



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1999 Volume IV: Detective Fiction: Its Use as Literature and as History

Reading Clues Closely

Curriculum Unit 99.04.04
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The following curriculum unit circumscribes some potential roles for detective fiction in the classroom, teaching writing to high school students. But before we define what detective fiction is, some general remarks must be made. Because teaching writing also involves teaching how to read, and inevitably involves research and consideration of evidence in order to write cogent analytical responses, the teacher must press into service disparate walks of life, reaching for analogies and connections. A writing class asks not only for lessons about metaphor and simile, but demands demonstration of these figures as living tools and links to the living past and future. A writing class which weighs the interactions between myth and history, must trouble itself with the conventions of genres. The teacher trains students in a practical fashion, with an eye to composition as a craft. Within this there is also the aspiration, the edge with an eye to each draft's artfulness.

The question of what to read is a difficult one. One may simply need to demonstrate such devices as hyperbole and caricature, or else works of a particular genre. If I were to teach Raymond Chandler, it would be for the sake of relief, I suppose, as an interlude with an easy pleasure, useful for demonstrating various formulas. But would I imply that it is such good writing that it should take priority over a grave classic? Pulp fiction, a low-imitative expression of popular culture, composed of street slang and shop talk, patently sentimental about truth and justice, hackneyed and foreseeable, has made it to the classroom, I suspect, because teachers will try nearly anything to get students to read. Assuming one has not chosen F. Scott Fitzgerald or Nathaniel West to fill the slot (authors capable of higher irony and satire, less sullied by cliché), let us assume for the sake of this curriculum unit that Chandler may be taught. Students may unravel the detective's analogues, each student herself a detective, gazing at history or the news, all clues potential evidence, all sources needing verification. Students are able to think about the notion of rational inquiry, and its fundamental place in what we think we know for sure; as opposed to what we casually assume: the dross of hearsay and tangles of passive consensus. Good minds are made to find irony, with proper guidance, in the method of Socrates, and fantastic, mythical romance and its monsters in the *Odyssey*. So too should they find pleasure in the caricatures dabbled by Chandler, with his deadpan hyperbolic similes. All projects such as this launch the student into the realm of comparative literature, a realm composed of unsaturatable potential for discovery.

Discovery is the basic ingredient in any learning. Works of detective fiction, if paired with other works of high literature, have much to teach about the structures of discovery: the hide and seek of gradual revelation based on tests of one's valor, wit, and of course, ability to explain, by way of rational inquiry, the story of a question and its best answer. No wonder Robert B. Parker gives us Spenser: he calls attention to the romance

of the Faerie Queene, the allegorical landscape, the moral snares and need for uncompromisable self-examination, clear intuition, and the hard work of research. By its very nature conventional, this genre relies heavily on recurrent elements, long identified. Though naïve and romantic commentators may find it spoils a simplistic notion of inspiration to say that formulas may be employed by a professional writer working in a highly conventional, ritual space, genuine laborers at the art of written expression will have little objection to the accusation that they employ formulaic devices, of plot, characterization, motif, rhythm, figurative language, metrical structure and so forth. The following sections, through considerations of history and poetry as well as prose fiction, situate detective fiction within a larger world. A larger world must be emphasized, not a compartmentalized, provincial perspective. Writing means reading, assessing, most of all questioning. Judgment follows on its heels, then an answer.

Often a teacher is asked by a student to answer a question seemingly unrelated to the lesson at hand, which, serendipitously, ends up opening a discussion quite relevant. A freshman, who happens to be a girl, and black, asked me if I knew that Cleopatra, the Egyptian Queen, was black. I asked her where she had heard this and she replied that her grandparents had told her. This young girl holds her grandparents in very high esteem, actually thinks of them as nearly infallible. When I told her that Cleopatra was not black, was in fact a Macedonian, and offered texts to prove it, she refused to believe that her grandparents could be wrong, and even doubted whether the books were right. This phenomenon has been referred to as the "parental threshold," beyond which the child's mind fears to tread. Summarizing an argument of Hartley's, Routley states, "Compassion without justice becomes sentimentality, and sentimentality becomes cruelty: so compassion defeats itself if it is not subordinate to justice..." Many issues come into play when a student has learned the wrong information. No teacher wants to have to tell a student that her beloved grandparents are mistaken; compassion would have us break it to her gently. But the spirit of inquiry demands that we ask ourselves how and why a misconception came about. In this case, perhaps it was the noble search for role models from the ancient past, a search for great black women to look up to, mixed up with various popular misconceptions; or quite possibly it was a deliberate fabrication based upon a rueful combination of ideological ambition and historical ignorance; perhaps, even, simply wishful thinking. Did she mix her up with Nefertiti, whose illustrious bust appears in many texts? If the teacher is to teach well, teaching the students to use reason responsibly, he must stand for justice, where justice equals the preservation of the truth of matters as they really happened, as fully as may be demonstrated in fact. How else can something true overcome the suspicions derived from ignorance and ideology?

A responsible reader of history, under proper circumstances, may parallel the hero-detective who finally shouts "eureka" after he has looked so long beyond the effect to the causes of what he has encountered. He must let the truth be known, and in so doing he simultaneously makes a stand for the necessity of rational inquiry and clear, scientific reasoning, with eyes to revelation, and thereby, justice. By historical analogy, as a teacher who attempts to bring rational inquiry to devout students, it seems one must resemble the astronomer of the 17th century trying to persuade a Ptolemaic Christendom that the earth revolves around the sun. Many of the students, when pressed, reject any Darwinian hypotheses as somehow offensive to their dignity. If justice is a matter of discerning the truth by weighing rationally as much of the information as possible, then we have a duty to be critical of issues of belief as compounded of myth. There is no denying that the hummingbird and the flowers which use it for pollination show the intricacy of superior design. It is a matter of myth, ordained meaning and belief (irrational), to say that it is the handiwork of the divine. But faith and science are not enemies, as some would assume, nor in any way incompatible. One may believe it to be so, but a teacher has an obligation to explain it on as many levels as possible, to differentiate the mythical explanations from the scientific explanations. We should be clear about what results from methodical, rational inquiry, and what is a matter of belief.

