The Mystery Plot

Though the mystery is often identified with a single genre—detective fiction—it's literary examples stretch beyond the confines of a particular genre or period. This course focuses on the evolution of the modern mystery plot, tracing a long arc from its emergence in eighteenth-century Gothic and terror fiction to its contemporary reinventions in the television procedural and the true crime podcast. Moving from the medieval castle to the urban street, the open sea to the country estate, we will investigate the extraordinary range and resilience of one of the most fundamental narrative forms across historical contexts. We’ll analyze the use of serial form in Wilkie Collins’ *The Moonstone* and the podcast sensation *Serial*; the invention of the clue and the transformations of the detective in the writings of De Quincey, Poe, Conan Doyle, and Himes; and the production of suspense in Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and Melville’s *Benito Cereno*. Throughout the course we will pay special attention to the mystery’s uncertain relationship to the novel, to realism, and to the literary itself.

Texts

**available at the Stanford bookstore:**
Edgar Allan Poe, *Selected Tales* (ISBN 9780199535774)
Herman Melville, *Billy Budd and Other Stories* (Penguin, ISBN 9780140390537)

**available on Canvas:**
Thomas De Quincey, “The Avenger,” “Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts”
Sigmund Freud, “The Wolf-Man”
Chester Himes, “He Knew”
Jorge Luis Borges, “Death and the Compass”

**available via iTunes or your preferred podcast app:**
*Serial*, season 1

Assignments:

One of the aims of this course is to think about how a narrative structure like the mystery operates across texts, genres, media, and historical and cultural contexts. What forms shape both the canonical novel and the potboiler, the psychoanalytic case study and the true crime podcast? In this sequence of assignments, you will build the tools you need to

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think beyond the scale of the single text and to develop theories that cut across the challenging range of our materials on our syllabus. You’ll begin by isolating textual features in single works, and then develop arguments about what those features do in groups of texts, ultimately assembling your own idiosyncratic archive of texts to examine in your final paper.

Four short essays (1-2 pages each, due 6/28, 7/5, 7/12, and 7/19): To prepare for vigorous discussion and germinate ideas about the reading, in weeks 2-5 you’ll write a short essay in which you isolate a particular feature of the text you read for class and reflect on its significance. That feature might be a sentence, a plot device, an aspect of the setting, a character trait, a striking trope, or something else; it could be something that seems especially characteristic or especially unusual in the broader context of the work or genre. These assignments will be graded on a check / check+ / check– scale.

Revision and expansion of one essay (3 pages, due 7/28): For this assignment you will pick one essay to develop into a comparative argument by examining how the feature you examined in the original essay functions in two different texts.

Final paper (6-8 pages; draft due 8/9; final version due by noon on 6/14): You are encouraged to develop your final paper idea out of one or more of your earlier essays in consultation with me. The argument should incorporate at least two texts (one of which may be off the syllabus).

Informal assignments: Throughout the class you will complete a variety of informal assignments, including brief presentations to spark discussion, in-class writing, discussion recaps, peer review workshops, and conferences with me on your work in progress. Though these assignments are informal, they are required, and will factor into your participation grade.

Unless otherwise indicated, responses are due at 9:30am via email (Word document attachment). Late papers will be graded down by 1/3 letter grade per day.

All written work should be double-spaced, in 12-point Times New Roman font, and should conform to MLA citation and formatting conventions. Please refer to the MLA Handbook and the MLA guide on the Purdue OWL website (https://owl.english.purdue.owl/resource/747/01/).

All work that is not your own and is not considered common knowledge must be cited. This includes not just verbatim quotations, but also paraphrases, ideas, conceptual frameworks, and collaborative work. When in doubt, identify your sources. If you have questions about when or how to cite, or if you find yourself facing a deadline with nothing to submit, contact me and we will find a solution.

Attendance and participation

The success of this seminar depends on your regular attendance and active participation.
in class discussion. If you must miss class for religious holidays, medical reasons, a family emergency, or valid University-related activities, it is your responsibility to let me know as far in advance as possible and to ask about opportunities to make up missed work.

**Grade breakdown:**
Class participation – 30%
Short essays – 30%
Final paper – 40%

**Students with Documented Disabilities**
Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations.

OAE contact information:
563 Salvatierra Walk
650-723-1066
[http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/oae](http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/oae)

**Honor Code**
The Honor Code is the University's statement on academic integrity written by students in 1921. It articulates University expectations of students and faculty in establishing and maintaining the highest standards in academic work:

The Honor Code is an undertaking of the students, individually and collectively:
1. that they will not give or receive aid in examinations; that they will not give or receive unpermitted aid in class work, in the preparation of reports, or in any other work that is to be used by the instructor as the basis of grading;
2. that they will do their share and take an active part in seeing to it that others as well as themselves uphold the spirit and letter of the Honor Code.

The faculty on its part manifests its confidence in the honor of its students by refraining from proctoring examinations and from taking unusual and unreasonable precautions to prevent the forms of dishonesty mentioned above. The faculty will also avoid, as far as practicable, academic procedures that create temptations to violate the Honor Code.

While the faculty alone has the right and obligation to set academic requirements, the students and faculty will work together to establish optimal conditions for honorable academic work.

**CLASS SCHEDULE**

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Week 1

Tu 6/21:  (in class) episode of CSI; selections from Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot* and Tzvetan Todorov, “Typology of Detective Fiction”


Week 2

Tu 6/28:  Thomas De Quincey, “The Avenger,” “Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts” (on Canvas)
short essay #1 due

Th 6/30:  Edgar Allan Poe, "Murders at the Rue Morgue” and "The Purloined Letter”

Week 3

Tu 7/5:  Edgar Allan Poe, “The Gold-Bug”
short essay #2 due

Tu 7/7:  Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone*, prefaces + 1-105

Week 4

Tu 7/12:  Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone*, 105-190
short essay #3 due


Week 5

(in class) *Serial* podcast, episode 1
short essay #4 due

(in class) *Serial* podcast, episode 2

Week 6

Tu 7/26:  Herman Melville, *Benito Cereno*, 161-228

Th 7/28:  Herman Melville, *Benito Cereno*, 228-258
eSSay revision and expansion due
Week 7
Th 8/4: Sigmund Freud, “The Wolf-Man” (on Canvas)

Week 8
Chester Himes, “He Knew” (on Canvas)
(in class) clips from Witness for the Prosecution (1957, dir. Billy Wilder)

Draft of final paper due
Th 8/11: Jorge Luis Borges, “Death and the Compass” (on Canvas)
Su 8/14: Final paper due by noon