



## **Criminal Bodies in Popular Victorian and Modernist Detective Fiction**

**Kevin Hart**

### **Abstract**

This paper will examine the representation of the criminal body in detective fiction from the popular Victorian story magazine *The Strand* in its relationship to modernist experimental fiction which draws on the detective genre. Offering a broad survey of the Sherlock Holmes and other detective stories published in the first fourteen years of *The Strand* (1891-1904), the paper will argue that the period's theories of criminal anthropology and hereditary criminality are consistently called into question in the popular magazine, suggesting that late-Victorian detective fiction was ambivalent toward theories of biologically determined criminality and was alive to problems of racial and class prejudice, corruption, and misidentification in criminal detection. Moving from the popular press to the canon, the paper will then make a claim for reading literary texts like G. K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday: A Nightmare* and Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent: A Simple Tale* alongside the classic detective fiction of the popular press. To understand these novels in their engagements with classic detective fiction is to reconceptualize the notion of a neat divide between the period's genres of fiction and to reach for a broader frame of literary responses to early criminology.

### **Keywords**

criminal biology; detective fiction; *The Strand*; Conrad; Chesterton

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## Criminal Bodies in Popular Victorian and Modernist Detective Fiction

Kevin Hart

“There are some trees, Watson, which grow to a certain height and then suddenly develop some unsightly eccentricity. You will see it often in humans. I have a theory that the individual represents in his development the whole procession of his ancestors, and that such a sudden turn to good or evil stands for some strong influence which came into the line of his pedigree. The person becomes, as it were, the epitome of the history of his own family.”

“It is surely rather fanciful.”

“Well, I don’t insist upon it.”

Doyle, “The Adventure of the Empty House” (1903: 363)

### Introduction

During the late-Victorian period, theories of criminal determinism drew on discourses concerning the biological identification of convicts in order to argue that criminal tendencies are discernible in biological features. Measuring the anatomy of convicts, physicians connected bodily to criminal types and established taxonomical systems by which to diagnose criminal inclinations in, for example, the width of the brow or the shape of the nose. Of interest is the reaction of the period’s detective fiction. One branch of criticism suggests that the classic detective story reinforces notions that physical characteristics can indicate predispositions to crime.<sup>1</sup> These readers observe the emphasis on physical malformation and abnormality among

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<sup>1</sup> Franco Moretti says that the criminal in a detective story must by definition betray some abnormality (1983: 135). Heather Worthington observes that in late-Victorian detective fiction “unpleasant or evil characters are often ugly or deformed” (2011:73). Others analyse Conan Doyle’s well-known stories to make similar claims. Rosemary Jann (1995) sees in Holmes a hero of positivist empiricism, a champion of Victorianism’s faith in progress and in science’s ability to classify criminals. Ronald R. Thomas (1994) asserts that the legible bodies of Holmes’ adversaries bear out Francis Galton’s and Havelock Ellis’ contentions (discussed below) that criminal tendencies can be viewed on the body. In his later work, however, Thomas revises and expands on this position. In an argument more in line with my own,

the genre's villains in order to claim that the precedence of such physical markings reinforces the idea that biology determines criminal behaviour. By contrast, other criticism suggests that classic detective fiction was not complicit with but critical of determinist criminology.<sup>2</sup> In these opposing readers' views, the popular genre challenges theories which argue that criminal tendencies are acquired at birth and visible on the body.

The question is important for our understanding of late-Victorianism, its popular fiction, and its relationship to the biological and social sciences. If the classic genre supports theories of born criminality, then it might also serve to reassure its readers and pacify fears of social disorder. After all, to assert that criminal tendencies are visible on the body is arguably to assuage conservative readers' fears with the comforting thought that social surveillance can detect and eradicate crime. Michael Holquist argues precisely this point: that the late-Victorian detective story is supposed to reassure its readers that criminals can be detected and that "reason can conquer chaos" (1983: 149). Further, to assert that criminal behaviour is congenital is to imply that society is not responsible for crime in the first place, but only for the correction of criminal acts once they occur. Finally, if detective fiction were to support theories of criminal biology, it would be complicit with the xenophobia, ableism, classism, and racism that undergirded many of the period's criminological discourses. Thus, to assert that classic detective fiction affirms theories of criminal biology is to suggest, as criticism often has, that the popular literary form is designed to entertain, to reaffirm, and not to challenge the status quo, unlike the later experimentation of high modernist fiction which subverts both popular fiction and social conservatism.

Taking a revisionist approach to this line of criticism, this article follows the lead of scholars like Alice Von Rothkirk (2014) and argues for a broader understanding of the classic genre.<sup>3</sup> Often, readers who identify classic detective fiction with criminal determinism single out just one or two stories to support the claim that the genre reinforces determinist criminology. However, a wider reading of once popular but now lesser-known detective stories reveals a genre of nuance and play, a popular literary form which does not support, or even eschew, but which examines the social and intellectual problems of criminal determinism and ultimately ridicules and disputes the theory. In order to argue this point, I first provide context by reviewing the claims of Victorian and Edwardian theorists of criminal determinism. I then turn to *The Strand Magazine* for a broad reading of its detective stories and the ways in which they present challenges to theories of criminal biology. The literary output of a single magazine is not intended, here, to represent the entire genre of popular Victorian detective fiction, but rather to work toward a study of a relatively broad range of detective stories in the magazine that popularized Sherlock Holmes and would become a key publication in the early detective genre's bids to enter the literary canon. The closing analysis reads G. K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908) and Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907) for their own parodies

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Thomas comes to claim that the genre is ambivalent insofar as it sometimes invokes the authority of the period's criminal sciences, and sometimes challenges it (1999: 6).

<sup>2</sup> For example, see Christopher Pittard's *Purity and Contamination in Late Victorian Detective Fiction* (2011) and Clare Clarke's *Crime Files: Late Victorian Crime Fiction in the Shadows of Sherlock* (2014). Clarke identifies late-Victorian "stories where detectives are criminals and murderers, where criminals are heroes, or where crimes go unsolved," exposing the "often wholly overlooked formal and moral diversity of late-Victorian crime writing" (2).