II

A Red Herring

Few readers of modern poetry in English have not read T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Few who have read the poem have understood it outright, and few would understand it to this day had not many decades of scholarship shed light on its many mysterious allusions. Eliot himself provided footnotes to the poem, a controversial move, quite unprecedented. Indeed, many of Eliot's notes are helpful to the reader attempting to figure out the poem's puzzling landscape. After all, the author's commentary upon his own intentions should be helpful... and yet, to one intimately familiar with Eliot's poetry in general, his influences and intentions, the notes, at times, seem to have been written by Eliot's critical alter-ego, a perspective only marginally more privileged than the reader's. At times, Eliot's notes seem deliberately calculated to deceive.

Why would a poet provide misleading notes to his own poem? Why has he provided notes to some allusions, but suppressed others? One recalls the idea that a composer or poet may not necessarily be the best interpreter/ conductor of his own work. Let us look at an example from Eliot's notes on *The Waste Land*. In part V of the poem, lines 357-363, we read:

...where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees

drip drop drip drop drop drop drop

but there is no water

Who is the third who walks always beside you?

When I count, there are only you and I together

But when I look ahead up the white road

There is always another one walking beside you...

What notes does Eliot offer the reader? Regarding the hermit-thrush he quotes from Chapman's *Handbook of Birds of Eastern North America*, saying, "its 'water-dripping song' is justly celebrated." The following lines, about a mysterious third party, he states, were "stimulated by the account of one of the Antarctic expeditions (I forget which, but I think one of Shackleton's)..." Shackleton (he thinks)... Shackleton died in the year of the poem's publication. To anyone familiar with the real allusions Eliot is making in these lines, the notes seem almost laughable, with their dead pan literalism and obfuscation. They are utterly misleading. The allusions he protects from detection by this red herring, this deadpan reference to a bird book and an Antarctic explorer's journey, are to Eliot's most relevant American precursor, Walt Whitman, and his most relevant poem, *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*, a spring elegy for the fallen Abe Lincoln. It is the hermit-thrush and its "song of the bleeding throat, / Death's outlet song of life" that is central to that poem. And at line 120 we find the source of the allusion Eliot would have us believe referred to an Antarctic explorer:

Then with the knowledge of death as walking one side of me,
And the thought of death close-walking the other side of me,
And I in the middle as with companions, and as holding the hands of companions,
I fled forth to the hiding receiving night that talks not,
Down to the shores of the water, the path by the swamp in the dimness,
To the solemn shadowy cedars and ghostly pines so still.
And the singer so shy to the rest receiv'd me,
The gray-brown bird I know receiv'd us comrades three,
And he sang the carol of death, and a verse for him I love.

Why would a poet deliberately obfuscate? In this case Eliot makes the notes part of the substance of the poem, so that anyone hoping to understand the author's intent must take the notes seriously. This gives Eliot the liberty to be rather playful in his notes. If we are to know with relative certainty what allusions the poem makes, what texts of the past it is echoing, we must know those texts. Once the ideas and texts upon which the poem has been founded are identified, then it is up to the reader to explore the connections. Knowing that the labyrinth of notes and allusions would keep the reader occupied, Eliot also tried to mislead his readers, if in a gentle way. The reader cannot take the author's reliability for granted. Eliot would prefer that allusions to Whitman be suppressed, not stated outright, for he was writing a European poem. Of course reading Eliot's work with a healthy skepticism we see he is an American poet from St. Louis. He chose to put the emphasis elsewhere, while his roots remain inescapable. One might say the same for "The Fire Sermon" and "What the Thunder Said." He might have stated that ideas within these sections run from old Boston sources, like Cotton Mather. But stating it outright was out of the question, and unnecessary. If the poet were to tell us everything about his poem, we would still have to investigate for ourselves to confirm whether or not he is being truthful.

III

Dorothy Sayers on Odysseus

In her witty alignment of the principles of literature framed by Aristotle, Aristotle on Detective Fiction, Dorothy Sayers more than once raises the spectre of Homer. For it was Aristotle who wrote that "Homer more than any other has taught the rest of us the art of framing lies in the right ways." That is, Odysseus manages to come up with many false tales based loosely upon actual events. Thus lying is easier when there is a grain of truth to it. In book XIV of the Odyssey, Odysseus weaves together a tale for the swineherd, telling him he is from Crete, filling in the story with relevant, believable details. Unlike the swineherd, the reader is aware that Odysseus is lying. The fascination derives from our knowledge that the lies Odysseus is telling are remarkably similar to the truth, but the names and places have changed. Rather than his rescue coming from Nausikaa, the young girl who led him to her father's hall, Odysseus says it was a young boy who did as much. When he speaks of his men losing control, he is echoing the actual events of the narrative he told to the Phaeacians.

Pleasure results from the manipulation of perspective, where we are given a godlike perspective as readers, while the characters are left in variable degrees of ignorance. As Jacques Barzun states, it is the "concealment that arouses curiosity." Elements of disguise enable the poet to expose the flaws of those characters that fall prey to the misleading layer of appearances.

