

Mystery & Detective Stories

Tropes, Terms, and Strategies

Great Mouse Detective: Setting, Atmosphere

- Fog, gaslight, Victorian settings
- Costumes: deerstalker, bowler hats, etc
- Disguises
- Violin, Magnifying glass

Great Mouse Detective: Basil

- Lives in 221 B Baker St
- Expert on miniscule details
- Lays out his deductions rationally
- Nemesis is a villainous professor, his intellectual equal
- Aristocratic, perhaps above the others (certainly intellectually)
- Not good with women or children
- Empire depends on his abilities

Great Mouse Detective: Dawson

- Retired military, medical doctor
- Narrates the story; we see Basil through his eyes
- Flawed (low alcohol tolerance, not as smart as Basil)
- Perhaps slightly lower in class
- Old, bumbling, kind, funny

Great Mouse Detective: Other Details, Practices

- Mrs Judson (Mrs Hudson)
- “Elementary, my dear Dawson”
- Heightened sense of archetypes

What is a **TROPE**?

- In strict literary criticism, it's a figure of speech (e.g. a metaphor, a simile, a synecdoche, etc.)
- In narrative theory it's a **convention**, a shorthand, a recurrent theme or motif, a linguistic practice, something that today leads to memes: the star-crossed lovers, good cop/bad cop, the hooker with a heart of gold, "I'm a doctor, not a....", etc.

In narrative, we have

- Early or '**ur**' **examples**
- The **trope maker**—the first identifiable, intentional example
- The **trope codifier**—the example to which all later uses can be traced back in some way

So for mystery stories...

- We have examples of mysteries going as far back as the Oedipus story
- There are the 'Newgate Calendars' of the late 18th century
- There are newspaper accounts of crimes...
 - These are the '**Ur**' **examples** of mystery/detective fiction

Then we get to the 1840s...

- And Poe creates C. Auguste Dupín. **Poe is the *Trope Maker*** for detective fiction.
 - Modeled on actual French Prefect of Police
 - Uses some of the methods of England's new Civil Police (1829) and Detective Bureau
 - Emphasizes ***ratiocination***—the systematic application of rational thought to solving a problem or answering a question
 - Possesses cultural prejudices against the police and “authorized” detectives

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The Murders in the Rue Transnonain

By Edgar A. Poe.

It is not improbable that a few farther steps in phrenological science will lead to a belief in the existence, if not to the actual discovery and location of an organ of analysis. Of this power (which may be described, although not defined, as the capacity for resolving thought into its elements) be not, in fact, an essential portion of what late philosophers term ideality; then there are indeed many good reasons for supposing it a primitive faculty. That "it may be a constituent of ideality is here suggested in opposition to the vulgar dictum (founded upon the assumptions of grave authority), however, that the calculating and discriminating powers (causality and comparison) are at variance with the imaginative; - that the three, in short, can hardly coexist. But, although thus opposed to received opinion, the idea will not appear ill-founded when we observe that the processes of invention or creation are strictly akin with the processes of resolution - the former being nearly, if not absolutely, the latter conversed.

It cannot be doubted that the mental faculties discussed, as the analytical are, in themselves, but little susceptible of analysis. We appreciate them only in their effects. We know of them, among other things, that they are always to their possessor, when most richly possessed, a source of the liveliest enjoyment. As the strong man exerts in his physical ability, delighting in such exercises as call his muscles into action, so glories the analyst in that mental activity which dismantles. He derives pleasure from even the most trivial occupations bringing his talent into play. He is fond of enigmas, of anagrams, of hieroglyphics - exhibiting in his solutions of each and all a degree of acumen which appears to the ordinary apprehension preternatural. His results, brought about by the very cool and evenness of method, have, in truth, the whole air of intuition.

