

The Two Stories of Detective Fiction

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Abstract: My paper discusses the double narrative of modern detective fiction: the crime and the investigation¹ and how this can be utilised in the literary theory classroom at undergraduate level. It argues that there are strong similarities between the process of detection and the reading process. As the reader joins the detective in assessing clues and false trails and in making connections between seemingly unrelated facts and evidence, he makes the story his own. Based on Jacqueline Winspear's first novel in the 'Maisie Dobbs' series (set in the aftermath of World War One), I explore the relationship between the story of the crime and the story of the investigation and how the reader connects the two. Because the crimes in modern detective novels about World War One are almost invariably connected to events that took place during the War, the reader also gains valuable insights into one of the most cataclysmic events of the twentieth century.

The double narrative of detective fiction, the crime and the investigation, makes the detective novel an excellent tool in the undergraduate literary theory classroom. The strong similarities between the detection procedure and the reading process provide a fruitful ground for students to practise literary criticism.² With the aid of a historical detective novel set in England in the aftermath of World War One, namely Jacqueline Winspear's award-winning *Maisie Dobbs* (2005),³ I demonstrate how three literary theories, text-, context- and reader-based, enable students to gain new insights into both the nature of literature and the reading process itself. For the text-based theory, New Criticism has been chosen, for the context-based, Historicism, and for the reader-based, Reader Response. Students at Kristianstad University, who have limited experience of detailed literary analysis, use Steven Lynn's excellent introductory work, *Texts and Contexts: Writing About Literature with Critical Theory* (2010)⁴. Literary analysis is similar to detective work: close attention must be paid to detail, the evidence must be analysed, and conclusions drawn. Where the novel focuses on a particular period — in this case, World War One, students can also gain valuable insights into major historical events.

The popularity of detective novels has steadily increased from the 1920s, the so-called "Golden Age" of detective fiction, and currently accounts for nearly 60 per cent of popular fiction sales.⁵ Historical detective fiction is *particularly* popular. As Jim Huang, editor of *The Droid Review* and owner of the Deadly Passions Bookstore in Kalamazoo, Michigan argues, historical detective fiction, "is the strongest sub-genre

within the mystery field I've seen in the last five years, and it shows no sign of waning. It's stronger than ever."⁶

The two stories of detective fiction have been described by Tzvetan Todorov as follows: "the first — the story of the crime — tells 'what really happened,' whereas the second — the story of the investigation — explains 'how the reader (or the narrator) has come to know about it.'"⁷ The detective is the central figure. As Most and Stowe argue, the detective is "the figure for the reader within the text, the one character whose activities most closely parallel the reader's own, in object (both reader and detective seek to unravel the mystery of the crime), in duration (both are engaged in the story from the beginning, and when the detective reveals his solution the reader can no longer evade it himself and the novel can end), and in method (a tissue of guesswork and memory, of suspicion and logic)."⁸

The focus in the following discussion is on the private investigator Maisie Dobbs in the novel of the same name. The action takes place in 1929. *Maisie Dobbs* is the first in a series of nine books in which Maisie is the protagonist. What does Maisie discover about the crime, and what methods does she use? These questions will be explored with the aid of the three literary theories, New Criticism, Historicism, and Reader Response. The basic principles of the theories will be briefly outlined before studying two extracts from the novel. The focus here, as indeed in detective novels in general, is on the investigation because this is where the parallel activities of the detective and the reader are seen most clearly. It should be noted that while this article focus on just two extracts, students would be required to read the whole novel as part of their course. They would also be encouraged to select passage of their own for analysis and to bring these up in class for discussion.

The three theories: a brief outline

New Criticism

One of the most important features of New Criticism is "close reading," in which special attention is paid to images, symbols, repetitions, opposites, contradictions, and other stylistic devices as a means of identifying and understanding both the message of the text and its unified structure. New Critics' basic assumption is that there is a clear meaning in the text, which can only be identified by close reading. In the case of *Maisie Dobbs*, what is the main message? What special skills has Maisie honed both during and after the War? What textual clues demonstrate how she uses her knowledge of the War to understand the criminal? Throughout the series, the crimes investigated are invariably related to the War.

Historicism

Historicists emphasise that the message of the literary work is best understood by careful examination of the historical context of the work itself and of the plot/action. In the case of *Maisie Dobbs*, close attention must be paid to the state of England in the aftermath of World War One. How were people thinking? What did they fear? How had England changed as a consequence of the War?

Reader Response

For the Reader Response critic, meaning is created by the reader and not the author. It is our environment, education, interests and experience that determine how we understand a literary text. There is no definitive meaning in a text; all readings are, in fact, “misreadings” to a greater or lesser degree. What do students know about World War One? How do they perceive war in general? To what extent and in what ways can their experience influence their perception of Maisie Dobbs, her character and methods?

