buildings? (A diagram of the possible connection of the two buildings might spill some of the beans, but might also spark some genuine interest.)

5. Which house would you be more willing to enter? Why?

Utterson has stumbled across an important puzzle piece during his Sunday strolls. The good detective never fails to collect and carry data everywhere he goes.

Lesson Six—Limiting the Possibilities

In Hillary Waugh's *Last Seen Wearing* , the reader's first encounter with Detective Sergeant Burt Cameron includes Cameron's reconstruction of Lowell Mitchell's wardrobe in order to figure out exactly what she was wearing when she disappeared. [9] Cameron gives Lowell's roommates time to go through her belongings and to offer helpful information. He then asks questions and sends for missing laundry and dry cleaning data. Two tight pages lead the reader to the certain knowledge that this man knows exactly how to proceed with the case.

There is nothing particularly dramatic or metaphoric about Cameron or about this excerpt. The passage will, however, emphasize the fact that even minor details in our daily lives can be important leads to a thorough detective.

Before reading the passage, students should be told that the selection is about identifying articles of clothing. Ask students where they keep their clothes. Ask if they may have forgotten any possible alternative locations. Then begin to read.

Questions for students after the passage:.

1. Why do you think these three girls know so much about Lowell? Is it realistic?
2. Could you identify what is missing from your own closet?
From your mother's? Your sister's?
3. What was Cameron's smartest question? Why.
4. What was Lowell wearing when she disappeared? Are you sure?

Lesson Seven—The Art of Detection

In John Ball's *In the Heat of the Night* , the hero, Virgil Tibbs, is an expert homicide detective. In a small segregated Southern town, he meets Police Chief Gillespie. Two brief passages quickly reveal the vast difference in the levels of expertise that exists between Tibbs and Gillespie. Present each passage separately, asking the same questions after each.

> The chief walked without hesitation to the slab in the middle of the room, bent over and stared hard at the dead man. He walked around twice. Once he reached out and carefully bent the dead man's arm at the elbow, then he replaced it as it had been. Finally he squatted down and scrutinized the top of the man's head where he had been struck. Then he rose once more to his feet.
>
> ***
>
> When I examined the body . . . it was evident that the fatal blow had been struck by a blunt instrument at an angle of about seventeen degrees from the right as the skull is viewed from the rear. That makes it almost certain that the assailant was right-handed. [10]

Gillespie apparently learns nothing from his cursory examination of the body. Tibbs, on the other hand, has discovered a great deal about the murder and the murderer (Tibbs' analysis continues in the paragraphs that follow the passage cited above).

Questions for students after each paragraph is read individually:

1. What did you learn about the crime?
2. What did you learn about the investigator?
3. Would you like to have this detective working on a case in your city? Why or why not?

The students should decide that Tibbs sounds more reliable. A demonstration or diagram of the angle of attack might clarify his comments and lead students to other logical questions of their own including: Could Tibbs know how tall the murder was? Could the victim have defended himself? Here again the paragraphs underscore the importance of every detail of an investigation. The students should also be looking forward to the battle between Gillespie and Tibbs.

Notes

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1. Winks, *Modus Operandi* , p. 80.
2. Winks, *Modus Operandi* (Boston. Godine, 1982), p. 4.
3. The four stages are dealt with in more detail in R. Austin Freeman's essay, "The Art of the Detective Story," *The Art of The Mystery Story* ed. Howard Haycraft, pp. 14-15.
4. W. H. Auden, "The Guilty Vicarage," *Detective Fiction* , ed. Robin W. Winks, p. 14.
5. Lambert, "The Dangerous Edge," *Detective Fiction* , ed. Robin W. Winks (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1980), p. 47
6. George Grella, "The Hard-Boiled Detective Novel," *Detective Fiction* , ed. Robin W. Winks, p. 105.
7. Hillary Waugh, *Last Seen Wearing* (New York, 1952), 31.

8. Robert Louis Stevenson, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* , p. 492, 503
9. reprinted at the conclusion of the unit
10. John Ball, *In the Heath of the Night* (New York: Bantam Books, 1965), 21, 29-30.

Annotated Teacher Bibliography

Note: The four titles on the Student Reading List should be considered to be part of this list; descriptions are included in the body of the unit.

