"I suppose that I am commuting a felony, but it is just possible that I am saving a soul"

Ethics in Detective Fiction

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This essay deals with the contentious notion that ethical criticism can be fruitfully applied to genre fiction, in this case detective fiction written between 1892 and 1930. An argument is made that an analysis of the ethical frameworks in which detectives and villains act and the scope for ethical decision-making that detectives have reveals the cultural assumptions made by authors, editors and readers and allows important insights into genre development.

1. Introduction

Ethics is one of the main branches of philosophy and, if a vast generalisation be permitted at the beginning of this essay, it deals with various conceptions of ‘the good life’. The ‘good life’ refers to the worthwhile rather than the merely pleasurable life, and philosophers like Kant have developed frameworks whose observance makes the ‘good life’ possible, whereas Aristotle and followers have focused on the qualities a person needs to develop, so-called ‘virtues’, which allow him or her to live the ‘good life’. Ethical thought in its many variants lends itself to application to everyday contexts, as a cursory glance in any textbook on ethics shows (see, e.g., Singer 1993, Vardy & Grosch 1999). This applies even to the study of literature. Indeed, readers intuitively apply ethical categories to their interpretation of what they read when they ask themselves questions like: “Did Adam Bede do the right thing when he forgave Hetty Sorrel in George Eliot’s Adam Bede?”, “Is all that violence in Brett Easton Ellis’s American Psycho really necessary for the point of the book to come across?” and “What can I learn from Pip’s experiences in Charles Dickens’s Great Expectations?”
Ethical criticism is so ingrained that for the most part of several hundred if not thousand years of literary criticism it was simply called ‘criticism’. However, in the 20th century ethical criticism fell, in Booth’s words (1988, chapter 2), on hard times. Critics began asking suspiciously whether ethical readings of texts might not end up encouraging readers to think that there was a ‘right’ and a ‘wrong’ way to read a book, that there were ‘good’ and ‘bad’ books highlighting ‘good’ and ‘bad’ morality while disguising that it was a particular gendered, political, class-based, etc. viewpoint that was thus privileged. Other critics feared censorship, i.e. the elision of texts from reading lists, library catalogues etc. if they were considered to be morally corrupting, something which did and does, of course, happen. The Leavisite stance, which was at least partly informed by ethical criticism, had become deeply unfashionable, partly because of the assumption that there was one common standard by which to judge books, and partly because of the snobbishness displayed by Q.D. Leavis, who wrote with some exasperation in her report about public libraries entitled Fiction and the Reading Public (1939) that “the book-borrowing public ha[d] acquired the reading habit while somehow failing to exercise any critical intelligence about its reading” (Leavis 1939: 7). Furthermore, ethical critics looking for a ‘message’ sometimes forget that they are dealing with a literary text, which may not directly reflect the author’s point of view. Thus, Brett Easton Ellis, the author of the aforementioned American Psycho, often found himself accused of the misogyny displayed by the central character Patrick Bateman, an accusation which can ultimately not be proved either way (see Aitkenhead 2010).

Despite these valid criticisms, ethical criticism is experiencing something of a resurgence, perhaps because of a return of the ethical into the general social (particularly the political) context (e.g. Robin Cook’s attempt at an ‘ethical’ foreign policy in the UK after Labour’s victory in 1997 or George W. Bush’s ‘war on terror’, which also framed foreign policy in terms of ethical categories), perhaps because literary critics were becoming tired of some aspects of postmodern theory, which appeared to lose sight of meaning in the free play of signifiers. The many facets of the argument for or against the possibility, viability, desirability and form of ethical criticism have been summarised by Noël Carroll (2000). The main arguments for and against ethical criticism were made by Richard Posner (1997, 1998), Martha C. Nussbaum (1998) and Wayne C. Booth (1998) in their somewhat heated exchange in Philosophy and Literature. In the following, I will assume that the value of ethical criticism for the study of literature has been established pace Posner. I will, instead, focus on another contentious issue: namely the question of whether ethical criticism is possible or meaningful when applied to formula fiction, in this case English detective fiction published between 1892 and 1930.

Why is this a contentious issue? Most philosophers and literary critics who endorse ethical literary criticism, like Booth and Nussbaum, apply it
to multi-layered narratives with psychologically complex characters. Nussbaum, for instance, can readily derive moral insights for real life by reading Henry James (1990). Booth differentiates what he regards as ‘good’ literature from ‘bad’ literature by arguing that ‘good’ literature allows a meaningful, deep engagement, something he describes in terms of friendship between reader and text. ‘Bad’ literature, in his view, trivialises moral issues. Thus he is outraged at Agatha Christie’s Curtain (1975) because “its conclusion, celebrating altruistic suicide, is not only predictable but to me morally superficial and offensive” (Booth 1988: 59). The implication is that formula fiction like Christie’s is simply not capable of sustaining any meaningful ethical engagement.

Booth is clearly right to suggest that formula fiction does not deal with ethical issues in the same way as non-formula fiction can (but not always does). The implication, though, that an analysis of ethical issues in formula fiction is therefore fruitless does not follow. I would endorse Chesterton’s slightly tongue in cheek remark that “[a]ny form of art, however trivial, refers back to some serious truths” (Chesterton 1925) – or at least it can do. There is nothing inherent in the detective fiction formula, which makes this type of fiction inevitably trivial or unsusceptible to an ethical reading:

The essence of a mystery tale is that we are suddenly confronted with a truth which we have never suspected and yet can see to be true. There is no reason, in logic, why this truth should not be a profound and convincing one as much as a shallow and conventional one. (Chesterton 1930)

Formula fiction is badly served if the critic approaches it with the critical toolkit that is meant to enable her to read multi-layered, non-formulaic fiction with complex characters. It is my aim to explore what kind of critical analysis deals adequately with ethics in early detective fiction. My examples will come from the short stories and novels of the pre-golden age period by Arthur Conan Doyle, who established one of the most powerful detective stereotypes in Sherlock Holmes, R. Austin Freeman, who developed the Holmes stereotype in ways which replicate the cultural assumptions of his time in fascinating ways, and Arthur Morrison, whose rogue detective Horace Dorrington appears, at first glance, to be written in opposition to all that is holy to the Holmes type. A comparison of the ethical frameworks and modus operandi of these three characters will enrich the study of the genre within the cultural context of its time. I will use the term ‘detective fiction’ to describe a particular subset of crime fiction, namely that involving a clearly recognisable amateur detective agent.

