



The Wasteland and the Grail Knight: Myth and Cultural Criticism in Detective Fiction

Susan Rowland

Abstract. The author argues that all detective fiction is essentially mythical, with the story of paradise rendered as a wasteland until the hero, whether feminine or masculine, completes the quest for the grail. The author provides examples from the work of Agatha Christie, Reginald Hill, and Michelle Spring.

The myth is a complex of three interrelated stories: Two give accounts of creation by either a feminine or masculine deity, then the story of the wasteland and the grail knight emerges from the terrors as the creation myths cease to balance one another. Detective fiction enters this complex at the point where the story of paradise has become the society of the wasteland, until the grail quest can be completed. Therefore, it is *by means of* the myth, not in spite of it, that detective novels are marvelously flexible vehicles of social analysis. Whereas a number of previous studies have recognized elements of myth in aspects of detective stories, the following aims to provide a more far-reaching and socially oriented account of detective fiction as mythical, drawing on examples from Agatha Christie, Reginald Hill, and Michelle Spring.

In this argument, myths are not taken as fixed forms, templates that stamp rigid and archaic structures onto detective fiction. There is no ur-myth, a founding story from which detective fictions derive. Myth in detective fiction is a narrative drive enacted differently in each story as it draws on its specific cultural circumstances. Myth is the generic identity animating the stories, and shaping psychic meaning. These myths are *energetic cultural forms* imbued with urgent political, social, and psychological questions, and drawing upon deep narratives that are only partly conscious in the social collective. By building a myth

Susan Rowland, a member of the *Clues* editorial board, is Reader of English and Jungian Studies at the University of Greenwich, United Kingdom. Her books include *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell* (Palgrave, 2000).

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theory from recent investigations into the ritual origins of narrative, it can be explored how detective fiction functions as a flexible space where ideas about gender, power, and justice can be debated and made psychologically potent to reader and author.

THEORIES OF MYTH

The incisive questioning of the social effects of myth goes back at least to ancient Greece (Coupe 9). A perennial question is whether myth is in some way transcendent to everyday life and so manifests as a form of authority or constriction on what is permitted and what is forbidden. Conversely, myth may be regarded as immanent to society, as a patterning to experience that contributes to the formation of meaning without determining it. Ancient Greece describes this as a debate between *mythos*, meaning story or patterning, and *logos*, which is the more abstract knowledge derived from myths.

Laurence Coupe uses slightly different terms in contrasting the “allegorical” use of myth to produce “truth” or doctrine as in the abstraction of Christian ideas from the narratives of the Bible (Coupe 15). The alternative he poses is “radical typology”—not the typological reading of religious myth for truth, but the privileging of story itself as the potentially endless recapitulation of mythical narrative to enrich meaning without ever closing its possibilities. It is in this sense that detective fiction is a particular manifestation of myth in modernity. It functions as a distinctive revelation of social trauma and the desire for redemption.

Marina Warner has a similar attitude to myth, and her slightly more skeptical tone is useful (qtd. in Sellers 14–15). While insisting, in a radical typological manner, that no one telling of a myth has any primacy over any other, she stresses the creative possibility of a conscious intervention to realign patterns that appear to be reactionary. So women writers, especially women detective writers, can exploit the potential complexity in the myth of the hero. Contemporary authors such as Sara Paretsky and Sue Grafton, among others, are, for instance, arguably very conscious of both inheriting and rewriting a complex of gendered ideas surrounding the literary detective.

THE MYTH OF THE HERO

The amenability of myth as radical typology to imaginatively embrace the other in new and liberatory ways is a significant factor in the history of detective fiction. It provides an important counter-perspective to the ideas of Joseph Campbell, major scholar of the hero myth. For Campbell, myth is a relic of our archaic life when we lived immersed in nature (390). Even for modern man, it still offers hope for redemption because “myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation” (3). Unlike Coupe and Warner, Campbell does discern an ur-pattern. His “monomyth” is the basic fate of the male hero:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder; fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man. (30)

This hero meets woman as goddess or temptress and only in the sustaining powers of the cosmos does he find his grail (36, 42). However imaginatively potent is Campbell’s

vision, his myths point the human psyche either back into the distant past or into an archetypal realm of gods and demons without the more mundane necessity to travel the roads of our social world as part of the quest. Ultimately, Campbell sees myth as an alternative to modernity while a radical typology sees myths as animating modernity. Indeed, Campbell is insistent that popular culture is too degraded for myth to flourish in it.

