



## CHAPTER 2

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# Defining Detective Fiction

*The popularity of mystery/detective fiction is only matched by the popularity of received ideas about what it is and what it does.*  
—Kayman (1992, 104)

Detective characters in fiction appear long before there is a coherent genre of detective fiction, and crime has been a popular topic in writing for centuries. Recognizable and clean-cut as the term detective fiction might initially seem, it is surprisingly hard to find a definition that fits all representatives of the genre. A rather frequent approach is to work inductively and determine common features from a very narrow corpus, such as that of Edgar Allan Poe's detective Dupin stories. T.J. Binyon argues that "the [detective] genre grew out of the character, rather than vice versa" (Binyon 1989, 1) and builds his definitions around Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* stories.

Frequently, such attempts to define the genre seem too narrow and too broad at the same time. Julian Symons's often quoted suggestion that "[t]he two qualification everybody has thought necessary are that [detective fiction] should present a problem, and that the problem should be solved by an amateur or professional detective through processes of deduction" (1985, 13) excludes much of the hardboiled detective genre, where deduction tends to play only a minor role. W.H. Auden's plot-based definition that "[t]he basic formula is this: a murder occurs: many are

suspected; all but one suspect, who is the murderer, are eliminated; the murderer is arrested or dies” (1948, n.p.) only applies to a very narrow set of text from the clue puzzle subgenre.<sup>1</sup> Out of the first twelve Sherlock Holmes short stories (usually printed and sold as *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*), for example, only three revolve around (attempted) murder. Furthermore, “[m]ost major Victorian novels contain at the very least a mystery, and many feature both a crime and a character who performs the work of detection” (Reitz 2006, n.p.), yet the majority of them would not be considered detective novels.

An attempt to give a comprehensive definition of detective fiction that tries to be precise enough to be useful, and still holds for all representatives of the genre, is destined to fail, it seems. Therefore, in accordance with my discussion of the form of the list, I will describe the genre in terms of family resemblances and provide a number of common and recurring features that I consider central to detective fiction, even if some of them rarely occur together within the same text.<sup>2</sup> Such an approach allows to combine aspects of several definitions, all of which have their merit, and situate texts along an axis of more or less prototypical—rather than sort them into a binary and often arbitrary in-or-out model. The following list provides an overview of frequent features and addresses thematic, formal, and ideological aspects:

- Detectives and detection: an obvious starting point included in almost all definitions is the presence of a detective character, professional or amateur. This figure is centrally involved in a plot, which “describe[s] the effects of detection” (Knight 2004, 28).
- Crime and investigation: thematically, detective fiction plots are characterized by an “interest in the nature of, motives for, and results of, [sic] a crime” (Symons 1985, 16), which are then explored in an investigation.
- Documents and documentation: in terms of content, another recurring topic in detective fiction is a concern with written documents and their role in conveying and preserving knowledge. Especially early detective stories show a heightened interest in practices of recording and the documentation of knowledge.
- The power of reason: the detective most frequently relies on reason and rationality when solving problems. Such reliance often expresses itself in an affinity for or references to scientific procedures, which are conceptually tied to ideas of objectivity.

- Containing disorder: regardless of specific themes or plot points, detective stories tend to engage in empowering fantasies of controlling and containing disorder and disruption. Such control is frequently achieved through the power of reason, but can also arise from the detective's physical prowess. This tendency for containing disorder is also reflected in the ways in which the genre makes use of lists.
- Clue puzzles: a feature that is strongly indicative of detective fiction and typically found in the subgenre of Golden Age clue puzzles is the presence of textual clues that hint toward the central mystery throughout the novel. These clues can be spotted and pieced together by the reader to solve the puzzle on their own.
- Reader participation: a rarely discussed, but frequent feature of detective fiction is that it encourages "reader participation" (see Bleiler 1980, 1540).<sup>3</sup> John Gruesser refers to a similar phenomenon when he points out the competitive nature of detective fiction that often involves the level of the reader, for example, by encouraging readers to piece together the clues before the fictional detective does (see 2020, n.p.).

None of these features can be considered as genre-defining on its own, but together, they form a pattern that can be recognized because it has been internalized by readers.<sup>4</sup> Recent studies have employed such pattern recognition on an empirical level and used computer-based, statistical models to establish patterns of coherence within a group of texts considered to belong to the same genre. Ted Underwood, for example, identifies a pattern in detective fiction that is "textually coherent across a period of 160 years (1829–1989)" (2016, 15). Underwood's pattern is consistent across subgenres from the clue puzzle to hardboiled fiction that at first glance seem to differ widely in theme and plot mechanics, while at the same time it proves clearly delimitable from Newgate and sensation fiction, which are generally considered to be closely related to detective fiction (*ibid.*).<sup>5</sup>

The idea of pattern recognition also forges a strong conceptual link between the form of the list and the genre of detective fiction. Lists become a tool for both detectives and readers that enables them to recognize patterns and to (re-)order information. This book's underlying assumption that detective fiction uses lists as formal devices to represent ideas about order is rooted in the genre's history. On the following pages,

a closer look at this history will demonstrate how the clearly marked reader positions that develop across various subgenres of detective fiction are linked to different conceptions of knowledge, which, in turn, crucially influence how information is conveyed. Examining different reader positions and ideas about knowledge in the context of their development can thus shed light on the different ways in which lists—as textual tools of both creating order and representing knowledge structures—are used in detective fiction.