To explore the possibilities, I will first describe the nature of formula fiction. Cawelti defines ‘formula’ in terms of cultural stereotypes and larger plot patterns. Formulas that are cultural stereotypes refer “to patterns of convention which are usually quite specific to a particular culture
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Thus, the stereotype of the ratiocinative detective developed by Conan Doyle, while based on Poe and Gaboriau, emerged from a specific, late 19th-century British context, which saw the loss of the power of religion to define morality, the rise of science as a provider of truth and explicator of life in general, a redefinition of the nature of crime, the rise of consumer society and, as the century closed, a concern regarding the possible ‘disenchantment’ (Max Weber) with the strictly rational, positivist view of the world (see Saler 2003, 2004, Jackson 1939).

A formulaic plot pattern “will be in existence for a considerable period of time before it is conceived by its creators and audience as a genre” (Cawelti 1977: 8). Anne Katherine Green, Poe and Gaboriau were the pioneers, but it took time before crime fiction became recognisable as a genre rather than as fiction with crime elements. It can thus be argued that Conan Doyle and Arthur Morrison wrote at a time when the genre was still in flux, thus allowing them to conceive of detectives with radically different moral outlooks.

Formulas do not appear in isolation. Textbooks on crime fiction (e.g. Priestman 1998) show that the formula owed much to the treatment of crime in sensation fiction, such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862). Links can also be made to adventure fiction, e.g. Robert Louis Stevenson, and spy fiction, e.g. William Le Queux or E. Phillips Oppenheimer (see Haynsworth 2001). Chandler has argued that the balance of popularity between rogue story and detective story tipped over in favour of the detective story when the rogue story lost its appeal at the end of the 19th century, which makes the detective a close relative of the literary rogue such as E.W. Hornung’s Raffles (F.W. Chandler 1907: 524ff.). Finally, Holbrook Jackson draws attention to the elements detective fiction shares with romance, stories which follow a predetermined pattern and which generally end ‘well’, numbering Conan Doyle as one of the writers of the ‘new romance’, which “owed its renaissance to Science” (Jackson 1939: 202; see also Saler 2004: 611). The detective story emerged from a variety of literary formulas and genres at a particular point in time and has proved flexible enough to persist in a range of genre variations to this day.

Formula fiction is a type of mass art, which Carroll defines as “the art of mass society, predicated on addressing mass audiences by means of the opportunities afforded by mass technologies” (Carroll 1997: 189). They are accessible and readily assimilated by ‘untutored’ audiences – untutored, that is, in literary knowledge (Carroll 1998: 196). The detective story was shaped by the opportunities and pressures of the new literary mass market in literary magazines like *The Strand, Windsor Magazine* or *Pall Mall Gazette* and mass-produced books, i.e. largely by the literary tastes and expectations of editors and a mass readership. This had and still has repercussions for the ethical frameworks of the narratives and for
the scope of ethical decision-making given to detectives. The accessibility criterion means that complex moral issues are often simplified to stark moral choices, although more recent crime fiction has aimed at a more subtle treatment of ethical issues. Authors are likely to write according to established ethical schemata, which allow readers to understand moral issues and dilemmas with reference to their own life experience and which readers usually endorse. Moral learning occurs largely by activating and modifying existing beliefs rather than by adding new schemata (Carroll 1998: 323). Going completely against the grain of readers' moral convictions, as non-formulaic fiction often does, is usually not encouraged by editors or publishers, nor are books like that likely to sell well. Again exceptions, which confound conventional moral expectations exist, like Patricia Highsmith's Mr Ripley. More usually, though, reader reactions and buying habits lead to standardisation. In this way genres and the rules that govern them are shaped by an ethical criticism of the book buying public and literary editors, who try to satisfy what they regard as public demand.

Usually ethical criticism of literature focuses on the way readers identify with characters. Currie has proposed a model by which such identification is possible by simulation. He assumes that readers temporarily take on the beliefs and desires of main characters (1995: 252). I share Carroll's doubts that simulation actually describes our reading experience. Instead, readers are more likely to observe characters in action and compare their lives with their own (1998: 342-356). More importantly, though, the idea that readers gain moral knowledge through identification makes an ethical reading of formula fiction impossible as formula fiction consists of stereotypical characters and situations, which do not encourage identification. In pre-golden age detective stories readers cannot identify with the detective, who tends to be presented as brilliant and remote. Villains only appear very briefly and are drawn to be unlike the readers. Victims are passive. The only character who is at all close to the readers is usually the narrator, and it is not his morality we are interested in. Problematic as it is in other types of fiction, identification is clearly not the right approach for formula fiction like early detective fiction.

What can an ethical criticism achieve? Main characters in formula fiction are based on stereotypes but they are not necessarily simple creations. Successful formula characters like Sherlock Holmes consist of striking, often contradictory elements. They represent cultural characteristics of their time and those that transcend it. Holmes embodies the late 19th-century faith in the scientific method but he is also a romantic knight-errant, who is motivated by his sense of chivalric duty and valour. An ethical reading can disentangle the various motives of detectives and provide explanations why stereotypes work for historical as well as contemporary readerships.
Moreover, and pace the many theorists who see the reader/viewer of
mass art as a purely passive consumer of pre-fabricated pap, I would
agree with Carroll, who argues that mass art does not induce mere passiv-
ity in audiences:

Reading a novel [...] is itself generally a moral activity in so far as read-
ing narrative literature – from Thackeray to Patricia Cornwell – typically
involves us in a continuous process of moral judgment, which [...] itself can
contribute to the expansion of our moral understanding. (1998: 331, ital-
ics in the original)

A great deal of the success of the formula is predicated upon the reader
accepting its key elements as interesting, entertaining and being within
acceptable limits of morality. The reader who disapproves of Dashiell
Hammett's portrayal of the forces of the law as corrupt is unlikely to pick
up another hard-boiled detective novel. The task of the ethical critic of
formula fiction is to map out the ethical choices open to significant and
successful formula characters and to determine implied and actual audi-
ence reactions. As Raymond Williams has so successfully argued, a work
of art does not exist in isolation: it is written in line with or against other
works of art and exists in an environment made up of authors, editors,
readers and even non-readers who are aware of the stereotype developed
in a story. It was to describe “this essential relationship” between a work
of art and its environment, and the power of a work of art to influence
that environment, that Williams coined the term “structure of feeling”,
writing: “What I am seeking to describe is the continuity of experience
from a particular work, through its particular form, to its recognition as a
general form, and then the relation of this general form to a period”
(1964: 9). A detective story is read by many people, discussed, forgotten
(most of the time), anthologised and thus canonised (some of the time)
and perhaps even adapted for other media. Some stereotypes, such as the
Holmes formula, survive and determine the general shape of what later
becomes known as a genre. An analysis of the ethical framework of de-
tective stories as well as the detectives’ scope for ethical decision making
is thus a powerful tool to gain insights into contemporary cultural atti-
dudes as well as the mechanics of genre development.

