

**English 231: Detective and Mystery Narratives
Final Lecture: TSL and Detective Fiction**

The first four numbered sections here are an outline of the lecture; the later sections “flesh out” these outlines.

1. *The Silence of the Lambs* takes on the major forms and themes of detective fiction

- a. TSL contains many of the important elements of earlier detective and mystery narratives - but tends to invert them, play with them, supersede them.
- b. Postmodern writers embrace pastiche (the collaging/putting together of ideas and texts generated by other people) quite frankly. Postmodern writers tend to acknowledge that “there is nothing new under the sun” (the quotation is from Ecclesiastes).
- c. As readers, however, we must be careful to avoid believing that postmodern literature is more “advanced” than earlier works because it appears to “contain everything.”
- d. This lecture helps review some of the course’s major themes. However, it focuses on only a few main elements of previous texts - there are many others worth discussing. You’ll need to do your own reviewing of main topics.

2. TSL retraces key formal elements

- C Parable form - involving the reader by speaking indirectly, by asking questions (New Testament; traces in many texts).
- C Systematic deconstruction and defamiliarization of moral conventions
- C Locked-room elements: a brilliant, eccentric detective, bumbling sidekick, introductory exercise, ineffective police, locked-room contrasted with infinitude, false arrest or red herring, detection by deduction, solution by surprise, expansive and condescending explanation at end by detective

3. TSL questions the emotional isolation of the detective

- C A full integration of emotional and intellectual elements; acknowledgement that detectives and victims have feelings and that feelings can help detectives solve crimes
- C A detective whose isolation/Otherness allows her to solve crimes
- C A “Bluebeardian” gothic framework foregrounding the threat of serial violence against women

4. TSL shows how postmodern culture begets violence and crime

- C In Starling’s world, money and violence are replacing language as dominant symbolic discourse (Chandler).
- C Seriality as the logical expression of ongoing, unstoppable nature of violence, evil - and detective and mystery narratives themselves (traces in many texts - how many feature a detective who appears in more than one story or novel?).

FORMAL ELEMENTS

2a. PARABLE FORM

- * Lecter, like an inverted version of Jesus, gives CS the information in parables: "let those who have ears, hear; let those who have eyes, see." Like Jesus with the disciples, he doesn't just solve the problem (though sometimes he gives partial explanations to help her) but asks questions, leads her to clues. [Lecter knows his Bible; his reference to the Paschal lamb (19) and later consumption of lamb chops and interest in CS's lamb-slaughter story shows that he's ready to participate in scapegoating/sacrifice - recognizes it as inevitable.]
- * Lecter, like Jesus, isn't really a detective; he knows everything all along and plans to "give" Gumb to Starling as a gift. Like Jesus with his disciples, Lecter seeks to teach CS to be a detective, and at the end pays her the supreme compliment of telling her he won't pursue her, the "world being more interesting with you in it" (366).
- * Lecter is thus CS's primary teacher, a kind of ironic Dupin or Holmes figure who treats her like a bumbling sidekick, but instead of solving the problem for her in a condescending manner (compare Dupin and Holmes), teaches her how to solve it herself.
- * BUT: instead of (like Jesus) teaching CS about the nature of good, Lecter teaches her unstintingly to look evil in the face; he presents himself as an example (see next section). IRONY: Harris seems to be making a statement about religion through a figure who resembles not Jesus but Satan. (!)

2b. DECONSTRUCTING/DEFAMILIARIZING MORALITY/EVIL

- * The novel defamiliarizes "morality" and reintroduces the problem of "good and evil."
 - * The concept of "murder" deconstructed and reconstructed as "intra-species predation" - flaying/cannibalism (discussed last time).
 - * The novel asks the logical (and amoral) question "why not hunt down, kill for, and enjoy the best body parts, the high-quality hides?" It answers the question by pointing out that when we teach ourselves to see other beings as "THINGS," evil becomes possible; connections between beings are lost.
 - * The problem of evil is reintroduced.

Lecter introduces himself as the embodiment of evil: "Nothing happened to me, Officer Starling. I happened. You can't reduce me to a set of influences. You've given up good and evil for behaviorism, Officer Starling. You've got everybody in moral dignity pants - nothing is ever anybody's fault. Look at me, Officer Starling. Can you say I'm evil? Am I evil?" (21)

When Starling naively defines evil as "whatever is destructive," Lecter presents example that indisputably refutes her reasoning: "I collect church collapses recreationally" (22).

Novel ends with similar comment about newspaper accounts of Buffalo Bill: "At least two scholarly journals explained that [Gumb's] unhappy childhood was the reason he killed women in his basement for their skins. The words crazy and evil do not appear in either article" (357).
- * Evil is presented as seriality writ large: it goes on and on; can't be quantified, predicted, or eliminated; it can only be understood and pursued.

2C. LOCKED-ROOM ELEMENTS: these elements are inverted, parodied, or deconstructed to show how unstable and unpredictable “real” crime has become.