On the other hand, appearances can yield clues to identity, but only if one is privileged with the proper insight into what the visual clue means. Think of the famous recognition scenes late in the *Odyssey*: In book XVII, Argos the dog recognizes his master's voice after twenty years; and, in Book XIX, Euryclea, the loyal maidservant, identifies the beggar as Odysseus by the scar given to him as an adolescent. The latter is the subject of an equally famous essay by Erich Auerbach in *Mimesis*, entitled "Odysseus' Scar." We delight in Euryclea's recognition of her old master because it happens at a sensitive moment, within eyeshot of Penelope. Homer takes us on an extended digression intended to further solidify Odysseus' true identity, recalling his genealogy and the reason for his scar. Penelope, along with Laertes, father of Odysseus, and of course the suitors, still does not know it is Odysseus. Barzun tells us:

"In the ancient stories a single physical fact—a ring or other object, a footprint, a lock of hair—usually suffices to disclose identity and set off the denouement. The object is symbolic and conventional rather than rationally convincing. What happens in modern detective fiction is that objects—and more than one in each tale—are taken literally and seriously. They are scanned for what they imply, studied as signs of past action and dark purposes. This search for history in things is anything but trivial. It reflects the way our civilization thinks about law and evidence, nature and knowledge."

From this perspective we can see that by focusing on the literal explanation for the hermit thrush, T.S. Eliot distracts us from the symbolic role of the bird, thus enshrouding his secret purpose in mystery. Homer is the supreme master of objects: he relies on definite physical objects as symbols, but also as literal realities. When, after twenty years of rumors and tales of reputation, Telemachus finally meets his father, he is, naturally, stricken with skeptical disbelief, his essential trait before the meeting. As he has searched for his father he has been unwilling to put all of his faith in the gods, afraid to commit himself to an idea which he cannot prove true. Even now, since he has never seen his father, though he has been told by Menelaus and Helen that he resembles him, Telemachus has no definite proof. Homer has Odysseus respond to Telemachus' skepticism with the authenticity of his paternalism, but the words he uses subtly sustain the difference between the rumor of the man and the man himself:

This is not princely, to be swept
away by wonder at your father's presence.

No other Odysseus will ever come,

For he and I are one, the same; his bitter

Fortune and his wanderings are mine.

The duality is clear: the man you have heard about, the fiction you have built up in your mind, the myth you have stored all of these years, that person is me, because I am the reality behind the myth, I am the man in flesh and blood. It is the sheer economy of Odysseus' words and immediate turn to meditation upon the necessity to act, which leaves all doubt behind.

The Representative of the Ethical

According to W.H. Auden "the job of the detective is to restore the state of grace in which the aesthetic and the ethical are one." The detective must be either the "official representative of the ethical or the exceptional individual who is himself in a state of grace." Knowing this, and taking into consideration Sayers' reference to Aristotle's mention of paralogismos (the art of the false syllogism), we may have special insight into why Dr. Sheppard, narrator of Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, seems, at first, above our suspicion. It is the illusion that the doctor is a trusted member of the community and a confidant of many that makes us overlook the first vital clues to his actual guilt, early in the narrative. Sayers rightly asserts that because he is a Watson-like character, and Watson was an honest man, we assume that Dr. Sheppard must also be honest. But this is not the only reason he escapes our immediate suspicions. It is as a representative of the ethical, the doctor in whom folks may confide, as a curious amateur with genuine curiosity, that the doctor escapes reproach. He also has a rather likable sense of humor, and seems incapable of meanness. Christie banks on this assumption, even though as the story progresses his flaws begin to accrue. Were it not for the confidence we place in him at the outset, there would be no mystery to build on.

Formulaic Literature

And now a look at structural similarities between detective fiction and a work of ancient poetry. In his essay *The Study of Literary Formulas*, John G. Cawelti proposes four "interrelated hypotheses about the dialectic between formulaic literature and the culture that produces and enjoys it." To sum up quickly, Cawelti asserts that formulaic stories, firstly, confirm existing conventional views in a culture; secondly, they present us with an individual in conflict with the convention, which makes for a plot of conflict leading to resolution of the conflict and reinforcement of the convention; thirdly, formulaic stories enable the reader to enter the realm of fantasy, vicariously, beyond the normal boundaries of what is allowable, but contained within the short space of the story's control; and lastly, literary formulas preserve the capacity of a culture to integrate new elements and changes into the mostly unchanging, conservative structure of its stories. These four points are general enough to precipitate a constructive comparison between works quite dissimilar. Still, it is enlightening to contemplate the similar roles such works play within their cultures, and then to look closer at what the works have in common across a gulf, in this case, of 2700 years.

"Formula" (the first type) may mean "a conventional way of treating some specific thing or person," but it may also refer to common plots (the second type), including the use of myths to "support and give deeper meaning to action." For writers of all kinds the first type, a conventional way of treating the material, has broad and specific applications, for even when we are not constructing plots (as in the second type), we are always subject to the conventions of communication, and their rhetorical schemes. Thus rhythmical devices, figures of speech and types of imagery fall under treatment of material. Whether in a business letter, editorial, essay, speech, elegy, or inaugural address, the writer molds his effort to the decorum of the occasion. A strong argument can be made that genres are extensions of actual occasions and rituals, that if we look back far enough, most conventions evolved out of their events, such as toasts at dinner, love poems for courtship, epithalamia for marriages, elegies for the occasion of death, and so on. The second type of formula has to do with how the plot functions, and one may refer back to the four tenets of formulaic literature to get an idea.

The Odyssey is a highly formulaic work on the border between oral and written poetry, employing systematic use of epithets, similes, dactylic hexameter as the fundamental line unit, leitmotifs, repetition, and so on. It employs both types, making use of traditional material, with additional elements of the new and fantastic, in the formation of its plot. For instance, the tradition of the "nostoi" or "returns" of the heroes from Troy was central to the cultural identity of the Greeks, and Homer's work does not stray from this foundation. Raymond Chandler's novel *The Big Sleep* also works with both aspects of formula, both conventional treatment of characters and things, including epithets and similes, and conventional plot development. There are characters and landscapes quite familiar to us, which is how we like it, but also fantastic elements of the unknown integrated into the story, providing the slight uneasiness essential to our involvement in the story. For example, the Greeks were exploring new areas of the Mediterranean, looking outward to new wonders, while struggling to preserve an older continuity. And so do we meet with many strange creatures from the outskirts in the Los Angeles of the thirties of this century, a town changing into a big city, with big city problems. We meet equivalents of the Cyclops.