<sup>3</sup> Like me, Von Rothkirk samples a great number (140) of classic detective stories and finds a marked absence of abnormal physiognomy in criminal characters. Rothkirk reasonably concludes that authors did not want to spoil the mystery by betraying the criminal too soon. But this does not account for the numbers of stories that actively contradict biological determinants of crime – stories portraying criminals who are intelligent, beautiful, dignified and, indeed, moral.

of determinist theories of crime. In this manner, I argue that the classic detective story not only questions criminal determinism but also anticipates later, similar subversions of the theory by novels in the literary canon.

## Victorian and Edwardian Theories of Criminal Determinism

Like Conrad and Chesterton, the contributors to *The Strand* would certainly have been acquainted with the theories of criminal determinism popularized by the physician and founder of the Italian School of Criminal Positivism, Cesare Lombroso. Lombroso's categories of criminal types are infamously prejudiced in their employment of disability, racial, and class stereotypes: thieves have "small wandering eyes" and "squashed noses;" rapists have "jug ears" and "swollen lips and eyelids;" habitual murderers have "hawklike" noses, thin lips, and large canines, while arsonists have a certain "softness of skin" ([1876] 2006: 51). However, these varieties of criminal do share a family resemblance, as "nearly all criminals have jug ears, thick hair, thin beards, pronounced sinuses, protruding chins, and broad cheekbones" (52), and they also exhibit abnormalities in the brain and skull, signifying below average intelligence (49).

Although Lombroso is perhaps the most well-known nineteenth-century theorist of biological determinism as a cause of crime, others were forwarding similar arguments in Britain at the same time, as Lombroso was well aware.<sup>4</sup> Henry Mayhew and John Binny, for example, cite the opinion that convicts possess an innate "disposition" toward criminal behaviour, compelling the authors to call for a shift in focus from the criminal act to the criminal himself, and to the causes, in his personality, of criminal behaviour ([1862] 1968: 84-8). In an essay published in *The Journal of Mental Science* Bruce Thomson, surgeon at the General Prison at Perth, announces that criminals are perceptibly "puny, sickly, scrofulous, often deformed, with shabby heads unnaturally developed" (1870b: 328-9). In "The Hereditary Nature of Crime," also published in *The Journal of Mental Science*, Thomson includes other "abnormal states – such as spinal deformities, stammering, imperfect organs of speech, club foot, cleft-palate, hare-lip, deafness, congenital blindness, paralysis, epilepsy, scrofula, &c." (1870a: 490). The physician Havelock Ellis' *The Criminal* agrees, though less strongly. For Ellis, the criminal is "by no means an idiot" and anatomical irregularities by no means uniform (1890: 223-9); however, Ellis concurs with Thomson that criminals tend to exhibit more "anatomical abnormalities" than the law-abiding (208); and he offers his own list of abnormalities, from protruding jaws (63-4) and "prominent ears" (66) to faces scored with wrinkles (72) and thick, woolly hair (73). William Douglas Morrison, prison chaplain at Wandsworth, would get at the pith of these claims by concluding that criminal behaviour springs from the criminal's "physical or mental constitution. It is accordingly not immediately social; it is anthropological" (1899: 15). This notion that criminal dispositions are biologically determined and observable in the body can also be found in the period's discourses of mental and social development. In an 1894 essay, the psychiatrist T. S. Clouston claims that criminality is caused by low cerebral development which is perceptible in the eye and the face, and adds that "there can be no doubt" of criminals' physical inferiority (219-20).

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<sup>4</sup> In *Criminal Man*, Lombroso cites Bruce Thomson and Henry Maudsley (discussed below ([1876] 2006: 51, 108)). In *Crime: Its Causes and Remedies*, he praises England's recognition that some criminals are incurable, saying that "while the less advanced peoples are lingering over the utopias of the old jurists and, believing that reform is possible for all criminals, are taking no measures against the continually rising tide of crime, the English, more provident, have recognized that although they have been able by their efforts to eliminate the accidental criminal almost entirely, the born criminal still persists. They are the only nation to admit the existence of criminals who resist all cure, the 'professional criminals,' as they call them, and the 'criminal classes'" (Lombroso [1899] 1968: 432).

Many British physicians did seek to distance themselves from criminal anthropology, but this was often not because they recognized a flaw in methodology (i.e., the theory's implicit biases concerning race, class, and ability), but rather because they were awaiting clinical evidence.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the pull of the theory was strong enough to influence even its avowed detractors. The prison physician Charles Goring, for example, cites biometric data to prove that "there is no such thing as an anthropological criminal type" (1913: 370). However, he goes on to contradict his claim, conceding that the English convict has a "defective physique" and "defective mental capacity" (370).<sup>6</sup> Less obviously, Henry Maudsley, in an essay which purports to argue against the theory that biological characteristics determine criminality, nevertheless suggests that what he calls "natural or essential" criminality might be passed from parent to child, and also proposes a scientific examination of criminals' "bodily characters" (1888: 163-5).

If arguments for criminal biology are cropping up in arguments against it, this is in part because many theorists who might refute the idea of anthropological criminality (that physical characteristics indicate criminal dispositions) nevertheless endorse theories of hereditary criminality, generally neglecting how these two subsets of biological determinism are linked through their emphasis on congenital causes of crime. For Maudsley, the "natural or essential" criminal is the product of heredity. Drawing on theories of degeneration which propose that criminals are lower on the scale of evolution and pass on inferior traits to their children, Maudsley maintains that the existence of a criminal indicates an immoral strain in the parents, asserting that "the fathers have sown guile, and the children have reaped crime" (166). Such arguments echo Bruce Thomson, who unequivocally asserts that "in by far the greatest proportion of offenses *Crime is Hereditary*" (1870a: 488, emphasis in original). An early eugenicist, Thomson argues that criminals should be barred from having children (1870b: 331), anticipating Francis Galton's agenda of selective breeding.<sup>7</sup>

It is easy to see how concepts of the anthropological and hereditary criminal could be applied to police work. If criminality is inherited, then criminals are detectable by pedigree. If criminals bear physical abnormalities, they are detectable on sight. Many of the authors above foreground the importance of their findings for criminal detection. Morrison asserts that a detective is able to pick out a criminal by look alone (1899: 189). Thomson says that it is "singular...how the detective knows" an offender on sight (1870b: 328). Clouston likens the physician to the detective, saying that "what were 'symptoms of disease' to me would certainly have been to the policeman and the magistrate evident proofs of 'criminality'" (1894: 223).

