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Dime Novels and the Roots of American Detective Fiction

Pamela Bedore
Department of English, University of Connecticut, USA
To my parents, who always believed in me
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Introduction

In the 1920s, many *New Magnet Library* reprints of Nick Carter detective novels included marketing copy that evokes several of the issues central to the exploration of American contributions to detective fiction:

In the old days, anything between paper covers was a dime novel and, therefore, to be avoided as cheap and contaminating.

Since men like Frank O’Brien have pointed out to the world the fact that some of the best literature in the English language first appeared between paper covers, such books are welcomed in the best of families. (back-cover blurb, excerpted)

Taken as a whole, this statement contains a certain desperation, a yearning for respectability by a mass-produced popular text within a marketplace it dominates commercially. The rhetoric of this advertising material suggests that the contamination associated with dime novels can be contained by scholarly acceptance. O’Brien, a New York City dentist, was an early dime novel collector whose personal collection became the core of the first major dime novel collection to be held by an institution.¹ Hardly a household name even in the 1920s when this copy appeared, O’Brien’s recommendation of the paper-covered dime novels represents a metafictional slippage, calling upon exactly the rags-to-riches rhetoric that made so popular the Horatio Alger dime novels as these novels, like Alger’s street urchins, make the journey from the streets into the ‘best’ households. And yet, this blurb appears
not on a novel narrating a poor boy’s meteoric rise to success through his own hard work and his unwavering belief in the American Dream writ large, but rather on a series featuring Nick Carter, the most prolific of all dime novel detectives and thus a figure whose success, even more than that of Alger’s protagonists, depends on his liminality, his ability to negotiate multiple identities and to be welcomed not only by ‘the best of families,’ but, perhaps more importantly, by the worst of low-lifes, by the ruffians – rich and poor – whose criminal acts threaten the city of New York.

Dime novels, the blurb tells us, were once considered ‘cheap’ and ‘contaminating.’ In fact, there was no need for the past tense in the 1920s when this blurb appeared, or even in the 1950s, when A. E. Murch used this and other marketing copy as evidence that the Nick Carter dime novels are interchangeable and homogeneous, lacking moral complexity and character development, ultimately ‘without literary value’ (139). It is perhaps no surprise that the genre of detective fiction, with its fundamental interest in negotiating tensions around various forms of criminality, experienced its first mass instantiation in the dime novels, themselves viewed as rife with threats to readers, who could be contaminated by their exposure to stories of criminality and surveillance. Indeed, dime novel publishers often claimed that their products presented uncomplicated moral messages in order to avoid censorship that was costly and sometimes even resulted in arrest. Just as Nick Carter muses about the thin line between detective and criminal attributes in order to finally laud the detective, so too does the dime novel industry acknowledge and attempt to contain its potential dangers, partly through back-cover blurbs like this one that simultaneously assure dime novel readers that the novel they are about to read contains the titillation previously called ‘contamination’ while also assuring censors that this contamination is relegated to the past.

Detective fiction, this book argues, functions through a careful balancing of tensions around potentially contaminating threats and the narrative strategies used to contain them. Indeed, there is something uncanny about detective fiction. It appears to be one of the more formulaic of the genre fictions – compared to science fiction or horror, for example – yet the sheer volume of scholarly attention it receives demonstrates that much remains to be understood about its formulas. Over the past six or seven decades, the ‘rules’ of the genre have been written and rewritten, and the appeal of the genre has generated more potential explanations than occur in even the most convoluted of detective narratives; indeed, the pleasures of scholarship about detective fiction
mirror and echo the pleasures of the fiction itself. And detective fiction is a bit like pornography in that you have a hard time defining it, but you know it when you see it: the genre includes quite disparate subgenres that seem to bear little resemblance to each other but that nonetheless reside under the umbrella of detective fiction.

Many studies of detective fiction are organized on a now-familiar history of the genre that takes us to America in the 1840s, where Poe wrote his three detective short stories, giving us the masterful and effete C. Auguste Dupin as a prototypical detective and laying out the early rules of ‘ratiocination.’ Poe’s stories contain the seeds of many features of the genre still alive today, and these three tales have often been seen as the sum of America’s contribution to nineteenth-century detective fiction, with the genre lying dormant for almost fifty years until the introduction in 1887 of a tall, thin, cocaine-addicted, violin-playing detective working out of 221B Baker Street in London. Dupin and Sherlock Holmes are generally seen as the two pedestals upon which twentieth-century detective fiction rests: the genre develops the ‘golden age’ or ‘classic’ puzzle stories nurtured mostly in England, moves to the edgy and morally conflicted hardboiled tales born in 1920s California, and on to the police procedurals set in metropolitan areas in both America and Britain in the 1950s, landing in the 1970s on the ‘detectives of diversity’ that are part of the postmodern detective’s concern with all manner of questions of identity, with an especially robust development of women detectives. Out of a fairly stark geographical distinction that awards Brits with the puzzle and Americans with the hardboiled, post-World War II detective fiction is characterized by its global reach.

This literary-historical narrative of detective fiction is attractive in that it allows us to organize into a single chronicle a number of texts that do not appear to have all that much in common. Sherlock Holmes, Sam Spade, Stephanie Plum, and Andy Sipowicz are all recognizable heroes of the genre, but they inhabit substantially different worlds – geographically, historically, epistemologically, and aesthetically. When we look at the entire genre, then, we are faced with a conundrum in which even basic questions about how the genre functions and why it is so appealing to readers and writers alike generate different answers based on the particular subgenre under examination. In classical detective narratives, for example, the pleasures of the genre seem to reside in the highly rule-based and rational competition between detective and reader, while in hardboiled texts the genre appears to provide a vicarious thrill to readers who enjoy watching a tough detective get beaten up physically and emotionally before emerging, not entirely victorious,
from the corrupt underbelly of the city. Or perhaps, as Robert Rushing compellingly argues, our enjoyment is based on the tedious repetition that is thoroughly detailed in the police procedurals currently so popular on TV as well as in serial novels.

This familiar narrative overlooks the diverse pleasures of detective fiction, which can be illuminated by an investigation of the genre’s nascence and of America’s second major contribution, following Poe’s seminal Dupin tales. Let us consider the supposedly stagnant period between Poe and the hardboiled in America, focusing on the fictional detectives who populated thousands of dime novels published between the late 1870s and the dime novel’s demise in 1915. These detectives are not entirely unknown, of course, as they are at the center of studies like Gary Hoppenstand’s *The Dime Novel Detective* and Michael Denning’s *Mechanic Accents*. But they are often treated as a cultural phenomenon rather than as literary works, as in excellent recent studies, like those by Christopher Breu and Charles Rzepka, who make a nod to the thousands of detective narratives published in American dime novels without engaging individual detective characters or even series. What were these detective novels like? To which subgenres of detective fiction did they contribute most significantly? How might we explain the incredible predominance of detective narratives amongst the dime novels that developed all the major genre fictions, including romance, Western, adventure, and even science fiction? Why are they virtually absent from the scholarship on detective fiction?

This book attempts to unravel the case of the purloined detective stories (which are hiding in plain view), arguing that doing so disrupts several existing critical narratives and suggests new answers to some questions grappled with by scholars of both detective fiction and American literature. Reexamining the relationship between popular texts and their historical moment, for example, can explain why the roots – and sometimes even early flowers – of every subgenre of detective fiction can be found in the dime novels, which contain examples of classical, hardboiled, police, postmodern, and diverse detective fiction. This study contributes to the ongoing interdisciplinary conversation about the appeal of detective fiction, proposing that even from its earliest mass-produced instantiations, the detective figure maintains a precarious balance between tropes of contamination and containment. It is the finely-tuned fragility of this pendulum between moral and material danger and safety that is craved by detective readers as well as by writers like Mark Twain and William Faulkner, who were continuously drawn to the tropes used in detective dime novels despite the
modest acclaim their own detective writing achieved. For both Twain and Faulkner, the balance between contamination and containment surrounding the detective ‘hero’ provides powerful analogies to and intersections with two of their central concerns: a young man’s move from innocence to experience, and race relations. Closely examining detective dime novels illuminates the function and appeal of the detective genre not only for readers, but also for writers, including two of America’s most prominent men of letters.

 Construing the absence of the dime novel detective

The early absence of dime novels from scholarly work on detective fiction is no mystery: their material features laid the foundation for both their run-away market success and their almost complete omission – until recently – from most serious studies of detective fiction. As popular literature quickly produced on cheap paper, dime novels were devoured by their multi-faceted readership and almost as quickly became part of the ephemera of nineteenth-century American culture. Indeed, over 50,000 dime novels were published between 1860 and 1915, and at a cost of five, ten, or fifteen cents each, individual titles were seldom preserved in systematic ways. Dime novels were sold largely in bookstalls and train stations or by individual subscription rather than to lending libraries, so although many American homes of the early twentieth century would have contained stacks of dime novels, research libraries did not become involved in organizing and cataloging them until they were no longer in print. The sheer number of dime novels, along with a general problem of accessing them, helps explain their early exclusion from studies of American literature.

 It is important to note, too, that dime novels – especially those featuring detectives – were highly controversial in their day. In debates rhetorically similar to those that followed the widespread popularity of comic books and television, nineteenth-century educators and government officials were split in their understandings of the moral impact of dime novels on the youth. Anthony Comstock (1844–1915), self-acclaimed ‘scourge of the dime novel,’ became both a spokesperson for and a symbol of their censorship during his long reign as Post-Office Inspector and as Secretary and Chief Special Agent of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. Mocked and derided but nonetheless feared, Comstock held real power: he was personally responsible for the arrests of more than 3,600 people, including dime novel publisher Frank Tousey, and he destroyed thousands of volumes
of cheap fiction (Bremner, xi). In *Traps for the Young* (1883), Comstock characterized dime novels as ‘death-traps’ and ‘literary poison’ (42), arguing that ‘[e]vil reading debases, degrades, perverts, and turns away from lofty aims to follow examples of corruption and criminality’ (5). Comstock argued that exposure to immoral materials such as those published in newspapers and dime novels could be linked directly to adolescent criminality, citing as evidence numerous cases in which young boys who had committed crimes were also readers of newspapers and popular fiction. For twenty-first-century scholars steeped in the theoretical frameworks of cultural studies, the controversy around dime novels makes them more enticing as objects of serious scrutiny, but their widespread disparagement probably did not recommend them to earlier literary critics.

Some of the earliest scholarship on popular literature and culture mentions dime novels only briefly as it tries to carve out a respectable niche for various genre fictions, and Nick Carter’s market prominence and development of detective conventions often allowed him to stand in for all dime novel detectives. For example, Howard Haycraft’s *Murder for Pleasure* (1941) states that detective fiction in American lay ‘fallow’ between Poe and Anna Katharine Green’s *The Leavenworth Case* (1878), ‘Unless the reader is prepared to admit Nick Carter and his confreres and the semi-fictional Pinkerton reminiscences and their ilk to the dignity of detective novels’ (83). Similarly, A. E. Murch’s 1958 treatment mentions Nick Carter only in passing, deeming him ‘the detective of the uneducated’ (149). For Murch, late nineteenth-century detective fiction was on a ‘downward trend’ until Sherlock Holmes saved it (145). Even Edmund Pearson, whose full-length study, *Dime Novels; or, Following an Old Trail in Popular Literature* (1929), presents a much more open-minded examination of dime novels than does most criticism of the day, describes Nick Carter as one-dimensional. Pearson provides lengthy quotations from Nick Carter novels, situating the detective as partly responsible for the dime novel’s eventual move to limited respectability, but his examples of Carter at work fail to engage his most compelling features, since Pearson focuses on Nick as ‘a return to virtue’ (210). These judgments of the iconic Nick Carter as either too formulaic or too dull for serious study have been accepted by most detective scholars until quite recently.

A similar trend occurred in work on the Western, which also developed several of its conventions in the dime novel industry. Henry Nash Smith devotes a considerable portion of his landmark 1950 study of the American West to the dime novels but, like Haycraft and Murch in their
roughly contemporaneous studies of detective heroes, Smith accepts as fact the marketing ploy of dime novel publishers, who deliberately packaged these narratives in clearly branded series to look interchangeable. In considering the allegedly formulaic nature of dime novels, Smith argues that scholarly interest should be limited to understanding their articulation of cultural fantasies and their ability to capture ‘the dream life of a vast inarticulate public’ (92). For Smith, dime novels lose even their value as a barometer of cultural desire when they become increasingly sensationalized in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, thus moving them away from accurate representations of the popular imagination. The tension between formula and sensation – between repetition and novelty – that underlies Smith’s claims about Western dime novels can be seen in dime novel detective stories as well. Indeed, the value of dime novels for better understanding the nature of detective fiction lies as much in the deviations as in the formulas. By charting some of the more blatant injections of diversity into early detective narratives – whether at the sites of gender, race, or even disability – we can map the territory of early detective fiction and better understand the genre’s potentials as well as its limitations. As Smith notes, a typical early dime novel had a print run of 60,000 copies, with reprints available for the most popular titles (90–1). We might productively ask: what kinds of detective formulas – and variations on those formulas – could sustain a loyal fan base week after week for about forty years? Do those early tropes still exist within today’s explosion of detective narratives in books, movies, and television series? Can examining dime novel detective stories help us understand the continuing appeal of this enormously popular genre?

The moment has come to address these questions seriously. Throughout the twentieth century, dime novels were difficult to study for any scholar who did not have access to a major research collection specializing in nineteenth-century American popular literature. Even with such access, it remains difficult for scholars to know where to start when faced with thousands of paperback or microfilmed volumes, all deliberately branded to look as similar as possible. J. Randolph Cox’s The Dime Novel Companion: A Source Book (2000) provides a basic topography of the complex landscape, introducing major series and characters with highly usable cross-referencing. Recent new editions now render some specific dime novels teachable, and recent projects of digitizing dime novels and their tantalizing cover art, make this a perfect time to use Cox’s careful bibliographical work as a diving-board into more theoretically reflective analyses of dime novels.
Twentieth-century scholarship on dime novels tends to focus not on individual texts, but on series or even genres. The broad lens offers much to cultural historians, but the notion that individual dime novels are interchangeable has obscured the fascinating inventiveness of specific works in this long neglected literary archive. As we shall see in Chapter 2 when we read the endings of 115 dime novels from the *New York Detective Library* series, although some dime novels are indeed poorly written and formulaic, others contain well-developed detective characters as varied as those found on the shelves today. Indeed, the fact that many dime novel detectives anticipate developments generally associated with much later historical periods – the hardboiled detective, the police procedural, various detectives of diversity, and even some postmodern detective moves – suggests that emerging popular genres go beyond the anxieties of their historical moment.

Michael Denning’s important study of dime novels, *Mechanic Accents* (1987), has ensured their mention in many studies of detective fiction over the past two decades, but Denning’s sophisticated cultural analysis has, unfortunately, often stood in for detective scholars’ own investigations of dime novels. Indeed, Denning’s work has had a complicated relationship with our growing understanding of the roots of detective fiction: on the one hand, *Mechanic Accents* provides an important foundation for understanding the class and power implications of early detective fiction, but on the other hand, the foundation is so persuasive that readers conflate it with the whole story, resulting in numerous monographs that mention dime novels only through Denning’s filter of their place in American cultural and literary history.

My own work is, necessarily, richly influenced by Denning’s, but mine is in part a project of recovery. Following in the footsteps of detective critics opening up new areas of early detective fiction – like Catherine Ross Nickerson in her study of American women detective writers of the nineteenth century, Heather Worthington in her exploration of early nineteenth-century British detective fiction, or Maurizio Ascari in his examination of early continental crime fiction – I hope this book will prompt readers to actually read some detective dime novels and to pursue more detailed mappings of their place within not only American cultural history, but also American literary history. Examined closely, dime novels complicate our understanding of the detective genre. This is, after all, a genre whose imminent demise was famously announced by R. A. Knox in 1958 on the grounds that the inherently limited supply of detective stories and puzzles would soon be exhausted by too-frequent repetition (193–4). Knox’s focus on clever plots has clearly
been inadequate in accounting for detective fiction’s continued – and even growing – popularity. But how do we proceed when we find substantial evidence against the commonly accepted view that the genre’s major developments are linked to the sociopolitical anxieties of specific historical periods and geographical spaces?

Looking closely at the dime novels allows us to better grapple with this thorny question. This project engages a three-pronged methodology. First, it uses quantitative methods to characterize trends in the conclusions of detective dime novels, noting especially the fault lines and tensions in those trends in order to clearly articulate the various detective tropes that developed within American popular literature long before the official advent of the hardboiled. The numerous exceptions to what we have come to think of as detective formulas leads to the argument that the earliest sustained body of American detective fiction contains within it seeds of subversion that suggest a new explanation of the genre’s continued popularity. Secondly, close readings are provided for a handful of specific dime novel texts featuring two of the most popular detectives of the period: Nick Carter and Allan Pinkerton. The focus here is not only on their intrinsic literary interest but also on their exemplification of several tropes that give the genre its continuing power. Finally, an analysis of Twain’s and Faulkner’s detectives suggests that these literary luminaries wrote their detective fiction at least as much out of a dime novel tradition as out of the Sherlockian or hardboiled conventions with which they are generally linked. Closely reading detective dime novels, then, provides insight into the projects not only of popular detective writers but also of more canonical American writers whose lifelong attraction to the genre has always seemed a mystery of its own.

**Who is the American dime novel detective?**

Perhaps the most accurate statement one can make about the dime novel detective is that he (or occasionally she) is amazingly varied. Broadly, the dime novel detective hero grew out of the American adventure formula that also produced the period’s Western and outlaw heroes. And yet, when one starts reading detective dime novels in any number, it becomes increasingly difficult to pin down recurring traits. This probably results from the originary nature of dime novels, which were not simply reproducing the formulas of genre fiction, but were actively developing and producing them. Moreover, the highly competitive publishing landscape encouraged a careful balance between recognizable formulas
and more sensational novelties. Readers were attracted to detectives they already knew, as evidenced by the 1,400+ titles featuring Nick Carter and the numerous others featuring Allan Pinkerton or Pinkerton operatives. At the same time, the dime novel industry placed a premium on originality; the New York Detective Library, for example, includes many titles featuring detective names, and these range from the masculine to the wise, like Robert Maynard’s Jerry Owens, The Young Western Detective or Police Captain Howard’s Old Bullion, the Banker Detective, to those with unique personal attributes such as Allan Arnold’s The Dandy Detective and The Dwarf Detective or Old Cap. Darrell’s Billy Bones, The Negro Minstrel Detective.

This book includes chapters on two of the most representative dime novel detective heroes: Allan Pinkerton and Nick Carter. Like the majority of figures in the genre, both are white, able-bodied men who are generally but not always successful in their detective adventures. Pinkerton was a fascinating historical personage – the first professional private detective in America as well as an avid abolitionist who manned a stop on the Underground Railroad – who fictionalized himself through what he called his ‘memoirs’ and whose iconic figure was then taken up as a character by numerous dime novel writers. Nick Carter, on the other hand, was a wholly fictional character who appeared under the house name ‘Nicholas Carter,’ and whose legacy spilled into the latter half of the twentieth century. Pinkerton and Carter are both described as having an enviable store of courage and good judgment, although their actions sometimes undercut their narrators’ apparent certainty on the latter point. Like the hardboiled detective, Carter is often susceptible to the femme fatale, and like the police procedural detective, Pinkerton is often tempted to step outside the bounds of the legal system that he is committed to uphold when faced with particularly heinous evidence of depravity. Emphasis on deductive reasoning varies according to the wide-ranging nature of the narratives in which these detectives find themselves. From their inception, these two figures were enormously influential within the dime novel landscape, both spawning numerous imitators. Pinkerton’s first memoir, The Expressman and the Detective, appeared in the middlebrow press in 1874, and The Pinkerton Detective Series, a dime novel enterprise taking up the character, ran from 1887 to 1901; Pinkerton, his two sons, and various other Pinkerton operatives can be found in dime novels spanning numerous series. The fully fictional Nick Carter first appeared in a story paper serial (New York Weekly) in 1886, and became a dime novel staple as of 1891; Carter is by far the most widely disseminated detective of the period, appearing in over 1,400 dime novels.
Although Nick Carter remains a vital, relatively young man throughout his decades in the dime novels – and even beyond, through his appearance on radio shows in the 1940s and even in spy stories in the 1980s and 1990s – the historically based fictionalized figure of Allan Pinkerton does age. He is in good company in the dime novels as an older white man, sitting alongside a cadre of elderly detectives marked by their long experience in fighting crime and mentoring young detectives. Indeed, such figures as Old Broadbrim, Old Cap. Collier, Old King Brady, and Old Sleuth flourish throughout the dime novels. Even Nick Carter participates in some portions of the old-detective motif, being initially introduced as the son of the venerable Old Sim Carter, and regularly mentoring young detective assistants himself. For the most part, ‘Old’ detectives are each known as ‘the best detective in’ the city, the country, or the world. These detectives tend to be masters of disguise; indeed, it is not unusual for a single-issue ‘Old’ detective to turn out to be a handsome young man in disguise who happily marries the dead man’s daughter or some other beautiful young woman in the conclusion. The male detectives featured in series are generally single and they tend to combine adventure with mental prowess in capturing and convicting crooks and outlaws. Serial detective stories often match up the detective with one or more lifetime criminals, and very rarely deal with a single crime committed by, say, a spouse who initially appears to have an alibi.

Like Nick Carter, many of these detective names occupy the positions of both author and main character; for example, Old Sleuth Weekly (1908–12) featured stories about various detectives including Old Sleuth, each published under the house name ‘Old Sleuth.’ Within this group of masterfully disguised Old Detectives, we find that each of the most popular has a unique identifier that balances the formulaic with the original. Old Broadbrim, for example, is a Quaker, ostensibly dedicated to pacifism but often drawn into violent altercations. Old King Brady, the second most prolific dime novel detective behind Nick Carter with over 800 stories featuring his adventures, provides a relatively realistic depiction of police work and experiences fear when confronting some criminals, perhaps because he isn’t a great shot and his disguises are often cracked by the crooks he attempts to deceive.11

Several of the ‘Old’ detectives are paired up with youngsters like ‘Young Sleuth,’ ‘Young Brady,’ and ‘Young Broadbrim.’ These explicitly named youthful detectives, generally in their late teens or early twenties, although occasionally younger, were probably featured so often in part because dime novels tried to appeal to a young male demographic.12
In the dime novels, as in Faulkner's detective stories, we find a reliance on the trope of mentorship, which accomplishes a narrative move akin to the awed-narrator convention featured in the Dupin and Holmes stories. Proponents of the idea that readers enjoy detective fiction because it affords them the opportunity to compete against the detective in trying to solve the mystery have often noted that Watson, like Dupin's unnamed friend, provides a more realistic competitor against which the reader can match wits, since Dupin, Holmes, and others of their ilk are mentally untouchable. The mentorship model of the dime novels achieves much the same goal, but with a little more realism. Instead of speaking to an intellectually inferior close friend about detective strategies, a dime novel detective often explains his methods to a bright youngster in training, and, by extension, to the reader. The young detective's 'graduation' ceremony often occurs when he or she deduces that the mentor is in grave danger and appears at a scene just in time to save the older detective from certain death. Such a young detective might then go off to star in his own series.

Although most dime novel detectives are male, issues of gender are far from uncomplicated in the pages of America's earliest mass-produced literature. Young Sleuth, who appeared in Young Sleuth Library as well as other serials between 1877 and 1896, has lots of company as an androgynous 18-year-old whose disguises often place him in the role of a beautiful young woman. As I have written elsewhere, the New York Detective Library, which presents almost exclusively single-issue detectives, includes several male detectives whose gender is marked as fluid and complex, and although these 'dandy' detectives exist in a heteronormative framework, often complete with marriage, the slippages in their performances of masculinity are ultimately celebrated as contributing factors in their success as detectives.

Some dime novel detectives are women, often remarkable women as fit and capable as they are intelligent and beautiful. All women dime novel detectives appear in only one or two novels rather than in series. Recent scholarship on detective fiction has focused on the explosion of female detectives of every sort from the 1970s to the present, and a growing interest in the ways gender is constituted in all genre fictions has led to a reexamination of the earliest American female detectives. A 1990 reprint of four dime novels, Old Sleuth's Freaky Female Detectives (Roberts et al.), features three fairly representative women dime novel detectives from the Old Sleuth serials. Kate Edwards, who appears in two dime novels, is a self-made young woman in the model of Horatio Alger's rags-to-riches stories, who embodies the consonances between
detective and sentimental traditions that Leonard Cassuto associates with the hardboiled. Kate’s hard-edged tracking of criminals, complete with harrowing episodes escaped only through physical and mental prowess, combine with the sentimental trope of a good woman ‘saving’ what we might call an *homme fatal*. Kate Goelet, the second detective heroine, shares many of Kate Edwards’s traits, and even falls in love with her quarry, whom she also saves with her goodness. The editors of the reprint construe Goelet’s ‘Saving Angel’ construction as evocative of nineteenth-century textbooks on manners, with Kate and her eventual husband a couple to be emulated, in contrast to the criminal couple in the novel, whose ‘dark morality’ ultimately leads to their downfall (Roberts et al., 7). The third female detective of the collection, Alice VanCamp, is analogous to several of her male counterparts as a society girl whose role as a highly successful detective is a disguise. As Madge the Detective, Alice restores order to upper-crust society in the mold of the classical detective genre generally associated with British detective fiction at the turn of the twentieth century.

Detective dime novels, as we will see in more detail in Chapter 2, often cement their happy endings by pairing the solution of the mystery with a wedding. Most female detectives, and many single-issue male detectives, are rewarded for their investigative prowess with marriage that confines the protagonist’s detective work to a single incident in what is presumably an otherwise normal life. The dime novels, then, are populated by professional detectives like Nick Carter and Allan Pinkerton, whose identities are almost entirely constituted by their work, alongside more occasional detective figures with whom the reader can presumably more readily identify. In either case, the dime novel detective addresses crime rather than non-criminal mystery, and generally brushes up against the potentially contaminating threats of the criminal underworld only to have those threats contained by marriage or financial success that removes the detective from these threats.

**Disrupting existing narratives about detective fiction**

**The cultural studies approach**

Even the most cursory glance at the history of cultural studies reveals its formidable contributions to deepening our understanding of all literatures, especially popular literatures. Within the realm of dime novel studies, Michael Denning’s *Mechanic Accents* (1987) is by far the best example of the explanatory power of cultural approaches in making sense of a huge body of often bewildering texts. Denning changed the
face of dime novel studies with his exploration of the intersections between the material realities of dime novel production and nineteenth-century American working-class culture. His main argument is as persuasive as it is elegant: the dime novel can be seen neither as purely escapist fiction intended only as entertainment nor as entirely manipulative literature written by the middle and upper classes to appease and control working-class Americans. Denning suggests instead that the corpus of dime novels should be read as constantly negotiating class, as ‘accented’ by the tropes and signs it evokes, as ‘contested terrain, a field of cultural conflict where signs with wide appeal and resonance take on contradictory disguises and are spoken in contrary accents’ (3). Denning’s wide-ranging methodology includes reader reception studies, empirical history, and sociocultural analysis.

These valuable methodological contributions and their attendant theoretical implications make Denning’s book a crucial one. And yet, the powerful tools that illuminate much about the complex mechanisms of mass-produced cultural objects can also obscure their vitality. It is perhaps instructive to examine Denning’s work on nineteenth-century dime novels alongside Catherine Ross Nickerson’s *The Web of Iniquity* (1998), a study of what she calls ‘domestic detective fiction,’ the middlebrow detective stories written by and often featuring American women in the same period as the dime novels. Nickerson’s work has forced scholars of detective fiction to acknowledge a new body of texts, mostly long out of print until she recovered and analyzed them. Critics such as Susan Stabile and Tom Gunning, for example, extend Nickerson’s work by engaging in close reading of the novels Nickerson introduces, such as Anna Katharine Green’s *The Leavenworth Case* (1878) or *The Mystery of the Hasty Arrow* (1919), among others. Michael Denning’s book, which spends a fair bit of time discussing dime novel detectives, has not made a similar intervention in the narrative of the detective genre’s development on behalf of dime novels. Indeed, recent books like Charles Rzepka’s *Detective Fiction* (2005) and Christopher Breu’s *Hard-Boiled Masculinities* (2005), both insightful studies of the detective genre, acknowledge dime novel detectives mostly through Denning’s compelling narrative of how they fit into the fabric of nineteenth-century American literature. Reading Denning, unfortunately, has often come to stand in for reading the dime novels.

Contrasting assumptions about canon-building are partly responsible for Denning’s and Nickerson’s different approaches and results. Nickerson, on the one hand, believes in recovering ‘lost’ texts, and has edited accessible new versions of such texts as Metta Fuller Victor’s
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The Dead Letter and Anna Katharine Green's That Affair Next Door. Denning, on the other hand, places his study in the role of mediator between the dime novels and interested scholars, arguing that it is unpromising to select specific examples from among the thousands of dime novel titles for close critical examination. In fact, Denning worries that detailed analysis of individual dime novels could elevate those titles in status, making a literary critic complicit in creating a dime novel counter-canon, with all the messy and inherently freighted complications canon-building always entails. For Denning, the decision to avoid recommending specific titles for new editions is bound up with an assumption that the alleged interchangeability of the dime novel places it in the category of journalism. He writes: ‘If the production of dime novels is considered as a branch of journalism, the repeated formulas, the quantity and rapidity of the writing, the lack of a clear “author,” the appearance of current events in the stories, and the industrial conditions of dime novel writing become more comprehensible’ (24). As Denning has ably shown, some detective dime novels certainly do work out current events, and the Molly Maguire books Denning analyses at length are an excellent example of this trend.

But many – perhaps most – detective dime novels are not ‘ripped from the headlines.’ Although some of the crimes represented in dime novels were certainly inspired by real-life events, many are quite ordinary and are politically fraught only in the sense that detective fiction often explores the politics of state intervention in the citizenry’s attempts to police itself. Consider a scene: an unidentified man is found murdered on a wharf and a diamond earring is found near his body. The journalistic version of that eminently ordinary story might include a short initial announcement followed by updates on the police investigation. The dime novel version, Allan Arnold’s A Diamond Ear-ring; or, Nina, the Female Detective (1888), marries sensation fiction and detective conventions and includes several notable features: a sassy female detective; the discovery that the murdered man has infuriated his wife’s ex-suitor, a man with a twin sister who can easily pass as him; various adventures including a ‘Devil’s Jaw’ false-floor booby trap that almost claims the detective’s life; and a complicated fake wedding ceremony in which the groom confesses to murder in order to wed the widow, only to discover himself surrounded by police. To see this as ‘a branch of journalism’ because it was published under a house name and may have been based on a real dead body is to miss the exciting resonances of the story: the interest in doubling engendered by the twin criminals and the detective’s ability to disguise herself as the victim’s widow; the false
marriage plot that rewrites the classical mystery’s reliance on romantic subplots to cement order at the end of detective narratives; and the various explorations of gendered desire throughout the novel. Indeed, *A Diamond Ear-ring* serves as a vibrant example of dime novel contributions to detective fiction.

In *Mechanic Accents*, Denning explains that he has not ‘devoted a chapter to the dime novel detective, largely in order to avoid the twentieth-century reification of the detective story genre’ (204). This suggests that the detective genre became a concrete entity only in the twentieth century, and that to separate out a set of dime novels under the rubric of ‘detective fiction’ is to anachronistically use our current understanding of the genre to read and categorize these earlier texts. Denning’s approach allows him to trace the ‘working-class accents’ he studies across generic boundaries, following detective figures beyond the genre named after them. And certainly, detective characters appear in a great variety of dime novels, as they do in Victorian sensation fiction of the same period and earlier; in both cases, stories in which detectives are ancillary to the main narrative thrust are not productively studied as ‘detective fiction.’

Although detective fiction, like all the genre fictions, has been the subject of many competing definitions, it is Tzvetan Todorov’s delineation that I – and many others – find most useful in grouping texts that share the same thematic and rhetorical approaches to questions of crime and mystery. For Todorov, a detective story always contains two narratives: the story of the crime that occurs before the narrative opens, and the story of a figure (the detective) uncovering the original story (46). The detective genre, then, is fundamentally epistemological, requiring a central narrative trajectory in which truth is uncovered – from an armchair or in the mean streets – and the mystery is solved in the end, whether or not the various threads of the narrative are fully resolved. With thousands of stories that meet these criteria appearing in stories with the word ‘detective’ in their titles or in their series’ titles (*New York Detective Library* and *Detective Story Magazine*, for example), it seems important to acknowledge the growing generic stability of detective fiction in America by the late nineteenth century. Certainly, the nineteenth-century people involved in the writing, reading, and publishing of detective fiction found this a useful category. To ignore their assessment can lead us to overlook the insights Denning offers into the genre’s deliberately troubled location between the conservative and the subversive, as we shall discuss in more detail throughout this book.

Denning’s attention to detectives deployed beyond their generic boundaries allows him to make connections across genres, as when he
characterizes both Nick Carter, the most famous dime novel detective, and Frank Merriwell, the most famous dime novel schoolboy athlete, as ‘figures of the Anglo-Saxon chauvinism of the turn of the century’ and as products of the attendant fragmentation of working-class culture (205). The comparison between these two central dime novel heroes speaks as much to scholars of detective fiction as of working-class culture. After all, as a detective hero, Nick Carter is freighted with meaning that is contingent on his central role within a genre whose definition and stability were already quite established by the time Merriwell appeared in 1896. Denning notes that although Carter’s use of disguise is legendary, the reader always knows that beneath the disguise is a straight, white, relatively young male, and thus a character in the same mold as Merriwell, whose school and sports stories make heroic a privileged masculinity whose concerns are far from anything like the mean streets. This comparison provides an important insight into Nick Carter as a detective hero. As we shall see in Chapter 4, Nick Carter’s apparently suave and uncomplicated masculinity becomes quite tricky in places. Carter may seem to dominate most of the situations in which he finds himself, but a closer look reveals that he is sometimes seduced by science as by superstition, and that his role as a detective, constantly brushing up against physical and mental danger, creates slippages in all parts of his narratives’ constructions of masculinity, epistemology, and morality. These slippages are constitutive elements of detective stories rather than exceptions, and Denning’s insight into the kinds of baggage straight young middle-class white Nick Carter brings to his role helps explain the power of detective fiction in carving out liminal spaces. *Dime Novels and the Roots of American Detective Fiction* is intended, in general, to complement and extend rather than contradict Denning’s *Mechanic Accents*. Indeed, this book often excavates from Denning’s study key insights into detective fiction that are gained from examining detective dime novels separately from other genres. It also analyzes detective dime novels individually as well as in groups, with the hopes that other scholars might want to read and teach some of these fascinating texts. This project of recovery challenges some fairly settled notions in our understanding of twentieth-century developments in the detective genre.

**The historicization of detective fiction**

Perhaps because detective fiction provides an entry into several complex sociopolitical and philosophical tensions – law, order, surveillance, epistemology, power, and so on – it has usually been understood as
inextricably linked to its historical moment and geographical location. This is true of all popular literatures to an extent; for a text or genre to be popular – that is, in high demand among readers – it might be imagined as responding to a cultural desire that might be specific to a particular time and place. Detective fiction has several quite distinct subgenres: the classical, the hardboiled, the police procedural, detectives of diversity, and the postmodern detective. As Robert Rushing has ably shown, these subgenres have recently broken into increasingly specialized sub-subgenres (18), but for the purposes of our explorations here, the five large subgenres will suffice.18 Today examples of new texts in each subgenre coexist happily on the shelves – real or virtual – of any bookstore’s detective section, and yet, each subgenre is generally linked to a country of origin and to a specific decade or two.

Although the historicization of the development of detective fiction has been useful in tracing some of the genre’s philosophical and rhetorical resonances, it does not tell the whole story. The presence of detectives like Allan Pinkerton, Nick Carter, and others in the ‘fallow period’ between Poe and Hammett forces us to reexamine the fairly settled notion that the subgenres emerged in particularly fraught historical moments. As this book reveals, all these subgenres can be found in their nascent form within the dime novels, and their omission from the history of detective fiction obfuscates the central role American dime novels played in working through the various potentials of the detective genre. Indeed, the missing dime novel detectives have allowed for a linear narrative of the genre’s development that conceals its potential for subversion by tying it to specific historical developments rather than seeing it as part of continuing negotiations at the sites of surveillance, law, and identity. The thousands of tales of detection produced in America between Poe and Hammett were widely read and had enormous cultural influence in shaping and vitalizing the detective genre and its central hero.

Curiously, it is the detective subgenre closest to the dime novel in time period that is least well represented in its annals. The classical detective story, alternately known as the drawing-room, puzzle, or Golden Age mystery, is marked by its alleged belief in order and rationality as well as by what Brigid Brophy characterizes as a detective who ‘is (witness his disdain) an aristocrat, but a natural one, just as he is merely rational, but more incisively so than common people’ (136). Although the true armchair detective is perhaps best exemplified by Sherlock Holmes’s agoraphobic elder brother, Mycroft, the sixty texts of the Sherlock Holmes canon (1887–1927) are also highly representative of the classical
subgenre. Taking much from Poe’s three Dupin tales (1841–44), Holmes has come to stand for the effete and eccentric European puzzle-solver whose keen eye and keener mind appear to leave absolutely no mystery unsolved. In Holmes, epistemological mastery is usually a greater site of reader focus than say, an interest in victims being avenged, innocently accused men being redeemed, or criminals being punished. The epistemological certainty underlying the Holmes tales seems to play out in the Great Detective’s brushes with the supernatural, in which the explanations are always ultimately found in the realm of the purely rational. However, as Elliot Gilbert has pointed out, the Holmes canon represents only those cases that have been solved, and Watson often hints at other cases whose conclusions may not offer as much narrative closure. Just as the nineteenth century is sometimes characterized as fully committed to a belief in rationality while the reality of the period’s philosophical underpinning is considerably murkier, so too even the epitome of the classical detectives is sometimes caught between narratives of rational worldview and epistemological uncertainty.

Although a few armchair detectives exist in the dime novels, they are not particularly common, probably because dime novel heroes are seldom aristocrats, no matter how broadly we define the term. Dime novel detectives often possess considerable confidence, but it never crosses into the realm of entitlement. They tend, too, to live at least as much by their brawn as their brain, a gesture to the Western hero developing alongside – and sometimes in concert with – dime novel detectives. Sherlock Holmes has to deal with outlaws (American outlaws, in fact) on occasion, but there is never any question about Holmes having been or becoming anything like an outlaw, despite his mastery of shady disguises; in American dime novels, blurring between outlaw and detective positions occurs at levels far exceeding the field of disguise. And the ‘fair play’ convention associated with classical detection is presented in the dime novel through a model of mentorship rather than friendship that provides a realistic formula through which the reader can admire the detective’s mental prowess from the perspective of a young apprentice who is bright but inexperienced rather than through the somewhat cloudy perspective of the detective’s close, but intellectually inferior, friend. The allegedly classical notion that all things can be known, all mysteries ultimately solved, is fairly pervasive in the dime novels, although revelations are often the result of chance rather than mental acumen.

The reliance on chance for narrative momentum and closure is central to a detective subgenre quite prevalent in the dime novels: the
hardboiled. Indeed, many detective dime novels use conventions associated with the hardboiled ethos, whose origin is placed in the *Black Mask* magazines of the American 1920s by scholars of various theoretical persuasions. Donald Westlake approaches the hardboiled from a sociohistorical perspective, tying its development and immense popularity to Prohibition, a time which called attention to the institutional inadequacies of law because it turned so many Americans into lawbreakers and helped solidify the foundations of organized crime in the United States (5). Taking what he terms a ‘psycho-Marxist’ approach, Christopher Breu locates the origins of the hardboiled in the complex tangle of racialized and gendered identities at play in the 1920s, suggesting that the hardboiled genre, marked by an unacknowledged debt to black iconography, emerged as an ostensible rejection of middle-class white Victorian masculinity, and that the hardboiled figure in fact marries the resonances of the black rapist and the white moralist.

Like Breu, Leonard Cassuto is concerned with the hyper-masculinity of the hardboiled, but Cassuto’s project is one of tracing influence, and he connects the hardboiled narrative of the twentieth century to the sentimental domestic fiction that dominated women’s writing of the nineteenth, suggesting that domestic sentimental fiction, typically figured as feminine, shares roots and concerns with the allegedly more masculine hardboiled.

Hardboiled writers of the 1920 and 1930s, most notably Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, certainly address anxieties around an expanded definition of criminality (Westlake), around vexed constructions of masculinity in the face of destabilized and destabilizing race relations (Breu), and around changing domestic roles (Cassuto). But, as Cassuto’s analysis suggests, these concerns were not new to the interwar years. The latter half of the nineteenth century saw significant sociocultural instability around masculinity in the face of newly free blacks as well as perceived threats to the domestic sphere in the person of the New Woman. Although alcohol use wasn’t criminalized until 1919 in America, labor unrest led to the criminalization of thousands of workers fighting for new labor laws in the nineteenth century. Even if we accept the premise that popular literature is linked to specific historical and geopolitical anxieties, it is unsurprising to find early versions of Chandler’s honorable working-class private detective walking (or constructing himself as if he were walking) the mean streets even in the nineteenth-century dime novels and Pinkerton memoirs. Thematically, the hardboiled dick has much in common with the Western adventure hero, who, to cite Chandler, ‘might seduce a duchess … [but] would not
spoil a virgin’ and whose ‘story is his adventure in search of a hidden truth, and it would be no adventure if it did not happen to a man fit for adventure’ (237). Chandler’s idealized description of the hardboiled detective, then, fits comfortably with hundreds of dime novel detectives whose urban world contains the epistemological fractures of the mean streets and whose approach to detection is thus to face head-on the threat of the criminal underworld, recognizing that taking a beating can often lead to uncovering truth, or what passes for truth in an unrelentingly chaotic world.

Similarly, the defining elements of the police procedural were actually developed in the Pinkerton memoirs and dime novels much earlier than most histories of detective fiction would lead us to expect. For example, Robert Winston and Nancy Mellerski’s excellent study of the subgenre identifies the police procedural as belonging to the ‘third stage’ of detective fiction, suggesting that the lone detective, like the lone Western hero before him, had to adapt to cultural anxieties around new technological and economic realities by becoming part of a team committed to fighting injustice and uncovering truth. Under this rubric, the police procedural responds to the needs of a post-World War II society dominated and defined by corporate interests and attendant social anxieties. Scholars of the police procedural like Hillary Waugh and George Dove suggest that it brings two major innovations to detective fiction in the 1940s and 1950s: a focus on detection as teamwork rather than as individual enterprise, and a much more realistic and less aestheticized portrayal of the actualities of detective work. While these narrative constructions clearly respond productively to the anxieties of the 1950s around police surveillance and corruption – witness the run-away success of Ed McBain’s 87th Precinct series, set in a lightly veiled version of New York City – a look at the dime novels reveals that this exigency was far from new. The Pinkerton memoirs of almost a century earlier are not only redolent with the details of detective work and the focus on teamwork that marks the police procedural, but they also address concerns about what Alan Trachtenberg calls ‘the incorporation of America.’ Winston and Mellerski have identified a tension within Cold War police procedurals that resonates with the Pinkerton memoirs and dime novels: the narrative of law and order is continually accompanied by an undercurrent of subversion that sometimes coincides with and sometimes undercuts the methodical detective work being performed. As we shall see in Allan Pinkerton’s self-portrayals as well as in attendant dime novel representations, even in nineteenth-century popular texts, the police detective’s body acts as a site of physical and ideological rupture.
A focus on the body as a possible site of detective identity is not generally associated with the nineteenth century, but rather with the latter part of the twentieth century, which is often seen as ushering in a more diverse cadre of detectives, often as part of a postmodern project that is invested in multiplying perspectives in order to represent a non-rational world. Detectives of the 1970s and beyond do not always inhabit male, middle- or upper-class, straight white bodies. Although women detectives like Miss Marple, Harriet Vane, and others graced the pages of classical mysteries in the early twentieth century, these relatively rare – and fundamentally unthreatening – characters are wholly different from the women featured in 1970s detective narratives. Here we find hardboiled private eyes like Marcia Muller’s Sharon McCone (1977–present) and Sara Paretsky’s V. I. Warshawski (1982–present) who can give as well as take a beating alongside such figures as Amanda Cross’s literary scholar Kate Fansler (1964–2002), who straddles the classical and the postmodern in her investigations of murders that are always rife with epistemological, aesthetic, and ethical conundrums. An attractive critical narrative can explain the role of women detectives chronologically: the women of classical mysteries may be associated with a genteel brand of first-wave feminism; the hardboiled woman detective and her postmodern counterpart may be seen as more radical offshoots of feminism’s second wave; and the sexually or racially ‘other’ detectives, which scholars occasionally delight in naming ‘lady dicks’ or ‘black dicks,’ might be imagined to coincide temporally with third-wave feminism, with its commitment to inclusion and multiplicity. It is a logical reading of the detective genre’s evolution, but the quite radical woman detectives of the dime novels challenge the historicity of this narrative.

As I have argued elsewhere, dime novels include not only radical female detective characters, but also radical recastings of generic conventions within detective fiction. ‘Queer Investigations’ reads closely two radically othered dime novel detectives: a sassy female Secret Service agent whose masterful use of violence and male disguise are highlighted by a plot that includes a parodic reversal of the marriage scene that often marks the happy ending of a detective dime novel, and a young male detective known as Gay Gus Giles, the Lady Detective, who uses his complexly gendered identity as a powerful investigative tool and who also participates in a subversive wedding at the conclusion. Such characters as effeminate Gay Gus and tough-girl Nina Renard and such narrative moves as recasting the happy-ending wedding convention that George Grella sees as tying detective fiction to the comedy
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of manners, question not only the historicity argument about detective fiction but also the conservative argument. The genre’s capaciousness in including diverse detective heroes contributes quite productively to scholarly conversations about its general orientation: is detective fiction fundamentally conservative or subversive? Most of the scholarship on this point leans towards the conservative. George Dove’s nuanced reading suggests that while detective fiction is always formally conservative, its playful nature allows it considerable thematic flexibility, since it can feature a detective hero who is personally or politically subversive within the constraining formal structure (Reader, 5). Dime novel detective fiction – with its not infrequent portrayals of diverse detectives – reveals a continuum of representational politics even from the genre’s earliest inception.

Further, it points to what we might call an epistemological continuum, since the detective narrative itself is prone to rupture, a phenomenon we see most clearly in what is generally called ‘postmodern’ or ‘metaphysical’ detective fiction, a relatively small corpus of work that has, as its name suggests, been associated with a post-World War II postmodern project replete with self-reflexivity, intertextuality, generic hybridity, and deep-seated parody. These texts are global in scope, including as they do E. C. Bentley’s Trent’s Last Case (1936), Alain Robbe-Grillet’s The Erasers (1952, translated from French), Manuel Puig’s The Buenos Aires Affair (1973, translated from Spanish), Umberto Eco’s The Name of the Rose (1983, translated from Italian), and Paul Auster’s New York Trilogy (1987). These texts have a contrapuntal function in that they solidify the genre’s edges through their mockery and unbalancing of its central rhetorical and aesthetic moves. Trent’s Last Case, for example, emphasizes the convention of the dramatic revelation when Trent gathers a group of suspects together only to unveil the wrong man. Likewise, The Erasers emphasizes the multiple possible plotlines that always exist in the crime narrative by continually embedding alternate explanations of the detective’s story as well as the criminal’s story that he is trying to uncover. Auster’s disorienting trilogy brilliantly evokes several of the central conventions of detective fiction – including the body on page one, the dark double, and the locked room – only to turn them on their heads while telling the reader that this is exactly what is happening.

Certainly the dime novels are not full of metaphysical detectives self-reflexively mocking their own fictionality and their participation in the creation of a brave new genre. While hardboiled and police detectives abound in the dime novels, and racial and gendered others are quite
frequent, texts anticipating the postmodern project are relatively rare, but they exist. Chapter 4 analyzes in some detail a proto-postmodern Nick Carter novel that luxuriates in epistemological uncertainty and a dazzling array of *femme fatale* rewritings. Clever rewritings of generic conventions – and the attendant recasting of reader expectations – provide reassurance that a genre exists and that its boundaries are relatively well established. It is in fact the existence of dime novel detective stories that participate in the playful, metanarrative, self-reflexive, intertextual games we tend to associate with postmodern writing and thinking that provides the strongest evidence that the detective genre was alive and well in the American nineteenth century; after all, the detective genre could not be mocked and questioned unless its expectations were well known.

