Clue, Code, Conjure: The Epistemology of American Detective Fiction, 1841-1914

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CLUE, CODE, CONJURE:
THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF AMERICAN DETECTIVE FICTION, 1841–1914

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment
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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

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Adviser: Professor Marc Dolan

This dissertation posits American detective fiction between 1841 and 1914 as a meaningful category and interrogates forms of knowledge used in this genre. The conventional wisdom on detective fiction creates a dichotomy of British and American production, with British detective fiction in a rational style dominating in importance into the 1920s, and American detective fiction dominating in importance with the “hard-boiled” style of the 1930s and ’40s (as described by Raymond Chandler). This dissertation argues that American detective fiction is a meaningful category before and beyond the hard-boiled style.

Abductive reasoning, a form of logic based on observation, hypothesis, and confirmation, is the characteristic mode of detection in fiction. Abductive reasoning requires the use of background knowledge to draw conclusions. Therefore, cultural context and beliefs become part of the interpretive process. Works by Edgar Allan Poe, Metta Victor, Anna Katharine Green, Mark Twain, Pauline Hopkins, Edwin Balmer and William MacHarg, and Arthur B. Reeve are used in this study to demonstrate the wide variety of knowledge sources considered relevant in this period. The clearest unit of information in detective fiction is the clue: an object or occurrence that provides critical information toward solving the mystery. The detective figure is
the master interpreter of clues, with the observational skills, knowledge base, and imagination to identify and interpret information that others do not.

The period of 1841 to 1914 saw extensive industrialization, geographic expansion, and racial turmoil in the United States. Forensic science advanced both technically and culturally as part of a larger movement toward scientific management. The transition to scientific thinking as depicted in detective fiction is, however, significantly complicated by continuing reliance on sentimental and sensational elements such as magic, religion, and intuition and on community-based ethics.
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# Contents

Introduction............................................................................................................................................. 1

Chapter 1. The Clue, Epistemology, and American Detective Fiction................................................. 6

Chapter 2. American Parthenogenesis ................................................................................................. 30

Chapter 3. A Modern Scientist in an Antebellum Court: Law and Knowledge in Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson* ......................................................................................................................... 64

Chapter 4. “Unseen Forces”: Forms of Knowledge and Disrupted Identities in Pauline Hopkins’s *Hagar’s Daughter* ..................................................................................................................... 104

Chapter 5. Scientific Detection ............................................................................................................. 135

Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................. 170

Works Cited ........................................................................................................................................... 176
Introduction

This dissertation looks at the development of American detective fiction through the lens of the clue; that is, information and epistemology. Questions considered include: What forms of knowledge are used in United States proto- and para-detective fiction before the conventions of the genre were established? What other genres and cultural movements engender these forms of knowledge? How are the forms of knowledge used and treated both within the texts (by characters) and by authors, and how do authors use them in relation to their thematic content? How do these forms of knowledge relate to the idea of the clue as it emerges in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries?

The idea of the clue in American detective fiction developed along with the genre and intersected with other themes in literature and culture. This dissertation questions the widely held belief that American detective fiction between Edgar Allan Poe and Dashiell Hammett was a wasteland and that the genre history progresses from Poe to Arthur Conan Doyle’s creation of Sherlock Holmes, to Hammett and Raymond Chandler, with voids of insignificance in between. It also undermines the idea that the most useful way to look at detective fiction is by dividing its elements into rational, classic, and semiotic on one side versus hard-boiled, realistic, and hermeneutic on the other.

The overarching idea is the importance of the religious and sentimental ideas that are affirmed in these works in the most ostensibly positivist genre. Although detective fiction focuses on finding facts and solving problems, the social changes that lead to the development of the genre also bring increasing mechanization and depersonalization. Detective fiction
emphasizes scientific inquiry but also validates religion, family, and emotion as sources of ethics and information.

In some ways, this dissertation is about science, broadly defined, and religion, even more broadly defined, as the basis of knowledge, and how the transition to scientific thinking as shown in American detective fiction is far from complete. Religion in this broad definition includes forms of magical and integrative thinking, and not only Christian evangelical belief, but also African American folk beliefs, superstition, and an underlying sense of mystery and order in things that cannot be fully seen. Science includes forensics as well as detective elements that are based on observation (i.e., inspired by scientific method, as described by Nancy Harrowitz and others in Umberto Eco and Thomas Sebeok’s collection *The Sign of Three*) and on signs, symptoms, and diagnoses.

The clue is traditionally a thread: either the thread of life spun by the Fates, or the ball of thread that Ariadne gave Theseus to help him find his way out of the labyrinth in the myth of the Minotaur ("Clue, n"). Detective fiction explores what makes things happen in the universe, what traces those causes leave on the world, and how we read those traces. The clue is an important trope in detective fiction and beyond—from law enforcement to medicine. At root, the clue is information. Where the information comes from, where it goes, what counts as meaningful information, and how it comes to mean are some of the questions defining the epistemology of a genre. This dissertation investigates forms and sources of knowledge in American detective fiction between the 1840s, when Poe created the genre in its modern form, and the second decade of the 1900s, before Ellery Queen and Dashiell Hammett began to establish its more recent modes.
Clues in detective fiction tell us what counts as knowledge and where knowledge comes from. This means that the different kinds of clues in detective fiction and how they are interpreted show us a worldview of cause and effect: a conceptual space of causality. Culturally specific styles and tropes are available for forms of knowledge, and these forms of knowledge also express values and beliefs. Viewing literature through this lens suggests alternate trajectories of a genre and enriches our understanding of its conventions.

The works considered here range in publication from 1841 to 1914, with a concentration around the turn of the century. Chapter 1 outlines the history of the genre, including Poe’s contributions, and formal and thematic aspects of the clue. Poe, Chandler, and the “rules” writers of the late 1920s participated in this critical history, with early Queen providing examples of how the rules may be realized on the fiction page. Both the Golden Age writers and their most cutting critics are proponents of rigor; they are prescriptive in their approaches and reject the feminine or magical. They want to nail down where knowledge can/should come from—for the detective, but also for the detective writer. This chapter sets out the received history of American detective fiction and then describes modifications, the critical background supporting its modification, and useful theoretical tools for rethinking. The work of Poe provides examples.

Chapter 2 considers forms of knowledge in domestic detective fiction, especially the work of Metta Victor and Anna Katharine Green from the 1860s to the turn of the century. Detective fiction in this period preceded the strong conventions of the twentieth century. Instead, these works explore how sentimental and gothic tropes can help make sense of societal disorder. Such novels and stories less often depict the kind of atom-like, decontextualized clue that would develop as a detective trope.
Chapters 3 and 4 respectively are dedicated to *Pudd’nhead Wilson* by Mark Twain and *Hagar’s Daughter* by Pauline Hopkins, two novels of racial knowledge and misconstruction that feature detective figures. Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson* is a comic novel set in the 1850s that ironizes the definition and significance of race. The fortunes of the hero, a late-century scientific man in a mid-century setting, demonstrate shifts from character to identity and from affiliation to expertise as the basis of knowledge. These chapters also include as background the historical and literary arrival of the professional detective (public and private). These two thematically related works show part of the range of detection and scientific tropes available through turn-of-the-century lenses. The forms of knowledge affect the thematic elements, and the genres Twain and Hopkins choose affect the forms of knowledge. Although Hopkins emphasizes familial feeling and objects as clues, and Twain emphasizes science and the expertise of an outsider, both employ elements of the professional detective, and both show how illogical and socially disruptive racial logic can be.

The works covered in this dissertation are in mixed genres. The novels are not detective novels per se but a mixture of genres including detective elements. The exception is in chapter 5; these stories are definitely presented as detective fiction and conform to our sense of what that means, but they are not well known. Because genre definitions are often based on canonical works, texts that are non-canonical and texts that combine genre elements help expand our notion of the development of that genre and its cannon. Chapter 5 is on scientific detection, especially in the stories of Edwin Balmer and William MacHarg and Arthur B. Reeve, with further examples from Jacques Futrelle and Hugh C. Weir, and tying in the Carolyn Wells novel *The Clue*. The conclusion sketches the subsequent interrogations of the clue. Writers in hard-
boiled and other modes show how a rich understanding of the clue shapes our reading of detective fiction.
Chapter 1. The Clue, Epistemology, and American Detective Fiction

Almost from the beginning, detective fiction in English has been a self-conscious genre. Writers of detective fiction have described, and often prescribed, both the operations of detection as a mode of thought, and detective fiction as a form. As the genre gained wide popularity in the early twentieth century, this tendency became more evident. The British writer G. K. Chesterton wrote a “Defence of Detective Stories” in 1902 before he created the detecting priest Father Brown. Carolyn Wells, a prolific American writer in the first half of the twentieth century, published *The Technique of the Mystery Story*, a how-to, in 1913, after she had published several detective novels.\(^1\) Anna Katharine Green, known as the mother of the detective novel, wrote several essays on the workings of mystery plots in 1918 and 1919. These writers have made their pronouncements in critical essays, anthology introductions, guidelines for professional organizations, and manuals.

Detective fiction presents a fundamentally scientific mode of thinking that has to do with the hidden truths and their outward manifestations—the fundamental causes that are under the surface and the effects that ripple out and are available to us. This is reported in the literature in Umberto Eco and Thomas Sebeok, especially Nancy Harrowitz and Carlo Ginzburg. However it is also related to points made by Howard Haycraft and others about what detective fiction thinking looks like, and also by G. K. Chesterton in his essay about the manmade objects in cities. The clue is the effect in a system of cause and effect, where the cause—the underlying—is to be inferred, and *can* be inferred. However, the clue is information, knowledge, which comes

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\(^1\) This dissertation is more accurately about detective fiction in the United States. In this dissertation, the term “American” refers to the United States, both for brevity and because it shows the way the United States culture as it develops in this period is imagined as continental.
from and is used for other things, too. Within this (ostensibly positivist) framework, there are varieties of clues and possibilities for awe.

**Historiography of Detective Fiction in the West**

The trope of murder and detection as a game is ubiquitous in detective fiction, and understanding the ways in which authors use the clue as a piece of a game allows insight into their cosmology. In “The Purloined Letter,” Dupin draws a parallel between his method of detection in that case—the correct measurement of his opponent’s intellect—and a child’s game of “even or odd” (Poe 502-05). The character of the opponent is the clue that allows the detective to succeed in his game against the minister. In the 1920s and ’30s, the metaphor of the game is developed further. The detective in S. S. Van Dine’s *The Canary Murder Case* uses a poker game to identify the criminal. In *The Bishop Murder Case*, Van Dine brings in archery, cards, and chess as possible clues in what turns out to be a vast game between killer, the public, and the detective.