Let us begin by looking at one element of the first type (treatment of the thing) essential to both texts: the use of similes. Readers of Homer will be familiar with many. They may be implied similes, without like or as, or they may be similes hinged upon the word "so." The author grasps for images familiar to his readers from the natural world, often using images of weather and animals to vivify the portrayal. For instance, in chapter V of the Odyssey, Odysseus is tossed from his raft and forced to swim towards shore. The shore he reaches is treacherous though, unswimmable, and he may be crushed by the surf. Thus he is forced to hold on to a jagged rock with his bare hands. What kind of image does Homer choose?

he gripped a rock-ledge with both hands in passing
and held on, groaning, as the surge went by,
to keep clear of its breaking. Then the backwash
hit him, ripping him under and far out.
An octopus, when you drag one from his chamber,
comes up with suckers full of tiny stones:
Odysseus left the skin of his great hands
torn on that rock-ledge as the wave submerged him.

The octopus was familiar to the Greek people, a common sight even. The same choice would not be as appropriate for an audience unfamiliar with the sea and sea creatures. In the same chapter Hermes is compared to a gull, and Odysseus to a fresh brand tucked in a bed of embers. To the eyes and ears of New Haven schoolchildren, the gull is familiar, but not the brand. When Odysseus' raft is destroyed we read:

A gust of wind, hitting a pile of chaff,
will scatter all the parched stuff far and wide;
just so, when this gigantic billow struck

the boat's big timbers flew apart. Odysseus

clung to a single beam, like a jockey riding..."

Images of harvest wheat are more familiar, to most students, from the Bible's figures than they are from actual bundles seen at harvest time. This was not always the case. But Homer's imagery not only relies on familiar animals and climates, but geography. The audience, we may assume, was familiar enough with their own region to have a common store of reference, while increasingly familiar with the fantastic regions, such as Egypt, just beyond their borders. The Big Sleep also stands riddled with similes reliant upon imagery familiar to its audience, with exotic elements woven in. Americans in particular can savour many references to their cultural landscape. For instance, in the succession of no more than a handful of pages we find three.

First, General Sternwood says he used to drink brandy. "I used to like mine with champagne. The champagne as cold as Valley Forge and about a third of a glass of brandy." Valley Forge, Pennsylvania is a part of the American cultural landscape, a mythical place where General Washington's men endured a harsh winter, as we all know. Or do we? And what of it if we do? The Man making the statement is a General himself, a symbol of dying propriety, a Laertes whose Odysseus does not return, left instead with untamable daughters. Our protagonist takes a liking to the man, his withering dignity, just as the General took a liking to Regan, who had many war stories to share. The simile makes a point about the man, but also makes an expressionistic stroke for the tone of the book, one of sentimental preoccupation with the decline of better things. Much like the Odyssey, The Big Sleep is built upon the longing for a continuity and connection with a grander, yet simpler, heroic past. Those with the eyes of old soldiers seek each other out to share their stories. There is a code of respect which, if not for those few left aware of it, would vanish from the earth.

Just a paragraph later Marlowe responds in kind. They are sitting in a greenhouse full of orchids. It is very warm: "I stood up and peeled off my coat and got a handkerchief out and mopped my face and neck and the backs of my wrists. St. Louis in August had nothing on that place." One begins to sense a thoughtful selection of appropriate images from across the United States. Having been to St. Louis in August, one knows the temperature in triple digits and the humidity unbearable. Even if the average American reader for whom this story was intended has not been to St. Louis in August, he feels the connection to a part of his own land, a land both familiar and strange, and registers the landscape as part of an assumed national identity, part of himself and including himself.

Then again in the same conversation, a few pages later, Chandler reaches for another section of the country: "...the heat, which made me feel like a New England boiled dinner, didn't seem to make him (the General) even warm." A New England boiled dinner, to my recollection, means lobster by the coast, or may also refer to stewed beef, cabbage, potatoes and so on. The stodgy New Englander may cherish the image, though I don't imagine anyone stodgy reading Chandler. Once again, one need not have eaten a New England boiled dinner, one may even have been raised on king crab in Bremerton, or crawfish in Lafayette, but the effect remains nearly the same. Marlowe, our cliché-ridden first person, likes to hear himself sound funny, off the cuff, uncanny, but the images which work may even go so far as to enrich the claim it has on our love of the familiar cultural emanations, garish or otherwise, of our corrupting land. Chandler's Los Angeles is Ithaca without the hope of an Odysseus, as the hard-boiled, but soft and syrupy Marlowe reminds us, commenting on the stained glass narrative in the Sternwood house. It is a town, but it is a land and it is a people, somehow we are wished to consider. Then consider Odysseus introducing himself to Nausikaa with flattering speech. He tells her:

Never have I laid eyes on equal beauty
in man or woman. I am hushed indeed.
So fair, one time, I thought a young palm tree
at Delos near the altar of Apollo-
I had troops under me when I was there
on the sea rout that later brought me grief-
but that slim palm tree filled my heart with wonder:
never came shoot from earth so beautiful.
So now, my lady, I stand in awe...

Certainly Odysseus accomplishes a great deal through his words to the young princess. The reference to Delos and Apollo shows Odysseus is a man who has traveled much, as a man aware of the gods, a man versed in customs. Delos was a fixture on the Greek spiritual and geographical landscape needing no explanation to the audience, home to a great cult site of Apollo, familiar from both stories and eye-witness accounts.