Several recent studies have identified a trend in turn-of-the-twenty-first-century detective fiction that increasingly blurs generic boundaries. The boundaries, a reading of dime novel detective fiction suggests, were perhaps always already blurred. Within the space of two decades – the two decades preceding the publication in 1890 of the first Sherlock Holmes story in America, in fact – the dime novels developed a number of narrative conventions that have come to prominence at different times.

The existence of all the subgenres within the dime novel corpus forces us to reevaluate the evolutionary model of genre popularized by Charles Bazerman, in which various conventions flourish in specific sociohistorical moments because of their aptness in finding productive evolutionary niches. The rhetorical model of genre developed by Carolyn R. Miller, Aviva Freedman, and others, though seldom applied to literary genres, seems rather more apropos here. The dime novels developed what we might consider a ‘typified rhetorical action based in recurrent situations’ (C. R. Miller, 31), where the recurrent situations – the social exigencies – were both timely and timeless, including anxieties around justice, surveillance, epistemology, and personal identity. This is not to suggest that individual detective works do not reflect specific concerns of their time and place; it is rather to argue that these reflections are more complex than a one-to-one relationship to a historical moment, often drawing simultaneously upon multiple tropes that are generally associated with different periods.

In the various subgenres developed in the dime novel, we see a tension in the representation of the detective that works at several levels, reflecting an anxiety typical of nineteenth-century newspaper and magazine representations of the new profession of the police officer. The dime
novels were written against a social backdrop of ongoing debates about whether police should be required to wear identifying clothing that would effectively preclude them from conducting undercover operations for fear that they could not be trusted to emerge unscathed from encounters with the criminal underworld. The sociohistorical context has changed over the past century and a half, but concerns about the moral and physical danger that accompanies detective work remain. The development of the detective genre within the uncertain aesthetic landscape of the dime novel represents not only a development of common conventions like the body on page one, the dark double, or the wedding conclusion; it also establishes the boundaries of the genre as far more capacious – structurally and ideologically – than has previously been recognized.

Contamination, containment, and the appeal of detective fiction

The historical narrative of the development of detective fiction locates the genre’s immense popularity to readers and viewers in its ability to articulate, represent, and complicate sociocultural anxieties that are historically and geographically specific. Two problems have long stood in the way of a straightforward explanation of the genre’s appeal: first, the subgenres seem so different that it’s hard to imagine a single explanation that would cover the appeal of even contemporaneous detectives like Miss Marple (who first appeared in 1926) and Sam Spade (1930); and second, the question of appeal is inextricably linked to the alleged conservatism or subversiveness of the genre, and critics disagree on its general ideological thrust. Close examination of dime novels poses a third complication: various potentials of the subgenres were always already there in the dime novels and so cannot simply be explained by peculiarities of later historical moments. Scholars of all stripes have explanations for detective fiction’s appeal, including: Edmund Wilson, who sees the genre as a vice ranking ‘somewhere between smoking and crossword puzzles’ (263); Raymond Chandler, who articulates the rules of fair play and constructs the reader as enjoying the competition with the detective in seeing who can solve the mystery first; George Grella, who imagines the pleasure of the detective narrative to reside in its security, as the status quo is always restored in the end;24 Carolyn Heilbrun, who sees the genre’s formulaic nature as providing the author with space to explore subversive subjects (7); and Charles Rzepka and Lisa Zunshine who, separately, take cognitive science approaches to locate generic pleasure within Theory of Mind.
In much detective fiction, the impetus to read voraciously remains something of a mystery. It is not fully explained by the reader’s desire to discover the truth, as the truth is sometimes unknowable and sometimes revealed long before the end of the book, nor by a competition between reader and detective, since the very concept of ‘fair play,’ as Rzepka and others have shown, is frequently manipulated by highly popular detective writers. Robert Rushing suggests, radically, ‘There is no hermeneutic component to the detective novel’ (161, his italics). Rushing’s excellent study of the psychoanalytic appeals of detective fiction is particularly compelling in its argument that detective fiction relies on repetition to attract and maintain its diverse audience. Through close examination of detectives in the midst of or on the margins of police procedurals as different as Henning Mankell’s Kurt Wallander and the USA Network’s Adrian Monk, Rushing argues that readers and viewers consume police procedurals compulsively not in spite of but because of the irritation that so repetitively marks the police procedural genre. For Rushing, Adrian Monk’s obsessive compulsive disorder fundamentally mirrors that of the detective genre’s reader: Monk’s disorder is not a gimmick but a constitutive feature that functions like Wallander’s alcoholism or Holmes’s cocaine addiction to exemplify the fundamentally unmet desire at the heart of the genre. Unlike those who see detective fiction as conservative, Rushing argues that the genre is marked not by its closure but by its repetitiveness. His focus on the recurring deferral of desire through the continual irritants negotiated by a detective (especially a serial detective) is especially powerful in explaining how the tedium of police work provides a space for repetition that is linked to psychological enjoyment and even pleasure or jouissance.

I propose an explanation of the detective genre’s appeal that is based in an ongoing trajectory between contamination and containment. This explanation complements and extends Rushing’s psychoanalytic reading of the genre while also drawing on Fredric Jameson’s work on mass culture, which, he suggests, ‘strategically arouses fantasy content within carefully symbolic containment structures which defuse it, gratifying intolerable, unrealizable, properly imperishable desires only to the degree to which they can again be laid to rest’ (141). For Jameson, the containment structure defuses or lessens the cultural fantasy, returning what, in detective fiction at least, is probably a dark desire to its proper place – ‘laid to rest,’ so to speak. Jameson uses the detective ending as an emblem of commodification in literature: it is the thing whose commodity value resides purely in its position within a narrative. As we will see in Chapter 2, the commodification of the detective genre by
its satisfying ending is not always complete. Likewise, the containment structures of detective fiction are less conclusive than those Jameson examines in *Jaws* and *The Godfather*. Rather than cultural fantasy being raised in order to be managed, the dark desires and fears of contamination in detective fiction are continually bumping up against, being rebuffed by, and even intersecting with the structures of containment.

In fact, it is the continual tension between tropes of contamination and containment that impels readers. The constant and repeated threat that the detective will be contaminated by his work through bodily danger or mental derangement balanced against the near certainty that he will be able to manage that threat without losing himself and his beliefs provides narrative momentum. Several well-established tensions within detective fiction can productively be understood through this model, including: the trope of the dark double that structures many detective–criminal relationships; the liminality or identity fluidity of many detective heroes, who are often able to successfully negotiate class, gender, ethical, and even aesthetic boundaries; the fluidity of identity highlighted by tropes of disguise and dangerous performance; and the remarkable reach of the genre within a marketplace that includes women writers like eminent feminist scholar Carolyn Heilbrun and cat-mystery writer Lilian Jackson Braun, and male writers like much maligned Mickey Spillane and Nobel laureate William Faulkner. The pleasure of detective fiction, for readers of the missing dime novel detectives’ adventures as for readers of the genre today, lies in the continually fraught balance of these tropes along a tightrope between contamination and containment.

The dark double is frequently a structuring principle of the detective narrative, which has at its center a triangular relationship: that of detective, criminal, and victim. Because the detective and criminal meet, so to speak, over the dead body of the victim, theirs is the most active, potent, and potentially contaminating axis of this triangle. In order to solve the mystery, the detective must in some sense take on the criminal’s persona, tracing the criminal’s footsteps metaphorically and often physically. The threat inherent in the detective’s temporary displacement into the criminal’s mental landscape emerges from one of the genre’s founding texts: Poe’s ‘The Purloined Letter.’ Here the detective and the criminal are brothers, both hiding in plain sight the truth that they are perfect doubles of each other, that the detective is just as capable of deceit and manipulation as is the criminal. Of course, Poe also wrote ‘William Wilson,’ a story that does not meet the basic criteria of detective fiction, but that presages one of its main
anxieties: that the dark double might be more than a mirror image, more than an instantiation of the detective’s darkest potential – that the dark double, in fact, might be the self.

The triangular formulation at the center of detective fiction is thus rife with the threat of contamination, since it encourages slippages in identity. As the detective tries to think like the criminal or to reenact the crime from the criminal’s perspective, he momentarily feels like – and perhaps in some sense becomes – the criminal. The detective must play more than one role in order to actively uncover the criminal act that has already been performed by the person who is the prime mover of the narrative. The threat of the triangle collapsing, of the detective becoming contaminated by his interactions with the criminal, is always present in detective fiction, but it is also almost always contained to a satisfying degree. With rare exceptions (largely from the postmodern detective canon), the detective is able to contain his dark desires to become a killer except when it is the criminal who becomes the detective’s victim, as in Showtime’s hit serial killer/detective show, *Dexter*. The vengeful detective, in fact, is a recurring example of pleasurable interpenetrations of contamination and containment.

The dime novels repeatedly explore the dark double structure by pairing the detective hero with the figure he replaced as the prominent face of dime novel masculinity: the outlaw. Indeed, the ongoing struggle between detective and outlaw is a central trope of America’s earliest mass-produced detective fiction. Daryl Jones characterizes the outlaw hero as providing a complex space in which a single character collapses ‘the two ostensibly irreconcilable traits which the reading public most highly prized and most often demanded of those it would venerate: virtue and rebelliousness’ (654). This complexity of character is equally central to the detective hero, who is constantly negotiating tensions between social justice and individualism. Although the detective narrative can be seen as the optimistic brother of outlaw fiction or crime fiction, its endings, as we shall see in Chapter 2, often belie its surface belief in preserving the status quo. The potential subversiveness of detective endings is particularly evident in dime novels that match up detective and outlaw heroes – especially when these heroes are historical figures like Allan Pinkerton and Jesse James – since these seldom provide victory to either side, but rather narrate a complex conflict that ends without even a semblance of resolution: structures of containment are evoked but never fully held in place.

In order to successfully negotiate his encounter with his dark double, the detective must be a liminal figure, able to move effortlessly between
worlds and to adopt identities that cross boundaries of class, race, and gender. This is true across subgenres, as the classical detective is often a class outsider who can nonetheless convincingly enter seemingly closed aristocratic circles disrupted by crime, and the hardboiled detective is, as Chandler describes, at once ‘a common man’ and ‘a unique man’ who can gain entry into the criminal underworld. Whether his main stage is the mean streets or the country manor, the detective also must navigate a relationship with the police, who, as Brigid Brophy notes, are often shown as a threat to the population rather than a protector, as when they arrest innocent people or interfere with the detective protagonist’s ability to make progress on a case (138). For classical and hardboiled detectives, the police detective acts as a sort of secondary double, and while the relationship between detective and criminal is clearly a dark one, that between private detective and police officer encapsulates a number of complexities. Although many dime novel detectives get back-up from reliable but unimaginative police detectives, a good number also discover and eventually capture corrupt police detectives who provide a sharp contrast to the detective hero while also embodying the terrifying power of a contaminated detective.

The police procedural, which makes heroic the position viewed with suspicion by both the classical and the hardboiled, often emphasizes the police detective’s liminality rather than his conformity, as the police hero tends to function at the limits of the law, struggling to pursue justice within the bounds of his numerous rules and scarce resources. Indeed, many police procedurals embody a rich site of contamination in detective fiction: that of extended disguise. While Holmes adopts multiple disguises that sometimes fool even Watson, his core self remains untouched by the garb that he dons or the affectations of movement and voice he adopts. In the dime novels, though, disguise can be much more threatening to the detective’s sense of self, having the potential to create fissures in personal identity and thus in the very concept of a detective hero. For the police detective who engages in long-term undercover operations, the body in disguise is often permanently marked by its extended presence in the criminal underworld, raising sometimes articulated questions about whether the mind and heart are equally altered. As we shall see in our discussion of Allan Pinkerton in Chapter 3, even the earliest police procedural narratives exploit the tension between contamination and containment in creating a serial character continually on the brink of giving in to sinister temptations but (almost) always managing to contain his dark desires by story’s end.
Since the reader of detective fiction is deliberately positioned to identify with the detective, the tropes of contamination and containment extend beyond the narrative and into the marketplace. Many detective narratives reside at the boundary with crime fiction, especially in the dime novels, which were pressured by organized censorship groups to avoid the perspective of what we would now call ‘crime fiction’ (the outlaw fiction of the dime novels shares narrative structures with novels by the likes of Jim Thompson and James M. Cain, who brought crime fiction to the edge of the literary canon in the 1930s). In the late nineteenth century, media stories abounded that purportedly showed young boys turning to a life of crime after reading dime novels glamorizing the dark underbelly of the city, leading publishers (many of whom were occasionally arrested in censorship cases) to focus on the detective figure, at least in marketing their novels. The careful positioning of the reader on the side of justice and truth is often blurred, however, when the detective goes undercover and acts as a criminal or when the novel provides multiple points of view, highlighting the reader’s potential pleasure in adopting various roles, including those of frightened victims or dangerous criminals.

John Irwin articulates a complication in the way the double functions in detective fiction when he argues that doubled characters are usually internally split, and so ‘doubling tends to be a structure of four halves problematically balanced across the inner/outer limit of the self rather than a structure of two, separate, opposing wholes’ (Mystery, 5). The multiple positioning of the reader in both detective and criminal viewpoints – and, more rarely, victim viewpoints – creates a highly contaminated space indeed, although this space can be contained by a figure like Watson or a dime novel acolyte detective with whom the reader can identify. Further, the reader of detective fiction is in competition with but also imitating the detective, seeking to uncover a narrative that places the writer alongside the criminal, also in a bond of competition and mimesis, trying to escape detection. The very concept of ‘Nick Carter’ presents a site rife with potential contamination, since the detective and the author are both named ‘Nick Carter,’ so that the name comes to stand for a structure that is split between covering (as the author) and uncovering (as the detective) the narrative of the crime that motivates the detective’s trajectory.

Because of the role of crime as a constitutive feature of the detective narrative, detective fiction was seen as especially contaminating within nineteenth-century conversations about the threat of cheap fiction. And yet, the detective genre itself appears to be as liminal as its central
character, at once derided and respected as it moves between worlds and takes on various guises, including the guise of near-canonical literature. The ability of detective fiction to traverse epistemological, ethical, and even aesthetic boundaries may reside in part in its inception in the not quite respectable – but undoubtedly impressive – pen of Edgar Allan Poe.

The capacious bounds of detective fiction have also drawn such literary giants as Mark Twain and William Faulkner, and their attraction to the genre can be explained by its ability to poise between contamination and containment. As we shall discuss in Chapter 5, Faulkner and Twain repeatedly employ the same narrative structures as do dime novel narratives featuring Allan Pinkerton and Nick Carter, with all acknowledging and even perhaps celebrating the fact that in detective fiction containment structures are always to some degree unsuccessful. Faulkner’s and Twain’s lifelong dabbling in detective fiction has often been understood as linked to an attraction to the story of crime, especially murder. That explanation but scratches the surface of their interest. The model of contamination and containment reveals a structural feature of detective fiction that links it to two of the most potent themes examined in the oeuvres of these great writers: the young boy’s journey into adulthood and, often relatedly, his growing understanding of the complex rhetoric surrounding questions of miscegenation. Race relations and attendant anxieties about identity were – historically, culturally, and aesthetically – collected and refracted within the liminal figure of the mulatto, a potentially contaminating force always incompletely contained by legal and cultural structures. The complex ways in which miscegenation, like detection, produces a threat of contamination that sits poised in a precarious balance with structures of containment underlies the detective genre’s potent appeal. Indeed, examining the earliest mass-produced corpus of detective narratives alongside the work of Twain and Faulkner reveals that detective fiction fulfills a desire for order and protection alongside a certain pleasure in subversion and unresolved anxiety at the sites of authority, ethics, and identity.

Some organizing principles

Most monographs about detective fiction organize around the subgenres, showing up the very chronological order challenged by the dime novels. This book, instead, presents four highly interconnected analytical chapters that tease out the multiple implications of taking seriously the impact of dime novels on the development of detective
fiction. While the scholarly trend is to explore only the cultural and material aspects of this fiction, pointing the lens of literary criticism at individual texts here pays dividends in both uncovering the subversive potential of detective fiction and in better understanding the forays of mainstream writers into the genre. Close readings of dime novels are grouped around two iconic nineteenth-century popular detectives – Allan Pinkerton and Nick Carter – and then paired with new readings of Mark Twain’s and William Faulkner’s career-long fascination with detective characters and the detective genre.

Chapter 2 investigates claims about detective fiction’s inherent conservatism, which have often been made in part because of detective stories’ endings: the mystery is solved, the criminal is captured and suitably punished, and the detective is rewarded, sometimes with marriage and/or recognition, and sometimes simply with the personal satisfaction of seeing justice done or of achieving epistemological certainty. Detective dime novels especially have been characterized as providing relatively uncomplicated ‘happy’ endings (Denning, Klein, Hoppenstand, and others). This project analyzes dime novels whose endings could hardly be characterized as happy or conservative: for example, the closure on the brutal torture and death of the detective in one case, the acknowledgment of a dramatic breakdown of epistemological certainty in another. By examining 115 dime novels from the New York Detective Library (65 from 1883 and 50 from 1888), I construct a dataset that demonstrates that most detective dime novels do restore order in the end, often undergirding that restoration with a marriage plot involving either the detective or a suspect who has been exculpated. However, these endings are not always uncomplicated in moral or epistemological terms, and this chapter looks at trends and specific examples of dime novels in which justice is not reached, knowledge is not attained, and even two cases in which heroic detectives are killed. Beyond the several novels in which the endings are decidedly not happy, this chapter also examines three novels that make metacritical statements on dime novel endings through parodic marriage plots.

Chapter 3 attends to the detective fiction conventions introduced in writing by and about America’s first professional private detective, Allan Pinkerton (1819–84). While Pinkerton’s influence on the American hardboiled is somewhat acknowledged (Dashiell Hammett, after all, was a Pinkerton operative before he created Sam Spade and the Continent Op in the late 1920s), this chapter argues that his legacy has been central in the development of both American and British detective traditions. Pinkerton himself developed a profusion of potential
detective identities that he attempted through his memoirs to construct as heroic figures carefully balanced between conservative and subversive ethos, and yet his deliberate self-construction as a professional taps into nineteenth-century notions of manhood that form a vexed relationship with the realities and representations of the detective’s work. In the dime novels taking Pinkerton and his operatives as raw materials for the construction of detective heroes, the cracks in heroic identity present in the Pinkerton memoirs become fissures through which contamination of the detective is not only likely but almost inevitable; it is these fissures that first allow Mark Twain parodic entry into the detective genre.

Chapter 4 examines the Nick Carter stories’ attempts to contain the dangerous desires inherent in detective doubling. Close analysis of three novels focuses on Carter’s mentorship of young detectives, his use – or overuse – of games as an aestheticizing factor in dealing with the criminal other, and the proto-postmodern overtones associated with the epistemological breakdown of the game as a means of containment. As a master of disguise who often faces opponents whose mastery of identity-performance equals or even betters his own, Nick Carter earnestly puts forth the game as a strategy to provide a safe space for the doubling of detective and criminal, but the breakdowns of the rationality of the game create fissures in the detective narrative that reveal many interpretive conundrums – at the sites of gender, identity, and even sanity – that are taken up again by William Faulkner, who employs many of the tropes developed by Nick Carter in his ‘detective’ Gavin Stevens.

Chapter 5 examines the legacy of dime novel detectives in the detective writings of Mark Twain and William Faulkner, arguing that both writers wrote from the dime novel detective tradition rather than the classical or the hardboiled. In addressing Twain’s lifelong dabbling in the elements of detective fiction (as in, for example, The Adventures of Tom Sawyer and Pudd’nhead Wilson) as well as his two detective short stories, I read him as responding directly to narratives around Allan Pinkerton that focus on the slippery locus of reader identification in early detective fiction, where bodily substitutions of detectives for criminals within the structures of practical jokes and of graphic torture highlight narrative and cultural tensions around the detective. Ignoring Pinkerton’s pervasiveness in the dime novels leads us to locate such dilemmas of identity in the hardboiled tradition, thereby missing the ‘joke’ of ‘The Stolen White Elephant’ as well as the metacritical nature of ‘A Double-Barreled Detective Story’ and Pudd’nhead Wilson. Likewise, Faulkner’s
detective hero Gavin Stevens can productively be read as a descendant of Nick Carter, with his ambivalent construction of heroic manhood, and Stevens’s nephew and acolyte Chick Mallison as an avatar of Nick’s adopted son and protégé, Chick Carter. Gavin resembles Nick not only in his attraction to the dark world of crime and detection, but especially in his narrative attempts to negotiate the threats of that world using the safe haven of mentorship, the structuring principles of games, and the unresolved specter of the *femme fatale*. As in Nick Carter’s stories, though, Gavin Stevens’s detective narratives are ultimately unable to fully contain the ethical and epistemological breakdowns in which reside the pleasure of the detective genre.

This book, admittedly, provides only a brief foray into the complex landscape of dime novel detective fiction, and its focus on iconic characters and authors should be considered no more categorical than the narrative of detective fiction it attempts to disrupt. In this age of digitization, scholars are increasingly gaining access to once forbidding archives, and a close examination of the dime novels – as literary as well as cultural products – will repay us with new insights into popular genres as well as into nineteenth-century constructions of personal and cultural identities. A short concluding chapter, therefore, suggests directions for future research.
2

The Happy-Ending Deception; or, Uncovering the Subversive Potential of Detective Dime Novels

Introduction

From marketing materials and cover art, we might expect dime novels to conclude with happy endings embedded in simplistic moral frameworks that offer a point of identification to an adolescent male readership. And indeed, many of them do. An 1883 dime novel, *Young Sleuth, The Keen Detective*, from the *New York Detective Library*, for example, provides such an ending while using exactly the kind of unsophisticated prose Henry Nash Smith leads us to expect from these texts:

Well, this story is about wound up.

The mystery is cleared up, the fathers have found their sons, the cousins – Hal and Joe – have been brought together; everybody is happy, vice is justly punished, virtue is rewarded after long years of patient suffering, and having no more events to chronicle concerning the characters of this story, we take leave of the reader and of Young Sleuth, the Keen Detective, still believing him to be ‘THE SHARPEST BOY IN NEW YORK.’

THE END

This conclusion also meets expectations – putting questions of style aside – for any nineteenth-century detective narrative: the unambiguous solution of a mystery, the resolution of fraught relationships, and the satisfying punishment of all criminals. Indeed, it is easy to imagine a classical detective tradition of the past in which all stories include
these elements, in contrast to today’s more sophisticated stories, where fictional victims (virtue notwithstanding) are often devastated by the crimes perpetrated against them, and fictional detectives – especially series detectives – are far too complexly drawn to be unambiguously virtuous, so are often rewarded with complicated workplace relationships, substance abuse problems, and troubled or nonexistent love lives.

Claims about both the dime novel and the detective narrative have often been asserted based in part upon these allegedly formulaic endings. Such diverse critics as George Grella and Teresa Ebert, for example, have used detective story endings to posit the genre’s inherent conservatism, suggesting that even detective endings that are not unambiguously ‘happy’ at least restore order and contain criminal disruptions. Similarly, Michael Denning assumes a basic happy-ending structure in his argument that while dime novels contain ‘mechanic accents’ of subversion, they function fundamentally as tools of cultural hegemony. This suggests that their appeal to their contemporary readership is based on their part in building shared cultural fantasy – exactly the fantasy articulated by the final lines of Young Sleuth, The Keen Detective.

Young Sleuth, though, is not fully representative of detective dime novels. This chapter takes an empirical approach to characterizing the features of dime novel endings, using a study of 115 final chapters to grapple with two thorny questions raised by an excavation of dime novels: (1) to what degree are detective narratives inherently conservative or subversive? and (2) to what degree are endings implicated in the continued appeal of detective fiction to a mass readership as well as to some of America’s finest writers? The landscape of the detective dime novel, as discussed in Chapter 1, is rife with the contradictions one would expect from such a vast body of work; as soon as a trend or convention appears across multiple texts, it is undermined – sometimes quite dramatically – by other texts, often within the same series. This chapter maps the most common concluding moves as well as the fault lines around those conventions, providing basic trend analysis to support assertions about which formulas dominated the earliest mass production of detective narratives as well as the various ways in which those formulas were subverted. This study suggests that, far from reflecting a single set of ethical values or epistemological approaches to detective work, the detective dime novels published by the New York Detective Library in its first year, 1883, and in its more established form in 1888, contain narratives from the detective subgenres typically associated with the twentieth century and present a number of decidedly unhappy as well as ambiguous endings. This chapter wrestles with that rather substantial group of potentially subversive
texts in order to reconsider the commonly held view that much popular fiction simply does the work of cultural fantasy. The subversive endings located within this corpus of popular dime novels represent much more than ‘accents’ to a hegemonic project.

The primacy of endings: a theoretical excursion

In his landmark 1979 essay, ‘Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,’ Fredric Jameson cites the detective ending as an exemplar of commodification in literature. Contemporary books, Jameson asserts, are like detective stories: ‘you read “for the ending” – the bulk of the pages become sheer devalued means to an end – in this case, the “solution” – which is itself utterly insignificant insofar as we are not thereby in the real world and by the latter’s practical standards the identity of an imaginary murderer is supremely trivial’ (132). We may chuckle at Jameson’s observation, for indeed, the hermeneutic puzzles and ethical dilemmas of detective fiction have no practical value in the world. We may also chuckle at the dime novel quotations – and especially at the earnestness of some of their narrators’ voices – when we consider their lack of real-world applicability. And yet, as Jameson and the numerous scholars influenced by his approach to mass culture would attest, popular literature provides a rich place for sociocultural explorations: the detective ending’s seemingly absurd importance to the reader signals the crucial cultural work it accomplishes. The interest of the ending often transcends the revelation of the murderer’s identity in order to reflect on the results of the detective’s journey into the treacherous landscape of criminal investigation. Is the detective finally and irrevocably contaminated by her foray into the criminal underworld? From this perspective, the ending becomes more than a mere commodity, functioning instead as an orientation to questions of justice, order, authority, and sometimes even truth itself.

The most sophisticated explorations of detective endings are often found in the scholarship on gender in detective fiction, which reveals both the limits and potentials of looking to endings to understand the sociopolitical and aesthetic work of detective stories. Indeed, detective fiction has a built-in mechanism for exploring questions of gender identity and power dynamics between men and women with its inherently gendered roles in the detective–criminal–victim triangle that underlies its narrative. Looking to endings can reveal the various ways gendered conflicts are or are not resolved and represented. Although Catherine Ross Nickerson has identified an important groups of texts she calls ‘domestic detective fiction,’ a number of detective novels written by
and about American women contemporaneous with or slightly preceding the dime novels, it was the explosion of female detective writers and characters in the 1970s that led to a great deal of discussion about the genre’s potential to effect productive gender critique. On one hand, feminist optimism abounds among quite diverse women writers and critics. Anne Cranny Francis, for example, sees all genre fictions as a site of great subversive potential, since explicitly feminist writers can reach audiences who are committed to a specific genre but would not normally select fiction concerned with gender issues. Susan Leonardi focuses on academic mysteries featuring female detective-professors to suggest that such novels have the potential to transform the views of their readers – or students – by exploring ‘the strange and unsettling’ (122). Carolyn Heilbrun, who wrote the Kay Fansler academic mysteries under the name Amanda Cross, sees the relatively fixed structure of the detective genre as having the potential to advance a feminist project, arguing that ‘with the momentum of a mystery and the trajectory of a good story with a solution, the author is left free to dabble in a little profound revolutionary thought’ (7). Ruby Rich, more radically, celebrates the ‘lady dick’ who kicks butt in the lesbian detective subgenre. The detective genre, then, has clear appeal to feminist writers and scholars, many of whom believe in its potential to participate in subversive gender representation.

But what of the endings? George Grella, who focuses on the detective novel’s comedic features in rectifying a criminal disruption and returning society to its previous state, has been particularly influential in drawing critical attention to detective endings. In fact, it is often detective fiction’s endings – with their anticipated hermeneutic revelations – that have defined not only the genre, but also its allegedly inherent conservatism. Indeed, detective fiction outside the postmodern subgenre is generally seen as ending with a return to the status quo, a move seemingly at odds with a feminist project. Teresa Ebert takes up this point in her argument that detective fiction is fundamentally accomplishing the work of patriarchy, regardless of the intentions and orientations of its writers and readers. In some ways, Ebert and I are both doing what David Morley calls ‘oppositional readings,’ albeit from two different perspectives. Ebert examines seemingly feminist texts while the corpus I am analyzing is generally considered patriarchal, but we both look to structural features to tease out potential gendered readings almost certainly not intended by authors but nonetheless available to readers. For Ebert, detective fiction ‘enlists individuals – regardless of their “gender” (anatomy) – as agents of phallic authority who act
to restore patriarchal order and hegemony’ (13). She specifically uses the ending of the famous feminist novel by Amanda Cross/Carolyn Heilbrun, *Death in a Tenured Position*, to suggest that what appears to be a feminist examination of corrupt and corrupting gender politics in academia is in fact unwound and rendered ineffective by the novel’s participation in an inherently conservative genre, since the novel’s ending simply reaffirms the patriarchy’s authority and agency at the site of a dead female professor.

It is possible, then, that detective endings typically subdue any subversion undertaken elsewhere in a text. Kathleen Gregory Klein, though less starkly pessimistic about the genre’s subversive potentials than Ebert, reaches a similar conclusion in her work on female dime novel detectives. Klein examines seven dime novels featuring women detectives and concludes that none is particularly effective in moving beyond the conflict between the needs of the detective story and those of the woman’s story (*Woman Detective*). Klein articulates three problems: some women detectives, though biologically female, function basically as male characters; others appear in dime novel titles but play subordinate roles in the texts as sidekicks and love interests to more central male detectives; and most female dime novel detectives end up participating in the marriage convention that concludes both the detective narrative and the woman’s brief foray into detective work. In their collection, *Old Sleuth’s Freaky Female Detectives*,Garyn Roberts, Gary Hoppenstand, and Ray Browne similarly characterize female dime novel detectives as falling short of accomplishing real gender critique. The novels featuring women in the *Old Sleuth* series, for the editors, seem to embrace the position of the ‘freak’ in a productive way, but in the end any true subversion available to a female detective is effectively contained by her marriage, which signals the end of her incursion into worlds of danger, disguise, and deduction at each novel’s conclusion.

Not everyone, however, sees the detective story’s conservative endings as entirely trumping the deduction, the disguise, and the danger. Catherine Ross Nickerson sees the focus by Klein and others on endings as restricting our understanding of how early women detectives negotiate and represent gender politics in fiction. In her study of mid-brow nineteenth-century American women’s detective fiction, Nickerson notes that the reader is always urged by the detective story to construct various potential interpretations, an act that can itself constitute a subversive activity. Charles Rzepka identifies this multiplicity of interpretive prospects as central to the appeal of the genre, arguing that the reader’s pleasure lies less in the detective narrative’s
concluding moves than in its ability to prompt the reader to form a series of mental arrays – complex narrative lines – that provide cognitive stimulation and satisfaction as the reader continually changes existing arrays and creates new ones to accommodate new information. For Nickerson and Rzepka, then, endings are less important than trajectories in understanding how detective fiction functions.

Indeed, the ending is not inherently more powerful than the many other elements of a detective narrative. And, as this study shows, not all detective endings are overwhelmingly ‘happy’ or uncomplicated; instead, the structures of containment put forth in endings are often coded as inadequate even within twentieth-century texts spanning the subgenres of the classical, the hardboiled, and the police procedurals. Many detective stories show the resolution of a mystery independently of any return to the status quo, and characters, whether detective, criminal, or victim, are often fundamentally changed by the crimes they encounter. *The Maltese Falcon* does not end happily for anyone. Nor does ‘The Final Problem.’ The police procedural, with its emphasis on realism, does not even always end with a solution to the mystery. Despite their appearance as interchangeable commodities, dime novels, like the twentieth-century subgenres they presage, do not unilaterally embrace closed-form happy endings either.

This study moves beyond the question of whether or not the conservative endings of detective novels trump any subversive work that occurs earlier in the narratives; whether endings supersede trajectories or not, they certainly help track the values explored and played out in a novel. Indeed, reading endings can give a scholar a sense of which mass-produced texts might be most promising for further study. An analysis of 115 endings reveals substantial diversity in the concluding moves and values. Dead detectives, suicidal criminals, and tortured victims reside in the dime novel endings alongside less extreme but equally interesting characters and situations that reveal the subversive potential of the dime novel and the detective narrative to effect complex sociocultural and generic critique. The lack of uniformity in ‘happy’ endings in dime novels suggests that the concluding position of these texts is not always one where cultural fantasies are simply defused or contained. We might productively imagine a generic structure that looks like a sort of mad pendulum, where the repetition of detective dime novels is made compelling by each novel’s potential to end not at rest, as one would expect of a pendulum, but anywhere along a swinging trajectory marked by total contamination at one end and total containment at the other.
Methods and trends: (de)coding the dime novel detective

This study extends the work of Stephen Knight, who reads eight ephemeral texts, complete with trend analysis, in a 1998 pilot study in which he argues for more sustained attention to the low-brow serialized detectives who have been largely obscured by the shadows cast by Dupin and Holmes (‘Enter’). Dime novels, like the magazine and newspaper tales Knight examines, form such a massive – and surprisingly diverse – corpus of literature that they prove quite resistant to narrative generalizations. The methodology of quantitatively coding detective endings, on the other hand, can be quite effective in providing an empirical basis for answering several questions: What are the main concerns of these stories? Which of the main detective subgenres do they resemble, if any? Which crimes are the focus of these stories and how are criminals punished? What sorts of detectives are featured? What sorts of criminals? Victims? And what happens to these various characters in the end? How are ethical and narrative values cemented or threatened by these stories’ endings? Are these endings as conservative as many critics of both detective fiction and dime novels would lead us to expect?

The New York Detective Library (NYDL) provides an illustrative sample of dime novel endings as one of the longest-running multiple-author and multiple-detective series; a series written by a single author or starring a single detective would be less representative of dime novel detective fiction as a whole. NYDL also has the advantage of being available on microfilm and thus relatively accessible to other scholars, always an important consideration when working with ephemeral literature. The study includes all novels from 1883, the first year of publication, and from 1888, after the series was well established and before Sherlock Holmes’s influence was deeply ingrained (see the tables in the Appendix at the end of the book for detailed results of the survey).

I coded 115 endings, 65 from 1883 and 50 from 1888. As I read the endings, I tracked the main attributes (gender, race, and age, when available) and outcomes of the three main subject positions found in most detective stories: the detective, the criminal, and the victim. I characterized settings, recognizing that the final chapter might not reflect the entire novel’s locale. I read each ending twice, and the second time I coded for patterns I had observed but not quantified on my first reading, such as the prevalence of doctors and bankers in the novels, the seeming paucity of Western themes, and the reliance on gothic conventions. I also ranked each novel’s subversiveness on a ten-point scale, creating an admittedly idiosyncratic dataset that helped me to select the
22 endings that lay furthest from the formulas for a complete reading. Although my analysis offers no firm conclusions about the dime novels as a whole, it provides a thorough empirical portrait of one detective dime novel series and offers some starting points to understanding the narrative and aesthetic import of these texts in their development of the detective genre. This chapter tells the stories of many of these dime novels, including quotations where possible, in order to provide a flavor of the texts alongside their analysis.

First, a note about the differences between 1883 and 1888. Literary and para-literary features alike reveal a trend toward standardization as the series progresses. For example, whereas the larger 1883 sample includes 26 different author names, the 1888 sample contains only 12, and titles become similarly more formulaic with the passage of time, referring increasingly to an intriguing object, a person, or setting. Final chapters also have more consistent word length and format in the latter novels, including a standard opening move of some sort of ‘thrilling’ event (often including the capture of the criminal – and perhaps that criminal’s suicide), as well as a summary of the fates that have befallen each major character, generally beginning with a litany of criminal punishments, followed by a visit to the victims and any innocent people who are now free of suspicion, and concluding with the detective’s outcomes. It was too difficult to ascertain the employment situation of each detective given the complex set of detective positions available in the real and fictionalized worlds of 1880s America, but both years include roughly one-third amateurs, one-third police detectives, and one-third private detectives. Although there are minor shifts in the trends displayed by the 1883 and 1888 datasets, the interplay between conventions and their subversions remains quite constant in both, with at least some rifts within the happy ending convention found in, conservatively, 15 percent of endings in each year.

The settings of NYDL stories are quite diverse: the victim’s or accused person’s home; the criminal’s home, den or dungeon; outdoors; a police station or prison; a boat; and a courtroom. The stories ending in someone’s home are often oriented to the classical mystery, with the detective visiting the victim or the falsely accused person in order to effect a happy ending by reporting on his progress, explaining the solution, perhaps asking a beautiful young woman to marry him, and/or learning of the betrothal of two secondary characters. The tales set in criminals’ homes, dens or dungeons, on the other hand, are usually aligned with the hardboiled, and often show detectives in substantial physical danger; 37 percent of the novels in my sample include at least one detective in
danger. When a police station or a prison is the setting, we generally see consonances with the police procedural, and those stories that conclude in courtrooms are obvious relatives of the courtroom drama subset of the police procedural. Outdoor settings evoke the received wisdom that dime novel detective fiction shares lineage with Westerns developed in the same mass format; my sample, though, includes a number of urban outdoor settings, and only ten of the 115 novels actually have Western themes. The boats seen in final chapters vary substantially and resonate with various detective subgenres; they include steamers that act as closed systems, smaller boats used in chases, and at least one boat that acts as a torture chamber (in *Was He Murdered by Freemasons?*). Less frequent settings include gaming-houses, churches, hotels, hospitals, banks, and so on. The diverse settings highlight the presence of all detective subgenres within the dime novels.

Although most detective dime novels (77 percent of my sample) include at least one murder or attempted murder, secondary crimes abound as well, including, in order, murder, theft, attempted murder, kidnapping, fraud, realized or attempted forced marriage, forgery, and counterfeiting. Many of the crimes against persons (murder, attempted murder, and kidnapping) are connected to crimes against property, since a criminal who wants to defraud an heiress, for example, may kill her guardian and kidnap her in an attempt to force her to marry a man who will then take control of her inheritance. The year 1888 sees a sharp rise in forced marriages (they occur in 8 percent of 1883 novels and 22 percent of 1888 novels), reflecting an increasingly hardboiled edge to the dime novels as the sexual violation of women – almost always discussed in veiled terms – becomes more acceptable as a topic of detective discourse by 1888.

Dime novels have often been characterized as deliberately appealing to a white adolescent male readership, therefore featuring mostly able-bodied white male characters, with stereotypical female characters providing love interests and victims. We might expect the nineteenth-century classical detective novel to feature male detectives and criminals meeting over the supine body of either a female or feminized victim or a male victim whose expulsion from society is itself a return to the status quo. In the classical formulation, exotic others would occupy mostly secondary roles, with the potential of taking mostly criminal positions. A simple count of characters in the NYDL endings reveals that these novels are not simply precursors of the classical tradition about to be made wildly popular by Sherlock Holmes. Although the characters are overwhelmingly white males, the exceptions are highly
provocative. Four percent of detectives, 15 percent of criminals and 37 percent of victims are female. Two percent of detectives, 4 percent of criminals, and 4 percent of victims are ‘ethnic others.’

The prevalence of male detectives supports the sense of a homogeneously male readership, since the detective is the most obvious site of reader identification in these texts. The six female detectives and two black detectives in my sample gesture toward the detectives of diversity that we generally associate with the 1970s and beyond. Two of the female detectives do not marry at the end of their novel, and one of the black male detectives does, speaking to a more complex set of gendered moves than expected. The substantial cadre of female victims is subjected to crimes such as kidnapping, attempted forced marriage, and theft, which points to a trend in gender representation: women’s bodies can be subjected to many crimes – including graphic torture and less explicit sexual violation – but it is only seldom that a woman’s body is found on Page One, providing the momentum of the mystery. Female victims in the dime novels, then, do not simply occupy the position of object of desire; they are often a site of reader identification, thus demonstrating the complex potentials offered by the detective triangle and suggesting that dime novel readers enjoyed experiencing consonances with female characters.

In the gendering of criminals, the dime novel clearly presages the hardboiled. The narrative momentum of detective fiction is based largely on the tension inherent in the detective–criminal relationship. The detective must think like the criminal or enter into physical or mental conflict with the criminal in order to solve and resolve a case, which provides the threat that propels the narrative forward: the detective is constantly in danger either of being harmed by or, perhaps more frightening, of becoming the criminal. Since the criminal is by nature a detective’s double, one might expect popular novels that use stereotypes as a shorthand to rely on male criminals, since placing a woman in a position that doubles a man is by nature somewhat subversive. The hardboiled, of course, exploits the tension created through a female criminal with its reliance on the femme fatale, whose sexual threat serves to simultaneously intensify and complicate the male detective’s sexuality by evoking his masculinity while placing him in a sort of consonance with the sexually frightened or violated women who often populate these texts.

Most (64 percent) of the female criminals in my sample are adjuncts to other (generally male) wrongdoers. The solo actors and criminal leaders tend to be the more developed female characters, and in my sample they fall into three basic groups: the hapless woman, the evil fiend,
and the *femme fatale*. The hapless woman is often an unwed mother or otherwise violated woman whose abusive past and subsequent poor judgment have led her into a life of crime. She is generally a secondary character whose fate is unspectacular: a light prison sentence, death by natural causes, or release in return for her testimony. Such a woman may even be capable of reform. In *Old Reliable*, for example, Lotta Lee, the daughter of a train robber and a member of a jewel theft ring, is taken under the elderly detective’s wing when he pays to send her to school, thus preparing her to be the love interest of Old Reliable’s young detective partner, who has taken a great fancy to the young lady and has, despite a lifelong aversion to letter-writing, ‘suddenly developed a perfect passion for scribbling missives, which, strangely to say, are all addressed to “MISS LOTTA LEE”’ (27). An unfortunate young woman such as Lotta Lee is neither a double nor a sexual threat to the detective and despite her mild criminal acts is presented as a sort of secondary victim.

The evil fiend, often an old hag, presents a more formidable threat to both the detective and the living victim he is trying to protect; in some cases, the evil fiend may even be an important influence on the criminality of others, as in *Young Weasel, the Baltimore Detective* (1888), where a mulatto nurse takes fiendish revenge on her master’s aristocratic archenemy: ‘The count had a daughter, a child of about ten years, and seizing her she branded her face with a red hot iron, disfiguring her for life’ (27). This is the back story of the redoubtable female criminal mastermind of the novel, who after her disfigurement became ‘a fiend in woman’s form, and the head of an organization preying upon society, and which, in revenge for her own wrongs, she named the brotherhood of the Scarlet Scar’ (27). Like the hag, the dime novel *femme fatale* is extremely dangerous, although she is also sexually desirable. The hag and the *femme fatale* are both as masterful and daring in their disguises and machinations as the detective himself. Neither is likely to survive, with suicide as an empowered act their most frequent response to being captured.

The received wisdom about dime novels is that they are racist as well as sexist, using racial identifiers as stereotypical shorthand. Tracking ‘ethnic others’ reveals that the minority characters in this series (four detectives, ten victims, and eighteen criminals) do not single out any ethnic group. The othered criminals are led by three French criminals, two each of Gypsy, Jewish, Mexican, and Russian wrongdoers, and one each of Creole, Cuban, East Indian, Italian, Mennonite, and Spanish lawbreakers. Victims are also spread expansively across groups,
with final chapters mentioning two Cuban and one each of American Indian, Bornean, Gypsy, Italian, Jewish Mennonite, Negro, and Spanish victims. The four minority detectives are two Negro and two French detectives. Monte, the scrappy French detective, appears in several dime novels and often acts as a mentor to young American detectives. Mollier, his countryman, is the only well-developed corrupt detective character in my sample, and he is discussed at length later in the chapter. One Negro detective, Dan Sharp, is paired with a fellow mentee as one of two young detective assistants to receive the same reward for brave, intelligent, and humorous service: professional promotion to the police force without the marriage that often accompanies such plots.

The other black detective, the title character of *Billy Bones, The Negro Minstrel Detective* (1888), is introduced in fairly standard terms by the narrator: ‘In New York he was well known, where his name was a household word, as one of the shrewdest little detectives in America’ (4). Billy’s work is typical of dime novels detectives as he manages two intertwined problems: he must prove a wrongly accused innocent while rescuing a young white heiress who has been kidnapped by the real murderer. Smart, talented, and funny, Billy is a typical young New York detective except for his race. The way other characters respond to his race becomes a barometer of personality: the criminals underestimate him because he’s black, while other characters judge him by his abilities rather than his race, immediately recognizing his superiority as both a skilled stage performer and a brave detective.

Linguistically, the novel’s handling of race is quite complex. The omniscient narrator seems to relish in language evoking Billy’s race, from the note that Billy does not need to ‘black up’ for the minstrel show (6) to descriptions of Billy as ‘a dark, skulking form’ (4) who observes others from ‘the shadow of the corridor’ (8) and whose entrée into the criminal world is facilitated by his skin color, as the white criminal, Haley, imagines Billy to be, ‘like himself, a little “off color” as regarded strict moral principles’ (15). Although he is the only black character in the novel, the reliance of the narrator on terms of darkness and color spills out over the entire cast of characters. In a moment of particularly over-the-top dialect, even by popular literature standards, Charlie Fairfax, falsely accused, says “‘I have great faith in you, Billy,’” garnering the response: “‘Bet yo’ possum skins dat dis coon will work hard,” declared the little detective, his eyes shining like beads. “Hab no uneasiness, Marse Fairfax, it will all cum out right nuff, only yo’ mus’ keep dark”’ (13). Indeed, this expression of ‘keeping dark’ occurs throughout the novel as Billy advises two falsely accused white men in
different circumstances to ‘keep dark,’ or to stay under the radar rather than turning themselves in to police.

Billy Bones, The Negro Minstrel Detective in no way presages the complex work of Walter Mosley or Chester Himes, but its inclusion in an 1880s series of dime novels featuring overwhelmingly white male protagonists speaks to the dime novels’ abilities to imagine the detective position more broadly than generally acknowledged. Billy uses his race to go undercover with the gang of criminals behind the kidnapping, and he successfully saves the white heiress while proving the innocence of two different falsely accused men. He also claims his professional identity quite powerfully, as seen when he asks a passerby for help: “I ain’t a nigger. I’m a detective, boss” (22). Billy’s conclusion is at once hopeful and horrifying as a space of productive work in representing the issues of race relations so central to American literature. Billy is rewarded with a $10,000 check, a substantial sum by dime novel standards, and this pecuniary success allows him to at last wed his long-time sweetheart, a mulatto woman from New York, revealing that a black dime novel detective can enjoy the same successes as his white counterparts. And yet, Billy’s response to the news of his reward again indulges in offensive exaggerated dialect as he exclaims: “Fry dis nigger fer sassage” (28). As this example indicates, representations of race do often rely on stereotyping as a shorthand, but they also include complex if problematic representations of extraordinary black characters. This brief analysis of trends in representing ethnic others in this series confirms the need for much more research on the roots of race representations in detective fiction, an avenue also illuminated by Marlena Bremseth’s recent new edition of the earliest black detective dime novel writers.

Billy Bones’s conclusion is quite typical of detectives’ generally happy endings: they marry in 36 percent of novels, receive financial rewards in 25 percent, become famous in 18 percent, and get great new jobs in 11 percent. Detective fates change substantially between the two years of the sample, reflecting more professionalization as the genre becomes increasingly codified. In 1883, about half of detectives marry and/or get new jobs, often in the firms of their new fathers-in-law, while less than a quarter receive fame and/or explicit financial reward. In 1888, the percentages are almost switched, with just over a quarter marrying and/or changing professions and just under half becoming famous and/or wealthy, often with a dollar amount attached. In six cases, a detective is celebrated through posterity when a marriage of secondary characters results in a child named after the detective (four in 1883 and two in 1888). In some cases, the rewards are intertwined, especially when
the detective receives a substantial financial reward – perhaps even a job offer in a corporate setting – that allows him to marry a woman he might otherwise have been too poor to woo. Dime novel endings, then, highlight two motives for detective work: financial security and personal happiness. Detective outliers – six dead, six corrupt, and three ineffective detective characters – are few but fascinating, and we shall examine these later in the chapter.

Dime novels’ endings often sharply contrast the outcomes for detectives and criminals, so the vast majority of criminals end up dead or imprisoned (47 percent dead, 32 percent in prison, and 2 percent in asylums). These criminal fates suggest a fairly simplistic moral universe that harbors little hope of criminal reform. That said, a few criminal fates do challenge this unambiguous notion of justice: 12 male criminals escape custody entirely, often representing flaws in the system of justice and, in a few cases, even of truth. As we shall see in our discussion of *Detective Davis*, some dime novels end without any closure in even identifying – let alone capturing – the criminals. The decision not to prosecute 25 criminals also demonstrates a certain ethical nuance, since in most of these cases the detective consciously decides not to seek or turn over evidence, and the criminal’s tragic background provides a more compelling storyline than would his conviction or death. Occasionally, though, a criminal with few if any redeeming qualities is forgiven.