In addition, the writers who codified detective fiction depicted the genre itself as a game between reader and writer, or reader and fictional detective, and a game in which the purity of the clue was an important rule. The oath of the London Detection Club, founded in 1928, demanded that members swear “never to conceal a vital clue from the reader” (“The Detection Club Oath” 198). The treatment of the clue, which must be “instantly produced for the inspection of the reader,” is also essential in Ronald Knox’s rules of the game (196). In early Ellery Queen novels, such as *The Roman Hat Mystery*, the narration would break and the author would announce a “challenge to the reader.” The reader has all the necessary clues, so that “the solution... may be reached by a series of logical deductions and psychological observations”
Queen’s interlude shows the way the clue is inextricably linked with the idea of the game in the late 1920s.

Other writers have also embedded their guidelines within their fiction, whether as exposition by a narrator or as the detective’s own words. For example, John Dickson Carr’s 1935 novel *The Three Coffins* includes a scene where the detective holds forth on the locked-room trope in detective fiction, classifying such scenes into seven categories. The paragraphs are numbered within the text, making this speech appear as a set of formal dictates.

In the 1920s to ’40s the genre reached a height of self-analysis and professionalization. In Britain, writers such as Dorothy Sayers and R. Austin Freeman wrote analytically and prescriptively on detective fiction, as did Willard Huntington Wright, the American author of the S. S. Van Dine novels. Critical writing in this period is focused on taxonomy, addressing such questions as whether Poe’s “Thou Art the Man,” Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House*, or Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* should be considered detective fiction. (Many of these critical essays, introductions, and sets of guidelines are included in Howard Haycraft’s *The Art of the Mystery Story*, 1946.)

This period of introspection corresponds to the so-called Golden Age of detective fiction in Great Britain and the United States, which occurred from mid-1920s to early 1940s. It entailed the professionalization of detective writers as they saw themselves. Both the London Detection Club and the Mystery Writers of America were formed in this period, and authors wrote essays and lists of rules for detective fiction. The dominant metaphor in the minds of these writers was the game: a mystery is a game played between the writer and the reader.

By the 1920s, a set of conventions for the detective novel had been established by frequent repetition in the United States and Great Britain. Examples include the prescriptive writings of the American author S. S. Van Dine and the early clue-puzzle mysteries of Ellery
Queen. These expectations emphasize the detective form, first, as *game*, and second, as *drama*. The rules set out unities and economies of place, time, and action.

A dominant metaphor of the fair-play documentation is, of course, play, as in games. *The Roman Hat Mystery*, however, uses the apparatus of the play, as in drama. It begins with a “Lexicon of Persons Connected with the Investigation,” given “solely for the convenience of the reader. . . . The writer. . . urges a frequent study of this chart during the reader’s pilgrimage through the tale, if toward no other end than to ward off the inevitable cry of ‘Unfair!’—the consolation of those who read and do not reason” (Queen viii).

Some of the main ways of looking at detective fiction have been in structural terms and in historical or phenomenological terms. The structural approach holds that the method described by Julian Symons as “true deduction” characterizes all detective fiction (Symons 24-25; qtd. in Harrowitz 180). Biblical and early modern works that feature problem solving through deduction would be considered detective stories. On the other side, the “phenomenological approach . . . claims that in order to have detective stories you must have police forces and detectives” (Harrowitz 179). Policing in that form was recent, coming with urbanization. By this definition, detective fiction could not be said to exist before the 1800s. There are problems with both approaches. The history cannot be considered closely without characterizing the method. On the other hand, writers often call all logical forms “deduction” (Harrowitz 180).

**A Simple Art**

One essay has been especially influential in the history of detective fiction criticism: Raymond Chandler’s “The Simple Art of Murder” (1941, revised 1946). To Chandler, the continuing attempts to refine the genre were going the wrong direction. The problem was its refinement. Chandler indicts mystery novels of his time as being false and effeminate. He writes
that Golden Age, or “classic,” detective novels are “dishonest” both in their representation of life and in their living up to their own stated goals (“Simple Art” 231). Writers of traditional detective novels were playing a game for gain, disingenuously plotting in an atmosphere he describes as rarified and paradigmatically upper-class British. American writers, to Chandler, were especially bad, because their use of the British model was even more false. In the British version, “there is more a sense of background, as if Cheesecake Manor really existed all around and not just the part the camera sees . . . and the characters don’t all try to behave as if they had just been tested by MGM” (231).

On the other side were the hard-boiled writers of the pulp magazines, whose plots emphasized action, often paired with an atomized, nihilistic worldview. Chandler begins by stating an important assumption: “fiction in any form has always intended to be realistic” (222). Therefore, his major complaint is artificiality, figured as flatness.

The flat film set is one image of two-dimensionality, versus going “all around.” As for the characters, they are like the flat images on a Hollywood screen, behaving in the way most conducive to two-dimensional representation. This is of a piece with the “cardboard out of which the characters are cut out,” which is thinner in the bad mystery but cardboard nonetheless in the good mystery (225). The purpose of reading for pleasure is escape “into what lies behind the printed page” (232), making it a necessity that the physical page be more than its own materiality.

William W. Stowe has posed the style of Chandler’s fiction against the most classic of classic detectives, Sherlock Holmes, created by Arthur Conan Doyle. He sees in Chandler’s work a hermeneutic model versus a semiotic one. The hermeneutic model is one in which the actions of the detective are not only or even primarily readerly or “simply instrumental”; rather, the
detective’s experience of the case is highly subjective and often morally involved (377). On the one hand, this model is helpful in looking at these works through the lens of their epistemology. On the other hand, this can also seem like a way of reifying the classic versus hard-boiled distinction (and the privileging of the hard-boiled style) in different terms. The history of detective fiction calls for approaches that complicate the clarity of these distinctions by using a different framework, rather than a column A/column B approach.

A strongly implied effeminacy is a key part of Chandler’s argument against traditional detective novels. Second is their Britishness. Third, and closely related, is the class that is the setting. Chandler provides the fanciful titles of three detective novels he imagines clogging the shelves and best-seller lists: *The Triple Petunia Murder Case*, *Inspector Pinchbottle to the Rescue*, and *Death Wears Yellow Garters*. These titles clearly point at the femininity, Anglophilia, and formulaity he sees in the so-called Golden Age from the end of World War I to 1930.

Against these false, effeminate, and Anglophilic works, Chandler contrasts the hard-boiled American style, which takes as its subject the mean streets. His essay condemns the game model of detective fiction, instead celebrating Dashiell Hammett and the hard-boiled mode. Hammett, writes Chandler, “gave murder back to the people who committed it for a reason, not to provide a corpse.” Chandler believes that, unlike other detective novelists, Hammett writes of “the world he lives in” (237). At the same time, Hammett elevates the hard-boiled to the literary.

The rules of the 1920s aimed to exclude the feminine, the emotional, and the intuitive from detective fiction. In the 1940s, Chandler aims to exclude what at that historical point now seems effeminate—the game orientation of the Golden Age. First, his imagined titles of detective novels emphasize the feminine with garters and petunias, along with the British flavor. “The
Simple Art of Murder” privileges American, masculine, and “real” over British, feminine (or, worse, effeminate), and artificial. His essay is a fantasy of violence against an imagined siege of effeminacy. Chandler uses the feminine or effeminate as a generalized slur.

To some extent we can read a history of detective fiction in what was outlawed, repressed, and mocked. Chandler’s disowned forbearers are the prescriptive writers of the 1920s. Those writers in turn disparage those who came before them and continue to compete with them by defining barriers to entry. Except for Poe and Doyle, most writers before the 1920s are unknown to general readers. Clue-puzzle advocates reject melodrama with its coincidences and intuitions, which they associate with femininity. The rules developed in the 1920s and ’30s rule out some events as sources of enlightenment, such as women’s intuition. However, hard-boiled, as redefined by Chandler, is a rejection of what is seen as effete about puzzle novels. In Chandler’s lone man, there is a rejection of the model of protecting the community which is also a rejection of depicting a community that can be protected, whether or not it should be. A major assumption in the criticism of detective fiction is that in order to take American detective fiction seriously, we must privilege the hard-boiled, often including its cultural claims. That is, exalting American detective fiction has historically been based on exalting the self-consciously masculine style and values of hard-boiled.

Some critics, Chandler concedes, would not consider Hammett to be writing detective fiction at all; these critics are focused on the rules and the purity of the form. Chandler calls them “flustered old ladies—of both sexes (or no sex) and almost all ages.” If being an old lady is not bad enough, the critic could be an effeminate man or a eunuch, all possibilities emphasized by Chandler’s punctuation (“Simple Art” 234).

Chandler ends with a paean to his type of detective and to the writer:
Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He must be the complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. […] He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world. (237)

But above all, he must be a man. This is clear in the pronouns, the sexual code, the reiteration of “man.” American detective fiction must create and embody the ideal of American masculinity.

The claim that British detective fiction is the epitome of the form did not begin with Chandler; he repeats it. Wright includes primarily English authors in his 1927 anthology because he believes American writers inferior due to a failure of work ethic. “The American novelist, when he essays to write this kind of story, does so with contempt and carelessness. . . . He labors under the delusion that a detective novel is an easy and casual kind of literary composition, and the result is a complete failure” (Wright 61). Chandler was trying to push the so-called Golden Age writers out, but they were trying to push sentimental women writers out, and were successful.

The criticism of this period—its histories, taxonomies, and complaints—has continued to influence thinking about the genre in and out of scholarly discourse. Haycraft repeats it in his history Murder for Pleasure, as does Julian Symons in Bloody Murder (1972):

Almost from the beginning the American crime story was deeply in debt to its British counterpart. (Poe was an exception.) Writers like Van Dine, and Queen in the first stage of his career, put an American gloss on what was essentially a British central figure, and there was nothing peculiarly native about the Rinehart formula. (143)
The tendency to “gloss” British elements is in itself an American trope, a holdover. The parenthetical remark hints at Symons’s general orientation, however. It is not clear how the progenitor of a form can be a mere “exception.” It is also not clear what Symons would expect to be “native” about Rinehart’s novels. They certainly do not take the Holmes model; they are much too domestic.