This chapter will thus provide an overview over the genre history of detective fiction in order to highlight different reader positions and their connections to distinct conceptions of knowledge, and to embed the subsequent analysis in a cultural and historical context. The following summary by no means aims to be a comprehensive overview of the genre but is rather meant to establish some common terms and reference points for the further discussion of selected texts from the genre.<sup>6</sup> The chapter concludes with a brief excursion on the numerous rule catalogs produced in the Golden Age period, which will highlight the conceptual link between lists and detective fiction from an additional perspective.

## PRECURSORS, INFLUENCES, DEVELOPMENTS: FROM THE *NEWGATE CALENDAR* TO THE GOLDEN AGE

### *Beginnings: The Newgate Calendar*

The *Newgate Calendar*, a collection of crime stories which first appeared as a printed anthology in the eighteenth century, is often quoted as an important predecessor to detective fiction. The *Newgate Calendar* was initially issued as a monthly record of executions by the chaplain of Newgate prison, where criminals were held to await their sentence or execution, but the pamphlets were adapted by publishers into collections of morally edifying crime stories in multiple volumes which collectively came to be known as *The Newgate Calendar* (see Knight 2004, 5–6).

The (allegedly true) stories in the *Newgate Calendar* are a testimony to shifting views on crime and mark the transition from a theological to a more secular frame of reference for criminality (see *ibid.*, 9). They feature no special agent of detection because they are situated in a social context in which the belief is still prevalent that crime and deviance cannot go unnoticed in a tightly knit community (see Knight 1980, 18). Ideologically,

the *Newgate Calendar* is thus based around what Stephen Knight calls an “organic model of society” that is founded on the idea that society can negotiate aberrant behavior without the interference of a mediating instance (ibid., 13). At the same time, the stories make evident the fissures between such a belief and a social and economic reality which has long moved on from the religious views and the political system of feudalism that gave birth to those beliefs (see Knight 2004, 8).

Since personal guilt and social observation are central factors in exposing crimes in the stories related in the *Newgate Calendar*, the plots of these stories are often resolved by what appears to be coincidence from a modern point of view. But within a framework in which individual humans exert only little control over events, such solutions become acceptable (see Knight 1980, 18).

Newgate stories remained in fashion into the early 1830s, when a number of novelists resorted to the *Newgate Calendar* for inspiration for their works. Newgate novels, which enjoyed enormous popularity during that decade, were centered around criminals and the spectacle of punishment rather than disciplinary power that would become inseparable from the figure of the detective (see Pykett 2006, 34).

### *Influences: Edgar Allan Poe, Eugène Vidocq, and Émile Gaboriau*

The first English language texts in which both a detective figure and the act of detection play a major role are Edgar Allan Poe’s C. Auguste Dupin short stories. Poe’s stories are frequently considered to be the origin of detective fiction, and both French and British crime writers were greatly influenced by the pattern Poe established.<sup>7</sup> *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction* references the notion that Poe’s first Dupin story “Murder in the Rue Morgue” (1841) is to be considered the first detective story as “standard view” (Priestman 2006b, 3), and even computer-based, statistical models identify Poe’s Dupin stories as prototypical representatives of the genre (see Underwood 2016, 13).

Poe’s short stories are centered around the steps his detective takes in order to resolve a number of incidents that leave the police in the stories at a loss. Detective Dupin, Stephen Knight argues, was to become the model for the “intelligent, infallible, isolated hero so important to the crime fiction of the last 100 years” (1980, 39). Poe’s stories suggest that “isolated intellectual and imaginative life is a sufficient and successful response to the world and its problems” (ibid., 39) and thus address

nineteenth-century values about individualism, reason, order, and, implicitly, even reflect contemporary concerns about state power growing out of perspective. Dupin presents Poe's readers with a set of values that they can both share and admire, and his emphasis on the analysis of physical data (see Knight 1980, 42) is a testament to an ever-growing interest and belief in the power of science and human reason to explain the world.<sup>8</sup>

Both Dupin's character traits, which mark him as a somewhat aloof genius, and his methods, which (he claims) are firmly grounded in observation and scientific reason, and that hence seem demystified and reproducible, exerted a strong influence on numerous detective figures that were to follow him. Most notably among them is Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, who shares Dupin's intellectual prowess and his predilection for empiricism.

The French tradition of detective fiction also exercised considerable influence over the genre's development in Britain. Two French detective figures that should be mentioned here are the criminal-turned-detective Eugène Vidocq, whose (partly ghost-written) autobiography *Mémoires de Vidocq, chef de la police de Sûreté, jusqu'en 1827* (1828–1829) is often quoted as a possible first detective novel, and Émile Gaboriau's detective Monsieur Lecoq. Lecoq served as a role model for Doyle's Sherlock Holmes (see Knight 2004, 52), and according to E.F. Bleiler, Gaboriau's novels already assemble all the features that would later become central to the detective novel (see 1980, 1540).<sup>9</sup>

### *Precursors: Sensation Fiction*

Poe is often considered a notable influence on the sensation fiction writer Wilkie Collins, whose 1868 novel *The Moonstone* is commonly regarded as the first novel-length piece of detective fiction in Britain.<sup>10</sup> The establishment of a detective department at the London Metropolitan Police in 1842 sparked a new wave of interest in the topic of crime and detection. This renewed interest found its expression, among other things, in the abundance of sensational crime stories featured in newspapers, which recent innovations in printing culture made cheaply available and which, due to ever-growing literacy rates, were widely distributed and read.