2. Sherlock Holmes: the scientific artist at work

Sherlock Holmes first appeared in the novella A Study in Scarlet (1887)
and since then has never left public consciousness. He has had an inter-
esting career in fiction, on stage and on screen, the latest example being
the radical re-interpretation by Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss for BBC
TV in 2010.

Holmes is an unofficial consulting detective, who is engaged by the
police on a case by case basis and by an ever increasing number of pri-
vate clients. He is a university-educated gentleman, who, despite his professional manner, continues the tradition of the Victorian amateur scientist. For Raymond Chandler, Holmes is "mostly an attitude and a few dozen lines of unforgettable dialogue" (1960). Indeed, he is not a realistic character: he has no depth, does not develop and is made up of easily identifiable characteristics - he has a brilliant mind, is emotionally cold, is egocentric and has a Bohemian disregard for ordinary middle-class lifestyles despite holding up middle-class virtues to the villains he encounters (see Knight 1980: 92). He is also unfailingly chivalrous, being imprinted with Conan Doyle's concept of the knightly honour code (see Carr 1953: 63). He is a man of his time and a timeless romantic hero, and, of course, the perfect English gentleman.

An interesting question is whether Holmes's gentlemanly honour code is based on purely class-based characteristics or whether it is primarily ethical in nature. In his analysis of the Raffles stories, for instance, Orwell reads the gentleman's code as "merely certain rules of behaviour" which are observed "semi-instinctively" and thus do not constitute actual ethical choices (1965: 66). Holmes has internalised this code, but he also reflects on the ethical choices he makes - usually at the end of a case when he decides whether to give up the villain to the police or not. His scope of ethical decision-making thus goes beyond an unthinking application of a class-based code of behaviour.

Holmes's sense of justice is based on Victorian Utilitarianism according to the English philosopher Henry Sidgwick, who in his immensely influential *Methods of Ethics* (1874) aimed to provide an ethical framework without recourse to God (see also Schneewind 1977). Holmes's work is largely determined by the principle of securing the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. His motivation to do his job, on the other hand, is based on hedonism tempered by his chivalric honour code: he is a detective because he enjoys solving puzzles and feels honour-bound to aid needy clients. In this way, he embodies the strangely schizophrenic world of the Decadent 1890s: he is deeply moral, but also filled with ennui at stuffy Victorian moral conventions.

Sherlock Holmes's Utilitarian principles are most obvious when he, acting unofficially, has determined the identity of the villain and has to decide whether to alert the police. In "The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle" (1892), the morally weak hotel attendant James Ryder succumbs to the lure of the jewel, steals it, panics, and makes a mess out of trying to rid himself of the jewel to evade arrest. He breaks down when Holmes confronts him. Holmes lets him go and reflects:

"After all [...] I am not retained by the police to supply their deficiencies. If Horner [another suspect arrested by the police] were in danger it would be another thing; but this fellow will not appear against him, and the case must collapse. I suppose that I am commuting a felony, but it is just possible that I am saving a soul. This fellow will not go wrong again; he is too
Holmes reasons that no useful purpose can be served by having Ryder arrested. Indeed, Ryder might be turned into a real criminal by his prison experience, which would not serve the principle of utility.

Importantly for the development of the formula, it is Holmes who dispenses justice rather than the forces of the law. In “The Adventure of the Abbey Grange” (1903), he holds an impromptu jury trial with him in the role of judge and the English everyman Watson as jury. As the victim, Sir Eustace Brackenstall, turns out to have been the villain – a favourite plot twist of Conan Doyle’s – and as he had died by misadventure rather than murder, the accused, Captain Croker, who is in love with the widow, is acquitted by this jury. Holmes pronounces a fitting sentence: if nobody else is arrested by mistake, he will keep quiet. Croker, in turn, has to promise to only return after a decent interval to marry Lady Brackenstall. Holmes thus ensures that Lady Brackenstall’s innocence is in no way questioned, e.g. by an overly hasty remarriage, and that her honour is left intact. The principles of utility and of chivalry are observed. And, as no other person is concerned, the affair can be kept out of the public eye.

Preventing public scandal is a major concern for Holmes, and this reflects how the birth of an intrusive mass journalism in the 1890s had changed the nature of the public sphere. A number of stories feature exalted aristocratic clients, whose problems are to be kept out of the public arena, but whom Holmes feels free to castigate in private. “The Adventure of the Priory School” (1903) is typical: it is a preparatory school for the privileged and the Duke of Holdernesse, a great man of public affairs, has his son Lord Saltire educated there. The boy disappears, and the German master Heidegger, who mysteriously disappeared at the same time as the boy, is found dead. Holmes shows that James Wilder, the Duke’s secretary, was responsible for the kidnapping and that the Duke colluded with him. What comes as a surprise even to him is the Duke’s confession that Wilder is his illegitimate son.

Holmes’s manner towards the Duke is designed to deflate the man’s immense arrogance in private. An astonished Watson reports how Holmes “stepped forward and touched the Duke on the shoulder. "I accuse YOU [...] . And now, your Grace, I’ll trouble you for that cheque”” (94). Holmes is not an effusive man and by touching such an elevated personage he asserts his moral superiority. Holmes also uses the address ‘your Grace’ with a frequency that makes the reader suspect that he is being ironic. Finally, the reader knows that Holmes only insists on being paid when he deals with a client whom he is required to respect socially, but whom he despises morally:
In the first place, your Grace, I am bound to tell you that you have placed yourself in a most serious position in the eyes of the law. You have condoned a felony and you have aided the escape of a murderer; for I cannot doubt that any money which was taken by James Wilder to aid his accomplice in his flight came from your Grace's purse. [...] Even more culpable, in my opinion, your Grace, is your attitude towards your younger son. [...] To humour your elder son you have exposed your innocent younger son to imminent and unnecessary danger. It was a most unjustifiable action. (87)

Again, Holmes is shown to be concerned with a more general justice than mere justice in the eyes of the law: Wilder is held morally culpable for Heidegger's death but, more importantly, the Duke is held responsible for exposing his legitimate son to unnecessary danger. Holmes's critique is that of a social conservative who is offended that the Duke has not fulfilled the role of moral leader predicated by his noble birth.