The above three literary theories require different skills, presenting students with very specific problems. New Criticism, for example, necessitates a good knowledge of linguistic and stylistic devices; Historicism entails painstaking research and an ability to use sources of different kinds: history books, memoirs, diaries, letters, historical records etc.; and Reader Response requires that students can utilise personal experiences to understand the text while at the same time bearing in mind that it is the text itself that is paramount. Their analysis must maintain an objective critical style even when it is based on personal experience. I hope to show in the following that detective fiction provides rich opportunities to practise all three theoretical approaches.

Maisie Dobbs Extract One: The Crime

As with all the Maisie Dobbs novels, the crime originates in the War. Maisie is commissioned by Christopher Davenham to investigate if Celia Davenham, Christopher’s wife, is conducting an affair. Maisie soon discovers that Celia spends her time not with a lover but in visiting a cemetery. The latter contains mysterious graves, the occupants of which have two things in common: they have only a Christian name, and they all once lived at a home known as “The Retreat,” a refuge for soldiers who were severely disfigured during the War. Maisie is suspicious and decides to investigate the home. Placing her assistant, Billy Beale, as a spy, she learns that the manager of the home, Major Jenkins, abuses the situation of the inmates by charging them excessively high fees; he also basically holds them as prisoners. If they try to escape, they are executed for what Jenkins describes as “desertion”. Buried in the cemetery with only a Christian name, they are hard to trace.

The passage below describes the scene at the end of the novel when Billy is caught trying to escape from The Retreat. He is about to be executed. The court martial, described in just a few pages, is a replica of earlier bogus courts martial conducted by Major Jenkins over the years. Billy is on a platform, close to a wooden structure that turns out to be a gallows.

Maisie gasped as she scanned the tableau before her. A sea of men were seated on chairs,	1
facing a raised platform with a wooden structure placed upon it. With their damaged faces,	2
once so very dear to a mother, father or sweetheart, they were now reduced to gargoyles by a	3
war that, for them, had never ended. There were men without noses or jaws, men who	4
searched for light with empty eye sockets, men with only half a face where once a full formed	5
smile had beamed. She choked back tears, her blue eyes searching for Billy Beale.	6
As the rising sun struggled against the remains of night, Maisie realized that the wooden	7
structure was a rough gallows. Suddenly, the men's faces moved. Maisie followed their gaze.	8
Jenkins walked towards the platform from another direction. He took centre stage, and raised	9
his hand. At his signal Archie and another man came towards the platform, half guiding, half	10
dragging, a blindfolded man between them. It was Billy. As she watched, Billy – jovial, willing	11
Billy Beale – who surely would have given his life for her, was placed on his knees in front of	12
the gallows and held captive in the taut hangman's noose. It would need only one sharp tug	13
from the two men working in unison to do its terrible work (262-3).	14

Student tasks: New Criticism

Students should be encouraged to note the stylistic devices in the above passage, including the metaphor “a sea of men” in l.1., which emphasises the large number of men present and the fact that they are a “fluid” mass rather than individuals. Students should also consider the order in which “mother, father or sweetheart” (l. 3) appear: the first mentioned often being the most important. What implications does the ranking of the three people have for our understanding of the nature of the crime?

What is a “gargoyle” (l. 3) and how does it suggest ugliness?

Why does the narrator choose “searching” (l. 6) rather than “looking for”? The extra intensity of “searching” is subtle but also very important as it highlights the degree of Maisie’s desperation.

The contrast between the “sun” and “night” in l. 7 is also significant. Maisie brings sun with her to dispel the darkness of the court-martial and the agony of its witnesses. Again, the order here is important: sun comes before night, suggesting that it will be victorious. The reader understands that the ending will be a happy one.

The repetition of “half” in l. 10 underlines the urgency of Billy’s situation.

The adjective “jovial” in l. 11 is in sharp contrast with the scene on the platform. Two worlds are being juxtaposed as well as two different time periods: past and present. Why?

The adjective “taut” in l. 13 serves to emphasise the urgency of Billy’s position. He is already close to choking. Maisie Dobbs knows that she has only a few precious minutes in which to save her assistant’s life.

Punctuation is also important in New Criticism. There is, for example, no need for questions or exclamation marks in the passage: the nature and urgency of the

situation are abundantly clear. Students should be encouraged to consider how urgency is heightened in this scene. One of the chief means is the length of the sentences. As Jenkins approaches, for example, they become shorter (ll. 7-9), matching Billy's laboured breathing and emphasising the imminence of death.