The faculty in question is possibly much invigorated by mathematical study, and especially by that highest branch of it which, unjustly, and merely on account of its retrograde operations, has been called, as if our excellence, analysis. Yet to calculate is not in itself to analyse. At chess-play, for example, does the one without effort at the other. It follows that the game of chess, in its effects upon mental character, is greatly misunderstood. I am not now writing a treatise, but simply prefacing a somewhat peculiar narrative by observations very much at random - I will, therefore, take occasion to assert that the higher powers of the reflective intellect are more decidedly and more happily taxed by the unostentatious game of draughts than by all the elaborate frivolity of chess. In this latter, where the pieces have different and bizarre motions, various and variable values, that which is only complex is mistaken (a not uncommon error) for that which is profound. The attention is here called powerfully into play. If it flag for an instant, an oversight is committed resulting in injury or defeat. The possible moves being not only manifold but involute, the chances of such oversights are multiplied; and in nine cases out of ten it is the more concentrative rather than the more acute player who conquers. In draughts, on the contrary, where the moves are unique and have but little variation, the probabilities of inadvertence are diminished, and the mere attention being left comparatively unemployed, what advantages are obtained by either party are obtained by superior acumen. To be less abstract, let us suppose a game of draughts where the pieces are reduced to four kings, and where, of worse, no oversight is to be expected. It is obvious that here the victory can be decided (the players being at all equal) only by some recherche movement, the result of some strong exertion of the intellect. Deprived of ordinary resources the analyst throws himself into the spirit of his opponent, identifies himself therewith, and not infrequently sees thus, at a glance, the sole methods (sometimes indeed absurdly simple ones) by which he may reduce into miscalculation or hurry into error.

What has long been noted for its influence upon what are termed the calculating powers; and men of the highest order of intellect have been known to take an apparently unaccountable delight in it, while eschewing chess as frivolous. Beyond doubt there is nothing of a similar nature so greatly taxing the faculty of analysis. The best chess-players in Christendom may be little more than the best players of chess - but proficiency in what implies capacity for success in all those more important undertakings where mind struggles with mind. When I say proficiency, I mean that perfection in the game which includes a comprehension of all the forces (whatever be their character) from which legitimate advantage may be derived. These are not only manifold but multiform, and lie frequently among recesses of

Mrs.

Amadeo Prince & Co
36, Rue Lafayette

Paris

PROVISIONAL.



Poe's Tropes: Storytelling Strategies

- Narrator takes subject part of the way and then Dupin explains
- Audience realizes things when friend does—not geniuses
- Gives the witnesses' accounts, including bits about the languages
- Red herrings
- Chekov's gun
- Occam's razor
- Audience must have known languages, classics, untranslated

Poe's Tropes: The Detective

- Not cruel to police or to his friend but sees himself as smarter than they are
- Finds clues nobody else finds (and conceals them)
- Notices things about shutters, hair no one else notices (we don't participate in that)
- Story told through dialogue between Dupin and friend, not big passages of description
- Nonchalance about the solution—no hurry
- Imagination and “thinking outside the box” in his solutions

Poe's Tropes: The Companion

- Written in such a way that he has the opportunity to see the clues, step by step
- Got many different witnesses & perspectives
- Not as smart as the detective
- Not as distrusting of the police

Poe's Tropes: Other Practices, Details

- Takes reward from the cop
- Ruffling the feathers of the police
- Information & satisfaction about solving the case
- Locked Room
- Procedural feel
- Adversary who is smart and imaginative
- Scientific passages (about analysis, about mathematics, etc.)

Murders in the Rue Morgue



- Art
- Recreation
- Society
- Technology
- Science
- Economy

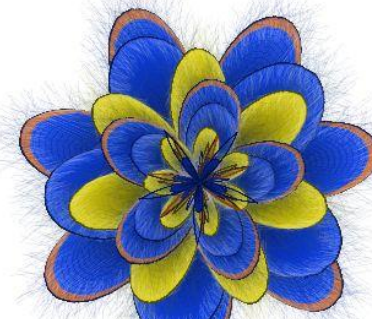
Source code: [sketch_flower0](#)

Built with [Processing](#)

Rules for interpretation:

1. The same text will always generate the same flower.
2. More text will generate more layers of petals.
3. The primary topic will be shown using the associated colour on the outermost two layers of petals.
4. If there is a secondary topic it will be shown on the third layer of petals. This pattern repeats, two layers using the primary, then one with the secondary.
5. If there exists a tertiary topic its' colour is used to accent the edges of some of the primary coloured petals.
6. The number of little 'hairs' on the flower is indicative of the number of personal pronouns used in the text.
7. Rounder petal shapes are suggestive of emotionally positive terms (love, yes, peace) , and more elongated terms indicate negative terms (death, murder, idiot).