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<sup>5</sup> As David Garland (1988) and Neil Davie (2010) have argued, British physicians required empirical evidence of the anthropological criminal; in this sense, they were more sceptical than many criminologists on the Continent.

<sup>6</sup> For analysis of Goring's unintentional defence of criminal anthropology, see Nicole Rafter (2008). As Rafter aptly puts it, this is one of those rare books that actually "says the opposite of what the author claims to have said" (126).

<sup>7</sup> Like Thomson, Galton asserts (in *Inquiries Into Human Faculty and its Development*) that a "criminal nature tends to be inherited" ([1883] 1907: 43). Therefore, he argues, society ought to forbid known criminals from reproducing. In "Eugenics: Its Definition, Scope, and Aims," Galton goes on to say that such a society will free itself from "criminals" and "others whom it rates as undesirable" (1904: 2). By the same logic, Galton's *English Men of Science* argues that a community should encourage the coupling of its most desirable members so as to maximize those members' good qualities in generations to come (1874: 18, 69).

## Detecting Criminals in *The Strand Magazine*

But how does detective fiction view all of this? Some scholars think the esteem is mutual: criminal anthropologists have great faith in detection, and detection's popular representative, the detective story, supports theories of criminal anthropology. In order to interrogate this line of criticism, I will turn to *The Strand Magazine*. As the platform for and beneficiary of Sherlock Holmes' fame, *The Strand* was both immensely popular and a mainstay of the classic detective genre. The magazine achieved a circulation of nearly 400,000 by the mid-1890s, in part because its founder George Newnes consciously targeted a middle-class readership (Jackson, 2001: 94-5).<sup>8</sup> Newnes' goal was to turn out fiction for light entertainment (Pound, 1966: 25, 29). As Mercedes Sheldon (2021) has recently shown, although *The Strand* was marketed to a conservative readership, its authors nevertheless slipped in progressive and challenging material. Nevertheless, Newnes' stated conservatism has no doubt helped to shape the reception of the magazine in scholarship which claims that the content of the magazine was politically unchallenging. For example, Kate Jackson affirms that *The Strand* "was comforting to a middle-class audience who, beset by anxiety, change and uncertainty, sought reassurance in its pages," suggesting that it would be in keeping with the magazine's agenda of 'comfort-reading' for *The Strand* to reinforce positivist claims that science could identify and contain criminal types (92).

Indeed, some of *The Strand*'s detective stories do support theories of criminal anthropology. In L. T. Meade and Clifford Halifax's "The Red Bracelet" (1895), a blind girl being seduced by a villain breaks his hold on her when she regains her sight, since simply to see him is to know he is wicked. In Doyle's "The Adventure of the Norwood Builder" the hereditary criminal and the anthropological criminal are conflated, as the villain "was more like a malignant and cunning ape than a human being," and he was that way "ever since he was a young man," suggesting he is a born criminal (1903: 489). Similarly, in "The Adventure of the Six Napoleons" the criminal is a "sharp-featured simian man with thick eyebrows, and a very peculiar projection of the lower part of the face like the muzzle of a baboon," signalling both physical and moral degeneracy (1904: 487). While these stories seem to uphold the theories of the period, a larger sample shows a different pattern.

The magazine published scores of detective stories in its first fourteen years (1891-1904), and most of these do not support criminal anthropology.<sup>9</sup> Instead, they represent an index of doubts about the new science, a catalogue of the many ways it might possibly, or will probably, introduce error to the work of detection. In the epigraph above, Watson's lack of confidence in biological determinism as a source of crime reflects the general attitude of *The Strand*'s detective stories. Holmes' half-hearted suggestion that people can be born criminals is deflated with a single word, "fanciful," and Holmes, uncommitted to the theory, swiftly retracts it. Far from receiving theories of born criminality with credulity and faith, *The Strand* consistently expresses misgivings about them, beginning with the magazine's hesitation to credit criminal deviancy's supposed visibility on the body.

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<sup>8</sup> Remarking on the popularity of the magazine, Conan Doyle joked that "foreigners used to recognize the English by their check suits. I think they will soon learn to do it by their *Strand Magazines*. Everybody on the Channel boat, except the man at the wheel, was clutching one" (quoted in Reginald Pound 1966: 63).

<sup>9</sup> This period (1891-1904) spans the magazine's first year of publication to the year that concluded *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* series. I call a story a detective story if it, first, presents a mystery to be solved, second, alludes to a possible crime or misdoing, and third, focalizes on the viewpoint of the (often amateur) detective or detective's assistant. For a thorough breakdown of the components of the classic detective story, see John G. Cawelti's *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* (1976).

*The Strand*'s stories are reluctant to believe that the body betrays criminal tendencies. The stories exhibit a high incidence of criminals who are able-bodied, physically attractive and mentally astute. According to the tenets of positivist criminology, such individuals should be less likely to commit crimes; yet *The Strand* features 'normal,' healthy, intellectually competent or even superior criminals in half of its stories, while anthropological criminals appear in only a small selection of *The Strand*'s first fourteen years of detective fiction. The legible body, these stories tell us, might not be so legible after all. Confidence in causal relationships between physical abnormality and crime is stretched past the point of breaking in the popular magazine. In Doyle's "Adventure of the Crooked Man" (1893), for example, the deformed hunchback, a suspect of murder, turns out to be the victim of the respected Colonel. Another hunchbacked suspect, this time from Doyle's "Story of the Lost Special" (1898), again turns out to be the victim, in this case, fatally. To confuse not a random innocent but the actual victim for the criminal makes the point that much more poignant: "spinal deformity," one of the born criminal's tells according to Thomson, is an invalid measure of the criminal's supposed weak will and morals, and so, by extension, is his anatomy in general.