The disquieting novel, *Trapped; or, Tony and the Banker’s Secret* (1883) opens with banker Guy Horton saved from destitution when his friend Aleck Hyatt, a stockbroker, asks him to conceal a quarter million dollars’ worth of assets. Horton immediately hatches a scheme to murder Hyatt in order to save his bank from insolvency. Hyatt dies in an accident, saving Horton the ‘necessity’ of murder, and Horton simply keeps Hyatt’s assets with no regard to the dead man’s family. In a novel largely about class, working stiff Tony Brandon acts as a detective, usually at cross-purposes with professional detectives who perceive him as a criminal and bumblingly attempt to capture him on several occasions. In the final sting, Tony joins forces with the police and a disreputable fortune-teller in order to trap Horton into confessing his theft in front of Hyatt’s widow. Horton begs for clemency on behalf of his nubile daughter, and Mrs. Hyatt grants it, allowing ‘the wily banker’ to simply return the stolen bonds, which he can easily do since the stolen money has acted as a successful investment, returning prosperity to his bank and his family. Horton is thus richly rewarded for his crime.
Plucky amateur detective Tony Brandon’s ending is equally unsettling. The vengeful Horton offers a ‘good-looking dandy clerk’ from his bank $5,000 to successfully woo and marry Tony’s long-time girlfriend, one of Horton’s domestics. Surprisingly, since Katie has figured as an affectionate and devoted partner to Tony in several scenes throughout the novel, the dandy succeeds. Tony’s ‘happy ending’ is so perfunctory it rings false: ‘Tony was overwhelmed with surprise, but said nothing. He went on in the even tenor of his way, and six months later became the happy husband of Alice de Leon, with a princely fortune’ (27). To highlight the ambivalence of heroic Tony’s move into the upper echelons of society occupied by Guy Horton and friends, the detective’s conclusion is placed in the penultimate position, leaving the criminals’ unremarkable fates – not prosecuted and ‘fled the country’ (27) – as the last word. Tony is corrupted by his one-time foray into the world of detection.

Unlike Guy Horton, most dime novel criminals do pay for their crimes, often with their lives. Their exits, though, are by no means homogeneous. The three most common causes of death, accounting for 59 percent of demises, are, in order: death at the hand of a detective, suicide, and legal execution. Only 10 percent die of natural causes, while another 18 percent are killed by another criminal or a victim. Evidently, these deaths tend to be violent, with many resulting from the criminals’ interactions with other members of the triangle, most often the detective that structurally doubles them. Death by detective or victim is generally constructed as self-defense for professional detectives, and as revenge for victims and for the amateur detectives drawn into detective work because a loved one has been killed or kidnapped. In either case, few dime novels explicitly raise ethical questions about the killing of criminals.

But do dead criminals truly indicate happy endings? They indicate resolution, to be sure, but do they point toward the return of the status quo that gives detective fiction its reputation as a conservative genre? In Grella’s configuration of ethical mores in detective fiction, the criminal interruption in the closed system of the story must be negated, and the criminal’s suicide is a morally acceptable way to effect his removal (44); as Dove has noted, the criminal who, often with the detective’s silent consent, chooses suicide over punishment by the state was once a mainstay of the classical tradition, but has faded considerably in the twentieth century and beyond (Reader, 12). The 46 criminals who commit suicide in my sample tend to exhibit defiance or despair rather than the resignation or even enlightenment we attach to the classical criminal suicide. Several dime novel suicides are dramatic, with the means
of suicide, in order: poison, prison hanging, gun, suicide by cop, and drowning.\textsuperscript{17} The two most common means, accounting for half the sample, are often more dramatic than they might appear. Take, for example, a representative scene on the deck of a steamer in \textit{The Dwarf Detective} (1883) when the detective attempts to capture Clarence Clayton, leader of a major criminal organization. Clayton resists arrest, shoots at the detective, and eventually finds himself with no option but surrender. Clayton kills one of his pursuers, ‘and with a savage cry of triumph … [springs] upon the bulwark. “Curse you, I never will be taken alive” he [says]’ (25). Clayton leaps overboard, and his ‘lifeless corpse’ proves his commitment to his decision to defy the detective, who then arrests Clayton’s two female accomplices. One springs from the detective’s grasp, pressing her poisoned ring to her cheek: ““Now,” she said quietly, “I too can defy you”’ (25). This young woman is a jewel thief, so her suicide seems an excessive reaction to the punishment she is likely to receive until we look at the fate of the other female jewel thief, who is taken into custody, confesses to stealing the diamonds, receives a sentence of ten years in prison, and dies before she has served six months. Suicide in many dime novels functions as a means of empowerment for criminals that subtly critiques the prison system in which most real-world criminals would ultimately participate.

It is perhaps suicide by cop that most clearly demonstrates the defiant criminal whose insubordination is implicitly celebrated. In \textit{The Drunkard’s Son} (1883), for example, the narrative presents the criminal, Tyrone Battis, as a somewhat heroic figure as he faces four unnamed detectives: ‘As the two boats [of detectives] approached, Tyrone Battis came up from the hold, and grasping a revolver in each hand, stood in a tragic mode, covering each one of them with deadly aim’ (30). It is usually the detectives who display their commendable masculinity through ‘deadly aim’ and unwavering courage in the face of extreme odds, so here Battis is quite explicitly glorified in his refusal to surrender to police. \textit{A Piece of Paper} (1883) provides similar respect to other suicide-by-cop criminals when Harris, having shot two officers, drops dead ‘without a moan or cry of anguish’ (26) when he is eventually shot by the police captain. These criminals emphasize the close consonances between detective and criminal character in their embodiment of the uncompromising courage and skill that often make the detective a figure of heroic masculinity.

Examining the central roles of detective narratives by race and gender are obvious trends to be quantified and articulated. Smaller trends emerge as well, including a prevalence of professional men, with 17 bankers and
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13 doctors appearing in final chapters. Four of these are secondary characters and two doctors provide assistance to the detective without actually taking on a detective role. Others, though, are part of the central triangle, and as such, bear further examination. Of the bankers, we find nine victims, six criminals, and two detectives; the doctors are more sinister, with one victim, seven criminals, and zero detectives. The late nineteenth century saw a marked increase in professionalization and regulation of several occupations, including the detective, so this prevalence of professionals from the worlds of finance and medicine may reflect anxieties about real-world detectives’ attempts to figure themselves as analogous professionals, a historical and rhetorical trend discussed at more length in Chapter 3 with regard to Allan Pinkerton, the man and the myth.

Against the backdrop of these trends, we turn now to look at novels from the sample that delimit the boundaries of detective fiction, as the novels discussed in the second half of the chapter have endings – and developments throughout – that do not fit the trends sketched out so far. Indeed, it may be the presence of such novels that keeps the genre a potent one, as these highlight the tensions that provide both narrative structure and complication. Robert Champigny, among others, suggests that mysteries that lack hermeneutic closure simply cannot be counted among detective narratives. To me, though, the dime novels provide a unique landscape through which we can articulate a more complex sense of detective fiction’s potentials, since all these novels – whether they end ‘happily’ or not – were written and read as detective novels, and indeed, they can be mapped as such using Todorov’s definition and the centrality of the detective–victim–criminal triangle. George Dove characterizes detective fiction as structurally conservative but thematically flexible, allowing writers to explore subversive themes as long as they do not disturb the basic conservative pattern (Reader, 41). In the dime novel narratives in which structures of containment are most clearly inadequate, though, gender, class, and ethical critique can be carried out successfully both thematically and structurally.

A shadowy detective and a police captain: gender bending and genre blending

Police Captain Howard is a house name assigned to numerous dime novels, including 20 in my sample (seven from 1883 and thirteen from 1888). Howard is the ‘author’ and narrator of Shadow, The Mysterious Detective (1883), a novel that exemplifies the presence of all the subgenres in detective fiction’s earliest mass instantiation. The novel’s
blending of the generic features usually associated with separate
detective subgenres intersects with one of the conventions that pro-
vide detective fiction its most subversive potential: the detective in
disguise. A detailed discussion of this novel, complete with representa-
tive quotations, demonstrates several of the most common features in
the *New York Detective Library* novels as well as the various ways these
tropes are manipulated in creating a rich tension between themes of
contamination and containment.

*Shadow* is plotted around two unsolved cases that become linked to
a single mystery: who is Shadow, the mute and mysterious new detec-
tive in town who infiltrates criminal circles and provides intelligence
to the police in return for half of various rewards? The first open case is
presented briefly, given resonance only by its position in the opening
chapter. A young man – whose name, Tom Smith, highlights his role as a
plot device and nothing more – is murdered, and his fiancée, a recently
discharged store clerk named Nellie Milbank, is left utterly alone in the
world. Police Captain Howard lends Nellie money to give her lover an
appropriate burial and moves on to other cases when this one grows
cold. The second unsolved case is that of a kidnap victim, Helen Dilt,
whose fiancé, the recently laid-off Mat Morris, is determined to find
her. Once again, Howard takes up the case but must eventually turn to
other matters when he has exhausted all investigative avenues.

Like many dime novels, *Shadow* draws upon sensational conventions
in creating a page-turner. The novel is presented in 27 chapters, with
regular shifts between the two main storylines: Helen Dilt’s adventures
at the hands of her cruel kidnappers, and Howard’s interactions with
the mysterious Shadow in the course of several different investigations.
Many chapters end as cliff-hangers, as when we leave Shadow about to
be caught infiltrating a criminal den at the end of Chapter VII in order
to return at the opening of Chapter VIII to Helen, whose life was in
danger at the end of Chapter V. The novel is unusual in its use of a first-
person narrator, as only five of my 115 titles use this technique, which is
more often associated with the hardboiled than with other subgenres.¹⁸

The first-person narrator speaks directly to the reader on several occa-
sions, with the effect either of highlighting the alleged veracity of this
surprising tale or of evoking a specific visceral reaction in the tradition
of Victorian sensation fiction.

The first person slides easily into the second, as on occasions when
Howard asks the reader to imagine specific scenes in order to identify
more closely with a character, deliberately positioning the reader to
identify with the victim on several occasions. After the perfectly sane
Helen has been unwillingly committed to a horrendous asylum, she is gleefully and graphically tortured by the fiendish hag, Tige. The reader is asked not only to participate in a creepy voyeurism but also to identify with Helen’s pain when, for example, she is left, bound and spread-eagled, on a bed for an extended period of time:

There was agony to be endured in even this quiet position.
Place a pound weight on the palm of your hand, and endeavor to keep that hand extended, for, say, five minutes.
Can you do it?
You think you can, that is if you have never tried it.
Try it now.
You will not be able to do it.
Long before the five minutes have expired your arm will be a pathway for a succession of spasms of pain such as you have never felt before.
All that you can voluntarily endure, quadrupled and more, Helen was forced to pass through because of the strained position of her arms. (19)

Helen, then, is to be admired as much as pitied. The reader is to measure himself in comparison to the young kidnap victim, and is to come up short. Although she has no choice but to endure the torture to which she is subjected, Helen becomes a study in the power of the human mind and spirit.

In an extended female-on-female torture sequence, Helen's hold on her sanity continually slips and is regained, creating sustained narrative tension. The reader knows who has kidnapped Helen and why: her uncle has attempted to deprive her of her inheritance and she has refused to marry McGinnis, who has placed her in the hands of the truly evil Tige in punishment. But the reader turns the pages to find out if Shadow or Captain Howard will be able to save Helen before her intense pain will destroy what Elaine Scarry has called the self-in-language. In torture, as Scarry explains, ‘as the content of one’s world disintegrates, so the content of one’s language disintegrates; as the self disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and its subject’ (35). As the reader is asked to identify first with the pain of Helen's pinioned arms, and then with increasingly violent graphically described torture involving pincers and hot irons, the reader watches/imagines the disintegration of Helen's hold on language and self. Eventually, Helen's impressive breaking point is reached, and
she ‘turns the corner’ of her reason (27), going into wordless hysterics at the very sight of her torturer. ‘Few people,’ the narrator muses, ‘have any idea of the frailty of the tenure which the human mind holds on reason, or how easy the mind can be warped or upset’ (27). The embodied display of the thin line between mental safety and danger for Helen Dilt becomes an emblem of the ways in which victims and readers, like detectives, can also be marked by their encounters with violent crimes.

Three detectives play out an even more sinister movement in this novel, as they represent three different types of contamination. Police Captain Howard is the venerable police detective who narrates the tale. Shadow, whose abilities of disguise are even greater than those of the legendary Howard, ends up fitting into the vigilante mold of detectives. And Dick Stanton is a ‘false’ or corrupt detective whose betrayal of his profession and his fellow officers is matched only by his betrayal of his new colleagues in crime. Howard is initially presented as a detective hero residing firmly in the world of the police procedural. He juggles numerous commitments and although he is brilliant and brave, he is not able to solve every case he encounters, getting continually caught up ‘in the busy details of life’ (4) as the cycle of crime in the city continues unabated. He is a successful and knowledgeable officer who can recognize a thief’s style and discourse on various criminal stratagems, and he exemplifies the element of teamwork at the heart of the police procedural. Nonetheless, he tends to share with many fictional police detective heroes a penchant for the potentially contaminating margins of his profession.

After all, it is Howard’s first-person narration that introduces two contrasting dark detectives. Howard has nothing but scorn for the corrupt Dick Stanton, a member of the police force who accepts bribes to warn criminals of upcoming police actions. When Howard captures Stanton, the ‘false detective’ offers to turn State’s evidence, leading Howard to muse: ‘How disgusted I was with Stanton! / A traitor to the force, he was no sooner found out than he was ready to turn traitor to his pals’ (13). Stanton, then, is a despicable character whose treasonous nature contaminates the very position of ‘detective.’ And yet, Howard’s interactions with the corrupt detective push the seemingly upright police captain to the limits of the law, for after he has captured Stanton, Howard has an idea: ‘It was, instead of taking Stanton to the police station – where I would have been obliged to enter a specific charge against him – to take him to a secret place of confinement and there keep him until I had bagged the river-pirates, penetrated to the Black Hole, and bursted
up the villainous den’ (13). The secret holding location turns out to be in the home of a deputy sheriff, ‘who had built several strong cells in his cellar, for occasions similar to the present’ (17). Police officers of the highest echelons, then, participate in detective practices outside the law, perhaps especially when they are dealing with the shadier side of their own profession as emblematized by a hopelessly contaminated detective like Dick Stanton.

Howard’s relationship to the title detective of the novel is much more complex, since Shadow’s own identity is, aptly, continually blurred. The enigmatic figure resides at the boundary between the amateur detective and the hardboiled, just as the novel repeatedly shifts into liminal generic territories that encapsulate classical and hardboiled conventions within the police procedural frame. Shadow earns a living as a private detective, undertaking dangerous undercover missions when a reward is involved. The young detective repeatedly gets into treacherous situations that are close to but not quite within the ‘tough guy’ tradition; although Shadow usually escapes through guile and stealth rather than physical prowess, ‘his’ bravery, which borders on recklessness, is reminiscent of the hardboiled hero. At the same time, Shadow’s identity provides a classical puzzle, since two equally coherent – and metaphorically intersecting – explanations are available to Howard and the reader. Howard initially assumes Shadow to be Mat Morris, going undercover in his desperate search for missing fiancée Helen Dilt; eventually, though, in a chapter entitled ‘Man or Woman?’ Howard explores the possibility that Shadow is Nellie Millbank, who may have adopted the persona as part of her quest to avenge her lover’s murder.

Despite their difference of gender, Mat and Nellie are presented as equivalent, almost interchangeable characters. Both have recently – and disastrously – become unemployed and have unexpectedly lost a lover to crime (kidnapping and murder, respectively). Howard’s initial exposition about Nellie’s murdered fiancé and her delicate financial situation provides few descriptive details, focusing on her state of shock: she is under 20 years old, ‘wild-eyed,’ ‘pale-faced,’ and speaking ‘in trembling tones’ (2). Nellie exhibits enormous grief when she identifies her dead lover at the morgue, and after the detectives wait for her anguished tears to cease, she shows her tougher side when ‘exhibiting a singular self-control, [she] asked for as close a description of the assassin as [Captain Howard] could give’ (3). Mat is described in terms that come to apply to Nellie as well, as he too is about 18 years old. ‘His worst fault, perhaps, was in being a little reckless, or over-brave and independent,’ the narrator reveals, and he ‘was of slight build, of lithe and willowy
frame, in which, however, resided an amount of strength which few would have dreamed possible’ (3). Both are grateful to Howard for his attempts to solve their cases, but also understand that their personal grief renders them better advocates for their loved ones than even the most committed professional, thus demonstrating the importance of amateur detectives even in a world where police detectives are heroic.

Shadow, assumed to be Mat, is continually referred to by Howard using a male pronoun. Howard’s descriptions, though, provide cues to the reader, as Shadow’s gender, like that of lithe and willowy Mat, is continually presented as a site of potential slippage. Howard first sees ‘the shadow of a slender figure, in male attire’ and looks into a ‘boyish-looking face’ (5). In his first conversation with Shadow, Howard gives the mysterious detective an envelope and demands answers:

‘Hold on! Here is your share. And now, who are you?’ and I bent closer to the mysterious being, and then discovered that I did not see a real face, but a closely-fitting mask, which defied all but the closest scrutiny.

‘I am Shadow.’

‘A detective?’

‘Yes. Now go – leave me alone – cease your questioning. And, as you value my friendship (which may be worth much to you), never speak to me again, but act simply as I shall write.’ (5)

This encounter highlights the deliberate fluidity of Shadow’s identity, as well as the power that resides in her liminality. Howard initially attempts to trade money for information in demanding to know Shadow’s identity as he gives her the portion of a reward she has earned through previous intelligence-sharing. Shadow firmly claims the title of detective but is otherwise entirely unwilling to satisfy Howard’s – and the reader’s – curiosity. Instead, she confidently assumes the power to dictate the terms of her relationship with a police captain, partly because her investigative prowess has real monetary value, since nineteenth-century American police detectives regularly supplemented their incomes with rewards offered for the recovery of specific stolen goods or the capture of high-profile criminals.19 Her power is further underlined when even the already ambiguous ‘boyish-looking face’ is called into question by her mask, marking Shadow’s superiority to Howard in one of his strengths: disguise.

In the end, although a famous detective in his own right, Police Captain Howard acts as a sort of Watson in describing Shadow’s prowess
and eccentricity. But this structure of containment – where the reader identifies with a first-person narrator-observer rather than with the more dangerous detective – does not fully erase the threat of the detective, the narrator, and perhaps even the reader being contaminated by detective work and its narrations. Nellie Milbank does not pursue her lover's murderer in order to turn him over to authorities. In a scene in which our narrator follows Shadow into a saloon, we see her most impressive disguise yet – as a trollop. Captain Howard is deeply confused: ‘That swelling bust might be a work of art, but it seemed to me that it arose and fell too naturally to be anything but genuine’ (27). Shadow sees that Howard has recognized her, but continues with her plan nonetheless, encouraging McGinnis, Tom Smith's murderer and Helen Dilt’s kidnapper, into drunkenness while dumping her own drinks, accepting his drunken caresses as they leave the saloon, leading him to the docks, handcuffing and gagging him, and placing a revolver to his head.

Howard’s narration here is entirely as an observer, and his complicity in Shadow’s actions is highlighted as he and the reader watch as the clock strikes ten: ‘It was a fearful sight, that of this man struggling with such fierce intensity to burst his bands, to free his hands, to save his life’ (28). Howard, presumably, could step in at any time, but he does not even mention this possibility to the reader. The killing of McGinnis occurs between paragraphs, indicated only by a dash:

‘The three minutes are gone,’ he [Shadow] finally said, in a tone that was harsh but unwavering, and then ——
‘Avenged!’ muttered Shadow, as he glided away from the spot a few minutes later. (28)

As the clock strikes eleven, a mere hour later, Howard is preparing for bed when he receives a note from Shadow asking him to accompany her on the rescue of Helen Dilts and the recently kidnapped Mat Morris.

Howard’s total unconcern for the life of a criminal is highlighted by the final paragraphs of the novel. At a celebratory dinner for the return of Helen and Mat, Howard asks Nellie/Shadow where McGinnis is; when she doesn’t answer, Howard notices that ‘the merriment of Nellie Milbank was rather forced’ (30). In an obtuse observation unworthy of even Watson’s level of deduction, Howard continues: ‘This I thought might be because of a natural embarrassment at being in men’s clothing after having revealed her true sex’ (30). Or perhaps, even the average reader might deduce, Nellie’s lackluster mood could be the result of having committed, the night before, what was ‘becoming spoken of as
the most brutal murder on record’ (30), an act Howard has just evoked by asking about McGinnis. Howard continues to emphasize his own unreliability as a narrator as he provides closing statements on each of the characters. About Nellie, he says she was never seen again, unless he saw her some time later in the garb of a Sister of Mercy. ‘It may not have been Nellie Milbank,’ Howard confesses, ‘but I have always thought it was, and hope that I was right’ (30).

*Shadow*, then, evokes tropes from the subgenres of detective fiction in its triple population of the detective position, where Howard shows himself to be vastly superior to – despite some uncomfortable resonances with – the false detective, Dick Stanton, and yet continually inferior to the better disguised, more successfully shadowy vigilante detective. Shadow fails to conform to the gendered expectation for women dime novel detectives set out by Klein and others. Her happy marriage was taken from her by a murderer, and there is no wealthy and loving groom available to replace her slain lover. In the end, Nellie escapes virtually all the stereotypes of the dime novel woman except the weak attempt at containing her in the garb of a nun. An oppositional reader might wonder if there is irony, after Nellie single-handedly organized Helen and Mat’s rescue, in the fact that the happy couple name one of their children Howard. Perhaps another is named Nellie? If so, there is no mention of it.

**Forced marriages, faked weddings, and gendered problems of closure**

As a female dime novel detective, Nellie is unusual in her non-participation in a ‘happy ending’ marriage. Indeed, the icon of the bride allows us to trace several of the ways in which detective dime novels work through questions of gender and genre. In the comedy of manners linked by Grella to the classical mystery, the wedding acts as an emblem of comedic closure, of a happy resolution to the obstacles – and in mysteries, the criminal acts and potential accusations – that have threatened the central characters. Within this framework, the bride can act as both a point of reader identification and a symbol redolent with whatever erotic and familial values infuse a narrative. In the hardboiled, as Dennis Porter notes, the wedding is often evoked but almost always avoided as ‘the discovery that love, too, is perverted occurs as a final confirmation of quasi-universal corruption’ (186). We see many weddings in the conclusions of dime novels in my sample; 64 percent of all final chapters include one or more weddings, and 39 percent of all novels narrate the
detective’s betrothal or marriage. In most of these texts, happy endings of various kinds are cemented by weddings in exactly the mode identified by Grella. In others, though, weddings are reframed in subversive ways; in fact, 19 percent of these final-chapter weddings include some sort of what I’m calling ‘wedding trouble’ in evocation of Judith Butler’s ‘gender trouble.’

The first novel of the *New York Detective Library* series not only introduces the happy-ending wedding formula that spills out over the series; it also articulates both its power and its limitations. The final chapter of *Old Stealthy, The Government Detective* (1883) opens with a showdown between Old Stealthy and Jason, the criminal mastermind who is mangled beyond recognition in a spectacular explosion; ‘A horrible death had been the end of his guilty life,’ the narrator sagely points out (31). Jason’s mutilated body serves as a contrast to the beautiful drugged body of the heiress, rescued by the detective and attended to by a fine physician. The chapter cuts to a final scene in the heiress’s home a few weeks later, when, expecting to find Old Stealthy in her parlor, the now recovered Adele Rivers is faced with ‘a young man dressed in the height of fashion – a handsome young man, too, with a quizzical expression in his dark gray eyes’ (31). Old Stealthy, it turns out, has been the brilliant disguise of Fred Raymond, the nephew of a family friend and therefore a perfectly marriageable young man. In this first novel of the series, the formula is self-consciously laid out by a mostly omniscient narrator who takes a moment to address the reader: ‘Given a tender, loving girl and a handsome young man who had more than once saved her life, and whom she had every reason to regard as a hero, cannot the readers easily imagine the result? If they cannot, the writer will mention that the wedding is fixed to take place early in the coming autumn’ (31). In this penultimate paragraph, the narrator articulates an expectation for future novels in the series, which are, of course, filled with the rescues of tender and loving young heiresses by handsome young men whose disguises sometimes confuse these nubile women, who cannot quite understand their attraction to seemingly elderly and frail men of the detective class.

And yet, this seemingly straightforward use of the wedding within the tradition of comedy is perhaps clouded by the fact that the forthcoming and unnarrated wedding that marks the happy ending of *Old Stealthy* is not the only important wedding to grace the pages of this novel. Adele Rivers, it turns out, is the victim of attempted forced marriage, a crime quite common in the *New York Detective Library*; in fact, forced marriages are referred to in the conclusions of 17 of the
115 novels in my sample.\textsuperscript{20} *Old Stealthy* is emblematic of the most common type of ‘wedding trouble,’ with the threat of a forced marriage largely dissipated by a real marriage at the end. And yet, even this only mildly subversive novel reveals the fragility of marriage as a narrative strategy of comedic closure.

The forced marriage functions in several ways. It is likely an artifact of censorship battles around dime novels, since it allows these texts to address sexual crimes against women without using the word ‘rape’ or even the terminology of a ‘fallen’ or ‘ruined’ woman that we see in mid- and high-brow literature of the day. As a result of this deliberately named and enacted criminal act, where a woman is always technically married (although usually by a sinister minister conspiring with the rapist) before being sexually violated, a villain is protecting and ethically violating her honor at the same time. A victim of rape outside marriage would be a ‘ruined’ woman, unavoidably contaminated by the criminal actions of a villain; the act of ‘forced marriage’ throws up a highly unsatisfying structure of containment against this adulteration.

The forced marriage also locates the representation of sexual and financial desires as inherently intertwined in the criminal mind, since it is none but beautiful heiresses who are forced into marriage; there are no plain wealthy women kidnapped solely for their money nor any beautiful poor women stalked only for their physical attributes. The bodies of these female victims therefore provide a site at which sexual and financial desires are dually marked in a sort of palimpsest as the villainous ‘grooms’ of these schemes often partake simultaneously in narratives of love and of theft in describing their actions. Generally, the rape is a carefully articulated threat rather than a crime that is actually carried out, allowing the detective to foil the forced marriage plot, often in ways that substantially reframe the dynamics associated with the institution of marriage. Clearly, the very concept of forced marriage reveals a deep fissure in the optimistic potentials of the wedding ceremony. An optimistic wedding like that which will eventually join wealthy and attractive characters like Fred Raymond and Adele Rivers is narrated in a clause as an event clearly outside the narrative scope of the novel, while the threat of an unholy union between the young heiress and the terrifying ruffian who has kidnapped her provides narrative momentum for several chapters. Forced marriages, then, act to disrupt the symbolic import of concluding weddings. If the institution of marriage is so often perverted in a criminal way, what value does it retain as a narrative tool to cement ethical and epistemological certainty?
Old Stealthy, like 82 percent of novels in which attempted or realized forced marriage is mentioned in the conclusion, pairs the perversion of the institution of marriage with an explicitly happy marriage at the end (although almost half of those seemingly happy endings contain ‘wedding trouble’ beyond the criminal act of forced marriage). The doubly desired and desirable female body – desired by criminal and detective alike, desirable for its wealth and beauty alike – thus traverses the space between forced and consensual marriage, and the final wedding articulates a stop in the pendulum at ‘happy marriage.’ The final wedding in a story like Old Stealthy thus appears to function as a containment structure, a narrative ballast in which the threat of rape is entirely removed by the detective, who clears the name of an eligible bachelor or who provides himself as a suitable husband whose participation in a real marriage saves the institution from perversion by a criminal element that has been fully removed.

In the group of novels that follow up the threat of forced marriage with a happy wedding, a standardized strategy for relatively thorough containment of the contaminating threat of rape, it is worth briefly mentioning The Broken Button (1883) for its foray into the fraught territory of miscegenation. Here, Maud Gilman is an heiress whose father has been killed, with evidence pointing overwhelmingly to her fiancé as the murderer. Young Sleuth’s observations lead him to believe in the fiancé’s innocence, and he sets out on the trail of the kidnapped Maud. In an episodic narrative in which Young Sleuth defeats certain death numerous times, Maud’s adventures are even more compelling. Maud’s kidnapper is a man named Mardo whose ‘foreign’ accent – Sleuth believes him to be ‘Mexican with a dash of Indian blood in his veins’ (8) – marks him as other. Mardo plans to marry Maud to his nephew, who is relatively good-looking ‘as far as regularity of features went’ (11), although he is clearly a relative of Mardo’s, with all the racial connotations thus entailed. When Maud refuses to succumb to the forced marriage, Mardo provides an extreme racialized threat in the person of Belphigor, ‘a negro hideously deformed. His body was twisted out of shape, while his limbs were out of all proportionate length, and, with their huge extremities, gave him a sort of resemblance to a cuttle-fish. His face, too, was one solid scar, as if it had been vitrioloed’ (15), which indeed it has. Mardo’s final threat is that Maud may choose between marriage to his nephew, a man of breeding and education, or Belphigor, who utters ‘a sort of growl that was anything but human in its articulation’ when he is guarding Maud (15). After some soul-searching in which she keeps suicide in mind as a back-up plan, Maud agrees to
marry Ralston, but only on the condition that the marriage be ‘in name only’ and lead to separation after her assets are transferred; in other words, Maud agrees to the theft but not the rape involved in the forced marriage. Eventually Maud is rescued by a member of Mardo’s gang, but the escape turns out to be rife with sexual danger, as her would-be liberator ‘seize[s] her around the waist’ and a ‘kiss [is] planted on her cheek’ (20). It is Belphigor who kills the ruffian after additional molestation, and Belphigor speaks ‘in a voice that, though harsh, had none of the usual negro accent. “I am your friend.” / Maud opened her eyes and gazed at him in astonishment … She had before regarded him as a species of wild beast’ (23).

*The Broken Button* is the only dime novel in my sample to articulate the threat of contamination that most vividly underlies nineteenth-century anxieties about race relations: miscegenation. The novel’s politics on this point are complex. Maud is in danger of forced marriage from three different men: the white ruffian who bodily molests her; the ambiguously raced Ralston who is quite satisfied to take Maud’s fortune without violating her body; and the hideous Negro whom Maud fears most, but who ends up saving Maud from her ordeal and kills both unwelcome suitors. This racial dynamic is clearly subversive, locating the black man as a heroic figure who does for Maud what Young Sleuth tries but never quite succeeds in doing: he twice removes the threat of forced marriage, with the intertwined rape and theft implied therein. Young Sleuth, in fact, kills only Belphigor, whose justified murder of Mardo (who was responsible for Belphigor’s terrible childhood injuries and deformities, and who has now shot the black man’s mulatto wife) crosses a line when the black man attempts to pull Mardo’s heart from his lifeless body, prompting the omniscient narrator to comment, ‘Who had fired the shot [Young Sleuth’s fatal shot at Belphigor] no one inquired, but all experienced a feeling of relief. / Though the ruffian [Mardo] had richly deserved death, the negro’s act was too barbarous’ (27). Young Sleuth then kills the far less threatening Ralston and frees Charles Harrington, completing the work required to allow Maud to participate in a happy-wedding ending.

The removal of Belphigor functions as a conservative corrective, as his racialized sexuality and unexpected heroism both provide a threat to the worldview of the white upper-class society to which Maud and her fiancé belong and which Young Sleuth protects. And yet, the novel’s ‘happy’ ending is highly tinged by the complex dynamic that has led to the final wedding scene. To more explicitly mark the inadequacy of Maud and Charles’s wedding as a point of uncomplicated happiness, the final paragraph details Young Sleuth’s emotional reaction to the
wedding; he declines the honor of best man, and when he ‘salutes the bride’ after the ceremony, ‘the heartiness with which the bride returned the caress would have been sufficient cause for a severe attack of jealousy.’ As Young Sleuth watches the couple depart on their wedding journey on a steamer, he turns away, ‘with a sigh, the reason for which he could hardly have told’ (28). Young Sleuth’s identity as a detective rather than a potential husband is cemented by the final comment that he has been ‘engaged’ upon hundreds of cases and the reader can expect to read about more of them in the near future. Nina the Female Detective, from *A Diamond Ear-ring* is also ‘engaged’ to her vocation, but this is presented as a celebratory moment in the place usually reserved for the female detective’s marriage announcement; these echoes confirm Young Sleuth’s troubled marriage plot.

*Old Stealthy* and *The Broken Button* destabilize the notion of the final wedding as a conservative move through their narration of the crime of forced marriage, but their use of a second wedding provides at least a partial corrective to the representation of marriage as threat. In turning to the dime novels that introduce the happy wedding only to deliberately problematize it, we see, once again, that the detective genre does not merely raise subversive cultural fantasies in order to contain them, or articulate criminal disruptions in order to completely remove them; the structure of containment is often so inadequate that it creates a narrative tension that has always already been part of the genre’s powerful potential.

Four of the novels in my sample include detectives who subvert forced marriage plots by creating fake weddings. On the one hand, a fake wedding could be seen as an attempt by a detective to save the institution of marriage from a terrifying criminal perversion; on the other hand, in doubling the criminal’s action, the detective may well be corrupting the wedding’s narrative potential beyond its ability to stand in for a happy and conservative ending. In *A Diamond Ear-ring* (1888), the victim of forced marriage agrees to the wedding only in exchange for the name of her first husband’s killer; the criminal weds a veiled woman, reveals himself to be the murderer, and finds out that the female detective has arranged for a substitution and that he has in fact remarried a woman from whom he was divorced. *Little Ferret* (1888) presents a similar plot, although here the murderer/groom reveals his guilt after the betrothal but before the marriage, and he is killed by natural circumstances in the meantime, leaving the young woman free to marry the detective; interestingly, the detective chooses never to reveal the dead man’s guilt, and the case remains officially unsolved.
Old Bullion, The Banker Detective (1888) narrates a double sting. Wealthy banker Herbert Percy, who goes by the name Old Bullion in his one-time detective persona, is on the trail of the group who has kidnapped his fiancée, heiress Aida Victor; as is frequently the case, a woman criminal is an accomplice in the forced marriage plot. Old Bullion is about to rescue his veiled fiancée when a priest arrives to perform the forced marriage ceremony; thinking quickly, Bullion inserts himself in the place of the delayed criminal groom, and the marriage ceremony is performed, apparently linking the young lovers. Moments later, however, the bride is revealed to be a female criminal disguised as the kidnap victim, so that Young Bullion’s riches are now also secured by the criminal gang, who still plan to secure Aida’s separate fortune through the initially planned forced marriage. All four novels including fake weddings are worthy of textual investigation that traces their various reworkings of the gendered narrative conventions associated with betrothal and marriage, but here we will attend to only one of the group.

Old King Brady and the Telephone Mystery (1888) ends with a spectacular sting operation that reveals the depth of gender and genre trouble that can be caused by complex rewritings of the wedding convention. Meredith Saulnier is a diamond smuggler who has recently crossed into the more sinister territory of attempted forced marriage, and who learns in the final chapter that his kidnap victim, beautiful heiress Emeline Hodder, has finally consented to marry him. He waits impatiently at the bottom of an ornate staircase for his bride to appear and to, at last, reward his patience and cunning with both her highly desirable body and her vast fortune. The stage is set, and the reader well knows that Old King Brady’s youthful mentee Walter Bell loves drama. When the bride appears, the villainous Saulnier gasps and the blood drains from his face. A parodic rendering of the bridal figure provides the final incident, among several, of gender performance throughout this novel, in response to Saulnier’s ‘Why?’:

Because the blushing bride is clad in a gorgeous silk ball dress of yellow and black.

To be sure her features were hidden by a veil, but that does not prevent Mr. Saulnier from recognizing the dress as the one in which he himself had masqueraded at the Duffield Ball!

Then the veil was suddenly thrown back, and the smiling countenance of Walter Bell appeared.

‘Here I am! Do you want to marry me?’ he said. (27)
The male detective’s performance of the bridal victim role illustrates a complicated power dynamic. The detective’s protection of the victim by assuming her place at once injects that role with the final boost of power needed to permanently disable the criminal, but it also demonstrates that the victim herself is incapable of protecting her own body in the face of an assault whose technical details – the priest, the victims, the ceremony – evokes a sense of complicity on the victim’s part. The detective figure in *The Telephone Mystery* is simultaneously substituted for the victim and the criminal, as he is playing the role of the female victim of forced marriage while dressed in the feminine garb worn earlier in the novel by the potential rapist. The complete collapse of the positions in the detective–criminal–triangle indicates a comprehensive contamination of roles that is tied to potentially powerful collapses in gender identity by the use of the ubiquitous costume.

This novel has all along highlighted gender trouble through Walter’s confused gaze at criminal and victim alike. The detectives and criminals are set up as uncanny doubles on the night of the costume ball, with Old King Brady acquiring a perfect duplicate of the senior criminal’s costume, while his acolyte, Walter Bell, is charged with shadowing the beautiful woman who appears to be the elder criminal’s accomplice in the recent murders. Walter follows the Spanish beauty, ‘a gorgeous vision in yellow silk with dark hair and piercing black eyes’ (5) on a long journey through the city until he finally spies her in the process of removing her dress: ‘At first Walter drew back instinctively, then he looked again, and in an instant saw that it was well he did’ (13). The mysterious woman, of course, turns out to be a man in disguise. And yet, as Walter continues his pursuit, he notices that the man’s face is beardless and effeminate, and he wonders: ‘Could it be that he was still studying a disguise? – that this was a woman after all?’ (14). Walter follows the mysterious figure to a house, where he peers in through the window, and sees ‘the most perfect picture of sleeping beauty that it had ever been his fortune to view. There was a small single bedstead in one corner, upon which, slumbering peacefully, lay a young girl, whose sweet face sent a thrill of shame to the detective’s breast’ (15). The shame is caused, the narrator tells us, by Walter’s discovery that he is surveilling not a potential murderer but an innocent young woman in the intimacy of her bedchamber. And yet, Walter’s shame and embarrassment are the same when he looks at the woman who is about to become a victim of attempted forced marriage as when he observes a man dressed as a woman. A detective’s observational skills are among his best assets, but Walter Bell, novice
detective, is equally blinded by biological and performed femininity, always unsure of when and how to look.

In the end, after Walter eventually processes his quarry’s gender and enacts a duplication of Saulnier’s cross-dressing, creating a parodic version of what was already a false wedding, we return to Old King Brady’s perspective as he reflects on the success he and Walter have shared in rescuing Emeline, defeating the diamond smugglers, and solving a series of forensically complex murders that have transformed the new technology of the telephone into a deadly weapon. Brady reflects on Walter’s trajectory: the young man has resigned from his position as detective, become a partner at Emeline’s murdered father’s business, and asked Emeline to marry him. The novel ends: “Dear me,” thought the old man, as he trudged along, “how do these young chaps manage it?" / To Old King Brady this seemed the most mysterious part of the TELEPHONE MYSTERY after all’ (27). Walter’s ‘happy’ ending, then, challenges Brady’s police-procedural worldview, where detectives are engaged to their profession, not to the sexually threatened heiresses they rescue.

The NYDL series includes a relatively even mix of novels in which weddings are markers of resolution and happiness in the style of the classical mystery and novels in which weddings are entirely absent from conclusions, as we would expect from the police procedural subgenre. Moreover, the series includes a substantial number of novels in which the narrative and iconographic potentials of the wedding are rewritten in cynical ways usually associated with the hardboiled. These rewrites often explicitly explore themes of sexual violation in complex ways that marry salacious voyeurism and substantial gender critique. A reader of the New York Detective Library series in 1883 or 1888, then, would be exposed to various structures of relationships between detectives and marriage, representing the full range of potentials played out in the detective subgenres usually associated with recent decades.

The detectives that don’t work out: death and corruption in the detective position

We expect our fictional detectives to remain trustworthy and alive, and we are seldom disappointed in these matters. Yet, even within ‘canonical’ detective fiction notable exceptions challenge these expectations. Agatha Christie’s The Murder of Roger Ackroyd and Arthur Conan Doyle’s ‘The Final Problem’ provide classic examples of highly successful detective endings that not only break ostensibly central rules of the genre, but that also cause a sensation in doing so. Christie’s novel was influential
enough to merit a title place in Edmund Wilson’s famous diatribe against detective fiction, ‘Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?’ and Conan Doyle eventually recanted the heretical ending of his short story in response to reader pressure by explaining away Sherlock Holmes’s death in a future story. Non-traditional endings for detectives, then, may undergo a corrective à la Sherlock Holmes or may come to stand in for the truly satisfying besting of readers by an author like Christie, demonstrating that even the detective position is not sacred.

As the detective was developing in the dime novels, dead and corrupt detectives are rare but present. My sample includes mention in the final chapter of six corrupt detectives and six dead detectives, all men; note also that there are only six women detectives in the entire sample, so it’s as likely for a detective to die or be corrupt as be female. The figure of the corrupt detective is redolent with the nineteenth-century anxieties about police and policing discussed in more detail in Chapter 3 with regard to Allan Pinkerton. The corrupt detective also embodies the moral threat inherent in detective work; a corrupt detective is contaminated by his dealings with the criminal underworld, and through his continued corruption of his position of power, he becomes a threat to both the society he is meant to protect and the profession he represents.

Most corrupt detectives are clearly secondary to the main detective, as in *Nameless; or No. 108* (1883), when the family reunion narrated in the final chapter includes a character recounting the tale of a corrupt detective who years earlier had forced an innocent man to adopt a new identity so that the detective might blackmail an embezzler, thus using his position of power for his own gain. Another detective eventually unravels that case, allowing the innocent man to be reunited with his long-lost daughter. The plot is much more complex, but the trajectory is a common one: the figure of the corrupt detective is acknowledged and set up as a criminal actor, and an unambiguously good detective provides a corrective. In some cases, though, the presence of a corrupt detective has consequences for his more heroic colleague. Our discussion of *Shadow* reveals that even when paired with seemingly exemplary colleagues a corrupt detective poses a threat of contamination, as when the recurring character Police Captain Howard states his disgust with the false detective Dick Stanton while also narrating his own passive witnessing of a retaliatory killing by the novel’s heroically constructed title detective. We turn now to *The Priest’s Crime* (1883), the only novel in my sample to give substantially more narrative space to the corrupt detective than to his heroic counterpart.
The Priest’s Crime occurs largely in France, where morally complex French characters contrast with the more steadfast – and less developed – Americans they meet in the last third of the novel. The novel narrates a long episodic quest that resembles nothing more than Louisa May Alcott’s aptly titled and anonymously published A Long Fatal Love Chase (1866). The most prominent detective is Baptiste Mollier, a wealthy Frenchman at the height of his field who has entered the detective profession in order to avenge his father’s murder. As the chase, with its many intrigues and deceptions, makes its way to the US, an American detective is hired and largely takes on the detective role as Mollier’s involvement becomes more complex and as the highly pro-American narrator notes that ‘Mollier was one of the brightest lights of the Parisian force, and yet he did not possess much confidence in his own ability when he found himself in a strange land [the United States]’ (21). Theodore (Ted) Webster, American detective, is ‘a man in every sense of the word’ (21) who acts as a double to Mollier as he too is a wealthy man who has entered the force when his father was defrauded and the family fortune almost lost. Interestingly, Ted was planning to join the ministry before this familial event, also thematically linking him to the priest of the title. The anxious relationship of French and American detectives will be discussed at more length in Chapter 3 when we examine the reverberations accompanying Allan Pinkerton’s media sobriquet, ‘the Vidocq of the West’ – a characterization Pinkerton continually resisted. For now, it is worth mentioning that the characters’ names, with resonances of a French playwright and an American lexicographer, emphasize the national identities at play throughout this novel.

With apologies for sharing plot details that might make my reader’s head spin, I will point out that the novel’s convoluted plot contains a series of overlapping erotic triangles developing out of the complex detective–criminal–victim triangle that opens the narrative. And yet, it is far from a hermeneutic puzzle, since the reader knows immediately the murderer’s identity and (somewhat compelling) motive. Eugenia Gosher, an attractive peasant Frenchwoman, is beloved by two brothers and chooses the playboy, Louis Hubert, rather than his gentlemanly brother Edmond, who enters the priesthood after she rejects him. When Eugenia, whose ruin at Louis’s hands is demonstrated by the existence of her child, learns that her lover is marrying wealthy Parisian Lucille Dallas, she confronts Louis and fatally stabs him in a fit of passion. The second erotic triangle, then, represents a conflict in which Louis is the object of desire to two women who are consistently doubled by the narrator throughout the novel, especially when
they both enjoy considerable success at disguises in male costume. The detective triangle is also an erotic triangle, since the detective investigating Louis’s murder is Baptiste Mollier (his father, coincidentally, was killed by Eugenia’s father, although neither of them know this yet), who is in love with Eugenia. The erotic detective triangle is doubled by that including Mollier–Eugenia–Edmond, since Edmond, still in love with Eugenia despite his commitment to God, confesses to the murder to save Eugenia and her child. Mollier’s obsession with Eugenia prompts him to knowingly accept the priest’s false confession and to ask Eugenia to marry him; he is a good enough detective to infer the dynamics of the confession and the true identity of the murderer, but he becomes the central villain of the novel as he repeatedly tries to coerce Eugenia into marriage.

In due course Lucille meets Father Edmond and she too falls in love with him, so that the good priest simply replaces his brother in the Eugenia–Louis–Lucille triangle. At the same time, Mollier and Edmond compete for Eugenia’s hand, with the obstacle of Edmond’s vow as a Catholic priest always a complicating matter. At various points, each star-crossed lover, Eugenia and Edmond, secretly agrees to marry her or his aggressive suitor in order to protect the other from prosecution for Louis’s murder; one might imagine that this tragic frame (with plenty of references to drama and the stage throughout the novel) would be happily resolved in a detective story ending. The final two chapters, though, provide a denouement as steeped in chaos as pathos. The penultimate chapter is, perhaps ironically, titled ‘Mollier Gains His Point at the Close of the Drama’ and is presented in a theatrical manner, with most of the action provided in dialogue with clear stage directions. Eugenia announces that she will wed Mollier on the condition that he prosecute neither the priest nor her father and that Father Edmond, over his own objections, officiate. Lucille and Ted stand as witnesses, and Eugenia participates in the ceremony fully, answering the priest ‘in clear, ringing tones; and she permitted Mollier to embrace her without betraying the least emotion’ (30). Eugenia then ascertains that the priest has loved her and shall never marry again, she makes Mollier repeat his pledge, and she turns to Lucille, saying ‘“You have failed, proud woman. The good man will never be your husband. That is one triumph for me”’ (30). She then steps outside the door to commit suicide, her final act of control. The scene ends on Edmond: ‘“May Heaven have mercy on her soul,” sobbed the young priest. “I am the cause of her death. Mollier, Mollier, see how the struggle has ended”’ (30). For Edmund, his crime is officiating the wedding rather than perjuring himself for Eugenia or
falling in love with a woman after he has committed his life to God's work. This is complex wedding trouble indeed, especially when we consider that the forced marriage is at the hand of a corrupt detective who uses his professional position and the threat of exposure therein to coerce his suspect to become, very briefly, his wife.

Mollier acts as a contaminant of sorts as a different kind of wedding trouble marks the final chapter, ‘The Last Scene in the Drama,’ which is set in Paris. American detective Ted Webster visits Lucille in her posh home to report on the fates of all the characters, revealing that Mollier and Eugenia's father are both dead, appropriately having killed each other. The priest has gone ‘out in the great West among the Indians’ (30) and is providing funds for Eugenia's orphaned child. Ted introduces his own happy ending by asking Lucille to marry him, to which she responds with one condition: ‘Promise to take me to the great West at some future day. ... To see the dear man. You will not be jealous of him?’ (30). Does Lucille still love the priest? This comic ending, hollow at best, reveals the same kind of wedding trouble we see in many dime novel texts. Here, the much narrated and anticipated false wedding that involves a corrupt detective as its offender contaminates the very concept of marriage so that the good detective is unable to provide a complete corrective to earlier wedding trouble, as his briefly mentioned forthcoming nuptials reward him only with an obsessive woman whose heart will always belong to a wholly unavailable other man. The detective triangle gets twice recast, with the priest, beloved by both Eugenia and Lucille, as the third figure to the erotic triangles of both the corrupt and the honest detective. Although the legal crime in the novel is the murder of Louis by his wronged lover, Eugenia, it is the eponymous priest’s ‘crime’ that comes to represent the impossibility of comedic closure that would have been provided by a truly happy wedding.