Symons writes, “a truly American crime story, making full use of the manners, habits, and language of the United States, and breaking completely with European tradition, appeared in the twenties. It emerged through the pulp magazines, so named because they were printed on cheap, grainy wood-pulp paper” (143). It seems here that the tradition is presumed British unless there is some evidence of overt “Americanness,” even without any sign of “Britishness.” Actually, after Metta Victor’s *The Dead Letter* appeared in the United States, a version appeared in England that changed the locations to make the story appear to have been written by a British writer. The publishing house objected not on the grounds of copyright, which was not respected across the ocean, but because the American origin was masked—as it is again here. This ignores the interaction between American and British readers and writers, as well as their interactions with Continental writers. The idea that Hammett and Chandler were the American contribution to detective fiction was picked up and became almost a commonplace.

When Symons claims that there were no American “manners, habits, and language,” it seems that he defines American habits specifically as the masculine-identified motifs of hard-boiled. If he means Chandler, this is especially ironic, as Chandler was British and also claimed to have made up some of his most vibrant phrases. Further, Symons has a collector’s obsession with primary content; that is, the figure of the detective. The collective fantasy of hard-boiled masculinity, articulated by Chandler in 1941, suppressed the history of American detective
fiction in order to privilege the hard-boiled style as the American language of life and death. Chandler dismissed other American detective writers as artificial, pseudo-British, and feminine. The side effect is that many readers are unaware of the influence and popularity of women writers of detection and of writers who subvert the classic/hard-boiled dichotomy. Certainly there is plenty that is false, maudlin, or laughable in American detective fiction after Poe but before or other-than Hammett and Chandler. Yet if we accept the Poe–Doyle–Hammett model, we skip major events in the history of detective fiction in English as well as in the history of American popular literature. In addition, reading from the “Simple Art” foundation can lead to a rational/irrational bind, with fair play on one side of the axis and gritty realism on the other. Looking back at American detective fiction during its development shows some alternative schemas.

**Analysis and Recuperation**

American detective fiction before hard-boiled was a diverse and influential body of work. This work cannot be separated from that in the United Kingdom at this time, but the influence happened in both directions. American detective fiction also responds to American cultural currents. Some elements in American detective fiction of the 1860s through 1910s relate to big themes in American literature more broadly and to trends in later fiction, as in ethnic and metaphysical detective fiction of the twentieth century.

In the 1960s through 1980s, the critical focus was on the narrative and formal operations of detective fiction, rather than truth or aesthetics, and in some cases, on detective fiction as exemplifying formal and narrative operations. In 1966, Jacques Lacan published his “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” in which he traces the letter as object and as sign in Poe’s story. Roland Barthes treats detective fiction as an exemplar of levels of narrative in *S/Z* (1966). In his 1979
book *The Role of the Reader*, Umberto Eco considered narrative effects in Eugene Sue’s *Mysteries of Paris*. Excerpts from these works are included in Glenn W. Most and William W. Stowe’s collection *The Poetics of Murder* (1983), along with essays by Fredric Jameson, Frank Kermode, and Dennis Porter. The narrative and semiotic strain did not primarily engage with questions of content, culture, aesthetics, or originality and therefore did not address the truth value of the received history of detective fiction in Britain and the United States. However, they did provide tools and constructs for understanding information in detective fiction.

Three currents in criticism have moved in a way that engenders a new analysis of American detective fiction outside the hard-boiled tradition. The first is Umberto Eco and Thomas Sebeok’s 1983 collection *The Sign of Three: Dupin, Holmes, Peirce*, which provides a useful term, *abduction*, to scholars of detective fiction. The second is the recuperation of lesser known works of detective fiction as part of the broader consideration of literature by women and African American writers. This includes *The Blues Detective* (1996), by Stephen F. Soitos, which considers African American detective fiction across the conventional/hard-boiled divide, and *The Web of Iniquity* (1998) by Catherine Ross Nickerson, about women writers who were both extremely popular and crucial to the development of the detective form.

The third trend is recent looks at the hard-boiled that examine the cultural contexts of the form, and in the process demonstrate the assumptions and exclusions of hard-boiled. The more nuanced understanding of hard-boiled allows us to go back and reread the work that hard-boiled defined itself against (and the work that defined itself against hard-boiled). In the 1990s through 2000s, authors began to consider the construction of detective fiction, especially the hard-boiled style. Two recent books on American hard-boiled fiction have helped finally reclaim that territory from Raymond Chandler’s pronouncements. Sean McCann’s *Gumshoe America* (2000)
situates hard-boiled stories and novels in the context of 1920s, ’30s, and ’40s race politics and populism as they alternately clashed and intersected. He analyzes the hard-boiled in the context of populist and progressive movements. Christopher Breu’s *Hard-Boiled Masculinities* (2005) reveals the layers of fantasy that constitute the hard-boiled hero, an emblem of racialized masculinity. He looks at the way serialized pulp in particular defines gender. These works delineate the exclusions and assumptions of hard-boiled. If we reconsider the valorization of hard-boiled and instead recognize it as a historically produced mode, then the next question is what has been excluded by that valorization.

The last decade has seen new attention to detective fiction in its cultural contexts. In *The Blues Detective* (1996), Stephen Soitos reads African American detective fiction as subverting the supposed boundaries between different styles of detective fiction. Soitos considers both hard-boiled and conventional detective fiction in his look at African American contributions to the genre, and particularly how African American detective fiction throughout the twentieth century does not always follow the hard-boiled/classic delineation. He also claims that detective fiction by African American writers shows the way double consciousness can be an epistemological asset.

Catherine Ross Nickerson has worked on the period between Poe and Holmes, when American women writers perhaps invented, and certainly brought to prominence, novel-length works of detective fiction. *The Web of Iniquity* (1998) returns to the American women who created and popularized full-length detective novels. Nickerson shows how these women writers created early conventions and the ways in which their “domestic detective novels” engaged with questions of women’s money and women’s stories. These early detective novels came from the sentimental tradition as well as from Poe and from real-life detective tales. Specifically, the
novels of Metta Victor and Anna Katharine Green have a lot of melodrama and coincidence components, emotionality, and change of location. They are also episodic.

**Narrative Levels and Abductive Reasoning**

Barthes uses detective fiction as an illustration of the difference between *discours* and *sujet*, the telling and the tale, in that there is the map of information initially presented, and then there is the underlying story that is to be discovered. A clue indicates an event in the past, and it leads the detective to create a hypothesis about what event caused that clue. Abduction provides the link between the formal, epistemological, and content in detective fiction. The formal elements and content both roll up to (or come down from) the epistemological.

Another way to say this is that the effects are available; the detective must induce the causes that lead to those effects. The solution is the single cause that explains all of the effects. This is the principle of abduction, or guess and check. Based on an observation (an effect), the detective makes a hypothesis about what could have led to that observation (the cause). To check, he speculates on other effects that cause would lead to. He then makes additional observations. If they are consistent with that cause, his hypothesis is stronger. This is not logically infallible, which is illustrated in Wilkie Collins’ *The Moonstone* and T. S. Stribling’s story “The Message on the Lawn” as well as in *The Leavenworth Case*.

Reading gothic literature, Eve Sedgwick argues against privileging the surface/depth metaphor. At the same time, that distinction is still an important part of the gothic convention. In detective fiction, similarly, there are levels of surface and depth: an apparently irrational situation up above and a rational solution underneath. Like gothic, the detective story is based on correspondences—things that have left their traces— that are causal in a way not applicable to
gothic, and which make the underlying more primary or true. When the underlying story is given first, we call it an inverted detective story, as with R. Austin Freedman.

**Causality, Context, and Knowledge**

Whether focused on a type of reasoning or on a detective figure, detective fiction is about hidden information and how that information is revealed. Reading fiction, especially genre fiction, involves beliefs about how fiction works or should work and about the relationship between the reader and the text. At the same time, social values and assumptions provide background for narrative reasoning.

Clues in detective fiction are signs of an underlying situation that it’s the job of the detective and reader to unearth. The idea of causality operates strongly in this genre. A clue is an effect, or a part of an effect, of a cause that is as yet unknown. What constitutes a clue is different depending on the work and the conventions it engages with. A clue need not be an object; it can be a look between two characters, a word choice, or a physiological measurement.

Types of information and types of knowledge that are allowed in a work circumscribe boundaries of cause and effect. This is kind of a philosophical or epistemological argument. Based on clues (effects), one speculates about causes, and then narrows down the possibilities by gathering more data, either through further investigation or by changing the situation to create an experiment. However, to initially speculate, one must have background information. In this way, detective fiction is not deductive in the sense of formal logic. Clues are never themselves sufficient without a context for speculation. The concept of abduction, as articulated by Peirce and discussed at length in Eco and Sebeok’s *The Sign of Three*, foregrounds “the problem of what to look for, how to direct the inquiry, which clues are important and which are irrelevant, what ‘truth’ is being sought after” (Harrowitz 194). Considering abductive reasoning rather
allows one to compare detective fiction across boundaries of culture and convention, while still addressing how detection works. Harrowitz points out, “when prophetic dreams and intuition are included in the realm of experience from which new knowledge is generated, we are talking about epistemological possibilities which have a range far broader than the usual” (197).

A clue in detective fiction provides an answer to the question: What kinds of causes have effects in this fictional world? That is, the possible explanations for a phenomenon—a vision, a footprint—provide information about the fictional world, specifically its space of causality; that is the set of possible causes within a worldview. The conclusions drawn by the detective are another kind of effect. What events in a detective story can lead the detective to a solution?

The main event of a detective novel (for example, the murder) is an effect. The detective story must have its own version of what kinds of things could lead to that effect. For example, the possibility of having a ghost as a culprit is one element of a space of causality. In a locked room mystery, indicating that a ghost is not an appropriate suspect might be part of the initial story. Part of the work of detective fiction is in circumscribing that space.

The sources of information and the kinds of information that are considered valid in a work are based on its metaphorical space of causality: the set of events allowed as possible causes for effects. Reasoning in detective fiction is rarely deductive in the formal sense; it is usually abductive. The concept of a space of causality that describes valid explanations available for abductive reasoning emphasizes the strength of context in detection. Context is based on cultural conventions and historical knowledge. When writers diverge a bit from the most common cultural and generic conventions of their times, their works may be especially startling or controversial. Agatha Christie’s very famous work *Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?* violates a generic convention of its period, while her *Crooked House* violates a cultural one. However,
violating background assumptions too extensively can lead to annoyance in readers of genre fiction. Abduction represents a way of determining most likely explanations rather than certainties, and therefore relies on some kind of shared set of possible explanations.