Primary Sources

Buchan, John. *The Thirty - Nine Steps in Modern Mystery and Detective Novels* . Jay E. Greene, ed. New York: Globe Book Company, 1951.

This particular volume also includes *Jamaica Inn* , *Portrait of Jennie* , and *Dr* . *Jekyll and Mr* . *Hyde* . It is used at Hillhouse and Lee. The Buchan work is the classic spy thriller. It offers the teacher a chance to study an amateur detective who is unexpectedly involved in a mystery that could lead to the hero's death.

Burns, Rex. *Angle of Attack* . New York: Harper and Row, 1979.

This is a fine example of the police procedural. Although Ed McBain is considered the master of this type of work, Burns' work is much more involving and, in many way, superior in style and content. Wager is a solitary figure and a great cop. He is also a man with a definite sense of justice. This book would work well with a quality group who would get the subtler descriptions and decisions made.

Chandler, Raymond. *The Little Sister* . Boston: Houghton, 1949.

Any Chandler would offer the teacher a good view of the American hard-boiled detective in the form of Philip Marlowe. The detective here is a cynical outsider who is more interested in working toward the solution than in making the criminal pay.

Christie, Agatha. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* . *More Stories to be Remembered* . Thomas B. Costain and John Beecroft, eds. New York: Doubleday, 1958.

Christie is the mistress of the English manorhouse mystery. This particular work introduces the teacher to Hercule Poirot, the detective with all those wonderful “little grey cells.” Fair play is the big issue here; did Christie rob the reader at the end?

Hall, Adam. *The Tango Briefing* . Glasgow, Great Britain: Fontana, 1973.

This novel is a personal favorite. The main character is Quiller, of *Quiller Memorandum* fame. Again, the teacher will be thrown into a foreign threatening landscape where the only way to survive is to rely on self only. The book is brilliant to the end, which is a real shocker in itself.

Household, Geoffrey. *Dance of the Dwarfs* . Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1968.

This book clearly illustrates the literary value of the genre. It is too difficult for all but the best of classes, however, it will convince skeptical teachers that detective fiction can be much more than a casual read.

Le Carré, John. *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* . New York: Dell, 1963.

This is the classic modern spy novel. It is a believable cold war tale; the spy, Leamas, is both dedicated and alienated. Again, the end is unexpected.

Parker, Robert. *Mortal Stakes* . New York: Berkely Medallion Books, 1975.

Another good choice for teachers who feel they will not like detective fiction at all. This novel is about baseball and is set in Boston. Spenser, a series figure, is another ex= ample of the American hard-boiled detective. Parker uses violence throughout his mystery novels to alter characters’ perceptions of themselves and society.

Sayers, Dorothy. *The Nine Tailors* . New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1934.

Sayers is a difficult author to read but she is the first mystery writer to be admitted to the ranks of “great writers.” This is a *very* English novel and should be viewed as an important piece of background reading for the genre.

Secondary Sources

Haycraft, Howard, ed. *The Art of the Mystery Story* . New York; Grosset and Dunlap, 1936.

This is a collection of essays about both the genre in general and many of the classics.

Winks, Robin W., ed. *Detective Fiction* : *A Collection of Critical Essays* . Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1980.

In addition to a marvelous menu of articles, the volume offers two bibliographies designed for college courses and a list of the author’s two hundred favorite titles. Professor Winks was the seminar leader.

Winks, Robin W. *Modus Operandi* : *An Excursion into Detective Fiction* . Boston: Godine, 1982.

This is a personal statement about the importance of the mystery and detective novel both as literary and social work. There is a tremendous amount of information about authors and their works but he gives nothing essential away. This is an enjoyable book, a rare find in the all-too-often boring category of background material.

Student Reading List

Ball, John. *In the Heat of the Night* . New York: Bantam Books, 1965.*

James, P.D. *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* . New York: Popular Library, 1972.*

Stevenson, Robert Louis. *Dr* . *Jekyll and Mr* . *Hyde* . school edition

Greene, Jay E. *Modern Mystery and Adventure Novels* . editor, New York: Globe Book Company, 1951+

Waugh, Hillary. *Last Seen Wearing* . New York: Perennial Library, 1952*

*Several copies should be available at the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute.

+Class sets can be found at Hillhouse and Lee High School.

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