Student tasks: Historicism

When applying Historical Criticism to the above passage, students might focus on ll. 2-6, which can act as a starting point for investigating how the medical services coped with mutilated soldiers at the end of the War, how World War One marked the beginning of plastic surgery, and how the English public perceived mutilated soldiers (a common sight on the streets of most British cities and towns). It would also be useful to consider the function of courts-martial during World War One. How does such knowledge heighten the reader's understanding of the scene? What were the proper routines at courts-martial during the War? How does the scene in the novel deviate from a "normal" court martial in 1914-1918?

To gain a proper understanding of the historical context, students should be encouraged to consult the works of such well-known historians as Gordon Corrigan (*Mud, Blood and Poppycock*, 2004), Richard Holmes (*Tommy. The British Soldier on the Western Front 1914-1918*, 2004), Samuel Hynes (*A War Imagined. The First World War and English Culture*, 1990), Gary Sheffield (*Forgotten Victory. The First World War: Myths and Realities*, 2002), and Jay Winter (*The Great War in History. Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present*, 2005; and *The Legacy of the Great War Ninety Years On*, 2009). Memoirs such as Harry Patch's *The Last Fighting Tommy. The Life of Harry Patch, The Only Surviving Veteran of the Trenches* (2008) can also provide useful contextual information. Where students consult the internet, guidance should be given in how to select reliable sites, i.e. those produced by academics or other experts within the field. The Imperial War Museum's centenary site (iwm.org.uk) and the British Broadcasting Corporation's centenary site (bbc.co.uk) are cases in point.

Student tasks: Reader Response

In terms of Reader Response, l.3 in the above extract is particularly important. To what extent can students empathise with the reference to "mother, father or sweet-heart"? Have they seen what a hangman's noose looks like, or read stories about it? How calm would they be if they knew someone dear to them was choking to death and dependent on their making the correct decision? Have they read similar stories that might influence their perception of the scene, and if so, which ones and how might these influence their interpretation?

Having completed the above tasks, I would encourage students to identify which theoretical approach gave them the deepest insights into the crime and Maisie's ability to solve it without loss of life. I would ask them to explain their answers and to consider the possibility of using more than one theory at the same time. What are the advantages and disadvantages of combining two or perhaps even three theories?

The value of such discussions can be enhanced by reference to other passages taken from the novel.

By applying all three theoretical approaches to the above extract, students are able to identify different features of the text and recognise the particular contributions that each theory makes to their understanding. It is important to emphasise, particularly for undergraduate students, that one's response to the text should always take precedence over the theory itself: theory is a tool and not an end in itself.

Having discussed and analysed the crime itself, the student is better able to understand the second story of detective fiction, the investigation. The above three literary theories can be used with equally good effect to identify the nature and significance of different steps in the investigation process.

Maisie Dobbs Extract Two: The Investigation

The extract below describes Maisie's first visit to The Retreat. She is interviewing Major Jenkins prior to planting Billy Beale in the home as a spy. She has already noted that the guests are known by first name only, is curious why this is the case, and asks the Major for an explanation.

"Ah yes. Reminds them of better times, before they became pawns in the game of war.	1
Millions of khaki ants clambering over the hill and into oblivion. The familiarity of	2
using Christian names only is in stark contrast to the discipline of the battlefield, of this	3
terrible experience. Relinquishing the surname reminds them of what's really important.	4
Which is who they are inside, here." He held his hand to the place just below the rib	5
cage to indicate the centre of the body. "Inside, who they are inside. The war took so	6
much away."	7
Maisie nodded her accord and sipped her tea. Maurice had always encouraged judi-	8
cious use of both words and silence.	9
<i>/. . . /</i>	10
She left The Retreat thirty minutes later <i>/. . . /</i>	11
Maisie questioned Jenkins's approach. True, it seemed a benevolent idea, and she	12
knew how successful the "holiday camps" had been in France, providing a resting place	13
for wounded men struggling to return to peacetime life. But the fine glaze used on tin	14
moulded to fit a face ten years younger now provided little respite from the mirror's	15
reflection (228-230).	

Student tasks: New Criticism

Students could be asked to consider word choice in the selected passage: what does the word "pawns" in l.1 signify, for example? What is the purpose of contrasting "game and War" (l.1)? It should be noted that "game" comes first, highlighting its special importance. Students could comment on the metaphor of the "ants" l.2, which suggests large numbers engaged in a thoughtless and arduous task. It is significant that Major Jones uses the verb "relinquishing" in l. 4, which is so much more powerful than merely "abandoning" because it denotes a deliberate giving up. Why does Major Jones repeat "who they are inside" in ll. 5 and 6? Does it suggest that he knows and sees more than others, for example? What is the purpose of the adjective

“judicious” before “words and silence” in l. 7? Having read the entire novel, students will know that silence is a very important strategy for Maisie. This passage makes it clear that Maisie has drawn important conclusions during her period of silence.