**Traces**

G. K. Chesterton saw the detective story as the poetry of the city, its essential speech. In his essay “The Exterior as Intérieur: Benjamin's Optical Detective,” Tom Gunning also argues that detective fiction is the genre of the metropolis, but specifically a city’s bourgeois inhabitants. The detective in Gunning’s reading is the figure who best traverses the interiors and exteriors of this space. Citing Ginzburg’s *Clues, Myths*, Gunning writes, “the traces left in personal belongings, which detectives examine, take the form of incriminating clues. Impressions of the human personality and its deeds become absorbed without one’s awareness by the nearly animate objects of the intérieur and eventually betray the owner or user” (Gunning 110). This is epitomized in the dossier detective novel, which is just those scraps, the detritus of events and life.

The interest in the material traces of the past is evident in the advances made in other fields of inquiry contemporaneous with the development of detective fiction. Lawrence Frank argues that the work of Pierre-Simon Laplace and Charles Darwin enhanced a worldview of reconstruction based on traces of the past. Laplace posited the nebular hypothesis of the origins of the galaxy, a precursor to the Big Bang theory. Laplace’s theory and Darwin’s both saw the existing world as layers of time with evidence that is discoverable in the present (Frank 3-4, 8). Darwin, for his part, often used the language and especially historical linguistic metaphors in his presentation of natural selection and his argument for the fossil record (Frank 11).
The idea of tracing events through their material remainders is not new to the nineteenth century, of course. Carlo Ginzburg writes of a “venatic” model, by analogy with hunting—using the traces left by animals. According to Ginzburg, such traces lead causally to the invention of writing and also to Mesopotamian divination, which involved using details to tell a story (*Clues, Myths* 103). Ginzburg tracks venatic thinking from hunting and divination to pictographic representation, language, and general signification.

Where Chesterton sees traces of human action in the shapes of cities, Walter Benjamin takes it to private interiors and semi-private haunts. Gunning writes that “Benjamin’s arcades need to be grasped as a topographical fantasy. . . ., an exterior space conceived as an *intérieur*” (105-06). For Benjamin, the *intérieur* is the bourgeois apartment, the epitome of private space at the end of the nineteenth century. Outside, the city streets are full of threats. As the center of bourgeois life and identity, the apartment must be protected from those outside threats.

Paradoxically, the apartment thus becomes a place of fear:

The furniture style of the second half of the nineteenth century has received its only adequate description, and analysis, in a certain type of detective novel at the dynamic center of which stands the horror of apartments. . . . This character of the bourgeois apartment, tremulously awaiting the nameless murderer like a lascivious old lady her gallant, has been penetrated by a number of authors who, as writers of ‘detective stories’. . . have been denied the reputation they deserve. (Benjamin, qtd. in Gunning 113)

Crime, in this model, is an intrusion of outside to inside. Gunning provides an example from Anna Katharine Green’s 1906 novel *The Woman in the Alcove* where a woman at a dinner party glimpses for a moment the uncanny image of a face, which she is later able to identify as
the reflection of the murderer lying in wait. This scene and others in the genre Gunning identifies as part of a trope in which “complex optical situations reveal the entrance of the criminal into the midst of apparent bourgeois order,” a “more startling” supplement to the diagrams that show the path of death through this order (121). For Benjamin and Gunning, the distinction between interior and exterior, with the interior protected from the exterior, is a defining feature of bourgeois life that detective fiction reifies.

The detective, as described by Benjamin and Gunning, has two important abilities in this system. On one hand, the detective finds and deciphers the clues that are embedded in the interiors—marks in fabrics, smudges on veneers (109). On the other hand, the detective can also make the transition from inside to out, from watching, static, to tracking a culprit along a city street. This transition is exemplified in the Poe story “The Man in the Crowd,” in which the narrator, inside, espies a suspicious person on the street and follows him. Benjamin presents two versions of the detective in space, one where the detective reads traces within textured interiors, and the other where the detective tracks in urban exteriors. As a “topographical fantasy,” the arcade is a space that has neither the perils of privacy nor the fearful boundlessness of the streets. It is a space of motion and play for the metropolitan bourgeoisie.

Traces need not be material objects. They can be linguistic clues, such as accents or indications of knowledge. Clues can include traces left on spaces, on bodies, and on minds in the form of expression. A provocative initial premise in “The Purloined Letter” is that thoughts affect one’s expression to such an extent that another’s thoughts can be reconstructed by taking on his expression. This type of identification between thought, act, and affect strays into different types of science and into non-science. T. S. Stribling’s story “Passage to Benares” and Ellery Queen’s novel Ten Days’ Wonder both include the claim that crimes reflect the mind that
committed them. This extends Ginzburg’s discussion of hunting and Chesterton’s paean to cities to the realm of the mind.

**Codes**

Another model for information is encryption. Shawn Rosenheim writes about what he calls “the cryptographic imagination,” a way of looking at the world and particularly texts as encrypted versions of an underlying truth or text, that is, a plaintext. He situates this especially in Poe, who arguably popularized cryptography with his story “The Gold Bug” and with his puzzle column in a Philadelphia newspaper. The writers of the Golden Age identify with this model as well, although they conceptualize it as a game. Their model is the crossword puzzle or a closely woven rug. As in a cipher and its plaintext, the clues and the solution have a one-to-one correspondence, with nothing extraneous.

Poe’s interest in ciphers is evident in “The Gold Bug.” This tale was written in 1843, right in the middle of the three Dupin stories that cement Poe’s role as the father of detective fiction. The action precedes the explanation of method, which is one reason it is not considered a detective story, although it has a problem-solving plot, a character with a similar temperament to Dupin, and a narrator who acts as a reader surrogate. The second half of “The Gold Bug,” where protagonist Legrand explains his interpretation of the cipher, is obviously about decoding. However, the first part also features codes. One is servant Jupiter’s speech, rendered in dialect, which, like that of Shakespeare’s fools, creates riddles. These riddles include cryptography as a subject when Jupiter tells the narrator,

“And den he keep a siphon all de time –”

“Keeps a what, Jupiter?”
“Keeps a siphon [ciphering] wid de figgurs on de slate – de queerest figgurs I ebber did see.” (77)

The narrator then asks, “Did you bring any message from Mr. Legrand?” and learns that Jupiter did not bring a message, but rather “dis here pissel [epistle]” (78). In the process of tracing Kidd’s description, Legrand instructs Jupiter, “Find the left eye of the skull”; to which Jupiter replies in earnest, “dat’s good! why dey ain’t no eye lef at all.” (85) Legrand uses the gold bug as an index, dropping it from a tree branch to create a plumb line for surveying.

Trace, code, and conjure overlap. One could argue that trace is a kind of code. In the narrative levels idea if we expand the idea of code to metaphor, as in The Matrix, what is visible is seen as an encoded version of an underlying reality.

**Conjuring**

One of the surprises of American detective fiction is its abiding interest in the irrational and even magical. Stories include spiritual or providential evidence even though some (and some of the same) stories debunk spiritualism. Detective stories and novels, especially the early ones, include a combination of natural forces and things that can’t be explained. Later works in the twentieth century add in less-rational forces to deepen detective stories.

Detective fiction is invested in the power of objects and the performativity of language, both elements of magical structures. Another proto-detective story by Poe, “Thou Art the Man,” shows a common way that objects and words make things happen in this genre. Myths around corpses are behind the narrator’s idea; a bone elicits a confession. Although the idea of the body bleeding in the presence of the murderer is not scientific, the analogous performance created by the narrator does lead to a similar revelation. Magic and scientific forms of knowledge also shade into each other as the idea of what constitutes science changes with time. In Pudd’nthead Wilson,
Wilson is expert in both palmistry and fingerprinting; these disciplines both have positive truth value within the narrative. In Balmer and MacHarg’s stories of scientific detection, *The Achievements of Luther Trant*, a police officer confuses palmistry with conductivity; this confusion is an indicator of his ignorance of modern science. Some of the most science-oriented stories and works of detective fiction seem the most gothic in casting the detective as a medium, reading the secret language of the body and mind.

The notions of magic and performativity overlap with encryption and venatic clues. An object that leads to a reaction is exposing traces of thoughts and events. The performative element is strong in detective fiction resolution scenes, most obviously those stagings by Agatha Christie’s sleuths and by Rex Stout’s Nero Wolfe. The detective gathers people for what is claimed to be a performance of truth telling. Instead, the performance elicits truth telling on the part of others.

**The Persistence of Awe**

Detective fiction that predates hard-boiled or continues the classic tradition has strong associations with logic and rationality. In a historical discussion of surveillance, Jill Lepore writes that “in Poe every mystery is soluble. Nothing ever remains hidden. Crimes must be solved. Walls must be breached. Tombs must be unearthed. Envelopes must be opened” (34). This is a fair claim to make about the Dupin detective stories, but a strange one to make about stories such as “The Cask of Amontillado,” with its entombment, and “The Man of the Crowd,” which illustrates the statement that “some secrets do not permit themselves to be told” (Poe 107).

“The Gold Bug,” a classic of metaphorical and literal decryption, asserts unknowability in the end. Of the skeletons found with the treasure, Legrand says, “It is clear that Kidd — if Kidd indeed secrete this treasure, which I doubt not — it is clear that he must have had assistance
in the labour. . . . Perhaps a couple of blows with a mattock were sufficient, while his coadjutors were busy in the pit; perhaps it required a dozen—*who shall tell?*” (Poe 107, emphasis added).

Similarly, the detective–hunter–flaneur of “The Man in the Crowd” begins and ends with an evocation of a book that does not allow itself to be read.

Writing on Anna Katharine Green, Gunning notes,

> The detective’s methodical scrutiny of objects and ability to respond to unconscious optical experience adumbrates a method that will turn that ruffle [of the eternal] inside out, finding within its immemorial folds both the space within a space and the time within time.” (129)

Such “unconscious optical experience[s]” persist in later detective fiction by Stribling and Faulkner (*Intruder in the Dust*). This kind of unconscious analysis is related to the figure of the classic detective as a “bi-part soul,” part mathematician, part poet, as Dupin says about Minister D— in “The Purloined Letter.” The structure of abduction requires both. The mathematician connects causes to effects. However, abduction requires the speculation of possible causes, including those outside everyday probabilities. This speculation requires the imagination of the poet. This ideal duality of logic and creativity is the basis of classic detective fiction. The “observed detail” that gives fiction texture also forms the material of the clue. The face of the scientific sleuth has eyes that light up with moments of intuition. John T. Irwin writes of Poe that he “finds himself in the uncertain region between knowledge and belief, waking and dreams, between what compels him intellectually and what moves him emotionally” (Irwin 223).