Once the child is out of danger Holmes suggests that the Duke should separate himself from Wilder and seek forgiveness from his estranged wife, so that the nuclear family unit can be restored and fulfil the function of social and moral leadership that the middle class expects of them. The degree of Holmes's meddling in the Duke's private affairs and the Duke's meek acquiescence shows the power of a middle class in the ascendency as well as the workings of Holmes's Utilitarian ethics: once the innocent are protected and the transgressive elements are removed, Holmes can afford to drop the inquiry.

Holmes often follows the principle of Act Utilitarianism: actions that are commonly regarded as morally bad – such as burglary or theft – can turn out to lead to good ends, for instance when the burglary is committed in the house of a well-known blackmailer and the theft concerns indiscrete letters from an otherwise blameless victim. This is the plot of "The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton" (1903), in which Holmes resorts to burglary when his attempts to reason with Milverton fail.

Interestingly, the story is written to resemble a typical Raffles story, but one that is morally improved as the burglary is justified. Conan Doyle never approved of his brother in law E.W. Hornung's Raffles stories. Conan Doyle himself felt so uncomfortable about writing crime stories that he often twisted the plots so that no crime actually occurred. He did not like the idea that the Raffles stories, which feature the aristocratic gentleman burglar and his sidekick Bunny, might superficially resemble his own stories, arguing that a hero should not be an unrepentant criminal (see Carr 1953). But Doyle was not insensible to the value of a good adventure yarn. Watson records:

My first feeling of fear had passed away, and I thrilled now with a keener zest than I had ever enjoyed when we were the defenders of the law instead of its defiers. The high object of our mission, the consciousness that it was unselfish and chivalrous, the villainous character of our opponent,
all added to the sporting interest of the adventure. Far from feeling guilty, I rejoiced and exulted in our dangers. (124)

Watson’s keen enjoyment replicates Bunny’s emotions on the occasion of the latter’s first burglary almost verbatim:

The romance and the peril of the whole proceeding held me spellbound and entranced. My moral sense and my sense of fear were stricken by a common paralysis. And there I stood, shining my light and holding my phial with a keener interest than I had ever brought to an honest occupation. (Hornung 1899: 22-23)

However, the thrill, which reveals Bunny’s moral bankruptcy, is heightened in Watson’s case by being entirely justified. The interests of utility allow Holmes and Watson to briefly cross the line into lawlessness in order to establish justice.

Holmes’s stance towards his profession is that of a hedonist: the thrill of the chase, the complexity of the problem, and the chance of a “sporting duel” with a cunning villain outweigh other considerations (“The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton”, 121). This hedonism is expressed in an unflattering egocentrism and vanity, but it does not compromise the outcome of his cases. Schultz interprets Sidgwick’s Utilitarianism as not being based “on pure reason alone” and thus as being different from Kantian ethics (2006: np). Holmes proves the point that a mixture of hedonist enjoyment and Act Utilitarian ethics can lead to moral outcomes.

The Sherlock Holmes stories thus weave together elements of knightly romance narratives with elements of adventure stories and elements of the emerging formula of the ratiocinative detective (see Arthur Bartlett Maurice – no bibliographical details of the source given – quoted in Wells 2007: np). Saler comments that this mixture was characteristic for a time, which “mourned the apparent absence of communal beliefs and higher ideals in an age that seemed dominated by positivism and materialism” (Saler 2003: 602). Holmes’s scope for ethical decision-making fully reflects the culture of the 1890s in England. His tendency to take the law into his own hands reflects not only a prevailing distrust of the police following the Jack the Ripper fiasco in 1888 (see Flanders 2011: 425ff.) but also the sureness of his moral instincts, which were (and probably are) largely endorsed by the reading public.

3. Dr Thorndyke and the duty of a citizen

Like Conan Doyle, R. Austin Freeman was a medical doctor who, however, was forced to give up practising due to ill-health and who wrote detective fiction as a way to make a living. When the first stories featuring his series hero Dr Thorndyke appeared, he had already acquired something of a name for himself as the author of the acclaimed travel
narrative *Travels and Life in Ashanti and Jaman* (1898), which drew on his experiences as an army doctor in Africa. He had also published stories about the rogue Romney Pringle, a more middle-class version of Raffles, with J.J. Pitcairn under the pseudonym Clifford Ashdown. *The Red Thumb Mark* appeared in 1907 and already has all the ingredients which were to characterise all further novels and short stories, which were published until well into the 1940s. Even though the period of Freeman's writing thus overlaps with the development of the golden age detective novel, he continued to employ a formula that was pre-war and was more closely related to the Holmesian formula than to that of contemporary writers.

When looking at Thorndyke, one cannot help but discern the angular outline of the shadow of Sherlock Holmes behind him. Reviewing *Dr. Thorndyke Intervenes* in 1933, Marcus Magill writes approvingly:

But pride of place among those in the Holmes tradition belongs without question to Dr. Thorndyke. He was one of the first in the field and he remains pre-eminent. Dr. Freeman's medico-legal expert is more human and less showy than his great predecessor; his knowledge of forensic medicine and his use of scientific deduction are fully as sound. An Austin Freeman book has a flavour as precise and individual as had the Conan Doyle series and it is not surprising to find his novels on the bookshelves of serious students of crime. (Magill 1933: 412)

Freeman always denied that Thorndyke was based on Holmes, protesting (too much?) that

[h]e was deliberately invented. [...] H]is personality was designed in accordance with certain principles and what I believed to be the probabilities as to what such a man would be like. As mental and bodily characters are usually in harmony, a fine intellect tending to be associated with a fine physique, I made him tall, strong, active and keen-sighted. As he was a man of acute intellect and sound judgment, I decided to keep him free from eccentricities, such as usually are associated with an ill-balanced mind, and to endow him with the dignity of presence, appearance and manner appropriate to his high professional and social standing. Especially I decided to keep him perfectly sane and normal. (cited in Donaldson 1971: 65)

