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LITERARY LABYRINTHS: READING LIKE A DETECTIVE

by

Emma A. Hallock

**Capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for graduation with**

UNIVERSITY HONORS

with a major in

**English Literature
in the Department of English**

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Abstract

Studying literature is like walking through a labyrinth of interpretative possibilities. So, it is no mystery why an English major would be fascinated with detectives; they seem to show the way out of the literary labyrinth. Like detectives, literary critics look for clues in the texts they study and interpret them to find meaning. However, many critics argue that detectives make bad models, and that reading like a detective leads to interpretations that are at best boring and at worst dangerous. It is not clear whether detectives are the best literary critics or the worst. To make sense of this problem, I argue that it is necessary to pay attention to specific fictional detectives rather than talking about the figure of the detective in general. This thesis is a study in sleuths that examines how individual detectives fail and succeed as models for literary critics. I will begin in the nineteenth century with Wilkie Collins's novel *The Moonstone* (1863) and Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories and then move onto the twentieth century with the hard-boiled detective novels *The Big Sleep* (1939) by Raymond Chandler and *The Maltese Falcon* (1929) by Dashiell Hammett and Agatha Christie's Miss Marple short stories. Later in the twentieth century, detective fiction turns metaphysical, as in Jorge Luis Borges's "Death and the Compass" (1942). None of these detectives offer satisfactory ways out of the labyrinth. However, I argue that Charles Dickens's novel *Bleak House* (1853) anticipates the problems of interpretation that arise throughout the history of detective fiction and shows through Mr. Bucket, the detective, how to live in a literary labyrinth.

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Literary Labyrinths: Reading Like a Detective

Part I: The English Major

To begin at the beginning, I am writing my senior capstone project. I would like to go on till I come to the end and then stop. But, unfortunately for me, this project does not have an end, and there is no stop. Instead, I am going to go the other direction, back to before I started writing my capstone. Two years ago, I was in my second year of college, in my second literature class, and the second paper of the semester had just been assigned. It was on Christina Rossetti's surreal poem, "Goblin Market" (1862). I do not have time to tell you exactly how wild, confusing, and distressing reading "Goblin Market" was, so just know that the poem snapped my brain right in half. I was not alone in my confusion. Caroline Norton's 1863 review of the poem says that "Goblin Market" is "one of the works which are said to 'defy criticism.' Is it a fable—or a mere fairy story—or an allegory against the pleasures of sinful love—or what is it?" (401). Norton suggests that we "not too rigorously inquire" (401-402). She is probably right. Sane people should leave the literary works that "defy criticism" alone. Thankfully, I am an English major. I have license to ignore Norton, which is good because "or what is it?" is a question that nags at my brain whenever I read.

It is also a question that I have to try and answer if I want to pass my English classes. Answering Norton's question was part of the assignment description for the Rossetti paper, and it was an extremely difficult task. Our class discussions were helpful, but in a way that made everything more confusing. When I started writing, that confusion only grew. There were false starts, dead ends, and ends that probably would have been better off dead. It would be generous to say that my first several drafts were a train wreck. Writing that goes that badly inevitably

makes you think about how you write. For me, the hardest part about being an English major was figuring out what I was supposed to be doing. Even when I “did it” well enough to get a good grade, I could never articulate, even to myself, why what I had done worked. It bothered me, but I could mostly repress it and move along. “Goblin Market” pushed all of that uncertainty and anxiety to the surface because whatever I had been doing clearly no longer worked. If I wanted to turn in a paper, the only option left was to spend some serious time thinking about how I think and how I write.

This meant going back to the basics. What do English majors do? Well, I knew they started by reading a text. Then they read it again (and again and again), looking for the interesting or strange parts. After noticing details, English majors put the pieces next to each other and find a way to make sense of them. Then, they have to explain what they have found in a way that makes sense to other people. This thought experiment made me realize that I had been asking the wrong question all along. It was not a question of what I was doing as an English major; it was a question of who I was being, and I was being Nancy Drew. The quotes from “Goblin Market” that I had stuck up on my wall were clues, and now all I had to do now was be a sleuth. I had my elementary school dream job and did not even realize it. Instead of tackling the entire poem at once, I could point to specific details and explain their surface and deeper meaning. Together, all the details built the case that was my argument about “Goblin Market.” Reading like a detective gave me a framework to come up with an interpretation of the poem that I could support in a paper.

The way that I approached writing my “Goblin Market” essay shaped the way that I have approached every writing assignment I have had since then. If reading like a detective could help me interpret a literary work that seemed to “defy criticism,” then I figured it could apply to

almost any work. I adopted it as my go-to strategy and have used it in every one of my English classes. Reading like a detective gave me a way to order my thoughts and then my writing. It did not make literature classes easy or unsurprising, but I was no longer completely unmoored. Being a literary detective helped me succeed in class, and I really enjoyed what I was doing. Studying literature is like walking through a labyrinth. You go around and around an endless maze. When I was a sophomore, writing about “Goblin Market,” I was trying to find my way out of the labyrinth. Reading like a detective seemed like the best solution. Solving impossible puzzles is in the detective job description. As long as I kept reading like a detective, everything would be fine.

At least, that was what I used to think, but the idea of reading like a detective begs to be investigated, and I could not resist it. There is a long history of comparing detective work to literary criticism. There is also a long history of pointing out the problems with reading like a detective. Many critics argue that reading like a detective leads to interpretations that are at best boring and at worst dangerous. My perfect solution was not so perfect. Reading like a detective helped me succeed as an English major, and so I have had four years of college to prove myself right. That is not what I am interested in anymore. In this thesis, I want to put my own methods under the microscope first by studying critics’ responses to reading like a detective. Then, I am going to take whatever skills I have gained as an English major and go back to detective fiction. I will trace the history of the genre, looking at novels and short stories by Wilkie Collins, Arthur Conan Doyle, Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, Agatha Christie, and Jorge Luis Borges to see how the detectives fail, succeed, or do both as models for English majors. I argue that all these detectives ultimately fail, but if you are willing to wander around the literary labyrinth for a

while, there is another detective who can help because he works outside of the detective fiction genre.

Part II: The Critics

Rita Felski discusses the dangers of reading like a detective. She explains that “while ordinary readers, just like the hapless Watson, are easily deceived by the evidence of their eyes, the professional reader, whether critic or detective, presses below distracting surfaces to the deeper meaning of signs” (“Suspicious” 224). This tallies with my own experience; pressing below the surface is what happens in literature classes. Felski describes a typical class where “the animating spirit of our inquiry is the conviction that appearances deceive and that texts do not willingly surrender their secrets” (“After” 28). Many of my classes have had this same “animating spirit,” but I never thought that the books we read were deliberately deceiving us like criminals. Felski claims that reading like a detective inevitably leads to an antagonistic relationship between reader and text because “the text, like the criminal suspect, must be scrutinized, interrogated, and made to yield its hidden secrets” (“Suspicious” 224). If reading like a detective means reading suspiciously and reading suspiciously means becoming the text’s adversary, then reading like a detective is not the solution that I thought it was.

However, the real problem is not that *I* want to read like a detective; it is that *everyone* wants to read like a detective. Felski states that “for several decades [suspicious interpretation] has served as the default option, business as usual, the taken-for-granted methodological norm in literary studies” (“Suspicious” 231), which Felski finds concerning. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick shares Felski’s concerns. Sedgwick argues that “the broad consensual sweep of such methodological assumptions... may, if it persists unquestioned, unintentionally impoverish the

gene pool of literary-critical perspectives and skills” (143-144). Everyone wants to be a detective, and so suspicious reading “singularly fails to surprise” (Felski “Suspicious” 231). While suspicious reading might fail to surprise professional literary critics, it does surprise me. I did not know that “gestures of demystification and exposure are no longer oppositional, but obligatory” because they were not obligatory to me (Felski 231). When I wrote about “Goblin Market,” no one forced me to be suspicious. Felski says that suspicious reading “is the mainstream” (231), but there was no real mainstream in my sophomore English class. So, there must be other reasons why a person would choose to read like a detective beyond just falling in line with mainstream practices.

Maybe it is because reading like a detective is fun; finding solutions feels good, but that feeling can obscure the fact that you are always proving yourself right. Felski says that suspicious reading, “like the detective novel... embodies the pleasures of ratiocination, exercising mental agility and inventiveness” (229). Finishing a paper on “Goblin Market” feels as good as guessing the ending of a detective novel. According to Sedgwick, paranoid reading “may be experienced by the practitioner as a triumphant advance toward truth and vindication” (135). So, it makes sense that “scholarly prose can easily take on the triumphalist cast, as readers... congratulate themselves on their perspicacity, feel sharper, shrewder, more knowing, less vulnerable” (Felski “Suspicious” 230). The problem is, *feeling* sharper is not the same as *being* sharper. However, that feeling increases the likelihood that the critic will cherry-pick evidence that continues to prove them right. So, suspicious reading “can’t do anything other than prove the very same assumptions with which it began” (Sedgwick 135). However, the reader, who feels triumphant, cannot recognize this. Bruno Latour asks whether “you see now why it feels so good to be a critical mind? Why critique, this most ambiguous *pharmakon*, has become

such a potent euphoric drug? You are always right!” (238-239). Being a detective, and being right, makes you feel smart, but if you cannot help but be right, then that is a problem.