Raine Eisler provides a feminist-oriented alternative to Campbell's masculine heroes. Instead of the aptly named monomyth, Eisler provides a cultural history of two genders and two forms of the mythic hero. Stemming from creation myths are two modes of cultural psychic conditioning. Patriarchy invokes sky-father gods whose relationship to "his" creation is one of separation. This becomes the culture of the blade where the human is signified by man and woman is the "other." Although the blade culture pretends that there is no signifier for feminine hero, this is not true. The "other" creation myth is that of the goddess as sacred earth giving birth to human beings. Her "chalice" culture is one of creative receptivity, of connection and relationship. Her heroes can be women or men, figures for the goddess or her son-lover, whose heroic action is focused on healing through relationship. Effectively, Eisler aims to convert creation myth into both historical analysis and *current* cultural transformation. Drawing heavily on feminist theory, theology, history, and archaeology, Eisler challenges the masculine bias of previous scholarship. Rather than "forge" a story of progressive Western civilized "progress," she sees all human cultures as poised between two basic models: of partnership, based on equality of the sexes, and a dominator model, based upon masculine ownership of his "other," woman (Eisler xv–xx). Historically, this has seen the most ancient cultures as aligned with the partnership type of culture through their reverence of the earth goddess as the feminine principle and source of life. Eisler converts her mythical reworking of creation myth into the cultural synecdoche of chalice and blade. From thence she produces the sociological "Cultural Transformation Theory" (xxii). Her book is aimed at aiding the resurgence of the partnership model that she interprets as underlying such modern movements as Enlightenment emancipation, feminism, as well as ecology, and calls for social justice (Eisler xx, 105–06).

Eisler's literary criticism reads texts such as ancient Greek drama as active interventions into political consciousness. To continue this treatment of fiction as the site of cultural transformation, it is useful to look for evidence that the literary detective is a protean site for the myth of the hero. Whether a masculine hero of dominator father-god or feminine hero of partnership and the goddess, the detective is undergoing transformation. Thus it is time to look at the social politics and myth of the hero of detective fiction and suggest that modernity has suffered from a surfeit of the masculine hero. Without his discriminating blade-type consciousness existing in a dialogue with feminine connectedness, the male hero turns desperate and predatory. The feminine hero is urgently needed to redress the balance and find a secure relation to her "other," the sky-father knight. The important point is that human consciousness and human society cannot survive with only one gendered mythic hero, as can be seen in detective fiction.

MYTH AND DETECTIVE FICTION

John G. Cawelti acknowledges that myth is an element in what he calls the "formulas" of popular fiction (27). These formulas, both narrative and symbolic, are charged with feeling and work through social tensions. Crucially, Cawelti lists four hypotheses about the dialogical relationship between culture and popular fiction. Such works affirm existing atti-

tudes, resolve tensions, explore boundaries of the permissible, and help to assimilate social changes (95–96). Detective fiction also offers three further experiences. First, it explores the notion of heroism as an orientation of consciousness toward separation and discrimination (masculine sky-father hero), or integration and relatedness (feminine earth-mother hero), as a way of changing or rebalancing these ways of relating. Detective fiction adopts, interrupts, and re-creates mythical heroism, so often caught up in masculinist structures. Hence *feminine hero* is used here, a motif applicable to male as well as female detectives when embracing earth-mother and “chalice” qualities of relational embodiment. *Masculine hero* stands for the patriarchal myth whose emphasis on separation inevitably imports a “dominator” social structuring, since “he” defines himself as not-other, not feminine. The term *heroine* is not used here because of its debased connotations, signifying a female adjunct for patriarchal posturing.

Second, detective fiction is a way of translating *logos*, abstract knowledge, like the “bare bones” of evidence into *mythos*, story: Detective fiction, however cozy and self-consciously artificial, makes us realize that human life cannot be reduced to a list of facts. Third, detective fiction offers a redemptive hope to the wasteland of the world of the crime. It therefore has a spiritual function, even if redemption is shown to require more social energies than the form can provide. This myth-complex in detective fiction is about the genre itself as dynamic, as *making* the social changes.