Like corrupt detectives, dead detectives are always presented in combination with those who survive the ordeal, but here too, the corrective is always inadequate, since the happy ending of one detective does not fully assuage the disruption of another’s death. Most detective deaths are mentioned only in passing, but one novel in my sample lingers over a main detective’s death as the centerpiece of the conclusion. *Detective Davis; or, The Moonshiner's Terror* (1888) is set in the wilds of Tennessee. One of the few true Westerns in my sample, it involves outlaws and detectives in continuous battle, with gunfights on horseback, abandoned mine shafts, boisterous square dances, and substantial narrative ambivalence about whether or not it is appropriate for the state to police
the activities of strong and courageous men whose livelihoods brand them as outlaws. The novel follows two detectives: Algern Madison, a young detective whose romance plot threatens to overshadow his detective work, and Jim Davis, whose long-time devotion to fighting moonshiners – with all the dark doubling that entails – preordains his death.

The novel introduces its title detective in dishonorable contrast to the criminals. The opening celebratory homoerotic scene presents the ambiguous criminals through the third-person narration of a ‘stag dance,’ an all-male dance in which squeaky violins play while ‘The men caught hold of each other, and with wild shouts and laughter, went whirling around and around’ (2). The characterization of these merry outlaws is redolent with uncertainty:

The moonshiner is one of the most dangerous of outlaws. His acts are only the robbing of a nation, and acting from a misconceived idea of right, which is sure to be wrong, he brings in a false patriotism to aid him in his unlawful business.

Making whisky has long been the occupation of these men. Their families and themselves depended on it for food and clothing.

What right, then, they would reason, had the Government of the United States to interfere with their means of livelihood?

They raised their corn, and had a right to make what they pleased out of it.

The fallacy of their reasoning is so apparent that we will not attempt to argue with them. (2)

This description of the moonshiners contains far more than mere accents of subversion; the last line almost mockingly pays lip-service to national tax laws, but the focus on the ‘misconceived idea of right,’ the survival of families, the over-reach of governmental authority, the self-evident right of farmers to use their corn as they please, all point to a deeply entrenched critique of police and policing. The detective figure is introduced as an antagonist to the complex moonshiner: ‘Their sworn enemies are the revenue officers and the United States detectives’ (2). From the start, the narrative emphasizes the fiscal rather than ethical nature of the government’s policing of moonshining. The opening chapter ends with the dancing men hearing a faint cry for help and finding an unconscious man lying on the ground in a clearing. Their first thought is that their nemesis Detective Jim Davis has attacked this man, but the insensible man is actually Detective Davis in disguise.
He takes advantage of the moonshiners’ grudging kindness to learn more about their operations, and the remainder of Davis’s narrative includes repeated captures of and by various moonshiners, until his unavoidable fate is narrated in the final chapter, starkly titled ‘Death of Davis – Conclusion.’

As soon as Davis’s identity is revealed, his actions place him in a logic of substitution, where detective and criminals continually take on each other’s roles in an increasingly contaminating narrative trajectory that leaves the two roles virtually indistinguishable. For example, Davis is labeled a murderer by the bereft widow of a moonshiner he has killed, and a deputized moonshiner attempts to arrest him as a murderer. Even the names of secondary characters highlight the logic of substitution. Campbell Morgan, a leader of the moonshiners, fights George W. Campbell, an important member of the detective force. After Morgan is captured, he is reformed by the detectives and joins them in their never-ending battle against the moonshiners, demonstrating the ease with which detective and moonshiner identities can be collapsed. These positions, then, are two sides of a coin, and the killing of several moonshiners throughout the novel makes fair game the final killing of a detective.

Within Detective Davis’s narrative, any structure of containment is little more than a platitude about the importance of detective work or a detective convention perfunctorily presented within a narrative raging with contamination. The narrative that shares the novel is itself a ballast to Davis’s story. Paired with Davis, and seldom seen in the same scenes, is courageous young detective Algern Madison, whose story is straight out of the sentimental tradition Leonard Cassuto accurately identifies as a precursor to the hardboiled, with its marriage of sentiment and tough-guy detection. Algern, repeatedly referred to as ‘our hero’ despite Davis’s place in the title, is torn between romance and detective plots, as evidenced when he discusses his next move with his superior on the force. Algern asks Captain Davis: ‘“Can I not carry love and duty on the same boat?”’ to which the older detective responds ‘“Not easily, when duty says exterminate the moonshiners, and love says wed one of their sisters”’ (11). Indeed, Algern’s love for Lillie Wild, alleged sister of the terrible Wild brothers but unknowingly a misplaced heiress, makes him a bad detective, almost entirely unresponsive to the mission at hand: the violent overthrow of the moonshiner gang. Fortunately for Algern, Lillie is kidnapped, so he can perform his duties as detective and lover simultaneously in his quest to rescue and eventually marry her.
Lillie’s kidnap is particularly distasteful because the men she has always known as brothers plan to force her to marry one of them when they learn of her true identity and the wealth that accompanies it. Lillie’s introduction emphasizes the conflict and contrast between the two detective stories:

In the wildest portion of that mountainous region of Tennessee, infested with moonshiners and outlaws, one would scarcely expect to find beauty and refinement.

Yet, as the rarest flowers grow in the mountain wilds or desert wastes, so in the wildest regions we sometimes meet perfection in womanly beauty. (5)

The contamination inherent in the criminal–detective battles of this detective story gives rise to a pure and untouched woman whose feminine qualities allow her to transform not only her environment but also her man, using the charms of the private sphere to influence her lover’s very public work. In the fashion of sentimental heroines, Lillie bravely faces her plight as a kidnap victim and tells Algern that she can help him by praying for him; the young detective is transformed by his lover’s words and takes strength from the knowledge that she is tucked away in what passes as the private sphere (a dank cave) praying for him as he faces overwhelming adversity in the public sphere of detective activity. Algern ends up teaching the Wild brothers the meaning of sentimental masculinity as he begs them to spare their sister’s life even if they kill him: ‘The Wild brothers exchanged curious looks with each other. They had never yet heard such expressions. Sentiments of true manhood were new to them’ (21). Algern’s words resonate on a visceral level as their deepest emotions are stirred, moistening their eyes and quickening their hearts. For the Wilds, ‘There was something grand and noble in such an expression of true manhood, which even affected them, moonshiners as they were’ (21). The Wild brothers do not survive the novel, but their interactions with Algern are contaminating in the best sense, as the young detective’s moral purity transforms the outlaws immediately before their deaths.

Jim Davis’s death is presented in stark contrast to the narrative of deathbed conversation. In fact, the final chapter of Detective Davis; or, The Moonshiner’s Terror intertwines the two detectives’ fates in a logical conclusion of the novel’s narrative momentum. Its structure clearly illustrates the inadequacy of the romantic detective as comic corrective to the graphic death of the too-staunch title detective. The chapter begins
with the announcement of the betrothal of Detective Algern Madison and Lillie Wild; such a statement, complete with the restoration of Lillie’s inheritance, would usually end a dime novel, placing the detective hero’s happy fate in the prominent last paragraph. The narrator then apologizes for the ending, evoking the real world as an excuse for breaking the tradition of the detective genre: ‘Were it only a story of the imagination, we might shape it to suit ourselves, but this being a true account of actual occurrences, we are not allowed to shape the ends to suit our own fancy’ (30). This rhetoric is common to many works of nineteenth-century fiction, of course, but here it resonates as a genuine critique of the criminalization of what begins as tax evasion by fairly poor Tennessee farmers, and then turns into widespread violence in which detectives and moonshiners play equal parts.

In contrast to the brief narration of Algern’s happy ending, the final scene is graphic in its detail. Echoing an earlier firefight in which the detectives have injured or killed several moonshiners, this scene describes Davis’s wounds in detail. He is first hit in the leg and thrown from his horse. His gun is then shot from his hand. As the outlaws gather closer, shooting continually, Davis’s fate unfolds tortuously over many paragraphs as ‘Bleeding from a dozen wounds, he struggled once more to his feet, and limped onward toward safety’ (30), and finally:

Thus died Jim Davis, the terror of the moonshiners. He was a man beloved by all the good and law-abiding, hated and feared by all who violate the law.

Campbell [a detective sidekick] made his escape, and with a strong posse went back and found the horribly mutilated body.

An inquest was held, and the verdict was that he came to his death by shots fired by parties unknown to the jury.

Green B. Raum, Commissioner of Internal Revenue, offered a reward of five hundred dollars for the capture of the murderers of Detective Davis, but the assassins have not yet been brought to justice.

[THE END.]
many criminals killed by detectives in other dime novels, often without public acknowledgment.

Although dead and corrupt detectives are rare in the *New York Detective Library*, their presence delimits the ethical and generic boundaries of detective fiction. Mollier and Davis are both prominent and well-respected members of their profession until they are contaminated by their interactions with criminals. In each case, a more heroic detective is proffered by the narrative, but his secondary story is inadequate as a structure of containment. The threat inherent in detective work leaks through the veneer of the happy ending to contaminate the novel, thus providing the narrative impetus that continues to propel the detective genre.

*A Terrible Ending: an unambiguous antidote to happy endings*

The slow and unavenged death of Detective Davis certainly marks a terrible ending, but it is rivaled in its pathos, if not its unsettling lack of closure, by the aptly titled *A Terrible Ending* (1883). Obviously telegraphing its narrative trajectory, this novel opens with an awful beginning, as the brutal murders of two women are graphically described in the present tense by an omniscient narrator whose perspective is near that of the criminal. One of the women cries out the murderer’s name and ‘That instant the blade descends. It cuts her upraised hand and arm. Again and again it falls, burying itself into her slightly protected bosom’ (2). The men who find the bodies allow their gazes to linger over the dead woman’s uncovered bosom: “Oh – look! – look! – look!” and with trembling finger he [Gifford, a secondary character] pointed at the ghastly wound in her bosom, for the front of the gown had been cut and torn by the cruel assassin’ (4). The murders, then, are subtly sexualized in an evocation of the erotic trouble that is tangled with the detective narrative and makes a happy conclusion impossible.

Sid Seaton, the detective, is introduced as an outstanding member of his profession, but his fallibility becomes increasingly evident as his deductions lead him to identify Marvin Milton as the murderer; he is the son of the older victim, a young man with a propensity for gambling but no stomach for murder. Even the jury sees Milton’s innocence when Seaton cannot. With his innocence finally accepted by Seaton, Milton remains under a cloud of suspicion in his social circles and resolves to unravel the mystery himself. In so doing, he and Seaton discover that Milton’s mother has been killed by his long-lost father,
and further, Milton’s beloved, Lettie Markham, is none other than his own half-sister.

As the official detective on the Milton case, Seaton contributes to the final tragedy as well as to the gender critique throughout. Two clearly doubled nubile female characters, Lettie and Nettie, are subjected to aggressive male gazes that are marked as sinister. Lettie, apparently the daughter of a profligate gambler, is desired by her father’s younger friend: ‘Lettie Markham was not long in finding out the man’s purpose toward her. She had only to look into his hungry, covetous eyes to read his desires; and when she once understood them, there came into her heart the first firm resolve of her life: it was to thwart, and, in some way, circumvent the villain, for villain she was sure he was’ (15). Lettie’s agency here is remarkable, as she goes against the wishes of both her parents in resisting Felton’s forceful courtship. Felton sees Lettie’s ability to read his villainous gaze and attempts unsuccessfully to correct his facial expression, a scene analogous to one in which Detective Seaton has convinced Nettie to provide evidence against Marvin, but the detective allows himself an ‘exultant smile’ as he follows the young woman to where she has hidden the bloody dagger. Nettie sees the smile: ‘“He is a liar,” she thought. “He is deceiving me ... this contemptible villain would make me his instrument.”’ With deep chagrin Seaton saw that his own thoughtlessness had made the girl lose faith in him’ (19). The detective, then, is as careless in allowing his desires to mark his face as is the criminal, and both are rebuked by women resisting the male gaze.

The narrative provides both women as sites of reader identification, and also presents Marvin as a worthy if not entirely heroic character. However, excellent skills of observation and self-knowledge are not rewarded in this novel, where the detective’s inability to observe and deduce correctly endanger all the characters he is meant to protect. Nettie ends up killing herself, to the following response: ‘“I feared it would be so,” said the detective, regretfully. “Well, it can’t be helped now, and perhaps she’s better off”’ (28). The final chapter provides a complex tangle of familial relations instead of the more typical third-person narration of each character’s fate. Marvin visits his father in jail and agrees to return to witness the older man’s execution, asking the detective to reserve him a room with a view on the prison yard as per his father’s request. The execution is described in florid prose from Marvin’s perspective as he looks down while ‘his father [is] launched into eternity’ (29). Newly orphaned and hopeless in the face of his incestuous love, Marvin pulls out a revolver only to be interrupted
by the arrival of his half-sister. The two give in to their illicit desire before a final suicide scene: “One kiss, darling brother,” she said, “and then you shall do whatever you think is best.” / In an instant they were in each other’s arms, and amid sobs, and groans, and kisses, they clung fast to each other, in a farewell embrace’ (29). The final line of the novel describes Seaton and fellow detectives investigating the gunshots: “Too late!” said Seaton, sadly, as they gazed upon the horrible sight, and the others, like a dismal echo, repeated the remorseful words: “Too late!” [The End] (29). The echo, of course, is also of Seaton’s words upon learning of Nettie’s death after he has attempted to get her to provide evidence against Marvin. A Terrible Ending provides a situation in which detective, criminal, and victim positions are constantly collapsing in a situation that can only end, as the title promises, terribly.

In conclusion …

Conclusions matter. In 1977, Robert Champigny worried that scholars’ scruples about not revealing the ending of detective stories could be ‘imped[ing] precise textual analysis’ (149). I would go further and suggest that avoiding detailed discussions of endings impedes not only close reading but also broader reading of the genre’s sociopolitical, ethical, and aesthetic concerns. I haven’t worried about ‘ruining’ the endings of novels almost no twenty-first-century reader is planning to read. Perversely, I hope that looking at these endings, and especially at the ways in which representations of marriage in the New York Detective Library often collapse on themselves in remarkably subversive ways, will lead others to read these dime novels not despite the fact they know the ending, but because of it. Champigny distinguishes between ludic and aesthetic reading pleasure, providing as a test for aesthetic pleasure the willingness of a reader to reread a text while knowing the ending (4–5). Although the dime novels here discussed employ neither sophisticated nor poetic prose, I think they can provide aesthetic pleasure as Champigny defines it through their relentless plotting, their unresolved anxieties about the detective figure, and their continual rewritings of gendered relationships, especially within a capacious framework of representations of weddings and threats thereof. The detective genre is a particularly important one in exploring the possibility that the structures of containment provided by popular fiction are always necessarily and inherently insufficient, since it is this insufficiency that gives rise to a continued need for
the repetition of a generic formula. After all, the story at the heart of a detective’s adventure usually thematizes the contamination and containment that structure its generic pleasures. A close examination of the conclusions of the earliest mass-produced corpus of detective stories, then, provides a foundational map of the detective landscape that allows us to examine more closely the construction of two of the most important dime novel detective ‘heroes’: Allan Pinkerton and Nick Carter.
Introduction

In the 1902 dime novel, Jesse James Foiled; or, Pinkerton’s Best Play, Jesse and Frank James, the famous outlaw brothers, are hiding behind a rock when a group of six Pinkerton operatives ride by on horses. The James boys decide to stay hidden rather than to open fire unsuccessfully in the darkness. Their discussion reveals much about the fictionalized Pinkertons and outlaws that were often paired in the dime novels:

‘I heard that fellow Lindsay’s voice, so we didn’t kill him,’ muttered Frank, after they were at a safe distance.
‘And I recognized West and that fellow Ray,’ answered Jesse.
‘They’re hard to kill, curse them!’
‘Exactly what they think of us, I reckon,’ chuckled Frank.

These characters are just as ‘hard to kill’ as are the dime novels that dominate the low-brow literary marketplace. Highly episodic in nature, Jesse James Foiled demonstrates the unlikely resilience of both detective and criminal figures an absurd number of times. The James brothers have this conversation immediately after they pull off a daring escape involving a stagecoach hold-up, a near-fatal drop down a precipice fortunately softened by a pile of dead horses, a number of gunfights and major injuries, as well as, of course, multiple encounters with the Pinkerton detectives, who are always hot on their trail. Pinkerton operative Will Star has accompanied Jesse on the dead-horse-softened plunge and has also undergone more typical trials, having been shot, burned,
and even placed in a coffin in preparation for burial within this dime novel. The Pinkerton detective, like the outlaw, usually survives these ordeals, often with a joke and a hand extended to help his sworn enemy to his feet at the end of a battle. After all, as detective and outlaw heroes came together in the same novels late in the nineteenth century, both had a substantial public following and their encounters usually had to end in a draw to satisfy a literary marketplace that would resist killing either of the serial characters meeting in these novels.

Generically, too, detectives and outlaws were largely constrained from killing each other. Constructed as near-interchangeable doubles, their storied histories brought new energy to the criminal–detective axis of the central detective triangle. Their names in the title ensured audience interest and their continued survival ensured the grounds for the next story in the series; further, as literary doubles, these characters kept each other alive in order to avoid the fate of Edgar Allan Poe’s William Wilson, whose confrontation with his double leads to ‘both’ of their deaths.1

At the center of this detective tradition’s formulation resides America’s first professional private detective, Allan Pinkerton (1819–84), who was crucial to the development of the thematics of doubling that have come to define the detective genre. The Pinkerton books and the dime novels he inspired explore the resources of doubling first introduced in Poe and work through their literary, ethical, aesthetic, and erotic potentials, demonstrating in the final analysis that detective work and its narration are fraught, continually poised between threats of contamination and necessarily inadequate structures of containment.

Allan Pinkerton’s iconography: all-seeing eyes, Civil War spies, and the Underground Railroad

By the latter half of the nineteenth century, Allan Pinkerton’s name, like his detective methods and his advertising strategies, had become ingrained in the language of detection, and therefore in cultural representations of the detective found in dime novels as well as in newspaper and magazine articles recounting the vexed relationship of the public to the new detective figure. By the 1880s, the name ‘Pinkerton’ was often used synonymously with ‘detective,’ a fact the never-modest Pinkerton was happy to point out (Spy, 156). Because Pinkerton’s life story as developed in both fictional and factual accounts is at the center of his public image, a brief biographical sketch will be useful to twenty-first-century readers who do not have access to constant accounts of his adventures and exploits, many of which were detailed in newspapers of the day.2
Pinkerton was born in Scotland in 1819 and worked as a cooper until he was forced to flee to North America to avoid arrest as a Chartist in 1842. Pinkerton’s early commitment to political activism provides an intriguing backdrop to his work as a private detective and a popular writer, since in both these roles he is continually negotiating the issues of class and authority central to Chartist thinking. Near Chicago, Pinkerton opened a cooperage that eventually employed eight workers, the first of several business ventures.

Pinkerton fell into detective work by accident at a time when the position of ‘detective’ did not yet exist as a viable occupation in the United States. In a real-life story worthy of Mark Twain’s adventure tales, Pinkerton discovered that a local island was a hideout for a band of counterfeiters, and he worked with the local sheriff to capture the criminals in a late-night arrest that was witnessed by the entire town – the first of several very public moments in his life. When another group of counterfeiters was suspected shortly thereafter, a sheriff from a nearby town sought Pinkerton’s help. On this assignment, Pinkerton overstepped the bounds of his instructions, risking sheriff department monies to make a bigger capture than he had been asked to undertake; since his sting operation was successful, he was forgiven his unauthorized initiative. His reputation grew until he was eventually recruited by the Chicago Police Department to be its first full-time detective. Pinkerton hesitated to take this position because it would mean closing down his cooperage, which had become not only a significant stop on the Underground Railroad, but also a way for Pinkerton to train escaped slaves as coopers; in the end though, he chose to pursue a career in investigation, something he had keenly enjoyed in his early forays in the field. After selling his cooperage, moving back to Chicago and working for the police for a short time, Pinkerton realized that he could make significantly more money by practicing his trade on a consultant basis. In 1850, after first securing contracts with six companies, Pinkerton opened Pinkerton’s National Detective Agency, which provided surveillance of employees to corporations, protection for transportation systems against highwaymen, spies and security for the North during the Civil War, and a major strikebreaking force. A century and a half later, the Pinkerton name brand is still used in the security branch of a multi-national corporation called ‘Securitas AB.’

The range of services offered by Pinkerton operatives was rhetorically organized under a single icon that became a potent symbol of detection: an open eye under the logo ‘We Never Sleep.’ In Pinkerton’s ‘testing programs,’ in which employees were routinely surveilled by
operators, the eye came to have ‘a double meaning,’ as Joseph Morn notes, since ‘for the worker it meant deception and distrust, for management it meant control and accountability’ (‘Pinkerton,’ 545). As The Eye, a Pinkerton operative might seem firmly ensconced as the subject of the gaze, whether investigating a crime or preventing one from happening as part of extensive surveillance, and yet, Pinkerton’s business structure very much kept an eye on The Eye. All Pinkerton operatives were regularly subjected to the scrutiny of Pinkerton or one of his lieutenants through their daily reports, and Pinkerton employed his own services, regularly subjecting his own operatives to surveillance by others. And even as surveillance may have seemed constricting to some, the gaze Pinkerton provided was quite liberating to others, as the eye in Pinkerton’s hands is without gender, race, or class markers. At a time when we might expect to find the power of the detective’s gaze in the person of a middle- or upper-class white male subject, Pinkerton’s detectives included women, blacks, and poor white men, a fact he emphasizes in his ‘memoirs.’ The early Private Eye, unsurprisingly, was an object of scrutiny to the public, kept abreast of detective investigations through regular media accounts of Pinkerton’s work.

And that work was often newsworthy. In 1861, Pinkerton himself detected a plot on Abraham Lincoln’s life, foiling it in a highly picturesque adventure which included disguising the president as an old woman in a plaid shawl and commandeering a train to spirit the president away. This led to Pinkerton’s assignment as a Union spy and eventually as the head of the United States Secret Service during the Civil War, where he used many of his already-trained operatives as spies, and expanded his workforce to include escaped slaves as new operatives who were highly effective at gathering intelligence. These brave black men and women were perhaps the bright spot of Pinkerton’s spy work, whose efficacy has been questioned; even Lavine, whose admiration for Pinkerton permeates his analysis of the detective’s life, says that Pinkerton ‘could not tell a battalion from a regiment’ (82). Nonetheless, Pinkerton’s role in the Secret Service, revealed soon after the end of the war, led to significant publicity for his agency and considerable commercial success. The Pinkerton Detective Agency became known for its development of a new tool against crime, a Rogue’s Gallery that served as the first comprehensive database of criminals in America, and Pinkerton became a close acquaintance of many pioneers of American industry through his security work for railroad and express companies.

When his health failed in the 1870s, Allan Pinkerton’s sons, William and Robert, took over the supervision of the agency, and Allan turned
to writing – or at least supervising the writing of – memoirs, admittedly embellished, of his remarkable life. This was in some way a continuation of the writing and interviews he did throughout his career, telling the public about the importance of detective work and emphasizing that his agency worked for a set fee rather than for rewards, since he saw rewards as potentially corrupting. Since most of the Agency’s early records were destroyed in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, Pinkerton worked largely from memory, and he is known to have occasionally attributed some of his operatives’ adventures to himself. Morn notes that Pinkerton made a smooth transition from businessman to writer because he approached the two occupations in much the same way, as corporate enterprises with clear hierarchies and teamwork (“Eye,” 80).

Although Pinkerton likely enjoyed telling his stories to ghost writers and writing some of them himself, his chronicles also served a business purpose. Pinkerton’s interest in writing coincided with a period during which detective work was being harshly criticized by the press, so it seems likely that his writing was in part intended to salvage the reputation of detective work generally and the Pinkerton Agency in particular (Morn, “Eye,” 80). In addition, as a good businessman, Pinkerton recognized the opportunity to profit from a growing interest in fictional or fictionalized accounts of detective stories as these accounts were proliferating in the dime novels.

Pinkerton did not write dime novels, although the Pinkerton detective stories entered into conversation with – and were sometimes mistaken for – the dime novels being concurrently produced and consumed. The eighteen cloth-bound books printed under Pinkerton’s name – or to borrow J. Randolph Cox’s language, ‘sponsored’ by the Pinkerton Agency (Dime, 213) – were published by reputable book publishers (as opposed to periodical or dime novel publishers) and sold for between $1.00 and $1.50. Indeed, Pinkerton was on record stating that dime novel detectives like Old Cap Collier and Old Sleuth cheapened the detective profession ‘with their emphasis on theatrics and mysterious exploits’ (Morn, “Eye,” 82). Although these were the same dime novels for which Pinkerton was clearly a major source, his attempt to distance himself from these cheaper texts demonstrates Pinkerton’s commitment to constructing the detective as a professional within a corporate system rather than as an unlikely heroic individual working for rewards. In fact, detective dime novels and Pinkerton memoirs shared much. Both relied upon a team of writers under production pressure, and both tend toward episodic narratives, short chapters, a great deal of dialogue, and frequent narrative interruptions that provide explicit moral messages
attempting to stave off the charge of real-world contamination of young readers as well as the fictional contamination to detective characters within the texts.

The complexity of the interactions between real-world discussions of detective work and Pinkerton’s fictionalized representations is perhaps best captured by frequent media references to Pinkerton as ‘The Vidocq of the West’ or ‘The Chicago Vidocq.’ Eugène François Vidocq (1833–73), the famous Parisian thief-turned-detective, wrote memoirs that resonate with the sense that detective work is inherently contaminating; since reformed criminals make excellent detectives, it stands to reason that detectives might also have aptitudes for criminality. Despite Pinkerton’s best efforts to glorify the profession he was so central in building, his own memoirs, as well as the numerous dime novels they spawned, highlight the very tensions within detective identities and narratives that ensure longevity for the genre by never providing purely heroic portrayals of their central figure.

Pinkerton’s generic breadth: classical, hardboiled, police, and diverse detectives

Although Pinkerton’s brand of detective fiction is often associated with the hardboiled tradition, his memoirs provide numerous detective models, and his near-mythic stature prompted even more as the dime novels repeatedly took up this iconic character. Indeed, early Pinkerton narratives already contain substantial elements of the subgenres of detective fiction generally associated with much later periods. In Pinkerton’s 1875 collection, *Claude Melnotte as a Detective, and Other Stories*, for example, we see the development of three distinct Pinkertonian detective figures brought together to construct the detective position as a fluid one with multiple heroic potentials. The three tales in *Claude Melnotte* include a comedic story whose biting social critique builds on the generic features of comedies of manners as the classical mystery often does, a tragic tale of exploitation and human misery with explicit sexual content that anticipates the dark erotic explorations of the hardboiled, and a strictly non-fiction piece featuring a team of detectives that struggles to maintain narrative interest while realistically recounting what is often rather tedious work. The presence of early prototypes of these three detective models in a single 1875 American text suggests that these figures are not simply constructions that arise strategically at various historical moments to embody social anxieties or debates. Rather, they form the essence of detective fiction, always already a part of the genre’s potential
to traverse a variety of ethical, erotic, and epistemological landscapes in representing the tensions that arise inherently around questions of law and order, crime and criminality, power and knowledge.

_Claude Melnotte as a Detective_, the novella-length first story of the _Claude Melnotte_ collection, comes close to classical mystery in both tone and construction, although it predates that subgenre’s first representative figure, Sherlock Holmes, by over a decade. Indeed, the novella fits remarkably well within George Grella’s formulation of the classical detective story. For Grella, classical mysteries share much with comedies of manners, as both include: a belief that the world is a rational place; an upper-class and usually isolated setting; a disruption to social order that must be addressed by the hero; a romantic subplot; and the handling of a number of stock characters functioning within an established tradition. Grella argues that the amateur detective succeeds in formal mysteries because the police are unable to negotiate the social codes of the aristocratic landscape in which the crime/disruption has occurred. Additionally, the victim is a purely undesirable character whose expulsion is the first step towards a restoration of order, while the criminal may be a more ambivalently portrayed character, having both committed a crime and expelled a social evil (41–2). Therefore, although the detective is sure to expel the criminal in the conclusion, punishment by law is not always required, and some noble criminals are allowed to quietly take their own lives while others are simply asked to leave the social setting. _Claude Melnotte’s_ near-adherence to formulas not yet prescribed invites us to follow Stephen Knight’s lead in investigating the texts that were left behind in the construction of a grand narrative of detective fiction in which Dupin and Holmes were, to use Knight’s term, ‘predators’ who ‘swallow[ed] up the ideas, the motifs, the forms and themes’ of popular detective writers (‘Enter,’ 14).

Set in Chicago’s most fashionable and exclusive hotel, _Claude Melnotte_ provides a working-class version of the classical mystery as it narrates the police’s failed attempts to solve a series of thefts that have wreaked havoc on the idyll of wealthy families. The hotel board approaches Allan Pinkerton, who sees that the police detectives’ failure grows out of their inability to negotiate the affluent setting. This is clearly a time for an undercover operation, and Pinkerton has just the man: Streble, who will be entering the Clifton under cover of the name Claude Melnotte. The story’s general structure is that of the classical whodunit, with a series of suspects including unfairly accused servants, a parodic romantic subplot, and the detective’s decision at the end to withhold the punishment prescribed by law from the criminal, whose victims
are even less attractive than he. But Streble’s identity – and the way Pinkerton narrates his interactions with upper-crust Chicago – creates a major divergence from the tenor of the classical mystery that unfolds its narrative in earnest in the decades to follow. For Streble is not an aristocratic insider decoding various characters’ personal worth according to class lines in order to find and expel the criminal, who is transgressing a privileged space. Rather, Streble was a janitor in Pinkerton’s building before the older detective recognized his good character and intelligence and invited him to join the agency. Streble’s transgression in enacting an undercover role as a European prince is thus far greater than that of the criminal, a wealthy young American who has temporarily strayed into the world of petty theft but is capable of reform. If it didn’t precede the classical mystery’s codification, *Claude Melnotte* might appear to be a parody of the genre, evoking its conventions in order to humorously disrupt them with biting class critique. Instead, we can see, it provides further evidence for Knight’s hypothesis that rather than popular writers imitating aristocratic literature, it is often low-brow writers who work out successful formulas and tensions that are appropriated, in the case of detective fiction by writers like Poe and Doyle (13–14). Pinkerton here is writing a decade before Doyle, so is drawing on and rewriting the highly popular comedy of manners in class-crossing ways that claim professional and literary status for the new detective figure.

Streble’s disguise as a European prince reveals the absurdities of both the upper-class characters and the convention of secondary marriage plots undergirding central plots in comedies of manners as well as in dime novel detective fiction. Pinkerton anticipates that the disguised detective will be attractive to the young ladies staying at the fashionable hotel, and, in fact, Streble’s presence does prompt substantial rivalry between the ridiculous American families who seek to match their daughters with royalty. The narrative characterizes such behavior as predictable and risible, and he early explains to readers that he feels no guilt about positioning a detective as a Prince in a space that includes marriageable young women, since he knows these women will be drawn by the Prince’s social status rather than any real emotional attachment (20). In his introduction to the collection, Pinkerton identifies the sequel of the first story as the only portion of the book to be significantly embellished, and here the class critique is at its sharpest, as the invented plot empowers European conmen who trick the very hotel patrons who had initially imagined that the thefts must have been committed by servants.
Pinkerton telegraphs his class critique by giving his janitor-turned-detective the name of ‘Claude Melnotte,’ the romantic lead of Edward Bulwer Lytton’s tremendously popular *The Lady of Lyons; or, Love and Pride*, in continual production from its premiere in 1838 to the turn of the century. Pinkerton’s dramatic rewriting of Bulwer-Lytton’s romance plot engages in more pointed class critique than does the original. In Bulwer-Lytton’s play, Claude Melnotte assumes the disguise of the Prince of Como to woo the Lady of Lyons, who is heartbroken when she learns of his deception; the lovers are eventually reunited and the lady is, as the title suggests, the main site of interest in the play. In Pinkerton’s hands, the multiple ladies who pursue the Prince in disguise are caricatures, the result of pampered upbringings and a faux high-culture ethos among America’s wealthiest families. The narrative interest lies with the working-class Streble, whose detective skills raise him to the professional class and reveal the deep flaws of American ‘aristocracy.’

The conclusion of ‘Claude Melnotte’ provides fissures in both the romantic and detective plots. Instead of a group scene in which the revelation of ‘whodunnit’ cements the detective’s deductive prowess and ability to return the status quo of social order, this novella shows Pinkerton quietly confronting the thief, persuading him to return the stolen property, and refusing to divulge the thief’s identity to the hotel board. Pinkerton, like many classical detectives to follow, works toward social good rather than within legal rules: ‘I knew I had no right to compound a felony, but I felt that I could better serve the interests of society by giving this young man a chance to reform, than by delivering him up to a long term in prison, whence he would come out a hardened villain – his hand turned against every man, and every man’s hand against him’ (113–14). The thief’s father is very grateful to Pinkerton and with the wealthy Mr. Bright’s gratitude in hand, Pinkerton sits in a hotel office right after Christmas, feeling ‘like a genuine Santa Claus’ (115) as he returns the stolen property individually to each guest. The alleged Prince stays on at the hotel for an additional week – expensing his lavish vacation to the hotel board, of course – to maintain his cover. And instead of this detective participating in a marriage plot that celebrates the return to order he has effected, his invented identity in some ways re-victimizes the very people to whom Pinkerton has enjoyed returning the stolen jewels. For the four families who go to Europe in pursuit of the non-existent Prince, the detective has caused great expense, dashed hopes, and severe embarrassment without any redemptive value.

Pinkerton presents the wounded American socialites and their families as deserving of their fate, an assessment with which the reader – who
had paid $1.50 for this cloth-bound detective story when dime novel
detective narratives were widely available – may or may not agree. In
this buoyantly narrated tale, with its minor and reversible crime and
criminal, we see a splitting of the detective figure that hints at its dou-
bled potentials: the well-known Pinkerton sets up an undercover opera-
tion that he watches from afar, joining in only as a concluding Santa
Claus figure, while the attractive young Streble successfully transcends
his humble origins to deceive the upper crust of society. The narrative
contains much humor, but those who have had contact with the detec-
tive do not emerge unscathed; the young ladies, in fact, never even
learn that they have encountered a detective rather than a Prince.

While the title tale of Claude Melnotte as a Detective, and Other Stories
provides an early prototype for classical mysteries with a satirical
American twist, the second tale of the collection is a clear forebear of
the hardboiled tradition usually associated with the American interwar
years. Christopher Breu identifies famous Pinkerton operative James
McParlan’s narrative as an ur-text for the hardboiled (29), which empha-
sizes that several generic moves were inherent to the detective genre’s
first burst of mass production in the dime novels. Breu and Leonard
Cassuto both explore the influence of the nineteenth century – and
especially its representations of Victorian manhood – on twentieth-
century hardboiled fiction. Breu argues that the ‘tough-guy’ persona
propelling hardboiled twentieth-century American texts functions in
direct opposition to the gendered expectations of the Victorian period.
Nineteenth-century manhood, for Breu and others, is based in exactly
the sentimentality Cassuto too traces to the hardboiled. The Victorian
gentleman, Breu argues, unconsciously structures his masculinity in
opposition to the un governed sexuality of all sorts of racialized male
others, shorthanded to the figure of the black rapist; in contrast, the
hardboiled hero’s psychosexuality collapses the two constitutively
diverging nineteenth-century identities of Victorian gentleman and
black rapist, and sets him up in opposition to the equally complex
figure of the femme fatale, who combines the virgin and the whore in
a single figure.

Breu’s analysis is enormously appealing, taking a ‘psycho-Marxist’
approach (16) that sorts out two strands of scholarship on the hard-
boiled: that concerned with the influence of the Western hero on the
hardboiled detective (Slotkin, Smith, and others) and that concerned
with the hardboiled construction of what Bethany Ogden calls ‘hyper-
masculine identity’ through contrast with a feminized or racialized
other. I would extend Breu’s formulation backward, though, seeing the
hardboiled figure as already quite developed in the dime novels, and thus as a trope defining the detective genre’s potentials from its beginning. After all, the genre’s reliance on the threat of the dark double is not constrained by historical time period, and the hardboiled detective’s ethos can be seen as a response to what Karen Halttunen calls ‘sexual murder stories.’ A gentleman thief like Bright in Claude Melnotte allows for – and even calls for – Pinkerton and Streble to enact gentleman detective personae. The much darker threat of criminals involved in a sex-slavery ring in the second novella of the collection calls for an opponent much darker than the Victorian gentleman, or even his class-crossing sidekick. The collapsing of the Western hero’s individualistic, near-outlaw identity and the classical detective’s more intellectual, socially refined identity into a single hardboiled figure is an effective generic move. If the sexual murders whose presence in American society and representation Halttunen traces from the seventeenth century are to be addressed by detective fiction, the outlaw detective persona is required to face the criminal, while the gentleman persona must keep the outlaw contained within what becomes a complex hardboiled detective identity.

In the second tale of Claude Melnotte and Other Stories, ‘The Two Sisters; or The Avenger,’ Pinkerton is hired by the heart-broken brother of two young girls who have been kidnapped, raped, and forced into prostitution. The identity of the criminals is clear from the start, and Pinkerton uses the first-person narration often preferred by hardboiled heroes to recount his own growing horror as he enters more deeply into his investigation of what turns out to be a sex-slavery ring. As the self-appointed avenger of the kidnapped and defiled sisters, Pinkerton not only brushes up against the limits of the law as police procedural detectives often do; in true hardboiled fashion, he constructs a liminal identity for himself that allows him to access the revenge ethos of the Western hero along with the sometimes disquieting sexuality of the mostly-honorable detective walking Raymond Chandler’s ‘mean streets.’ The narrative’s regular moves between the plight of the victims and the detective-avenger’s quest to save them speaks to the tale’s dual generic lineage, as it draws from the city mysteries and the Western. Within this hardboiled context, Pinkerton cannot avoid becoming – and even celebrating his transition to – a contaminated detective figure.

Pinkerton’s normally even-handed detective persona is contaminated by his dealing with the sinister and depraved sexual criminals, Blake and Sloan. Although not explicitly raced, both men bear markers of otherness. Pinkerton describes Blake as handsome, but also as ‘generally
dressed in excellent taste, with the exception that he showed a weakness for jewelry’ (153). In additional to this implicit criticism of Blake’s sexuality, he is also called ‘a sly coon’ (167) by Sloan, who is himself ‘dark complexioned’ (156). Against this suspect masculinity, Pinkerton can be neither a straightforward Victorian gentleman nor what Breu calls a ‘petit-bourgeois detective’ (14). Indeed, Pinkerton breaks many of his own agency’s rules in his pursuit of Blake and Sloan, working alone, writing no reports, and even neglecting the legal paperwork his bureaucratic detection model always stresses. The individualistic Western avenger becomes collapsed with the gentleman detective in true hardboiled fashion in the face of the rape of young white American virgins.

Although Pinkerton’s darker persona in this tale results from his doubling of the darker criminal figures, the tale does not entirely avoid the hardboiled tendency to use a female or feminized figure as a structuring identity factor as well. The double-edged title of the story, ‘The Two Sisters; or, The Avenger,’ foregrounds the female victims and effaces the criminals while highlighting the threatening, vengeful part of the detective’s identity. Although Pinkerton never constructs himself as a victim, he tries to align himself with the victims, whose loss of innocence is narrated throughout the piece, claiming his own innocence: ‘This form of crime was new to me then, and I never before had heard such a truly painful case’ (192). As Halttunen has shown, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century representations of sexual crimes often implicitly blamed the female victim regardless of the circumstances. In this novella, Pinkerton explicitly attempts to distance himself from that ethos, but by so doing, he raises its specter, which contaminates both the victim and detective positions. The sisters, Mary and Alice, place themselves in a perilous position by ‘working out’ at the restaurant/inn in which they are attacked by the innkeeper and his friend when the woman of the house is away visiting a sick relative. Pinkerton assures the reader that the sisters are entirely blameless, and have been driven to the workplace by their family’s recent financial straits; in fact, Pinkerton says that in the West, the girls’ work would be read as demonstrating their devotion to family, thereby raising them in the estimation of their friends. At the same time, Pinkerton’s continued statement of the girls’ blamelessness is not always echoed in his thoughts. When he tells Mary that he has killed Blake, the girl bursts into tears. Pinkerton’s reaction: ‘The thought flashed across me: “Can it be possible that she cared for this handsome scoundrel?”’ (217). Pinkerton’s suspicions are entirely unfounded, since devout Mary is
weeping for Blake’s soul, as the ruffian has died before repenting his sins. Pinkerton’s attempts to avoid blaming the victim are never complete. Nor are his attempts to suppress his own sexuality, as we see one night when he lays awake in bed thinking of the plight of the violated girls (192); this in effect places him in the same sinister position as the men who have long plotted the crime.

Indeed, Pinkerton’s position is a vexed one from the start, since he must think about and share details about the sexually vulnerable victims and their abuse in confronting his dark doubles: the depraved criminals whose manhood is built on the abjection of innocent girls. Pinkerton continually narrates his own self-conscious negotiation with the difficulty of telling this tale of indecency. For instance, he writes: ‘I shall not try to describe the agony of these pure young sisters; it would be impossible for pen to give an adequate idea of their sufferings’ (187). Later, though, he provides details of the abuse that could be considered gratuitous, as when he realizes that an ‘infamous libertine’ has been in Mary’s hotel room, and he muses: ‘What was the business that kept him in Mary’s room for over an hour? I had to shudder at the only answer that could be given’ (200). He puts further details in the words of other characters. A letter from one of the kidnappers to the other states: ‘Mary has several admirers, and I often have two gentlemen up to see her of a night’ (219). The doctor who examines Mary after Pinkerton has rescued her says “She has been poisoned by heavy doses of cantharides, or Spanish fly, administered for a purpose better imagined than described”’ (225). Pinkerton is treading a fine line here, as these details – certainly horrifying but also titillating – evoke the disreputable city mysteries and their hardboiled offspring rather than the less sinister classical or police procedural subgenres.

The structure of the detective work in ‘The Two Sisters’ is very much at odds with Pinkerton’s usual method, in reality as in representation, as the hardboiled Pinkerton eschews much of the professionalism he usually fights so hard to associate with the detective. In this novella, Pinkerton muses on the failures of the legal system in dealing with depravity at this level: ‘What earthly punishment could be devised severe enough to punish justly the brutes who had debauched them?’ (187). He finds himself reacting to the girls’ story on a visceral rather than intellectual level, having to force himself to remain calm when he learns that the girls have not only been kidnapped, but forced into prostitution: ‘I confess that I had never been so excited before. I had been deeply affected by William’s story … I was ready to take the law in my own hands, if necessary, to prevent the outrage’ (206). This confession,
laced with suspect sexual excitement, creates Pinkerton as an avenger, which substantially collapses his professional identity, hitherto based on complete adherence to the law. Throughout this novella, Pinkerton feels justified in making his own laws, pursuing the slavers into Illinois when he knows his warrant does not extend to that state, and even killing Blake because, in his anger, he has forgotten his handcuffs, and the criminal resists arrest (209). Working alone for the most part throughout the investigation and walking the very mean streets of the Wild West, Pinkerton represents the contaminating threats of detective work that underlie the hardboiled ethos.

The third tale of *Claude Melnotte and Other Stories* is more typical Pinkertonian fare, sharing substantially with the rhetorical thrust of the police procedural subgenre. ‘The Frenchman; or, The Bills of Exchange’ narrates in careful detail every move of the team of Pinkerton operatives that tracks the famous French forger, Jules Imbert, recalling Pinkerton’s first memoir, *The Expressman and the Detectives* (1874), in which a female Pinkerton operative is disguised as the very same Jules Imbert’s wife in a sting operation to capture another white-collar criminal. Although the corporate detective cannot rise to the status of individualistic hero when faced with a crime played out on a piece of paper rather than on a young girl’s drugged and violated body, the detectives of ‘The Frenchman’ and *The Expressman* are nevertheless positioned as heroic, albeit within the more limited framework of the bureaucratic team player. Robert Winston and Nancy Mellerski argue that the police procedural manages reader anxiety about the police, a central symbol of societal control and surveillance. ‘By shifting reader identification from the criminal element to the state apparatus which opposes it,’ they write, ‘the procedural reshapes the potentially destructive impulses of individualism into successful participation in a corporate structure, the police squad’ (2). Along with George Dove and other scholars of the police procedural, Winston and Mellerski focus on its ability to construct the corporate as heroic, to humanize for readers the very police officer who might not be entirely trusted with the type of control he wields over other citizens. Although they examine works critical of the police apparatus, Winston and Mellerski suggest that the appeal of the police procedural arises from its ability to narrate successful cooperation between a society and its police (7).

Pinkerton’s detectives are private rather than public workers, but the narrative is similarly invested in the same commitment to building reader identification with the heroic corporate detective. With very few exceptions, Pinkerton’s writing shows his agency working in concert
with or as an extension of the public police force, only rarely engaging in the competitive play with police that often characterizes the classical and hardboiled subgenres. Indeed, Pinkerton’s stories about fighting white-collar crime are devoted to demonstrating his agency’s high standards for ethical behavior and effectiveness to both the general public and the corporate clients who are often the victims of such crimes. The rhetorical momentum of these tales therefore resides in their commitment to building strong reader identification with the corporate detective hero rather than with the potentially attractive outlaw figure against whom the detective fights.

‘The Frenchman’ is structured to meet these rhetorical goals. It opens with a Prologue that details the banking practices around bills of exchange, explaining exactly how the forger’s crime is committed, at once distancing the general reader from the criminal, since a regular citizen would be unfamiliar with the details of complex financial instruments and their loopholes, while also demonstrating to corporate clients that Pinkerton’s detectives, while neither bankers nor forgers, have acquired the expertise needed to regulate this portion of commerce. The narrative then provides a detailed character sketch of the criminal, establishing Jules Imbert as a worthy opponent to the detective. Imbert’s precocious childhood, his outstanding and far-reaching intellectual achievements, and his superior charm and adaptability, all serve to create him as an impressive dark double to a white-collar detective hero. Imbert, in fact, has qualities that would make him a fine detective, as evidenced by Pinkerton’s statement that ‘the forger is a keen observer and a shrewd judge of human nature’ (246). Indeed, Imbert’s ability to accurately read his potential victims is compared to the detective’s ability to read the criminal. The narrative then goes on to explicitly provide a corrective to the ways detectives are represented in modern novels and dramas before turning to the main course: the story of detection from the corporate detective’s point of view. The story deliberately highlights the criminal’s sinister attractions in order to build reader identification with the detective, who is shown as both an individual citizen and as part of a team that protects the citizenry.

Pinkerton addresses representations of detectives in popular literature and on the stage, arguing that ‘the individual detective of former days has passed away, or, if he exists, has become corrupt’ (251). For Pinkerton, the threat of detective corruption is managed by a new structure in which the detective is always part of a bureaucratic system that mimics the corporate world it is designed to protect. The detective, Pinkerton argues here and elsewhere, is a carefully trained pseudo-professional whose
honesty is ensured by the clear reporting lines of the team with whom he works. The honesty and good character of his detectives, though, must be stressed, given the nature of their work. In discussing contemporary fiction’s representations of detectives, Pinkerton writes: ‘An actor sometimes tries to play the part of a detective on the stage; the detective must always be an actor, and nine-tenths of the acts on the stage to-day would do well to take lessons in their own profession from him’ (251). The detective, then, is both eminently trustworthy and always playing a role, a dissonance Pinkerton explores and tries to manage throughout his many memoirs.