Always proving yourself right, no matter the evidence, sounds worryingly like a conspiracy theorist. When I read like a detective it is easy for me to imagine that I am being perfectly rational because detectives are symbols of rationality. However, as Felski explains, “the deciphering of clues blurs the line between reason and irrationality” (“Suspicious” 228). Even when I develop an interpretation that feels logical, I always wonder whether I manufactured an argument that suited me. There is no sure ground, but “isn’t this what criticism intended to say: that there is no sure ground anywhere?” (Latour 227). Maybe. But Latour asks what it means “when this lack of sure ground is taken away from us by the worst possible fellows as an argument against the things we cherish?” (227). If reading like a detective blurs the line between reason and irrationality and removes sure ground, then it seems like critic and conspiracy theorist are synonyms. Latour finds “something troublingly similar” about conspiracy and critique “in the first movement of disbelief and, then, in the wheeling of causal explanations coming out of the deep dark below” and so do I (229). If literary critics are like detectives and detectives are like conspiracy theorists, then... yikes.

So, if reading like a detective is a problem, is there a solution? Felski explains why suspicious reading fails, but she also says that “even as suspicion of literature is abjured, it resurfaces in the guise of what we can call *metasuspicion*” (“Suspicious” 227). That is, being suspicious of suspicion is still being suspicious. Felski acknowledges that this shows “the critic’s entrapment within a suspicious sensibility and the mentality of critique, as she finds herself caught in an infinite regress of skeptical questioning... it is hard to see how any objections to suspicion, my own included, can entirely escape the snarls of this contradiction.” (218). Even if I

wanted to, I cannot escape suspicion because I will be *metasuspicious*. Felski quotes Sedgwick, who argues that “paranoia is nothing if not teachable. The powerfully ranging and reductive force of strong theory can make tautological thinking hard to identify even as it makes it compelling and near inevitable” (136). Is suspicious reading both a bad option and the only option? Felski does not make it clear; she ends the paper by asking “how else might we venture to read, if we were not ordained to read suspiciously?” (232). Ending on a question is worrying because, based on this paper, that is a question that cannot have an answer.

Sedgwick and Latour argue that criticism should be positive instead of negative and that critics should read reparatively. Latour explains that conspiracy theorists are the ones who debunk, but the critic should be “the one who assembles” (246). He asks what critique would do “if it could be associated with *more*, not with *less*, with *multiplication*, not *subtraction*” (248). Associating criticism with “more” does sound like a solution, but not a solution that I know how to implement. Latour does not tell me how to go about putting everything back together again. Sedgwick is more specific, arguing that paranoid reading should be replaced with reparative reading. Paranoid readers attempt to break open the texts they read because they do not want to be surprised, but “to a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise” (146). However, from my own experience, I know that being surprised and being suspicious are not mutually exclusive. So, the difference must be the energy; a paranoid reader’s main energy is fear, but “hope... is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates” (146). This is still a problem because I do not feel like I am fearful or paranoid when I read, so I do not know how to start reading reparatively. Neither Latour’s nor Sedgwick’s solutions are actionable for me.

Felski proposes that literary critics should pay more attention to the reader's attachments to a text. She says that, right now, "becoming a critical reader means moving from attachment to detachment and indeed to disenchantment" ("After" 30). For me, there is nothing more enchanting than finding out that there is more to a text than what appeared on the surface. Felski argues that "affect cannot be separated from interpretation," but in this paper, she does not address the affect of reading like a detective (32). Surely, investigating a text is one way to become attached to it, and, according to "Suspicious Minds," it is an inescapable attachment. When Felski offers her solution in "After Suspicion," she says that "the starting point is a deep sense of curiosity about the nature of our aesthetic attachments, as worthy of sustained and sophisticated investigation" (32). Conducting a "sustained and sophisticated investigation" sounds exactly like being a detective, a detective who investigates the reader's response instead of the hidden meanings of the text, but a detective nonetheless. At its core, the type of reading that Felski discusses in "After Suspicion" does not seem terribly different from the suspicious reading that she repudiates. So, it seems that I have no choice but to read like a detective. However, there are lots of different detectives, and I get to choose *who* I want to read like.

Part III: The Detectives

The Moonstone

I will start with what T.S. Eliot called "the first, the longest, and the best of modern English detective novels," *The Moonstone* by Wilkie Collins (1863). In *The Moonstone*, a diamond goes missing during a birthday party, and different characters become detectives to find it. Gabriel Betteredge, the first narrator, is both a detective and a literary critic. When he is not working with police detective Sergeant Cuff or gentleman detective Franklin Blake, Betteredge

turns his interpretive powers to literary texts or rather a text. Betteredge claims to be “a scholar” who has “read a heap of books,” but firmly believes “that such a book as *Robinson Crusoe* was never written” (22). *Robinson Crusoe* gives great advice, is a friend, and the cure for bad marriages all in one. Betteredge looks to *Robinson Crusoe* for answers throughout the novel, and he ends his narrative by saying that “you are welcome to be as merry as you please over everything else I have written. But when I write of *Robinson Crusoe*, by the Lord it’s serious – and I request you to take it accordingly” (463). However, Betteredge’s *Robinson Crusoe* writings are very obviously not serious. D.A. Miller argues that “Betteredge’s language unproblematically ‘names’ him, we know exactly what weight to give to its cognitive claims about other matters in the novel... though he treats *Robinson Crusoe* like an oracle, we don’t seriously expect that book to figure in the solution to the mystery” (53). Betteredge’s passion for *Robinson Crusoe* does not matter to the other characters in *The Moonstone* or the reader.

Betteredge’s literary criticism goes wrong because he always thinks *Robinson Crusoe* is saying something about him. Betteredge claims that he could have predicted Blake’s unannounced arrival because he had just read the sentence, “I stood like one Thunderstruck, or as if I had seen an Apparition” (301). According to Betteredge, “if that isn’t as much to say: ‘Expect the sudden appearance of Mr Franklin Blake’ – there’s no meaning in the English language!” (301), which is not true. There is meaning in language outside of any one interpretation. If Blake had not appeared, Betteredge would have noticed a different sentence or found a different interpretation. Betteredge says that a man who does not believe in *Robinson Crusoe* is “a man lost in the mist of his own self-conceit!” (86). However, Betteredge is the one lost in the mist of his own self-conceit when a random page in *Robinson Crusoe* reveals what is about to happen to him. He cannot even “tell the story of the Diamond” without “telling the story

of my own self” (26). If an English major were to say that *The Moonstone* is (by the Lord!) serious because it is prophetic for her, that would not mean anything to anyone else. It is no wonder that Blake calls Betteredge’s interpretations a “favourite delusion” to humor (409). When Betteredge interprets facts, whether they be the words on the page or the clues in a case, it is always about him.

That is when the facts are considered at all; Betteredge often ignores evidence entirely. When Cuff confronts Betteredge with a clue that seems to prove Rachel’s guilt, Betteredge is upset for a moment, but then remembers that he is “(thank God!) constitutionally superior to reason” (174). He even advises the reader to “profit... by my example. It will save you from many troubles of the vexing sort” (174). He is not wrong; being unreasonable does save one from many vexing troubles, as Blake discovers. When he finds evidence of his guilt, Blake tells Betteredge that “there is the witness against me! The paint on the nightgown, and the name on the nightgown are facts” (316). Betteredge remains unconcerned. According to him, all Blake needs is to “take a drop more grog... and you’ll get over the weakness of believing in facts!” (316). It is no surprise that Betteredge’s assessment of the case is wrong because a detective cannot solve a problem without facts. It is easy to mock Betteredge’s solving problems by ignoring anything problematic. However, this sounds worryingly similar to Sedgwick’s concern that paranoid reading “can’t do anything other than prove the very same assumptions with which it began” (135). Cherry-picking evidence for a literary analysis paper is very easy, and it makes the vexing troubles disappear. If English majors are like Betteredge, then they are more magicians than detectives.