Sensation fiction takes its name from its appeal to and stirring effect on the senses, that is, from supposedly causing excitements and other sensations in its readers. This preoccupation with readers and their involvement in fictional texts already foreshadows the keen interest that detective

fiction was soon to take in its readers. Sensation novels draw on topics which hitherto had been the hallmark of Gothic fiction but relocate issues such as “social transgressions and illicit passions” and “nervous, psychological, sexual and social shocks” (Pykett 2006, 34) from remote Gothic castles in faraway times and countries to modern British middle- and upper-class homes in order to directly affect their readers and “preach [...] to the nerves” (ibid., 33).

Not unlike the genre of Newgate fiction that arose out of the eighteenth century *Newgate Calendar* in the early 1830s, the immense popularity of sensation fiction sparked concerns about the genre’s possibly corrupting influence on its middle class, largely female readership, and on culture in general (see Reitz 2006, n.p.). The genre raised particular concern with contemporary reviewers and critics because it not only treated unseemly and indecorous topics, but moreover had them play out in “the drawing room rather than the drinking den” (Pykett 2006, 34).<sup>11</sup>

Two examples of immensely popular sensation novels that had a great influence on the reading public are Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1859) and Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1861–1862). *Lady Audley’s Secret* includes all the hallmark features of sensation fiction: a concern with the (in)stability of class boundaries, transgressions of gender roles, a “mix of thrillingly gendered crime and sexually exciting beauty” (Knight 2004, 42), and a secret that revolves around the rift between seeming and being with regard to (social) appearances and respectability.

Due to its fascination with secrets and concealment, sensation fiction frequently features elements of detection, just as many aspects of detection—such as the detective’s supposed ability to see through the surface of things—are portrayed as sensational. One criterion that distinguishes sensation fiction from detective fiction such as Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone*, however, is that detective fiction “shifts the focus from the crime itself [...] to its investigation” (Priestman 2006b, 4). While many sensation novels exhibit an interest in letters, descriptions, documents, and the display of realistic detail—features they share with detective fiction—they “tend to have deeply improbable lurches in the plot that suggest there are strange forces in the world beyond mere realism” (Knight 2004, 43).<sup>12</sup>

According to T.S. Eliot, Collins’s *The Moonstone*, which revolves around the theft of an Indian diamond, is to be considered “the first and greatest of English detective novels” (1934, 426), and Dorothy Sayers has called it “the finest detective story ever written” (1928, 25). The novel was inspired

by a true crime case<sup>13</sup> and features not one but several detectives (both amateur and professional).<sup>14</sup> *The Moonstone* contains many features that have become central constituents of detective fiction, such as a plot focused on an investigation, the examination of evidence, so-called *red herring* clues supposed to lead the reader astray, a grand revelation, and the reestablishment of order at the end of the story—the latter also being a typical trait of sensation fiction.<sup>15</sup>

### *Detectives and the Police*

With all the popular attention paid to stories revolving around crime and detection in fiction and newspapers, and with a newly established detective department in London, one might wonder why the great majority of (successful) fictional detectives in the nineteenth century were individual amateurs or, like Sherlock Holmes, private investigators. This has a lot to do with the English public's attitude and relation toward the police. Before the establishment of the Metropolitan Police in 1829, crime was dealt with locally or regionally by the constables that individual country parishes employed, a system established in Tudor times.<sup>16</sup> With the advent of the London Metropolitan Police, for the first time, police organizations were centralized and became immediately subordinate to the home office. This centralized police force was generally regarded with suspicion and hostility by the British public, to a degree where police officers initially had to wear their uniforms even when they were off duty in order to alleviate fears of state espionage (see Shpayer-Makov 2010, 674–675).<sup>17</sup>

Such distrust toward the police is deeply intertwined with Victorian anxieties about privacy and class stability and turns police officers (and later, detectives) into projection surfaces for misgivings ranging from surveillance to class affiliation. The fact that the first detectives employed in the newly established detective departments were recruited from the ranks of the working classes further fueled such fears among the bourgeoisie, “whose normality has been hitherto defined as a matter of not needing the police” (Miller 1988, 3). Even in fictional contexts, the detectives' ability to move between social strata and blend in anywhere stimulated the fear that class boundaries were not fixed and threatened to expose the instability of class-based identities as such (see Milton 2011, 519).

The invisibility and undetectability awarded to detectives by their exemption from having to wear a uniform fostered the fear of state espionage and increased the perceived threat emanating from the existence of



such a position (see Shpayer-Makov 2010, 673). The threatening nature of the detective's newly established role as unseen observer largely resulted from a perceived imbalance of power: while detectives themselves were all but invisible because they did not have to wear a uniform, they still supposedly were able to see through what others wished to conceal. The powers of observation ascribed to detectives, and their alleged ability to endow seemingly irrelevant details with incriminating meaning, according to D.A. Miller, appeared almost superhuman to those not capable of drawing the same conclusions (see 1988, 28). For a society obsessed with visibility, the anonymity of detectives and the opacity of their power were particularly disconcerting. A detective's outstanding "super-vision" is closely connected to the "police supervision that it embodies," as Miller points out (*ibid.*, 35),<sup>18</sup> and indeed the words *detective* and *spy* were used synonymously long into the nineteenth century (see Knight 2004, 10). In this context, it is hardly surprising that lists, as tools that visualize a certain way of ordering the world, feature so prominently in many texts in which detection plays a central role.