- * The "**brilliant, eccentric detective**" **element** deliberately mixed up with "**ineffective police.**" Who is the detective in this novel? Who are the police? Who is incompetent? Competent? Boundary deconstructed; sometimes people are both.
- * HL's **introductory exercise** is reading Clarice Starling
- * **The red herrings** are everywhere - including Catherine Martin's pornographic pictures and LSD.
- * **The staged ruse** - deliberately placed to confuse the police - is probably Lecter's "Billy Rubin" characterization.
- * **Locked room**
 - * Instead of a single locked room, the novel is packed with them, making it hard for Clarice to figure out what she should investigate. The story is filled with locked rooms - Behavioral Sciences, the morgue, Catherine's room, Fredrica's room, and it's the last that yields the best clues.
 - * Gumb's house (the oubliette, warren of basement rooms where Gumb entraps and kills his victims) and also the asylum where CS visits Lecter for clues; the two sites, both underground, are "doubled."
 - * When Clarice finally arrives at the "locked room" of the basement, the criminal is still there, and wants to make her his next victim.
- * The **solution by surprise** inverts the masterful-detective formula. The detective finds the clue in a clothes closet; the potential victim is unimpressed by the detective; the detective finds and kills the perp almost by accident (hears, fires at the "snick" of the gun cocking) and in self-defense.
- * Instead of a **condescending explanation by the detective**, we get ironic asides from the narrator about the press's handling of Gumb's death and about Clarice's relationship to Pilcher. In fact, the explanation deflates Lecter's status: it shows that he knew all along that Gumb was the likely perpetrator, that evidence sufficient to solve the crime was in the hands of Raspail's relatives the whole time, and that since Lecter has escaped, the threat of serial violence has only begun anew. Chaos, not control, reigns; the detectives have been working on problems other people already knew how to solve.

3a. EMOTIONAL INVOLVEMENT CAN HELP DETECTIVES SOLVE CRIMES

- * CS's Otherness (2b) and isolation from the community (she is, as Lecter says, "a rube") are related to her emotionalism; she is female, young, vulnerable, and not yet out of school.
- * Starling is neither fully a member of the police nor a citizen; she is neither, and consequently, because estranged from both groups, uniquely qualified to see clearly and solve the problem.

- * CS trades emotional vulnerability for information. (Direct contradiction of her instructions from Crawford: "don't let Hannibal Lecter inside your head.") Psychiatrist/patient dyad; she tells him, he teaches her to interpret.
- * CS identifies with the victims and uses her rage to help prevent another victimization.
- * CS constantly struggling to master her rage as she moves through the case. She is angry at the killer and also angry at the "crimes" different in scale but similar in type that people like Chilton commit against her.
- * Crawford's shut-down emotions may be the source of his inability to solve the crime; perhaps he calls in CS because he senses she has the emotional ability he doesn't. Crawford also identifies with the victims as he watches Bella die a senseless and meaningless death - as he observes her becoming less and less like her remembered self - and is completely stripped of his defenses when he cries on the street.
- * Lecter feeds on others' pain (breast-feeding comment is metonymic - he is like the "moth that lives on tears"), perhaps because he has none of his own. The ultimate psychopath is the great mind without emotion.

3b. A BLUEBEARDIAN GOTHIC FRAMEWORK EMPHASIZES SERIAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

- * TSL postmodernizes the story by emphasizing the saving power of the heroine and her sister.
 - * "Behavioral Science," with its contrasting of domesticity and violence - "checkered cafe curtains and its file cabinets full of hell" - mirrors Bluebeard's castle, is the place where the Bluebeardian crimes are documented.
 - * The "oubliette" and Gumb's storefront/house are Bluebeard's closet: the bodies of strange women buried there. Fredrica's writing him "notes from the pit" ("dearest secret friend of the heart" 360) accentuates the pathos of the serial murder of the young women.
 - * Catherine Baker Martin and CS (respectively) the surviving narrator/wife and the sister who sends for help.
 - * Harris seems to be rehabbing the Bluebeard story: promoting the saving sister as the new fighter of inexorable domestic violence.

4. Postmodern culture begets violence and crime that cannot be stopped, only temporarily silenced

- * Money talks:
 - * Senator Martin able to "buy" Lecter out of the asylum; results in mayhem and his escape.
 - * wealthy victims (like Catherine) get better, more focused treatment and attention than poorer victims like Kimberley and Fredrica.

- * Crawford threatens the Johns Hopkins doctor with governmental budget cuts (having transsexual surgery declared "cosmetic") in order to get the information he needs. (Good cause, but does the end justify the means?)
- * Violence talks:
 - * Clarice the focus of much violence against women - told to remain in her place.
 - * Lecter terrorizes most people through violent actions (he terrorizes Clarice with words).
 - * Gumb hopes his violently-acquired "girl suit" will transform him into someone desirable.
- * Language is relatively ineffective:
 - * Clarice told to remain silent - her mouth will get her, as Krendler tells her, "in the typing pool."
 - * Crawford is a man of few words. He telegraphs himself physically much of the time.

4c. Seriality as the logical expression of ongoing, unstoppable nature of violence, evil

- * **No message about how order has been restored - chaos has been restored.**

Lecter: "Well, Clarice, have the lambs stopped screaming? You owe me a piece of information, you know, and that's what I'd like. . . . I won't be surprised if the answer is yes and no. The lambs will stop for now. But, Clarice, you judge yourself with all the mercy of the dungeon scales at Threave; you'll have to earn it again and again, the blessed silence. Because it's the plight that drives you, and the plight will not end, ever" (366).
- * Detective and mystery narratives themselves play on this seriality - take advantage of the fact that violence will never stop (traces in many texts - how many feature a detective who appears in more than one story or novel?).