Henry Fielding dubbed the Odyssey "the eatingest epic," and indeed, much eating goes on. But since the Odyssey, as the author of *On the Sublime* called it, is a comedy of manners, this should be no surprise. Eating offers the writer a great occasion for indulgence in formula; after all, when was the last day you did not sit down to eat, and when you ate, ate only alone, without conversation, or ritual indulgence in thanks, a toast, & cheer? The way people go about this fundamental act tells a great deal about them. Robert B. Parker even goes so far as to begin *Looking for Rachel Wallace* in a restaurant. Thus, like a microcosmic epitome of formulaic construction, the meal's conventional codes serve as grounds for distinction by contrast. For instance, in our very first look at Odysseus' manor, in the first chapter of the Odyssey, the poet describes the serving of a meal. This description, or at least the bulk of it, recurs repeatedly in the story that follows:

A maid
brought them a silver finger bowl and filled it
out of a beautiful spouting golden jug,
then drew a polished table to their side.
The larder mistress with her tray came by
and served them generously.

And a few lines later occurs a description which is repeated no less than eleven times:

Now they laid hands upon the ready feast

and thought of nothing more. Not till desire
for food and drink had left them were they mindful
of dance and song, that are the grace of feasting."

The wedding meals and the meals of welcome for strangers, the daily meals, and the meals that follow holy sacrifice: we never stray too far from the diurnal necessities, though the examples range from the lavish banquet in a palace to the humble leftovers in a cabin. These common descriptions serve as stations or landmarks against which we may weigh the behavior of individual characters. So we have identical introductions of the food in the house of Odysseus with the suitors, and in the house of Menelaos. They shed light on each other, and we gain insight by contrast. Menelaos' house is in order, as a house should be, and the meal is conducted in such a way as is fit for a king and a wedding day. The suitors, on the other hand, are careless debauchees and the estate of Odysseus is out of order in his absence. We notice very early in the first chapter the rudeness of the suitors in comparison to the well-mannered, if not confident, welcome extended by Telemakhos to Mentos, the disguised Athena.

Of course the Odyssey is also about the absence of meals, and times of hunger in between. Odysseus is unapologetic about his appetite after long hunger. The Big Sleep concerns itself less with eating, though there are meals, than imagining the consequences of coffee and whisky showered on an empty stomach. The formulaic equivalent to Homer's food would have to be the rituals and codes of drinking and smoking, smoking in particular. In fact, Chandler leans heavily on the use of smoking to propel his story and portray his characters. The General finds in the smell of tobacco a kind of Proustian drift, and each smoker after has his own type of smoke and approach to smoking it.

When first meeting Vivian Regan Marlowe self-consciously executes a maneuver well rehearsed in American cinema: "I snicked a match on my thumbnail and for once it lit. I puffed smoke into the air and waited." The need to look cool, if not feel cool, is of great concern, and nothing draws it out more dramatically than the device of smoking. Chandler's characters smoke with patience and impatience, with calm assurance and without it, hoping to recover it through the act of smoking. Marlowe plays the antagonist to Agnes at Geiger's shop by getting comfortable in a chair and lighting up, so as to show he can wait as long as it takes. Smoking bears out certain immediate understandings, as though through the rehearsal of lighting up, two people can share an unspoken code. Consider Marlowe lighting the smoke of the woman at the legitimate bookstore down the street from Geiger's: "She reached for a pack of cigarettes and shook one loose and reached for it with her lips. I held a match for her. She thanked me, leaned back again and regarded me through smoke... She blew a soft gray smoke ring and poked her finger through. It came to pieces in frail wisps. She spoke smoothly, indifferently..." She helps him with information, smoking while she thinks, and their exchange has a vague flirtation to it. Actually, the act of smoking is at many times in this novel synonymous with the act of thinking. On the next page Marlowe narrates: "I sat there and poisoned myself with cigarette smoke and listened to the rain and thought about it."

Each character has his or her own particular kind of smoke. Ohls, the DA man friendly with Marlowe, "stood up and pocketed a flat tin of toy cigars called Entractes, jiggled the one in his mouth up and down and looked at me carefully along his nose, with his head thrown back." Chandler relies quite heavily on smoking to convey states of mind. As Ohls asks questions at the crime scene, he "twitched his little cigar like a cigarette," the movement of one trying to figure something out. By giving him tiny cigars, Chandler paints him as a man of some authority, but of measurably less than, say, the DA himself, Taggart Wilde, whose house smells of "good

cigar smoke," and who smokes a "dappled thin cigar" while sipping black coffee. Captain Gregory, the cop at the Missing Persons Bureau, smokes a briar, a pipe, which he is always tapping, packing and puffing on, ritualistically, the way a meditative desk cop would if kept inside with paperwork. His habit is metonymy: pipe smoking equals deeper thought. Mrs. Regan, a lady of wealth, picks a cigarette "out of a French enamel case." And Eddie Mars, the man whose every feature is gray, a smoother sort of thug, has "monogrammed cigarettes."

Marlowe the detective can smoke in front of people to show that he is going nowhere, and thus makes of himself a menacing presence. At Brody's apartment, for instance: "...the man in new overalls was grunting hard as he stacked heavy boxes... I stood beside him and lit a cigarette and watched him. He didn't like my watching him." When interrogated by Eddie Mars Marlowe uses the cigarette to show he is unaffected, wry and deadpan: "It was a good guess but I wasn't going to let him know it. I lit a cigarette and blew the match out and flicked it at the glass eye of the totem pole." A gesture meant to show he is unintimidated, that he couldn't care less. Joseph Brody responds in a similar way to Marlowe's appearance at his door: "Nothing in the man's face changed that I could see. He brought a cigarette from behind the door and tucked it between his lips and drew a little smoke from it. The smoke came towards me in a lazy contemptuous puff and behind it words in a cool, unhurried voice that had no more inflection than the voice of a faro dealer." Faro is a game of cards, cards being, aside from drinking and smoking, the other classic American all-purpose metaphor.