Other stories push this inability to tell the victim from the criminal further still, demonstrating doubts that criminals are physically identifiable. In Meade and Robert Eustace's "The Bloodhound" (1898), the criminal mastermind Madame Koluchy uses a doppelganger to fake her own death, baffling detectives because the criminal and the victim look so alike. In Doyle's "Story of the Black Doctor" (1898) the dead villain resembles his living brother so well that he can pass as his double. In both stories, the detectives are fooled by the body swap and only discover the truth through the voluntary confession of the survivor. Such stories present uncertainties about criminal anthropology. Meade's is especially cynical. If a detective cannot even distinguish a murderer from her victim, how can he know a criminal on sight? Doyle's poses a similar problem: if one man is lawful and another is not, why isn't the difference visible? Because they are brothers? But that just shifts the challenge from anthropological to hereditary criminality.

In fact, many of *The Strand*'s stories distrust claims that criminality follows family lines. The commonest disparity settles on the trope of an upstanding father and an unaccountably ignoble son. In "Why He Failed" (1891) an honest detective discovers that the criminal he is tracking is his own son. In Joyce Muddock's "The Jewelled Skull" (1892) the renowned colonel's son is an opium-smoking thief. Doyle's "Story of the Latin Tutor" (1899) features a retiring schoolteacher whose son is a murderous brute. Meade's "Eyes of Terror" (1903) and, with Robert Eustace, "A Visible Sound" (1899), feature similarly wayward children. These stories suggest that criminal inclination is not hereditary, as even a community's most celebrated and incorruptible members can sire corrupt scions.

*The Strand*'s contributors also resist the theory that criminals beget criminals. Meade and Eustace's "The Blood-Red Cross" (1902) centres on an orphan, Antonia, whose father murdered her mother. The story's villain, Madame Sara, writes the girl's family history on her neck in nitrate. The words will remain invisible until exposed to direct sunlight and then the chemical will burn the skin, indelibly marking the girl with a murderous heritage. The detective's ability to neutralize the nitrate and wipe out the bodily inscription, maintaining Antonia's innocence, suggests she was innocent to begin with: the crimes of her father have not been passed on to her, and neither has a criminal disposition. The story might stand as a proclamation to the period's criminal theorists that the threat of physical marking is not natural, but artificial, that what we read on the body is what we ourselves write there, and that this has no correlation to the character of the individual who is branded.

Other *Strand* stories push beyond mere resistance against biological determinism to question whether the laws that define criminality are right in the first place. Doyle's "The Boscombe Valley Mystery" (1891) presents a potentially justifiable murder of a blackmailer,

and Holmes decides not to arrest the man. In Robert Barr's "Transformation" (1896) the victim of a dynamiter becomes an amateur detective, hunts down his assailants, and mercilessly murders them. In both stories, there is no question of legal guilt: Holmes' man confesses to murdering his blackmailer, and in Barr's story we witness the murder. So the men are legally guilty, but (the stories explicitly ask), are they morally wrong? The answer is more ambivalent than might be imagined by much present-day criticism which asserts that detective fiction upholds the "belief that the mind, given enough time, can understand everything. There are no mysteries, there is only incorrect reasoning" (Holquist, 1893: 157). Questioning the moral legitimacy of the law as well as the very idea that law can be established according to a universally applicable system of reason, these stories imply that even a crime as severe as cold-blooded murder might, under the right conditions, be justified, and that right and wrong reasoning can be difficult indeed to distinguish between. *The Strand's* first fourteen years of detective fiction feature many such morally upright criminals, characters who become criminals out of an understandable necessity, who become criminals unwittingly, or who wittingly and justifiably defy the law.

Such justification also undermines forensic science's new innovations. New technologies of detection and surveillance were being tested during the turn of the century: Galton was developing composite photography of criminal types during this period, and fingerprinting and the Bertillon system were contending for the primary position as the method for identifying recidivists.<sup>10</sup> But what good is it to detect a criminal if we are not certain the crime merits correction? In Arthur Morrison's "Case of Mr. Foggatt" (1894) the detective Martin Hewitt uses Bertillon's system to identify a murderer. However, judging the murderer justified in his act, Hewitt decides not to pursue the case. The ability to identify a criminal is useless here; what is needed is the insight to tell what should and should not be a crime. Nor are these new systems of detection infallible in these stories: in Doyle's "Adventurer of the Norwood Builder" fingerprinting is proven manipulable by criminals when a murderer plants fingerprints to frame a young man and get him executed.

Moreover, crimes that a given narrative designates morally unjust can come from the unlikeliest sources, from detectives themselves, the champions of law and order, and from those who commit crimes unintentionally. Rather than a physically marked criminal, the criminal might be the detective. In Farjeon's "Three Birds on a Stile" (1891), the "gentleman" detective turns out to be a conman who frames his marks and then accepts bribes not to arrest them. In Grant Allen's "The Great Ruby Robbery" (1892), the detective is an actual detective, and he finds the missing jewellery, but rather than turning it over to its rightful owner, the detective steals it for himself and uses theories of criminal anthropology to cast suspicion on two types of people that resemble born criminals: a cold servant woman and an enterprising Irishman. In these stories the law's keepers are capable of breaking the law, and criminal detection's anthropological methods can be used to deflect criminal detection.

Still more doubtful of criminal anthropology are *The Strand's* stories that put forth the idea that good people who do not want to commit crimes can be compelled to do so without their knowledge and against their will. In Meade and Halifax's "The Panelled Bedroom" (1896) an innocent heiress falls under the influence of a mesmerist who causes the girl to try to murder a man. The heiress remains unconscious of the murder attempt which, had she been master of her will, she would never have perpetrated. The message that anyone can become an unwitting murderer promotes the position that crime might owe more to circumstance than to birth. This position is repeated by Grant Allen's Hilda Wade story "The Episode of the Wife Who Did

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<sup>10</sup> Developed in the late nineteenth century by Alphonse Bertillon, the Bertillon method combined a system of bodily measurements and facial photographs to be kept in police records for purposes of criminal identification.



Her Duty,” about a caring husband who unaccountably murders his wife. As Hilda Wade explains, “there are murderers who become so by accident;” “all kinds, good and bad, quick and slow, can be driven to it at last” (Allen 1899: 520, 522). It is not a predetermined type that is prone to crime; given the right conditions, anyone can and will commit a crime. This is why everyone avoids the detective in Florence Warden’s farcical “The Nine-Fifteen” – because everyone is guilty of some crime. As the young woman of the story puts it, “everybody is a wrong-doer, more or less, at some time or other, and very often it is more by misfortune or by weakness than by wickedness” (Warden 1902: 690).