While detectives as agents of the state were regarded with considerable suspicion, the idea of an art of detection as a way of thinking and looking at the world sparked widespread fascination among the public. Caroline Reitz argues that "[d]etective fiction gave a particular expression to what was arguably a much larger cultural methodology, detection itself" and that the detective profession can be considered as only one among many professions emerging in the nineteenth century "who use observation and deduction to grapple with the challenges of modernity" (2006, n.p.). One factor for the enormous success of the character Sherlock Holmes toward the end of the nineteenth century may have been that Doyle's detective caters to the fascination with the detective's alleged power of vision and absolute command over human reason. At the same time, Doyle sidesteps anxieties about class and surveillance by making Holmes a private investigator, who is asked for help by his clients rather than intruding on their privacy unwanted.

### *Doyle and Positivism*

The nineteenth century's fascination with detective fiction, Caroline Reitz observes, is "part of an emerging faith in observation and empirical data shared broadly by the Victorians" (2006, n.p.). However, despite the detective's ability to reimpose order on social problems that appeared

increasingly unmanageable toward the beginning of the nineteenth century (*ibid.*), the image of the detective as a protector of society only took hold gradually and only slowly superseded that of the criminal as a romantic outlaw hero (see Symons 1985, 45). It was only with the creation of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes that this development achieved its full momentum.

Stephen Knight sees two main reasons for the appeal that the character of Sherlock Holmes held for a Victorian audience: "Doyle has two premises: the rational scientific idea that events are really linked in an unaccidental chain, and the individualistic notion that a single inquirer can—and should—establish the links" (1980, 68). Such an approach both separates the enormous power Holmes commands from an obscure and untrustworthy state institution and, by implicitly linking rationalism and individualism, creates the illusion that Holmes's powers of observation and his command over logic and reason are qualities potentially attainable by anyone. Through listing and referencing techniques, Doyle's short stories and novels suggest to readers that replicating Holmes's methods of investigation should be as easy as looking up a reference in an encyclopedia. Yet, at the same time, his abilities make Holmes an idealized hero figure than can be admired. Such alluring power fantasies of "individualized rationality" (*ibid.*, 68) of course appealed to an audience grappling with rapid technological developments, the crumbling certainties of class stability, and changes in societal structure.

The early *Holmes* stories do not share sensation fiction's fascination with murder but instead foreground Holmes's amazing observational and problem-solving abilities that make him an embodiment of the "romance of science" (Knight 2004, 56) that constitutes a big selling point of these stories. Unlike sensation fiction, Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* stories are no longer interested in the sensational aspects of crime. In fact, some of the stories from *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* do not feature a proper crime at all.<sup>19</sup> The focus of these stories is not the crime itself but rather the mystery it presents and the intellectual achievement displayed in resolving such mysteries. Holmes uses his capability for rational thought as a tool for maintaining order to champion his rather bourgeois values (see Knight 1980, 103)<sup>20</sup> and thus appears as a hero that seems tailor-made for the Victorians. Holmes's success in his investigations relies not only on his brilliant mind but at least as much on his exceptional command over recording and documentation techniques,<sup>21</sup> which themselves bear associations with the bourgeois virtues of exactitude and diligence.

The aloof attitude, trust in science, and emphasis on accuracy and rational thought that Holmes shares with earlier detectives such as Poe's Dupin<sup>22</sup> are all features that were to shape many of the detective figures that succeeded Sherlock Holmes. One such successor that deserves a brief mention here and that takes the detective fiction genre's fascination with science and positivism to a hitherto unreached level is Richard Austin Freeman's Dr. Thorndyke. Dr. Thorndyke is positivism personified. He emphasizes the prime importance of analyzing observable details (which he calls "data") when solving cases, and he uses his capacity for rational thought to create a number of hypotheses (based on what he at least claims to be observation and probability, and enumerated to the reader) for each puzzle he encounters. The pattern is that Thorndyke then eliminates all but one of those hypotheses with the help of classical observation-based investigation and logical thought.<sup>23</sup> Contrary to the allusions to science displayed in the *Holmes* stories that function more to convey a ritual of scientificity that is effect- and not content-based, the scientific facts in Freeman's *Thorndyke* stories are—so Freeman and his fans claim—all accurate to the last detail. Freeman provides detailed descriptions and explanations of the scientific procedures Thorndyke follows to solve his cases and thus, supposedly, lets his readers partake in these processes (see Symons 1985, 80). The didactic quality of Thorndyke's deliberations often puts readers in the position of a student to be educated about scientific principles and procedures.

Thorndyke represents the epitome of a strand of detective fiction that portrays the detective as a "rational superman" (Knight 2004, 68), that is, as an even more scientific, more intense version of the Sherlock Holmes model that proved so successful with its Victorian audience.<sup>24</sup> The American mystery writer Jacques Futrelle's detective Professor Augustus S.F.X. Van Dusen, PhD, LL.D., F.R.S., M.D., M.D.S., is another noteworthy figure within this tradition, and Futrelle's highly artificial puzzle plots have been considered as forerunners to the British clue puzzles of the 1920s (see Knight 2004, 69).

### *The Golden Age: Fair Play and the Clue Puzzle*

The so-called Golden Age of detective fiction is usually dated between WWI and WWII.<sup>25</sup> In this period, the novel superseded the short story as prevalent medium and publishing channel for detective fiction. Changing reading habits after WWI may also have been responsible for the

increasing popularity of novels. Such shifts in popular taste, Julian Symons argues, also influenced the audience the detective fiction genre drew. Besides an increasingly female readership, the genre also saw a rise in female writers during the Golden Age, so that, in this period, detective novels were written increasingly by and for women (see 1985, 86).