The value placed in different forms of knowledge in early American detective fiction is due not only to the imaginative needs of abductive reasoning. Detective fiction also includes the multiple voices of coexisting literary and cultural traditions, as in Mikhail Bakhtin’s idea of
polyvocality, an essential element of the novel. Jameson, writing about Marxism and religion, says that their relationship is “a two-way street, in which the former is not necessarily discredited by its association with the latter. On the contrary, such a comparison may also function to rewrite certain religious concepts—most notably Christian historicism and the “concept” of providence, but also the pretheological systems of primitive magic—as anticipatory foreshadowings of historical materialism within precapitalist social formations in which scientific thinking is unavailable as such” (285). Jameson positions providence and magic against historical materialism; this logic also applies to other materialist traditions, specifically scientific positivism. However, Jameson imagines such transitions as highly linear: Christian historicism and primitive magic happen in “precapitalist” societies, with the former presumably after the “pretheological” latter. Yet pretheological thinking can continue in religious precapitalist societies. These epistemological families coexist. Similarly, there are eras when when “scientific thinking” is not unavailable but rather is available but undesired, and not only for reasons of nostalgia. Sacred and magical thinking can be replaced by science, can exist alongside science, and can even seem to inhabit scientific inquiry.

The interpretation of information in detective fiction—that is, crime solving—uses a logic that is not deductive or from first principles. Abductive detection requires some background assumptions, which then requires a point of view. To understand how knowledge and information work in detective fiction, then, one also needs a somewhat historicizing approach. The structural and cultural approaches to criticism in detective fiction are not at odds, but merely difficult to generalize together.

The barriers between genres are porous and, when a genre is developing, sometimes faint. Forms of knowledge from other kinds of literature merge into detective fiction; the idea of
detective fiction must therefore be fairly broad in this early period. This analysis intends to expand what counts as a clue and what counts as knowledge. Streams of thought going into detective fiction include sensation and sentimental literature, and these literary traditions contribute their forms of knowledge.

The translation of Egyptian hieroglyphic writing, Irwin argues, disrupted the way people thought about human language and its correspondence to metaphysical truths (Irwin 5-6). Some of the lost mysticism of language, however, inheres in the idea of a clue: a symbol that means more than it seems and can only be fully interpreted by an elect specialist. The clue in American detective fiction is, as Jameson claims of modernism, a form of “compensation for . . . desacralization in daily life” at the end of the nineteenth century (42). The ways in which clues reveal their meaning create narratives of causality to replace or buttress religion in a nation whose “particles” are perceived as unglued.
Chapter 2. American Parthenogenesis

In the United States, women writers were creating wildly popular detective novels beginning in the 1860s and '70s. Catherine Ross Nickerson calls these works “domestic detective fiction,” and they came out of sentimental and sensational traditions and conventions of serialization as much as out of then-amorphous detective conventions. Because of these diverse streams, works feature a variety of forms of knowledge. Further, the shape of cause–effect relationships incorporates science and magic, clue and feeling, human agency and providence.

Domestic Detective Fiction in the United States

Pioneering works in the tradition of domestic detective fiction in the United States, such as Metta Victor’s The Dead Letter (1867) and Anna Katharine Green’s The Leavenworth Case (1874) take advantage of a complex relationship between magic, text, and objects. There is interplay between texts as texts, texts as objects, objects as clues, and objects as magical or sensational. The main form of important texts is letters. Letters in these stories show how language is our prosthesis and our replacement. It allows us to exert influence at a distance, but we cannot control its dissemination (including interception). Furthermore, in the tension during this industrialized period between the machine and the person, these works affirm feeling—both sentiment and sensation—against alienation. The works considered in this chapter explore how human intentions move and act in relation to other forces. This relationship is especially visible with objects and texts as they act as clues in domestic detective fiction. This chapter also demonstrates the way concerns about the rapidly shifting demographics of the United States—because of western expansion, dislocations from the Civil War, immigration, and urbanization—were expressed and resolved in the language of sentiment in early detective novels. An important
way of reading and controlling people is through physical objects, such as the dead letter. Here the emphasis on the clue in Poe’s stories intersects with the emotional resonance of objects in the sentimental worldview.

*The Dead Letter*, by Metta Fuller Victor, was published serially in *Beadle’s Monthly* beginning in January 1866, two years before Wilkie Collins published *The Moonstone* in England. Metta Victor was the editor of *Beadle’s Monthly* and *Beadle’s Home*, of which her husband, Orville Victor, was the publisher. In that period, the firm of Beadle & Adams was instrumental in creating the dime novel, and Metta Victor wrote a variety of dime novels of adventure and other genres, as well as moral nonfiction (Rahn 380; Nickerson “Introduction” 1-2). Victor used multiple pen names for her various works; her two mystery novels were published under the name “Seeley Regester.” In addition to the Beadle’s magazines, Victor published poetry and articles in magazines and newspapers (13).

Domestic detective novels, as described in Nickerson’s *The Web of Iniquity*, are woman-authored detective novels from the second half of the nineteenth century that are concerned with domestic settings and emotional attachments. Arguably, the first American detective novels, Victor’s *Dead Letter* and *The Figure Eight* (1869) and Anna Katharine Green’s *Leavenworth Case* (1874), are in this genre. These novels came out of sentimental and sensational traditions, and feature clues and sources of knowledge from those literary streams. These novels do not look like detective novels because they are also sentimental novels, part of a tradition with both cultural and political influence. Victor also wrote a very popular anti-slavery novel, *Maum Guinea* (1852), although one that stops short of a full call for abolition. Domestic detective fiction predated the creation of Sherlock Holmes. Arthur Conan Doyle corresponded with Anna Katharine Green in 1894, and the two discussed meeting in the United States. Biographer
Patricia D. Maida notes that “at that time, [Green’s] place in detective fiction was well established, while Doyle was a relative newcomer” (29).

These novels are particularly concerned with the realm of women, including family, home, and money. Plots typically involve an inheritance plot where, as in some sentimental novels, characters may be left destitute if the mystery is not solved. Narratives include subplots that lead to other states or countries or to the past to a much greater degree than the regimented game-type novels of the 1920s, which had their own dramatic unities. Domestic detective novels unabashedly rely on intuition, romance, and coincidence. Sources of information that allow the detective and narrator to solve the mystery in *The Dead Letter* include handwriting analysis, observation, intuition, clairvoyance, analysis, decryption, accidental eavesdropping, and spying. As in later detective fiction, boundaries and logic can vary by work and author.

In *The Dead Letter* and *The Leavenworth Case*, a professional detective and an amateur work together to solve the mystery. These amateurs are not detached figures. In *The Dead Letter*, the amateur is a wronged suspect and family member; in *The Leavenworth Case* he is a junior lawyer and a protector of the Leavenworth nieces. Similarly, in Mary Roberts Rinehart’s *The Circular Staircase* (1908), the (female) narrator is involved in the mystery and also works with a professional detective. This divided detection is a way that domestic detective fiction negotiates the relationship between the characters with an emotional stake in the sentimental drama and the new figure of the professional detective. The division also allows domestic detective fiction to be of two minds regarding the necessary invasion of private life that detection must entail.

*The Dead Letter*

The emotional and informative properties overlap in detective fiction to an extent not generally noticed. In domestic detective fiction, objects are both informative and emotional. As
in later works of detective fiction, objects are and bear physical signs of events. At the same time, they also bear sentimental and sometimes magical properties in the tradition of sentiment and sensation. These particular works highlight the connection between the emotional and informational in detective fiction because they emphasize sentiment and sensation, even while they debunk some spiritual and magical belief systems.

Metta Victor’s *The Dead Letter* begins in the dead letter office in Washington, DC. The dead letter office was important in the period leading up to Victor’s *The Dead Letter* for both logistical and sentimental reasons. The sentiment attached to the dead letter office and its work relates to the fetichization of private life in the face of alienation. *The Dead Letter* begins:

> I paused suddenly in my work. Over a year’s experience in the Dead Letter office had given a mechanical rapidity to my movements in opening, noting and classifying the contents of the bundles before me. . . . (13).

The narrator’s initial description of the work as “mechanical” and “monotonous” denies “anything exciting to the curiosity” (13), painting the department as a bureaucracy with no emotional or moral function and himself as an industrial tool. Yet the federal Dead Letter Office was a place of fascination and concern for mid-nineteenth century readers. The concern was due in part to the public perception of the office’s insufficiency. The office had been established in 1836, and in 1859, under pressure from the business community and general public, the Senate passed a bill that the postal system must account for such letters. Following this mandate, the office reported the next year that 2.5 million letters, including $45,000 in funds, did not reach their destinations. An improvement in operations was “a matter of urgent importance,” opined the *Merchants Magazine* in 1860 ("Dead-letter office" 739).
Publications attributed the glut to the rapid demographic changes taking place in the United States. Besides wrong addresses or bad handwriting, speculates Merchants, “the migratory habits of the people must also be considered among the prominent causes of the accumulation of dead-letters, more particularly in the western or newer portions of the country” ("Dead-letter office" 739). Westward migration and constant immigration taxed the administration of the mail, especially mail from outside the United States. The span of the nation was “as yet unsettled,” with “constant changing of abode” in its newly arrived and scattered population ("Dead-Letter Office"). Works of domestic detective fiction feature action across distance and time, including events that happen in California or in other countries. However, it was not only the sparser reaches of the country that challenged communications. In fact, the post-master general in 1860 found that a very small number of post offices—40 out of more than 28,000—provided the majority of dead letters to the Dead Letter Office. That means that most undeliverable mail came from one fifth of one percent of the offices—”including, of course, the large cities and towns” ("Dead-letter office" 739). Thus urban concentration vied with westward scatter as factors in losing people and letters. Mail could not “find [its] way home” (Copcutt 180) because the shifts in population made “home” an unstable address. The urbanization of population is likewise considered to be an essential reason for the development of policing and of detective fiction in the United States and Europe.

Despite public attention and the regulatory efforts of Congress, the problem of missing mail worsened. In the mid and latter part of the decade, many dead letters were addressed to soldiers. Thus, the administrative issues also exposed a national wound. Public and business interests sought to mend the nation by mending its communications. “Perhaps no division of any department under the Federal government,” wrote The Flag of Our Union in 1869, “is engaged
in more important and responsible duties, bearing directly upon the interests of the public at large, than the dead-letter branch of the General Post Office Department” ("Dead-Letter Office").