Cawelti identifies elements of myth in hard-boiled crime fiction by regarding the hero as a knight in the wasteland of the city (150–55). However, for him this is a limited identification of only one aspect of the genre. He does not connect myth to gender as something interrogated by detective fiction nor the crucial matter of how the detective relates to the quest. Interestingly, Cawelti criticizes George Grella’s notion of classic detective fiction as closer to comedy than tragedy or romance (108). Yet *classic* detective fiction, such as Christie’s novels, heals the wasteland, if only ironically. It restores the natural balance of the social group, which has accommodated itself to necessity and death and now moves on, often celebrating life with a romance. These characteristics are those of comedy, and of comedy attuned to nature as Joseph Meeker alleges.

Christine A. Jackson provides a reverse emphasis to Cawelti. Focusing on female private investigators, Jackson shows how the achievement of the detective quest restores or creates some unfinished parts of the female self. Where the wasteland comes into the detective’s suffering, there may be failure, as Paretzky’s V. I. Warshawski often discovers. To Jackson, Grafton’s Kinsey Millhone is more successful in enacting myth structures. Jackson stresses that she is arguing about *women’s* detective fiction on the reasonable grounds that female authors may look to a variety of myths and rituals in an attempt to refashion the detecting hero. It is necessary to broaden the framework about literary form as a mode of evolution of social consciousness into one that is dynamically mythical for both genders.

THE MYTH COMPLEX: SKY FATHER, EARTH MOTHER, AND THE GRAIL QUEST

One key aspect of the myth-complex animating detective fiction is the endemic struggle over the nature of heroism, which seems, as Baring and Cashford suggest, to be embedded in oppositional thinking:

The image of *opposition*— of the heroic consciousness banishing chaos to create and order the world — became the model for the way of thinking by which civilization was sustained, and so it entered Judaeo-Christian thought as the basic structure through which the world was perceived and the quality of life was ensured. (667; emphasis in original)

If the definition of the hero is at issue, a very ancient figuring of gender in creation myths can be recalled. Is the detective a knight of the sky-father god, built on separation from and repression of the other? Here, the danger is of creating rather than healing the wasteland. Or can “he” also be “she,” knight of the earth-mother goddess, seeking a relational, erotic connection to the other as part of healing the ravaged earth? An interesting example of a detective debating these dilemmas is Hercule Poirot in *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934). Uniquely in his career, he decides here that exposing the guilty would wound the wasteland rather than save it. Such a detective, who can find something within himself that allows him to recast the hero myth, sounds seductive to a culture that has perhaps suffered too much from patriarchy’s heroic son.

Yet the creation myths themselves are, like gender, not either/or. For consciousness and society to thrive, culture needs both creation myths in balancing relationships; the hero of the mother needs to learn to avoid being swallowed up by erotic connection to the land, while the hero of the father must learn to relate and to connect if he is to succeed in solving the crime. The process enacts a grail quest, for the world is a wasteland when feminine and masculine powers are out of harmony. This founding mythical gendering of detecting practice is a crucial aspect of the form. Put simply, the detective story has to negotiate these two forms of heroism, and that very negotiation will be social criticism for these myths, as they are not separable from culture but are fundamental structures within it. The sky-father and earth-mother creation myths give the genre the basic dynamism or mode of operation of the singular detective, while the grail quest gives the genre its orientation toward society. To what extent then does detective fiction offer spaces where the competing claims of these interconnected creation myths might be functioning in the service of rebalancing gender and relational structures and concepts of justice and ethical practice?

For the social space of the story, the myth is one of a landscape that ought to be a paradise, but is, in fact a wasteland, because something human has gone wrong. The ailing king must be healed, yet the only thing that can heal him is the sacred cup or grail, and nobody knows where it is to be found. In detective fiction, the grail is the truth about a crime or crimes. Only by rebalancing the gendered creation myths can the king recover and the (social) wasteland bloom. There must be a grail knight who will seek the grail as the truth that will unlock the wasteland or ask the right question of the ailing king. How many detective stories turn on the detective learning what the right question is? The moment of the *right question* is also a moment of *right questioning* as the detective finds the healing balance of masculine and feminine relating. The grail hero succeeds in uniting the creation myths: The detective is hero to the earth mother *and* sky father.