The Purloined Letter



- Art
- Recreation
- Society
- Technology
- Science
- Economy

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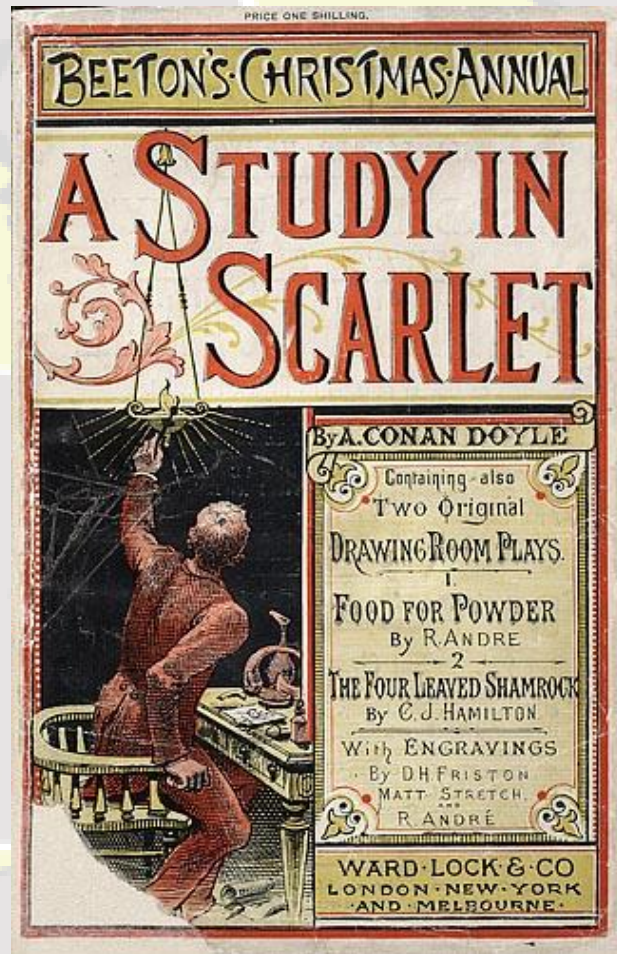
- <http://tarakaye.wordpress.com/2011/12/15/methodology/>

After Poe, we get

- Many more Victorian imitations (British, American, continental)
- Spin-offs in Sensational Fiction (Wilkie Collins, *East Lynne*)
- Serialized novels in popular magazines
- Glamorized criminals (*Oliver Twist...*)

And then in 1887, we get the

TROPE CODIFIER



- Sir Arthur Conan Doyle invents Sherlock Holmes and Captain John H. Watson, M.D.
- Immediate success, heavily imitated, huge audience reaction

What are some of the tropes Doyle establishes?

- The Great Detective
- The Watson (the domestic commentator)
- The Gaslight Setting
- The Evil Counterpart
 - The slightly less-competent Evil Henchman/men
- The Science of Deduction (clues, reference books, scientific method)
- The 'Sherlock Scan':
<http://movies.netflix.com/WiPlayer?movieid=70174779&trkid=7882979> @ 24 minutes

For Wednesday

- Read the four stories:
<http://faculty.winthrop.edu/kosterj/engl200/Sheerlock/CalendarM13.html>
- Concentrate on identifying tropes (both those we've named and new ones)
- Concentrate on plot, structure, & description: what are Doyle's narrative strategies? Mark passages to share in class.