With such shifts in publication form and audience, the themes dealt with in these kinds of stories changed as well: in Agatha Christie's crime stories, for example, "[h]ard work, activity, professionalism and the positivistic mysteries of contemporary forensic science [...] are all thrown out together" and replaced by "peaceful reflection" (Knight 1980, 110). This not only makes detection more accessible to the general public but also caters to the "illusion of effective self-help and self-sufficiency" propagated in the post-WWI period (*ibid.*).<sup>26</sup>

In terms of the crimes covered in these texts, there is a clear shift from the non-violent offenses (such as theft) and concealed identities that characterize the early *Holmes* stories to murder. Yet, Golden Age murderers are rarely to never professional criminals and usually come from the same social (middle to upper class) circle as the victim, and they have personal rather than professional motives for crimes (see Knight 2004, 87–88; see also Symons 1985, 94). The crime typically takes place in an enclosed setting that allows for a limited number of suspects (Knight 2004, 87), and as a general rule, the setting disregards the real-world historical context of depression, trade unions, and other political developments (see Symons 1985, 96).

The most salient modification that came with the Golden Age, however, is a structural one. Golden Age fiction prides itself with making all the clues that the detective uncovers and needs to successfully complete the investigation available to the reader. Because of its emphasis on textual clues, the detective fiction of the Golden Age is frequently referred to as the *clue puzzle* (sub)genre.<sup>27</sup> In fact, the central idea associated with detective fiction literature of the Golden Age today is that the reader is supposed to be able to solve the puzzle the text presents along with or even before the fictional detective. For this purpose, clue puzzles frequently feature lists that summarize or order information as tools for readers. With the rise of the clue puzzle, maps of the crime scene, which served as an additional tool of detection for readers and made it easier to follow the detective's movements, became a standard feature included in detective novels of the period (see Knight 1980, 109–110).

Both writers and readers of such clue puzzles took the notion of *fair play*, which states that important clues must be made accessible to the reader and thus provide them with a fair chance of detecting the guilty party, very seriously. This becomes evident, for example, from the principle's inclusion in the "Detection Club Oath," which was drafted by a group of British writers including Agatha Christie and had to be sworn upon admission to the Detection Club. The "Detection Club Oath" includes a set of rules based around Ronald Knox's "Detective Story Decalogue" (1929), which members of the Detection Club were supposed to adhere to when writing their fiction. The Golden Age produced a plethora of such rule catalogs and investigations of the underlying principles and building blocks of the genre. Since those genre rules frequently appeared in or heavily relied on the form of the list as their mode of presentation, the remainder of this chapter will take a closer look at three such rule catalogs and elaborate on this curious connection to list-like structures that seems to be written into the detective fiction genre.

#### EXCURSUS: LISTS IN THE HISTORY OF DETECTIVE FICTION—THE RULE CATALOGS OF THE GOLDEN AGE

Susan Lanser argues that "form functions as social and cultural content" (2019, 10). This is certainly true when considering the significance that the form of the list takes on in the rule catalogs produced by detective fiction writers of the Golden Age. Those catalogs employ lists to support the genre's ideology of portraying a neatly ordered world that is logically structured and comprehensible through a commitment to human reason. At the same time, the normative authority that the list carries is used to support the authors' portrayal of the genre as serious and worth of critical attention. This excursus will consider three different rule catalogs from the Golden Age that take great pains to delineate the rules according to which the detective fiction genre works. In these catalogs, the form of the list is used to validate the rules and categorization strategies that the list-makers come up with in order to award their personal tastes normative force. Furthermore, I want to examine how two of these catalogs reference implied or actual readers to justify their claims—Austin Freeman does so by emphasizing the social status of his alleged readership, and Ronald Knox implicitly invokes the fair play principle as a justification for his rules.

The special status of the reader in detective fiction is thus already written into the rules that are meant to establish the foundations of the genre.

W.H. Auden's (1907–1973) "The Guilty Vicarage" (1948) is an attempt to make the author's very personal taste in and ideas about what makes a good detective story appear as objectively valid criteria—something he shares with Freeman, who will be discussed below. Already in his introduction to his essay, Auden uses enumeration markers such as "[f]irstly," "[s]econdly," and "thirdly" (Auden 1948, n.p.) to evoke the impression of organized, logic thought, that mimics the (supposedly) orderly world and structure of the kind of fiction he describes. Even Auden's definition of detective fiction itself has an enumerative structure: "[t]he basic formula is this: a murder occurs; many are suspected; all but one suspect, who is the murderer, are eliminated; the murderer is arrested or dies" (ibid.).<sup>28</sup> The lack of causal connectors evokes the impression that his definition is descriptive rather than interpretative and hence objectively representative of the genre. Auden then further strengthens the supposed objectivity of his definition by following it with an elaboration on two special cases to be explicitly excluded from his considerations, and the length of these exceptions distinctly exceeds the length of the definition. These two exceptions are listed after a colon and each starts with a number. Auden thus makes use of the orderly impression that list-like structures create on the level of form to award the content he represents the same kind of orderly appearance.

This becomes evident at the latest when he proceeds to turn his "formula" (ibid.) into a table:

Peaceful state before murder	False innocence
Murder	Revelation of presence of guilt
False clues, secondary murder, etc.	False location of guilt
Solution	Location of real guilt
Arrest of murderer	Catharsis
Peaceful state after arrest	True innocence

The form of the diagram, similar to the list, carries vibes of scientificity, and the horizontally and vertically ordered structure evokes an empirical

background that Auden's contentual speculations clearly do not live up to. It is through his clever choice of form that Auden lends credibility to his content.