In his description of the office, Dead Letter narrator Richard Redfield says that

Young ladies whose love letters have gone astray, evil men whose plans have been confided in writing to their confederates, may feel but little apprehension of the prying eyes of the Department; nothing attracts it but objects of material value — sentiment is below par. (13)

This sentence personifies the Department, with its “prying eyes” and capacity for interest. However, the reader suspects irony in the language concerning those pitiable lovers and dastardly villains. The narrator confesses to the “folly” of wistful imaginings about “a withered rosebud,. . . a homely little pin-cushion” (Victor 13). The Department may not be attracted to their letters, but he is. The personification of the Department, then, creates a sense of distance between it and its human agent. In this office and in the narrator, sentiment and alienation play against each other; in the newspapers of the previous decades, sentiment is a major impetus for the department’s existence.

Letters were significant objects, but they also could contain objects, and processing packages was included in the duties of the Dead Letter Offices. The objects have sentimental and sometimes material value through the idiom of sentiment. The contents of such packages, in their diversity of function and value, were a source of wonder to journalists who visited. They listed objects for men, women, and children; for office, lab, and farm; meant to be seen or hidden:

- coats, hats, socks, drawers, gloves, scarfs, suspenders, patent inhaling tube, gold pens, . . ., box of dissecting instruments, pocket bibles, children’s dresses, . . . chemises, . . . and a thousand other things too numerous to mention. No
pawnbroker’s shop ever excelled, in variety, the collection of the Dead-letter Office. ("Dead-letter office" 740).

Public curiosity led to great excitement at periodic sales of dead-letter contents (Eckley). Auctions were well publicized, and attended by “the liveliest kind of bidding” ("Sale of Dead Letters").

“Sound public sentiment” demanded that undeliverable mail be returned, whether or not it contained objects of value ("Dead-letter office" 739). But if a letter could not be returned, the public wanted to read about, imagine, or buy its contents. In such moments, dead letters evoke Ann Douglas’s critique of sentimentalism as encouraging consumers to “locate and express many personal, ‘unique’ feelings and responses through dime-a-dozen artifacts” (qtd. in Wexler 10). If mass-produced cameos or photographs might give middle-class consumers entry into a standard life, dead-letter contents gave them entry into a unique life, each object special in its juxtaposition with others and each with the aura of loss. This paradox of privacy and voyeurism speaks to the power of the dead letter as object, inducing “many a dreamy reverie,” as Francis Copcutt writes. They seem to speak of “mystery, melancholy,” and of the “ludicrous and sorrowful.” The ludicrous might be represented by the unusual objects found at dead letter auctions, but the sorrowful element is deeper, included in the name. “Dead letters! Does it not sound like dead men?” writes Herman Melville in “Bartleby, the Scrivener” (1853). Part of the power of the dead letter is that it can indicate a dead person both metaphorically, as Melville does above, and metonymically. The dead letter can be the corpse or the killer, causing death through presence or absence. As an example of the latter, Melville goes on to imagine “a bank-note sent in swiftest charity:—he whom it would relieve, nor eats nor hungers any more” (641). The death of the letter makes the death of the man.
Dead letters spoke of uncertain futures and lives lost; of the vulnerabilities of business and bureaucracy; and above all, of stories untold: of mysteries. The dead letter is the paradigmatic sentimental object: unique but quotidian; low in monetary value but high in associative power. As texts, as objects, and as adjuncts to objects, the letters speak stories.

Domestic detective novels, characterized by their “interest in moral questions regarding family, home, and women’s experience” take place among the social functions of middle and upper class home and society (Web xi). Nickerson argues that part of the subgenre’s social criticism was the idea that the homes of the middle and upper classes “needed the services . . . of the detective” (14), for the demographic changes that overwhelmed the mail also affected the ideal of the home. In The Dead Letter and other domestic detective fiction, the home is no longer shown as inviolable, but rather needs outside assistance. In addition, one is struck by the economic dependency and uncertainty of many members of the household. Their precarious situations motivate both criminals and amateur sleuths. Although the scene of domestic detective fiction is the home, it is a home with extended or disrupted families, which might include multiple generations, nieces and nephews, governesses, servants, and family friends. Besides servants, who are part of the trappings of the higher social classes, other household members speak to the economic dependence of certain members of the middle class on vague family or personal ties.

Nickerson attends particularly to the status of unmarried women. However, these novels also depict men who are dependent on their households for support and legitimacy. In The Dead Letter Richard Redfield is supported by an old friend of his father. “When young men, they had started out life together, in equal circumstances; one had died early. . . .; the other lived to continue in well-earned prosperity” (14-15). This friend, Argyll, funded Redfield’s education and
is now his employer. Perhaps most important for the general domestic aura is Redfield’s frequent visits to the Argyll home, “with liberty to come and go as I pleased” (139). When the family begins to suspect Redfield, he loses not only his close friends but also his job. To Redfield, the dead letter office represents the vulnerability of his affiliations, for Washington is “that magnetic center of all unemployed particles” (Victor 142). The image of the nation’s capital as the site of alienation echoes the loss of mail in the urban centers.

In bringing the detective into domestic spaces and situations, domestic detective fiction shows the tension between the sanctity of the home and the perceived need for outside moral enforcement. In the sentimental worldview, the home is the moral analog of the nation. Both the postal clerk and the detective are authorized to pry into private financial and emotional business to administer the nation in one case and the home in the other. Redfield claims that “evil men whose plans have been confided in writing to their confederates, may feel but little apprehension of the prying eyes of the Department.” His story, however, makes the dead letter office a site of providential order. Prying is necessary to restore morality to home and community.

**Powerful Objects**

*The Dead Letter* and other works of domestic detective fiction emphasize the power of objects—especially letters and portraits—to do things. There is a kind of continuity between people and objects. Richard Redfield finds a letter in his work marked with the time and place of the murder, two years ago, of which he was accused. Redfield’s most dramatic reactions to the letter occur before he understands what it says; many of his reactions occur before he has even opened it. Redfield experiences a “magnetism” between himself and the object, “putting [him], as the spiritualists say, *en rapport* with it” (137).
Here was placed in my hands—at last!—a clue to that mystery which I had once sworn to unravel. Yet, how slender was the clue, which might, after all, lead me into still profounder labyrinths of doubt and perplexity! As I pondered, it seems to break and vanish in my fingers. Yet, I felt, in spite of this, an inward sense that I held the key which was surely to unlock the awful secret. I can never rightly express the feelings which, for the first few moments, overpowered me. (137)

Redfield’s comment about being en rapport with the letter indicates his awareness of and slightly ironic attitude toward varieties of pseudoscience that proliferated in the early and mid century (Reynolds 243-44). He also alludes to the mythological source of the clue.

Before Redfield even opens the letter, the words of the date and address “burned . . . into [his] brain” (137). As an object, the letter exerts psychological, even physical force far out of proportion to its slender form. The letter as object seems to “vanish” behind the force of its meaning. The sense that the letter is disappearing in Redfield’s hands makes it seem ancient or magical; he describes it as a “time-stained epistle” (14), which enhances the sense that the letter is older than its two years. Both the visible text—date and place—and the letter as object cause physical and psychological effects in the viewer. At the same time, the promise of rapid vindication is contradicted by the “slender” form of the clue and its possibilities as “labyrinth” or as Pandora’s box, creating more doubt and more questions. He admits that to an outside reader, the letter would be “neither lucid nor interesting in itself” (14). However, the memories it excites make up the bulk of the novel and provide the apparently unsolvable problem. The existence of the letter recalls Redfield to his true self. He quits his job and returns to New York to carry out his purpose (140).
Victor’s dead letter functions as a clue in many registers. First, it acts on people physically and psychologically as an object and as text. As an object, it holds emanations that can be felt by a clairvoyant and sometimes by others. As text, it can be decrypted. In addition, its lettering can be read in a way that, to the modern reader, seems to combine science and clairvoyance. Finally, it is a tool of Providence. In her defense of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Jane Tompkins writes,

The power of a sentimental novel to move its audience depends upon the audience’s being in possession of the conceptual categories that constitute character and event. That storehouse of assumptions includes attitudes toward the family and toward social institutions; a definition of power and its relation to individual human feeling; notions of political and social equality; and above all, a set of religious beliefs that organizes and sustains the rest. Once in possession of the system of beliefs that undergirds the patterns of sentimental fiction, it is possible for modern readers to see how its tearful episodes and frequent violations of probability were invested with a structure of meaning that fixed these works, for nineteenth-century readers, not in the realm of fairy tale or escapist fantasy, but in the very bedrock of reality. (127)

One set of rules developed in the so-called Golden Age states that no “accident may ever help the detective, nor must he ever have an unaccountable intuition which proves to be right” (Knox 195). In contrast, *The Dead Letter* overflows with intuition and fortune. The professional detective, Burton, combines the ideas of logical causality with the evangelical viewpoint Tompkins describes when he says, “All things are Providential, . . . none less, and none more so. Causes will have their effects” (141). The dead letter operates in spiritual, contextual, and
semiotic ways, many of which would be rejected by more famous writers of the 1920s and 30s. “Feminine Intuition” and “Divine Revelation” were two sources of knowledge strictly prohibited by the rules of the British Detection Club ("The Detection Club Oath" 198). However, these various modes of meaning illuminate both the development of the clue in United States detective fiction and the alternate sources of knowledge in some later writers.

Lynn Wardley’s analysis of domestic objects and spaces in the work of Harriet Beecher Stowe provides another way to understand the appeal of the dead letter in general and this letter in particular. She points out the importance of ambient subcultural practices, such as conjure and spiritualism, to the way in which sentimental objects were conceived during the antebellum period (204). She writes, “the ‘anthropomorphising instinct’ Ann Douglas identifies in the sentimental writer and disparagingly links to the sentimentalists’ interest in a nascent consumer society might. . . be read in connection to the West African understanding of the afterlife and to the practice of fetishism” (204). These multiple meanings situate this dead letter within the context of an earlier mingling of traditions—in Jon Butler’s phrase, the “antebellum spiritual hothouse” (Wardley 204-07). Elements of spiritualism have important roles in detective fiction up until the 1950s. Redfield does not link his experience of the dead letter with any notion of the afterlife of the murder victim, Henry Moreland. Rather, the letter seems to signify its own afterlife, bringing back from the dead not a person but a context and set of information. In fact, even as a dead letter, this object seems to have risen from the crypt after its time. Redfield considers that, based on the policies of the postal service, the letter should have been sent on to Washington three months after it was sent. Yet it has arrived at the office two years later. Redfield’s reaction to the letter pulls from sentimental, Christian spiritual, and gothic motifs.
Holding the letter induces in Redfield a failure of expression, where he “can never rightly express the feelings that overpowered [him]” (137). Here the gothic trope of indescribable sensation adheres to the notion of the clue: a single, small object that is superficially plain but to the right reader provides an essential piece of information that leads to a solution. Thus, this passage combines a spiritual, a spiritualist, and a semiotic perspective on the meaning of objects. The sentimental use of objects discussed by Wardley and the signifying force discussed in Chapter 1 converge on the treatment of the mystery clue in domestic detective fiction. This tension between the sentimental attachment and the everyday objects of very real economic import is part of a larger struggle and quandary over how to interpret consumer lives.