In ‘The Frenchman,’ Pinkerton provides three main metaphors for the corporate detective. The notion of the detective as actor is a crucial one, as it sets up an important site of dark doubling, especially in the world of white-collar crime. In order to respond to the criminal con-man, whether on the streets or in the corporate boardroom, the detective must himself be an actor, a conman of sorts whose final triumph is successfully conning the criminal. Such a dynamic is obviously rife with threats to the detective, whose methods place him in very close proximity to the criminal, raising what Franklin Rogers has called ‘the more chilling aspects and consequences of a Pinkerton investigation’ (xxv). As head of the Pinkerton Detective Agency, Pinkerton characterizes himself as an army general (251), with his detectives thus metaphorical soldiers fighting a war on crime. The notion of the detective as soldier, battling an unending criminal force, always in a crisis mode that is dulled by its seeming endlessness, is common to the police procedural. This metaphorical entailment also allows Pinkerton to highlight the discipline of his establishment. Like soldiers who might be marred by the killing they are forced to undertake, Pinkerton’s detectives might be marred by the con-artistry necessary to their work. Structures of discipline and reporting, though, allegedly provide containment against the potentially contaminating aspects of the work. In demonstrating that readers need not fear detectives, Pinkerton goes one metaphorical step further. He describes Imbert’s surveillance: ‘[he] was under the observation of a man [a Pinkerton operative] who would watch his every action with the care of a guardian angel, entirely unknown to the object of his attention’ (258). The idea that a citizen can become an object of such close scrutiny is, of course, difficult to sell to the general public, but in true police procedural fashion, Pinkerton attempts to create the surveillor as heroic. This ‘guardian angel’ is protecting not only the citizenry from Imbert’s costly forgery; he is also protecting Imbert from the metaphysical consequences of his own criminal behavior. Pinkerton is
enacting the sort of ‘utopian vision of cooperation between the police and society’ (7) that Winston and Mellerski see as central to the police procedural subgenre.

In writing about white-collar crime, Pinkerton also engages in a fourth subgenre of detective fiction: that featuring detectives of diversity. In *The Expressman and the Detectives*, the memoir that shares most extensively in the themes of ‘The Frenchman,’ Pinkerton introduces a female detective who has all the heroism of her male counterparts, foreshadowing the generic embrace of women detectives that becomes so prominent in the 1970s. Although Kate Warne, a historical figure, has been with Pinkerton for two years, he narrates their first meeting when she asks for a job in *Expressman*:

> At this time female detectives were unheard of. I told her it was not the custom to employ women as detectives, but asked her what she thought she could do.

> She replied that she could go and worm out secrets in many places to which it was impossible for male detectives to gain access. She had evidently given the matter much study, and gave many excellent reasons why she could be of service.

> I finally became convinced that it would be a good idea to employ her. True, it was the first experiment of the sort that had ever been tried; but we live in a progressive age and in a progressive country. (95)

Warne becomes a key figure in bringing down John Maroney, the brilliant and popular expressman who has robbed the Adams Express Company of $50,000. In describing this famous woman detective and his earliest meeting with her, Pinkerton emphasizes Warne’s intelligence and initiative as well as her skills as a detective who can con a conman (or, in the case of *The Expressman*, a conman’s wife). Pinkerton takes credit for seeing Warne’s value and acting in a wise, progressive manner, but he also, here and elsewhere, represents female detectives as equal and often superior to their male counterparts. The detective genre’s ability to accommodate diversity in the detective space is also evident when Pinkerton hires recently escaped slaves as operatives during the Civil War.

In working through several ways in which detection can be performed, the *Claude Melnotte* collection suggests that several of the major subgenres of detective fiction – classical, hardboiled, and police procedural – already exist in nascent form during the ‘gap’ between Poe and Doyle in the
American popular imagination. And in these early prototypes, even in the hands of a great defender of the detective profession in real life and in fictionalized accounts, we see negotiations around the threats inherent in detective work and its representation: the janitor-cum-detective is transformed by his detective disguise into someone who hurts young women under the guise of class critique; the avenger of horrifying sexual violation feels justified in leaving the tools of law behind in gaining justice; and the detective in pursuit of a professional forger must himself become a conman. Always a liminal figure, the detective in Pinkerton’s nineteenth-century memoirs demonstrates many of the narrative moves available to this new hero. Precariously balanced between tropes of contamination and containment, the Pinkerton operative already encapsulates much of the narrative momentum of the detective genre in its more mature phases. The problem of contamination is particularly fraught for detectives in deep cover, and is nowhere more discussed in the late nineteenth century than around the case of the Molly Maguires, narrated in Pinkerton’s The Molly Maguires and the Detectives (1877) as well as in dozens of accounts of the historical event appearing in dime novels and newspapers.

**Contamination and the problems of deep cover**

Pinkerton’s Molly Maguires memoir has been the subject of substantial critical attention, with Breu seeing it as a prototypical hardboiled text and Denning treating the memoir and its numerous offshoots as a case study for nineteenth-century negotiations of multi-accented signs. In focusing on the nascence of detective fiction, Pinkerton’s account of the case also reveals early instantiations of several of the tropes within the detective narrative rife with the threats of contamination that provide the detective narrative its momentum: namely, the dark double, the sinister side of detective disguise, and the potential collapse of the detective–criminal–victim triangle. Studies of this case, especially Denning’s, also demonstrate the precarious line between reality and fiction in the dime novels, a line perhaps nowhere more blurred than in dime novel detective fiction.

As Denning shows in his excellent reading of six dime novels taking up the Molly Maguire and Pinkerton story, Pinkerton’s interactions with the Mollies were simultaneously processed as Labor (the Mollies) fighting capitalism (the Pinkertons) and/or as crime (the Mollies) fighting order (the Pinkertons). Pinkerton’s work on the Molly Maguire case was highly publicized – by newspapers as well as by his book – and the
case has been closely examined by historians of police as well as of labor movements, with scholarly understandings of these events varying almost as much as did contemporary opinions. In the 1860s and 1870s, a number of unsolved murders occurred within Schuylkill County; Morn sets that number at about fifty murders between 1863 and 1867, but even the number of murders is debated (“Eye,” 94). In 1873, Franklin Gowen, president of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad, which controlled the Philadelphia and Reading Coal Company, hired Allan Pinkerton on a $100,000 retainer to investigate the Molly Maguires, characterizing them as a radical Irish labor group and secret society (Boyer and Morais, 51). As Pinkerton explains in his memoir, he knew that infiltrating the group over an extended period of time was the only adequate response to the long-term conflict with which his agency was becoming engaged. Enter James McParland, a young, white, able-bodied male detective who committed two years of his life to climbing the echelons of the Molly Maguire organization, eventually providing testimony against society members that would lead to the convictions and executions of several men.5

McParland offers a clear site of identification for the reader as he demonstrates courage, humor, and aplomb in the face of the tough challenge of maintaining his detective identity while infiltrating the Mollies. On the one hand, he has a great deal in common with the miners, sharing their enjoyment of music, humor, camaraderie, and, as evidenced even in Pinkerton’s positively-spun account, the alcohol to which Boyer and Morais refer when they write that ‘the spy [McParlan] in three years of effort had gathered in nothing but a certain amount of booze and pay. He had obtained no evidence’ (53). He even falls in love with a woman who had been dating a high-placed Molly, thus easily fitting into a classic competitive doubling relationship. On the other hand, McParland faces two major hurdles in constructing himself as a Molly: solvency and literacy. He fabricates a criminal past to explain his relative financial ease, thereby adding credibility to his persona as the type of out-of-work, criminally minded Irish worker who might become involved with the miners. The question of literacy is more vexing, and Pinkerton devotes a good deal of space to explaining the ruses McParlan adopts in order to avoid being observed writing and mailing his daily reports to the agency’s office. Indeed, McParlan stretches the boundaries of acceptable behavior within Pinkerton’s strict conduct guidelines when he is unable to produce the required daily reports. McParlan finally solves the problem of his obvious and necessary literacy by becoming the secretary of the Mollies’ inner council. His qualifications for the
post, which he fulfills admirably, are a direct result of his background as a more educated man and a detective, where he employs the tools of the businessman, not the miner.

It is when he employs his literacy in a high-level Molly position that McParlan is most able to embody his undercover identity. Pinkerton’s McParlan never seriously considers defecting from the side of order – however ambivalently that side is constructed – but the very fact that he can be construed as an *agent provocateur* raises questions about his possible complicity with his dark doubles. If he *does* in some sense provoke the violence about which he testifies, which Pinkerton’s account firmly denies, even that account, in its tone and colorful depictions of the men McParlan helps to hang, would suggest that he provokes crime not in order to glean evidence toward persecution, but because he has so enthusiastically adopted his disguise.

Indeed, Pinkerton’s memoir is explicitly concerned about the threats that arise from the slipperiness of long-term disguise. For almost two years, McParlan has nothing but written contact with the detective agency, and that time brings significant physical changes: he suffers illness, undergoes substantial bodily changes as a result of alteration of diet and exercise, and loses all his hair. When Pinkerton finally arranges a meeting with his detective, he reflects upon the younger man’s appearance: ‘I was somewhat surprised to observe the change that two years had wrought in the appearance of my operative. While there was no doubt that once more I grasped McParlan by the hand, yet I could scarcely bring myself to believe it. The voice was familiar, and the eye, but all beside seemed different’ (278). The voice, in some sense, has been in contact with the agency through the written reports, and the eye has allegedly maintained its role as detective surveillor. Although McParlan seems more familiar to Pinkerton after he reverts to his old dress, the change Pinkerton observes is not merely effected by McParlan’s disguise; he is fundamentally altered by his experience. Detective work, then, has the ability to change the detective, to shape him into a more complex – and contaminated – being based on not only his experiences, but also the fact that he has undergone those experiences in the persona of another.

The Molly Maguire case provides a particularly rich example of the sinister potential of detective disguise because of its collapsing of the triangular structure central to the genre. The deliberate packaging of the story as a detective narrative by Pinkerton and by dime novels negotiating this important historical moment of conflict between murkyly defined forces emphasizes the potential of the detective form to present
ambivalences and complexities even within its somewhat rigorous conventions. Who is the victim in this case? Clearly the murdered people and their families deserve victim status, but both the Mollies and the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad try to claim victimhood, citing corrupt capitalists and an organized crime cabal as the criminals, respectively. Even the detective position is made fluid by its rhetorical recasting as agent provocateur. Further, Pinkerton may be over-zealous due to the huge sum of money he has received for his work on the case, and Francis Gowen, the Railroad’s president, himself appears in the secondary detective role of the prosecutor in the legal proceedings against the Mollies. It is hard to image a more contaminated and contaminating detective narrative, and yet the case continued to be rhetorically constructed using detective tropes throughout the last decades of the nineteenth century. The collapse of central detective features within a containment structure that somehow continues to hold reveals the acuity of Breu’s characterization of the text as hardboiled as well as the detective genre’s reliance on precarious balances between contamination and containment for narrative impetus.

In his examination of the origins of hardboiled detective fiction, Richard Slotkin also looks to Cooper’s Natty Bumppo, who influenced both the detective hero and the outlaw hero, and to Allan Pinkerton’s partially fictionalized detectives. Slotkin argues that the power of hardboiled detective fiction comes out of its ability to simultaneously embrace and critique the institutionalized authority represented by Pinkerton and about which Americans often feel highly conflicted (‘Hard-Boiled,’ 99). He aligns Pinkerton’s detective fiction squarely with the establishment, characterizing Pinkerton as residing on ‘the corporate side’ of sociopolitical life (98). Pinkerton’s high-profile involvement in cases like that against the Molly Maguires clearly does align him with the establishment. And yet, as we have begun to discover, Pinkerton’s corpus of work is more nuanced than a view of him as purely corporate might suggest. In his life, as in his fictionalized memoirs and the dime novels taking up Pinkerton as a character, we find many complex negotiations with representations of gender, race, and authority. Indeed, in the extremely popular form of dime novels pitting detectives against outlaws, perhaps the most potent pairing is Jesse James (1847–82), the Southern outlaw fighting reconstruction, and Allan Pinkerton (1819–84), the Northern abolitionist at once a source of order and of subversion. These are especially rich in the ways they play with nascent detective conventions by showing detectives and criminals as not only doubled, but also as taking part in a symbiotic literary partnership.
Outlaw doubling lite: the humorous logic of bodily substitution

Narratives about the outlaw brothers, Frank and Jesse James, and their gang of bandits were extremely popular throughout the 1880s and 1890s and even into the new century. The first James gang story was published in 1881, shortly before the historical Jesse James’s death the following year. A few stories were published in the early ’80s, followed by a five-year hiatus during which Postmaster pressure against outlaw stories prevented the dime novel industry from producing them. By 1889, the James brothers had returned to dime novels and were featured in a number of serials, with the last Jesse James dime novel published in 1910 (Cox, Dime, 143–5). Although many dime novel serials specialized in either outlaws or detectives, a surprising number focused on the intersection between the two types of heroes, an ambivalence proclaimed in series titles like The Jesse James Stories: A Weekly Dealing with the Detection of Crime and the New York Detective Library, for a time subtitled, The Only Library Containing True Stories of the James Boys. The inclusion of outlaw stories in the NYDL and other detective libraries shows not only far-reaching public interest in such stories, but also the deep conceptual links between these heroes.

These intersections have been the subject of substantial scholarly attention, usually within the context of larger studies of the Western ethos. Edward Wheeler’s Deadwood Dick has been a particularly productive site for examining the construction of the popular hero. Appearing in 34 dime novels (1877–85, reprinted well into the twentieth century), this famous Western character reveals the consonances between Western and detective identities in his move from outlaw to detective within the series. Henry Nash Smith focuses on the outlaw-cum-detective’s embodiment of ideals of the self-made man and positions Deadwood Dick within the framework of his mythical construction of the utopian imaginative power of the West. Daryl Jones highlights the narrative of persecution and revenge that drives both outlaws and detectives, arguing that both arise from a deeply felt ambivalence toward systems of law, whereby most nineteenth-century Americans believed in the value of the law while finding the legal system generally unresponsive to their needs (653).

Slotkin’s Gunfighter Nation frames cultural ambivalence at the site of the Pinkertons and the James Gang as a tension between the ‘excesses of order and the excesses of liberty’ (143), tracing the considerable commonalities between detectives and outlaws. Slotkin’s insights on the
national consequences of the dime novel’s fictional detective–outlaw pairings are particularly important: ‘By transforming the labor struggle to a western setting, the dime novel is able to imagine a “utopian” resolution for the labor strife of the metropolis’ (145). The utopian impulse Slotkin identifies recalls that noted by Winston and Mellerski regarding the police procedural Pinkerton was so influential in developing. And certainly, some of the detective–outlaw pairings use bodily substitution that positions each hero in the other’s terrain, perhaps allowing each to more fully comprehend the other’s perspective, and therefore leading to a harmonization of seemingly conflicting ideals. Such a reading explains why the Pinkertons and the James brothers are equally hard to kill; if they have achieved some sort of ideological harmony by novel’s end, their struggle can be utopically resolved without requiring the punishment or death of either the outlaw or the detective.

But what happens if we examine outlaw–detective pairings as detective narratives? After all, many of these appeared in the serials that codified the potentials and boundaries of the detective genre. As Pinkerton demonstrates in the *Claude Melnotte* tales, the detective’s doubling of his criminal opponent gives rise to detectives – sometimes even the same detective – constructing themselves in classical, hardboiled, or police procedural molds. How, then, is a detective identity constructed in the face of an opponent who is himself a heroic figure already at the center of a complex set of popular narratives? In outlaw narratives, it is often the detective who is constructed as the sinister half of the doubled relationship. When facing an outlaw double, the detective must embody the twin traditions of gentleman and outsider, since the outlaw often practices a type of Victorian chivalry in the midst of the violence and lawlessness that define his character.

As John Irwin shows in his insightful exploration of the geometries underlying the dynamics of detective narratives, ‘doubling is almost always splitting and doubling’ (*Mystery*, 5). Each of the doubled figures in detective fiction, and perhaps especially in detective–outlaw pairings, is already highly complex, often already collapsing dual identities in the manner Breu associates with the hardboiled. In a character like Deadwood Dick, we see several identity resonances harmonized within a single figure who demonstrates a linear progression as the outlaw becomes the detective, metacritically representing a generic shift in the dime novels from the popularity of the Western hero to that of the detective. In the detective–outlaw pairings that feature Pinkerton or an avatar (often Old King Brady) in opposition to the James brothers
or a lesser known outlaw gang, the doubles are always simultaneously converging and diverging.

Allan Pinkerton and Jesse James are, in many ways, perfect doubles around which to center detective stories. From a historical perspective, both gave rise to complex narratives negotiating their meanings. Both were iconic figures, nationally recognizable as residing at the pinacles of their respective fields, both heading successful enterprises. Their opposition could be dually constructed as North vs. South (Slotkin) and Capital vs. Labor (Denning). In this context, Pinkerton and James are thus opponents at two important sites of ideological conflict: slavery and capitalism. The complex social anxieties underlying these historical figures are simultaneously highlighted and simplified when Pinkerton and James meet at the site of relatively straightforward crimes like highway robbery or kidnapping. An examination of their dynamics in various interstices – historical, heroic, and generic – helps us trace Pinkerton’s contributions to the development of detective fiction.

In *Jesse James Foiled; or, Pinkerton’s Best Play* (1902), as intimated in the short discussion that opens this chapter, the James boys are pitted against Pinkerton operatives (Allan Pinkerton is not involved) in an episodic narrative full of colorful adventures and dangers. This typical detective–outlaw novel takes a light tone, and the dual heroes are managed through regular shifts in point of view, both presented as viable heroic figures, although the outlaws are sometimes rebuked in asides by the third-person narrator. The hardboiled identities of detective and outlaw alike present tough-guy Western personae shot through with chivalry and good sportsmanship. On the pile of dead horses that has softened their fall down a cliff, Jesse James and Pinkerton operative Will Star call a brief truce during which Jesse admits his admiration for the detective: "Cussed if you ain’t the nerviest chap I ever met! You deserve another chance, Will Star, and, by the eternals, you are going to have it!" (7). Shortly thereafter, as Will helps the injured Jesse climb the cliff in exchange for a few more hours of life, he muses on the inevitability of their conflict even as he offers the outlaw respect and something close to friendship: "We detectives ain’t bad fellows when you come to know us, Jess," he went on ... "Of course, we’ve got to kill you if we can, but there ain’t a coward in the Pinkerton agency, and if you’re the best man, I’ll admit it every time!" (9) These types of exchanges, which abound in detective–outlaw novels, place the detective – and his outlaw double – into a chivalrous line of descent that includes Poe’s ‘*le chevalier*’ Dupin, Chandler’s Philip Marlowe, and Faulkner’s Gavin Stevens.
Dime novel detective–outlaw pairings frequently employ the trope of bodily substitution, since it is the interchangeability of these figures, at once sinister and humorous, that provides much of the threat – and the subsequent pleasure – of the genre. The interchangeability of detective and outlaw is perhaps nowhere clearer than in a scene in which Jesse James switches places with what appears to be Will Star’s corpse. Jesse is skulking around a mining camp where several Pinkertons are preparing to pursue him, still seeking the stolen $10,000 that has precipitated this adventure. The famous outlaw learns that Star has succumbed to his gunshot wounds and has been prepared for burial. Jesse realizes that the missing money must be hidden in Star’s coffin, a hunch that is confirmed when he finds the outbuilding containing the detective’s body. Jesse removes Star’s body from the coffin, sets a small fire, and substitutes his own body in the box with the money. When the alarm is sounded, several Pinkerton operatives rush in to save Star’s coffin and carry it outside. After the coffin has been carefully laid on the grass, they are met with an unexpected sight in the cabin: Star is fighting his way through the flames as he was only ‘in a trance.’ By the time anyone thinks to look in the coffin, its temporary inhabitant has disappeared – with the money. Star’s body in a coffin had marked a victory for Jesse James, evidencing the outlaw’s success in actually killing one of the cursedly hard-to-kill Pinkertons. And yet, in using Star’s coffin to steal the money and effect his escape, Jesse must give up the death of Star, whose revival occurs only after Jesse has removed him from his coffin. Jesse James, like the Pinkertons, is a professional, and it is by pursuing his professional goals rather than his personal vendetta that he escapes the paradox of the double exemplified by Poe’s William Wilson. Jesse briefly occupies the physical space of his double – in simulated death, no less – but that interchangeability leads to a momentary victory rather than to the inevitable death of Poe’s sinister double.

The detective–outlaw narratives play out largely in the physical realm, propelled mostly by able male bodies in physical conflict. But resonances of the classical or armchair detective reverberate through the practical jokes that often provide a counterpoint to the bodily violence. In Jesse James Foiled, for example, each side prepares a practical joke for the other. At one point, James changes clothing with Star’s unconscious body. Though obviously containing homoerotic overtones as well as suggestions of identity loss or theft, this scene is narrated as a joke, with Jesse thinking gleefully of the other Pinkertons’ reactions when they find their confederate dressed as an outlaw. Later, after following
a tip from a gang member, Frank and Jesse find a box that supposedly contains the money they seek:

There was nothing in the box but a bundle of blank papers. On the top of the bundle was a bit of pasteboard. The words, ‘Compliments of the Pinkerton Agency,’ were written on it. (19)

Although the outlaws tend toward violent, aggressive practical jokes while the detectives rely more on taunts, both perform jokes in which the pleasure resides in imagining the double experiencing the joke, creating a complex point of reader identification, as the reader sees both the fun and danger involved in various jokes.

In *Jesse James Foiled*, as in many detective–outlaw pairings, the two outsized title characters leave little space for the victim. Here the initial victim of a stagecoach holdup, Colonel Spencer, is of interest only when the narrative eye shifts briefly to his beautiful daughter before returning to the ongoing conflict between the Pinkertons and the Jameses. The last line of the dime novel, after promising further adventures from both protagonists, including pugilistic prowess the very next week, utterly sidelines the victim’s experience of crime: ‘Colonel Spencer never recovered the valuables he had lost, but his fate was the fate of many another. THE END’ (25). This virtual erasure of the victim role, typical in detective–outlaw pairings, places interest squarely on the doubled protagonists, encouraging readers to identify with one or the other, and often the divided selves of both.

The light-hearted play with doubling found in *Jesse James Foiled* is more complexly developed in an earlier detective–outlaw dime novel, *The James Boys and Pinkerton: Frank and Jesse as Detectives*. The novel’s marketing speaks to its duality: it appeared first in the *New York Detective Library* (1890), and was reprinted in *James Boys Weekly* (1901), a series that ceased publication in 1903 in response to public pressure (Cox, *Dime*, 144). This dime novel examines the boundaries of detective doubling in its reversal of the detective-in-disguise trope, its use of a female victim to ballast detective–criminal doubling, and its brief foray into the use of torture on the detective body. The novel opens with the death of a Pinkerton agent near criminal overlord Kit Rayburn’s headquarters. Allan Pinkerton, looking for new detectives to put on the case, is receptive to two newcomers, in fact the James brothers, who are disguised as Midwestern farmers allegedly seeking adventure. The reader knows the brothers’ identities when Pinkerton hires them as
detectives to raid Kit’s crime den and to arrest Greenbury Maxwell, a criminal whose capture carries a $20,000 reward. This dime novel, like many, ignores Pinkerton’s lifelong stand against rewards for detectives, recalling the newspaper editorials of the day that bemoaned the collusion of criminals and detectives in defrauding honest businessmen and sharing rewards. Despite real-world Pinkerton’s firm commitment to creating bureaucratic and financial structures (daily reports and by-the-hour pay rates) that would discourage detective–criminal collusion, his unwitting hiring of undercover criminals infiltrating the detective world places him firmly in such a collusion.

Like undercover detectives, the undercover outlaws struggle with slippery identities, providing a delightful frisson to readers. Presented with the James boys as a first point of identification, especially as the brothers engage in detective work, readers may find themselves cheering for the disguised outlaws as they enter Kit Rayburn’s dangerous den. Slippages proliferate. Frank and Jesse enter Kit’s as themselves, expecting to use their real identity to gain credibility with the criminals even while planning to capture them. The criminals, however, immediately question this identity, suspecting the James boys of being detectives, which is in fact their role of the moment. There is a complex irony in the fact that while the James brothers are easily able to deceive Allan Pinkerton with their detective disguises, they are unable to persuade criminals of their real-world criminal identities. This resonates with the anxieties raised in Pinkerton’s memoir of the Molly Maguires around detective disguise. Taking on a persona necessitates a major shift that can endanger one’s sense of self, and deep cover blurs the thin line that separates detectives and criminals. When the James brothers enter Kit’s den for the purpose of capturing a wanted criminal, it seems, they do not simply enact the role of detectives; in some sense they become detectives. They perform the roles expected of detectives when they struggle to have their identity accepted by criminals, act heroically, face what appears to be certain death, manage a narrow escape, and finally return to capture their quarry against all odds. These are typical scenarios for both dime novel detectives and outlaws, so Frank and Jesse enact a dual position. The success of their detective performance highlights the duplication of several traits in detectives and criminals as well as the very real challenge of taking on a double’s persona and bearing the gaze aimed at the double without actually becoming that double.

The James boys go undercover as detectives in order to one-up Allan Pinkerton and to make money. After they capture Maxwell, Jesse muses about possible careers as detectives: “We can alternate our work here.
Rob one day and catch thieves the next. One is about as profitable as the other, you see, and we could make an abundance of money out of it"’ (14). Nineteenth-century Americans were suspicious of detectives, as evidenced by articles about police uniforms, detective corruption, and so on, in all forms of periodicals. This flippant comment by the disguised Jesse James touches a cultural nerve about the interchangeability of outlaw and detective identities. Detection as a quite lucrative profession was seen as potentially corrupting. If by adopting the role of the detective, the criminal can assume the perspective and vision of the detective and alter his behavior accordingly, could not the contrary be true for the detective? Did McParlan in fact become a criminal in his two years of not only adopting the perceptions and behavior of a criminal, but also being seen and treated as one?

As in The Molly Maguires and the Detectives, a nubile woman also serves to highlight the interchangeability of the doubled heroes in The James Boys and Pinkerton. In this case, Alice Snow, an attractive young woman who has been pursued relentlessly by an unwelcome suitor and his overbearing mother, highlights duplicated desires between outlaws and detectives. Jim Cummings, a close friend of the James brothers, and Brigham Bender, Pinkerton agent Carl Greene’s acolyte, alternately ‘save’ Alice, initially from the unwanted suitor, but eventually from each other. As Alice is turned into a commodity, a prize that will reward the more meritorious of her two new suitors, she reveals disquieting similarities between the detective and the outlaw. When Jim Cummings tells Jesse James of his interest in Alice, the famous outlaw quite chivalrously advises him not to get involved, citing his own wife as evidence: ‘She knows what it is to wait day after day and night after night not knowing what hour or what moment may come and bring the tidings of a husband slain or worse still a captive in a felon’s cell. She knows what it is to hear a name she loves spoken of as a monster and reviled’ (21). In the end, of course, Alice chooses to marry the Pinkerton operative, participating in the exchange of women that often marks the ‘happy ending’ conclusion of dime novels. Here, the happiness of the ending is tempered by a line that has echoes of Jesse James’s warning against marriage for outlaws: ‘He [Brigham] still follows his dangerous calling, and but for the uneasiness Alice experiences when Brigham is off on some desperate case she would be perfectly happy’ (30). The rewarding of Alice to the detectives, then, marks an incomplete victory for the Pinkertons, since the detective husband shares with the outlaw husband not only a dangerous lifestyle that unsuits him for marriage, but also a homoerotic, morally contaminating bond that defines him much more
significantly than his marriage, as evidenced by the narrative space and attention given to each. Although it is not explicitly articulated in the happy ending statement, the rest of the narrative suggests the shared outsider status of detective and outlaw, so a reader can imagine that even married to Brigham, Alice may in future ‘hear a name she loves spoken of as a monster and reviled’ (21).

The Pinkerton operative in *The James Boys and Pinkerton* may win the girl, but the James boys taste sweet victory as well. They are successful not only in performing as Pinkerton operatives, but also in capturing and humiliating Allan Pinkerton himself. After luring Pinkerton to their hideout, the James gang strips him naked and ties him to a long pole that turns over an open fire, and slowly roasts him alive. The sexual sadism of this disempowering punishment makes Pinkerton a very uncomfortable point of reader identification indeed. When Carl Greene, the central Pinkerton operative in the novel, realizes that his chief is missing, he decides, radically, to proceed without orders and to track the outlaws. When he and Brigham locate and rescue the nude chief from torture and death, Pinkerton is ‘covered with shame and confusion’ (29). Greene attempts to comfort the older detective and to protect his pride, but the rescue scene clearly presents a bested Pinkerton turning over detective work to a new generation represented by Greene, who will be a worthy opponent to Jesse James in the future (for many dime novels to come, as it turns out).

The narration of the fall of Pinkerton is more than a nod to the historical fact that Pinkerton was in his fifties during the James boys’ heyday in the 1870s. Pinkerton’s humiliation is also an attempt to negotiate the uneasy position of the detective figure in the cultural imagination, an uneasiness that intertwined with anxieties about the outlaw. *The James Boys and Pinkerton* points up the fluidity of power in the detective narrative. On the one hand, the detective and criminal battle for power at the site of the victim, who is almost entirely erased from narrative interest. These doubles are both simultaneously fragmented and connected, as both detectives and criminals are able to take on each other’s roles, leaving the two perspectives to represent different angles rather than diametrically opposed views. In this kind of doubling, each hero is made suspect by his interactions with the other, and the fluidity of their uneasy positions raises interest for the reader, who has a simultaneous desire for subversion and resolution, and whose desire is met more intensely by a doubled subversion and resolution at the character position, since simultaneous subversion and resolution is not usually possible within the plot of a detective narrative. On the other hand,
when power resides along the detective–criminal axis, the two figures are marked as equivalent and symbiotic, which raises an anxiety about the whole system of law that the detective represents. After all, if the detective is a double of the criminal – and the reader – he is fundamentally another version of crime and disorder, and often offers only enough resolution to pave the way for the next novel.

Detective dime novels, like their progeny, often play with reader identification. In a whimsical article about the popularity of detective fiction, Nicholas Blake imagines an anthropologist from 2042 examining our interest in the genre: ‘He will conjecture – and rightly – that the devotee identifies both with the detective and the murderer, representing the light and dark sides of his own nature’ (400). John Cawelti places reader identification elsewhere, suggesting that ‘[t]he parade of false suspects and solutions brings under initial suspicion characters with whom the reader is encouraged to sympathize or identify, thereby exciting a fear that one of them will be shown to be guilty. The reader, in other words, is metaphorically threatened with exposure and shame’ (Adventure, 40). Together, Blake and Cawelti cover almost the whole gamut: readers of various detective novels are indeed encouraged to identify at times with detectives, criminals, and even falsely accused suspects. But what of victims? Can reader identification stray to what seems the least powerful position in the narrative? In stories like The James Boys and Pinkerton and the Pinkerton dime novel we shall examine next, the detective slides into the position of the victim, and it is in the resultant tortured body that Cawelti’s threat of shame and exposure resides. As the tortured detective freely roams all three points of the genre’s central triangle, the reader may be placed in the disquieting and potentially pleasurable position of identifying simultaneously with a skein of intersecting and contaminating subject positions.

Outlaw doubling darkened through the prism of graphic torture

Various scholars have argued that the stage was set for the detective profession and its representations in popular literature only after the use of torture ceased to be a mainstay in addressing crime and criminality, since this marked a shift in which the detective’s mind – instead of the criminal’s body – became an epistemological tool. Torture appears frequently in detective narratives today, seemingly in response to the increasingly foregrounded figure of the serial killer, who has escalated the level of violence in all the detective subgenres. Torture is almost
expected of fictional serial killers, and in the wake of fiery public discourse on torture in the twenty-first-century American political arena, detective narratives regularly employ this trope to explore the professional and ethical boundaries of detectives, especially those working against serial killers. Is it really wrong to torture a serial killer when doing so may save the lives of potential future victims? Detectives themselves sometimes slip into victim positions across from serial killers, so, by virtue of their work, today’s detectives are threatened with two discomfitting potential slippages – into the tortured or torturer positions. The presence of quite graphic torture in the dime novels that codified many of the detective genre’s most successful moves in the nineteenth century suggests that torture – like dark doubles or triangular structures – is a trope rife with contaminating potentials that is inherent to the genre rather than simply responding to historically bound sociocultural anxieties such as those raised a century later by the serial killer figure.

The power of the torture trope in maintaining the kind of precarious balances that keep the detective genre fertile resides in its ability to reposition readers. A detective being tortured has lost the fight with his dark double within the story, but may, in so doing, be winning the battle for reader identification. In the meaning-making activity of constructing heroes, the detective who remains brave in the face of torture is perhaps more heroic than the criminal carrying out or supervising that torture, especially if the torture is being used rhetorically (as a threat to future detectives) rather than pragmatically (to elicit information that will save lives). From the reader’s perspective, vicarious participation in torture from the position of tortured or torturer provides Cawelti’s shame and exposure. It does not, however, resolve or manage that shame and exposure, since the broken bodies resulting from torture provide an always incomplete response to questions of justice. Moreover, torture, perhaps more than other criminal activities, implicates yet another position central to detective fiction: the spectator.

In Pinkerton’s formulation and others to follow, the detective is, at a fundamental level, always the Eye. Identifying with the detective, then, allows the reader an unfettered gaze into all areas of life, a gaze perhaps especially pleasurable when it uncovers the ugly underside of modern life too dangerous for the reader to experience in real life. The deployment of graphic torture challenges the reader’s gaze and the meaning it constructs. William Ward’s detective–outlaw pairing, Jesse James’ Nemesis; or, The Pinkerton Oath (1908), plays with reader expectations at the site of the gaze, twisting what Mark Seltzer calls the reader’s ‘fantasy of surveillance’ (513) into a nightmarish identification with various Eyes in a
Dime novel organized around three scenes of extreme public violence. Each scene highlights the power of spectatorship in punishment and exposes the potentials of shifting both detectives and criminals into the victim position through refracted repetitions of ritualized violence. This novel contains the same potentially contaminating tropes – dark doubles, practical jokes, disquieting shifts in perspective – seen in other detective–outlaw pairings, but the repeated use of torture, along with the various ways the reader is asked to gaze at that torture, recasts these tropes to create deeply fragmented visions of both the detective hero and his criminal counterpart.

The first torture scene, recounted in the chapter ‘Doughnut Jack’s Awful Atonement,’ places the reader in an unsettling position, taking the perspective of Jesse James, the hidden spectator of the spectacular punishment of a gang member who has sold information about Jesse’s whereabouts. The main torturer, a close adviser of Jesse’s, is Dick the Rat, and he is the only one who knows that the gang is performing for their leader, secreted panoptically in a type of ‘balcony seating’ from which he gazes down at the dark cave in which the scene unfolds. The reader’s identification with Jesse, both the spectator and cause of the torture, is emphasized by a third-person narrative that slowly presents details only as Jesse processes them. Jesse has never been to the cave before, and the reader catches sight of its features alongside the outlaw leader, waiting as ‘his eyes became more accustomed to the weird, uncertain light, in the curious yellow glare of which objects assumed grotesque and fantastic shapes’ (55). Jesse slowly takes in details of the cave’s contents, and suspense is built through his unhurried visual investigation: ‘What caught and riveted his attention the longest, however, and the use of which he could not imagine, was a row of long black capes that hung at one side of the sleeping-holes’ (56). The outlaws about to arrive are familiar with the use of the ominous black capes, so the idea that their leader ‘could not imagine’ their function stretches the limits of credibility. It is the reader here, the vicarious observer perched on Jesse’s limited perspective, whose imagination fails him, and the emphasis on that failure highlights the clearly sinister – because unknown and unimaginable – nature of the garments.

The black capes become anonymizing costumes in a spectacle of public punishment that has Dick the Rat as its master of ceremonies, performing for the sixteen cloaked gang-member participants as well as for the two secret observers: Jesse James and the reader. Doughnut Jack’s excessive punishment is painstakingly described as Jesse views it: surrounded by his costumed brothers, Jack is sentenced to death,
stripped naked, forced to dance on sharp knives, repeatedly stabbed by his compatriots, hung on a hook, filleted of most of his flesh, and eventually tossed into the river in a gunny sack. Dick the Rat has ‘summoned in himself a dignity that amazed the onlooking pack’ (58) in order to mete out punishment that functions rhetorically to prevent further treason in the band. In his analysis of public punishment of criminals, Foucault notes that the crowd was often kept separate from the punishment place because some wanted to depart from the ritual in attacking the criminal while others wanted to free him; in fact, some people may have felt both impulses simultaneously when faced with spectatorship of the punishment ritual.

In sharing Jesse James’s perspective, the reader becomes complicit in Doughnut Jack’s torture and death. Dick the Rat stops the crowd of gang members as they attempt to depart from the ritual when Doughnut Jack pleads for assistance, although it is unclear which of Foucault’s impulses the gang members are about to act on when they almost break the circle. If the reader shared the perspective of one of the outlaws, she could at least imagine she wanted to help the tortured man. If the reader shared Dick the Rat’s perspective, she would surely experience discomfort in his sadism, but she might also understand the torturer’s rhetorical sophistication. In enacting the torture ritualistically, Dick the Rat has each man cut a piece of Jack’s flesh – in a ghastly evocation of sacramental ritual – in order to maintain equal responsibility for punishment in the band, thus fulfilling his duty to maintain order in the gang, pleasing his leader, Jesse James. James’s perspective as the secret onlooker, then, is the most contaminating point of reader identification, especially when the outlaw reflects on what he has observed: ‘Accustomed to witnessing and participating in deeds of fiendish brutality as Jesse was, the sight of the awful punishment inflicted upon the traitor cooled the marrow in his bones. Yet despite his feeling of horror, he could not but admire the cunning of the man who maintained his supremacy over his gang by acts so barbarous’ (61). The reader is thus forced to traverse with Jesse the bodily reaction of cooling bone marrow before moving to the rational – from Jesse’s perspective – admiration for a highly esteemed employee. Perhaps most disquieting for the reader are the resonances associated with such extended surveillance of criminal activities; as the reader of detective fiction well knows, the surveilling gaze that Jesse James and the reader have just enacted is ordinarily the province of the detective hero.

The second scene of graphic violence in Jesse James’ Nemesis; or The Pinkerton Oath is told from the only perspective more dangerous – if less
contaminating – to the reader than that of the spectating head outlaw: the perspective of the torture victim. Once again, this perspective is also that of the detective, since the victim here is Pinkerton operative John Whichler. In a chapter entitled ‘Jesse Writes a Defiance in Blood,’ the reader’s gaze rests with the detective, a viewpoint rendered particularly uncomfortable if the reader has noticed the novel’s subtitle, ‘A Brave Detective Meets His Death.’ Whichler has been shown throughout the novel as an excellent detective, working bravely to protect the citizenry from the threat of outlaw violence, a threat with which the reader is familiar given the earlier sharing of James’s spectatorship at Doughnut Jack’s torture and execution. Through Whichler’s capture and torture, the reader is drowned in the detective’s fear and pathos. When Whichler realizes that he is to become ‘the plaything of such grim-visaged, terrible fiends’ (138), he considers running in the hopes of a quick death since he, like the reader, knows that ‘[n]o men understood the art of exquisite torture better than the famous desperado and his brother and for several minutes they kept silence while the agony of the suspense in which he was showed clearly in the expressions that passed across the detective’s face’ (139). These facial expressions, the reader discerns, are fear, despair, and hope. The fear is a self-evident result of Whichler’s familiarity with the methods of outlaw torture, and the despair arises from the detective’s worry about his family, who will be left without support if he is not rescued.

The detective’s hope is the most manipulative aspect of the reader’s experience. Whichler, like any reader who has not noticed the book’s subtitle, hopes for the type of eleventh-hour rescue that abounds in dime novels (138). Indeed, those expectations are teased when the reader sees Jesse James discussing with his mother the possibility of releasing the detective, given his remarkable grit; Mrs. Samuels, however, counsels against reprieve. Later, Whichler hears horses approaching and hopes for rescue, but the unknown riders turn away before they reach the clearing in which he is being tortured. Despite these narrative tricks, Whichler’s torture scene ends up mirroring Doughnut Jack’s in its graphic description of horrific ritual, ending only when the outlaws are ‘amply surfeited by the terrible orgy of torture in which they had all participated’ (155) and Whichler is finally released into death.

The representation of Whichler’s torture scene from the victim-detective’s perspective may provide the reader Cawelti’s ‘shame and exposure’ or may promote anger and/or despair. The torture itself seems not to trouble the thin line between dark doubles, since the criminal is placed in clear opposition to the reader, the torturer gazing at and continuing to
manipulate and destroy the tortured until death. As Elaine Scarry argues, the gap between a person in pain and a person watching is due to pain’s language-destroying power. Since Whichler is being tortured as a message to other detectives rather than to elicit information, the torturer has language and the tortured has not. The gulf between criminal and detective/torture victim is thus enormous. The aftermath of the scene, though, raises uncomfortable resonances between outlaws and detectives, as Jesse James engages in the long-standing tradition of taunting practical jokes between these sworn enemies. In a particularly macabre move, Jesse, upon noticing a card in the detective’s pocket asking that William Pinkerton be notified in the event of sudden illness or death, rips a piece of John’s shirt and writes a message on it with John’s blood. Whichler’s body, rendered pre-linguistic by the intense pain of torture, becomes a message in the arena of outlaw–detective practical jokes. In case the reader is still reeling from the brutal torture too much to notice the trope of potential contamination between detective and outlaw positions at the site of practical jokes, the third scene of violence in the novel emphasizes the uneasy boundary separating these dark doubles.

The chapter titled ‘Terrible Reprisals’ narrates the novel’s final scene of violence, a real-life event that Slotkin places as central in changing public support for the Western detective to ambivalence at best. In 1875, a group of Pinkerton operatives surrounded one of Jesse James’s cabins near Kearney, Missouri, and ordered the outlaw to surrender. The exact sequence of events has been debated, but the result was that a grenade was thrown into the cabin (the Pinkertons denied the grenade came from them but the public was unpersuaded by this denial). Jesse was not there, but the grenade killed his young stepbrother and maimed his mother. In Jesse James’ Nemesis, William leads the band of Pinkertons, having taken an oath to avenge John Whichler’s death. Against William’s orders, two detectives throw the grenade, not part of the Pinkertons’ standard equipment. The deed is narrated very quickly, and is introduced in words that seem more judgmental than warranted: ‘And then, before any one knew what was happening, there was perpetrated a deed of wanton cruelty that surpassed any of the crimes charged to the terrible desperado’ (177). A reader might be surprised that the grenade is described as outstripping the two extended scenes of graphic torture earlier witnessed. The hyperbolic third-person criticism of the detectives continues: ‘But the cowardly, insane deed did not end the infamy of the manhunters! / Instead of rushing to the assistance of the stricken family, they turned and fled incontinently, never looking back to see whether the house burst out in flames or if any had been killed’ (178). In this analysis the
Pinkerton operative is cowardly, causing bloodshed from a distance in contrast to the intimacy of the outlaws’ torture. Further, the detectives attack innocent bystanders (albeit by accident) instead of the detectives and criminals who are fair play. Of course, Jesse James’s maimed mother is the same person who, in Ward’s novel, advises against a reprieve for Whichler, thus provoking his torture and death.

In *Jesse James’ Nemesis; or, The Pinkerton Oath*, then, the reader is deliberately positioned as a spectator and a victim of the horrors and ritual of outlaw violence, only to be told with journalistic terseness that such excesses of violence are not only duplicated but even multiplied by the outlaw’s more passive double, the detective. This seemingly odd move highlights the complex symbiosis that shapes detective–criminal doubling. In torturing and killing a Pinkerton operative, Jesse James loses his heroic status, which the narrative attempts to regain (perhaps in a deliberately unconvincing way) through an exaggerated report of Pinkerton’s retaliation, playing up the fact that it is taken from real life. The brevity of the chapter in which Pinkerton’s men throw the grenade, along with the narrative’s inability to *show* the reader the horrors of the detective act as it has shown the horrors of outlaw acts, speaks to the symbiosis of doubles in a way reminiscent of Otto Rank’s analysis. The symbiosis of the doubled relationship is demonstrated by the inability of the self to kill the double, an idea played out in the hard-to-kill detectives and outlaws that grace the pages of most dime novels narrating their encounters. In *Jesse James’ Nemesis*, the detective is killed, but in his graphically narrated death at the hands of the outlaws and in the violation of his body after death as his blood is used to compose a missive to William Pinkerton that violates the unwritten rules governing practical jokes in detective–outlaw interactions, the heroic potential of the outlaw, if not the outlaw himself, is killed. This dime novel’s ending, then, though quite different on the surface from others we have examined, reflects the same complex of fragmentation, doubling, and symbiosis between detective and criminal as other dime novels, as well as similar uses of the victim space by the detective to raise reader identification within the frame of the duplicity and manipulation that often go hand in hand with doubling in the detective genre.

**Conclusion**

In the powerful Pinkerton narratives – the corpus including the memoirs as well as the plethora of dime novels negotiating the historical and mythic potentials of Allan Pinkerton – the detective figure explores the
various resources of doubling when constructing an identity against that of a criminal. The detective enterprise, fictional or fictionalized, also has the ability to create the criminal against which the detective – in historical reality as well as representation – can construct his own identity. As Burton Bledstein argues in his exploration of nascent professionalization in the United States, Pinkerton, like other professionals, ‘cultivate[d] an atmosphere of constant crisis – emergency – in which practitioners both created work for themselves and reinforced their authority by intimidating clients’ (100). This resonates with Robert Weiss’s finding that crime statistics in the latter half of the nineteenth century were suspect and may have been manipulated in order to justify public and private detectives. Certainly the remarkable proliferation of detective books that marked the period include details that evoke an unrealistic threat; for example, detectives constantly notice pickpockets and kidnappers at work on the streets of major American cities in broad daylight.

Allan Pinkerton’s power, then, as a historical figure constructing the real-world detective, as a ‘writer’ producing early detective fiction, and as an icon continually perpetuated and negotiated within the dime novels, challenges the evolutionary narrative of the detective genre’s development. The idea of the detective narrative as social mirror, as strategy to identify major cultural anxieties and desires of a period, needs to be supplemented if we are to account for the enormous influence of Pinkerton, who produced and/or provoked detective fiction in all the subgenres. Detective fiction does not simply reflect the major anxieties and desires that shape a historical period: nineteenth-century detectives as symbols of rationality, hardboiled detectives reflecting concerns with an increasingly irrational world, police procedurals negotiating corporate culture, and feminist detective fiction as yet another genre affected by second-wave feminism. Allan Pinkerton himself was a complex historical figure – variously aligned with capitalists, escaped slaves, and feminist impulses. He stands in potently for the complex ethical and political landscape that maintains vitality in the detective genre.

Detective fiction, even in its nascence, was marked by an ongoing struggle – a ‘struggle’ to which the genre owes its popularity and perhaps even its existence – to negotiate the conservative and subversive potentials inherent in its subject matter and structure. The narration of crime, a subversion of social order, begs the narrative to comment implicitly or explicitly on the subversion. The focus on the detective story as the central narrative and the criminal story as the subordinate
but necessary precursor of the story at hand may suggest that the return of order is the key – and perhaps only – function of detective fiction. And yet, the detective hero is not simply someone who masterfully enters a situation and chases away the fears and anxieties that accompany a disruption to the social fabric. The detective is often an outsider to all the defined groups and classes within a text, which is why he can move between them. As the Pinkerton and related dime novels show, the detective can take on more roles than the hero walking the mean streets, the ratiocinator sitting in his armchair, or the police detective joining his squad in patrolling the streets. He can, even within those frameworks, be a social critic, an avenger flirting with the limits of the law, or a bureaucratic figure aligned with and using best practices from the corporate world.

The Pinkerton detective narratives demonstrate the multiple potentials of the dark double trope in poising detective fiction on the productive precipice that has contamination on one side and containment on the other. The collapsing of the genre’s central triangular structure, the dangers of detective disguise, and the breakdown of structures of language and power at the site of torture highlight the contaminating potential of detective work to both the detective character and the reader consuming his or her adventures. The containing features – professionalism, bureaucracy, even the linguistic elements of practical jokes – provide an always inadequate ballast. The complex symbiotic doubling of outlaws and detectives in the Pinkerton narratives represents a relationship that is central to and more aestheticized in dime novels featuring Nick Carter, where spectacles of ritualized violence are replaced by scenes of ritualized game play, and where the *femme fatale* and the detective as mentor explore even more fully the potentials and limits of the genre.
4
Playing with the Ace of Hearts; or, Mentorship, Sportmanship, and Nick Carter’s Epistemological Dilemmas

Introduction

The opening scene of *The Just and the Unjust; or, Nick Carter’s Sudden Resolution* (1914) finds Nick Carter and his adopted son/detective apprentice, Chick Carter, discussing a criminal they have recently captured. Their conversation demonstrates the complex moral and epistemological underpinnings of the series:

[Nick]: ‘I am convinced there is some good in the man. He surely has a quick brain, and he probably has a code of honor of his own. I should like to have him for a partner if he’d keep straight. He would be useful on the side of law and order. But I’m afraid such a thing would be impossible with a man of his temperament.’