In other words, this is a character with the brain of a Holmes but with none of his eccentricities. Freeman was a supporter of the Eugenics movement and a critic of what he believed to be modern degeneracy (see his *Social Decay and Regeneration* 1921). Thorndyke, a medico-legal expert, was based on thoroughly modern and rational principles. Freeman delighted in rewriting some of Conan Doyle's plots to debunk the scientific mystification upon which they rested and to base them on science that actually worked. Thus *The Red Thumb Mark* (1907) takes the evidence of a faked bloody thumb print in Conan Doyle's "The Adventure of the Norwood Builder" (1903), disproves that it could have been faked in the way Doyle suggests and demonstrates another way in which finger-
prints can be faked. In “A Case of Premeditation”, he shows how the apparently fail-safe sense of smell of the bloodhound, used to great effect in *The Sign of the Four* (1890, later *The Sign of Four*), can be misled. Similarly, in “The Anthropologist at Large” (1909), Thorndyke makes short work of Holmes’s complicated deductions of the evidence of an old hat in “The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle” (1892) by suggesting that the hat could have been purchased second-hand before commencing on his rather more believable deductions.

Thorndyke is evidently meant as an improvement of Holmes. This includes a changed ethical outlook. Where Holmes puts his enjoyment and the principle of Utility above everything else, Thorndyke follows an ethical code based on a priori ethical principles. His duty is to establish the truth regardless of consequences. Where Holmes had emerged out of the decadent 1890s, Thorndyke is a thoroughly modern Edwardian. A further motivation is that of being a good citizen, which usually entails assisting the police and acting in a lawful way – unlike Holmes. In “A Message from the Deep Sea”, he observes a policeman inadvertently destroy vital evidence with some chagrin, but, nevertheless he pledges that “I need not say that I shall do anything that seems necessary to assist the authorities. That is a matter of common citizenship” (1909: 178).

Also unlike Holmes, Thorndyke rarely acts unless he is professionally instructed. As a professional, he always puts duty before inclination, but one senses that duty and inclination are one and the same thing. His goal is to make sure that the case is solved and the guilty party is punished. Usually his stance is reassuring to friends and clients, but sometimes it frightens characters, particularly if they suffer from a guilty conscience, however unmerited. *Helen Vardon’s Confession* (1922) is narrated by Helen Otway, née Vardon, who, through a series of strange coincidences, is the last to see her estranged husband alive. Helen, who married Otway against her will and separated from him almost immediately, has good reasons to want to be free of him: she has fallen in love with someone else. When Otway, his health wrecked by a campaign of threatening letters, confesses to a fear of committing suicide, Helen is tempted to sub-consciously try to influence his thoughts, having previously experienced the power of hypnotic suggestion. When Otway dies, Helen is terrified. To her guilty conscience, Thorndyke appears as an avenging angel, who dispenses justice without mercy. “Dr. Thorndyke was not a guesser. If he had penetrated to that secret he would offer no speculative probabilities, but definite evidence, which would reduce the matter to certainty” (311). In the end, Thorndyke proves that Otway was killed by his previous mistress and housekeeper Mrs Gregg and he thoroughly debunks the pseudoscience of hypnotic suggestion. However, the impression is that if Helen had been guilty, Thorndyke would not have hesitated to pronounce the truth.
Thorndyke’s working methods express his ethics practically. The truth is established by a confirmation of facts, which are then logically linked. In this, Thorndyke is a materialist and positivist. Facts and logical reasoning are always to be preferred to mere testimonial. This is a metaphor of some importance in *The Eye of Osiris* (1911), in which the issue of fact versus testimonial comes to stand for a struggle between a priori moral principles versus moral relativism, which, in Thorndyke’s view, would shatter English civilisation. John Bellingham, a rich collector of Ancient Egyptian artefacts, dies naturally if unexpectedly in the house of the lawyer Mr Jellicoe. Bellingham’s unfortunate will dictates that his brother Godfrey can only inherit if John’s body is buried in one of three specific sites – otherwise his cousin George Hurst inherits. Jellicoe has some financial interest in Hurst inheriting the money and decides to hide the body so that it cannot be buried. He mummifies it and hides it in a mummy case, which Bellingham had planned to give to the British Museum. Jellicoe is finally foiled by Thorndyke, who, with the aid of x-ray photography, proves that the body in the case is Bellingham’s.

Jellicoe is the perfect villain as he constitutes Thorndyke’s moral opposite. He is a moral relativist who believes that the stronger argument necessarily wins. He expounds his views to Dr Berkeley, the narrator:

The scientific outlook is radically different from the legal. The man of science relies on his own knowledge and observation and judgment, and disregards testimony [...]. A court of law must decide according to the evidence which is before it; and that evidence is of the nature of sworn testimony. If a witness is prepared to swear that black is white and no evidence to the contrary is offered, the evidence before the Court is that black is white, and the Court must decide accordingly. The judge and the jury may think otherwise – they may even have private knowledge to the contrary – but they have to decide according to the evidence. (79-80)

When Berkely inquires if that does not make miscarriages of justice possible, Jellicoe replies smoothly: “Certainly [...] There is a case of a judge who sentenced a man to death and allowed the execution to take place, notwithstanding that he – the judge – had actually seen the murder committed by another man. But that was carrying correctness of procedure to the verge of pedantry” (80). Even allowing for irony, Jellicoe is inhumanly cold and amoral. At the end of the novel, he is forced to admit defeat, which, characteristically, is worded in terms of a defeat of method: Jellicoe admits to the lawyer’s “incurable habit of underestimating the scientific expert” (212).

While Holmes is happy to set himself up as judge, Thorndyke rarely does so. Instead, he tends to appear as the expert witness on the side of the defence. This is not to say that Thorndyke is never tempted to take the law into his own hands. In *The Eye of Osiris* (1911) he guesses that Jellicoe is planning to kill himself after his confession, but does nothing to prevent it. And in one of the few times when he is not professionally
engaged to solve the crime, he acts like Holmes and dispenses justice as he sees fit.