In terms of content, Auden makes use of the biblical binary ideology of guilt and innocence and applies it as a classifying tool. The rigorous formal structure of binary classification forges a connection between his elaborations and the formal text structure of classification, compressed information, and objective fact.<sup>29</sup> Lisa Gitelman has argued that (written) documents are concrete in terms of their content, but always also represent an abstract heuristics. This heuristics stands behind the documents' immediately apparent meaning and is a result of "practices of expression and reception" (2014, 3) that can become manifest through form. Such formal practices are reflections of cultural beliefs, and Auden expertly avails himself of the connotations of objectivity and scientificity that are culturally associated with the form of the list as an ordering tool and categorizing device to strengthen his argument. By choosing the form of the diagram, Auden, for example, evokes the impression that there is an ordered plot structure identifiable in detective fiction that can be described to begin with. He thus creates the impression that the content, here, mirrors the form.

Following the presentation of this diagram, and very much in the classificatory spirit of his essay, Auden continues to sort elements he considers part of detective fiction into self-created categories and sub-categories. He, for example, states that "[t]here are three classes of crime: (A) offenses against God and one's neighbor or neighbors; (B) offenses against God and society; (C) offenses against God" (1948, n.p.). Such a classificatory system reminds of the lists of hypotheses that scientifically minded detectives such as Freeman's Dr. Thorndyke use to analyze their cases, and the classificatory lettering shows the heavy emphasis placed on categorization. The practice of classification here appears as *the* ordering tool par excellence, through which human reason dictates how to accurately and efficiently sort through the seemingly random material our surroundings present us with. Auden's act of classification mimics how the fictional detectives he writes about seem to be able to sort through and classify criminal motives and actions in the same way they can classify material clues.

Auden's choice of structure and his mode of expression in this essay thus mirror his beliefs about detective fiction as a genre. By using the classificatory structures which he tries to impose on the genre of detective

fiction as structuring devices for his essay, Auden validates his own analysis and makes it appear comprehensive, logical, and empirically sound.

Despite all the emphasis Auden seems to place on structure, his conceptualization of good detective stories is content—rather than structure-based. Auden states that “[t]he detective story has five elements—the milieu, the victim, the murderer, the suspects, the detectives” (ibid.) and then proceeds to use these content-related elements as captions to structure the remainder of his essay. Hereby, Auden evokes the impression of definitional clarity and comprehensiveness. In his first category, which is concerned with the human milieu of detective fiction, he even goes so far as to establish two levels of subcategories, marked separately by letters and numbers (in the manner of “1 a, b, c; 2 a, b, c”). The letters and numbers draw attention to the list-like structure and intricate substructure of his classifications and evoke the impression of being comprehensive. At the same time, they conceal the fact that what is written down here shows Auden’s specific preferences and ideas and is, in fact, far from comprehensive. Auden’s text contains no tangible hints to humor; on the contrary, he seems to take his classifications very seriously and even references back to them later in his text. When listing possible causes of guilt in suspects, he, for example, writes “(1) the wish or even the intention to murder; (2) crimes of Class A or vices of Class C” (ibid.). By referring to his formerly established classes of crimes and vices not by their descriptive titles but by the classificatory letter assigned to them, Auden evokes the impression that his classification system can be taken for granted and should be so well known that it can be referred to by its abbreviated alphanumeric tag rather than its content. The actual content becomes secondary.

Austin Freeman (1862–1943), in his “The Art of the Detective Story” (1924), employs a similar strategy in awarding his personal opinions and preferences universal validity. Freeman’s essay aims to defend detective fiction as a serious genre and purports that the rules he proposes will serve to guarantee that texts which follow them maintain a certain standard. To be able to produce good detective fiction, Freeman argues, a writer must possess an innate talent for both ratiocination and imagination, which he considers contradictory qualities that rarely coincide in the same person. Furthermore, detective fiction writers are in need of an “extensive outfit of special knowledge” (1976, 9), which, in contrast to the former two qualities, can be acquired by anyone.

Freeman’s essay takes great pains to demonstrate how his own writing exhibits the analytical talent and extensive special knowledge he postulates



in detective fiction writers. This becomes evident from the abundance of medico-mathematical vocabulary in his text and from his use of the list form to validate his arguments. Like his detective Dr. Thorndyke, Freeman employs mathematical vocabulary to convey the impression that the rather personal preferences he describes in his essay constitute objective assessments that are both measurable and quantifiable. When he writes that the pleasure an argument affords the reader is “*proportionate* to the intricacy of the proof” (ibid., 12, my emphasis), he suggests that both pleasure and intricacy are quantities that can be easily measured and that there exists a simple linear relation between them that offers itself to comparative analysis. Moreover, he repeatedly uses the word “data” to designate matters he discusses and thus evokes the contexts of science and objectivity.

Freeman also makes his own medical background obtrusively obvious when he uses medical vocabulary to discredit sensation fiction writers, who, he states, need to “penetrate [their] reader’s mental epidermis” with their “literary projectiles,” and who will hence inevitably “create a tolerance which has to be met by an increase of the dose” if they are to continue to engage their readers (ibid., 10). This mixed metaphor calls on the word fields of “medicine” and “war” to paint sensation fiction as an unwanted, unpleasant, and even violent intrusion upon the reader’s well-being. The mention of tolerances and increased doses brings up medical contexts of addiction and floats the suggestion that there may be an overdose that could prove fatal to the reader’s health. His choice of medical vocabulary aims at awarding Freeman’s remarks the authority of a medical expert.