‘But,’ put in Chick, with dismay, ‘where should I come in if he were your partner? We’ve got along all right so far without any reformed crook to help us. It seems to me——’

‘I know – I know,’ laughed the detective. ‘I wasn’t thinking of it as a possibility – only what a pity it is that such brains should be wasted as they are. He has the detective faculty highly developed. I’d back him against any of the best men at police headquarters in running down a criminal mystery.’

‘He’s been a policeman, hasn’t he?’

‘Yes.’ (6–7)
The former policeman turned criminal rewrites Vidocq’s famous transition from criminal to detective, revealing, as Nick Carter narratives often do, that stories of crime and detection are always a matter of perspective. Nick’s fantasy about having a formidable criminal as his partner in detection highlights the permeability of identities in the roles central to the detective narrative as well as the potential tenuousness of the detective acolyte’s position. Nick’s mentee is often a point of reader identification, so this passage might dismay the reader as much as it does Chick, who, like Sherlock Holmes’s Watson, provides an appropriate opponent against whom the reader can match wits. How is the reader of detective fiction to compete with an accomplished criminal in unraveling the mysteries the famous detective is about to resolve? And how does Nick Carter’s easy conversational movement between detective and criminal challenge the boundaries that define the central detective–criminal–victim triangle?

Nick Carter is by far the most famous dime novel detective. The Nick Carter series ran in various forms in the pulp magazines for a full fifty years, from 1886 to 1936, and J. Randolph Cox has identified 1,465 different Nick Carter stories, taking into account the habit of publishers to reissue stories, sometimes with a new title, without indicating their original publication date (‘Elusive,’ 94). Radio plays, films, and comic books featuring both Nick Carter and his adopted son Chick were produced well into the twentieth century. In fact, the Nick Carter: Killmaster series issued 261 paperback spy novels featuring the famous detective between 1964 and 1990 (Dime, 52).1 Over 100 authors have contributed Nick Carter stories in total, 37 in the original dime novel format and about 70 in the Killmaster series (Cox, ‘Nick Carter Stories,’ 132). Nick Carter is not an entirely consistent character, as one would anticipate given his publication history. He is, however, centrally involved in the creation of an American detective identity that marks him as very different from both the dime novel detectives that preceded him and the English detective whose fictional career is almost exactly contemporaneous, Sherlock Holmes.2 Nick is younger than most serial dime novel detectives, he is sexier than Sherlock Holmes, his masculinity is constructed vis-à-vis his relationships with female as well as male criminals, and he works through the mimetic potential of detective fiction by frequently positioning himself as a teacher to young detective apprentices.

Despite his iconic status in turn-of-the-century popular culture and his complex explorations of the detective hero’s potentials, Nick Carter has garnered relatively little critical attention from scholars of detective
fiction. This is partly due to the twinned issues of access and selection, as the series has only recently become a target of digitization projects, so potential scholars have been left to navigate an overwhelming bulk of identical paperbacks in the company of largely bibliographic articles on America's most prolific detective. Even well-catalogued Nick Carter collections are intimidating, comprising rows and rows of 300-page yellow-backed novels, each intriguingly titled with attractive cover art and a back-cover blurb proclaiming this novel's neat fit within a formula. The marketing copy that assured dime novel readers that each novel would meet expectations while also assuring censors that each novel avoids transgression has actually made the novels less attractive to critics of detective fiction, as discussed in Chapter 1 with regard to A. E. Murch's use in 1958 of such blurbs to downplay the interest of the Nick Carter series, a critical judgment that has long stood in place of scholars reading these novels.

In fact, Nick Carter dime novels address the complexities of constructing a new hero within the detective genre with all the ambivalences and intricacies of the Allan Pinkerton texts, albeit using different narrative techniques. Masculinity in the battles between Pinkerton and Jesse James is built through homoerotic competition tied to sadomasochistic doublings and markings of the body, while femininity is constructed as a passive space upon which the battles of men are played out. In the Nick Carter books, on the other hand, constructions of masculinity rely on women as much as on other men, with female characters taking on more active roles, as victims and love interests to be sure, but also as formidable criminals, detective doubles, and even detective pupils. In fact, Nick Carter spends a great deal of time trying to read the feminine, finding repeatedly that the containing structures he uses to manage anxieties around gender, knowledge, and morality are often subverted in proto-postmodern ways. Like the Pinkerton novels, the Nick Carter narratives explore the potentials and boundaries of the logic of dark doubling, although the purely fictional detective tends to feature in less graphically violent and more analytically complex narratives. The Pinkerton books, whether doubling the detective against outlaws or laborers, are rife with anxieties about contamination since, within the logic of doubling, the detective can become contaminated by the criminality and subversiveness of the opponent with whom he shares a symbiotic relationship. The Nick Carter books, on the other hand, manage the fear of contamination inherent to nineteenth-century discussions of detection by using games and their rules to mediate where and how the detective and criminal meet. The game, however, is shown to have
its limitations, as it cannot completely protect against seduction, irrationality, or the limits of interpretation.

Where Allan Pinkerton’s memoirs and attendant dime novels develop multiple detective types in separate narratives, Nick Carter is often a genre-slipping hero whose narratives fit into multiple subgenres. Fundamentally concerned with the questions of masculine identity that underlie the hardboiled genre, especially given his frequent match-ups against femmes fatales, Nick also uses ratiocination and masterful disguise to solve mysteries unrelated to crime à la Sherlock Holmes, and although a private detective, he works regularly and cooperatively with a police team and even creates his own detective team through his informal school for young detectives. Perhaps the most surprising generic inflection to the Nick Carter novels occurs in the proto-postmodern concerns about linguistic and symbolic unintelligibility in novels such as The Turn of a Card; or, Nick Carter Plays a Skillful Game (1911). At the center of this complex of identity slippages resides a continual concern with doubling, whose potential for contamination is contained by structures such as mentorship, sportsmanship, and gameplay. Contamination through detective–criminal and detective–reader doublings is also less sinister in the Nick Carter stories, where competition and mimesis are managed by structures in which contamination is both less likely and less dangerous. In fact, the one locus that consistently includes contamination – the relationship between reader and writer – is constructed as having positive potential for the reader, who learns reading strategies from the writer just as Nick Carter’s apprentices learn detective strategies from him.

Nick Carter’s school for detectives: mentorship and fair play

Detective fiction inherently places its reader in a compromising position. At best, a reader passively observes a detective physically entering the dangerous spaces of the criminal underworld, revealing its threats and providing a narrative that moves said reader from innocence to experience of the ugliest kind. Often, the detective also enters the dangerous space of the criminal’s mind to uncover the story of the crime that precedes the detective’s narrative of discovery. The discovery itself may be a threat: while many detective stories demarcate the detective and the criminal as black and white representatives of good and evil, the most powerful stories – in dime novels as elsewhere – reveal the
criminal underworld as messy, replete with the kinds of moral dilemmas and uncertainties that make the Molly Maguire organization featured in the Pinkerton tales such a complex and productive occupant of the ‘criminal’ space. The reader here is a mere spectator to the detective’s potentially contaminating brushes with criminal elements. However, when the detective succumbs to the threat of contamination — by, for example, killing the criminal and thus occupying a similar space to that criminal — the reader identifying with the detective hero is also implicated in these dangers. The rules of fair play articulated by S. S. Van Dine in 1928 and R. A. Knox in 1929, in which the writer must give the reader all relevant information so that the reader can potentially solve the mystery before or alongside the detective, creates an even more vexing position for the reader. As Tzvetan Todorov and others have noted, the reader of ‘fairly played’ detective fiction tries to double the detective’s mental processes even as the detective is doubling the thoughts and actions of the criminal (Todorov 49; Rzepka 14). The reader, then, acts as an analog to the detective in observing and deducing, while the writer, like the criminal, is committed to secrecy and concealment. This reader’s active participation in uncovering the antecedent narrative of crime makes her complicit in any contamination that may result.

Nick Carter, the house name used in the author position of the series, symbolizes a complex relationship between reader and writer. Instead of acting only as a sort of criminal avatar, metaphorically concealing the truth from the reader as the criminal literally conceals it from the detective, Nicholas Carter, author, often positions the reader as a type of apprentice, often doubling an apprentice detective character. The reader as apprentice, then, shifts between the passivity of spectatorship and the activity of parallel deduction within the contained and containing role of the student in a twist on the admiring narrator strategy used by Poe and Doyle. John Watson and Dupin’s unnamed companion serve as manageable competition for readers, who cannot expect to compete with the unparalleled minds of Holmes or Dupin, but can compete with those of their more ponderous sidekicks. Readers, then, might feel the ‘shame and exposure’ John Cawelti suspects they seek from detective fiction (Adventure, 40) in identifying too closely with Watson or with Dupin’s companion, who are regularly lampooned for their inability to see a clue or make an inference.4 In the nineteenth-century rhetoric about juvenile fiction, however, the reader of dime novel detective fiction was viewed by some as always in deep danger of contamination.
The Nick Carter novels manage this anxiety about cheap literature – and especially detective narratives – by offering a less threatening locus of reader identification in the person of a detective in training. Indeed, the fair play in these novels is often thematized under the rubric of mentorship rather than competition with Nick Carter exemplifying the potential pedagogical qualities of a detective hero in a majority of his cases. The first Nick Carter novel, *The Old Detective's Pupil; or, The Mysterious Crime of Madison Square* (1886), sets up many elements of Nick’s character, including his almost fanatical use of disguise (he is seldom seen undisguised), his cooperative relationship with the police, and his remarkable powers as a detective. More importantly, Nick is the ‘Old Detective's Pupil’ of the title, his formidable detective skills honed by a long apprenticeship under his father. In keeping with the family tradition, Nick too becomes a mentor to several young detectives, including Chick Carter (Chickering Valentine before Nick Carter adopts him) and Patsy Garvan (Patsy Murphy in the first few books), who become able detectives in their own right. Nick’s successful apprentices often star in their own dime novels as well; Cox lists 46 separate works about young detectives trained through Nick Carter’s Detective School (‘Schoolmaster’).

Nick’s mentorship of young detectives focuses on effective techniques of detective work, of course, but it also highlights the development of ethical, intellectual, and physical maturity. In the near-retirement or post-retirement novels, Nick provides a gymnasium and coaching for his hand-chosen detective pupils, and he expounds on the importance of health and fitness to the detective. In general, when Nick works with an acolyte, he discusses the case with the pupil, gently correcting or enthusiastically praising the apprentice’s reasoning in determining a plan of attack. Throughout the investigation, Carter introduces the apprentice as his associate to other law enforcement personnel and clients and allows the youngster at least one unsupervised investigative task. The more seasoned apprentices may even track and rescue their mentor after he has been kidnapped, as he often is when dealing with the most dastardly criminals New York City has to offer. Nick’s is a values-based mentorship balanced between providing guidance and encouraging independence in the young detectives poised to be the readers’ entry into the exciting and terrifying criminal underworld always threatening to engulf the community Nick Carter protects.

*The Lady of Shadows; or, A Beautiful Foe* (1908) is a novel about fathers and sons in which the apprenticeship model allows Nick Carter to manage the twinned threats of dark double and femme fatale. The novel
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opens with overt discourse about the dangers of contamination inherent to detective work when Nick, at the breakfast table, addresses his long-time assistant Patsy Garvan:

‘Patsy, if your morals were not opposed to the idea, if the ethics of right living did not interfere, do you believe that you could instruct a person contemplating a crime how it might be consummated with little or no danger of discovery?’

Patsy was thoughtful.

‘I don’t know,’ he said, at last. ‘It would depend upon the person to be instructed, more than upon the instructor.’

‘Probably.’

‘I do think, however, that if I were to turn to crime myself, I could give even you a hard run before you could nail me.’ (5)

Nick agrees with Patsy that the younger man would make an impressive criminal, a compliment that highlights the permeability and shared skillset of criminal and detective as much as does the newspaper ad that has prompted Nick Carter to pose the question about teaching crime. For Nick Carter has just read, in the Sunday paper, an ad that will soon bring the police commissioner to his door. In an homage to Sherlock Holmes, who voraciously consumes the agony columns (personals), this ad offers to ‘instruct any person who is contemplating a crime of any kind, how it may be consummated without danger of discovery’ (6). The ad, which tells interested parties to identify themselves by writing the numeral ‘4’ in chalk on various street corners, is signed simply ‘DETECTIVE’ (6).

When the police chief asks Nick if he could teach someone to commit crimes undetected, Carter simply repeats Patsy’s answer, demonstrating the apprentice detective’s mastery of Nick’s teachings, and revealing the first lesson in contamination and containment. Contamination is clearly a threat, given the shared skillset between detective and criminal. Containment, at the same time, resides in the acolyte’s moral character, developed through his relationship with his detective mentor. The task of separating detective from criminal work, then, is the responsibility of the reader/apprentice in the Nick Carter novels, as Patsy asserts and Nick repeats. The reader, like Nick’s numerous acolytes, has substantial agency and individuality, since her potential as a learner surpasses even that of Nick as a teacher. ‘Winning’ the game between reader and writer in ‘fairly played’ narratives usually constitutes solving the mystery before it is revealed by the detective, generally in the penultimate
scene. Within the mentorship model of detection laid out in *The Lady of Shadows* and other Nick Carter novels, though, a successful detective apprentice is one who takes responsibility and realizes that he must learn rather than simply expect the expert detective to teach, and that one of the key lessons is the dangerous permeability of the boundary between detectives and criminals.

Patsy’s implicit lesson about the fluid boundary between detective and criminal is accompanied by a more explicit lesson about motive that lays bare the pleasure in detective fiction articulated by Charles Rzepka in his theory of mental arrays. For Rzepka, the appeal of the detective narrative is cognitive: the reader creates a series of mental maps – arrays – to explain the mystery, and subsequently enjoys the ways these are continually challenged and altered by new information as it is presented (25–30). Nick and Patsy’s discussion of possible motives for the newspaper ad guides the reader through an almost dizzying assortment of arrays. Ostensibly, the ad is promoting a criminal business venture whose complex sign-up mechanism (the sign of four on various busy street corners around the city) demonstrates to potential clients the criminal mentor’s ability to evade detection. As Patsy soon discovers while brainstorming ways to identify the criminal, the criminal’s move is a masterful one, since the criminal has to watch only one street corner while the detective must cover several, not knowing which the criminal will be watching. When Patsy suggests simply following the client, Nick points out that this will serve only to reveal the detective to the criminal while allowing the criminal to remain unseen; the criminal mentor, then, would become a type of detective, creating a mechanism by which to break a disguise (the detective’s, in this case). Indeed, as Patsy and Nick suggest to the police chief, the motive may be more aligned with detective work than the chief initially thinks, since the criminal mentor may be undertaking his enterprise not to provide the service advertised but rather to identify other would-be criminals, albeit for the purpose of blackmail rather than punishment. In essence, the ad is the perfect opening move in a mental game between criminal and detective. As the narrative soon reveals, though, the actual motive is one considered by none of the mental arrays Patsy and Nick’s conversation with the police chief identifies: it is to capture not a potential criminal but the most famous detective in the city, Nick Carter.

And Nick falls for it. Just as his dark double, criminal mastermind Livingston Carruthers, has previously been captured by Nick, so too will Nick pursue the placer of the ad into a fiendishly concocted trap that involves a beautiful woman as an accomplice as well as an unpatented
drug that provides temporary paralysis in its first nine doses and permanent paralysis in its tenth. This outlandish drug literally renders Nick a pure armchair detective. Unable to move but in full possession of his mental and ocular facilities, Nick deduces the details of his kidnapping but cannot act upon his deductions. Carruthers, whose very name contains Carter’s within it, doubles the detective in several features that reinforce the importance of mentorship to their respective crafts. Both follow in the footsteps of their deceased fathers; Sim Carter was a famous detective, while Livingston Carruthers Sr. was, as Nick puts it, “the smartest and slickest, the smoothest and the handsomest all-round crook I ever did know” (112). Both now act as mentors themselves. Indeed, Carruthers cites Carter’s mentees as a reason he targets the famous detective, suggesting that Carter may not have realized that “with Chick and Patsy counted in you make yourself a sort of hydra-headed detective,” to which Carter responds, “Oh yes, I have realized it” (70). Carruthers’ mentee is Miss Pauline Mason, the attractive young woman who lures Nick to Carruthers’ home. Pauline, it turns out, is a more powerful acolyte than Carruthers is a mentor, since she eventually goes against Carruthers’ teaching and tells Patsy and Chick where Nick is being held, allowing the young detectives to rescue their temporarily paralyzed mentor in the nick of time. Carruthers’ mentorship, then, is less effective than Carter’s, perhaps because the mentoring of young criminals is an inherently contaminating activity that can be raised but not condoned by the dime novel detective narrative.

The second half of The Lady of Shadows continues to explore the potentials of doubling in increasingly complex ways. For example, the centrality of unauthorized spectatorship to the work of criminal and detective is highlighted in a chapter entitled ‘A Strange Scene,’ in which the reader observes Nick Carter eavesdropping on two criminals – Janice and her unwilling accomplice, Bert Radcliffe – in the seven-room hotel suite shared by Janice and her husband, Carruthers. Nick has been allowed into the suite by the hotel detective, who is happy to help the famous detective with his investigation. When the conversation Nick observes reaches a climactic point – when Janice points a revolver at Radcliffe – Nick finally becomes aware that his own spectatorship is doubled by Carruthers’, who has been secreted in a different room of the suite all along, also surveilling its occupants. Carruthers moves from the role of spectator to participant when he reveals himself to Radcliffe and Janice, soon followed by Carter, who also joins the scene. As doubles, Carter and Carruthers participate in similar physical blocking and observation tactics.
Carruthers’ and Carter’s powerful eyes are echoed by those of the *femme fatale* of the novel, Janice, who is a model and a painter, both object and subject of the gaze, a woman whose eyes are always active and complex, described as ‘eager eyes; and eyes that were not only eager, but beautiful as well, save for a certain quality of boldness which fairly lunged at you, out of their black depths’ (131). These bold lunging eyes are central to the crime that drives the second half of the novel, a diamond robbery accomplished through the use of an extremely accurate life-sized painting of a diamond merchant’s wall, complete with safes. Janice’s work as the artist of this impressive masterpiece constructs her as a figure of contamination, as Nick Carter’s old friend, an artist named Bert Radcliffe, ends up being compromised by the seductive woman whose portrait he has painted and whose criminal masterpiece he cannot help but admire even as he characterizes it as a ‘prostitution’ of her artistic skills (168). Janice’s exquisitely detailed false wall also raises some of the questions about thin lines between reality and artifice that underlie much of the Nick Carter series: a criminal artist constructs an aesthetic product that facilitates a crime, just as a detective writer constructs an aesthetic product (the dime novel being read, for example) that describes the methods of crime and detection so clearly that a reader could emulate either one. Indeed, Nick Carter’s double, Livingston Carruthers, reveals that the criminal is just as apt to act as a mentor as is the detective, and criminal mentorship is thematized in popular novels that are themselves suspected of teaching young readers a great deal – perhaps too much – about the criminal underworld.

Just as Livingston Carruthers’ apprentice Pauline does not fully assimilate his criminal teachings, so too do Nick Carter acolytes occasionally show themselves to be unsuited to the adventurous life of a detective, and Nick mentors boys away from detective work as well as toward it. Tom Dawson, in *A Detective’s Theory; or, A Race with the Unknown* (1904), demonstrates through negative example which personal qualities a Nick Carter apprentice needs. After extensive mentoring from Nick Carter, Tom finally gets a chance to act alone when he overhears a plot to kill the King of Sandoval. Faced with a closed telegraph office and the absence of suitably rapid private or public transportation, Tom resolves to ‘borrow’ a train in his rescue attempt, ignoring his training: ‘He forgot for the moment that he was Nick Carter’s pupil, an emissary of justice – he became a purely impulsive, generous-hearted boy only, indignant at an awful wrong, inspired to save the life of an imperiled human being’ (69). Tom saves the King from murder in the nick of time, for which he is lauded by the King and the railroad workers. Nick also
praises Tom, but he ultimately agrees with his wife’s suggestion that “the detective life is too strenuous for our young friend” (79). The novel concludes with the news – constructed as a happy ending – that Nick has helped Tom to establish a successful bookstore, where he fondly reminisces about his time as Nick’s apprentice (217). Tom proves his physical strength and tenacity repeatedly throughout the novel; the ‘strenuousness’ to which he cannot adapt is a mental strenuousness, a rigor of thought that is simply not a part of his personality. Tom lacks the systematic decision-making skills that characterize the great detective and all his successful apprentices.

Tom Dawson’s brief apprenticeship in the Nick Carter series exemplifies the famous detective’s privileging of structures of containment within his work. Tom’s impulsive actions, though brave and ultimately successful, show his inability to weigh risk and to quell his outsized desire for heroic action. As Tom shadows the King of Sandoval’s would-be killer, the reader is presented with clear evidence that the young detective-in-training will not succeed within Nick Carter’s world. Tom realizes that he has plenty of time to get assistance from a nearby police officer before the attack on the King is even begun:

But Tom had enthusiasm, extravagant ideas of ‘fine work,’ a craving for brilliant action, and all that.

The way he had read it, real smart detectives like to play with their game like a cat with a mouse – like to unwind the reel of mystery clear to the end. (48)

By conceptualizing the criminal as ‘game,’ Tom is misinterpreting the game metaphor that acts as a key structure of containment throughout the Nick Carter series. Tom thinks detectives play with the game – the prey – instead of playing the game. It is through the metaphor of game player rather than hunter that the detective can actually unwind the reel of mystery, for it is as a game player that the detective performs multiple social functions by doubling his opponent more effectively than he is doubled. Tom is characterized here by ‘the way he had read it,’ a misreading that demonstrates that Tom is suited only for reading detective fiction, which sets the stage for his eventual happy ending as a bookstore proprietor. Tom is thus constructed as a foil to both Nick and his successful assistants, who understand the importance of the rules that govern the system within which a detective must function. In the end, Tom is selling books – perhaps even the Nick Carter book we are reading – rather than enacting detective adventures.
The mediating power of games

The ultimate representation of Tom as a reader – a good reader of detective fiction but a bad reader of the signs detectives must read – within the framework of his detective adventure in *A Detective’s Theory* highlights the potential slippages between the fictional and metafictional aspects of dime novels. These novels often offer self-conscious reflections about reading, where young characters are attracted to detective work because they have read detective stories like the one they are about to star in. Such characters in Nick Carter’s world, however, do not simply step from the reader to the detective position; instead, this transition is accomplished through a long apprenticeship in which they learn that detective work, while critical to protecting the real world in which they live, is best conceptualized as a game. For Nick, the game is a strategy for keeping the detective uncontaminated by both criminality and sexuality, useful in guarding against various seductions as well as moral ambiguities. With his pedagogical impulses, Nick teaches his detective apprentices the values of fair play and chivalry, intent on shaping them into good men and women as well as good detectives. The reader, like the apprentice, is often provided with lessons about justice alongside those about observational and investigative techniques.

The detective genre is well known for its ability to actively engage readers and writers in a battle of wits, and constructions of the detective–reader relationship as a game abound in the scholarship on detective fiction. A representative sample across time might include Robert Louis Stevenson’s characterization in 1892 of the detective story as ‘enthralling but insignificant, like a game of chess’ (quoted in Murch, 143), John Dickson Carr’s description in 1946 of detective fiction as ‘a hoodwinking contest, a duel between author and reader’ (quoted in Dove, 3), and George Dove’s assertion in 1997 that detective fiction’s ‘conservatism is that of the organized game, preserving custom and convention as essential to its own continuation’ (5). Specific game metaphors are also used in explaining the rules-based nature of the detective genre as it exists under the rubric of fair play. For Aaron Marc Stein, for example, ‘[a] detective story that does not observe the rules, however, is like playing tennis with neither a net nor a court. It would degenerate into an aimless batting about of balls’ (83), while for George Dove a detective story in which the solution is achieved accidentally is unacceptable, like ‘[a] baseball game in which one side is allowed four strikes while the other is limited to three’ (4).
The thin line between detective and criminal in Allan Pinkerton narratives is often relatively unmediated, with historical concerns about the criminal underworld contaminating the detective force and providing narrative momentum. The purely fictional Nick Carter, in contrast, frequently mediates his dangerous meetings with dark doubles and *femmes fatales* through game metaphors. Even the titles of Nick Carter novels demonstrate the centrality of the game metaphor in constructing the detective hero. Consider, for example, such representative titles as *The Double Shuffle Club; or, A Play That Led to Death* (1899), *A Checkmated Scoundrel; or, A Doubly Played Game* (1902), *The Hand that Won; or, Nick Carter's Clever Play* (1904), *Playing a Lone Hand; or, Nick Carter on Top* (1904), and *The Queen of Diamonds; or, A Cool Criminal* (1904). The detective as masterful game player is a metaphor rich with possibilities. Unlike the grim practical jokes of the Pinkerton novels, with their escalating violent competitiveness, Nick’s games provide a rules-based architecture that affords at least rudimentary structure to encounters between detectives and criminals. Instead of sending a grotesque object to a criminal by mail, Nick might sit down across from a criminal in a gambling parlor and compete with his opponent for hours before a climactic scene in the card game occurs, often echoing the dynamics of a ‘real-world’ scene from the novel. Nick’s mastery of numerous games that cross class boundaries highlights his liminality in mediating various social spaces as well as his skill at disguise and multitasking, since Nick is capable of observing nefarious goings-on around him while beating a card sharp at poker.

The variety of games at which Nick excels also reveals the multiple facets of his detective identity. In the metaphorical realm of the tennis game, for example, with its class implications and its bodily doubling of opponents holding weapons, the detective is quite differently constructed than in a game of poker, where the successful player encapsulates all the qualities of both the successful detective and the conman: observation, deduction, disguise, bluffing, and poise under pressure. The Nick Carter dime novels use the game metaphor to explore the potentials of doubling in ways that differ significantly from those we saw in the Pinkerton and related books. Both are descendants of Poe, but they explore different sides of the problems of contamination and containment. In the doubling of Pinkerton by outlaws and strikers, the categories of criminal and detective are shown to be fluid and negotiable, with contamination a threat for both the undercover detective and the reader consuming his narrative. The menace of moral contamination in the Pinkerton books is marked by the sinister atmosphere
evoked as the texts demonstrate the threatening symbiosis of detective and criminal, recalling the paradox of the double demonstrated in Poe’s ‘William Wilson.’ The Nick Carter dime novels, on the other hand, explore the analytical and competitive potential of detective–criminal doubling in ways much more aligned with Poe’s Dupin stories. For Nick, the game mediates between the detective and criminal, removing their ‘real-world’ conflict to a purely rational and rule-based space within which issues like disguise and identity are processed through an artificial frame. The game thus protects the detective – and the reader – from the contaminating dangers of criminality. The detective is not in danger of becoming a criminal by taking on a criminal’s viewpoint when he is simply in the position of a game-player, briefly taking on the perspective of the other only in order to better plan his own move within the rules of the game. These rules provide containment, allowing the detective to compartmentalize his life and stay removed from detrimental influences. Nick Carter novels use the game not only to mediate the doubling of detective and criminal but also to locate subversive ideas within an analytical or symbolic context of games rather than in the torture and homoeroticism of the Pinkerton–Jesse James stories.

*A Stolen Name; or, The Man Who Defied Nick Carter* (1910), foregrounds Nick Carter’s teaching of reading strategies as well as the containing function of the game metaphor. Featuring a bold male criminal and a beautiful but apparently dangerous woman as doubles to Nick, this novel demonstrates the potential of the game to work out questions of class, gender, and power dynamics within detective fiction. This dime novel exemplifies Nick’s pedagogical potential as author and detective mentor by revealing the inherent fluidity of the concept of class and embodying the idea that the rules and conventions governing interactions between men and women are themselves games, simultaneously competitive and mimetic.

*A Stolen Name* is in three major sections, each working through complex detective–criminal doubling. Nick’s first double, ‘Bare-Faced’ Jimmy Duryea, is a well-known thief whose most recent criminal act marks him as morally ambiguous. Jimmy and his second wife, Juno, have helped Ledger Dinwiddie, a lonely dying man, through his last few days with compassion and kindness. After the indebted man dies, Jimmy steals his identity in order to infiltrate a wealthy American household and become engaged to a lovely heiress, Lenore Remsen. In the process of committing a late-night jewel robbery in his betrothed’s home, Jimmy is unexpectedly spied by one of Lenore’s friends Nan Nightingale, who happens to be Jimmy’s first wife. Nan goes to Nick
Carter for assistance, and the detective confronts Jimmy with his crime, which he firmly denies. A drawn-out battle of wits between the two men results in an incomplete victory for Nick: Jimmy is imprisoned for the jewel theft, but under the name of Ledger Dinwiddie, since Nick is unable to prove the identity theft. The second half of the novel details Nick’s struggles to track down Jimmy’s second wife Juno, whose identity is even more fluid than her husband’s. This woman, known alternately as The Siren and The Leopard in various parts of Europe, appears to be a *femme fatale*, given her checkered past and her manipulative abilities as a skilled hypnotist. Shortly after Nick begins investigating Juno for his personal satisfaction, he is hired as a secret agent to help the Russian embassy recover some stolen papers, and in this capacity he unexpectedly comes upon Juno as a suspect. Through numerous encounters with Juno – marked by the repartee of both competitive and courtship games – Nick manages to read her as simultaneously a seductress and a victim. In a final twist, Nick Carter saves Juno’s life disguised as none other than his dark double and her ex-husband, Bare-Faced Jimmy Duryea.

Like Pinkerton’s *Claude Melnotte*, Nick Carter’s *A Stolen Name* is invested in demonstrating class as a social construct, as not only the inherently liminal detective, but also his dark double, successfully perform class markers to which they are not entitled, often under the rubric of the game. Jimmy’s ability to traverse the identities of gentleman and criminal is developed through the games he plays with Nick, which rely heavily on performance and spectacle. The first meeting between the men in the novel takes place in front of a group of upper-class Americans that includes Jimmy’s betrothed and his ex-wife (although Nan and Jimmy’s former relationship is known only to themselves, to Nick Carter, and to the reader). The two men are introduced and immediately recognize each other from previous interactions, but feign a first meeting for their audience. Nick explains his presence in seeking out the jewel thief, and Jimmy suggests that the thief may be a woman, to which Nan retorts that the thief is more likely a male guest. The interplay between the three characters is interpreted as merely humorous by the hosts and the other guests, but the reader is in the privileged position of understanding the double meanings of these public utterances. The conversation becomes a series of verbal thrusts and parries, perhaps unsurprising in a chapter titled ‘Throwing down the Gauntlet.’ The reader of this dime novel, alongside the main characters, is able to read the conversation as a double-edged game, and is thus positioned as superior to the upper-class characters watching Nick and Jimmy’s
interactions with confusion. Since Bare-Faced Jimmy can successfully cross class boundaries and the dime novel reader can better understand the repartee between characters than do the upper-class characters in the story, class itself becomes an unstable category.

The two men move from their public verbal duel to another civilized game: tennis. Tennis is an apt field on which detective and criminal can meet, since it highlights the doublessness of the two characters, requiring evenly matched partners for a good game. Tennis, like detection, features players anticipating moves and countermoves, and setting up shots in response. The controller of the game is ostensibly the server, since he makes the first move, but a good return of serve can easily upset that balance of power. Analogously, the criminal always gets the first move in a meeting between criminal and detective, but a well-prepared detective with good powers of anticipation can quickly take control of an investigation. Tennis also bears substantial class markers as an exclusive activity available mostly to the leisured class; any intelligent detective and criminal can engage in verbal parrying, but tennis requires practice, and thus access to the exclusive landscape of the tennis court, in addition to the physical fitness considered important by successful detectives and criminals.

The tennis match, which marks both Nick and Jimmy as having access to leisure activities, serves as an example of *A Stolen Name*’s interest in epistemological questions. This novel, like many in the Nick Carter canon, treats knowledge as a commodity that both acts as a consumer good (the tidy detective ending Jameson notes that readers privilege) and as a pedagogical tool to show readers the complexities of perspective. Here knowledge and understanding continually shift between the reader and various characters, between fictional and metafictional worlds in ways that anticipate and disrupt the ‘fair play’ trope soon to be codified in detective fiction. At the end of Chapter 4, Nick suggests the game of tennis, to which Jimmy replies that he is considered something of an expert at the game. Nick’s reply is understood by the reader and by his opponent, but not by other characters watching the scene with interest: “So much the better. I think I just suggested that about you in quite another line, didn’t I?” (45). Chapter 5, ‘The Ghost of Jimmy,’ opens with the rather terse line: ‘The game of tennis was over’ (46). No further reference is made to the tennis match throughout the novel, with no report of who won the match. This emphasizes that the game, like the case, although ostensibly about winning or losing, also does the work of constructing worthy opponents; the game occurs because the men are well matched. It also recasts the relationship between the
reader and the upper-class characters in the novel, who, as spectators, presumably know the outcome of the game. The reader here is not a double of the detective, but a double (a better reader of certain situations and a worse reader of others) of the spectators in the novel, who may learn about reading people from the public nature of the conflict between Nick and Jimmy being played out in their presence.

In the first private confrontation between Nick and Jimmy, the reader has access to information unavailable to other characters and is provided with reading strategies helpful to processing the scene. Nick accuses and even handcuffs Jimmy, but when the thief threatens to frame Nan for the jewelry robbery in barely veiled terms, Nick removes the handcuffs and decides that he needs more evidence before arresting the conman. Although Jimmy’s threat is clear to a twenty-first-century reader of detective fiction, the dime novel takes pains to keep its reader in a position of understanding: ‘It might occur to the reader to ask: Why did not Nick Carter seize upon his man then and there, put the irons on him and take him away?’ (55). Jimmy’s words are then carefully read for the reader, the implicit threat made overt. This lesson in reading the discourse of the criminal is consonant with the series’ attention to lessons in detective work as well as to understanding the concerns and discursive moves of people in a cross-section of society.

Many chapters of *A Stolen Name* open with an address to the reader, often teaching reading strategies. A chapter entitled ‘Plotting Against a Plotter,’ for example, gives the reader information unavailable to Nick Carter explaining that ‘the one who reads must understand that no such privilege could have been afforded the detective at that time. / He had to form his judgments as to what Jimmy might determine to do next, from his past knowledge of the man, and that, he decided wisely, was to be his credit’ (74). The rules of fair play are intended to protect the reader, preventing the detective from being privy to information that would provide an unfair advantage in solving the case; these rules assume a reader roughly on par with the detective in terms of problem-solving ability, a reader who perceives the detective novel as a riddle upon which to exercise his own powers of observation and problem-solving. The Nick Carter novels often work instead from the assumption that the reader is not in competition with Nick, but rather watching and learning from him. The give and take of information to the reader throughout the story both places her on par with and above the ‘bad’ spectators in the novel, namely the upper-class characters who are fooled by Jimmy and who distrust Nick. Although the reader knows that the responsibility of good readership lies with the acolyte and not
the mentor, she may also recognize the Nick Carter novels as sites of pedagogical potential.

A Stolen Name enacts the idea that an effective detective, like a successful criminal, is a master at reading people and situations and at performing various identities. Several key scenes throughout the novel point to the importance of public space in the detective narrative. The final meeting between Jimmy and Nick involves a carefully staged performance that enacts their commitment to the same woman. When alone with Nick, Jimmy suggests that the detective has a romantic interest in the criminal’s ex-wife; Nick parries by saying simply that as a gentleman, he tries to protect all innocent women. In preparing the reader for the final encounter, the narrative focuses on the parity between the men:

If Nick Carter knew and understood Jimmy Duryea, no less did Jimmy Duryea know and understand the detective.

At least he knew that Nick Carter could not be bluffed.

Jimmy’s trump card was Nan – and Nan’s position was precarious; and Jimmy knew that the detective would stand for Nan, and protect her, just as far as it was possible to do so. (77)

The two men here are doubled, both able to adopt the other’s perspective in enacting the games they play. In this competition, Nan becomes a trump card, a symbol rife with ambivalences, at once one of the most powerful cards in the deck but also still only a card to be played, an object in the control of the players. In constructing Nan as an object of exchange between the two men, it is Jimmy who takes the initiative, as the criminal usually does, since it is he who chooses to make Nan a trump card, choosing the ground (trump suit) on which the two men will compete.

Nick Carter and Jimmy Duryea play a good many games in the first half of A Stolen Name, demonstrating equal levels of wit, resolve, and daring in verbal parries performed for visitors to Lenore’s exclusive home as well as in games – tennis and playing cards – played literally or metaphorically for the pleasure of readers and/or other characters. The game metaphor acts as a barrier between Nick and the criminal, preventing any real threat of contamination. The situation is quite serious: Lenore is engaged to marry a man using an assumed identity and Nan’s hard-fought and well-deserved happiness is threatened by Jimmy’s presence in her new milieu, which also leads to the suppression of any romantic feelings that might otherwise develop between Nan and Nick. But the
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The novel unfolds quite lightly, reveling in the repeated verbal competitions between the two men as it instructs the reader in how to process their playful utterances and performances.

The ethical and erotic mediations of the *femme fatale*

In a dramatic shift of focus, the second half of *A Stolen Name* details Nick’s dealings with Juno, Jimmy’s second wife and his accomplice in the criminal’s ultimately successful theft of Dinwiddie’s identity. After being bested by Jimmy in the identity-theft case, a thoroughly annoyed Nick Carter decides to locate Juno in order to reopen the case and get a rematch against Bare-Faced Jimmy. Where Nan is a potential love interest and a game piece, Juno is a potential *femme fatale*. Nick initially turns to Nan as a detective assistant who can double Juno, since both have been married to Jimmy Duryea; in so doing, Nick takes up Pinkerton’s strategy of having female operatives track female suspects. Nan reluctantly agrees to help, but her attempts to compete against Juno are ultimately inadequate. *A Stolen Name*, then, suggests that gender is not the central dividing feature among game players, as Juno is in fact a worthy opponent for a man, and not just any man; Juno is an appropriate double for Nick Carter. Nick, then, is revealed to be a deeply liminal figure performing gendered competitions in the mold Christopher Breu and others associate with the hardboiled.

The relationship between Nick Carter and Juno, initially constructed as a detective–criminal doubling complicated by largely unacknowledged sexual tension, is eventually recast as a competition between spies representing governments rather than clients, and yet continually caught up in a game of sexual conquest. In competing against Jimmy in the first half of the novel, Nick shows himself to be an excellent reader of character and situation, always ready with the right countermove to Jimmy’s gameplay. In his interactions with Juno, however, Nick consistently misreads her as a *femme fatale* and initially plays a double game, trying to trick her by pretending to fall for what he perceives as her sexual tricks. As he moves through their interactions, which Nick sees as a competitive game, he is very slow in recognizing that to Juno, theirs is a courtship game. *A Stolen Name* evokes this anxiety and maintains it for over a hundred pages before Nick reads Juno accurately, forcing him – and the reader – to reread past scenes. Juno looks like a *femme fatale* but in fact is a highly successful professional woman – a spy – whose sexuality is in some ways aligned with mainstream Victorian literature. Indeed, the metaphorization of Juno’s threatening sexuality through
the game shares consonances with canonical heroines like Gwendolyn Harleth or Charlotte Stant. For example, the scene in Henry James’s *The Golden Bowl* (Chapter 36) in which Maggie Verver and Charlotte Stant look in through a window at a game of bridge being played by the men over whom they battle and the tempestuous roulette scene in which George Eliot’s Daniel Deronda first observes Gwendolyn Harleth in *Daniel Deronda* (Chapter 1) both resonate with the ability of a game to structure complex female characters and their interactions with men. Despite her appearance in a dime novel detective narrative, Juno is shown as having the same desires and concerns as heroines appearing at game tables in more canonical novels.

Juno is initially presented as a worthy opponent for Nick through the reputation she has built with the French police as ‘the Leopard,’ so called because of her grace and power in completely incapacitating and destroying men. The chief’s description of Juno is full of the ambiguities that serve to define her character throughout the novel, since, although she has often been questioned by the police, no charges have ever been laid against her. “It has even been said of her that she has lived a spotlessly moral life,” the chief confesses after saying he thinks she is responsible for many crimes, “and so far as my own knowledge goes, it is the truth. But, she is none the less a dangerous woman” (179–80). Juno’s simultaneous ‘spotlessly moral life’ and the danger she represents for a large number of men reveals that her ‘victims’ are fully complicit in giving her power over them. The dangers to Nick appear to be clearly laid out: if he can resist the seductive power of the Leopard, he can obtain Juno’s assistance in convicting Jimmy Duryea of identity theft.

As Nick’s investigation progresses, Juno continues to double him as she reveals that both have seductive as well as investigative powers, and both are partly innate, partly cultivated. Juno’s beauty is native, as is Nick’s physical appeal, characterized in awed terms in *The Old Detective’s Pupil* when bare-chested Nick’s attributes are described: ‘No muscle was over-developed. Every muscle was in harmonious working with its fellows, and in consequence the graceful, handsome, inoffensive-looking young man was without a peer’ (10). But part of Juno’s power as a seductress results from her fluency in hypnotism, a skill she has built through years of learning and practice analogous to those Nick has spent becoming a detective. Nick reflects on Juno’s hypnotism:

He had no doubt that she had cultivated that power to the utmost for years, under competent teachers, until she had become a master in its use. The power of exerting hypnotic influence is an attainment
which is the consequence of study and practice; it is not a gift. One may learn it just as one may learn to be a doctor, or a lawyer, or a dentist. (203)

Or, indeed, as one may learn to be a detective by developing skills of observation, memory, judgment, disguise, and physical prowess, as the Nick Carter novels carefully lay out. The construction of hypnotism as a learned science rather than a native ability serves to demystify Juno’s power, characterizing her as intelligent and focused rather than as consummately mysterious. This reevaluation of the eerily seductive woman serves to reduce the aura of almost supernatural mystery around her and to position her as a highly skilled professional, a worthy detective double.

Nick and Juno play extended games of sexual pursuit and conquest throughout the novel. In the first erotic scene, Nick pretends to be hypnotized so that he can observe his opponent; he is impressed with her hypnotic skills, which pose a challenge even to his own strong mental constitution. The long scene in which the two characters fight for control of Nick’s mind breaks down the game metaphor of detective and criminal meeting across a chessboard as Nick’s mental restraint becomes tangled with sexual desire:

Slowly, that free hand of hers stroked the backs of his.
Brightly, almost with a suggestion of living fire, her big eyes burned into his.
He felt a tightening at his throat. There was a sensation as if a rubber band wound tightly around his brows; but he controlled himself. He managed to fix his mind upon the object of his presence there, and he felt that he could resist her, even unto the end. (203–4)

Resisting Juno becomes increasingly difficult as Nick’s sexual arousal causes ‘beads of perspiration [to come] out upon his brow’ (204), and she eventually leads him to an armchair, where she strokes ‘his forehead with her velvety touch’ (205), rendering him almost as incapacitated as her previous male conquests. Although Nick manages – just barely – to hold on to his mental faculties in the face of Juno’s hypnosis, her sexual charms come close to incapacitating him and providing her a victory.

However, Nick Carter proves himself to be more than an armchair detective – albeit a sexually aroused one – when he moves between the classical detective persona and its hardboiled counterpart in counteracting Juno’s attempted hypnotism. Not to be outdone, Nick takes on
the role of sexual seducer, and by thus appropriating Juno’s strengths, he begins to gain control of her mind and access to her body. Still pretending to be hypnotized, Nick rises from his armchair and seizes Juno in his arms. She removes herself from his embrace, but not without hesitation: ‘He saw that for a moment she turned her back to him, and that she seemed to struggle with herself’ (208). This hesitation, Nick slowly figures out – surely more slowly than the reader – arises from Juno’s growing attraction to the detective, an attraction she freely admits, but that Nick misreads in a chapter entitled ‘In the Net of the Siren.’

Months after the abortive hypnotism/courtship scene, Nick, now working for the Russian ambassador against Juno the Siamese spy, attends an exclusive society party at which Juno confesses for love for him, going so far as to give him permission to make love to her. Reading Juno’s declarations as a ploy, Nick struggles again to control his reactions to her: ‘The detective felt the thrill of her; realized the magnetism of the woman; knew the danger he courted; understood that she was openly making a bid for his admiration – perhaps more’ (277). He catches her wrist in his hand as she reaches for him, gently disengaging himself. After a long discussion full of sexual tension and double meanings about criminal investigations in which both are involved, Nick admits that he refuses her advances because he does not trust her. Juno is no longer playing a game; her reactions are those of an upper-class woman confessing her love to a man rather than the repartee we might expect between detective and criminal:

‘Ah; you will not be quite frank with me.’
‘Perhaps it is best, countess, that we meet on the common ground of distrust.’

She started away from him. The remark stung her, and he could see that it had done so, although he had not intended to hurt her by what he said. (284)

This conversation sets the stage for a surprising conclusion to the novel: Juno is not the femme fatale Nick has suspected her to be; instead, as the French police chief has suggested, she is morally spotless. Her attraction to Nick is not feigned, and she is blameless in the mysterious deaths of several men she has known. Her response to Nick’s comment reveals her to be a lady.

The conversation in the greenhouse establishes the personal quality of both characters. By performing the role of a lady who will bear no insult from a man, Juno establishes her right to dignity; she tells Nick
that he is no longer welcome in her home. Nick reacts as a gentleman in the Raymond Chandler mold, as his musings – ‘A detective has to do many things which are not congenial, but he does not have to do ungentlemanly or dishonorable things’ (288) – presage Chandler’s articulation of the hardboiled detective as ‘a man of honor’ as well as ‘a lonely man.’ Here Nick puts character above profession when he respects Juno’s wishes at the risk of the investigation. Even as the discourse between Juno and Nick sounds more like a courtship than a competitive detective–criminal encounter, Nick eventually recasts his honorable attention to Juno’s wishes as a game: ‘Her conduct toward him when she drove him away from her home left no sting after it, for, after all, that was part of the game, and it was up to her to take all the tricks she could take’ (306–7).

Nick has misread a courtship game as a contest, something he will understand only in the final chapter, titled ‘Bare-Faced Jimmy’s Double,’ in which Nick disguises himself as Jimmy Duryea to undertake the final step of tracking the Russian embassy’s missing documents. This flawless impersonation is taken on so he can surprise Juno and hopefully force her to confess. Instead, disguised as her former husband, he finds Juno in danger from three assassins and saves her life. Nick’s failure to use the game metaphor to understand emotional entanglements is highlighted when Juno thanks him for having saved her life and apologizes for her cutting comment at the party:

‘Will you forgive me?’

‘Oh, that is all in the game, Juno. I think I admired you when you did it. It was a very plucky thing to do.’

‘No. That is a mistake. It was not a plucky thing to do; it was a despicable thing for me to do. Will you forgive it? Say yes, if you mean it.’

‘Yes. Wholly. Entirely. And now——’ (318)

Juno cuts off Nick’s attempt to clear up the final details of the mystery by drawing attention to the uncomfortable doubling inherent in Nick’s disguise as Jimmy, her former husband and the only man whose relationship casts her as a criminal, since she did abet the Ledger Dinwiddie scam. She says: “Go in there and remove your disguise. Let me talk to you as Nick Carter; not as what you appear to be”’ (318). And yet, Nick Carter may never be quite so much himself as in the moment he appears to be Jimmy Duryea, performing heroic and courtly acts along with the identity of a criminal lover of Juno’s. For Nick, disguise and performance are critical to the game of detection, a metaphor that structures all his relationships.
The suave Nick Carter of *A Stolen Name* perceives the woman who loves him as a fellow game-player in order to avoid having to think of her as a possible long-term partner with needs that might conflict with his life as a detective. The technique here makes clear why the name of Nick Carter was resurrected for Bond-style spy thrillers of the 1970s and '80s. By placing the object of his desire in the position of opponent or fellow game-player, Nick can compartmentalize his life in a way that keeps his identity as detective the salient fact about him. Thus, a whole series of narratives – spanning five decades in the pulps and another two in the spy novels – continually evoke a potent tangling of two powerful narrative forces: sexual tension and detective–criminal competition.