These stories respond to criminal classification by asking whether all people are prone to commit crimes. If so, then all bodies are potentially criminal bodies, and the anthropological classification of the criminal is impossible. More to the point, even *known* criminals’ bodies are immeasurable in *The Strand*. If criminal anthropology proceeds under the assumption that bodies are fixed and stable, betraying natural tendencies, *The Strand* contends that they are fluid, changeable, and, given to artifice, impossible to fix and detect. In *The Strand*’s very first Holmes story, “A Scandal in Bohemia” (1891), the world’s finest detective fails to identify the woman he is investigating when she follows him home disguised as a young man. In John Arthur Barry’s “A Bird of Prey” (1900) the police arrest a man named Brown, thinking he is the criminal known as the Toff, so the Toff decides to impersonate Brown, since that identity is now available.

Perhaps the series that stands best for the popular press’ representation of the criminal body as a body capable of assuming variable forms is Grant Allen’s *An African Millionaire* (1896-7). In this series of loosely connected episodes Sir Charles, a millionaire who has made his fortune from African diamonds and other morally questionable speculations, is repeatedly taken in and relieved of his fortune by the confidence trickster known as Colonel Clay. Clay is a master of disguise, impersonating a Mexican seer, a young clergyman, an Austrian nobleman, a venture capitalist, a German scientist, a detective, a doctor, a famous poet, and Sir Charles himself. The French police say that no one knows his nationality or age, that he is such a master of disguise that he can even change his pupils to suggest dull-wittedness or intelligence, and that some suspect that he is not one single man, but a band of thieves – all of which is to preface the detectives’ declaration that the man is undetectable and that it would be a waste of time to try to track him (Allen, “The Episode of the Mexican Seer” 1896: 667).

Facing a criminal who can impersonate anyone, Sir Charles decides that the safest way to proceed is to disown all claims to knowledge and to adopt the attitude that nothing is knowable: “We should disbelieve as well as distrust everybody. That’s the road to success; and I mean to pursue it” (Allen, “The Episode of the Seldon Gold-Mine” 1897: 32). Seymour, Sir Charles’ brother-in-law and secretary, affirms that he has learned to “discount appearances” and to assume the disorienting logical premise that those who look the least like thieves are the most suspect (Allen, “The Episode of the Old Master” 1896: 205). Their universal distrust and inability to detect their antagonist result in more than one wrongful arrest and a string of lawsuits from the wrongfully accused. New technologies of criminal detection are devalued here, too. In “The Episode of the Bertillon Method,” Clay is exposed by a method of photography “not unlike those composite photographs [by] Mr. Galton” (Allen 1897: 421). In the following episode, however, he convinces a jury not to credit the photos. Criminal detection is decidedly impotent here. Far from being “entirely innocuous” (Morton 2005: 175), Allen’s *African Millionaire* presents a world in which it is impossible to identify criminals.

The failures of criminal detection are compounded by these stories’ affirmation of the moral superiority of the criminal. As Colonel Clay makes clear in “The Episode of the Brawn Game” (Allen 1896), Sir Charles’ form of capitalism is more parasitic than plain robbery; Colonel Clay, a Robin Hood figure, only preys on the rich Sir Charles, while Sir Charles preys on everyone, including his family and the shareholders in his company. The criminal teaches

the capitalist how to be good to people: when Sir Charles exhibits sincere compassion for others, Clay refrains from robbing him as a reward for his “good behaviour” (Allen, “The Episode of the Japanned Dispatch-Box” 1897: 175). When, in “The Episode of the Old Bailey” (Allen 1897), Clay is finally caught and proclaims he is only sorry that he, the lesser of two rogues, should be the defendant, while Sir Charles, the greater of two rogues, should be the prosecutor, all of the courthouse and all of London agree. The inability of the law to detect criminals is compounded by its greater failure to be guided by equitable standards of ethics.<sup>11</sup>

All of these stories counter the scholarly stance that the classic detective story reinforces confidence in theories of criminal determinism. Far from reassuring readers that the forces of law and order can identify and regulate crime, *The Strand*'s detective stories suggest that crime and criminals defy identification and regulation. The implicit argument here is for reading with a wide lens. Taken alone, a story might or might not contest criminal science's efficacy. But taken together, a clear trend appears. Early detective fiction – or at least that of *The Strand* – is not easily consumed comfort-reading. Designed to entertain, it simultaneously demonstrates doubts about biological origins of crime and about the legitimacy of the law itself.

## Detecting Criminals in the Literary Canon

The often-overlooked stories discussed above parallel the complex representations of the criminal body for which some of the better-known texts of the literary canon are celebrated. For example, the morphing bodies in G. K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908) are part of the larger conversation on mutable bodies that we have already seen in *The Strand*. Chesterton's novel centres on Syme, an undercover detective who infiltrates an inner circle of anarchists. Each anarchist uses for his alias a day of the week, and each bears the physical stamp of the anthropological criminal: “each man was subtly and differently wrong,” one with a “twisted smile” and “emaciated” face, another with “almond eyes,” a “blue-black beard,” and “cruel, crimson lips,” and a third, the Professor de Worms, sunk in “senile decay,” a “corpse” whose “decrepitude” expresses some inner “corruption” which is “indefinably” horrible (Chesterton [1908] 2010: 42). As it turns out, each of these hideous born criminals is actually a detective in disguise: “there never was any Supreme Anarchist Council...we were all a lot of silly policemen looking at each other” (110). The main action of the novel consists of Syme (and his growing band of fellow detectives) tracking down the next inner circle anarchist, only to unmask him and discover that he too is an undercover detective. In his essay “The Domesticity of Detectives,” Chesterton argues that good detective stories shun conspiracies, cabals, “diabolical diplomatists” and other foreign terrors in favour of homegrown criminals, since “an Englishman's house is his castle; even if, like other castles, it is the scene of a few quiet tortures or assassinations” (1921: 39). In other words, the menace of a detective story should turn on something familiar, domestic, normal. Chesterton is arguing about foreign menaces, but his case can be extended to include the strange and unfamiliar physiognomy of the anthropological criminal. That puppet theatre of hunchbacks, the homeless, the one-eyed, scar-faced, beetle-browed, and hideous has no place in Chesterton's higher order detective story, as *The Man Who Was Thursday*, a parody of criminal abnormality, exhibits.