The novel *Mr. Pottermack's Oversight* (1930) reworks a plot originally developed for the short story “A Case of Premeditation” (1912). This is an ‘inverted’ detective story – an invention by Freeman – in which the reader observes the villain do his deed and then watches Thorndyke solve the crime – a way of telling the story which is now used to greater effect by writers of thrillers, particularly those which feature serial killers. In the short story, the convict Rufus Pembury, a “man of strong character and intelligence” (50) succeeds in escaping from prison and then, sensibly, turns his back on his life of crime and earns his fortune by hard work in America. He returns to England to retire, but encounters a man who used to be warder at his prison. The man attempts to blackmail him and Pembury realises immediately that the only way to escape his tormentor is to kill him. Thorndyke, acting professionally, solves the case. Pembury escapes, however, and Thorndyke sympathises: “he deserved to escape. It was clearly a case of blackmail, and to kill a blackmailer – when you have no other defence against him – is hardly murder” (81).

In *Mr Pottermack’s Oversight*, the central moral question “Can killing a blackmailer be justified?” is made clearer by disambiguating the circumstances of the murder. Here, the ex-convict and prison escapee Marcus Pottermack is a victim of a miscarriage of justice, while the blackmailer James Lewson, a former friend and colleague of Pottermack’s, is guilty of the original crime as well. James Lewson is a particularly bad man, as he also draws in Pottermack’s former fiancée Alice, marries her for her money, and then slowly drains her financial resources as far as her settlement will allow. Alice now lives separated from her husband and allows other people to believe that she is a widow. Pottermack, having gone to America, made his money and returned like Pembury, recognises Alice in the street and determines to live near her in the hope of rekindling their former love. Lewson recognises him as well and blackmails him. As the novel opens, Pottermack realises that he must somehow rid himself of this incubus before he can declare his love to Alice. Despite his revulsion, he kills Lewson. The justice of the killing and his subsequent actions are explained in the following way: “His previous experiences of the law had taught him that mere innocence is of no avail” (105), and being an escaped convict, he was not able to go to the police even if he had wanted to. Thorndyke believes that Pottermack’s deed is condonable from the beginning and studiously avoids being called in as an expert witness, which would force him to represent the side of the law against Pottermack.

A complicated plot twist, however, forces Pottermack to produce a body, so that Lewson can be pronounced officially dead and Alice can marry again. Once the body, an Egyptian mummy carefully de-mummified by Pottermack, turns up, Thorndyke has momentary misgivings:
It was here that the question of public policy arose. For here was undoubtedly a dead person. If that person proved to be James Lewson, there was nothing more to be said. But if he were not James Lewson, then it became his, Thorndyke's, duty as a citizen and a barrister to ascertain who he was and how his body came to be dressed in Lewson's clothes; or, at least, to set going inquiries to that effect. (120)

Having ascertained, though, that Pottermack managed to fool the coroner and the doctor into believing that the body of an Egyptian mummy was the corpse of James Lewson, Thorndyke permits himself to admire his skill and does not intervene. This is Thorndyke at his most Holmesian, as he carefully considers the effects of his actions and decides that – as nobody except the blackmailer was in any way injured – he could afford to let Pottermack go. However, only the fact that the murdered man was a blackmailer and the killer so entirely wronged allows Thorndyke to come to this decision.

Thorndyke's ethical stance, predicated as it is upon a secular Kantian ethics, makes Thorndyke a highly principled character, whose principles must not be sacrificed even if that would make for a more interesting narrative. Contrary to other fictional detectives, he never reveals his hunches, intuitions and deductions until the end. In this he follows Holmes and other detectives who still follow the adventure formula, but Thorndyke is no adventure hero. Neither does he satisfy readers' interest in dashing, romantic or eccentric qualities of fictional detectives. Given Freeman's tendency to indulge in lengthy descriptions of scientific methods, it is perhaps surprising that the stories and novels are not boring. Raymond Chandler writes that Freeman "has no equal in his genre [...] because he accomplishes an even suspense which is quite unexpected. The apparatus of his writing makes for dullness, but he is not dull" (cited in Donaldson 1971: 65-66). Freeman is a skilful creator of suspense and he, wisely perhaps, includes strong narrators, who bring humour and romance into the stories. Thorndyke is perhaps unique among the literary detectives for expressing the somewhat strident confidence and optimism of the Edwardian years, and also the peculiar way in which personal and public duty are often indivisible for Edwardian writers. Thorndyke is a man of science working for the universal betterment of humankind.

This sense of confidence in rationalism and scientific method is now dated in two ways. Firstly, it is based on eugenist teachings and a good dose of anti-semitism, which are unacceptable now. Secondly, this implicit faith in positivist materialism and the stridently optimistic tone of the time were shaken during the First and shattered during the Second World War. Thorndyke did not transcend the ethical mores of his time: he was the end of a line rather than a progenitor of a new stereotype, and, today, he is rather a museum piece.
4. Horace Dorrington: the detective as rogue

Arthur Morrison, a journalist and writer primarily known for his realist depictions of slum life in London's East End (e.g. *Child of the Jago* 1896), also created two detectives: Martin Hewitt, who resembled Holmes closely except in outward appearance, and Horace Dorrington, a shady rogue detective and confidence trickster. Both characters were created in the wake of Sherlock Holmes's spectacular disappearance down the Reichenbach Falls in 1893, which evidently created a need for new detective fiction. In this essay I want to focus on Dorrington, as his rogue characteristics at first seem to be at odds with the detective formula.

Clarke has argued that "the detective/criminal binary becomes blurred [in the Dorrington stories]; and the rule of law is almost completely absent, thus destabilizing the genre's reassuring nature and readers' conception of trust, morality, justice, and the way that society operates" (2010: 8). It seems to me, though, that Dorrington is not so much a misfit in a mostly coherent genre, but that the genre displayed considerable fluidity in the 1890s. At the outset the detective formula – close as it is to that of the literary rogue and the real-life police thief-taker – evidently did not prescribe the ethical outlook of the detective. Dorrington shares characteristics with rogues like Raffles, Grant Allen's Colonel Clay, Guy Boothby's Simon Carne and Clifford Ashdown's Romney Pringle. Nor is Dorrington the only detective who is a crook, although it must be noted that detective-crooks tend to appear in stories which are either parodies or at least mildly ironic. In Grant Allen's "The Great Ruby Robbery: A Detective Story" (1892), the police detective Mr Gregory is the villain, as is Mr Grodman, the retired policeman in Israel Zangwill's *The Big Bow Mystery* (1895). In Guy Boothby's "The Duchess of Wiltshire's Diamonds" (1897), Simon Carne successfully pretends to be the celebrated detective Klimo, who 'solves' the case of the disappearing diamonds without actually returning them to the Duchess. Victorian novels with detective elements nearly always express a distrust of police officers, who tend to be incompetent bunglers, e.g. Frances Trollope's *Hargrave, or the Adventures of a Man of Fashion* (1843). Even narratives written by authors who are impressed with the efficiency of the newly founded detective force, such as Charles Dickens (*Bleak House* 1852-53) or Wilkie Collins (*The Moonstone* 1868; for the relationship of both novels with the Road murder case see Summerscale 2008 and Flanders 2010), express a deep unease about the way in which the detectives, who are regarded as lower-class interlopers, meddle with the private affairs of the middle class with little regard for social conventions. Just a few decades earlier, members of the police force had been thief-takers and had often been just one step removed from criminality themselves. It appears that a spectrum of more or less ethically dubious detectives existed in the 1890s before the literary marketplace decided that it preferred the Holmesian formula.
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The reviews of the *Dorrington Deed-Box*, the collection of the six Dorrington stories that appeared in the *Windsor Magazine* in 1897, bear this out. The anonymous reviewer in *The Bookman* enthuses:

The private inquiry agent is generally a noble hero, according to the modern story-teller. Mr. Morrison, in this exciting tale, shows how formidable a villain he can be with his unusual opportunities. You may positively ensure a lively hour by the perusal of "The Dorrington Deed-Box". (1897: 54)

Not only is the reviewer completely unshocked by Dorrington's amoral behaviour – he or she is positively delighted by Morrison's ingenuity in twisting the emerging genre conventions. The reviewer for *The Graphic* concurs:

Without professing an exhaustive knowledge of all the stories of criminal mystery that have ever appeared, it is pretty safe to say that "The Dorrington Deed-Box" [...] by Mr. Arthur Morrison, will be found very hard to beat indeed – even by Mr. Arthur Morrison. He has found virtually fresh direction for his inventive powers in making his detective the hero of six separate cases, his premier criminal also. (1897: 804, see similar comments by the anonymous reviewer for *Academy* 1897: 127)

The reviewers applaud Morrison for having invented a new variation on what was rapidly coalescing as stereotypical characteristics of a literary detective. By contrast, in the 1920s, when the genre had established its rules, reviewers would mock-scold G.K. Chesterton for not conforming to them (McQuilland 1927: 443).

However, writing about a rogue detective does not necessarily mean endorsing an amoral ethical framework. "The Case of Janissary" (1897) begins with Dorrington doing a straightforward piece of detective work on behalf of the owner of a stable, who hires him because he is afraid that his best horse might be 'nobbled'. Dorrington astutely prevents the shady bookmaker Naylor from incapacitating the horse. The second half of the story deals with Naylor and his attempt to kill the stable owner's nephew because he cannot afford to pay out his winnings. Dorrington interrupts Naylor's attempt at murder and blackmails him into working for him and, if necessary, to kill people on demand. The ethical implications are obvious: Dorrington is honest when it suits him, and it is only by chance that he prevents two murders. His blackmailing another crook into becoming his hired killer is chilling in its implications. But it is quite clear, firstly, that the reader is not to endorse his behaviour and, secondly, that the actual outcome of this story is that Dorrington prevents two crimes.

The story also shows that Dorrington usually plays fair with ordinary people, whereas he tricks people who are crooks themselves. "The Affair of the 'Avalanche Bicycle and Tyre Co. Limited'" uses a similar principle. It is a fascinating story because it deals with a relatively new technology
upright bicycles, also referred to as safety bicycles – and with a particular type of white-collar crime: stock market fraud. The outwardly respectable manager of the “Indestructible” bicycle company, Mr Mallows, is involved in shady business dealings on the side. He and confederates set up the fictitious firm “Avalanche Bicycle and Tyre Co. Limited”, re-label a few bicycles, and begin a marketing campaign that is to culminate in the company’s entry into the stock market. Their plan is to let the company disappear overnight and to escape with the profits. Dorrington, curious if he can make money out of the new craze, uses a minor case as a way into the “Indestructible” company to gain insider information. By chance he realises that Mallows is up to no good, sets up a trap and offers Mallows a deal. Characteristically, Dorrington sees nothing wrong with the scam as such but wants to share in the profits. Mallows resists and nearly kills Dorrington, who promptly revenges himself by exposing Mallows to the newspapers. This story is typical in that it is made quite clear that Mallows’s and Dorrington’s actions are reprehensible. The reader derives entertainment from seeing two crooks fight, and, while Dorrington gets away with some money, it is by no means the large profit he was aiming for. Crime does not pay, and there is no ‘honour among thieves’.

From an ethical point of view the most interesting story is the first, “The Narrative of Mr. James Rigby”, which introduces the reader to Dorrington and provides the frame narrative for all subsequent stories. In a striking breach of the usual convention of either employing a Watson character as first-person narrator or an omniscient third-person narrator, this story is told as a first-person narrative from the point of view of the victim. This is unusual because the reader is not normally induced to have much sympathy with the victim (Cawelti 1977: 91). Here, the reader witnesses how the crook-detective carefully ensnares his victim and almost succeeds in killing him. Rigby escapes to tell the tale, however, and even though Dorrington has long escaped when the police raid his office, Rigby finds his ‘deed box’, which gives him his material for the subsequent narratives.

James Rigby, an impossibly naïve Australian, is emigrating ‘back’ to England. Being “without a friend in the world” (248) after his mother’s death, he is lured into telling his life story to the charming Dorrington, whom he meets on the boat. In fact, Rigby’s unreserved admiration for Dorrington has something of the homoeroticism of Bunny’s descriptions of Raffles:

He was a tall, well-built fellow, rather handsome, perhaps, except for a certain extreme roundness of face and fullness of feature; he had a dark military moustache, and carried himself erect, with a swing as of a cavalryman, and his eyes had, I think, the most penetrating quality I ever knew. His manners were extremely engaging, and he was the only good talker I had ever met. (248)
What is interesting about this description of Dorrington is that it contradicts the central assumption of Victorian criminology following Cesare Lombroso (*L'uomo delinquente* 1878, translated as *Criminal Man* by his daughter Gina Lombroso-Ferrero) and, to an extent, Havelock Ellis (*The Criminal* 1892) – an assumption replicated in popular melodrama and sensation fiction – that criminals are instantly recognisable by their outward appearance and manners. Dorrington's manners and appearance proclaim him to be a gentleman, but he is merely a clever actor, who understands the value of making a good impression.