Although this myth-complex animates all detective fiction, it is differently angled in the different subgenres. It would be easy to suggest that hard-boiled detective fiction resists the myth in that the wasteland is not healed at the end of the story. The most that seems to happen is that the detective hero takes on the role of emblematic sufferer, becoming a metonym for the wasteland itself. He or she becomes the sick king (part of the wasteland in the mode of the feminine wounded earth), as the lack of justice is internalized in the detective’s depression or heartbreak, or forcibly written on the body as wounds.

However, in the flawed suffering detectives of the most realistic police procedural or

the serial killer stories, even the close identity (which is not a complete identity) of criminal and detective remains a quest for redemption. Just because the myth is incomplete, indeed cannot be completed, does not mean it is not present as a desire animating the plot. A common development is for the hard-boiled detective to cease his quest only by taking on the mantle of the sick Fisher King himself. He sits with his whiskey encased in despair as the traditional masculine hero mode has failed him and this wasteland. Raymond Chandler's stories are early examples here. Consider, for example, Philip Marlowe's explicit treatment of General Sternwood as the sick king (also suggesting King Lear) in *The Big Sleep* (1939) to whom he will finally prove his allegiance. Marlowe also typically exhibits a "turn" in his detecting role, when his masculine singularity gives way to a more relational form of connecting that then drives the subsequent story — in this case, his loyalty to Sternwood. The modern detective takes up the Grail Knight's burden in reconfiguring the hero away from a merely egocentric separation from the other to an added emotional or erotic connection. The detective's connection to the world depends upon what kind of hero he or she will be. This very "heroic" relation to the world, seen in the acute sense of a society driven by money, becomes a structure that, in Chandler's work, incarnates and enacts cultural criticism.

What is known as Golden Age detective fiction is more readily identified with the myth as a successful quest. Here the wasteland may well be returned to a paradise on the achievement of the detective's discovery. On the other hand, paradise is, explicitly in this self-conscious, ironic form, a place of imaginative desire rather than social realism. For example, the Golden Age includes Dorothy L. Sayers, who shows the consequences of her grail knight, Lord Peter Wimsey, questing in the feminine with erotic and social relatedness to the wasteland. He discovers the high price of connectedness by his inability to cut himself off from the sufferings of punishment. It reawakens in him a time when he was in truth the suffering son of Mother Earth, in the mud of a World War I battlefield. The clearest example of this occurs in the first novel, *Whose Body* (1923).

This Golden Age form is often accused of an ingrained conservative bias. However, it is more complicated than that, because, intrinsic to the cozy, is literary self-consciousness, so the form is capable of arguing against its own stability. Second, myth may work for experimental progressive social criticism and not only used to glorify conventional norms. To explore these suggestions, it is necessary to look first at an example of the myth-complex from the heart of the Golden Age, as represented by the work of Agatha Christie. Next, two modern authors will be examined who draw on Golden Age tropes for their detectives yet evoke a more realistic hard-boiled wasteland for their depictions of contemporary crime: Reginald Hill and Michelle Spring.

DETECTIVE FICTION, MYTH-COMPLEX, AND CULTURAL CRITICISM

Golden Age detective fiction is not unproblematically conservative. In its small communities can be discovered evil whose eradication requires a level of irony directed at the power structures of an imperial age. So it is intriguing that in 1930, Christie's *Murder at the Vicarage* introduces Miss Marple as a cannibal:

"As a matter of fact," said Griselda in a low, mysterious voice, and stopped. Everyone leaned forward excitedly.

“I happen to *know*,” said Griselda impressively. “Her husband was a missionary. Terrible story. *He was eaten*, you know. Actually eaten. And she was forced to become the chief’s head wife. Dr Haydock was with the expedition and rescued her.”

For a moment excitement was rife, then Miss Marple said reproachfully, but with a smile: “Naughty girl!” (17; emphasis in original)