*A Stolen Name* ends with Nick suggesting to Juno that she give up her life as an international spy and ‘live the life that will make you happy.’ This comment is followed by one of the very few blank spaces in the entire novel, the text returning with the line: ‘After a time she asked him: “What will you do with those men downstairs [the assassins], Nick Carter?”’ (320). The reader of early popular fiction knows that the typographical gap is akin to the cinematic cut from a couple; it indicates that sexual interactions are taking place off-stage. The last line of the book, moments after the fate of the assassins has been decided and clearly in the position of the happy ending line, is: ‘Another thing: Bare-Faced Jimmy Duryea, with the many aliases, died that same night in the prison where he was confined’ (320). This marks Nick Carter’s complete victory over Jimmy, as he has refused Jimmy’s discarded woman, Nan Nightingale, and, disguised as Jimmy, he has won Juno, the woman with whom Jimmy had intended to share the spoils he gathered by impersonating Ledger Dinwiddie. In the terms set out by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her brilliant and insightful exploration of homosocial desire in *Between Men*, the most important relationship in *A Stolen Name* is that between the dark doubles, Nick and Jimmy, since their competition is played out in some ways through their struggle for the same woman, or in this case, the same two women. As the women are cast as a trump card and a misread sign, the presence of the game here can be seen as mediating not only the contaminations of criminality, but also those of both heterosexual and homoerotic desire.

**Proto-postmodern epistemological investigations**

The woman at the center of Nick’s investigation in *The Turn of a Card; or, Nick Carter Plays a Skillful Game* (1911)\(^{11}\) casts herself as both a game piece and an unreadable sign. This novel works out questions of artifice
and identity at the sites of gender and class through the game in a way that foretells William Faulkner’s Knight’s Gambit, a tale that simultaneously positions the characters within a detective–criminal–victim triangle and as pieces on a chessboard. The Turn of a Card is structured by a card game that interacts with detective conventions and plays within those conventions to create a surreal atmosphere that explores several highly permeable boundaries: the limits of the game metaphor as structure of containment, the impossibility of stable personal identity in a world where the figure of the double is itself multiplied, the threat of collapse between the spectator and the performer, and the limits of interpretation in a fictional realm in which rationality and madness coexist unlabeled and the detective is ultimately unable to provide the labels that will organize them epistemologically.

The plot is ridiculously complex. This is partly because this dime novel, like A Stolen Name, draws together three novellas that were initially published separately, but also because the novel uses numerous plot complications to mirror its interest in the ultimate breakdown of rationality. Even as three separate stories, the reader might experience what John Irwin calls ‘intellectual vertigo’ (Mystery, 11); taken as a whole, The Turn of a Card is labyrinthine, woven together by a mysterious female figure – a masked woman dressed as the Ace of Hearts – who, with her four assistants, the two through five of hearts, puts on performances throughout the country. The five women perform spellbinding dance numbers followed by an impressive display of shooting involving precision marksmanship with playing cards as targets. The image of the Ace shooting a two-dimensional version of her disguised self for the pleasure of the audience is a powerful one, as it is the first of a number of symbolic images of her struggles with power and identity. Nick, hired to unmask this mysterious woman, embarks upon a lengthy and tortuous chase that takes him through several theatre scenes, a roadside encounter beside the Ace’s out-of-commission limousine, two mansions booby-trapped to self-destruct on the Ace’s orders, a suicide safe, a downtown hotel, and a high-class gambling parlor with a trick floor.

The Ace turns out to be one of six women – two sets of three sisters who are cousins and strongly resemble each other – who are extremely intelligent, highly skilled in the arts of performance, disguise and games, and fundamentally mad. The narrative takes place largely in the space of dialogue between Nick and one of the women (not always the same one, although Nick cannot usually identify which), where he continually seeks to unmask and identify her but instead is always left turning over another card that poses another question. The story ends the
only way it can: with the death of all six women, two from illness, two murdered by others within the group, and two by their own hand. Nick is left with a resolution rather than a solution: the multiplied female figures who have challenged his grasp on reality are dead. But can their deaths allow Nick Carter to return to his previous rational understanding of the world? The lack of rationality in the women’s decisions creates them – whether victims or criminals or both – as unsettling doubles for Nick, who needs the game to mediate between them and himself to avoid the contamination associated with madness as much as with criminality. The game, however, falls short in creating Nick as the victor, because it cannot entirely account for the moves made by the six Bulwer women, or even, sometimes, those made by Nick Carter.

The game here, both as it constructs the relationship between reader and writer and that between characters, is shown to be inadequate. Instead of setting up a situation of fair play between reader and writer, the narrative self-consciously reminds the reader of the writer’s control over the narrative. In the first chapter, ‘The Ace of Hearts,’ Nick Carter stops on the street to pick up a common playing card that attracts his attention because it has a bullet hole exactly through its center. Nick’s interest, the reader is told, is piqued by the fact that ‘it so happened that at that moment of his experience, the ace of hearts, in whatever form or guise, pictured or spoken, was filled with profound interest for him’ (5). The reader follows Nick into a playhouse, spectating alongside the great detective, who ‘watched with apparently careless interest the beautifully formed woman who was the central figure of the act’ (6). The reader’s interest, of course, is anything but careless. The act, like the novel, is called The Turn of a Card, and it unfolds to thunderous applause as it introduces the spectacular Ace of Hearts. At this point, the reader is told only that Nick’s interest in the playing card – the found object and the woman – is based on a client’s visit. Chapter 3, ‘Five Spots of Mystery,’ opens with a reminder that the writer is not playing fair: ‘the actual matter which had taken Nick Carter into the city of Washington at this time need not be explained until another chapter’ (24). The reader finds out only in Chapter 4 that James Stuyvesant has asked Nick to find out if the Ace of Hearts is his vanished fiancée’s cousin, Selma Bulwer, whom he suspects was involved in his betrothed Beatrice’s disappearance. Even this transaction is wrapped in some mystery for the reader, as Stuyvesant presents Nick with a check, pleading that he take the case: “After I have questioned you further I may do so. The thing interests me,” said Nick; and he left the check lying where it was, without touching it’ (44). Nick Carter is a professional detective, and his fee is
often paid in front of the reader, who is not told why Nick does not pick up Stuyvesant’s check and later refuses financial remuneration when Selina Bulwer, supposedly the last of the madwomen, wants to hire him to protect her against her cousin. This small mystery for the reader, soon overshadowed by more significant ones, is never resolved. The impact in this entertaining but confusing novel is to place the reader once again in a position of not knowing why Nick acts as he does. His repeated refusals of payment suggest that this case is more than a job for Nick: it is a search for meaning, an attempt to uncover what Nick Carter dime novels often call ‘the deeper game,’ perhaps something akin to a quest for truth.

Indeed, throughout much of the novel, Nick investigates disguise rather than crime. In fact, he seems almost relieved when Stuyvesant is murdered: ‘Here, at least, was a definite crime, and there could be but little doubt concerning the source of it’ (123). His relief may arise partly from the fact that to investigate crime is to battle an act that he would not commit, but to investigate disguise is to examine a site at which he is usually the master. Battles over issues of disguise and hidden identities create an increasingly uncomfortable doubling between Nick and the Ace of Hearts. Although not as sinister as the doublings explored in the Pinkerton tales and related dime novels, it is a departure from doublings figured strictly through games. The arena of disguise is usually a locus of power for Nick Carter, and the Ace of Hearts’s even more extreme and complex use of disguise threatens his position and even his identity.

The Ace, indeed, continually both doubles and bests Nick Carter at the game of disguise. At their first meeting in her dressing room after a performance when she is still fully disguised, Nick is surprised that she recognizes him, and she tells him that she has observed him without his noticing it. She further tells him that she is always in disguise, claiming that this is good advertising for her show, although Nick repeatedly questions that motive. This recalls the earlier Nick Carter stories, in which he too is always disguised, often as his father. In *Nick Carter's Double Game; or, The Ghost of Ravenswood House* (1891), for example, Nick’s near-ubiquitous disguise contains a complexity reminiscent of the Ace’s persona. Nick has a client wait in the reception-room of his home while he observes her through the eyes of a huge portrait of his father. He meets her disguised as his father, and as he learns more about the case he realizes he will need to adopt a radical disguise: ‘When Nick Carter returned to the reception-room, he was without any disguise whatever – *i.e.*, he was Nick Carter in his own
proper person’ (6). Appearing without any disguise whatsoever, the reader learns, is one of Nick’s most potent personas. And yet, even this drastic move – that of refusing to double the opponent by dispensing with disguise altogether – is inadequate in the face of the Ace of Hearts.

Quite early in The Turn of a Card, Nick, disguised as a Virginia farmer, attempts to break the disguises of the women performers to no avail. Smarting from his defeat, Nick talks to the theatre manager, an old friend: ‘“I figured it out, Joe, that those people would enter the theater with the audience. I think they did so, but they succeeded in fooling me. Hereafter I am going to play my cards face upward on the table. There’ll be no more disguises in this game”’ (71). Nick’s choice to reveal his naked face, to ‘play [his] cards face upward’ reveals, as in A Stolen Name, his difficulty in managing competitive games against a female adversary. The Ace, undeterred, continues to multiply her disguises throughout the text, keeping her identity always one card away, as many of the encounters between Nick and a woman he thinks is the Ace are actually with one of her cousins or sisters. In an ironically doubled moment, the Ace is at one point revealed as the only woman not wearing a costume at a party, unreadable because of her lack of disguise. Even after Stuyvesant’s death, the central intrigue in the novel is not finding his murderer, but unraveling the layers of disguise and deception radiating from the Ace of Hearts in an attempt to read her meaning.

The Turn of a Card is filled with difficult and even unreadable signs, the most difficult always the woman at its center. The most famous unreadable sign in detective fiction, made even more unreadable by the sheer number of delightfully inadequate attempts to read it, is, of course, Poe’s purloined letter. In his reading of Johnson’s response to Lacan and Derrida as they reenact a central insight of Poe’s ‘The Purloined Letter’ by themselves playing the game of odds and evens that structures Poe’s tale, John Irwin manages to take doubling at the site of detective stories to a whole new level. He rehearses the arguments made by Lacan and Derrida as they recast the geometric configurations of Poe’s story in simultaneously doubled and opposed ways, and delights in the paradox of Johnson’s reading as the fourth in the series, showing that in its attempt to use self-consciousness in order to ‘create an insight without a blind spot,’ this reading both duplicates its own insight and leaves a blind spot because of it. Irwin concludes his chapter about the analysis of ‘The Purloined Letter’ by doubling back his analysis onto Poe, saying that analysis such as that he examines
and thus produces has the side effect of producing ‘a kind of intellec-
tual vertigo, a not uncharacteristic side effect of thought about
thought’ and that ‘no one enjoyed producing this vertiginous effect
more than did Poe’ (Mystery, 11).12 The chapter ends on an insight that
is central to the genre of detective fiction, that ‘there will always be
one more step needed in order to make the act of thinking and the
content of thought coincide’ (12).

Nick Carter’s story here does not have the rhetorical power or
procreative self-consciousness and self-reflexivity of ‘The Purloined
Letter,’ and no grouping of specific Nick Carter stories is likely to pro-
vide quite the pleasurable intellectual vertigo of grouping Poe’s three
stories, in which doubling works in complicated ways – the doubling
of Poe and Dupin in their attempts to solve the Marie Roget/Mary
Rogers case, the doubling of Dupin and the Minister D at the site of
the purloined letter – and which are themselves doubled by Borges
in his three detective stories. However, the Ace of Hearts is a remarkably
complex sign that attaches itself simultaneously to a woman, a game,
and a number of card tricks. The impossibility of reading the sign
remains the central issue of The Turn of a Card even after the murder
of Nick’s prospective client. In the end, the only way to explain the
multiplying layers of significance at the site of the sign of the Ace is
to say that the Ace and all the other women involved in the duplica-
tions of the sign are mad. This move, necessary for the conclusion of a
dime novel story spiraling out of control, also marks limits to rational-
ity. Despite his best efforts and the considerable skill and experience
behind them, Nick is ultimately unable to unravel the reel of mystery
erected by the Ace.

Part of the difficulty Nick faces in unraveling the mystery of the
Ace’s identity is that she often plays in the spaces between the rules
of the game and those of the trick. At a party hosted by the famous
actress Emily Yates, for example, Nick sees the Ace of Hearts and one
of her confederates doing a card trick. He recognizes the game as a
French card trick called Names. Nick approaches and just before the
Ace turns the final card of the trick, he takes a playing card from his
pocket and replaces that which she was about to turn. He explains
the trick to the audience and describes his card with the flair of a
magician performing: “... which you will observe is the five spot of
hearts, but I announce that beneath my hand upon that deck I have
the pictured face of a young woman I shall now name – a woman who
strangely disappeared from a box at the opera in New York some time
ago. I refer to Beatrice Bulwer”’ (110). The picture of Beatrice Bulwer
shocks the alleged Ace, who faints. Nick reads her physical reaction as confirmation that she was involved in killing Beatrice, but he later realizes that she is Beatrice.

Taking advantage of her state – in a completely ungentlemanly way that fits the rules of the game but not those of detective comportment – James Stuyvesant, Nick’s ‘client,’ bodily unmasks the unconscious woman. The crowd that has gathered around the performance of Nick inserting himself into the Ace’s performance space by taking over the trick draws back with gasps as ‘The exclamations that were uttered by different persons in the group surrounding the fallen woman were expressive of amazement, horror, and even terror’ (112). The face of the woman behind the mask is hideously deformed by incredibly lifelike tattoos of serpents ‘exercised with more skills and with more attention to horrible detail’ (112–13) than any other tattoo, making her face another ultimately unread sign. What is the story behind the hideous tattoo? What does it mean? A reader of detective fiction fully expects to have these questions answered, to gain some sort of epistemological satisfaction by novel’s end, especially when the famous Nick Carter is on the case. But in the fashion of the postmodern detective novel, no prior narrative explaining these tattoos is ever provided.

In the face of several identically disguised women, the tattoo holds the potential of being a distinguishing feature, at least. But does the tattoo belong to the Ace or to one of her doubles? After his ‘client’ is killed on the same night the tattooed woman is revealed and escapes, Nick Carter begins a labyrinthine process of reasoning the identities of the Ace, alternating between imagining the tattooed woman as the Ace or as one of her subordinates until next meeting with the Ace – or a woman dressed as her – when she lures Nick into a suicide safe where she ‘reveals all’ to Nick immediately before planning to kill them both. And yet even this explanation is more frustrating than enlightening for readers. Because he is busy trying to escape the strongbox, Nick pays little attention to her story, leaving readers to wonder if they are privy only to the parts Nick actually attends to. The tattooed woman tells the detective that the Ace of Hearts is in fact Emily Bulwer, a cousin who has taken on the identity of Emily Yates, the society woman who hosted the party at which the tattooed woman was revealed. When Nick asks carelessly about Emily’s real identity, the tattooed woman scoffs:

‘... her real character? Well, she has had many names given to her in different parts of the world, and there are many who believe that
it is not the same woman who has posed under all of them at one time and another. There are others – you among them, I think – who believe that the several women who have gained such notoriety in different countries, are one and the same. Do you know what I mean? In England she was the “Queen of Diamonds”; in Paris, she was called “The Sublime”; in Spain, she was known as “The Scorpion”; in India——’ (192–3)

This exposition on the Ace’s past highlights the impossibility of reading her. Nick has been pursuing the Ace of Hearts, an identity he eventually realizes is split between several women, and, even during this conversation about the Ace of Hearts, he is speaking to a woman dressed as the Ace. The ‘real’ Ace – more real than the others who share the disguise between them – has in the past multiplied identities – as the Queen of Diamonds, the Sublime, the Scorpion, and so on – rather than sharing them. And yet she is completely capable of doing both, making her much more effective at disguise than even Nick Carter.

The Ace of Hearts has chosen for herself a multiply valenced sign. The ace as a playing card has dual meaning, simultaneously the highest and lowest card of a suit. In fact, the Ace is positioned as the low card and also as the number one – unique, part of a system but not a duality – by her co-performers being 2 through 5 and not 10, J, Q, and K, as one might expect. The royal flush that would thus be formed would be the ultimate hand in poker and would place the Ace as the high card. This configuration, on the other hand, forms a straight flush with her that is, in poker, the guaranteed lowest hand as well as an excellent high hand. It also positions her as the first rather than the last of the five cards. More importantly, the slippages inherent in the Ace’s identity – and the different ways her sign can be constructed by the identities of those around her – show Nick Carter and the reader that context is crucial in reading disguise, especially when disguise becomes part of person’s identity rather than an alternative.

The Ace’s repeated performance of card tricks while Nick tries to read her through the metaphor of card games continues to foil the famous detective until he realizes that the game functions as a structure of containment only if its rules are followed by all the players. Nick is playing a game while the Ace is playing tricks. The second murdered body to appear in the novel is that of Selina Bulwer, whom Nick finds dead in a chair with a royal flush in hearts on her lap. Nick knows that the Bulwers, despite having a card mania, hate poker. The hatred of poker is at once a class marker and an irony, since the game developed
in America as a game of the lower classes, dominated by confidence men, and, as Jackson Lears writes, ‘constantly threaten[ing] to degenerate from a contest among equals to a confidence game between sharpers and shills’ (159). The Bulwers, of course, constantly threaten Nick through their refusal to play by the rules of any games, and yet they also eschew cheating, which marks them as playing in the space between play and games, neither quite breaking nor acknowledging the rules. Nick’s reading of the hatred of poker allows him to finally make some headway in reading the sign of the Ace. He reads the cards left on the dead woman’s lap not as the best hand in poker but as part of a complicated card trick. He explains his reasoning to a police detective investigating the case, who is clearly unable to follow Nick’s explanation of the meaning of the card trick, but who is nonetheless impressed when Emily Bulwer’s apartment is searched and reveals five piles of cards including a royal flush in hearts just as Nick had predicted. Nick has successfully read the cards at last, providing a small epistemological victory, but a short-lived one when this places him no closer to locating the Ace of Hearts and convicting her for the two murders he is now sure she has committed.

Instead, the visit to Emily’s rooms has revealed a veritable profusion of unreadable signs. In Chapter 33, ‘The Marked Panes,’ Nick notices that the windows have all been scratched, probably with a diamond ring: ‘Although, in the main, the scratches were undecipherable and seemed to have no significance at all, there were three of them which evidently had a meaning. Nick could not determine, however, whether the marks had been placed there inadvertently or by design’ (271). Meaning, then, can be construed even from marks made inadvertently, by chance. This passage, in which a detective tries to read meaning into signs while telling the reader that the signs may be ultimately random, places The Turn of a Card within the conceptual field of the postmodern or metaphysical detective narrative. This scene, in fact, resembles several within Paul Auster’s postmodern detective masterpiece, The New York Trilogy (1988), perhaps especially those scenes where Daniel Quinn, performing the role of the detective Paul Auster, reads the steps taken by the man he shadows as a series of giant letters being ephemerally ‘drawn’ onto the streets of New York. Captured in what the narrative shows to be an irrational belief in meaning, Quinn’s (mis)reading of these signs leads to his own implied self-destruction.

Nick Carter, fortunately, is a much better detective than Daniel Quinn. Despite his belief that some of the signs in Emily’s rooms have meaning,
Carter acknowledges that he cannot read them. Recognizing that he has reached the limits of his powers of interpretation in this case, he and Conroy, a police detective, find the police department’s expert on gambling. Instead of asking him to read the signs, they find out where high-class gambling parties that allow women are held. The symbols on the marked panes are never read beyond Nick’s initial attempts to read the three he thinks significant; rather, Nick finally abandons his rational approach to solving the mystery of the Ace in favor of setting up a game of chance in the hopes that the odds favor him. As he and Conroy go to Madame Icard’s hotel suite/gambling den, the reader is told that this is ‘nothing but a gamble’ (282–3). After almost 300 pages of trying to interpret the Ace through the prism of rational games, Nick turns to a game of chance, hoping for luck, which has been discussed previously by the narrator: ‘When we stop to think of it, our lives are made up of coincidences and chances which are frequently defined as “luck” or “ill luck” as the case may be’ (75). And much to his surprise, Nick Carter is favored by fortune, soon finding himself face-to-face with Emily Bulwer, who is winning hugely at the roulette table. He is so surprised by his good fortune that he is momentarily robbed of his normal ability to be ‘deliberately impulsive’ (289), a contradiction in terms that the narrative acknowledges and explains as resulting from Carter’s unusually quick abilities in rational decision-making. Temporarily foiled by a fully explainable trick floor, Carter pursues Emily to a final mad scene in which he subdues her and turns her over to an asylum, where she dies soon after.

Faced with unreadable signs that write the femme fatale as a figure of irrationality, Nick Carter eventually triumphs by determining which kind of dark doubling will be effective. In a rare novel that finds the normally team-oriented Nick Carter working mostly alone and without access to his mentees or his mentor persona, The Turn of a Card presents the Ace’s confederates as increasingly central to her ability to keep her identity concealed. Nick tries masterful disguise to counter the Ace’s superior performance skills, to no avail. Leaving behind any semblance of disguise, he attempts to understand and construct meaning through the containing structure of the game, again to no avail. It is not until Nick abandons all the attributes most important to his detective identity – mentorship, disguise, rationality – that he is able to make sense, albeit limited sense, of the Ace of Hearts. It is only through his final turning of an unusual card, his embrace of chance over rationality, that Nick Carter resolves, if not solves, the mystery.
Conclusion

As we have seen, as an early example of American detective fiction that relies heavily on the discourses of mentorship, fair play, and games, the Nick Carter stories explore the potentials of detective doubling in a more aestheticized way than do the Pinkerton novels and the dime novels exploring the meaning of Pinkerton and his mythical double, Jesse James. As a strictly fictional character, Nick Carter tends to move away from anxieties around the contested real-world intertwinnings of capital, crime, and detection. The pleasure of the Nick Carter stories resides in the continual interplay of the intellectual and the visceral, as Nick establishes and develops tropes now associated with all the detective subgenres through his extensive use of games as both structure and content. Nick's ability to play multiple roles – cast as part of playing a game, not as participating in a dangerous and potentially contaminating form of disguise – is at the center of these books' explorations of the potentials of the game metaphor and structure. The Nick Carter dime novels do not use the game simply to construct the relationship between reader and writer, a technique often associated with the pleasures of detective fiction; instead the game has the potential to allow doubling without contamination. The game metaphor is a multi-faceted one, and it can function simultaneously in several ways: as a mimetic move in which the narrative teaches reading strategies; as an exposition of the instability of class categories, which can be transcended through proficiency in the games that mark a class; and even as an exploration of the limits of rationality.

The *New Magnet Library*’s cover blurbs on Nick Carter novels admitting that these texts were once considered ‘cheap and contaminating’ are used to win what Paul Erickson calls ‘a game of cat and mouse’ against the Post Office by, to some degree, misrepresenting the content of the Nick Carter books. This provides a delightful funhouse mirror for the play of accurate and inaccurate representations that occurs as a result of Nick Carter's continual reliance on games within the texts. Indeed, Nick sometimes misreads situations because he constructs them as games, sometimes even making questionable decisions as a result of too-close adherence to the rules of the game, and yet the continued presence and prevalence of game metaphors throughout this series act to ensure his on-the-page as well as off-the-page success. Like the Pinkerton books, the Nick Carter novels achieve narrative momentum through a constant interplay between tropes of contamination and containment, although the more aestheticized and analytical fictional
detective achieves much more containment than does the real-world historical detective. It is this dance between contamination and containment in the figure of the heroic male detective that provides the detective genre not only its substantial success in the marketplace, but also its interest to canonical writers such as Mark Twain and William Faulkner, whose repeated dalliances with detective fiction and its concerns emerge, not in response to classical or hardboiled detective fiction, but to the representations of such figures as Allan Pinkerton and Nick Carter in the dime novels.
Faulkner, Twain, and the Legacy of Dime Novel Detectives

Introduction

William Faulkner’s Chick Mallison and Mark Twain’s Tom Sawyer may not seem to belong to the complex literary landscape constructed by nineteenth-century detective dime novels. And yet, both characters could have stepped out of the pages of the dime novels that surely shaped their construction. In *Tom Sawyer, Detective* (1896), for example, Huck Finn describes his friend’s interest in detective work in trademark Huckleberry style: ‘It was always nuts for Tom Sawyer – a mystery was. If you’d lay out a mystery and a pie before me and him, you wouldn’t have to say take your choice; it was a thing that would regulate itself. Because in my nature I have always run to pie, while in his nature he has always run to mystery’ (122). Tom, here and elsewhere, is described as every bit the enthusiastic young detective of the *New York Detective Library’s* weekly offerings, wanting nothing more than a good mystery to help him make his mark in the world. Tom also recalls Allan Pinkerton’s colorful tales, especially in the parallels between Pinkerton’s first real-world detective adventure, in which he discovered counterfeiters on an island by observing their lights in the nighttime sky, and Tom’s pirate play on the island in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876).

Chick Mallison, on the other hand, resembles Chick Carter almost uncannily, and not only in name. Both young men learn about detective work and models of manhood from experienced detectives acting as a father figure: Gavin Stevens, Chick Mallison’s uncle, and Nick Carter, Chick Carter’s adoptive father. And Gavin, like Nick, uses games as a central metaphor in providing sometimes opaque advice to the young detective in training. In *Knight’s Gambit*, for example, Gavin’s chess lessons to Chick are always almost transposable to real life. In the novel’s
denouement, Gavin tests his nephew by asking him to help construct an explanation of events using chess metaphors:

[Gavin:] ‘Maybe he realized that queen and the castle both had been gone ever since the moment he disarmed the prince with that hearth-broom. If he ever wanted her.’

‘Then what was he doing here?’ he said.

‘Why was he waiting?’ his uncle said.

‘Maybe it was a pleasant square,’ he said. ‘For the pleasure of being able to move not only two squares at once but in two directions at once.’ (229)

The detective’s pedagogical impulse to deploy a game and its epistemological power in understanding not only what happened but why is just as central to many Nick Carter narratives as to this Faulkner novella.

We have thus far focused on the dime novels through the lens of detective fiction criticism, sketching out ways that detailed readings of popular texts that are not at all homogeneous (despite publishers’ best efforts to make them look that way) provide us a richer sense of the roots of the detective genre. We turn now to the impact of taking detective dime novels seriously in the study of American literature when we trace detective tropes into the texts of canonical writers like Twain and Faulkner, both of whom were continually drawn to the detective genre throughout their illustrious writing careers in (generally not highly regarded) examples of full-blown detective narratives and in the use of detective conventions in more acclaimed novels. Twain’s and Faulkner’s detective texts are among their least studied works, and the evolutionary model of genre development would situate these works within a specific sociohistorical and aesthetic context, with Twain’s detective texts drawing from the classical detective tradition and Faulkner’s located within hardboiled conventions. What happens, though, if we position detective fiction from both writers alongside the dime novels instead? What if we read them as stories about contamination and containment?

Although Twain’s and Faulkner’s detectives stories are quite different from each other, they share the dubious honor of frustrating critics – and not in the pleasurable sense of Irwin’s intellectual vertigo. Twain famously derided the detective genre in his notebook, writing in 1896, ‘What a curious thing a detective story is. And was there ever one that the author needn’t be ashamed of, except “The Murders in the Rue Morgue?”’ (cited in Howe, 495). This assessment is surely tongue-in-cheek, since of Poe’s three detective stories, ‘Rue Morgue’ is the only one
that might remotely be considered embarrassing, given its conclusion of murder by orangutan. Twain, of course, is never to be fully trusted in his essays or his stories, but even given that, his lifelong love–hate relationship with detective fiction continues to puzzle his critics. Twain felt that he simply couldn’t get his detective stories right, a judgment generally echoed by scholars, but even as he frequently mocked detectives and detective fiction, his engagement with both is evident, as he returned to them several times throughout his career, with *Simon Wheeler, Detective* (1877),¹ ‘The Stolen White Elephant’ (1882), *Tom Sawyer, Detective* (1896), ‘A Double-Barreled Detective Story’ (1902), and even *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1894), which includes substantial detective elements. Faulkner also wrote only a few narratives structured as detective fiction according to Todorov’s typology, but he regularly employed detective tropes in some of his most acclaimed works,² and Gavin Stevens, county attorney cum detective was one of his favorite characters. The Gavin Stevens detective narratives comprising the novel *Intruder in the Dust* (1948) and the five short stories and title novella collected in *Knight’s Gambit* (1949), though, occupy something of a marginal space, largely overlooked by Faulkner scholars as well as detective critics. As May Cameron Brown and Esta Seaton note, Gavin’s detective work in *Knight’s Gambit* is often considered unsatisfying to readers of both Faulkner and of hardboiled detective fiction (28). These stories may fall short of expectations for some readers because they refuse to fit neatly into the two most popular detective subgenres of their period, the classical or the hardboiled, carrying instead resonances of the Nick Carter novels born of the 1880s but still popular through the first half of the twentieth century.

Faulkner and Twain, like many dime novel writers, were continually drawn to the narrative of burgeoning manhood, the mystery of a young man’s move from innocence to experience. Although iconic detective heroes like Pinkerton and Carter are adults – and even older men in some of the tales – their stories participate, alongside those in other publications such as the *New York Detective Library* or *The Young Sleuth Library*, in the creation of narratives exploring the intersections and shared resonances between the processes of becoming an adult and solving a mystery. It is not only the delightfully doubled narrative structure of detective fiction that Todorov delineates that drew Twain and Faulkner to the detective genre; it is also the location of the epistemological center of many dime novel detective stories in an apprentice’s growing understanding of relatively simple facts like whodunit as well as more complex underlying themes like the symbiotic interrelations of criminal and detective doubles, the inherent threats of contamination
that both construct detective work and emanate from it, and the potential inadequacies of various structures of containment to delimit knowledge and its attendant ethical questions. Indeed, young detectives in Faulkner and Twain often come to understand – or at least to demonstrate for readers – that notions of contamination and containment organize both detective adventures and one of the central concerns of the day: the legacy of slavery in America.

White elephants, doubled barrels, and Mark Twain’s detective obsessions

Tom Sawyer grows out of and responds directly to the detective dime novels. Tom’s obsession with mystery, humorously described as incomprehensible and perhaps unnatural by his boyhood companion Huckleberry Finn, is characteristic of representations of not only the young detectives in training who peopled the dime novels as characters, but also the dime novel readers who became consistent consumers of this new product. Perhaps especially in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884), Tom’s obsession with dime novels is mocked by the narrative as he devises increasingly complex and absurd ‘strategies’ for dealing with the dead serious real-world problem of Southern white boys aiding and abetting the complex figure of the fugitive slave. From Huck’s perspective, dime-novel-influenced activities – like sending Jim a rope-ladder in a pie or having Jim write unintelligible messages on a tin plate – provide nothing but unnecessary complications, although Huck reports these with the respect and admiration he imagines are due an avid reader like Tom. This positions Huck as at once a bad reader in the mold of dime-novel-consuming youth for giving Tom too much credit and a good reader for understanding the terrific narrative potential underlying Tom’s absurd actions. The dime novels, as we have seen throughout our explorations of their textual matter (as opposed to their more conservative cover matter), frequently position central characters in a precarious balance between forces of contamination and containment in order to explore and exploit the narrative potentials of dark doubling, epistemological uncertainty, and ethical complexity. Is it any wonder, then, that Twain and Faulkner, among other literary luminaries, have been attracted to the doubling inherent in the detective genre? In understanding Twain’s detective writings, the specifics of dime novel detective conventions can illuminate the complex jokes about detection and detective fiction in ‘The Stolen White Elephant,’ and the generic potentials made clear by the sheer number of dime novel repetitions of
detective conventions illustrate some of the metafictional resonances that emerge from the detective elements of ‘A Double-Barreled Detective Story’ and *Pudd’nhead Wilson*.

‘The Stolen White Elephant’ explores the dual potential of the detective to protect and to exploit. This farcical tale fits into the detective genre in its use of a doubled narrative structure that provides an epistemological story that tracks professional detectives in their quest to uncover the anterior story of a crime. Seen within the framework of dime novel detective fiction, the story demonstrates a recurring attempt by Twain to use the detective figure as a space for exploring the tensions inherent in representing a ‘hero’ who uses blunt investigative techniques even when faced with epistemological uncertainty. By story’s end, we are prowling the boundaries of postmodern detective fiction, since even the title is evidence of a mislabeling, a generic ‘mistake’; it seems likely that the white elephant was never stolen, and it is chance rather than the detective’s investigative prowess that provides a resolution to the mystery while ultimately leaving empty the details of the criminal narrative that always necessarily undergirds the detective narrative. In addition to its clearly parodic nature, ‘The Stolen White Elephant’ also bears markers of the epistemological uncertainty that has long accompanied the subgenre of postmodern detective fiction through Nick Carter’s *The Turn of a Card* (1911), E. C. Bentley’s *Trent’s Last Case* (1913), Alain Robbe-Grillet’s *The Erasers* (1953), Paul Auster’s *The New York Trilogy* (1988), and others. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Twain’s first published detective tale explores the boundaries of the detective genre rather than reinscribing its center.

The story, on its face, is an extended joke, and the two articles taking it as a sole object of analysis both first appeared in *Studies in American Humor*. The first-person story is narrated by an Indian civil servant who has lost a white elephant in New York City while transporting it from Siam for the Queen of England. This unfortunate man, who precedes the creation of Watson by five years, nonetheless watches with all the admiration of Doyle’s or Poe’s narrators as the aptly named Inspector Blunt sets the detective apparatus into motion. Blunt categorizes the mystery as theft and follows the detective playbook in addressing the recovery of stolen property: he takes a detailed description of the elephant, commissions fifty thousand flyers for distribution to pawnbrokers and other detectives around the country, and assigns numerous operatives to shadow all the usual suspects, interview potential eyewitnesses, and follow – always one step behind – the swath of destruction the elephant wreaks in its path. The story, like many of Allan Pinkerton’s memoirs,
includes documents that illustrate detective methods. In Twain’s hand, Pinkerton’s earnest commitment to bureaucratic record-keeping as a method of containing the threat of the corrupt detective becomes entirely risible when Blunt’s operatives write such telegraphed reports as this:

SAGE CORNERS, NY, 10.30. Just arrived. Elephant passed through here at 8.15. All escaped from the town but a policeman. Apparently elephant did not strike at policeman, but at the lamp-post. Got both. I have secured a portion of the policeman as clew. STUMM, Detective. (23)

The absurdity of both the inspector’s approach to solving the case and the operative’s handling of forensic evidence provide humor made even more biting by the story’s conclusion, in which the elephant’s rotting carcass is finally discovered in the basement of Inspector Blunt’s headquarters, ‘where sixty detectives always slept’ (256).

The sleeping detectives specifically reference Allan Pinkerton’s trademark slogan ‘We Never Sleep,’ so that the final pathos of the story has a direct target when the narrator reports that ‘The compromise cost me $100,000; my detective expenses were $42,000 more; I never applied for a place again under my government; I am a ruined man and a wanderer in the earth, – but my admiration for that man, whom I believe to be the greatest detective the world has ever produced, remains undimmed to this day, and will so remain unto the end’ (35). The inclusion of exact dollar amounts – and very large ones for the time – is also typical of Pinkerton’s memoirs. The narrator’s ongoing admiration of Inspector Blunt reveals his naïveté in trusting a man and a profession that is marked by gross misreading, resonating with Huck’s admiration of Tom as a detective. The narrator’s belief that Blunt is ‘the greatest detective the world has ever produced’ revels in the pleasure of dual and incongruous readings: the narrator has been unforgivably hoodwinked by the intelligent but corrupt detective, and/or Blunt is indeed the greatest detective in the world, which is saying something about the detective profession in general.

Peter Messent notes that at story’s end, ‘the reader is left with a peculiar sense of not having got the joke’ (‘Keeping,’ 62). Certainly the story contains many laugh-out-loud moments, from the inspector’s inclusion of such details as a small boil in the elephant’s armpit on the Stolen Property posters to the detectives’ earnest and thorough reports of the elephant’s escalating destruction of the landscape it traverses.
Yet Messent is right: what exactly is so funny about ineffectual detectives, especially when they end up costing a sympathetic character his life savings as well as his career? The humor, as we would expect in Twain, is cutting in its critique. At one level, ‘The Stolen White Elephant’ speaks to late nineteenth-century anxieties about the newly created profession of the detective, who surveils and polices not only criminals but also ordinary citizens. Indeed, Pinkerton explicitly addresses this anxiety in his memoirs and in various media venues, explaining that his corporation’s organizational structure has built-in safeguards (real-world structures of containment) against detective corruption and inefficiency; namely, it includes redundant mechanisms whereby the watchers themselves are always watched and it insists on meticulous record-keeping and frequent written reports. ‘The Stolen White Elephant’ leaves no doubt that Pinkerton’s safeguards do not – and perhaps cannot – function to prevent the contamination inherent in detective work. In fact, Twain’s parody of Pinkerton’s detective methods reflects exactly the ongoing societal concerns about detectives and their work that prompted Pinkerton to write his memoirs in the first place. What seems so improbable it almost isn’t funny in Twain is actually consonant with some of the absurd detective operations Pinkerton ran, including the one he describes in *The Expressman and the Detective* (1874), in which a Pinkerton operative arrests another as an accomplice to the criminal because so many undercover detectives are assigned to the case they can’t keep track of each other.

At the same time, Twain’s use of the white elephant as a central symbol – a continually misread sign – provides not only hilarity at the site of detective bumbling, but also a potential apology for the detective. In the end, the narrator ultimately blames the loss of his career and fortune on the detective by citing the details of his bill. But the title forces readers to ask if the detective can truly be blamed. Even in 1882, a white elephant was more than an unlikely and inherently comedic beast, a creature that would seem hard to misplace, deliberately or accidentally. It is also, as Messent notes in his revised analysis of the story, the most recognizable version of the trope of the poisoned present, the undesirable gift whose upkeep might bankrupt its recipient. By using an actual white elephant, and one from the King of Siam, where the etymology of the phrase arises, Twain plants an important clue about the complexity of his central joke. For Messent, the story has metafictional resonances, acting as a type of ‘allegory about the comic’ (*Mark*, 12) that exploits both the tensions between ‘the power of humour and its hegemonic containments’ (*Mark*, 12) and the tensions between an aggressive comic
violence and a more ideologically inscribed physical violence. Both, for Messent, suggest Twain’s ambivalence about his own comedic writing (Mark, 13).

The story also explores the tensions inherent in detective fiction and Twain’s resultant ambivalences about the genre. The Indian civil servant responsible for the white elephant is already doomed to bankruptcy, a certain victim long before he meets Inspector Blunt; presumably the only thing that could save this man would be to allow the elephant to remain missing. In the face of the white elephant curse, the actions of Blunt and his detective organization become irrelevant. What would an excellent detective do in Blunt’s position? If the case fits neither the Missing Persons nor the Stolen Property categories, how should a detective proceed? Perhaps the only effective action on Blunt’s part would have been to recognize the trope of the poisoned present and refuse to find the elephant. To do so, of course, would also mean to recognize his own fictionality, a move surely too disruptive even for Twain.

The central image of the (mislabeled) stolen white elephant – reinforced by its title position in not only the story but also the collection of short stories in which it initially appeared – cues readers to the instabilities explored in not only this story but the detective genre in general. Although Twain mused in a letter to Howells that it may not be ‘possible to burlesque that business [detection] extravagantly’ (cited in Twain, Satires, 309), the stolen white elephant is nothing short of an extravagant image. It represents a paradox for the nascent genre of detective fiction, demonstrating that on some level the nineteenth-century detective, newly professionalized by Pinkerton, is always doomed to be viewed with either gushing admiration of dubious credibility (the narrator) or parody and scorn (the story). The extravagant repetition of the detective’s story through the dime novels can never fully rehabilitate the figure of the detective, at once earnest protector and potentially sinister surveillor. Indeed, a full containment of the detective’s dangerous potential would mark an end to his narrative possibilities; as we have seen in the New York Detective Library as well as in Allan Pinkerton and Nick Carter tales, dime novels often end without full resolution and, although rarely as cutting as in Twain’s portrayals, the detective is far from a purely idealized figure. In ‘The Stolen White Elephant’ the detective becomes a figure of disruptive laughter: an epistemological quester at once risible for his ineffectual approach to solving a mystery and tragically incapable of breaking free from ineffective investigative techniques without recourse to metafictional analysis.
The detective genre in the twentieth century is well known for its metafictional disruptions as characters frequently note that if they were characters in a detective novel, such-and-such would occur. While the humor of ‘Stolen’ intimates a metanarrative element, Twain’s other detective tales anticipate this tradition more explicitly. As Messent has noted in various places, many textual and thematic connections ask us to analyze ‘The Double-Barreled Detective Story’ (1902) in conjunction with *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1894). Thematically, questions of doubling and disguise in both texts are played out in the ways originals and copies are constantly placed in problematic relations (Messent, *Short*, 206–7). Textually, a name – David Wilson – connects the two stories as Pudd’nhead Wilson’s real name in the earlier novel and as a secondary character’s alias in ‘Double-Barreled’ (Messent, *Short* 205). Further, Pudd’nhead’s famous half-a-dog joke, which has provided much head-scratching for characters and scholars alike, resonates with the later story in the figure of Archy Stillman, the detective from ‘Double-Barreled’ who presents himself as half-dog, displaying bloodhound abilities that act as the birthmark of his mother’s violent abuse at his father’s hands (Messent, *Short*, 208–9). In thinking about the potential of Twain’s detective fiction to provide commentary on the nascent detective genre as it was developing in the dime novels, these two narratives are once again two sides of a coin.

The double barrel of the story’s title invites several simultaneous readings. Intertextually, it evokes Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Sign of Four*, referencing a scene in which Watson reflects on his courtship of his soon-to-be-wife Miss Morstan through war stories: ‘To this day she declares that I told her one moving anecdote as to how my musket looked into my tent at the dead of night, and how I fired a double-barreled tiger cub at it’ (*Complete Sherlock Holmes*, 111). Watson, whose bumbling in courtship places him in the space of the awkward intellectual rather than the physical hero even while he recounts a physical adventure, is the iconic representative of the admiring gaze on a detective hero. The story’s ‘double-barreled’ structure, meanwhile, is patterned on another Sherlock Holmes adventure, *A Study in Scarlet*, which is explicitly evoked with the Hope Canyon setting, undoubtedly a reference to Jefferson Hope, a character from *Scarlet* who collapses standard detective narrative tropes, at some point occupying each of the victim, criminal, and detective positions. Indeed, questions of role and identity confusion are central to Twain’s parodic tale as well. Generically, the story elucidates the boundaries of the detective genre as defined not only by Doyle but also by the dime novels. In some sense, all detective stories are always
‘double-barreled,’ constitutively containing a doubled narrative structure that foregrounds the epistemological story as it uncovers the hidden tale of crime.

‘Double-Barreled’ goes much further than ‘Stolen’ in its blending of parody and tragedy, with each narrative segment anchored by a crime whose pathos cannot be concealed by the generally humorous tone. The story explicitly contrasts the American tradition of the dime novel detective with the English tradition exemplified by Doyle, with the latter the clear loser. Indeed, Sherlock Holmes himself appears as a character – or perhaps more accurately a caricature – in the story. The highly intellectual continental sleuth’s reasoning always leads him to exactly the wrong conclusions, and his nephew recognizes that with his famous uncle in town he is likely to get away with the crime he is planning. The effete ratiocinator is shown to be arrogant, annoying, wholly ineffective, and unreasonably worshiped by virtually all who encounter him, while Holmes’s American double, bloodhound detective Archy Stillman, is a relatively likeable character whose detective skills are passable if not impossibly impeccable. Archy is the product of a violating mating that, like the numerous forced marriages narrated in the New York Detective Library, occurs within the framework of marriage. Archy’s father assaulted his mother, with strong overtones of sexual violence, when he tied his pregnant wife to a tree and allowed his bloodhounds to rip her clothing from her body, leaving her naked for the townspeople to find in the morning. Archy’s birthright, therefore, is an unaccountable sense of smell that allows him to track people. Raised by his traumatized and vengeful mother to become his father’s nemesis, Archy ends up pursuing the wrong man (who eventually takes on the alias David Wilson) before finally stumbling upon a mystery where the murdered man is actually his father.

The coincidences in ‘Double-Barreled’ position it more within the dime novel realm of detective stories than in the Sherlockian tradition, despite the story’s explicit evocation of two key Holmesian texts. The tale also provides another level of doubling to accompany the doubled crimes (the rape of Archy’s mother and the murder of the man who turns out to be Archy’s father) and the doubled detectives (the burlesqued Sherlock Holmes who is often figured as a bloodhound and the more seriously represented Archy Stillman who is, with unacknowledged absurdity, a literal bloodhound). In a complex epistemological doubling, knowing through the body – through Archy’s nose – is ultimately more effective than knowing through the intellect, partly because the intellect is never used effectively in this story, in which the murderer brings
his Uncle Sherlock along with him to commit the murder because, as he explains, “I know about detectives on account of having them in the family; and if you don’t want them to find out about a thing, it’s best to have them around when you do it.” The central image of the double barrel, then, excessive as it appears to be, evokes the rational and the bodily – the classical and the hardboiled – approaches to solving a mystery, demonstrating that despite all the firepower of a dual approach, sometimes the inherently unresolvable tensions of the genre do seem as absurd as a double-barreled tiger shooting at a musket.

The double-barreled tiger is just as deliciously absurd as the half-a-dog joke and its attendant icon of the conjoined twins in figuring the complexities of that curious and shameful genre: the detective story. Although Pudd’nhead Wilson is not a detective novel of the Todorov typology, it provides Twain’s most developed detective figure, David Wilson aka Pudd’nhead, who is ridiculed more by the story’s townspeople than by the narrative itself. Wilson, like Faulkner’s Gavin Stevens, is a lawyer who acts as the town detective in a strictly unofficial capacity. His status in the town is complex, reminiscent of the ambiguities that accompany popular detectives in the dime novels of the same period. His professional status as an attorney might be expected to provide him some measure of respect, but Wilson lost all measure of admiration on his first day in town, when, in response to ‘an invisible dog’ barking, he announced that if he owned half that dog he would kill his half (6). This earns him his nickname by the townspeople, who immediately classify him as a fool, a judgment that holds for years. The detective as a figure of misunderstood epistemological mastery is a familiar trope from Sherlock Holmes, whose observations about crime scenes and seemingly irrelevant clues are often treated with skepticism and even derision by police detectives and others (think, for example, of the curious incident of the dog in the nighttime). Pinkerton and Carter also sometimes play out the figure of incomprehensible wisdom, although both typically explain their reasoning to their mentee or directly to the reader. In Pudd’nhead’s case, there is no mediator between the detective and the reader, so the reader may initially wonder if Wilson is in fact all the townspeople believe him to be (a lummux, a labrick, a dam fool, a perfect jackass). Of course, the novel mocks the townspeople as much or more as it mocks Wilson, and Wilson’s intelligence is eventually reclaimed by his early adoption of new forensic technologies, namely fingerprinting, and by the obscure aphorisms on his calendar. Indeed, it is Wilson’s careful fingerprinting of the often grudging townspeople that solves the case of the judge’s murder by revealing a
racially complex switch in identities at novel’s end. The townspeople
can be satisfied, but the reader is left wondering, at the end of a short
novel from which another short novel has been almost but not entirely
expurgated, to what degree David Wilson – and even the narrative – can
really solve the various deeper mysteries of *Pudd’nhead Wilson*.

The cryptic half-a-dog joke is one of the central mysteries of the
text, vying with the thefts and the murder for the reader’s interest and
certainly more compelling in the traces it leaves, given that the novel
never explains this joke. Critics have found substantial pleasure in
interpreting the half-dog. C. Webster Wheelock, Robert Keith Miller,
and others connect the problem of splitting a dog with the problem of
racial identity; as Miller notes, ‘it is no more possible to own a thirty-
second of a man than to own half a dog’ (159–60). In this reading,
which resides comfortably alongside others, Wilson’s joke about split-
ting a dog is actually a condemnation of the absurd way the institution
of slavery figured blackness, culturally and legally. John Bird reads the
half-dog as a metafictional substitute in his focus on the writing proc-

ess by which Twain initially drafted *Pudd’nhead* and *Those Extraordinary
Twins* as a single text before incompletely extricating the twins from
*Pudd’nhead* and giving them their own novella, albeit a novella con-

ected to the main novel in most editions. For Bird, trying to kill half a
dog is like trying to kill half a novel: it should not be done, since
*Those Extraordinary Twins* provides a powerful figure – the conjoined twins
who are simultaneously singular and doubled – that points up many of
the themes of *Pudd’nhead*.