Unlike Betteredge, Cuff is a proper police detective who only cares about the facts. Cuff is a wonderful close reader. Sherlock Holmes’s method is famously founded on the observation

of trifles, but Cuff has never even “met with such a thing as a trifle yet” (109). Cuff builds his case by paying attention to details and recognizes that even small details matter. Paying attention to details gives Cuff eyes that always look “as if they expected something more from you than you were aware of yourself” (437). He can see what others cannot. Inspector Seegrave, the other official detective, believes the smeared paint on the door is an unimportant “mere trifle” (109). Cuff argues that Seegrave makes “nothing out of a molehill, in consequence of your head being too high to see it” (115). The smeared paint tells Cuff when the crime was committed and implicates someone whose clothes are stained with varnish. Cuff is proved right for paying attention to details, and “the whole sequence makes a neat parable of the detective’s work: to turn trifles into ‘telling’ details” (Miller “From” 35). It is also a neat parable of the English major’s work. Reading like a detective made me feel grounded because, like Cuff, I could point details to help tell the story of my argument. To present a coherent interpretation of a text, first, you have to notice specific details.

However, Cuff keeps his deductions hidden from the other characters. He asks Betteredge to do his “detective business along with me” (128). Working together should make both Betteredge and Cuff better detectives because they can approach the problem together, like English majors in class discussing a text. This does not work for Cuff and Betteredge because Cuff does not reveal his actual thoughts. When he hints at his solution to the case, Betteredge and Blake “earnestly begged him to tell us what he meant,” but Cuff only responds, “wait a little... The pieces of the puzzle are not all put together yet” (115). Betteredge explains that “the more firmly Sergeant Cuff kept his thoughts shut up from me, the more firmly I persisted in trying to look in at them” (121). Since he does not communicate, the focus of the mystery shifts from figuring out who stole the diamond to figuring out what Cuff is thinking. An English

classroom made up of Cuffs and Betterredges would not work. Instead of trying to understand the text, everyone would be trying to figure out what everyone else is thinking. People would not explain what is going on in their own heads, and no one would get anywhere.

Isolated from everyone else, Cuff is vulnerable to Betterredge's problem and fails to solve the case. After gathering all the clues, Cuff deduces that Rachel stole her own diamond by looking "back into my own mind for my own experience" (173). He is confident about his wrong conclusion; he tells Betterredge, "I don't suspect... I know" (143). However, his method is a little troubling. Cuff has an idea, thinks about it, and then his brain confirms he is, in fact, right. This is not so different from Betterredge's method of divining solutions. Cuff's failure is "a striking reversal of the pattern of detective fiction" because he is the one "who ought to have done his 'detective business' along with the community" (Miller 41). Despite his devotion to empirical evidence and facts, relying only on himself leads Cuff to the same place as Betterredge. At the end of the novel, Cuff says that "I completely mistook my case... I own that I made a mess of it... It's only in books that the officers of the detective force are superior to the weakness of making a mistake" (437). Cuff is in a book, and even he cannot avoid mistakes. Cuff's failure turns "over the work of detection to prominent members of this community" (Miller 41). *The Moonstone* dismisses the idea that a single superhero-style detective can appear and find the solution.

Franklin Blake, Rachel's cousin, takes charge of the investigation, and unlike Cuff, he does not claim to have the one right conclusion. At the beginning of the novel, Betterredge and Blake discuss why Colonel Herncastle bequeathed the diamond to Rachel. Even before the crime, Blake sees that there are a dizzying number of possible interpretations as he takes up one view, then another. Betterredge says that Blake "seemed to pass his life in a state of perpetual

contradiction with himself” (55). If you pass your life in a state of perpetual contradiction with yourself, you really ought to become an English major. When interpreting a text, there are so many options that I imagine it is possible someone could get so lost they would even be willing to turn to fictional detectives for answers. Blake concludes that “one interpretation is just as likely to be right as the other” (55). He then “appeared to think that he had completed all that was required of him. He laid down flat on his back in the sand, and asked what was to be done next” (55). Initially, Blake does not take a very active role in the investigation. This means that he is not wrong like Cuff, but it also means that he does not present any solutions. So, he is equally far away from the truth.

However, Blake’s acceptance of “many interpretations” as an answer stops when the missing diamond directly affects his life. After a year, when it is clear that Rachel will not forgive Blake, he takes up the case again. Like Cuff, Blake follows a trail of clues. This time, the clues do not point to Rachel; they lead to the Shivering Sands. At the beginning of the novel, when Rosanna Spearman, the maid, looks out over the sands, she says, “isn’t it wonderful? isn’t it terrible? I have seen it dozens of times, and it’s always as new to me as if I had never seen it before!” (38). Those might as well be words out of my own mouth when I talk about my favorite novels or plays or poems. I do think that studying literature is wonderful. But it is also terrible. And the wonderful and the terrible are right next to each other, and they are both questions, and it is hard to tell which is which. This is where Blake’s deductions lead him: not back to himself, but to something unknowable. At the Shivering Sands, Blake sees “the preliminary heaving of the Sand, and then the awful shiver that crept over its surface – as if some spirit of terror lived and moved and shuddered in the fathomless deeps beneath” (312). Blake gets farther along in his

investigation than Cuff did in his because Cuff was certain about what he would find under the surface, and Blake is not.

When Blake pushes forward into the unknown, he finds himself, just like Betteredge and Cuff. If the Shivering Sands are like a piece of literature, then Franklin Blake is absolutely like an English major. Blake puts his face “within a few feet of the surface of the quicksand” and lays himself “down over the brink,” with only the seaweed roots as an unsteady anchor as he searches for a chain (313). Once Blake finds the chain, he pulls it up and discovers a box that contains the nightgown with the varnish. Blake “took it up from the sand, and looked for the mark. I found the mark and read – MY OWN NAME” (314). Like Betteredge, Blake was trying to tell the story of the diamond but finds out he is only telling his own story. It turns out the unknowable thing hiding in the sand is you. Blake cannot even process that the name on the nightgown is FRANKLIN BLAKE; he only recognizes that it belongs to him. Then, he looks “back again at the letters” (314). Now, Franklin Blake is not “my own name,” but a series of letters. All Blake can do is repeat that he sees “my own name. Plainly confronting me – my own name” (314). His identity splits apart; the dash separates “me” from “my own name.” There is Blake the person and Blake the name, and he cannot tell which one he is. Despite their differences, Betteredge, Cuff, and Blake all end up in the same place and fail to solve the case, which makes failure seem inevitable.

At the eleventh hour, a mysterious stranger appears who can finally solve the case. After Rachel’s birthday party, Mr. Candy, the local doctor, gets sick and cannot communicate with anyone, except in broken phrases. Ezra Jennings, the doctor’s assistant, writes down what Candy says, and then puts all the words together like pieces in “a child’s ‘puzzle’” (374). Jennings’s detective work lets him see beneath the surface “to the thought, which was underlying it

connectedly all the time” (387). So, Jennings discovers that on the night of the theft, Mr. Candy secretly gave Blake laudanum and guesses that Blake took the diamond in an opium-induced trance. To test this theory, Blake, Betteredge, and Jennings restage the night of the birthday party so that Blake will act out what happened in another opium-induced trance. This is a fine plan for recovering a missing diamond, but it does not translate to an English classroom. I would love to watch someone act out the one true interpretation of “Goblin Market,” but it does not exist. Jennings turning up is a fluke for the characters in *The Moonstone*, and for English majors, there is no Ezra Jennings to count on at all. Jennings can give the characters in *The Moonstone* a happy ending, but he cannot give me a happy ending. The perfect English major is also an impossible version of an English major.

Sherlock Holmes

There is another detective who almost always succeeds: Sherlock Holmes. Like Cuff, Holmes comes to conclusions that other characters cannot because he pays attention to details that seem trivial. In “A Case of Identity” (1891), Holmes tells Watson that he knows where to look for clues, knows “the importance of sleeves, the suggestiveness of thumb-nails, or the great issues that may hang from a boot-lace” (297). This is not so different from a literature class, where you pay attention to the importance of a metaphor, the suggestiveness of a word, or the great issues that may hang from a semi-colon. In both cases, attention to detail is not just interesting but essential for coming to any conclusion. When Holmes quizzes Watson, Watson misses “everything of importance,” but he does “hit upon the method” (297). William W. Stowe argues that “the assertion that it *is* a method, and not some mysterious power of Holmes’s, is part of the formula” (367). Attention to details is Holmes’s method, and like for Cuff, it gives a sense

of grounding, which means that “the readers... feel that they, too, could do what Holmes does if they only noticed what he notices (Stowe 367). Holmes’s client describes “the little things” about her missing fiancé (293), and Holmes tells her that “it has long been an axiom of mine that the little things are infinitely the most important” (294), but that makes depending on details more problematic. If the little things are infinitely important, then there are infinite interpretations. So instead of being a way out of the labyrinth, infinitely important details open up their own new labyrinth.