This is social criticism with a literal bite. Gossip’s dark predatory side can be seen on a par with fantasies about faraway peoples, specifically presented as delusional fantasies. Miss Marple is jokingly first presented as chief cannibal/consumer-by-gossip of village oddities. Are the true crimes of this fictional world located within the detective herself? It is very suggestive that Christie presents the double-edged nature of the quest hero: the problem of how the knight can be true to his healing mission when the *masculine* quest hero is all too likely to blunder about causing trouble with his sharp sword. This question is modern crime fiction’s attempt to integrate the creation myths. For example, Hill’s “good” policeman, Peter Pascoe, becomes more hard-edged after a career with his mythic boss, Andrew Dalziel. In *Good Morning Midnight* (2004), Pascoe, to blackmail a government agent, threatens to prosecute a frail elderly woman for her medicinal use of cannabis. Christie was consciously aware of the danger of the detective turning predator by taking on himself or herself the role of divine retribution. With Miss Marple gradually assuming the role of *Nemesis* (1971), as the novel title indicates, Christie’s other famous detective, Poirot, also assumes neo-divine powers yet uses them mercifully in the cause of social reintegration in *Murder on the Orient Express*, where he effectively pardons the twelve murderers. Poirot’s imaginative act of (divine) empathy, well outside the rule of law, haunts later novels. Ultimately, he ends his career as a murderer in the cause of justice in *Curtain* (1975). Here, Christie’s detectives have indeed become divine emissaries of revenge, putting them in danger of too much heroic separation from embodied humanity, which would bring darkness to the wasteland. Fortunately, the self-reflexiveness of the Golden Age form continues to endow them with a *fantasy* of sacred justice.

Golden Age detective fiction aimed at having the protagonist heal the wasteland. Such a social revolution is only achievable by an ironic self-consciousness that this was *fiction*. These works refer repeatedly to detective fiction itself to invoke a pact with the reader about literary expectations. Paradise in the works of Christie, Sayers, Margery Allingham, and Ngaio Marsh is explicitly a fantasy. Death is overcome in the new Eden by two forms of metonymic displacement. Solving the crime removes the corpse to the status of a token of death. It also, in fantasy, fulfills the death drive, so the corpse becomes the sign of the healing of death and is turned into the grail. Hence the detective’s role is completed and the reader’s quest for meaning satisfied. Death is *solved*. This literal embodiment of the myth continues in the modern cozy and, indeed, is what gives it its name. More interesting is work that complicates the relation between hard-boiled and cozy in the interests of social criticism, such as is seen in the work of two writers—indebted to, but not restricted by, Golden Age norms—who develop the mythic elements in striking ways.

THE DETECTIVE’S GRAIL QUEST IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Cambridge- and London-based private investigator Laura Principal narrates Spring’s series. Clearly influenced by feminist hard-boiled novels of U.S. writers Marcia Muller, Grafton, and Paretsky (the Canadian-born Spring lives in the United Kingdom), the nov-

els offer a more collective notion of the detective than a single figure on mean streets. Despite the singularity implied by her surname, Laura works with partners: Sonny, who is also her lover, and Stevie, an enigmatic woman of great resources. The Grail Knight ceases to be that dangerously unsocial masculine being, the lone wolf, and becomes a collective identity. Spring shows that the collective hero can be reconfigured through a successful crime investigation. Through the quest, the group is re-formed into a healed space of loving relationships. Laura's defining expansion of self comes through working with, not against, the group. Goddess consciousness is shaped into the detecting quest for the healing truth/grail. Fascinatingly, the truth is revealed as more *mythos* than *logos*, more overlapping layers of stories than abstract fact. Such a paradise might extend its beneficial powers to the outer wasteland. In effect, while Spring's novels conform to hard-boiled social criticism in revealing corruption rather than ameliorating it, she offers the fantasy of a return to a maternal paradise in the healing of a female-centered group of friends and lovers.

Crucially, Laura has a third base for living, officially nothing to do with her work or her Cambridge home. Wildfell is a remote country cottage shared with her close women friends, Helen and Stevie. There, Laura finds her true center of self. This is a clue to the underlying myth of the series. Narrated in the first person (like Muller's Sharon McCone, Grafton's Kinsey, Paretsky's V. I.), Spring's series is a feminist-inflected quest for self, but a self understood as relational and social and connected to Mother Earth in the female-shared space of the country cottage. So this detective prioritizes earth-mother relatedness, literally in her collectivity. Yet this earthed self is equally part of the suffering world. For although Laura finds herself forced to turn inward as part of the matter of her investigations, the stories very deliberately focus outward into an England warped by inequalities and deprivation. There can be a root of misogyny, often of ancient origin, twisting round the crimes Laura detects. In the hard-boiled tradition, Laura uncovers more than individual criminals. She often detects a terrifying fragility in the social advances of feminism, the welfare state, and the ability of the family to nurture the vulnerable.