**Intuition and Decryption**

To bring justice, Burton uses all the active and passive methods of interpretation described above. By looking at the outside of the envelope, Burton “made the contents of the letter his own, almost, before he read it” (141). This statement indicates the importance of the letter in its role as object prior to its role as text. The letter also acts visibly on Burton. Redfield describes how “as he continued to hold it in his hand, and gaze at it, one of those wonderful changes passed over his countenance.” When he does read it, “a stern pallor settled gradually over his usually placid face” (141). These changes of expression are also highly important sources of information in the domestic detective novel.

This system of plural epistemology still supports interpretation or decryption as one of many possible ways to react to a textual object. Redfield has said that the letter, to an outside eye, would not be “lucid,” and, in fact, it is not lucid to him either. In a gothic tale, this long-lost, yellowed document would be an example of “unintelligible writing” (Sedgwick *Coherence* 9). Nor does Redfield attempt to decode the letter. He merely registers it as evidence, and brings it
to Burton. Decoding the letter is another of Burton’s important tasks. The “key” to the encrypted letter comes to Burton “as if a vision had revealed it” (144). The letter is written in opposites, supplemented with metaphor. A mention of a “charming day” refers to the rainy night on which the murder took place. A mention of arms and pockets makes Burton remember an old tree. There, he induces, the murder weapon was and still is hidden (144). To a reader of Victorian or American Golden Age detective fiction, this kind of interpretation that is part logic, part intuition, is familiar; it is the bi-part soul again, both imagining his adversary and decrypting according to rules.

This form of interpretation coexists with one much less familiar to detective readers: the use of a clairvoyant, who is the detective’s daughter. When Burton places her in a trance state, young Lenore can receive emanations from objects. Burton gives her the letter, and here it functions purely as object. Lenore does not read the text to read the letter. Yet her responses take the form of a narrative, linear in time and space.

“I see a man dropping the letter in the box. . . . He steals up and goes off again very quickly.”

“Follow him, Lenore.”

“Now I have overtaken him again. . . . Now we are at the ferry. . . . but it rains so—and the water is so wild I can not make my way on to the boat.” (Victor 146)

In another instance, she is given the photograph of a mysterious woman. She is able to see the woman’s apartment, then go down to the stairs and to the corner, and read the street sign (Victor 74).

Although Lenore does not look at the photograph or read the letter before entering her trance, it is notable that both objects are overdetermined as holders of meaning. Much has been
written on the significations of photography in the nineteenth century, but Ronald Thomas succinctly describes its “double status” in detective fiction: “as artistic representation of middle-class self-possession on the one hand and as scientific tool for criminal control on the other” (Thomas 114). This duality is particularly appropriate for the woman in the photograph, Leesy Sullivan. For much of the narrative, her social status is unclear. She is suspected at times of both being the lover of the victim, and his murderer. In the end, however, her character is established as simultaneously virtuous and maternal. The photograph also serves as a sentimental fetish in Wardley’s sense. The encrypted letter refers to a “good [day] for taking a picture” (144). Burton correctly interprets this metaphor: “the picture taken was a human life” (Victor 145). The crossover between artistic representation and lives is a gothic motif. The ways in which objects are conceived to retain the traces of people and actions are, although formulated in diverse ways, a continuing theme in detective fiction’s development.

Lying somewhere in between Lenore’s clairvoyance and Burton’s code-cracking is his skill in chirography—handwriting analysis. This technique is very productive of information. In fact, Burton offers his description of the letter writer before he attends to the letter’s text. Some of his conclusions seem plausible or a little far-fetched to a modern reader, such as that the letter writer “has some education, which he has acquired by hard study,” and that “the third finger of his right hand has been injured.” Others are far into the territory of the psychic, such as that the writer “is about thirty years of age, has dark complexion and black eyes. . . . He is bad, from instinct, inheritance and bringing up” (Victor 141). Pudd’ nhead Wilson and works of later detective fiction feature a similar leveling of knowledge, in which conventionally realistic and supernatural effects converge to make a truth.
Within the world of *The Dead Letter*, both Lenore’s clairvoyance and Burton’s chirography are presented as incredible yet true. However, this fictional universe does not equally accept all forms of magic or spiritualism. In a subplot, several lower-class people believe that a house is haunted. The detective and narrator, on the other hand, are not superstitious and seek out the earthly body that is creating ghostly noises. This text does not present a magical universe; rather it draws a specific line between acceptable and unacceptable assumptions about the world.

Although the romantic element and emotion might seem to be the way in which domestic detective fiction most diverges from the game-model, it is perhaps the very start of *The Dead Letter* that shows the greatest difference. According to Van Dine’s rule #5, “the culprit must be determined by logical deductions—not by accident or coincidence or unmotivated confession” (Van Dine 190). *The Dead Letter* begins with a coincidence that the narrator himself finds astonishing. The significance of chance, or providence, in this novel is one of its distinctive features. On the other hand, Van Dine refers to the detective as the “deus ex machina,” a phrase that usually indicates some level of arbitrariness or authorial convenience (190).

As detective fiction developed at the end of the nineteenth and first decades of the twentieth century, writers attempted to deny the role of providence in their plots. They reduced the scope of allowable knowledge, first, to the scientific properties of objects and minds, and then further to properties of pure logic. However, writers of both hard-boiled novels and of alternate epistemologies challenge this movement—the former by denying interpretation, and the latter by pushing the bounds of logic.
Space and Surveillance in *The Leavenworth Case*

*The Dead Letter* features moments of accidental surveillance that are necessary to the plot. The opening of the letter itself is an accident; situating this scene in the dead letter office not only creates a logistical reason for Redfield to open the letter but also provides a moral rationale through the work of that office. Lenore exercises a kind of surveillance, but one that is clairvoyant. The intentional surveillance by Burton and Redfield are on a continuum with these ethically safer moments.

Domestic detective fiction displays ambivalence about surveillance. Spying to identify malfeasance itself shades into malfeasance. In Victor’s *The Figure Eight* (1869), Annie Miller is keeping secret things she has seen relating to both the theft of the gold and the death of Mr. Meredith. Keeping silent makes her visibly sick, creating a kind of imprisonment, but her ethics and family feeling require her to keep silent. This is resolved by another gothic breach, that between sleeping and waking. When she is under stress, Miss Miller sleepwalks. In her sleep she provides information that her conscience keeps her from sharing, avoiding the moral problem.

In *The Leavenworth Case* by Anna Katharine Green, the objects of the house are windows into its imagined private life, in contrast to an idea of the public, the masses brought into the house by the crime. The crime defiles this house and ruptures that barrier between public and private but in doing so also creates a reason to view what is otherwise private. In the Leavenworth house following the murder, lawyer Everett Raymond remembers,

I seemed to be divided between two irreconcilable trains of thought; the gorgeous house, its elaborate furnishings, the little glimpses of yesterday’s life, as seen in the open piano, with its sheet of music held in place by a lady’s fan, occupying
my attention fully as much as the aspect of the throng of incongruous and impatient people huddled about me. (*Leavenworth* 11)

These objects seem to exemplify a public/private split and ambivalence about surveillance and detection. The contrast between a grubby reporter and the luxurious home before the inquest introduces the ambivalence about detection as spying in *The Leavenworth Case*. Raymond especially notices a portrait, a painting of a beautiful young woman: “I could not rid myself of the idea that one, if not both, of Mr. Leavenworth’s nieces looked down upon me from the eyes of this entrancing blonde with the beckoning glance and forbidding hand” (*Leavenworth* 12). In the Gothic mode, this portrait would connect to a mystery of origins, revealing a double in a lost parent or sibling. Here, it creates a feeling of mutual surveillance. While Raymond (along with the public) is seeing glimpses of the private lives of the women in the house, their spirit seems to be watching him. In Green’s *The Circular Study* (1900), a painting of a young woman looks down into the study. “I felt the eyes of Evelyn’s pictured countenance upon me; Evelyn’s, whose portrait I had never lost sight of from the moment of entering the room,” remembers her brother. Some objects act on their viewers more than they provide information (*Circular Study* 265).

These early detective novels use spaces both for drama and to manipulate knowledge between characters. Surveillance seems to be a quality of these spaces, as with gothic spaces. Rosenheim gives a partial list of “gothic rhetorical effects”: “encryption, paralysis, violation, and unspeakability” (Rosenheim 49). All of these have their turns in domestic detective fiction, as do gothic spatial qualities. Gothic spaces and correspondences are similar to and different from the developing idea of surveillance and detection. Gothic spaces literalize permeability: boundaries that should be permeable and are not, as in imprisonment and coma states (Sedgwick *Coherence* 12), and boundaries that are permeable but should not be, as demonstrated in scenes
of surveillance and also in hidden passages and doors. In domestic detective fiction, as in the
gothic, spaces can have a kind of sympathy with mental processes. On his way up to meet the
Leavenworth girls for the first time, Raymond describes himself as “shuddering by the library
wall, which to my troubled fancy seemed written all over with horrible suggestions . . .”
(Leavenworth 51).

_The Dead Letter_ and _The Figure Eight_ taken together combine a gothic notion of objects,
which has to do with psychic interiors, space, projections, and correspondences, with the
sentimental interest in domestic private life and the fetishisation of the everyday. In the first
chapter of _The Figure Eight_, called “Shadow Life,” Joe Meredith sees the figure eight “on the
wall, on people’s foreheads, [. . . ] with the plates at table, with the stones of the
pavement”(Victor 211). This figure keys to a hidden interior. The replication of spatial forms and
objects between states of consciousness and physical interiors is a feature of the gothic. The
imagined parallel perception of Raymond during his introduction to the Leavenworth house is a
similar image. The sentimental relationship to objects is metonymic; each object has a story, and
the story, even an imagined story, makes it special.