By bringing together a room full of smokers at once, the author can create a kind of smoking counterpoint, wherein we may contrast one character's method with another's as reflective of the involvement or detachment of each: "Wilde waved his cigar... (he) looked at what I gave him, puffing gently at his cigar. Ohls lit one of his own toy cigars and blew smoke peacefully at the ceiling." And as much as Marlowe uses his own smoking habit as a strategic tool, as a prop and a disguise, the characters he would control are made to look unsteady by how they manage to smoke under pressure. First Brody's cigarette is "balanced on his lower lip," but when Marlowe intimidates him successfully, the cool balance is disturbed: "His cigarette jerked and dropped ash on his vest," then "his cigarette was jiggling like a doll on a coiled spring." Marlowe eventually meets Harry Jones, a man whom he later develops a sentimental attachment to, and uses what he knows to make Jones feel uncomfortable: "His face turned white as paper when I mentioned Eddie Mars. His mouth drooped open and his cigarette hung to the corner of it by some magic, as if it had grown there."

The formulaic recurrence of the ritual of smoking contributes to the vaguely expressionistic flavour of the work. By expressionistic, I mean Chandler paints with broad strokes; though he provides plenty of details, these details yield no more than a comic strip's depth, a low, even crass stylization dependent upon hyperbole and caricature. Consider the attention paid to clothes, or the bizarre exactitude with which he describes interiors, as though he were a decorator. Mrs. Regan's room is the epitome: "...the white carpet that went from wall to wall looked like a fresh fall of snow at Lake Arrowhead. There were full-length mirrors and crystal doodads all over the place. The ivory furniture had chromium on it, and the enormous ivory drapes lay tumbled on the white carpet a yard from the windows. The white made the ivory look dirty and the ivory made the white look bled out." The "all over the place" is signature hackwork, the lazy colloquialism. Mrs. Regan's beauty is given another paragraph. The atmosphere he creates is of an exaggerated, but extremely conventional sort. Atmospheres for the first impressions of heroines are vital to Chandler's approach. The first look at Eddie Mars' wife is even surreal: "She was so platinumed that her hair shown like a silver fruit bowl (a wig)... She was smoking and a glass of amber fluid was tall and pale at her elbow... Her eyes were the blue of mountain lakes... 'How do you feel?' It was a smooth silvery voice that matched her hair. It had a tiny tinkle in it, like bells in a doll's house. I thought that was silly as soon as I thought of it." Here the self-conscious Marlowe plays the improvisator, and we realize that most of the cartoonish images, the base, pop similes and

metaphors, we should believe, are products of the tired mind of a veteran sentimentalist, driven on, though impecuniously, towards truth and justice.

Eddie Mars, the man entirely in gray, and his lackey Canino, the man entirely in brown, may just as well epitomize the expressionistic method. Even Canino's socks and car are brown. Quicker to the point, recall our narrator's descriptions of the eyes of each character. Much like noses or bald heads, eyes, in Chandler's narrative, are handed down from generation to generation: the Sternwoods, being of noble stock, have dark black eyes of great depth and power. It is the "slaty" colored craziness and absence in Carmen's eyes that alerts us to her problematic nature. These bold colors actually say little, objectively, about the characters. Rather, the broad strokes trace motifs, much like the weather. Other than the importance the author gives them, assuming they tell us something about Marlowe or the character he describes, these colorful looks are random, what art critics would call "non-naturalistic." Very few people have ever had a good look at gray eyes, yet many of Chandler's characters have them. Of course Homer's Athena has eyes that have been translated, traditionally, as gray. But do gray eyes exist at all? You might as well ask Gauguin why he painted the grass red. With Gauguin, it will have to do with the emotional intensity of the color, but is not always answerable. With Chandler, if one can see beyond the cloying, hackneyed dust, there may be an emotional reason, or perhaps not. The internal logic is not allegorical, rather, ornamental. But may it also be, as with Homer's "wine-dark sea," a connection to the living oral tradition, a phrase so old that the original inspiration is far behind, and the author has simply carried on its use?

The characters in Homer's epic are rarely separated from their epithets, and if they are, the epithets take the place of their names. Much as in the film *Jaws*, where the familiar music marks the presence of the fiendish shark, so the epithets of certain characters or things or events come to serve even as leitmotifs. A good writer will give certain characters idiosyncrasies, which make them instantly recognizable. Just to mention one funny example: the lover of Geiger, the younger boy, is not named so much as he is recognized by two trademarks. He is the guy in the "jerkin" who never says anything but "Go f__ yourself." This is repeated so often as to make for several offhand jokes, but none is so witty as when the officer watching him comes into the room. When asked if the boy has said anything, the answer is: "'He made a suggestion,' the copper said and spat. 'I'm letting it ride.'" In other words, he told him he could "go f__ himself." It is, indeed, a suggestion. The euphemism is particularly funny to us by then, having heard the "suggestion" so many times already.

Formulas of the second type have to do with certain plots that get repeated again and again in a particular culture. The standards and expectations of a particular genre may be carried from one culture to another, as with epic and tragedy, but each new culture, against the standard of the ages, will reveal its own particular take. Then there are plots that integrate elements from older traditions, but go on to create their own genre. For instance, the *Odyssey* itself is actually a hybrid, having elements of what would later become the romance; the romance contains the basic structure of later genres such as the western, and, in many cases, detective fiction. Raymond Chandler's novel, set in Hollywood and the rest of Los Angeles, grew up in a young town that was beginning to feel its age. The juxtaposition of heroes of a higher quality, from the mythical past, with the everyday surroundings of Ithaca reflects the *Odyssey's* reverential tone towards that past. Much as the topos of "ubi sunt" or "where are they?" the whole story meditates on the days that are no more, those came before who have gone away. The old men lament that the day of well-behaved, respectful young men has been replaced by the day of insolent hotheads, stuck in that mode, thinking always on better days. Into this low state of affairs returns the hero. But Chandler, whose story is also set in such a mode of sentimentality, though on a dramatically lower plane, does not supply us with a hero as much as a self-conscious working man, a man with experience who knows the codes of a particular underworld.