Student tasks: Historicism

Students might consider how people were thinking in the 1920s. What did they fear? How had England changed as a consequence of the War?

They could look up the numbers of soldiers who died both in major attacks such as the Battle of the Somme in 1916 (nearly 60,000 died or were wounded on the first day alone) and in the War as a whole (over 60 million dead or wounded) — in this way, they can better understand the full significance of the reference to “millions” clambering into “oblivion” (l.2). By looking up the number of soldiers buried in France or Belgium and subtracting the total from the number of graves, students will understand that many either disappeared or were blown to pieces. Mourning was difficult and particularly painful when there was no body to bury.

Major Jenkins knows that Maisie will understand the suffering to which he is referring thanks to her period of service as a Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) nurse during the War. A number of useful historical sources about VADs and women’s contribution to the War are available, including Nigel Fountain’s *Women at War* (which also contains a CD, 2002), Ann Kramer’s *Women and War* (2004) and Lyn Macdonald’s *The Roses of No Man’s Land*, 1993). Official internet sites such as firstworldwar.com and ivm.org.uk archive may also be consulted, both of which contain useful archival material.

Student tasks: Reader Response

Given that war is an integral part of modern life, students applying Reader Response theory might be encouraged to consider the differences between warfare in 1914-18 and today.

Some students, and certainly many British ones, will have read World War One poetry by Robert Graves, Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon and Edmund Blunden: how does the picture of the War given in *Maisie Dobbs* compare with that given in the War poems?

The reference to the ageing process in l.14 might also interest the students: the soldiers who returned from the War were approximately the same age as that of many university students. How important is appearance in your twenties? What does it mean for building relationships? How might it feel not to be able to face yourself in the mirror (l.14)?

In applying the above three theories — text-, context-, and reader-based, students are encouraged to pay attention to the details of the text, and apply their critical faculties to understanding the features of the crime and its perpetrator while at the same time following each stage of the process of investigation. They learn not only to identify the salient features of both stories but also to appreciate their mutual reliance. The second story (the investigation), invariably takes precedence over the first, the crime itself. Throughout *Maisie Dobbs*, the narrator emphasises Maisie's different techniques: her use of silence, meditation, her mirroring of the posture of witnesses in order to understand their thoughts, and her methodical categorisation of clues and evidence. Attentive readers make attentive detectives as they pit their wits against the fictional detective — sometimes, indeed, even solving the crime before the detective does. Such painstaking attention to detail gives both pleasure and satisfaction. It produces knowledge about how to read and understand literature while at the same time giving the reader a deeper understanding of the subject itself — in this case, World War One. Detective fiction is one of our most popular genres. It deserves a more prominent position in our university syllabi not just because it gives pleasure but because it has such tremendous potential for teaching students how to develop their reading and analytical skills.

Notes

1. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, 1977.
2. See my *An Introduction to Literary Theory and the English Canon*. This was originally designed for Master's students of English at Ningbo University, China, but has subsequently been revised for use on the undergraduate course in literary theory at Kristianstad University: <http://webshare.hkr.se/maj/ningbo/LiteraryTheory> and *Writing an academic essay on literature.pdf* (accessed 5 April 2014).
3. *Maisie Dobbs* is the first of nine novels set in England in the aftermath of World War One. It was followed by *Birds of a Feather* (2004), *Pardonable Lies* (2005), *Messenger of Truth* (2006), *An Incomplete Revenge* (2008), *Among the Mad* (2009), *The Mapping of Love and Death* (2010), *Elegy for Eddie* (2012), and *Leaving Everything Most Loved* (2013).
4. This is complemented by Raman Selden's *Practicing Theory and Reading Literature: An Introduction* (Literary Theory). (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1993). For informative and stimulating discussions of the role of theory in university literature classes, see Richard Bradford, (ed.), *Teaching Theory* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
5. David Glover and Scott McCracken eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Popular Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2012, 28.
6. Quoted in Kathryn Kennison, "Past Mysteries, Present Masters. A roundtable discussion of the historical mystery with Edward Marston, Sharan Newman, Charles Todd, Sharon Key Penman, and Margaret Lawrence". *The Armchair Detective*, Spring 1997, 30:2, 177-184, 177.
7. *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977, 45.
8. Glenn W. Most and William W. Stowe (eds.) "The Hippocratic Smile: John Le Carré and the Traditions of the Detective Novel" in W. Glenn Most and William W. Stowe (eds.), *The Poetics of Murder: The Detective novel and Literary Theory* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 348.

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