This should be a problem, but, for Holmes, it is not; once he has gathered all the details that he deems important, he tries to find a thread that explains all the facts. This figurative thread continually reappears in the Sherlock Holmes stories, and it is just as important as his attention to detail because a list of observations does not solve a crime. Similarly, for English majors, a list of observations is not an interpretation of a text. There should be a thread that connects them into something coherent. In “The Final Problem” (1893), Holmes tells Watson that he “seized my thread and followed it, until it led me, after a thousand cunning windings, to ex-Professor Moriarty” (740). Holmes seizes the thread, but the thread is in control. He just follows it. In “The Reigate Squire” (1893), Holmes explicitly acknowledges that he makes “a point of never having any prejudices, and following docilely wherever fact may lead me” (638). Holmes is at the mercy of the facts. Except for when he is not. In “The Musgrave Ritual” (1893), Holmes listens to “this extraordinary sequence of events” and tries “to devise some common thread upon which they might all hang” (613). Now the thread is something Holmes creates, not something he follows. If Holmes is the model for English majors, then it is unclear whether they should be following the connections or creating them.

Whether he is creating or connecting, Holmes always explains his reasoning process to others. Interesting details and connections between them do not mean very much if no one else can understand them. At the end of *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), Holmes attempts to explain to Watson how he came to the right conclusion by endeavoring “to show you the different steps in my reasoning” (116). He walks Watson through the details he noticed and the connections that he made, point by point, until he comes to the solution, which is now perfectly clear to Watson and the reader. This beat is repeated in nearly every Sherlock Holmes story. It is a key part of the formula. When I write a paper for a literature class, I try to mimic the ending of a Sherlock Holmes story. I want my analysis to be so clear, simple, logical, and orderly that the reader will say, like Watson in “A Scandal in Bohemia” (1891), “when I hear you give your reasons... the thing always appears to me to be so ridiculously simple that I could easily do it myself” (241). But I also want them to be “baffled until you explain your process” (241). When Holmes explains the importance of a sleeve, he makes the ordinary seem mysterious. When he gives his final explanation, Holmes makes the mysterious seem ordinary. This is the same feat that a literary analysis paper has to perform.

Unlike Cuff, Holmes discusses his ideas and plans with Watson while he works on the case. Watson does not usually provide any information or interpretations that solve the case. However, his presence in the room prompts Holmes to talk about his theories. The conversation lets Holmes acknowledge the potential problems with his ideas. In “The Speckled Band” (1892), after listening to his client, Holmes develops a hypothesis, which he explains to Watson. Watson “can see many objections to any such theory” (407), and Holmes agrees. If Watson had not been there, Holmes would never have said his idea out loud. For an English major, there is a difference between the ideas that are in your head and the ideas you say to others. When the

difficulties are only in your head, it is much easier to find a way around them. Saying something out loud to another person allows you to become an audience to your own words and ideas. It also makes you accountable to another person because they can confirm that a theory presents difficulties or offer other ideas. Holmes and Watson's relationship highlights the importance of discussion when investigating a crime or when analyzing a text.

The problem is that Holmes often falls into the same trap as Cuff and deliberately leaves Watson in the dark. Just a few pages after Holmes talks to Watson in "The Speckled Band," he refuses to tell Watson and Helen Stoner, the client, his new theory. When Helen asks, he only says that "I should prefer to have clearer proofs before I speak" (416). Contradictions start arising here because refusing to confide in the others allows Holmes to have a grand reveal at the end of the story. If people already knew what Holmes was thinking, he would not seem nearly as smart in the end. This presents a problem for English majors following Holmes's model. Discussing the case makes him a better detective, but a less impressive one. English majors can have conversations or seem like geniuses, but not both. Pretending to be a genius and waiting for clearer proofs is the easier option. For Holmes, the clearer proofs always come, and he is always right, so losing discussion does not matter in the end. However, at least for this English major, clearer proofs never come in isolation. If all English majors followed Holmes, then communication in class discussions would shut down entirely.

This tension between Holmes's speech and silence in "The Speckled Band" exists throughout the entire Holmes canon. In the very first novel, Watson is stunned that Holmes "without leaving [his] room... can unravel some knot which other men can make nothing of, although they have seen every detail for themselves" (17). Holmes affirms that this is true. "The Greek Interpreter" (1893) introduces Mycroft, Holmes's brother, and Holmes readily admits that

Mycroft's powers of observation and deduction are superior to his own. However, Mycroft is "incapable" of detective work (684). Holmes explains that "if the art of the detective began and ended with reasoning from an armchair," Mycroft would be a brilliant detective (684). Instead of going outside, Mycroft prefers to spend his days in the Diogenes Club where "no member is permitted to take the least notice of any other one" and "no talking is, under any circumstances, allowed" (685). The Diogenes Club is like a perversion of an English literature classroom. Mycroft is doing all the English major things, looking for clues and connections, but no one is talking. That environment would not produce good detectives, just like it would not produce good English majors. So, the fact that Holmes claims that he can solve a crime without leaving his room shows his hypocrisy and flaws as a model for English majors.

Since no one can challenge Holmes's opinions, he can abandon his supposedly rigid method and find the facts he wants to. In five of the early Holmes stories, Holmes repeats the phrase "you know my method." The repetition of this phrase across different stories makes it seem like the method is consistent; it does not change depending on the crime. Having a method lets Holmes approach the strangest crimes in the same way he approaches the ordinary. However, as Ben Parker argues, "the decisive feature of the Holmes stories is not the presence... but the aura of decodable clues" (450). While "critics for a century have been 'catching' Holmes (or Doyle) not adhering to this postulated operating procedure" (452), there is no real operating procedure at work in the stories to fail. One moment, Holmes is following "docilely wherever fact may lead" (638). Then, in "Silver Blaze," he finds a match that was "invisible, buried in the mud. I only saw it because I was looking for it" (534). Finding a match because you look for it is the opposite of following the facts. Without a method, Holmes gets caught by confirmation bias. If an English major begins reading a text, already knowing what they will find, then

metaphorical matches in the mud start appearing everywhere. If every paper comes together easily and perfectly, that is probably a concern. Holmes is only apparently a genius because he is in control of the story.

Because Holmes only has to deal with the facts that he wants to, he can come to any conclusion that suits him. In “The Adventure of the Naval Treaty” (1893), Holmes claims that religion “can be built up as an exact science by the reasoner” (715). His evidence is a moss-rose, which he claims has no reason to exist other than its beauty. This proves “the goodness of Providence” (715). In *A Study in Scarlet*, Watson did say that Holmes’s knowledge of botany was “variable” (14), so fair enough, but Holmes is still wrong. Flowers exist for many reasons, but Holmes ignores any facts that might challenge his conclusion, which reaffirms a preexisting belief. The moss-rose is one of those infinitely important details that can prove whatever Holmes wants it to prove, just like a comma in a poem can prove whatever an English major wants it to prove. In “The Boscombe Valley Mystery” (1891), Holmes says that evidence “may seem to point very straight to one thing, but if you shift your own point of view a little, you may find it pointing in an equally uncompromising manner to something entirely different” (309). Either way, for Holmes, the evidence is always “straight” and “uncompromising.” That means that any one point of view can dominate and erase all others. If all evidence in literary studies is circumstantial, then it seems like having evidence does not matter at all.

If Sherlock Holmes is the model, that is true; no interpretation or solution actually matters because he is always proved right. It does not matter that Holmes perceives Watson has been in Afghanistan from his tropical tan. It does not matter that he deduces a snake killed Helen Stoner’s sister from a leash and a bowl of milk. It does not matter that he claims a moss-rose proves the goodness of Providence or anything else. In the Sherlock Holmes universe,

Afghanistan is in the tropics, snakes drink milk, and flowers are the basis of religion. The text and the other characters always treat Holmes as perfectly sound in his conclusions. In “The Speckled Band,” a story that features the most dubious of deductions, Holmes knows where Helen has come from based on her appearance. She tells him that “whatever your reasons may be, you are perfectly correct” (399). That line sums up Sherlock Holmes. It does not matter what his reasons are; he is always perfectly correct. So, if English majors are like Holmes, then they too are always perfectly correct, whatever their reasons. I decided to write this thesis because I wanted to leave the business of always being right behind, so it is time to say goodbye to Sherlock Holmes as a model.