In the novel most focused on a single family, *In the Midnight Hour* (2001), and the tragedy of the loss of a child, Spring's incisive cultural criticism is acute. Jack and Olivia Cable lost their four-year-old son, Timmy, when he disappeared from a Norfolk beach twelve years previously. With no body, Olivia persists in treating Timmy as if he were alive. The couple comes to Laura because Olivia believes she has found Timmy in a sixteen-year-old street musician. Jack wants him investigated. A shadowy presence in the atmosphere of trauma is Catherine, Timmy's elder sister who, even before his disappearance, took second place in Jack's view. Fortunately, Catherine proves resilient to the inequalities of gender. Far more fascinating, however, is the indictment of the role of Jack's mythic heroism in the destruction of his family. For it is this novel where the feminist myth of self as detective grail quester in earth-mother role is explicitly used to critique the traditional patriarchal sky-father myth of heroism.

Unlike Christie and Hill, Spring manages to separate out the destructive ego-centered hero from the detective by offering a more developed feminine hero of collective and relational methods. Masculine heroism, in the shape of Jack's story, here means an impossible journey for treasure/discovery, bravery, preservation of a life, and a triumphant return to the thanks of a grateful nation. However, while Laura has to battle with a profound breach of her autonomy in a miscarriage, she slowly discovers the heavy price paid by Jack's family for his heroism: an obsession rooted in a mad desire to locate two lost ships in the arctic. Made sick by his refusal to rest, Jack either neglected his son until the child drowned or may even have lashed out at the boy whining for his attention.

Sometimes in my mind I see a terrible scenario, Catherine had said to us, there at Cleybourne Hoop. Her voice dropped to a whisper. Timmy asking questions, over and over. Daddy trying to think, and demanding that Timmy be quiet. And then striking him when he isn't. Timmy falling and his head hitting a rock. It would be a sudden surge of anger, rather than a studied assault, Catherine said. But even so, it doesn't really fit with the daddy I knew. (301–02; emphasis in original)

In the unknowability of Timmy's exact fate lies a space where tragedy and patriarchy meet. It is where the new inflection of the grail myth in Spring's feminism clearly reveals and condemns patriarchy's perversion of the wasteland. At this point Laura draws back. By respecting the unknowability of Timmy's fate, especially as Jack is now dead, she combines the best of heroic styles: the relationality that empathizes with the pain of surviving family members with the ability to detach herself and move on. A detective needs both myths if the wasteland is to be healed more than it is wounded by the investigation/quest.

Hill's work, which combines strong elements of social realism with literary experimentation and self-consciousness, explores the semi-sacred roles of the detective. It would be tempting to suggest that Dalziel and Pascoe neatly divide the detecting roles between them. Does one of them embody the masculine hero by scrutinizing the crime from outside, and the other express the feminine quester who seeks truth by fully entering the world of the crime? In fact, the novels show the two of them trying out and adapting both types of myth-hero role. For example, in an early novel, *An Advancement of Learning* (1971), Dalziel theatrically stomps about a higher education college while Pascoe detects by renewing his passionate feelings for Ellie Soper (later to become his wife). However, it is suggestive that a much later short story on the first meeting of the formidable pair, "The Last National Service Man" (1994), has Dalziel surviving the rants of a crazed gunman by fully entering his world while Pascoe's naiveté contributes a useful innocent separation within a hostage situation.

However, *The Wood Beyond* (1996) is more typical of Hill's method of combining a passionate interiority somewhere in the detecting team with powerful social criticism in the totality of its activities. The novel combines modern crimes of animal rights activists attacking chemical laboratories with an examination of how historical atrocity and class-based cruelty can wound generations. The funeral of Pascoe's grandmother uncovers the shocking secret that her father, also called Peter Pascoe, was shot for cowardice in World War I. Meanwhile, Dalziel becomes involved when a raid by animal rights protestors stumbles on a skeleton at Wanwood House. Deeply disturbed by discovering his family on the other side of the criminal divide, Pascoe cannot help embarking on a personal quest alongside his police duties. Dalziel, too, seems bewitched by the personal in the person of animal-rights raider Amanda Marvell, with whom he begins an affair. Both men suffer for their time as detectives in the feminine mode, but only Dalziel feels he has to choose between Marvell and his job. In fact, it is, for him, no choice, but as Hill makes clear, Dalziel's unwillingness to have any faith in Marvell's innocence, when a little would be enough to retrieve their relationship, is more a fear of commitment than of noble necessity.

