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
It is not improbable that a certain step in the physiological science will lead to a belief in the existence of the natural direction and duration of an organ of sensation. If not the natural direction and duration of an organ of sensation, it may be detected, and, as far as it is possible to detect such things, it may be that the natural direction and duration of an organ of sensation are habituated only to the sensations of nature, and to no other sensations. A certain step in the physiological science will lead to a belief in the existence of the natural direction and duration of an organ of sensation.
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

The Purloined Letter

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).

Source code: sketch_flower0
Built with Processing

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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/Sherlock/CalendarM13.html](http://faculty.winthrop.edu/kosterj/engl200/Sherlock/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.