Freeman’s medical background and his rather distinct ideas about what constitutes high and low culture also make their way into how he conceptualizes his readers and the kind of reading experience detective fiction is to afford them. He argues that detective fiction is to offer its readers “primarily an intellectual satisfaction” (ibid., 11), and consequently, he imagines his readers as “real connoisseurs” originating from a “definitely intellectual class” (ibid.) of male professionals. Freeman then enumerates professions (theologians, scholars, lawyers, doctors) that are likely to produce such intellectuals and thus uses the social status of his imagined class of readers to award a prestigious status to what happens to be his preferred class of fiction. An interesting parallel to his less scientifically minded fellow Golden Age writers arises when Freeman emphasizes that readers are to be “invited to take part” in the intellectual puzzle a detective novel poses and demands that “the excellence of the entertainment must be

judged by the completeness with which it satisfies the expectations” of its addressee (*ibid.*).

In order to create such satisfaction with readers, Freeman argues, a good detective story needs to follow a certain structure. The structure Freeman proposes is presented in the form of a list and demands a proper detective story have:

four stages: (1) statement of the problem; (2) production of the data for its solution (‘clues’); (3) the discovery, i.e., completion of the inquiry by the investigator and declaration by him of the solution; (4) proof of the solution by an exposition of the evidence. (*ibid.*, 14)

This list is followed by explanatory paragraphs for each step that refer back to the numbering of those steps. By stating his ideas about structure as a consecutively numbered list, Freeman creates the semblance of an incontestable causal relation between the items: just as the number two always inevitably follows the number one, his structure suggests, so must the second stage he proposes always follow the first. Freeman makes use of the unassailable sequential logic of numbers to present his steps of composition as a kind of natural order dictated by logic and to award them the argumentative force of mathematical logic.

Last but not least, Ronald Knox’s “A Detective Story Decalogue” (1929) deserves mention among the Golden Age rule lists presented here.<sup>30</sup> The word “Decalogue” in the title is clearly aimed at awarding the ten rules that follow authority and speaks to Knox’s aspiration to standardize genre conventions.<sup>31</sup> The reference to the ten commandments suggests that the rules Knox establishes are to be followed religiously and even implies that violating them may have severe consequences. The title functions to award Knox, as the creator of those rules, authority over seeing to their observance and poses his voice as one that is endowed with genre-defining authority. Knox’s bold title may well have contributed to his rules being cited as a “moment [...] of genre consolidation” for detective fiction (Underwood 2016, 3).

Knox’s ten commandments, unsurprisingly, are presented in the form of a list. The text consists of twenty paragraphs that state ten numbered rules in italics, each followed by an explanatory section that discusses specifications or exceptions of the previously stated rules. Even though the numbered rules and brief italicized statements formally create the impression of clarity and cast each rule as a clearly distinguishable entity, the

sheer length of the explanatory paragraphs and the fact that four out of the ten rules come with exceptions already provides a hint that Knox's commandments cannot create the kind of orderly structured system their formal appearance simulates.

This becomes especially (and somewhat absurdly) evident from the phrasing of one of the rules, which seems explicitly designed to accommodate a text written by Knox himself. Rule III states that "[n]ot more than one secret room or passage is allowable" (1976, 195) in a detective novel and thus already inscribes the exception into the rule text itself. The explanatory paragraph that follows makes clear that Knox generally disapproves of secret passages because they can be used as the kind of unforeseeable surprise twist the fair play principle tries to do away with. At the same time, however, the explanation serves to justify an instance in which Knox himself resorted to this very device. The explanatory text comes up with the rather far-fetched addendum that secret passages should not be used "unless the action takes place in the kind of house where such devices might be expected" (*ibid.*), which, Knox emphasizes, is the case in his novel.

The cast-iron validity that the title and the orderly numbering suggest Knox's rules should have (and that would demand a phrasing such as "No secret room or passage is allowable" for rule III) is undermined by the—partly personalized—exceptions Knox has to allow to make at least his own published texts comply with his rules. Ultimately, the classificatory clarity that Knox aims for and that the list form coaxes readers into taking for granted is clearly a fantasy. All three texts discussed in this section use the list form to present subjective rules and impressions as founded in objective empirical evidence or a similarly irrefutable authority, and hence, as universally valid.

The historical overview I have provided in this chapter will serve as a framework that allows me to place the analysis of my material made in subsequent chapters in relation to the genre's history and to the cultural backdrop of the subgenres I discuss. Rather than trying to create a streamlined template that disregards specificity in favor of scope, the prototype-based approach I take to defining detective fiction enables readers to assess particular aspects of individual stories in relation to the historical background that produced (or obscured) them.

The rule catalogs discussed above make evident the difficulties of over-generalizations. Nevertheless, these catalogs lay bare some of the formal features and persuasive strategies that underlie the genre, and they testify to the importance of form *as* cultural content.