The ‘half a dog’ comment always functions as another figuration of
the ‘double-barreled’ story, a way of thinking about the always dou-
bled structure of the detective narrative as well as the doubling thema-
tized within the genre. The epistemological half of the detective story
would be absurd without the crime half, as is almost shown in ‘The
Stolen White Elephant,’ where the story of the (probably mislabeled)
crime is presented only as traces, as a mostly empty space that may be
responsible for the epistemological weaknesses of the detective; if no
crime occurred and the white elephant was always a poisoned present
whose absence is far preferable to its presence, the detective’s inabil-
ity to solve the mystery is inevitable. In *Pudd’nhead*, the two central
doublings – Thomas à Becket Driscoll/Valet de Chambre and Angelo and
Luigi Capello – result in four characters who are each as much a half as
a double. Tom and Chambers, the apparently interchangeable black and
white ‘twins’ whose identities spiral uncontrollably between the realms
of nature and nurture, are each but half a man at the end: Tom, newly a
slave, sold down the river in punishment for his crimes without any of the cultural know-how he will need to survive, and Chambers, newly a propertied white man, equally unequipped with the attitudes or skills needed to perform his new identity.

And yet, the detective’s accomplishment is ultimately shown to be inadequate to the social problem, as is usual in Twain and quite common in the dime novels. As a result of Pudd’nhead’s detective work, Tom and Chambers are back in their ‘rightful’ places, if slavery is in any way rightful, and the twins are cleared from false accusations, suggesting that the detective figure is redeemed from the derision he has suffered throughout the novel. But Pudd’nhead itself is only half a story, and it points to its own authorial bowdlerization through its treatment of the Capello twins. The novel never mentions that Luigi and Angelo are anything more than ordinary twins, but several representations of these glamorous Italian visitors are unexplained without the knowledge, explicitly stated only in the companion novella, Those Extraordinary Twins, that they are conjoined: the townspeople’s slack-jawed amazement at their performance of a duet at the piano, the judge’s characterization of the twins as “sideshow riffraff” and “dime museum freaks” (222), and so on. Those Extraordinary Twins, on the other hand, describes in some detail their lives as two beings with two heads and four arms but a single torso and only two legs. It also narrates their fate when, not long after Pudd’nhead clears them of guilt in the Judge Driscoll murder, they are, absurdly, hung in an attempt to correct the error of having elected one of them to a hopelessly deadlocked board of alderman whose meetings are not open to any non-member, but who need the tie-breaking Capello vote in order to move any business forward.

The figure of the conjoined twins is a striking metaphor for the structure of the detective story, with its inextricable pairing of two knotted narratives, showing the slipperiness between crime and epistemology, and its indissoluble doubling of the criminal and detective figures who necessarily share a common understanding of and interaction with the world. Indeed, we find here contamination and containment within a single body, as we see it elsewhere within a single story or game. Luigi and Angelo Capello are, personality-wise, strikingly opposite, containing within their single body a teetotaler and a heavy drinker, a devout Christian and a Free Thinker, and so on. The twins are positioned as the falsely accused rather than the detective or criminal in the twinned novels that describe various criminal activities and position Pudd’nhead Wilson of half-a-dog fame as a detective complete with forensic skills
and a courtroom revelation scene. However, in a narrative in which roles and identities are constantly confused and reversed, their physical embodiment represents the oppositions of the detective and criminal roles as well as the symbiotic links between them.

Like the enormous corpus of detective dime novels, Twain’s small detective oeuvre ends up teasing out the edges of the genre. ‘Stolen’ parodies the Pinkerton memoirs and dime novels, mocking the bureaucracy and resultant inefficiency underlying the Pinkerton brand of detective heroism while acknowledging that the detective figure is often blamed for things over which he has no control because of his presence within a liminal space shaped by contamination and containment. ‘Double-Barreled’ attempts to define the American contribution to detective fiction by presenting a metaphorical showdown between the American and English detective heroes – and subgenres – in the complex and confusing figures of Archy Stillman (a literal bloodhound) and Sherlock Holmes (whose bloodhound qualities are purely metaphorical); the American detective wins by a nose, but not before the whole genre is once again derided. *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, on the other hand, thematizes problems of doubling in the complex interactions of two sets of ‘twins’ whose meanings are developed largely through the companion novel *Those Extraordinary Twins*. Twain’s use of potentially confusing symbols like the stolen white elephant, the double-barreled detective story, and the half-a-dog joke ends up providing compelling metafictional icons for the detective genre itself.

In *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, the tropes of contamination and containment typical of detective fiction seep between the ethical and epistemological questions showcased and explored in detective fiction to the ethical and epistemological questions that always accompany representations of race relations. The central twinning of detection and miscegenation appears also in Faulkner’s writing, where, again, there are no easy analogies. Twain and Faulkner both move far beyond any possibility of simple pairings that would portray the detective as black, the criminal as white, or vice versa. Rather, the complex *interactions* between detectives and criminals – and between blacks and whites – and the great difficulty, often, of even defining those categories, carry deep-seated tensions that have often been figured under the rhetorical and metaphorical rubrics of contamination and containment. Like race identity, the central roles of the detective narrative – detective, criminal, and victim – are contextual. In conversations with his mentees, Nick Carter often affirms that a criminal can be positioned as a detective and vice versa, a point also made repeatedly in the dime novels pitting abolitionist Allan Pinkerton.
against the James brothers and other outlaws invested in Confederate ideologies. Importantly, the problems of dark doublng are never – and must never be – solved within the detective genre, since it is the tension between contamination and containment that provides ongoing narrative momentum to the genre. For Twain and Faulkner, repeatedly revealing the precariousness of balances and tensions in race relations was not a recommendation for the real world, but a space where narrative momentum was especially powerful.

**Chasing the unknown gambit; or, mentorship and games in Nick Carter and Gavin Stevens**

The title of Faulkner’s detective novella, *Knight’s Gambit*, is as much of an empty sign as is Twain’s white elephant. Chess includes the king’s gambit, the queen’s gambit, even the Benko gambit (which might be construed as a bishop’s gambit), but no knight’s gambit. And after reading of Gavin Stevens’s bold move in *Knight’s Gambit* – his betting of the queen against a man far his superior on a horse – and his oblique, chess-metaphored advice to his nephew Chick throughout the novella, the reader is faced with rather deep-rooted epistemological difficulties. What exactly is this new chess opening, the knight’s gambit? What lesson does Gavin expect his acolyte to take from this and other teachings? And to what degree are the characters of *Knight’s Gambit*, often doubled to represent black and white versions of specific chess pieces (although we are not always sure which is which), playing out an eroticized chess game that develops and interacts with the detective narrative?

Gavin Stevens has long been one of Faulkner’s most difficult characters, the one person in Yoknapatawpha County who looks a bit like Faulkner himself and whose words, especially about race relations, often echo Faulkner’s own. From the earliest scholarship on Faulkner’s two detective texts, critics have attempted to delineate the relationship between Faulkner and Gavin, trying to determine exactly how much ironic distance separates the two. Is Gavin an embodiment or mouthpiece for Faulkner? Or is he, as Lorie Watkins Fulton and others have argued, a self-interested character whose ethical framework is repeatedly shown to be not only inadequate, but deeply flawed? Using textual evidence culled from *Knight’s Gambit*, *Requiem for a Nun*, and *Intruder in the Dust* among others, Fulton concludes that Gavin’s inability to read people along with his deliberate legal manipulations leave him ‘ideologically only a degree or two away from the most terrifying dictators of the twentieth century’ (9). Some of Fulton’s most damning examples
of Gavin’s sinister side are taken from exactly the narratives in which he functions most explicitly as a detective.

This section briefly examines Faulkner’s two straight-up detective texts, *Knight’s Gambit* and *Intruder in the Dust*, not through a twentieth- or twenty-first-century legal and ethical framework, but instead as novels that develop the logic of detective doubling, often taking up the same strategies deployed in the Nick Carter novels to contain the potential contamination inherent in detective work. These texts are such a productive source of ethical conflict for Gavin Stevens precisely because they are detective stories, and contextualizing them within the framework of dime novel detective conventions allows us to see the continually negotiated nature of Gavin’s ethical and epistemological conundrums. John Irwin’s excellent work on Gavin Stevens as a detective elucidates Faulkner’s interest in the inherent relation between the triadic and the double (*Knight*, 100) and traces the ways in which Faulkner deploys and speaks back to Poe’s detective writing. Positioning Faulkner as in conversation with the dime novels as well as with Poe can provide complementary and complicating readings.

Irwin’s insightful reading of ‘An Error in Chemistry,’ a story from the *Knight’s Gambit* collection, for example, explores the tensions between the double and the triadic using detective tropes introduced by Poe – namely, the Locked Room and the Hidden Object – coming to the conclusion that Faulkner’s tale is marred as a detective story by his avoidance of the details of the murderer’s prison break and by the role of luck rather than deduction in the unmasking of the criminal. For Irwin, Faulkner’s best detective writing occurs ‘when he takes the conventions of the genre and shapes them to his own materials, his own obsessive concerns, rather than when he competes with the genre’s originator on terms that are almost wholly Poe’s’ (*Knight*, 103). Poe’s influence on Faulkner, and perhaps especially on his detective fiction, is undeniable, but Poe’s is not the only detective writing with which Faulkner interacts. He is also writing within the conventions developed in the dime novels, where much of the interest is in developing complex detective characters rather than providing puzzles, and where the trickier details of criminal undertakings are often sidestepped and chance is an integral part of the landscape. In this sense, ‘An Error in Chemistry,’ with its emphasis on the bodily substitutions of victim and criminal in lieu of attention to the details of the escape, functions quite successfully to highlight the contamination inherent in the detective–victim–criminal triangle and to provide the jolt of reader pleasure that accompanies that insight.
Gavin Stevens has particularly strong ties to Nick Carter, as both are highly invested in mentoring young detectives, use games to structure their thinking about detective work, discover the spaces where games fail to provide adequate foundations for viable epistemological frameworks, and struggle to accurately interpret their interactions with attractive women. Gavin's participation in the dime novel tradition of detective narratives is perhaps most evident in his position as a mentor, since neither Poe nor the hardboiled with which Faulkner is often compared are invested in this model of detective work. Gavin and Nick have strikingly similar sidekicks: Chick Mallison is Gavin's nephew, twelve years old in *Intruder in the Dust* and a teenager in *Knight's Gambit*, while Chick Carter is Nick's adopted son, also about twelve when Nick meets him in *One Against Twenty-One* and a teen in most of the hundreds of Nick Carter tales in which he appears. Both Chicks mediate between the reader and the detective very differently than do the narrators in Poe and Doyle. Neither acts as the awestruck narrator recounting the detective's exploits, since, as boy apprentices, neither of the Chicks is at all dull; rather, they are potentially brilliant. Watson can never become Holmes, whereas each Chick has the potential to emulate and even at times surpass his mentor. Although Gavin and Nick generally act as central protagonists, their stories are often intrinsically invested in the journeys of their mentees to become not only good detectives, but also good men. The apprentice detective, then, fits into an ideology of meritocracy often espoused by dime novels in which being a detective is something that can be learned and strived for rather than an activity reserved strictly for rare and gifted eccentrics like Dupin and Holmes.

Perhaps one of the reasons detective fans do not flock to Faulkner's detective stories is that, like Nick Carter's, they often ask the reader to identify with the apprentice, constructing the reader as a potential learner rather than a competitor. In the Nick Carter stories as in many dime novel series aimed at boys, the reader is often addressed directly and given strategies for effectively reading difficult conversations, elusive signs, and, basically, the conventions of the detective genre. Chick Carter also absorbs lessons of adulthood and masculinity, learning that class is a fluid construction easily traversed by people with the right skill set, that criminality and detection are two sides of the same coin, and that the most effective forms of justice are not always located within the legal system. Under Gavin's tutelage, Chick Mallison absorbs similar teachings as the recipient of many pithy messages about truth, tradition, race, honor, and justice. In 'An Error in
Chemistry,’ for example, Chick demonstrates his understanding of the centrality of games in shaping his uncle’s worldview when he notes that Gavin and the sheriff are friends, ‘in the sense that two men who play chess together are friends’ (111), before reporting an earlier overheard conversation:

‘Ain’t truth and justice the same thing?’ the sheriff said.
‘Since when?’ Uncle Gavin said. ‘In my time I have seen truth that was anything under the sun but just, and I have seen justice using tools and instruments I wouldn’t want to touch with a ten-foot fence rail.’ (111)

Gavin, whom one would expect to be an establishment figure as the county attorney and the town’s informal detective, clearly articulates his unwillingness to accept the notion that justice can be appropriately dispensed by a legal system that includes professional detectives and lawyers, a point implicitly made in many dime novels featuring Nick Carter.

Gavin and the sheriff are chess players, which, for Chick, means that they are ‘friends, even though sometimes their aims are diametrically opposed’ (111). Detective writers from Poe onwards often use chess to figure the detective–criminal relationship, with its potential for players to take on the perspective of the opponent. A good detective, like a good criminal, can simultaneously see the field of play from his perspective as well as from the criminal’s, and it is this ability to place himself into the criminal’s mind, behind the criminal’s eyes, that allows the detective to piece together the story of the crime that the criminal is attempting to hide, often in the same plain sight as the chessboard provides. Chick’s repetition that Gavin and the sheriff are ‘friends,’ twice qualifying this friendship, suggests that the position of the chess opponent is not always occupied only by the criminal, but may also be occupied – sometimes simultaneously – by the police detective, who is both a friend and an opponent of the private detective.

Of course, if men who play chess together are always in some sense friends as Chick suggests, the criminal is also always in this dual position of friend and opponent to the detective. This is often true for both Nick Carter and Gavin Stevens. Nick frequently displays a grudging admiration and respect for the criminals he opposes (think, for example, of Jimmy Duryea and the tennis match, or of Livingston Carruthers, who is Nick’s almost perfect double). Gavin, who seems to know every person in the county – and who remembers all their
names – is almost always known to criminals and victims alike, and even as his brand of justice often differs from that of the sheriff, he works from a deep understanding of the personalities involved as he tries to teach Chick what he sees as a complex but crucial lesson: that justice and truth are not always the same thing, any more than justice and law are synonymous.

Gavin and Nick, with their strong commitments to their apprentices, recast the game motif typically associated with classical detective fiction away from the metafictional fair play structure where the reader is competing with the detective into a purely fictional metaphorical space. Although Gavin and Nick rarely provide scenarios that allow readers to match wits with the central detective, both – detectives and narratives alike – demonstrate the power of the game, not just as an intellectual exercise but as a way of knowing and seeing. Like Nick Carter's *The Turn of a Card*, Faulkner's *Knight's Gambit* is a rare detective story that clearly falls under the conventions of the genre despite its absence of an opening crime. In both cases, the present-day epistemological quest story includes the crime – or attempted crime, in *Knight's Gambit* – only late in the story; indeed, the first half of each uncovers a mystery related to a crime that has not yet been committed. Nick eventually gets a murder to work on, but even after that, the sheer unreadability of the Ace of Hearts is much more interesting to Nick than is the murder of James Stuyvesant, which is never solved. In *Knight's Gambit*, questions of individual identity are perhaps less elusive, but relationships between the characters in the story are equally unreadable.

*Knight's Gambit*s complex tangling of games, relationships, and detective conventions is built into its long opening scene, which finds Chick and Gavin playing chess in Gavin’s rooms one night. Chick is feeling more confident than usual, having set up a long play that is going just as he expected, when the game is interrupted by the entrance of the Harriss brother and sister, who ask Gavin, in his role as county attorney, to remove Captain Gualdres from their home, deporting him to Argentina if necessary; the Captain, according to the boy, came initially into the household as his sister’s fiancé, but moved on to their widowed mother when he found out that she controlled their money. Request refused, the Harrisses, with a lack of civility that shocks Chick, leave abruptly, at which point Gavin turns back to the chessboard, from which Chick hasn’t even had time to rise. As Gavin’s next move exposes Chick’s castle, the detective apprentice realizes not only that once again he has been beaten at chess, but also that his usually garrulous uncle
is uncharacteristically silent in the face of their unexpected visitors. This leads Chick not to question his uncle/mentor, but to reflect on the Harrisses as if they are fictional constructs: ‘... the softly fading still softly pretty woman in the late thirties, and the two spoiled children a year apart somewhere under twenty-one, and the Argentine army captain house-guest, the four of them like the stock characters in the slick magazine serial, even to the foreign fortune-hunter’ (142). The Harrisses are like pulp fiction characters not because of their own lack of substance, but because of their environment, since ‘the county had been watching it [their story] unfold as the subscribers read and wait and watch for the serial’s next instalment’ (142).

This self-reflexive moment creates a scenario where the chess game between Chick and Gavin seems more real than the people who have interrupted:

He checked his uncle’s queen and her castle both with the horse. Then his uncle fed him the pawn which only he, Charles, seemed to have believed that nobody had forgotten about, and he moved and then his uncle moved and then as usual it was all over.

‘Maybe I should have taken the queen twenty minutes ago when I could, and let the castle go,’ he said.

‘Always,’ his uncle said, starting to separate the white and the black pieces as he, Charles, reached for the box on the lower shelf of the smoking stand. ‘You couldn’t have taken them both without two moves. And a knight can move two squares at once and even in two directions at once. But he cant [sic] move twice.’ (176)

Gavin’s slightly oblique lesson here is the first of several increasingly obscure explanations of how chess affords a strategy for interpreting human relationships. Gavin’s advice that one should always take the queen when one has the chance is straightforward enough, especially given that Gavin had a chance years ago to woo the woman who became Melisandre Harriss. And certainly, the construction of Captain Gualdres as a dark knight through his constant connection to his horse plays out nicely, especially when we locate white-haired Gavin as the opposing knight. John Irwin notes that the relationship between Gualdres and his intended stepson Max mirrors that between Gavin and his son surrogate Chick, providing a delightful reading of the doublings and oppositions played out in the always surreal Yoknapatawpha story and on the more concrete chessboard. Irwin’s reading is evocative, especially in his insight that the chessboard recreates the primal scene.
It is important, however, to note that while the game of chess highlights certain structures of the human relationships explored in the story, it also fails to fully represent the narrative’s trajectory.

The novel has the wrong number of queens. It has either one – Melisandre Harriss – desired by both Gavin and Gualdres and, in a sense, protected by Max, or three – Melisandre, Miss Harriss, and Miss Cayley. Gavin tries to characterize Melisandre as a queen and Miss Harriss as a princess, already a move that forces the roles. But what of Miss Cayley, who is desired by both Max and Gualdres? In fact, Miss Cayley and Miss Harriss might both be more accurately characterized as pawns than queens. Further, although his relationship to Gualdres can be seen as a dark mirror of Chick’s relationship to Gavin, Max Harriss is a difficult character to fit onto the chessboard, perhaps because he is, in the sense of the narcissistic doubling Irwin elucidates, always trying to play more than one role at once. And Harriss is planning Gualdres’s murder, thus setting himself in opposition to both his potential victim and to Gavin as an opposing chess player metaphorically performing the detective–criminal relationship. The game of chess, with its potential to reveal perspectives and to provide a structure of containment whereby characters act as they should according to their game-inflected role, breaks down in its ability to figure the relationships that develop before and after Max’s murderous plot, much as it does in Nick Carter’s *The Turn of a Card*.

Like this dime novel, Faulkner’s novella eventually turns what looks like a game into something else – at once based on the rules of the game and existing outside them – to elucidate questions of identity. Although Gavin and Chick play many games of chess throughout the novel, in the end it is not the game of chess but a chess puzzle that reveals the complex and problematic relationship tangles in the novel. When Chick is at his most confused, Gavin goes to the chessboard:

... suddenly his uncle swept the board clean and set up a single problem with the horses and rooks and two pawns.

‘It stops being a game then,’ he [Chick] said.

‘Nothing by which all human passion and hope and folly can be mirrored and then proved, ever was just a game,’ his uncle said. ‘Move.’ (192)

The existence of the rigid rules structuring the relationships between pieces in the game of chess allows Gavin to draw upon the chess puzzle
to illuminate the relationships between the characters in the story, averting the murder and resolving the disruption that threatens the principals of the tale. While this structure recalls Chandler’s Philip Marlowe and the chess puzzle in *The Big Sleep* (1939), it is also very similar to that in *The Turn of a Card*, in which Nick’s fluency with the multiple relationships possible between playing cards – the A–5 straight flush, the royal flush, the name trick, and so on – finally enables him to see that the Ace of Hearts constructs meaning both within and outside the strictures of the game.

And as in the Nick Carter novel, the reader, through Chick’s perspective, sees what Gavin struggles to comprehend: although the game can seem to provide a structuring principle for the detective tale, the inherent messiness of human relationships and the tendency of dark doubles to experience slippages of roles render the game always inadequate as a containing structure, leaving the characters more accurately represented by a puzzle or a trick. Indeed, when Gavin eventually locates the limits of the chess metaphor, he turns to a game that is in some sense its opposite: poker. Here nothing is in plain sight and chance plays a substantial role in determining outcomes. When Gavin tells Max Harriss to enlist, he takes on a sort of dark mentorship role, explaining to the young man that, like a poker player, he must accept the consequences of having entered the game, or of having planned a murder (225). Instead of providing another containing game metaphor – this one for young criminals, in contrast to chess for young detectives – poker acts to demonstrate the limits of both games as structuring tropes for the complexities of the detective figure and the double-barreled detective genre.

*Knight’s Gambit* ends with Gavin winning the contest, trading his protection of Gualdres against the murderous Max for Melisandre Harriss, leaving Gualdres to marry the Harriss girl, and allowing Max to enlist rather than to face criminal punishment. This move of Gavin’s has been read as evidence of his sinister nature (Fulton, 3) and as a typical and ultimately quite kind punishment from a small-town prosecutor (Irwin, ‘*Knight*,’ 114–15). In conceptualizing the detective as always morally threatened by his work, we might see Gavin’s paternalism here as both sinister and generous. He is in the realm of the conflicted and conflicting detective figure, who works outside the law when he thinks it suits the situation, but whose reading of the situation is by no means always accurate. Like his dime novel brethren, Gavin is far from infallible, and part of his mentorship of Chick
Mallison involves explicitly teaching his nephew, but also setting the stage for him to become an even better detective – and perhaps a better man – than his guide.

While much of the mentorship in *Knight’s Gambit* occurs literally in a drawing room, largely over the ascetic landscape of a chessboard that is eventually punctuated by a poker game, the lessons Chick learns in *Intruder in the Dust* develop in more sinister spaces, from the town prison to the darkened graveyard in which Chick and his accomplices dig up dead bodies for forensic analysis. This is a novel in which narratives of race, detection, and the journey to manhood intersect to demonstrate the limits and potentials of the dime novel model of detection. *Intruder* resembles Nick Carter’s *The Lady of Shadows* in its highlighting of the detective’s investigative weaknesses in the face of his mentorship triumphs. Just as Nick provides unhelpful advice to his mentees while following an erroneous path in *Lady*, so too does Gavin model poor judgment and inflexible reasoning for his acolyte in the face of Lucas Beauchamp’s indictment for murder.

Accused of murdering a white man, Lucas, a black man well known for his unwillingness to perform his race to the specifications of the community, is placed in prison, protected from lynching only because the Gowries prefer not to kill anyone on the Sabbath. Faced with Gavin’s lukewarm offer to stay with him in jail, Lucas is blunt: ‘“They kept me up all last night and I’m gonter try to get some sleep. If you stay here you’ll talk till morning”’ (65). For Lucas, Gavin’s brand of detection is too closely aligned to the talking and thinking of the classical detective, when the situation calls for someone who can take bodily action more in the mold of the hardboiled. Instead of the county attorney’s assistance, Lucas seeks out Chick Mallison, asking him to dig up the Gowrie grave in order to find evidence that will clear Lucas. Lucas has an epistemological insight that Gavin cannot teach Chick: ‘“Young folks and womens, they aint cluttered. They can listen. But a middle-year man like your paw and your uncle, they cant listen. They aint got time. They’re too busy with facks”’ (71). The elderly Miss Habersham, a white woman who grew up almost a twin of Lucas’s black wife, echoes Lucas’s understanding of investigation: ‘“Lucas knew it would take a child – or an old woman like me: someone not concerned with probability, with evidence. Men like your uncle and Mr Hampton have had to be men too long, busy too long”’ (89–90). Faced with these secondary mentors, Chick faces his fears and solves the mystery of the Gowrie murder, clearing Lucas in the process.
Intruder is not simply a novel of a detective acolyte surpassing his mentor, though. Part of Chick’s lesson is the hard lesson of the dime novel detective: knowledge is not always easy or even desirable. In berating Chick’s father for scolding his son, Gavin takes responsibility for his own blindness in the Beauchamp case and tries to position Chick as the mentor:

‘When did you really begin to believe him? When you opened the coffin, wasn’t it? I want to know, you see. Maybe I’m not too old to learn either. When was it?’
‘I don’t know,’ he [Chick] said. Because he didn’t know. (126)

Faced with the task of returning experience to innocence, of teaching a man who, according to wiser mentors, is too old to learn, Chick realizes that he himself has not retained the knowledge gained through his late-night graveyard adventures. In the process of solving the case, he has lost the ability to see with the uncluttered, unconcerned eyes necessary to not only digging up a body in the middle of night, but more importantly, to seeing a black man as potentially participating in narratives neither of submission nor of crime. As the novel progresses, Chick becomes increasingly suspicious of not only the inadequacy of his community’s imagination in the face of race relations, but, more importantly, the inadequacy of language itself.

Jay Watson notes that Gavin Stevens’s model of detection is that of a lawyer, relying fundamentally on talking and listening instead of on reading evidence and making deductions. Chick’s insight that language is always fundamentally insufficient to expressing knowledge points up a weakness in Gavin’s epistemological framework even while demonstrating the essential and unavoidable nature of that limit. In the end, Gavin Stevens is neither a wiseman in the classical model nor a wiseguy in the hardboiled model. He is, like his forebear Nick Carter, a detective, a favorite character of Faulkner’s and many readers not in spite of his ethical ambiguities and his epistemological shortfalls, but because of them. Like the dime novel version of the genre in which he often finds himself, Gavin is always poised between forces of contamination and containment, and he is always ready to expound upon all the big concepts central to detective fiction: truth, justice, race, honor, knowledge. And like the dime novel detective’s apprentice, Chick Mallison is always ready to process and mediate the lessons Gavin provides, but with the sharp eye of innocence not yet tainted by the unavoidable threat associated with detective work.
Conclusion

Clearly, both Twain and Faulkner owe much of their interest in detective fiction to Poe, whose Dupin stories provide many of the central tropes that still define the detective genre today. Indeed, the dime novels too can claim a substantial inheritance from Poe. But these lines of inheritance do not result in separate branches, where the repetition of detective narratives in the mass culture industry of the dime novels is separate or separable from the more illustrious adoption of the detective figure by two of America’s most prominent writers. On the contrary, Twain and Faulkner both responded directly to the phenomenon of dime novel detectives, repeating and refracting their central concerns and literary techniques. While Twain’s detective fiction provides an ironical response – sometimes humorous, sometimes biting, and often both – to the figure of Allan Pinkerton as constructed by the dime novels and memoirs, Faulkner’s main dime novel forefather is to be found in the massive corpus of Nick Carter and his interactions with his adopted son and detective apprentice, Chick Carter. And both give us good reason to consider excavating the largely forgotten dime novels in understanding not only their contributions to the detective genre, but also to Faulkner’s and Twain’s lifelong interest in its potentials.
American dime novels (1860–1915) are very much worth a second look for aesthetic as well as material culture research, and recent efforts at digitization and reprinting of dime novel texts and paratextual materials provide opportunities for important new scholarship. *Dime Novels and the Roots of American Detective Fiction* argues that an evolution theory of genre that connects each development in detective fiction to a specific time and place is inadequate in explaining the ongoing appeal of the genre because it emphasizes the idea that popular fiction represents precise sociocultural anxieties. After all, many of the detective formulas typically associated with the twentieth century – most surprisingly even formal self-reflexivity and detectives of diversity – appear in quite developed form within the mass of detective dime novels so popular in the 1880s and 1890s. This provides substantial support for Stephen Knight’s contention that the relationship between canonical and popular writers needs to be reexamined, since it is quite possible that rather than being imitators, popular writers are in fact working out the successful conventions that will be adopted by canonical writers.

This book also raises substantial questions for future research. What does our analysis of developments in the detective genre suggest about genre fiction more broadly? American dime novels also saw a proliferation of Western and science fiction narratives, just as crime fiction and other sensational genres propagated in the British penny dreadfuls of the earlier nineteenth century. Is it possible that popular genres – especially those whose appeals are ongoing decades after their first generation – contain within their first burst of textual repetitions a comprehensive exploration of their generic boundaries and potentials? This study of American dime novels is certainly willing to make that argument about detective fiction, given the finding that hardboiled,
female, amateur, minority and police detectives all reside side by side in a narrative landscape whose epistemic concerns go far beyond the rational worldview typically associated with nineteenth-century detective fiction. Further research into ephemeral literature including dime novels might reconsider various generic patterns and tensions in order to not only deploy but also speak back to genre theory.

The thorny question of the detective genre’s subversive potential is perhaps most clearly articulated in the scholarship on diverse detectives. Dime novel women have received a fair bit of scholarly attention between Kathleen Gregory Klein, Garyn Roberts at al. in *Old Sleuth’s Freaky Female Detectives*, and my own work in this book and elsewhere. Considerable work remains to be done, though, even at the site of gender, where masculinity studies, queer theory, and various feminist approaches might all offer much to our understanding of how the detective figure – simultaneously invested in the bodily and the epistemological – is deployed from the nineteenth century to today. Additional sites of diversity are much less explored in the dime novel scholarship but contain equally robust examples of ‘other’ detectives. Various black, disabled, or elderly detectives, as this study but hints at, might productively be analyzed to better understand their place within not only detective fiction, but also popular nineteenth-century literature and culture. Equally promising would be an examination of how dime novels play out transatlantic concerns of the nineteenth century, perhaps through detailed readings of recurring French detectives like Monte and/or how various European sites are represented in American dime novels.

The brief analysis of a few Faulkner and Twain detective narratives that ends this study only scratches the surface, sketching out some of the spaces where examining these writers in the context of dime novel detective fiction might offer additional insights. Scholars of race might find this a particularly rich area of study given the resonances between detective and racial identity, both exploring tensions between contamination and containment in their nineteenth- and early twentieth-century representations. The consonances between Chick Carter and Chick Mallison are also substantial, and much remains to be done in thinking about the impacts of seeing Mallison as a more complex version of young Chick Carter. Indeed, an analysis of representations of racial others across Chick and Nick Carter canons might usefully enter into critical conversation with the complex and much discussed interpenetrations of various constructions of race in Faulkner’s *Intruder in the Dust* and other stories featuring Gavin Stevens that process thorny
questions about race, including *Light in August*. Although Faulkner certainly read the hardboiled fiction of the 1930s, Gavin shares more with the hybrid character of dime novel detective Nick Carter. Gavin's relationship with women, and perhaps especially women who function in part as *femme fatale* figures, like Temple Drake, Eula Snopes, and even Linda Snopes, might also be illuminated by a much deeper investigation of Nick Carter's *femmes fatales* than I have provided here.

American dime novels touch upon many of the most important questions in literary scholarship today and they can productively be brought to bear on a range of issues in teaching and research, including canon formation, genre development, visual and rhetorical iconography, cultural and individual identity formation, race, class, gender, and sexuality. *Dime Novels and the Roots of American Detective Fiction* examines only textual material within the detective genre, but hopes to suggest the potentials of deeper and broader approaches to this corpus of texts and its various paratexts.
## Appendix Tables

### Table 1  Setting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Setting</th>
<th>1883</th>
<th>1888</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Victim’s or accused person’s home</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal home, den, or dungeon</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outdoors</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police station/Prison</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boat</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courtroom</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2  Crimes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crime</th>
<th>1883</th>
<th>1888</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Murder</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theft</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attempted murder</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kidnapping</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fraud</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realized or attempted forced marriage</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgery</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counterfeit</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* A concluding chapter that refers to five murders would only be counted once. Therefore, 89 of the 115 (77%) dime novels in my sample include at least one murder; many include several.

### Table 3  Characters by gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Detective</td>
<td>159 (96%)</td>
<td>6 (4%)</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal</td>
<td>380 (85%)</td>
<td>67 (15%)</td>
<td>447</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim</td>
<td>161 (63%)</td>
<td>94 (37%)</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4  The roles of ethnic others

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Criminal</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informant</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detective</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5  Female criminal roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>No. of women criminals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Member of a criminal organization</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solo</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader of a criminal organization</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accomplice to a man</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accomplice to a woman</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role not mentioned in concluding chapter</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6  Common and interesting detective fates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1883 (65 novels)</th>
<th>1888 (50 novels)</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>% of detectives</th>
<th>% of novels*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Detective marries</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financially rewarded</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becomes famous</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retires</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gets a new job</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dies</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never reveals the truth</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is revealed as corrupt</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is ineffective</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* My sample includes 165 detectives in total, although not all are represented in this chart, as not all fates are given. The percentages given here are calculated based on the number of detectives, not of novels. Therefore, 29% of detectives marry, while 36% of novels contain detectives marrying (although three of these include two detectives marrying).
Table 7  Most common criminal fates*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fate</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dead</td>
<td>177 (48%)</td>
<td>30 (45%)</td>
<td>207 (47%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imprisoned</td>
<td>115 (31%)</td>
<td>26 (39%)</td>
<td>141 (32%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fate not mentioned</td>
<td>32 (9%)</td>
<td>4 (6%)</td>
<td>36 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not prosecuted</td>
<td>29 (8%)</td>
<td>5 (7%)</td>
<td>34 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escaped</td>
<td>12 (4%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sent to asylum</td>
<td>7 (2%)</td>
<td>2 (3%)</td>
<td>9 (2%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The percentages are rounded off, so don’t quite add up to 100%.

Table 8  Causes of criminal deaths

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause</th>
<th>1883</th>
<th>1888</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Killed by detective</td>
<td>38 (29%)*</td>
<td>10 (14%)</td>
<td>48 (23%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicide</td>
<td>34 (26%)</td>
<td>12 (16%)</td>
<td>46 (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentenced to death</td>
<td>13 (10%)</td>
<td>15 (20%)</td>
<td>28 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cause not mentioned</td>
<td>16 (12%)</td>
<td>10 (14%)</td>
<td>26 (13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Killed by other criminal</td>
<td>15 (11%)</td>
<td>9 (12%)</td>
<td>24 (12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural causes</td>
<td>11 (8%)</td>
<td>10 (14%)</td>
<td>21 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Killed by victim</td>
<td>4 (3%)</td>
<td>8 (11%)</td>
<td>12 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Killed by God</td>
<td>2 (2%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total dead criminals</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Many more criminals are killed by detectives in 1883, even taking into account the higher number of criminals killed that year. This is largely due to Detective Allan Fernleigh’s bombing of 18 criminals in the 1883 novel, *The Black Doctor*.

Table 9  Means of criminal suicide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Means</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poison</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prison hanging</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gun</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicide by cop</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drowning</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Means not given</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1 Reassessing the American Contribution to Detective Fiction

1. Little is known of O’Brien, who donated about 1,400 dime novels to The New York Public Library in 1921 and about 2,100 dimes to The Huntington Library the next year; Marlena Bremseth’s research into his biography reveals little more than a paucity of information.

2. The dime novel is unusual in that we can pinpoint its end quite accurately. A change in postal rates in 1915 rendered dime novels unprofitable, especially on the heels of overwhelming competition from pulps, magazines, and films.

3. The term ‘dime novel’ first appeared in Irwin P. Beadle’s series, Beadle’s Dime Novels (1860–74). What began as a brand name quickly took on currency in referring to all paper-covered books that were issued on a regular schedule and that cost less than a quarter; the term is still used in this way by scholars and collectors.

4. For more on the censorship controversies around dime novels, see Paul Erickson and Stephen Mailloux.

5. In fact, Pinkerton appeared in 1874 at the tail end of the fallow period that Haycraft identifies, while Nick Carter did not appear until 1886. The most famous dime novel detective to precede Green’s novel was probably Old Sleuth (1872–1912, not always in print).

6. See, for example, Marlena Bremseth’s Who Was Guilty? and J. Randolph Cox’s Dashing Diamond Dick and Other Classic Dime Novels.

7. See, for example, Richard Slotkin on the dime novel Western or Gary Hoppenstand on the dime novel detective.

8. For a discussion of the intersections of detective and Western tropes, especially their shared interest in individualism, self-reliance, and the self-made man, see Cynthia Hamilton.

9. The Nick Carter novels are narrated in the third person despite the use of the same name in the author and main character positions. It was not unusual for dime novels to use a character name as a house name as part of its branding practices. For an excellent study of the many ways in which market realities impacted writing choices in dime novels and story papers, see Schurman and Johnson.

10. See Cox’s ‘The Dime Novel Detective and His Elusive Trail’ for a thorough catalog of the various versions of these stories.

11. For descriptions of the best-known dime novel detectives, see Cox’s The Dime Novel Companion: A Source Book, which provides publication information as well as summaries of the most commonly recurring characters and series.

12. Denning and others have shown that despite highly publicized protests about the impact of dime novels on young boys, their audience was actually much more diverse than dime novel historians used to think.
13. Although the acolyte is occasionally female, there are no series featuring girl detectives.

14. As Cox notes, the Young Sleuth of later stories is far more settled in his traditional masculinity, and seems at odds with his earliest instantiation (Dime Novel Companion, 295).

15. For a detailed analysis of an ambiguously gendered male detective known to his friends as ‘Gay Gus Giles, the Lady Detective,’ see my article, ‘Queer Investigations.’

16. For a detailed analysis of A Diamond Ear-ring, see my article, ‘Queer Investigations.’

17. See D. A. Miller for a discussion of how generic categories surrounding detectives have been formed.

18. The subgenres most closely linked to the past fifty years (detectives of diversity and the postmodern detective) are sometimes considered a single subgenre, but we will consider them separately because they took quite different paths of development in the dime novels.

19. Joseph N. Rainone has found one such detective who precedes but uncannily resembles Sherlock Holmes.

20. Amanda Cross is the pseudonym used for mystery writing by Carolyn Gold Heilbrun, acclaimed feminist scholar of modern British literature.

21. See, for example, Ruby Rich’s ‘The Lady Dicks: Gender Benders Take the Case’ or Roger Berger’s ‘The Black Dick: Race, Sexuality and Discourse in the L.A. Novels of Walter Mosley.’

22. Examples abound. For a seminal essay positing the conservatism of classical mysteries, see Grella, and for a more recent essay compellingly positing inherent patriarchy as a marker of the genre, see Ebert.

23. Three quite different studies come to mind: Marc Lits’s examination of the para-literary signs that confirm genre in detective fiction; John Cawelti’s insightful comparison of Sherlock Holmes and Dracula, with its acknowledgment of the ways in which detective narratives underlie recent popular vampire literature; and Robert Rushing’s assertion that detective fiction is continually ‘fracturing into ever-smaller units’ (18).

24. The critics working from this premise are too numerous to name, but Dennis Porter and Stephen Knight are particularly high-profile proponents of the theory that detective fiction is fundamentally conservative.

2 Uncovering the Subversive Potential of Detective Dime Novels

1. We’ll come back to the subversive potential of ambiguously gendered characters whose sex and gender seem at odds, as these female detectives might be accomplishing more than Klein gives them credit for.

2. The difference in sample size results from a publication schedule change: the NYDL began with daily publication in June of 1883 before moving to a weekly format in September of the same year. I deleted six titles from my sample because three were collections of short stories and three others did not map easily as detective stories, lacking clear detective, criminal, and victim positions.

3. John Cawelti includes the falsely accused person as a fourth position (Adventure); this recurring but not omnipresent character does not seem
to play a constitutive role in what is fundamentally a triangular dynamic. All falsely accused characters in my sample are exonerated in the end, and many will be mentioned throughout the chapter.

4. I had intended to read the ten novels with the most subversive endings, but I became intrigued by many more of these texts, so that I ended up fully reading almost 20 percent of the sample.

5. For exact numbers, see Table 1 in the Appendix.

6. For exact numbers, see Table 2 in the Appendix.

7. For exact numbers, see Table 3 in the Appendix.

8. For exact numbers, see Table 4 in the Appendix.

9. I have written in ‘Queer Investigations’ about A Diamond Ear-ring (1883), in which the female detective remains ‘engaged at her secret vocation’ (27) at the conclusion. The other ultimately unmarried female detective (from Shadow, 1883) and the marriageable black detective (from Billy Bones, The Negro Minstrel Detective, 1888) are discussed later in this chapter.

10. A notable exception is found in A Terrible Ending (1883), discussed at length later in this chapter.

11. For a table detailing the level of control exerted by female criminals, see Table 5 in the Appendix.

12. See, for example, Allan Pickrell’s ‘The WASP in Perpetuity.’

13. For details about the most common and interesting of detectives’ fates, see Table 6 in the Appendix.

14. For details about the fates of criminals by gender, see Table 7 in the Appendix.

15. For details about causes of criminal death, see Table 8 in the Appendix.

16. Grella, for example, suggests that a gentlemanly criminal might take the responsibility of punishment out of the detective’s hands and into his own in a way that recommends the criminal’s character over the victim’s (44).

17. For details about causes of criminal suicide, see Table 9 in the Appendix.

18. Shadow is the only one of the 20 novels in my sample published under the Police Captain Howard house name written in the first person.

19. It is not uncommon, though, for dime novel detectives to decline rewards out of gallantry. In Old Reliable, for example, a young woman offers the detectives a portion of the money they have recovered, which they do not accept because ‘they undertook the case without the hope of reward, and the state paid them well for the detection of the outlaws.’ In the next paragraph, however, the reader is assured that for the recovery of a dead outlaw, ‘they received a splendid reward’ (27).

20. This 14 percent figure is conservative, since forced marriages may be attempted in other novels without mention in the conclusion.

21. As always throughout this chapter, this is a conservative estimate, since it is possible that a corrupt detective appears earlier in a narrative but is not mentioned in the conclusion (indeed, I know of at least one case in which this happens: Detective Davis). I would think it unlikely that a detective’s death would not be mentioned in the conclusion.

22. Further work on this novel might consider the ways John-Baptiste Poquelin (Molière) and Noah Webster provide fodder for a metafictional reading of this novel, since Frenchmen Mollier and Molière both create texts/actions, while the two American Websters codify and interpret them.
23. As Richard Slotkin notes in *Gunfighter Nation*, many Westerns are actually set in what we might consider southern states; Jesse James, iconic outlaw, was from neighboring Missouri.

3 Allan Pinkerton’s Dangerous Detective Doubles

1. It is no accident that the writer who brought us the first fully-formed detective stories in the 1840s also wrote a defining dark double tale in ‘William Wilson’ (1839).

2. Constructing a biographical sketch is a fraught enterprise, given the numerous, often unreliable, accounts of Pinkerton’s larger-than-life presence in the popular imagination. My sketch is conservative in describing Pinkerton’s accomplishments. Although I use a few details from Lavine’s enthusiastic biography, I rely mostly on Joseph Morn’s and James Horan’s more even-handed treatments.

3. The Pinkerton Agency charged $3 per day for the services of a regular operative, $8/day for a supervisor, and $12/day for Pinkerton himself (Lavine, 21). To put that into perspective, laborers in the United States in 1860 made, on average, $1.03/day, while engineers and machinists made $1.61/day (U.S. Department of Commerce, 165).

4. For a detailed composition and reception history of *Lady of Lyons*, see Ganzel. Pinkerton may not have known of Bulwer-Lytton’s borrowing of the general plot from Helen Maria Williams’s *The History of Perouour; or, The Bellows-Maker* (1801) and of the decisions in his appropriation, and yet Ganzel’s account of this first rewriting provides fascinating parallels to Pinkerton’s transformation of the plot into a detective narrative.

5. Even the number of men executed is unclear. Without acknowledging the discrepancy, several scholars list different numbers: Morn says that 13 men were executed (“Eye,” 95); Boyer and Morais list 19 men, giving their full names (57); and Denning puts the number at 20 (119).

6. Thank you to *Dime Novel Round-Up* for providing permission to print this section, which is a revised version of an earlier article, ‘Constructions of Readerly Pleasure in Detective-Outlaw Dime Novels.’

7. Michel Foucault, for example, traces a trajectory toward fiction representations of ‘two pure minds’ in the murderer and the detective that is based on a movement away from torture and towards ‘the slow process of discovery’ (*Discipline*, 69). Similarly, Aaron Marc Stein ties the move away from torture to the rise of law that paves the way for the rationality central to the detective’s identity.

4 Mentorship, Sportsmanship, and Nick Carter’s Epistemological Dilemmas

1. Although the *Killmaster* series features a shift in Nick’s occupation from private detective to spy, Nick Carter maintains most of the basic qualities that construct him as a masculine hero with strong American values. For details on this late twentieth-century iteration of Nick Carter, see Murray.

3. See, for example, www.dimenovelcastle.com, a commercial site that provides digital and print reproductions of Nick Carter and other dime novels.

4. George Dove and others have noted that many avid readers of detective fiction do not, in fact, engage in competitive play but maintain a spectator position (Reader, 20, 91). Such readers might simply giggle at Holmes’s outlandish statement and move on without feeling any anxiety whatsoever.

5. Chick, who first appears in the Western-themed detective dime novel, One Against Twenty-One (1891), became a significant detective character in his own right, eventually starring in his own radio plays, Chick Carter, Boy Detective and in a 1946 film serial, Chick Carter, Detective. Some stories published in Nick Carter Weekly also include ‘Chickering Carter’ as a secondary pseudonym.

6. See, for example, Nick Carter’s Clever Protégé; or, The Making of a Detective (1899), which opens in Nick’s gymnasium with Nick coaching young Bob Ferret in boxing techniques.

7. This dime novel is a collection of three issues of Nick Carter Weekly, 607, 608, and 609, all written by Frederic van Rensselaer Dey and published in 1908. The stories were published as a whole in the New Magnet Library series as issue 687 in 1911 and reprinted as issue 1252 in 1929. All page numbers are taken from the 1929 reprint, available in the University of Rochester’s Rare Books and Special Collections.

8. The ‘4’ of this ad obviously brings to mind Conan Doyle’s The Sign of Four (1890), transforming the sign into a puzzle that eventually reveals the detective’s weaknesses in ratiocination.

9. Tom Dawson does appear as an apprentice in at least one other Nick Carter story. Nonetheless, within the frame of this dime novel, he clearly fails as an apprentice, and even within the larger frame of the series, his success is ultimately very limited.

10. This dime novel is a collection of three issues of Nick Carter Weekly, 716, 717, and 718, all written by Frederic van Rensselaer Dey and published in 1910. The stories were published as a whole in the New Magnet Library series as issue 763 in 1912 and reprinted as issue 1287 in 1931. All page numbers are taken from the 1931 reprint, available in the University of Rochester’s Rare Books and Special Collections.

11. This dime novel is a collection of three issues of Nick Carter Weekly, 770, 771 and 772, all written by Frederic van Rensselaer Dey and published in 1911. The stories were published as a whole in the New Magnet Library series as issue 799 in 1913 and reprinted as issue 1305 in 1931. All page numbers are taken from the 1931 reprint, available in the University of Rochester’s Rare Books and Special Collections.

12. Irwin probably comes close, as demonstrated by his delight in paradox and complicated geometric configurations throughout The Mystery to a Solution.
5 Faulkner, Twain, and the Legacy of Dime Novel Detectives

1. The unfinished manuscript was first published in 1963; Twain initially wrote *Simon Wheeler* as a play, and eventually spent time turning it into a novel, a project he never completed.

2. Edmund Volpe identifies five of Faulkner’s nineteen novels as employing a detective pattern: *Sanctuary* (1931), *Light in August* (1932), *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), *Intruder in the Dust* (1948), and *Requiem for a Nun* (1951) (86). *Sanctuary* and *Requiem* are plotted around a central crime and include a detective character (Horace Benbow in the former and Gavin Stevens in the latter), *Absalom* follows amateur detective/historian Quentin Compson’s quest to uncover the narratives, criminal and otherwise, of his ancestors, and *Light in August* centers on a mysterious stranger and eventual murder, and includes a brief but important appearance by Gavin Stevens.

3. Howard Baetzhold’s 1976 article reads the story as a parody of Pinkerton that took its material in part from a sensational body-snatching case from 1878. Peter Messent’s 1995 article explores the story as a metanarrative of epistemological uncertainty, locating the tale’s humor in the reader’s uneasy acknowledgment of the absurd but prevalent dislocations of meaning in modern life.


5. For a full account of this early debate as well as his contribution to it, see Monaghan.

6. Irwin’s article, ‘Knight,’ focuses on *Knight’s Gambit*, while his *The Mystery to a Solution* is broader in its choice of Faulkner texts.
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This book mentions over 100 dime novel characters by name, mostly within a single discussion. A few characters, however, appear in multiple places and are included here by name under their author name. The dime novel ‘authors’ (house names) included in this index are: Allan Arnold, Nick Carter, Police Captain Howard, Old King Brady, and Old Sleuth.

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