What is the plot of *The Big Sleep*? Of more interest than the actual main plot and its investigation is the sentimental portrait of Los Angeles, and everyday symbols of American loneliness, like the paintings of Edward Hopper: full of color, but still, sad and burdened with commonplaces. The melancholy rises to the surface in descriptions of the Sternwood oil fields, or at that most mythical of spots, the service station:

"Ten blocks of that, winding down curved rain-swept streets, under the steady drip of trees, past lighted windows in big houses in ghostly enormous grounds, vague clusters of eaves and gables and lighted windows high on the hillside, remote and inaccessible, like witch houses in a forest. I came out at a service station glaring with wasted light, where a bored attendant in a white cap and a dark blue windbreaker sat hunched on a stool, inside the steamed glass, reading a paper."

This is the epitome of the automobile culture which, as we now know, was to make further inroads in the decades that followed, to the point where all is now gobbled up in the LA we know. As we hear at points in the text: "This is a big town now, Eddie. Some very tough people have checked in here lately. The penalty of growth." And later, Wilde, the DA saying: "...you know how it is. This is a big city now."

This discussion of formulas is by no means complete, but within the space allotted may provoke useful comparisons between works similarly dissimilar.

VI

Strategies

The objectives of this curriculum unit should be evident from the preceding discussion: it is my hope that any course in writing which uses detective fiction will situate the chosen text in such a context as to draw attention to the devices and structures common to it and to other texts of greater literary merit. Raymond Chandler and Homer, obviously, have little in common. Any attempt to equate the two works I have chosen, *The Big Sleep* and the *Odyssey*, beyond technical and structural matters, would be misguided. Aesthetically, spiritually, morally or otherwise in terms of gravity and significance, these works are ant & elephant. The genre of detective fiction is accurately referred to as "escapist." The there is the *Odyssey*, where what we escape to is of a sublime order, full of eternal questions and struggles. Chandler's world lends no more than a paragraph of sentimentality to the subject of death, the purported topic of his novel, according to the title. *The Big Sleep* and the *Odyssey* are as, say, Bob Dylan and Bach. Few would argue that Dylan has not had an impact, but against the timeless completeness of Bach? The value of comparison here, aside from the contrast, is what each may reveal about the artistic possibilities of a time and place, and the priorities of one practitioner within the space of his chosen genres. I must emphasize that I would be sure to include *The Day of the Locusts* or *A Cool Million*, by Nathaniel West; *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, by Stephen Crane; *The Great Gatsby*, by Fitzgerald; and Melville's *The Confidence Man*, in any course that would include Chandler. Sticking just to the detective genre would not, to me, serve learning as well as an historical context and discussion of topical issues, matters of the art cutting across genres.

Strategies for teaching in a traditional writing course vary from teacher to teacher, though I am inclined to stick to traditional guidelines, such as those staked out by Quintilian. That is, students should spend their time reading, both silently and aloud; looking up unfamiliar words in the dictionary; writing critical responses to what they have read; memorizing certain passages for recital; writing imitations and parodies. Invention, the

source of all things new, may play a part in these assignments, insofar as it is trained to meet the assignment half way. Mind dumps or other varieties of automatic, unfiltered outpourings are not discouraged, but must be restricted to certain times and places.

The main thrust of this course should be to bring the chaotic creativity of young writers to bear on organized assignments that force them to step out of their usual selves and write under restrictions. The critical responses should be impersonal looks at the devices and plots, at the formulas, and not wholly subjective, emotional responses stating whether so and so "liked" the work. This should not have to be stated, but the knack persists. Critical reasons for disliking a work must be articulated as objections based upon artistic grounds, not gut feelings generated by thoughtless attitudes. The idea is to make the "writers" in this course see the craft of writing much the way they might consider the craft of carpentry, or plumbing, or bicycle repair: if certain parts are neglected or poorly made they can bring the entire otherwise lovely machine to a halt.

The "confessional" mode has become so commonplace as to make the structures of genres and topoi seem like archeological wonders saved from the sands of oblivion. The argument is not necessarily what makes up this or that tradition, so much as it is what is this tradition made of, what are the tools employed, what are the signatures of that trade? The carpenter of today savours Chandler's description of the various woods in the "parquetry" of Eddie Mars' place: "the parquetry was made of a dozen kinds of hardwood, from Burma teak through half a dozen shades of oak and ruddy wood that looked like mahogany, and fading out to the hard pale wild lilac of the California hills, all laid in elaborate patterns, with the accuracy of a transit." The carpenter's admiration should be the kind the writer has for the work he is reading, when the work, both subtle and elaborate, is as well patterned. Perhaps as in the centuries that followed Quintilian literacy will continue to decline, and appreciation for the technical virtuosity of a literary work will vanish much as the dozen or so types of trees used in that parquetry, but one would have to be as sentimental as Raymond Chandler to wax any further about the inevitability.

VII

Classroom Activities

1) Students must find a handful of particularly vital references to smoking in *The Big Sleep*, then come up with some other activity, similarly habitual, to substitute in its place in an imitation of the scenes which they will compose. This will draw their attention to the technical role the smoking plays, as well as it may demystify the actual allure of the act of smoking. Certainly it is not the teacher's job to lecture students about why smoking is a bad idea, nor should scenes which romanticize the act be edited. Prohibitionism of most sorts seems to me below the potentiality of the classroom. Students can come up with very comical alternatives to smoking. Special attention should be paid to the structure of the reference. If Chandler uses a simile, the student should use a simile as well. The tone and attitude should be noted too. What the student should end up with is a handful of parodic scenes focused on a habitual activity repeatedly portrayed in the text, with enough details to assess the accuracy of the rendering. It is a permissive assignment, fun to all, all the while keyed to essential devices.