Pascoe discovers a link between his personal quest and the current police case. The evidence of the then-capitalist patriarch, who lied to save his son, condemned Pascoe's great-grandfather. The delicately bred boy was the one who really exhibited uncontrollable fear on the battlefield. Yet, in a final layer of class callousness, the rich man who destroys the first Peter Pascoe proves to have been his father. Finally, today's Pascoe comes face-to-face with the ancient man who, once upon a time, languished in a hospital while his father lied to save him at the expense of his illegitimate brother. The old man sees the Peter of

long ago to ask forgiveness. The young man sees the need to, at last, *detach* himself from his role as a detective in the relational, feminine, interior mode. So he steps back into his official separation as a policeman to make an arrest for today's crimes.

The Wood Beyond explores the role of detective fiction as a metonym for representing war, the ultimate source of the wasteland, as Gill Plain has described. It may be the explanation for the popularity of detective fiction in the twentieth century, as it provided the mythical means to attempt to heal war—to turn the cup of death into the healer of life. Not only does Pascoe's personal quest dig up the horrors of the World War I, but it also unearths a skeleton that proves to be the betrayed Pascoe's angry cousin, Stephen. The quest into war history itself represents an argument about the way past corruption and class exploitation continues to trouble the present. This criticism is not confined to literal war. The animal-rights protestors are variously motivated by the agonies of the defeated miners' strike and the continuing cruelty of modern warfare such as the Falklands conflict.

Finally, the title of the novel is a reference to a William Morris fantasy text taken into the trenches. It reminds us of the ideal sacred woods of an England that maybe never was. In the novel, the last remnant of the ancient wood of Wanwood is brutally carved up, like a battlefield, to keep out protestors. Not all wars are called wars, the novel seems to suggest. Dalziel and Pascoe, in their struggle between detecting as separate and aloof or as relational and engaged, are forced thereby to detect their own selves, and they find themselves in the wasteland of modern capitalist enterprise. Yet *The Wood Beyond* does acknowledge the efforts of these heroes, not only in the successful capture of a murderer and closure of two corrupt businesses. Within the wood beyond, there is a rebirth, a resurrection as the skeleton becomes, through relational detection, a person and a story with the potential to heal a family: Pascoe's.

Hill combines social realism with literary density and self-conscious plotting to explore and test the narrative properties of the detecting myth. He is far less interested in giving a realistic portrayal of the police than in giving the reader a place at an excavation of the wasteland. Beneath the cruelty of today are deep structures of class exclusion and inequality. The detective grail quest uncovers them. The comfort offered is the possibility of salvation in the group—families, police officers, friends—might constitute a detective combining the justice-delivering properties of a masculine knight, with the relational compassion of the feminine detective.

CONCLUSION

By reading these novels, we are inducted into the worlds and choices of these detectives. The various inflections of the grail-knight myth are an attempt to structure readers' own desires in the context of arguments about society and culture. To read this literature of desire is to be suspended in an ethical quest—to be both *of* the world and to achieve a selfhood within it. Myths are energetic cultural forms by which consciousness is remade in individuals and wider society. Remaking consciousness is itself, and occurs by means of, cultural criticism. It is the repetitious nature of popular fiction, the way it is continually rewritten and reread, that allows it to take on the ritual properties inherent in myth.

Detective fiction arose within a modernity suffering from over-marginalization of feminine relating; a modernity in which the wasteland was becoming all too literal. In its very earliest forms, it detects the hysteria of the masculine quest hero if he has to live without the feminine other. Sherlock Holmes needs Dr. Watson's relating qualities if he is to

extend his formidable powers beyond his study. These qualities are present at the very start in *A Study in Scarlet* (1887). Ever since, the detective has had to struggle to balance his powers as hero of sky father and/or earth mother. She or he has had to embrace the wasteland in an attempt to find the healing grail. The grail may be the right question or the abolition of death. It may be embodied in the chalice of the family. What the grail always is for detective fiction is the myth supplying the nourishment of hope.

Keywords: Christie, Agatha; Hill, Reginald; myth; quest; Spring, Michelle

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