When they arrive in England, Dorrington induces Rigby to fear for his life and, in an apparently generous gesture, proposes to change identity with him temporarily in order to deal with the danger while Rigby stays in a safe house and waits until the danger has passed. In fact, Dorrington not only pockets Rigby's money, identity papers and the deeds to his property in Australia, but brings him to the Naylors – his hired assassins introduced in "The Case of Janissary" – to be killed. It is here that the first person narrative is employed most strikingly: the Naylors drug him and leave him to drown in the water cistern of the house. Rigby's painful struggles to free himself before the water reaches his head is almost inappropriately harrowing for the formula. The suffering of the innocent narrator, Dorrington's cold-hearted calculation and the effect created by the narrative point of view make it abundantly clear that Dorrington is not to be trusted. For all his undoubted intelligence, wit and charm, which is demonstrated again and again in the stories, this first story alerts the reader early on in the series that Dorrington's amoral behaviour is not endorsed.

Even though Dorrington is allowed to escape justice, the stories make it clear that his actions are morally reprehensible and that the reader is to disapprove of him, however much she is likely to enjoy reading about his exploits. Compared to the more light-hearted Simon Carne stories, for instance, the Dorrington tales support the existing moral code of the Holmesian formula and the character only appears to subvert it. And the fact that Dorrington only appears in one collection, whereas several collections featuring the more conventional Martin Hewitt exist, points to the fact that Dorrington, for all his charm, may not have charmed his audience enough.

5. Conclusion

I have argued that pre-golden age detective stories are capable of sustaining meaningful ethical engagement and that they do that by creating stereotypical detective characters and situations with specific ethical outlooks, which respond to widely available ethical schemata which author and audience share or at least know. Holmes judges the means largely by the ends they serve, Thorndyke follows apriori ethical rules, which regu-
late his behaviour, and Dorrington is an amoral character who offends common ethical conceptions. Rather than by means of identification, ethical viewpoints and actions are judged by the way they activate readers’ existing moral schemata, and it is likely that a reader will continue to buy magazines that contain stories which confirm his schemata. Obviously the primary function of detective stories is to provide enjoyable escapism. However, given that readers enjoy recognition of their ethical schemata in popular stories, that this enjoyment shapes their purchasing decisions and, consequently, editorial decisions, the scholar can learn how public attitudes influence the representation of ethics in popular genres and the development of the genre.

Sherlock Holmes was not the first detective, but he became the stereotype that other writers responded to from the 1890s onwards. He is a kind of Janus-figure, as he faces forward as a progressive man of science and backward as a romantic knightly hero. His Bohemian eccentricity is almost a camouflage which has little bearing on his ethical stance, and Conan Doyle was able to progressively rid his hero of the more conspicuous eccentricities, e.g. his drug habit, as time went on. In this way, he embodies the complicated 1890s, both a time of revolt against staid Victorian culture and a millenarian fear of a seemingly inescapable cultural decline. In a way, Holmes himself, his presence in print, on stage and later in film, and the many rewritings and parodies he inspired nationally and internationally, e.g. Maximilian Böttcher’s *Der Detektiv* (1899) or John Kendrick Bangs’s *R. Holmes & Co.: Being the Remarkable Adventures of Raffles Holmes, Esq., Detective and Amateur Cracksman by Birth* (1906) can be said to have impressed themselves upon literary culture more broadly. He inspired a change in the structure of feeling of popular literature.

Arthur Morrison created Martin Hewitt and Horace Dorrington, the good and the bad detective, virtually at the same time. His other writing shows that he was not afraid to describe the darker side of English society, but I would argue that Dorrington is not a realistic creation responding to real social problems. Instead, I see Dorrington as a literary experiment: would a detective, who is also a thorough crook in the manner of existing rogue literature, be accepted by a wider readership? It appears that the genre was flexible enough to accommodate Dorrington, as reviewers were almost unanimous in their delight at the way in which the formula had been varied. Comparing the many Martin Hewitt stories to the six existing Dorrington stories, however, it seems that magazine editors and readership might not have agreed. While the word ‘evil’ never appears in the stories, Dorrington comes uncomfortably close to being evil as he has no sense of remorse. Many years later, Ronald Knox put “The detective himself must not commit the crime” as his seventh commandment of detective fiction (see Ronald Knox Society of North America 2005), which is not only a question of ‘fair play’ but also rules out the
possibility that the detective is evil. By the time of golden age detective fiction, a detective like Dorrington no longer fitted in with acceptable structures for writing detective fiction. Indeed, even though some contemporary detectives, such as Ian Rankin's John Rebus, flirt with crossing the invisible line to 'the dark side', they always end up coming back to the right side of the law. The time for thorough-going rogues who were also detectives had gone before the 19th century was out.

Dr Thorndyke represents an evolutionary dead end in terms of genre development, as the particular nature of the a priori ethical principles on which his actions are based did not survive long beyond the First World War, even though, Freeman, of course, continued to write in the same vein until much later. Eschewing consequentialism and basing his decisions purely on a rational materialism, Thorndyke embodies a faith in the ability to derive complete explanations from material facts, which was shattered during and after the War years. Even in Agatha Christie's world material clues can lead astray and the truth is only known by careful observation of human relationships, particularly with regard to interlopers whose history is not known. Similarly, detectives such as Dorothy L. Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey or Margery Allingham's Albert Campion derive their ethical stance from (Christian) a priori principles, but they no longer believe that solutions to crimes can be found by following material clues alone, much like the most eccentric of all detectives, G.K. Chesterton's Father Brown. More literary crime fiction like Graham Greene's *The Ministry of Fear* (1943) does away with material and other clues completely, as the central character stumbles through the narrative unable to make sense of signs and clues, which have lost all fixed meaning, something which also goes for hard-boiled detective fiction like Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe. Indeed, Philip Marlowe is closer to Sherlock Holmes than to Dr Thorndyke in many ways, as his sense of ethics in an unethical world is solely based upon an inner moral code and not on a priori principles.

Pre-golden-age fiction can be shown to be infused with ethical concerns, which provide the raison d'être for the way characters act and the logic in which the story progresses from transgression, to detection and thence to solution and restoration of order. An ethical reading of these stories is meaningful not *despite* but *because* of the popularity of the genre. By carefully analysing popular, often unchallenging, perhaps not terribly distinguished texts and by correlating them with other popular writing, today's scholar can begin to establish a true sense of the cultural life of the many rather than that of the privileged few.
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