The protean bodies of *The Strand* presage the protean bodies of Chesterton's novel. Like many of *The Strand*'s stories above, *The Man Who Was Thursday* presents a world of performed identity and impersonation, a world in which the positive identification of a subject is always to be doubted. As more and more anarchists turn out to be fellow detectives, Syme's system of identification deteriorates, and his response could be Sir Charles' when Sir Charles

<sup>11</sup> For a fuller discussion of Clay's moral superiority, see Pittard's *Purity and Contamination in Late Victorian Detective Fiction* (2011: 119-27).

decides that nothing is knowable. After unmasking his latest ally, Syme wonders whether the man is still “wearing a mask? Was anyone wearing a mask? Was anyone anything?” (Chesterton [1908] 2010: 93). Syme’s utter irresolution signals the breakdown of empiricism. The data that can be gleaned from unstable bodies cannot be counted on to correspond to those bodies from one moment to the next. As Syme puts it, “was there anything that was apart from what it seemed. The Marquis has taken off his nose and turned out to be a detective. Might he not just as well take off his head and turn out to be a hobgoblin?” (93). Here, the presence of a false nose calls into question biological identification in general. Unable to differentiate between natural and performed characteristics, Syme concludes that authentic physiognomy is indeterminable.

The body’s resistance to fixed meaning comes near to shattering reason itself in the novel. Sunday is the head of the Anarchist Council, whose actions defy reason (he is actually also the head policeman who hired the detectives to infiltrate the Anarchist Council) just as his body defies description. One detective cannot decide how Sunday’s grotesque obesity can seem not heavy, but light. Another says that he is like some “final form of matter,” “sea lumps and protoplasm” (121). A third disagrees, maintaining that he is not a “freak physically” (122). Another cannot even conceive of him, and yet another admits that his “face escaped me...made me, somehow, doubt whether there are any faces” (123). By the time these baffled policemen hunt down Sunday, their questions have changed. No longer are they asking where to find and arrest anarchists. Instead, their questions are ontological: bewildered by a world in which identity is indefinite, they want only to ask Sunday “what they mean”; that is, who they are, what he is, and what the world is (112-13).

Like Chesterton’s novel, Joseph Conrad’s *The Secret Agent* (1907) advances an illegible criminal body that resembles those of *The Strand*. In Conrad’s novel Mr. Verloc, agent provocateur and member of an ineffectual band of anarchists, grooms and enlists his mentally disabled brother-in-law to deliver a bomb. When Stevie stumbles and explodes, he is reduced to a mess of human pulp that has to be gathered with a shovel, “nameless fragments” making up “a sort of mound – a heap of rags, scorched and bloodstained...[combined with] a sprinkling of small gravel, tiny brown bits of bark, and particles of splintered wood as fine as needles”; resembling the “by-products of a butcher’s shop,” Stevie’s body is not only “nameless” but unnameable, unclassifiable, obviating inspection ([1907] 2013: 59-60).

In spite of the illegibility of Stevie’s remains, critics have argued that *The Secret Agent* dramatizes how Lombrosian discourse constitutes bodies. For M. Kellen Williams (2002), in *The Secret Agent* the body is recreated through representational practices. I see the novel differently. To me, the centrepiece around which the novel revolves – Stevie’s death and the obliteration of his body – asserts the body as ineffable. Although discourse attempts to label the body, it ultimately fails. This body cannot be represented. It cannot even be adequately distinguished from inorganic matter. Nor can the narrative itself describe the body’s disintegration. In the inspector’s report the moment of violence is merely referred to, not represented (the inspector “stated the bare fact” (Conrad [1907] 2013: 139). The body that undergoes dissolution escapes the labelling effects of discourse as well as those of scientific identification through biometrics. As we have seen, this resistance to criminal classification in detective fiction was not new in Edwardian England; *The Strand*’s stories had been foregrounding similar problems for years. In fact, in some ways Stevie’s death is not unlike the death of *The Strand*’s master-criminal Madame Koluchy, who incinerates herself in order to deprive prying private-eyes of a corpse and deny criminal science its specimen (Meade and Eustace, “The Doom” 1898).

But still more reminiscent of the stories in *The Strand* is *The Secret Agent*’s position that a criminal can be a victim and a policeman can be a criminal. The novel conveys doubts about pre-determined criminality in much the same way as *The Strand*’s fiction: by skewing

the line between criminals and non-criminals. The bomber Stevie is more victim than criminal. Winnie, who murders her husband Verloc for destroying her brother, is also more victim than criminal. In fact, it is the police who look guiltier than the bomber and the murderess. As in Florence Warden's farcical story in which everyone is guilty of some crime, all of the supposedly upright characters of *The Secret Agent* possess criminal qualities. What many of *The Strand's* stories demonstrate in scene, *The Secret Agent* states in exposition: that "the mind and instincts of a burglar are of the same kind as the mind and instincts of a police officer" (Conrad [1907] 2013: 63). London's Chief Inspector Heat moves like "a member of the criminal classes" (138). The Assistant Commissioner, bored with desk work, turns his skill in detection to his subordinates, uncovering "incriminating" truths about his inspectors (80). He himself is not above corruption: wishing to stay in the good graces of a lady who looks fondly on a suspect of the bombing, he does his best to deflect suspicion from that suspect. The impossibility of distinguishing between victim, lawman, and criminal bears out the opinion of the novel's Karl Yundt for whom "Lombroso is an ass" whose methodology fails to account for socio-political causes of crime (32).