Hard-Boiled Detectives

There are other detectives who are not always right and know it. In the hard-boiled detective novel *The Big Sleep* (1939) by Raymond Chandler, detective Phillip Marlowe does not see everything clearly. About halfway through the novel, Marlowe rescues Vivian, his client’s daughter, when she is apparently attacked. In reality, “the whole thing was just some kind of an act” (152). Unable to see the truth, Marlowe walks through a literal and metaphorical fog. Fog everywhere. Getting stuck in the fog sounds like the opposite of a detective is supposed to do, and it is for detectives like Sherlock Holmes. *The Big Sleep* instead cultivates the feeling of being wrong. Not only does being wrong save Marlowe from becoming Sherlock Holmes, but, as Vivian tells him, there are reasons to love “a nice walk in the fog. You meet such interesting people” (146). Like Marlowe, English majors have to walk through the fog and sometimes get stuck there, but that is also where you meet such interesting people. Always immediately being right would be a pretty joyless exercise, as Marlowe knows. When he first takes the case, he

thinks that he has been given a lawyer's job "unless there was a lot more to it than met the eye. At a casual glance I thought that I might have a lot of fun finding out" (22). Not seeing everything clearly is what makes being a detective enjoyable for Marlowe.

The fog also has its problems; in *The Big Sleep*, there is often a disconnect between what someone says and what they mean. At the beginning of the novel, the dying millionaire General Sternwood hires Marlowe to stop Geiger from blackmailing him. However, there is more to it. Rusty Regan, Vivian's husband, has disappeared. Marlowe suspects that Sternwood "was at least half scared Regan might be behind" the blackmailing, even though Sternwood never says so (133). Sternwood's actual request means less to Marlowe than his casual mention that he is "very fond of Rusty" (10). After the meeting, when Vivian questions Marlowe, he tells her that Sternwood did not ask him to investigate Regan's disappearance "is that what you've been trying to get me to say?" (20). Vivian answers, "I'm sure I don't care what you say," which is true (20). Like what Sternwood says to Marlowe, what Marlowe says to Vivian does not matter because he means something different. In an English classroom, one of the biggest obstacles, in both speaking and writing, is bridging the gap between meaning and language, which is not easy. In this way, *The Big Sleep* is the opposite of a classroom because the characters deliberately widen the gap between meaning and language.

Marlowe lives in a universe where he has to look beneath the surface to develop an interpretation. When Sternwood hires him, Marlowe investigates the way he was asked to investigate Geiger. This leads Marlowe to the conclusion that he should not be interested in Regan, "not professionally. I haven't been asked to be. But I know somebody who would like to know where he is" (132). Trying to figure out where Rusty Regan went is a "hunch" that Marlowe plays out (211). At the end of the novel, Marlowe has another conversation with

Sternwood, and Sternwood tells him he did not want to know where Regan was; he was not trying to send any hidden messages. Marlowe “[assumed] a great deal. I usually ask for what I want” (210). Marlowe refuses payment for his unsatisfactory work and says he will drop the case. Sternwood then tells Marlowe to “quit, nothing... I’ll pay you another thousand dollars to find Rusty” (214), contradicting everything he said before. By having Sternwood deny that he ever wanted Marlowe to look for Regan while also allowing him to continue searching, *The Big Sleep* resist confirming whether Marlowe’s hunch was right or not. This sounds less like a classic detective story and more like an English classroom, where interpretations can be stronger or weaker, but never right.

Since interpretations cannot be proved, for Marlowe or English majors, there are never any satisfactory answers. Marlowe is “not Sherlock Holmes... I don’t expect to go over ground the police have covered and pick up a broken pen point and build a case from it” (213). If the police overlook anything, “it’s apt to be something looser and vaguer” (213). Unlike Jennings or Holmes, Marlowe does not deal with tangible evidence. Like an English major, Marlowe deals in things that are looser and vaguer. The only objects he owns are “a few books, pictures, radio, chessmen, old letters, stuff like that. Nothing.” (158). He owns items that you read, listen to, or look at: items with multiple interpretations. Marlowe looks at the chessmen and sees that “there was a problem laid out on the board, a six-mover. I couldn’t solve it, like a lot of my problems” (154). Marlowe “undergoes a kind of ‘loss of reality’ [and] finds himself in a dreamlike world where it is never quite clear who is playing what game” (Žižek 63). Losing reality and looking at a chessboard with an unsolvable problem is what everyone is doing in a literature class. The question is, what is the next move? Marlowe makes an effort and moves the knight. However, when he looks back, he sees that “the move with the knight was wrong. I put it back where I had

moved it from. Knights had no meaning in this game” (156). If analyzing a text is like staring at the impossible move on Marlowe’s chessboard, then any move is meaningless.

However, Marlowe does not quit; he works with the intangible evidence. In *The Big Sleep*, there are many “nice write-up[s]” about the case (118), but Marlowe cannot rely on written records. Vivian tells Marlowe that Owen, the chauffeur, did not know the right people, because “that’s all a police record means in this rotten crime-ridden country” (57). Like the words characters say, written words do not mean anything. Marlowe “went to college once and can still speak English if there’s any demand for it. There isn’t much in my trade” (10). All that matters is the story the writing presents. In Dashiell Hammett’s hard-boiled detective novel *The Maltese Falcon* (1929), detective Sam Spade explains that creating a nice story makes life simpler for everyone. The district attorney is “more interested in how his record will look on paper than anything else. He’d rather drop a doubtful case than try it and have it go against him” (180). The district attorney creates the same sort of record that Holmes would, everything neat and ordered. Marlowe and Spade both recognize that this story is a construction, because in a world with no satisfactory conclusions, there can be no clear stories.

It makes sense that Marlowe and Spade recognize this because they are also complicit in hiding the truth. To keep the police away, Spade comes up with a story so goofy that criminal Joel Cairo “felt decidedly ridiculous repeating it” (97). Spade argues that “its goofiness is what makes it good” (97). Detective fiction is sort of inherently goofy. I mean, an opium-induced theft? However, its goofiness is also what makes it engaging, which Spade recognizes as he writes his own story to draw in his audience. Similarly, the “nice write-up” in *The Big Sleep* was Marlowe’s idea. He says that in detective work “there’s always a large element of bluff connected with it” (212). To create a narrative that plays out the way he wants, Marlowe has to

tells Norris, the butler, that Sternwood's daughter "Carmen wasn't here. That's very important. She wasn't here. That was a vision you saw" (91). It seems that there are more similarities between Marlowe and Holmes than it first appeared. However, there is a key difference; Marlowe recognizes he is manufacturing a nice write-up and not telling the truth in its entirety. He might not get to be absolved by confessing, but he gets some credit for not being fooled by his own argument, like Holmes or a bad English major.

Not only do Marlowe and Spade write the story about the crime, but their investigation also shapes the crime. Unlike most detective fiction, hard-boiled detective stories are usually told in the first person, and "this change in narrative perspective has of course profound consequences for the dialectic of truth and deception. By means of his initial decision to accept a case, the hard-boiled detective gets mixed up in a course of events that he is unable to dominate" (Žižek 62). For instance, Marlowe knows that Vivian's attack was an act that "was at least partly for my benefit" (152). As he investigates, the crime changes because of his involvement and turns "into an intricate game of criss-cross... The 'truth' at which he attempts to arrive is not just a challenge to his reasons but concerns him ethically and often painfully" (Žižek 63). Like Marlowe investigating a case, when English majors analyze a text, they shape it. Whether or not I say "I" in a paper, my analysis is shaped by me. Getting involved, in an analysis or a crime, makes it impossible for the case to ever be solved. Marlowe takes care of Geiger almost exactly halfway through the novel and thinks "that left me" (129). The book does not end here because Marlowe is already concerned "ethically and painfully." He cannot "take another drink and forget the whole mess" (129), because he, part of the case, is still there.

With all these problems and impossibilities, the only way Marlowe can bring the case to an end is by blurring the line between fiction and reality. Like Sam Spade, Marlowe is a

storyteller, who makes the world “a very safe place to live in, and yet not too dull to be worth living in” (Chandler “Simple” 237). He finds the truth, but does “my thinking myself, what there is of it” and decides what to do with the truth (227). Often, that means spinning a fictional story. Reality and fictionality operate strangely in *The Big Sleep*. When Marlowe hears the criminal Harry Jones’s story, he thinks that “it had the austere simplicity of fiction rather than the tangled woof of fact” (169). This is clear; simple fiction is the opposite of confusing reality. Except, there is no reality in *The Big Sleep*. It is a fictional novel. Despite all Marlowe’s proclamations about reality, Chandler also draws attention to his fictionality. The first thing Vivian says to Marlowe is, “so you’re a private detective... I didn’t know they really existed, except in books” (18). Of course, Marlowe does not exist outside of books. Does that mean that *The Big Sleep* is austere simple? Or is saying that fiction is austere simple a simplification of fiction? The line between fiction and reality is so confusing that it highlights the problems of a real English major using a fictional hard-boiled detective as a model for her real analysis of fictional works. Students in a literature classroom following Marlowe’s model lose their sense of reality and their sense of self.