2) Weekly presentations: If the class is taught in a block period presentations may be given everyday during the first fifteen minutes of the class, with up to three different students taking five minutes each. If the class

has only forty-five minutes, no more than 7-8 minutes should be spent on the presentation of one student. Students should be given a few minutes to answer questions. Presentations should be written, whether in notes or outline form, or in the form of an essay (preferably). Either way, the student should have something organized to hand to the teacher for evaluation, in addition to the oral presentation, and its evaluation. Speaking before the class may be difficult for shy students, but this difficulty should not be too difficult to surmount.

The presentations should focus on either a particular chapter or chapters, or on particular formulas employed in those chapters. There are countless topics fertile for investigation: historical contexts and geographical contexts; placement of the work within a genre or artistic context; the themes of the work; development of characters; use of figures of speech; the use of slang and jargon; use of color; topics later used for cinema and television; the problems of cliché, and so on.

3) Five-paragraph essay: Since most students in ninth and tenth grade need training in the five-paragraph essay anyway, and most in the eleventh and twelfth could use the practice and review, weekly essay assignments should prove immediately valuable. Students will follow the conventional form, and so, like the detective novelist, bend their free egos to the necessities of a form with rules. Emphasis should be on locating evidence in the text to support a thesis. It may help to let the students imagine that they are lawyers representing a client. The client is their argument; the evidence is their support. The thesis comprises their opening and closing statements. The reader of their essay is the judge and jury. This is especially useful to tenth graders as a practice for the CAPT test.

VIII

Bibliography

-Chandler, Raymond. *The Big Sleep*. Knopf, New York, 1939. Although at times little more than a seedy, sentimental piece of hackwork, the lessons to be learned from this "masterpiece" of its genre and moment are worth the dive.

-Christie, Agatha. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. Dodd, Mead & Co., New York, 1926. This seminal work of the clue-laden "whodunit" relies on a more proper vocabulary than Chandler, and thus may be finished in a less torrid manner. Aspects of the story recall a certain debt to the classics, particularly the story of Oedipus, persisting in his curiosity until the awful truth has mastered him; in Poirot we have a Tiresius.

-Eliot, T.S. *The Waste Land and Other Poems*. Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., New York, 1934. When speaking of "clue-laden" works composed in Britain during the twenties, we must not forget the poem which had a seismic impact upon all letters in English, a mystery fit for the student-reader-writer as detective.

-Fagles, Robert. *The Odyssey of Homer*. Viking, New York, 1996. Although I recommend the Fitzgerald translation for classrooms, as far as the story, images and sounds go, the Fagles translation has its merits. For one, he uses the traditional pronunciations and spellings used in the English tradition, rather than the intimidating and often confusing restored spelling used by Fitzgerald. There is also a pronouncing glossary, which can make teaching much simpler. Still, as poetry, I prefer the Fitzgerald translation. Regardless, the extended introduction offered by Fagles would be extremely helpful to students and teachers alike (as is the introduction offered

by translator Richmond Lattimore to his version).

-Fitzgerald, Robert. *The Odyssey of Homer*. Doubleday, New York, 1961. Although line by line analysis of Homer's Greek may leave the purist gasping, and classicists often find reasons to rebuff it for making Homer sound like a Poundian bard, full of monosyllabics, under the spell of, say, Beowulf, rather than the Mediterranean poet found in the Greek, there may not be a more enjoyable and gripping rendering of the text in English. I have found the translation of Cook (1967) very good, much closer to Homer as Homer would be, but still, the effect of the counterpoint is to Cook's disadvantage. Chapman and Bryant may be brought in for a lesson now and then, as well as chapters of Pope. Fitzgerald also supplies some essays as a postscript, concerning the real geography of Greece, issues of translation and tradition, and interpretation of various mysteries of the text.

-Parker, Robert B. *Looking for Rachel Wallace*. Delacorte Press, New York, 1980. Parker's work is, as Chandler's, at times, horrendously cliché, but holds its own despite this necessary shortcoming of the genre. I especially enjoyed the critique of the hero and feminism the plot makes possible. Fecund comparisons of formulaic elements may be made between this work and *The Big Sleep*. Whereas Chandler gives us an eerie LA, Parker provides us with a cheery Boston; whereas Chandler gives us rain, Parker gives us snow. Both Marlowe and Spenser carry around large quantities of adolescent sentiment about truth and justice, yet both know the power of timely action and the need to get what one wants.

-Winks, Robin W. Ed. *Detective Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Prentice-Hall, 1980. This book has proven vital as a spine for the research undertaken in writing this unit. The essays fall under five major headings: The Genre Examined, A History of the Type, Literary Analysis, A Closer Look at Specific Authors, and Epilogue: An Eye to the Future. This reader especially benefited from essays by Auden, Sayers, Wilson, Cawelti, and Barzun. The Appendix and Bibliography of this collection are indispensable to the teacher.

IX

Reading List for Students

Students would, of course, read the works of Chandler, Christie, and/or Parker mentioned above within the context of a writing course. Other works might include, as mentioned earlier, Crane's *Maggie* and West's *Cool Million*, because stylistically they deal with some of the same problems. Geographically, historically and thematically also West's *The Day of the Locusts*, and perhaps *The Last Tycoon* by Fitzgerald, would serve well. Teachers should excerpt some critical points from the *Detective Fiction* collection mentioned above for students to read and respond to, applying the points to a critical reading of a fictional work.

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