Such sentiments would be familiar to readers of *The Strand*. Thus, Conrad is right to state in a letter to his literary agent J. B. Pinker that *The Secret Agent* is not "unsuitable for general reading" ([October 11, 1906] 1988: 364-5). Indeed, the novel's ironic treatment of crime and detection corresponds to the popular press that the public generally read. However, there is a scholarly tendency to presume that Conrad's detective novel breaks from the conventions of the genre. Stephen Skinner argues that "the unsettling disturbance of the detective story formula in *The Secret Agent* is the crucial element in its exposure of underlying social and existential disorder" (2003: 435). Skinner echoes an argument common to detective fiction scholarship: the argument that classic detective fiction was a "source of reassurance, resolution, and security" for its readers (436). Yet the stories of *The Strand* suggest otherwise. If *The Strand*, a monthly geared toward middle-class interests and its editor's taste for wholesome fiction, so frequently exposes social disorder, we must reconsider this assumption. The assumption that the early detective story reinforces social order does not hold up against scrutiny of the popular press: Conrad is not the only writer to expose disorder in society; actually, he is expanding on a convention of the genre's formula, namely, the early detective story's penchant for parodying the naivety of social discourses guaranteeing stability. The detective story formula is hardly disturbed by *The Secret Agent*; in many ways, it is replicated.

So, why read Chesterton and Conrad alongside the detective fiction of the popular press? The question itself is telling, for it suggests that perhaps these two authors should be understood in isolation from their contemporaries, from the type of story magazine in which they themselves published (see below), and from the variable iterations of detective fiction that they engaged with in their own variations on the genre. If criticism tends to think that Conrad's and Chesterton's contributions to the genre are rather distortions of the genre, it may be because these canonical novels are being taken out of the context of the popular literary culture in which they were composed, or that readers are falling into the traditional critical trend to frame classic detective fiction as formulaic and conservative, when a broader reading reflects the genre's diversity.

James Walton, for example, identifies Dickens' *Bleak House* (1852) as a model for *The Secret Agent*, particularly in regard to Conrad's "grotesque-comic" depiction of London and his deployment of the detective narrative for purposes of social satire (1969: 458). Although Walton acknowledges that Conrad would certainly have been aware of the popular detective fiction of his own time, he suggests that Dickens, and not the popular detective fiction to follow him, provided the model by which the detective motif could be used to "implement a comprehensive and intricate social satire" (456). However, as Ellen Burton Harrington argues,

*The Secret Agent* is more securely aligned with detective fiction than it is opposed to it. Rather than simply inverting the mores of this genre, Conrad's novel realizes that which is misrecognized and repressed in the machinery of the detective novel, the compromised position of the detective as officer of justice and the ineffectual substitution of truth for resolution.

(Harrington 1999: 115-16)

We might go further still, and suggest that classic detective fiction itself realizes rather than represses this sort of subversion of form. As Christopher Pittard (2010) rightly observes, although classic detective fiction comes to be associated with conservative values, it possesses a potential for farce and satire which *The Strand's* authors exploit. The difficulty in maintaining, as Élodie Raimbault does, that Chesterton and Conrad draw on "detective narrative" for "the general frame of the plots" of their novels, but otherwise "disrupt" it (2013: para. 5), lies in the fact that the form from its first years was itself already disruptive, prone to genre-mixing and self-parody.

Understanding the genre as an "aggregate of literary forms" (Ascari 2007: 8), contemporary criticism has increasingly shown that the stamp of conservatism with which classic detective fiction is often delineated has less to do with its actual form and content than with the discursive campaign of late-Victorian authors and critics to distance the developing genre from its antecedents in sensation fiction. In the decades preceding the popular rise of the detective story, sensation fiction and other earlier modes of crime writing came to be associated with lurid literature and moral degeneracy. Aware of the stigma attached to sensation fiction, authors and critics of the new genre of detective fiction sought to dissociate it from its literary forerunner. Tracing the history of this critical tradition, Maurizio Ascari remarks that "at the end of the nineteenth century, detective novelists and critics shaped the identity of what was increasingly perceived as a new genre by denying its sensational heritage – with its vibrant appeal to the emotions – in order to emphasize its rational character" in the attempt to ground detective fiction's "literary status on its association with the scientific method and highbrow literature" (1).

Reading for this project of literary self-fashioning in *The Strand*, Pittard shows that the magazine consciously defined itself against sensation fiction and the moral degeneracy that was connected to the penny dreadful mode of crime story, in contrast to which, again, *The Strand's* editor Georges Newnes promised "healthful literature" (2010: 105), a promise which close reading of the magazine's content suggests may have vivified rather than suppressed the inventiveness of its satires. Nevertheless, critics often point to Newnes' promise as a confirmation of *The Strand's* conservativeness, though the fiction itself often belies this. Nor should we take Newnes at his word, which is after all an advertisement intended to shape the reception of the magazine, and not a disinterested description of its actual content. After all, *The Secret Agent* (a story which we can agree is neither healthful nor wholesome) was first serialized in *Ridgway's Magazine*, a weekly containing journalism, editorials, and fiction, and promoting "good, wholesome fiction with honest sentiment and red blood in it" (Reid 2003: 59-60), an announcement which evokes the promise of *The Strand's* editor to provide "healthful literature." Though it was after Newnes' time, Conrad himself would publish a story of wartime treachery in *The Strand* ("The Tale" 1917) which calls into question the ethics of a British captain in a manner which – far from conservative – could have been taken to be undermining the war effort in Britain, once again demonstrating that *The Strand* was capable of transgressing Newnes' avowed direction.

As the new genre of detective fiction gained in popularity and began to garner positive critical reviews, individual authors like Chesterton and Conrad shaped their own literary identities in response to it. Conrad's correspondence about *The Secret Agent* at the time of its composition reveals a series of negotiations with popular fiction and the uncertain status of the detective genre in relation to sensation fiction. In a letter to Algernon Methuen, he