Miss Marple

In Agatha Christie’s short story collection, *The Thirteen Problems* (1932), Miss Marple appears to strike the perfect balance between classic and hard-boiled detectives. Like Sherlock Holmes, Miss Marple pays attention to the details around her, but without ego. When Holmes teaches Watson his method in “A Case of Identity,” he tells Watson that he “missed everything of importance” (297). The real problem here is not Watson’s observational skills, but that Holmes is the one who decides what is important. He never considers that Watson’s thoughts

might be worthwhile because they do not match his. In “The Tuesday Night Club,” the first short story in the collection, Miss Marple’s domestic knowledge about hundreds and thousands, a trifle decoration, gives her a key clue that Sherlock Holmes would have missed. Instead of focusing on “everything of importance,” for Miss Marple, everything is important. In “The Thumb Mark of St. Peter,” she cares “who cut the meshes of Mrs. Jones’s string bag? And why Mrs. Sims only wore her new fur coat once. Very interesting things, really, to any student of human nature” (78). Instead of positioning herself as the teacher on high, Miss Marple calls herself a student, which makes her a better detective.

Miss Marple’s attention to detail lets her make connections to the problem, so, like Phillip Marlowe, she gets involved in the case. Unlike Marlowe, she does not shape the case as it is happening. At the end of “The Tuesday Night Club,” Miss Marple starts talking about Mr. Hargraves, who seems completely unconnected to the problem at hand. However, for Miss Marple, “this story made me think of him at once... The facts are so very alike, aren’t they?” (13). Miss Marple does not go to the scene of the crime like Marlowe would. Instead, she uses what she knows about human nature and applies it to the case. This works for Miss Marple because, as she explains in “The Thumb Mark of St. Peter,” she has had “opportunities of observing [human nature] at close quarters in a village” (78). For most of *The Big Sleep*, Marlowe is isolated, and he ends the novel deciding to keep the solution a secret, alone in a bar, having “a couple of double Scotches. They didn’t do me any good” (Chandler 231). In contrast, Miss Marple relies on her connection to the other people in St. Mary Mead. Being part of a community enables Miss Marple to be a good detective and being a good detective ties Miss Marple to the community. So, she does not even need to leave her house to solve the case.

However, not leaving the house brings its own set of problems because the line between fiction and reality blurs even more than it did for Marlowe. The premise in *The Thirteen Problems* is that a group of characters, The Tuesday Night Club, meet together, and every week “each member in turn has to propound a problem. Some mystery of which they have personal knowledge” (5). This set-up makes the problems purely intellectual because there is always someone who already has the solution. No detectives are actually needed. Glenn Most argues that Christie’s detective stories “belong more to the category of riddles or crossword puzzles rather than providing the kinds of deeper anxieties and satisfactions that many readers of detective fiction seem to crave” (63). The Tuesday Night Club “play” the game of solving problems (5). Like solving a crossword puzzle, there are no stakes. Miss Marple connects the case to Mr. Hargraves and figures out that Gladys Linch put the hundreds and thousands on the trifle, but as Sir Henry explains, she had already “confessed the truth” before the story began (15). Most trivializes Christie’s stories, but *The Thirteen Problems* highlights the serious interpretative problems that all detectives face, especially detectives in an English classroom.

So, for the Tuesday Night Club, the problems of the past become the problems of the present. In “The Simple Art of Murder,” Raymond Chandler argues that “fiction in any form has always intended to be realistic” and critiques classic detective stories, like Christie’s, because they are “too little aware of what goes on in the world” (222, 231). However, the problem for The Tuesday Night Club and students in a literature classroom is that there is no real world, only a representation of the real world. In a literary history class, you can study texts from Victorian England, but cannot go there. Similarly, in *The Thirteen Problems*, the cases have happened in the past but are not happening now. The characters have to rely on words to represent and solve the case. Early in the first story, Joyce mocks Raymond, saying he “just likes the sound of words

and of himself saying them” (2). This is troubling because all the cases are made up of words, and Joyce implies that words can be meaningless, which makes the solutions based on these words questionable. In “The Companion,” the Tuesday Night Club, like English majors, have to do “all we can do—guess. We haven’t got any clues” (128). There is no matchstick in the mud. There is not even a matchstick or mud.

Relying on words make the clues in a case unstable, but it gets worse because those words also change meaning depending on the context. In “The Thumb Mark of St. Peter,” Miss Marple asks whether it “ever occurred to you... how much we go by what is called, I believe, the context?” (88). The entire case depends on Miss Marple realizing that “we don’t, as a rule, repeat the actual words; we put in some other words that seem to us to mean exactly the same thing” (88). In the story, “pilocarpine” and “pile of carp” get confused (89). One is medicine and one is a fish, but the context and listener make it so there is functionally no difference between the two. Even in *The Big Sleep*, facts were more stable than this. So, Most is right; Miss Marple stories are like crossword puzzles. Every word depends on all the other words around it. Albeit, this is a nightmare version of a crossword puzzle where words and clues keep changing. This prevents the cases in *The Thirteen Problems* from ever being definitively solved because there is no verification that Miss Marple’s context is the right one. In a roundabout way, I have found myself right where I started in this labyrinth. Miss Marple is the detective who solves cases like an English major, but she also has the same problems I started with.

Metaphysical Detectives

This thesis was doomed from the beginning. I imagined that uncertain interpretation was a mysterious labyrinth, but, if I grasped Sherlock Holmes’s thread, I could wind my way back

out. It turns out that uncertain interpretation is not a puzzle to solve, but the town that I live in. There is no exit. I have no solution to offer, and I must confess my complete failure as a detective. Well, my failure as a normal detective. Failing to solve the case is a hallmark of a metaphysical detective. In metaphysical detective fiction, “rather than definitively solving a crime... the sleuth finds himself confronting the insoluble mysteries of his own interpretation and his own identity” (Merivale and Sweeney 2), which is right where I find myself as an English major. “Death and the Compass,” Jorge Luis Borges’s 1942 short story, is a key metaphysical detective text and will be my point of entry into this particular labyrinth. Michael Holquist says that “if, in the detective story, death must be solved, in the new metaphysical detective story it is *life* which must be solved” (173). I hope Holquist is right because I need a solution for living in a maze without an exit.

Detectives often face problems with reality and fictionality; however, in metaphysical detective stories, there is no line between reality and fiction. Erik Lönnrot, the detective in “Death and the Compass,” does not face the problems that Phillip Marlowe and Miss Marple did, but that creates a new problem. After the first murder, Inspector Treviranus theorizes that it must have been a robber, but Lönnrot tells him that “here we have a dead rabbi; I would prefer a purely rabbinical explanation, not the imaginary mischances of an imaginary robber” (77). The flaws in this reasoning are pretty obvious. There is no reason why an imaginary “purely rabbinical explanation” is more likely than an imaginary robber, except that “Death and the Compass” is a fictional story, and that explanation is more interesting. However, Lönnrot is right. He can dedicate “himself to studying the names of God in order to come across the name of the murderer” and find it (78). By the time Lönnrot realizes that Red Scharlach, his enemy and double, is involved, he admits that “reality... hardly interested him now” (82). Lönnrot’s method

clearly parodies Sherlock Holmes, the detective not self-aware enough to realize that he walks the line between reality and fiction. Coming up with inane solutions to made-up problems is the worst version of being an English major or a detective.

Even though Lönnrot is right that there will be a murder at Triste-le-Roy, he fails to realize that it will be his murder. His devotion to the most interesting solution leads him to Scharlach. Triste-le-Roy, the place where Lönnrot dies, mirrors the convoluted reasoning process that led him there. The villa is a labyrinth that abounds “in pointless symmetries and in maniacal repetitions” (83). No matter how far he progresses through Triste-le-Roy, he ends up where he started, passing “duplicate patios, and time after time to the same patio. He ascended the dusty stairs to circular antechambers; he was multiplied infinitely in opposing mirrors” (83-84). Studying literature feels like walking through Triste-le-Roy. The end of a class or an essay solves the problem or at least progresses towards a solution. Then you keep walking, and suddenly you are passing the same patios and the same patios, and the text that was so clear yesterday is opaque again. In the circular room, you are reflected infinitely in opposing mirrors. Not only does this loop eliminate the possibility of a satisfying ending, but it also negates the possibility of a beginning; detectives and English majors are caught nowhere.

