**Proposal for a Freshman Seminar**

**What Detective Stories Can Teach Us About Empathy**

Autumn Semester 2017 ARTSCI

Time and Place TBA Day TBA

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**Course Description:** Empathy is the ability to put oneself in the position of another human being, and, by doing so, to understand their motivation, and vision of the world. Empathy plays a particular role in the detective story from its origins in nineteenth century figures like Sherlock Holmes to hard-boiled heroes or more modern day detectives. Imagining oneself into another point of view is very important for all of these investigators, because it enables the solving of crimes.

Particularly fascinating in the development of detective fiction is the idea of uncovering and interrogating social problems through empathy with victims and criminals. In the case of Sherlock Holmes, this means a chivalric attempt to protect women from violence, while the hard-boiled hero acts as a provocateur to the supposedly respectable.

Through the study of specific literary texts and films, we will consider the use of empathy in the detective story, employing ideas from philosophy, especially ethics.

**Grading:**

Class participation: 30%

Online exercises: 35%

Final reflective writing: 35%

**Required Activities:**

1. You will need to attend all classes and your participation in discussions will count towards your grade. Reading the novels and stories carefully is an important part of the class, but all films will be shown in class, so we can pause at certain moments and discuss.
2. Part of your assessment will be based on an online exercise. This requires you to provide a short piece of reflective writing (500 words) responding to a particular question on the texts discussed. This reflective writing will be posted to discussion board, and the second part of your assignment will be to respond to someone else’s writing with your own thoughts (500 words).
3. Your final assignment will be to write a reflective essay on what you have learned about empathy through reading detective fiction (1000 words).

**Course Objectives:**

1. Students will analyze, interpret, and critique significant literary detective stories.
2. Through reading, discussing, and writing about literature, students will appraise and evaluate the personal and social values of their own and other cultures.
3. Students will analyze and interpret major forms of human thought, culture, and expression, particularly regarding empathy, individualism, and human nature.

**Biographical Statement**

I am a Visiting Assistant Professor in English and Sexuality Studies, originally from the UK. I regularly teach classes on fiction (including honors students), as well as Creative Writing workshops, and I also teach courses on gender and sexuality (undergraduates and graduates). Students have reported enjoying my classes, because I often try to relate more universal issues to the specific challenges and concerns that relate to them. I have published peer review essays on fiction, gender, and violence, as well as two poetry collections, and an edited volume on violence. Finally, I have a life-long love of detective fiction, which has encouraged me to put this course together.

**Required Texts:**

Raymond Chandler, *The Long Goodbye* (1953)

Agatha Christie, *Sleeping Murder* (1976)

Arthur Conan Doyle short stories to be provided

Dorothy Hughes, *In A Lonely Place* (1947)

**Films Shown In Class**

*Brick* (2006)

*Chinatown* (1974)

*In A Lonely Place* (1950)

*Sherlock* (‘Scandal in Belgravia’) (2012)

*The Long Goodbye* (1973)

**Further Reading**

(Extracts from these texts will be provided throughout the course.)

Abbott, M. 2002. *The Street was Mine: White Masculinity in Hardboiled Fiction and Film Noir.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Allen, V. M. 1983. *The Femme Fatale: Erotic Icon.* New York: The Whitson Publishing Company.

Biesen, S. C. 2005. *Blackout: World War Two and the Origins of Film Noir.* Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

Coplan, Amie, and Peter Goldie eds. 2014. *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fay, J. and J. Nieland. 2010. *Film Noir: Hard Boiled Modernity and the Cultures of Globalization.* London and New York: Routledge.

Maibom, Heidi. 2017. *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Empathy*. New York: Routledge.

Maxfield, J. F. 1996. *The Fatal Woman: Sources of Male Anxiety in American Film Noir, 1941-1991.* Madison/Teaneck: Farleigh Dickenson University Press.

**Course Outline**

Week 1:

**Arthur Conan Doyle short stories, ‘A Scandal in Bohemia,’ ‘The Speckled Band,’ and ‘The Copper Beeches’**

Doyle’s creation, Sherlock Holmes, is ostensibly a character lacking in ordinary human tact or empathy in everyday situations, yet in solving crimes, Doyle poses him as having almost supernatural powers of deduction, which include empathy for criminals and for victims (murdered or alive and being abused). This is a classic detective story trope, and we explore it in detail in this opening week.

Week 2-3:

**Showing of Episode 1 Season 2 of the TV program *Sherlock* , and discussion of *Sherlock* in comparison with the source text**

Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss have remade Sherlock Holmes for the modern age in this recent TV series, but the narratives presented have a much crueler streak. Presenting Sherlock Holmes as an emotionally detached figure, they play up his inscrutability, whilst also challenging gender norms, as we will see in the episode, ‘Scandal in Belgravia.’

Week 4:

**Agatha Christie, *Sleeping Murder* (published in 1976, but probably written in 1940)**

Agatha Christie’s detective are often unlikely heroes : the fussy Belgian Hercule Poirot, or, in this case, the elderly Miss Marple. What makes her detectives successful, however, is the ability to empathize with criminals, as well as being capable of seeing beyond the façade of polite society. This particular detective story asks questions about trauma, loss, and memory.

Week 5:

**Dorothy Hughes, *In A Lonely Place* (1947)**

*In A Lonely Place* moves toward the *noir* detective story, which often asked the reader to position themselves with the perpetrators of crime rather than the detectives. This novel is written completely from the point of view of a man who stalks and murders victims. We will discuss the complexities of being forced into a killer’s head, and how the book creates tensions and shifting allegiances.

Week 6-7:

**Showing of *In A Lonely Place* (1950) and discussion of the film in comparison with the source text**

Here, we study the film version of *In a Lonely Place*, featuring Humphrey Bogart who was already famous for playing the parts of hard-boiled heroes. We will consider places where the film departs from the book, such as the ending, where Laurel’s suspicions are rebuked. What do such changes tell us about the demands of a mainstream audience in the 1950s?

Week 8:

**Raymond Chandler, *The Long Goodbye* (1953)**

Chandler was well-known by the time he came to publish *The Long Goodbye*, but he described this novel in a letter to a friend as his best work. In discussing this book, we consider his treatment of masculinity, and his framing of the possibilities of male empathy or not.

Week 9-10:

**Showing of the film *The Long Goodbye* (1973**)

This adaptation is rather irreverent, perhaps signaling that hard-boiled hero is passé, yet beyond the humor, there is a kind of anxiety too about being adrift, reliant on individualism, and disconnected from others. We will discuss these issues in response to a viewing of the film.

Week 11-12:

**Showing of the film *Chinatown* (1974), and discussion of new readings of *noir* detective stories**

An original screenplay, *Chinatown,* is a key film in thinking about the development of and nostalgia for detective fiction. Jake Gittes is a typical hard-boiled hero in many ways, yet the film also offers a more sympathetic portrait of the *femme fatale*, who is a victim of system rather than a cold-blooded harpy. Polanski’s film signals to structures of power and corruption that separate and isolate human beings.

Week 13- 14:

**Showing of *Brick* (2006), and discussion of modern versions of detective fiction.**

Rian Johnson, writer and director of the forthcoming Star Wars movie *The Last Jedi*, is interested in genre, and in this movie, he moves the typical detective story to a high school, a move that works because it brings the issues of empathy and isolation to narratives of growing up.

[The semester is roughly 15 weeks long, but we lose a week to Autumn Break and Thanksgiving.]

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