acknowledges that the novel treats “a sensational subject” ([November 7, 1906] 1927: 38), a sentiment which he later retracts in a letter to J. B. Pinker, stating that the novel does not contain elements of “sensationalism,” but also that the “novel does not strike me as bad at all. There is an element of popularity in it” ([May 18, 1907] 1927: 49), after which, in another letter to Pinker, he speaks of *The Secret Agent* as “a book to produce some sensation” ([July 30, 1907] 1927: 54). As Norman Sherry points out, Conrad’s “desire to gain popularity” is evidenced here (1973: 17). Also on display is his desire to attract readers of popular fiction while at the same time cultivating an identity as a writer of serious literature, which required that he navigate the uncertain terrain that separated the serious from the popular, and shifted all the more as detective fiction was making its own claims to literary relevance and thus changing the literary landscape. Similar manoeuvring is on display in the preface to the 1920 edition of *The Secret Agent* in which Conrad coyly acknowledges that the reader will recognize many of the sources from which the novel draws inspiration, as “they are not very recondite” ([1920] 1964: 198), a statement which Andrew Glazzard rightly reads as a tacit admission that the novel draws on earlier popular fiction like *Sherlock Holmes* and Edgar Wallace’s *The Four Just Men* (2012: 19). Conrad’s connections to popular forms of writing have been productively outlined by other critics as well. Drawing on Ford Madox Ford’s remembrances of Conrad, Harrington establishes that Conrad read “Victorian popular fiction, including sensation novelists” (2004: 52).<sup>12</sup> Turning from fiction to nonfiction, David Mulry (2000) reads for Conrad’s engagements with the sensational journalism covering the Greenwich Incident on which *The Secret Agent* is based. If Conrad’s relationship to popular writing was fraught with careful manoeuvring, it was nonetheless an elaboration along a continuum rather than a break from popular forms.

Chesterton’s writing on detective fiction also aids our understanding of its early reception. A regular contributor to the genre, Chesterton unequivocally aligns himself with detective fiction. He praises “those popular works of fiction which are the joy of my existence; the crime novels and the police romances and the rest,” and refers to *Sherlock Holmes* as “the friend of my childhood to whom I shall always pay a tribute of piety” ([1903] 2014: 20501). Later in life he would even assert that the classic detective story of “the late nineteenth century” in some ways demonstrated better craftsmanship than its Golden Age progeny ([1935] 2012: 112, 117-18). More significantly, he praises popular forms of writing, from the penny dreadful and detective fiction to news reports, for their sensationalism. He complains that unlike the journalism of “the Strand, in the great days of *Sherlock Holmes*,” later journalism has become “insupportably tame” and is no longer “sensational... enough” ([1908] 2014: 10321-22, 10337), a complaint which suggests that in Chesterton’s opinion the journalism of *The Strand* was less conservative than a recent fruitful study by Samuel Saunders finds.<sup>13</sup>

What Chesterton critiques in particular is the class prejudice he sees in the rejection of sensational writing. Sensationalism for Chesterton is inseparable from the “real plebeian pungency which can be heard from the ordinary cabman in the ordinary street” ([1908] 2014: 10321-32). As with sensational journalism, what he admires in the penny dreadful and detective fiction is the genres’ association with lower class culture which in Chesterton’s view is livelier

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<sup>12</sup> Harrington compellingly shows that the novel draws on sensation fiction as well as theories of criminal degeneracy in order to offer, through the character of Winnie, a “categorical examination of the conventional roles available to women in the late nineteenth century, which it delineates as a series of hopeless prospects” (2004: 61). For a further study of Conrad’s engagement with female authors of sensation fiction, see also Susan Jones (1998).

<sup>13</sup> Reading *The Strand*’s detective fiction alongside its journalism on policing matters, Saunders reports that the magazine’s journalism was moderately critical of the police force, whose efficacy it mocked, but mocked gently (2021: 217-23).

and more life-affirming than canons of literature marked for serious study. Chesterton's defences of crime writing and sensationalism in general constitute more than a mere critique of class bias, however. In his essays on popular crime fiction and criminology he exposes the mechanism by which both the lower classes and the literature associated with the lower classes come to bear the stigma of criminality. In "A Defence of Penny Dreadfuls" Chesterton objects to the "theory that the tone of the mass of boys' novelettes is criminal and degraded," and mockingly remarks that "if some grimy urchin runs away with an apple, the magistrate shrewdly points out that the child's knowledge that apples appease hunger is traceable to some curious literary researches" ([1901] 2015: 15-16). Similarly, he laments that:

When the ordinary detective story began to emerge, late in the nineteenth century, it was not merely regarded as common in the sense of vulgar, but as low in the sense of base. A blind and blatant snobbery, once conventional and still far too common, really did class certain things as lying on the verge of the criminal class, merely because they were associated with the lower classes.

(Chesterton [1935] 2012: 112)

These passages on penny dreadfuls and detective fiction as they were understood at the turn of the century speak to the fluid status of the latter, which at the time had not yet shaken off its association with sensation fiction. Chesterton was aware that despite late-Victorian attempts to sanitize the reputation of detective fiction, it still bore the taint of other forms of crime writing. By attacking the imputation that crime writing causes the moral corruption of its readers, he complicates contemporary critical conceptions which frame detective fiction as a conservative genre. In its ambivalent early years, detective fiction could be feared to instigate rather than curtail criminal behaviour. Importantly, Chesterton's critique of the criminalization of popular crime fiction also compliments his critique of other theories of crime, particularly theories of criminal biology. In "A Criminal Head," Chesterton dismisses the notion of a biologically criminal type and exposes the social biases underlying the pseudoscience, sardonically stating that "after exhaustive classification" of peculiar anatomical features he has struck upon "the one permanent mark of the scientific [criminal] type," which "consists in being poor" ([1910] 2005: 46). If Chesterton's vocal admiration of detective fiction is a statement of class politics, so too are his deconstructions – in fiction and essays – of supposedly criminal types.

The congruity of early detective stories – from Sherlock Holmes and *The Strand* to Chesterton's and Conrad's novels – when it comes to complicating criminal science attests to Foucault's ([1969] 1998) claim that literary works are less the products of a single individual labouring in isolation than they are the products of collective cultural phenomena. Hilary Fraser has noted that Foucault's premise "seems a particularly apt model for the nineteenth-century periodical" (2012: 66). Doyle himself views his literary coterie as a collective, not a disassociated group ([1923] 2007: 100). Insofar as they engage with similar concerns and techniques as the popular detective stories, Conrad's and Chesterton's experimental novels also belong to this group. Like Conrad's and Chesterton's novels, *The Strand's* fiction does not support theories arguing for biological determinants of crime. Instead, the magazine that will later establish the standard for the genre of detective fiction begins from the very start by demonstrating the genre's capacity for expressing doubts about the very tenets of detection.

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