All detectives are caught nowhere at some point, but they escape by building up a case that shows the way out. “Death and the Compass” contains many allusions to these other detectives; it would be easy to make a game out of spotting references. At first, Lönnrot has the most in common with Sherlock Holmes; he “believed himself a pure reasoner, an Auguste Dupin” (76). Like Holmes, he comes to a bizarre conclusion that no one else could have, and “the mystery appeared almost crystalline to him now; he was mortified to have dedicated a hundred days to it” (82-83). Readers of “Death and the Compass” know how this story should

go, and Borges depends “on the audience’s familiarity with the conventions of the detective story to provide the subtext” that he plays with (Holquist 172). Scharlach committing murders that “form a perfect rhomb” is a fine premise for a mystery (86). However, following Sherlock Holmes’s thread and finding the solution does not save Lönnrot like it would in an ordinary story. He tells Scharlach that his labyrinth has “three lines too many... I know of one Greek labyrinth which is a single straight line. Along that line so many philosophers have lost themselves that a mere detective might well do so, too” (86-87). Lönnrot’s chain of reasoning is the straight-line labyrinth. The closest that he can ever get to a solution is halfway, so he will always miss something, like the fact he is the victim and not the detective.

The metaphysical detective path leads to inescapable madness and misery. At Triste-le-Roy, Lönnrot thinks “*the dim light, the symmetry, the mirrors, so many years, my unfamiliarity, the loneliness*” make the house seem bigger than it really is (84). When you study literature and read like a detective, it is worth pausing to consider the dim light, the symmetry, the mirrors, so many years, my unfamiliarity, and the loneliness. However, they also make the problems grow. It is not inherently bad to go to Triste-le-Roy, but it is bad to get stuck there, as Lönnrot does. He is already trapped when he says Scharlach’s next crime will be “at A, then a second crime at B, eight kilometers from A, then a third crime at C, four kilometers from A and B, half-way between the two. Wait for me afterwards at D, two kilometers from A and C, again halfway between both” (87). Like Lönnrot’s labyrinth, this thesis has progressed in a Zeno-like line. If the solution I am looking for is at A, then *The Moonstone* is at B, eight kilometers from A; Sherlock Holmes is at C, four kilometers from A and B, half-way between the two. Hard-boiled detectives are two kilometers away, at D, and Miss Marple is at E, one kilometer away from that. I could tell you to wait for me at F, with the metaphysical detectives, but I will not be there. Majoring in

English has not been miserable, so as I look forward to graduation, I am also going to look backward, before F, E, D, C, or B.

Bleak House

Charles Dickens's novel *Bleak House* (1853) was published before any of the other stories I have looked at, but it anticipates the problems that later detectives face. It is also not really a detective novel, although there are detectives in it. *Bleak House* is a novel about textuality; papers are everywhere. As I know by now, many documents come with many interpretations and without satisfactory answers. Like Phillip Marlowe, the characters in *Bleak House* are surrounded by "fog everywhere" (13), and "at the very heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery" (14). Of all the documents in *Bleak House*, the legal documents in Jarndyce and Jarndyce are the most difficult decipher, and "the interminable process of interpretation to which the original will give rise, literally maddening to those who bring to it the demand that it issue in final truths and last judgments, is abandoned rather than adjudicated" (Miller "Discipline" 61). I certainly know what it is like to be maddened by interminable interpretation and to consider abandoning everything, like a metaphysical detective. Richard, a party to Jarndyce and Jarndyce, says that no outsider could "know much of such a labyrinth" (784). The metaphysical detective labyrinth turns up nearly one hundred years before metaphysical detectives do. In Jarndyce and Jarndyce, "every difficulty, every contingency, every masterly fiction, every form of procedure known in that court, is represented over and over again" (33). The case repeats itself over years and years but is never solved, which feels like a very familiar problem to an English major.

So, like an English major, *Bleak House* needs a detective, and three of the amateur detectives who investigate the web of documents illustrate the problems of later detectives. Mr. Tulkinghorn, the lawyer, is the ultimate failure of the Sergeant Cuff or Sherlock Holmes model. He is convinced that he knows more than anyone and so pursues Lady Dedlock “doggedly and steadily, with no touch of compunction, remorse, or pity” (459). Tulkinghorn does not even have a Betteredge or Watson to pretend to include because “he never converses, when not professionally consulted” (23-24). Tulkinghorn ends up murdered by one of the people he dismissed. Richard Carstone is the original model for the self-centered detective, like Gabriel Betteredge or Franklin Blake. He tries to figure out the solution to Jarndyce and Jarndyce by “poring over a table covered with dusty bundles of papers which seemed to me like dusty mirrors reflecting his own mind” (784). Like a hard-boiled detective, Richard gets so invested in the case that he believes “either the suit must be ended... or the suitor” (784), which makes his life “a dark-looking case sometimes” (625), and he ends the novel coughing up blood. Although, no one’s case is as dark-looking as Lady Dedlock’s. Like a metaphysical detective, she both investigates and is investigated. In the end, she gives up, wandering “these streets! I have no purpose but to die... I have done all I could do to be lost” (910). Like Richard and Tulkinghorn, she ends up a cold corpse.

Mr. Bucket is the detective who does not die, who even enjoys being a detective because, like Miss Marple, he is involved in a community. In “The Tuesday Night Club,” Miss Marple succeeds because “living all these years in St. Mary Mead does give one an insight into human nature” (5). Bucket also engages in his community. He goes to arrest Mr. George but stops and stays at the Bagnets for dinner. When Bucket leaves, the family is “much obliged to him for the pleasure he has given them in his company; and so they part with many expressions of good-will

on both sides” (765). Even during Bucket’s most difficult case, finding Lady Dedlock, he is always “kept fresh by a certain enjoyment of the work in which he was engaged” (881). Bucket shows how it feels to be a detective, finally answering Felski, who argued that “becoming a critical reader means moving from attachment to detachment and indeed to disenchantment” (“After” 30). For Bucket, the opposite is true. He is a critical reader who is deeply attached. However, Bucket does not just fall into attachment. After he leaves the Bagnets, Bucket tells George that he “endeavoured to make things pleasant to-night” (765). If he did not endeavor to make things pleasant, he could easily become a detached, disenchanted critical reader, like Tulkinghorn. While reading like a detective presents the risk of turning into Tulkinghorn, Bucket shows that there is a way to positively read like a detective.

Bucket’s friendliness is not limited to a small group; his community is broad. There is no need for a Watson-like companion because of Bucket’s “fondness for society, and his adaptability to all grades” (812). Anyone and everyone can talk to Bucket. Even George, who does not initially like Bucket, “begins, in spite of himself, to be rather proud of him” because “he is so friendly... and so easy to get on with” (764). Felski argues that if readers are detectives, texts are criminals who “must be scrutinized, interrogated, and made to yield... hidden secrets” (“Suspicious” 224). For some of the characters, the people who break the law are their enemies. When Tulkinghorn discovers that George hid the criminal Mr. Gridley, he tells him that “I don’t like your associates. You should not have seen the inside of my door this morning, if I had thought of your being that man” (445). However, when Bucket goes to arrest Gridley and finds that he is sick, he “good-naturedly offered such consolation as he could administer” (404). Like Miss Marple, Bucket does not let his ego get in the way. He tells Gridley that he is “welcome to drop into me, right and left, if he likes. *I shall never take advantage of it*” (405). For Bucket,

Gridley is not an object to be scrutinized or interrogated. Instead, he does everything he can to get him well again because Gridley is “half the fun of the fair, in the Court of Chancery” (405). Bucket’s friendliness and “adaptability to all grades” completely dismisses the idea that detective readers and criminal texts have to be enemies.

Engaging with many other people lets Bucket see problems from multiple perspectives and not become isolated like Marlowe. When George asks Bucket what he intends to do about Gridley, Bucket responds, “I don't know yet” (405). Those are words you rarely hear from a detective, but by this point, Bucket has already taken the “opportunity of entering into a little light conversation” with the other characters and can see that circumstances have changed (402). He is resistant to that “potent euphoric drug” of always being right (Latour 239). This is important because, at the end of the novel, Bucket faces a similar challenge when he tells Sir Leicester Dedlock and Volumnia that the case is “pretty well complete. It is a beautiful case” (811). However, Bucket knows that “when I depict it as a beautiful case... I mean from my point of view. As considered from other points of view, such cases will always involve more or less unpleasantness” (811). Bucket is in the same position as Marlowe at the end of *The Big Sleep*; the solution to the case will hurt someone, this time Sir Leicester. Marlowe keeps the solution to himself, but Bucket does not stop having conversations. He tells Sir Leicester about Lady Dedlock but did “endeavor to pave the way a little towards these unpleasant disclosures, yesterday” (820-821). Conversation allows Bucket to not always know and to pave the way towards kind solutions.

Even though he is a friendly detective, Bucket still does his job, and he finds a balance between work and conversation. Sherlock Holmes had too much work and not enough conversation. Miss Marple had too much conversation and not enough going out into the world.