## NOTES

1. Auden's definition does not even account for all the works within that particular subgenre and, for example, excludes canonical work such as Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), where none of the suspects can be eliminated because the crime was committed collaboratively.
2. For a similar approach, see Underwood, who also defines genre in terms of "overlapping features" (2016, 5).
3. Bleiler argues that the French crime writer Émile Gaboriau (1833–1873) was the first writer to establish a number of features that were to become common in novel-length detective stories.
4. Lisa Gitelman, too, speaks of genres in terms of pattern recognition (see 2014, 2) when she discusses documents as a genre and describes genres as "socially realized sites of coherence" (2014, 3).
5. Next to a thematic concern that revolves around the police, murder, and investigation, Underwood's statistical model also identifies the word field of "architecture and domestic furnishing" as indicative of the detective fiction genre (2016, 15). A possible explanation could be that the investigation of clues found in detective fiction usually necessitates descriptions of space.
6. For a more comprehensive overview of the detective fiction genre, see, for example, Knight (2004) and Symons (1985).
7. Martin Priestman cites Poe's influence on Emile Gaboriau and Wilkie Collins (see Priestman 2006b, 2), and Martin Kayman points out that Doyle's first Sherlock Holmes novel, *A Study in Scarlet*, has Sherlock Holmes compare himself to Poe's Dupin as if he were a real-world historical person (2006, 42).
8. This development marks a clear secular departure from community- and religion-based beliefs in the workings of order that are still prevalent around the time the *Newgate Calendar* appeared.
9. For more information on the French tradition of detective fiction, see, for example, Knight (2004, chapter 2); Schütt (2006); Fondanèche (2000).
10. See, for example, Priestman (2006b), who names *The Moonstone* as the first detective novel. Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853) was published earlier and is often mentioned in the same breath. However, it only has a subplot that revolves around detection.
11. Lynn Pykett considers the difference between Newgate and sensation fiction as "the result of a change in the cultural meaning of crime and the criminal, and a movement from a society controlled by the spectacle of punishment to one morally managed by discipline" (2006, 34).
12. One example for such an improbable lurch would be when Walter Hartright, by a very lucky chance, visits the grave of Laura's mother at the exact same time Laura and Marian happen to be there, too, in *The Woman in White* (see also Knight 2004, 43).

13. For an examination of the Road Hill House murder case in relation to *The Moonstone*, see the study by Kate Summerscale (2008).
14. Incidentally, it also features a laundry list that serves as a central clue.
15. Knight furthermore draws attention to the “inherent stasis underlying the sensational form—and indeed the patterns of crime fiction as a whole” that is closely tied to this inevitable reestablishment of order at the end of detective and sensation novels (2004, 47).
16. Efforts to maintain a more transregional exchange of intelligence were already made in the second half of the eighteenth century, with the establishment of the Bow Street Runners, a paid task force for the pursuit of criminals (but not for the detection of crimes) (see Kayman 1992, 66–67).
17. Ernest Mandel proposes a somewhat simplistic correlation between the public’s regard for the police and the type of crime the police most frequently investigated, and claims that once the prisons filled with more robbers and murderers than debtors, the status of the police in the eyes of the public improved (see 1987, 24).
18. Unless indicated otherwise, all emphases have been removed from quotations for better readability.
19. Instead, the cases featured in these stories revolve around impersonation or the concealing of one’s identity for disreputable motives. The harmless nature of these crimes may also serve a distancing function from an everyday reality that seemed increasingly threatening and dangerous (see Knight 2004, 27). The infamous criminal mastermind Professor Moriarty as Holmes’s nemesis only appears much later.
20. Interestingly, these values only very rarely seem to come into conflict with the character’s bohemian tastes and often decadent and eccentric behavior.
21. The recording and documentation techniques that feature in the *Sherlock Holmes* stories will be discussed in more detail in Chap. 5.
22. T.J. Binyon argues that the traits of pride, alienation, and isolation make both Dupin and Holmes “a product of the Romantic Tradition” (1989, 10).
23. Or so he claims. The excursus that follows Chap. 4 will examine the stance that the *Thorndyke* novels take with regard to empirical observations and logical thought in more detail.
24. Some recent publications have questioned the idea of the (Victorian) detective as the epitome of reason and rationality. However, I argue that detective fiction’s concern with lists makes evident a preoccupation with classification systems and ordering knowledge, and thus also with reason and rationality. For an approach that offers an explanation for the popularity of the character Sherlock Holmes that is rooted in media and material history, see, for example, Clarke (2019).
25. For a detailed discussion of the term *Golden Age* and some alternative suggestions for period dates, see Knight (2004, 85). While all period labels are naturally simplistic and somewhat restrictive, they can still be useful as umbrella terms to describe certain phenomena. It is in this way that period labels are used in this book.

26. For a discussion of the clue puzzle's relation to modernism, see Knight (2006). Knight argues with regard to the fiction of Agatha Christie that the clue puzzle's flat style, its interest in form, and particularly the way these texts repeatedly expose the constructed nature of identity are all features of modernism (see 2006, 90).
27. While the term *clue puzzle* is mostly associated with and originates in the literature produced during the Golden Age in Britain, not all clue puzzles are necessarily from this period or geographical origin. A notable exception are the novels of American crime writers Frederick Dannay and Manfred Bennington Lee, who published their novels under the pen name Ellery Queen. Ellery Queen's early novels went so far as to include a page with an explicit challenge informing the reader that all the clues necessary to solve the crime were now available to the reader (see Knight 2004, 91).
28. Interestingly, Auden's definition, unlike so many others, does not include a detective figure or an investigation among its criteria.
29. Auden's schema reminds of Propp's structuralist classification of fairy tales. Incidentally, Propp also uses a numbered list structure to present the elements he identifies and to underlie his claims (see 2004, 72–75).
30. Ronald Knox (1888–1957) was an English priest and detective fiction author.
31. In an American context, a similarly prescriptive rule catalog was created by American crime writer S.S. Van Dine [Willard Huntington Wright] in his "Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories" (1928). Although they were published in such close temporal proximity and overlap in some of their content, the two catalogs do not directly reference one another.

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