Duty “is one thing, and conversation is another” (766), but, for Bucket, they work together. When he pursues Lady Dedlock, Bucket stops and makes “himself agreeable and merry everywhere; but whenever he took his seat upon the box again, his face resumed its watchful steady look, and he always said to the driver in the same business tone, ‘Get on, my lad!’” (870). Later, he stops again but “never seeming to lose time, and always mounting to the box again with his watchful, steady face and his business-like ‘Get on, my lad!’” (881). The repetition of the same phrases and dialogue shows how Bucket mechanically returns his work, but where “the law is impersonal and anonymous, the law enforcement is capable of showing a human face” (Miller 78). Bucket puts a human face on his work. He has to tell Sir Leicester about Lady Dedlock but can do it with “a touch of compassion” (817). He has to arrest George but still asks if the handcuffs are “comfortable? If not, say so, for I wish to make things as pleasant as is consistent with my duty, and I’ve got another pair in my pocket” (767). Bucket works, but he works while acknowledging the humanity of other people.

Because Bucket acknowledges other people’s humanity, when he observes details, like Sherlock Holmes, he does so constructively. Bucket can also see “the great issues that may hang from a boot-lace” (Doyle 297), or the great issues that may hang from a comma in “Goblin Market.” Like an English major, “when Mr. Bucket has a matter of this pressing interest under his consideration, the fat forefinger seems to rise,” and he points to details (803). Pointing to details is a quiet action, but Bucket is a quiet character. He is first introduced as a mysterious stranger who “stands there, with his attentive face, and his hat and stick in his hands, and his hands behind him, a composed and quiet listener” (355). When Sherlock Holmes was quiet, it was because he was hiding a grand reveal, not listening. Conversations are important for all detectives, but it also important to be a composed and quiet listener. Bucket only says “what I

must say, and no more” (819). He never loudly exclaims what his findings are; he “completes his observations as quietly and carefully as he has carried them on” (861). At the end of the novel, Bucket can spring into action because he has read Sir Leicester’s “face with the greatest attention all along” (863). English majors also need to read with attention all along, because a conversation where everyone is waiting to be the smartest person in the room is much less interesting than a conversation where people point to and explain details.

Although he observes quietly, when he makes decisions, Bucket is confident, even though that sometimes leads to failure. Bucket does share some similarities with Sergeant Cuff and Sherlock Holmes. Near the end of the novel, “the velocity and certainty of Mr. Bucket’s interpretation on all these heads is little short of miraculous” (860). For Cuff and Holmes, quick and miraculous interpretations never boded well. However, although Bucket’s interpretations seem quick to Mrs. Rouncewell, they come after 860 pages of quietly observing. Bucket has had time to build up a case; Cuff and Holmes never did. Bucket is prepared to act quickly when he and Esther pursue Lady Dedlock. They get lost in the streets, but “it was nothing, he said, to lose such a track for one while, and to take it up for another while, and so on” (882), but then “the next stage, however, ended as that one ended; we had no new clue” (882). When Bucket realizes that they are going the wrong direction, he turns back “never wavering, he never even stopped to make an inquiry until we were within a few miles of London” (901). Still, they are not in time to save Lady Dedlock. Bucket finds the solution, but it “[misses] the essence of what it aspired to grasp” (Miller 97). *Bleak House* “counters the tidy conclusion of the case with a conspicuous recognition of all that must elude any such achievement” (Miller 97). Bucket solves the case and finds Lady Dedlock, but she is dead. The novel ends, but the last sentence is unfinished. Bucket, the best detective English major, still does not get a satisfying solution.

Reading like a detective is not easy. Successfully reading like a detective is even harder. As literary critics have pointed out and detectives illustrated, there are plenty of pitfalls. Bucket shows how to read like a detective and do it well, even though he does not show me the way out of the labyrinth. Like an English major, Bucket “pervades a vast number of houses, and strolls about an infinity of streets: to outward appearance rather languishing for want of an object” (803). Although, while he strolls through infinity, “he is in the friendliest condition towards his species, and will drink with most of them... but through the placid stream of his life there glides an under-current of forefinger” (803). So, “time and place cannot bind Mr. Bucket. Like man in the abstract, he is here to-day and gone to-morrow—but, very unlike man indeed, he is here again the next day” (803). At the beginning of this capstone, I said there would not be an end, but here we are. When you read like Mr. Bucket, you will still fail, but you fail while being in the friendliest condition towards your species. Most importantly, Bucket shows how to live in the labyrinth while still being here the next day. So, while this capstone is undoubtedly a failure in many ways, I know where I am now and have an idea of how to live here. As long as I fail like Bucket, I am happy and will still be here tomorrow—even supposing—.

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Reflection

The biggest challenge in writing my capstone was of my own making; I chose to write about a topic that was hard to write about. At least, it was hard for me. Instead of straight literary analysis, which I would have been more comfortable with, I mixed literary analysis with a sort of metacritical analysis. This meant that I had to spend many, many hours thinking about how I think and analyzing how I analyze. If that's not a recipe to make your brain hurt (and to cause occasional bouts of despair), then I don't know what is. Since this paper was so different from anything I had ever written in class, I felt very disoriented at first. Actually, for most of the fall semester I felt like I was completely lost. But, of course, this difficult writing assignment helped create a positive relationship with my capstone mentor, Dr. McCuskey. Back in September, I told Dr. McCuskey that I was worried I had picked a research question without an answer, and he told me to make no mistake, I had. Knowing that helped me stop being so self-conscious about what I was writing and helped me embrace the unknowable. Dr. McCuskey never showed me how to get out of the literary labyrinth I was lost in, but he always helped me make sense of my ideas and improve my writing, which are skills that I will continue to use well after I graduate. I truly appreciated the chance to work with him on my capstone this year.

And so, even with all the difficulties, I am very glad that I picked a topic that really challenged me. My capstone gave me the chance to not only to use the skills that I have developed in my four years of studying English, but also to think critically about those skills, and how I should be using them. So, despite all the problems it caused, my thesis topic was what created a capstone experience for my undergraduate education. Not to mention that, after all the problems, finally finishing my first semi-coherent draft felt like a real triumph. So, the best piece of advice that I can offer to future students working their capstones would be to try and

deliberately challenge themselves, even though that sounds counterproductive. When I first started working on my capstone, I felt a lot of pressure to make sure it was the best thing I had ever written. Maybe the best thing any human had ever written. However, when I realized how different this writing was going to be from the writing I had done in class, I also realized how ridiculous and unrealistic it was to expect that my first paper over 10 pages would be anything more than what it was: a first attempt. Although that seems blindingly obvious now, I'm not sure I would have ever accepted that if my topic hadn't challenged me. It made the process much more fun, interesting, and rewarding because instead of feeling pressure to write the best thing ever, I could try out something new.

The experience of writing an honors thesis substantially added to my overall education. First, this project helped me deepen my research experience within the major. Before writing my capstone, the only other big research project I had worked on outside of class was collecting data for an academic database. That project got me thinking about the ways that literary critics interpret texts. In my capstone, I was able to explore that question in an entirely different way, developing different skills. I started by reading the papers by Felski, Sedgwick, and Latour, which gave me a sense of how professional literary critics thought about reading like a detective. Then, I got to explore several detective novels and short stories for myself, which helped me develop my close reading and analytical skills. It was also just very fun. I also improved my writing skills through writing and rewriting 39 pages. This capstone experience also added to my education because it required me to think critically about topics in the major and the major itself. Although I have always loved being an English major, there was a point (or two) in the process where I genuinely thought that my English major story might not have a happy ending. Like I said in the thesis, I am okay with being a metaphysical detective, aimlessly wandering,

sometimes, but that would be a pretty bleak way to imagine my entire undergraduate experience. Instead, critically thinking about why it was okay not to find an answer helped me contextualize the last four years of my life in a way that I am happy with.

In my capstone, I wanted to explore interpretation and the problems that come with it, which I think matters beyond just my work as a literary studies student. When I first started working on my capstone, I wondered how I would ever get out of this labyrinth. Now that I am “finished,” I know that I won't. However, I would much rather know where I am than delude myself into thinking there are always clear answers. Completing my capstone project (and majoring in English literature) has helped me see more clearly why thinking about interpretation matters. Uncertain and unclear interpretive models are certainly not the sole property of English majors. Whatever your discipline, and even outside of an academic setting, you have to deal with interpretive problems. In a local and global community, people have to communicate with each other, and with any communication comes interpretation and all its difficulties. Anyone who talks to anyone else or consumes any media should be thinking about interpretation. A year ago, I thought that all my problems with interpretation stemmed from my decision to major in English. Now, I know that they stem from my existence as a person in the world. I, of course, have no answer to these problems, but I still think it is worth thinking about and studying, which is what I plan to do.

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Author Bio

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