Gothic correspondences are structured as as-above/so-below. Clues in detective fiction
are also correspondences, but they are traces of a narrative, like the original clew in the labyrinth
of the minotaur. With objects and texts such as the dead letter and the figure eight in Victor’s
novels, the clues have metaphysical resonances but also constitute evidence in the first two
instances. In _The Leavenworth Case_, the portrait is suggestive but also is a synecdoche for
private life: those pieces of everyday domestic existence are interrupted by crime, and
particularly striking _because_ interrupted. Rending domestic life is precisely what crime is
depicted as doing in both domestic and classic detective fiction.
In *The Leavenworth Case*, reading expressions is also important and also goes with an
ambivalence about spying that becomes a transition in the ethics of spying from the beginning to
the end of the book. The book acts as a justification of surveillance because of how people
misread each other’s minds. One reason is that the killer is not obvious as a murderer through his
affect and appearance. He seems completely impassive and unemotional, and the narrator
believes him strangely aloof and unaffected by the morbid situation. Actually, Harwell is acutely
sensitive and unstable. Characters also keep secrets because of misapprehensions about the
situation and misplaced concern for others. Therefore, the detectives have to undermine privacy
and use falsehood to save characters from their misguided actions. Eleanore Leavenworth
behaves in a secretive way and destroys evidence, bringing suspicion on herself, because she
believes that her cousin Mary is guilty. Mary’s husband, her cousin, and her friend have all
agreed to keep her secret and, because of their actions, are suspected in turn.

The narrator also visits the home of a woman he suspects of having information, who is
also known to be a moral and ethical person. He presents himself as a lodger. The narrator,
Raymond, suspects that this woman has information about the disappearance of a servant from
the Leavenworth household. As soon as Raymond is alone, he first investigates the home itself,
impelled by

something underlying all these [furnishings], the evidences which I found, or
sought to find, not only in the general aspect of the room, but in each trivial object
I encountered, of the character, disposition, and history of the woman with whom
I now had to deal (*Leavenworth* 258).

In detective fiction, objects and homes are depicted as a library of data on private lives.
Raymond perceives each item as a possible clue to an underlying truth, and no clue is too small.
His hostess is portrayed as an obviously good woman who helps the poor; his ambivalence about staying in her house under false pretenses and looking through her things is one possible basis of the chapter’s epigraph from *Much Ado about Nothing*, “Flat burglary as ever was committed.” Earlier, the narrator and a professional detective both overhear one niece accuse the other. The narrator is mortified to knock, but the detective bursts in to the room without knocking. This distinction is a class difference and also exemplifies the tensions around privacy and propriety in the detection of crime.

Jacques Barzun and Wendell Hertig Taylor write that *The Leavenworth Case* “introduced . . . certain novelties which were to become requisites in the detective fiction of the early twentieth century, including a series detective in a novel, interest in physical evidence, and documentary information (“Preface”). The novel employs conventions that would become familiar: a murder very early in the book; an orderly procession of evidence and testimony at the beginning in a coroner’s inquest, including forensics; and diagrams. Anna Katharine Green is an important figure in the history of detective fiction. First, she wrote *The Leavenworth Case*, which, until the rediscovery of Metta Victor’s two detective novels, was thought by some critics to be the first American detective novel and the first by a woman in any language (Haycraft 83-84; Symons 62). Second, Green had a successful, decades-long career. Third, she introduced multiple series detectives that would become useful types: the grizzled police detective Ebenezer Gryce, the lady professional Violet Strange, and the spinster detective Amelia Butterworth (Klein 154; Maida). For these reasons, Haycraft called her “the mother, grandmother, and godmother of the detective story” (84). Golden Age writer Willard Huntington Wright, who wrote detective fiction as S. S. Van Dine, comments on Green’s influence, noting that *The Leavenworth Case* “had a tremendous popularity” and that Green’s body of work includes “some
of the best-known detective novels in English” (46). Although acknowledging its popularity, Wright believes that the importance of *The Leavenworth Case* “lay in the fact that it went far toward familiarizing the English-speaking public with this, as yet little-known genre, rather than in any inherent contribution made by it to the genre’s evolution” (Wright 46). To Wright’s contemporaries, Green’s novels appear “as over-documented and as too intimately concerned with strictly romantic material and humanistic considerations” (Wright 46). What is not visible to Wright is that the romantic, over-documented, and humanistic elements of Green’s work connect it to dominant novelistic traditions of the nineteenth century.

**Communication and Prosthesis**

Anna Katherine Green’s work dramatizes the benefits and risks of communication, especially remote communication. In its ability to extend human influence, language exemplifies the permeability between humanity and technology. Harwell, the murderer of old Mr. Leavenworth, says of the days before the murder, “my monotonous work went on, grinding my heart beneath its relentless wheel. I wrote and wrote and wrote, till it seemed as if my life blood went from me with every drop of ink I used” (*Leavenworth* 389). This is an imaginative description of that prosthetic extension of self through text, with language replacing our physical selves. Harwell later chews up a piece of evidence, the letter from the victim, in a kind of obverse of this transition. Harwell also describes his alienation of labor by comparing his work to that of a mill. Harwell says that he has always been thought of as a machine by the people he works with and for. This likeness seems to be metonymically connected to his obsession with Mary Leavenworth and with his insanity. At the end of his confession, he is a machine broken and also describes movement between mind, language, and space: “Let these prison walls, this confession itself, tell the rest. I am no longer capable of speech or action” (*Leavenworth* 404).
Rosenheim writes of Poe that “the cryptographic imagination exists in complicated tension with a phenomenologically deep sense of self. . . . [O]rganicism, representation, wholeness, and depth are all undermined by the prosthetic extension of the self into telegraphic code” (Rosenheim 90). In both The Leavenworth Case and Green’s story “A Difficult Problem” a murder is committed long distance, not through telegraphy, but through the mail. Both murder plots hinge on an understanding of the victim by the killer. Harwell knows Hannah Chester’s romantic nature and convinces her first to destroy evidence, and then take a powder (poison). In “A Difficult Problem,” the killer sends the victim a puzzle made of coils and rings. The difficult problem of the title is not explicitly this puzzle, but the victim’s penchant for this kind of tricky diversion is the means by which poison is administered—on a sharp wire end.

Green extends the consideration of death at a distance and explores the problem of intent with more literal machinery in The Circular Study. Eccentric Felix Thomas uses colored lights to communicate with his deaf servant. After Felix’s death, madness makes the servant a machine, still responding to the code of the colored lights but without purpose. Felix is part of a plan of revenge engineered by his father, Amos. Amos’s plan uses people, a woman and a man, to exact revenge for a wrong many years earlier. His own reproductive capacity becomes an agent of revenge. Amos Thomas tries to collapse space and time and to make the man who wronged him feel what he felt with a generation removed. However, the plan still uses text to make the message explicit.

Green’s lady detective Amelia Butterworth says of Felix Thomas’s lair, “strange that we do not feel his spirit infecting the very air of this study. I could almost wish it did. We might then be led to grasp the key to this mystery” (Green, Circular Study 119-20). Her comment shows the necessity of identifying with someone to decode their messages. Rosenheim writes
that identification with the coder is essential to the process of decrypting code. In *The Circular Study* case, the literal code is in the lighting of the study, where each color communicates a specific set of instructions to a servant. Butterworth uses the language of decryption, *key*, to describe what that identification could provide.

“In telegraphy,” writes Rosenheim, “the Newtonian unities of being are replaced by the prosthetic extension of the self over a network of wires” (91). Although letters must be physically delivered, the properties of telegraphy Rosenheim emphasizes inhere to letters as well. Green plays with the same idea of separation, as does Metta Victor in *The Dead Letter*, which features a hired assassin. In *The Circular Study*, flesh and sense of self become the means for revenge, when Amos rears his son to disgrace his enemy’s daughter. *The Circular Study* then shows failures in these attempts. Amos’s plan for revenge on John Poindexter and his son Felix’s attempt to kill his brother and sister-in-law both fail because of humans. Specifically, both plans are undermined by young Eva’s unexpected force of beauty and personality.

Thomas De Quincey retells the Aladdin story in a way that emphasizes the instrumentality of Aladdin in the plot of a wizard. The footsteps of the child Aladdin are a percussive code. *The Circular Study*, like the Aladdin tale, shows the undoing of this kind of plot, in which one person tries to reduce another to a message. Innocent Eva Poindexter is supposed to be the medium of revenge, but she takes up a knife in her defense. The novel and the mystery are the retracing of this turn. Eva is not acting to rebel against her use by these men. She is acting for her survival, but then also making herself other than a communication. Her disruptive existence leads to the strange expression on the dead man’s face, which is so mysterious to the detectives.
Anonymity, Reference, and Interception

The ways in which language is powerful also create gaps for intervention and error, for loss of control, especially but not only at a distance. There are several ways in which language gets out of control. One is what Rosenheim calls “the essential, shocking anonymity of language” (14). He refers to cryptography and its connection to the invention of the telegraph in the 1840s. The telegraph calls attention to these features of language; it does not create them. The more distance language can cover, the greater the extent of prosthesis and the greater the loss of control. That is, the speaker isn’t connected and can feel arbitrary. The second is the arbitrariness of reference, of the relationship between symbol and meaning. The third is the uncertainty of receiver: the possibility of interception.

Language, writing, and technologies beyond writing allow meaning to be spread but also to be disconnected from bodies and the act of speech. This is the idea of language as live burial (Sedgwick Coherence 49). Language moves humans in that it makes our effects felt elsewhere. It allows us to be in two places at once and to communicate from the grave. In doing so, however, it supplants our physical selves. The Leavenworth Case features problems of that anonymity. Harwell sends a fake suicide note from Hannah in a real letter that he instructs her to burn after reading. Much of The Leavenworth Case is based on interpretation and determining speakers and authorship of texts. By making Hannah’s supposed suicide note too much like her, however, the real author has erred, because in the time between, Hannah Chester has improved her reading and writing. Textual clues in The Leavenworth Case include the letter received by the victim, Horatio Leavenworth, shortly before his death. It is doubly destroyed, first turned into curls for lighting fires, and then put in the fire, but survives in interpretable scraps. The narrator is able to reconstruct the letter and determine its author.
There is another related problem of anonymity, which is the confusion between the two Misses Leavenworth. Their patronymics make it truly “the Leavenworth case,” since much of the mystery is: which Miss Leavenworth? This question begins before the narrator even meets the Leavenworth women, when he and detective Ebenezer Gryce overhear the two women arguing. The narrator is sure that he has heard Mary accuse Eleanore. Gryce much later says that he thought he heard Eleanore speaking, but that it was fruitful to pursue both hypotheses equally.

Similarly, the narrator is at his manager’s home and recognizes Mary Leavenworth in the shadows, but it is actually Eleanore. There is also the question of who Henry Clavering referred to when he wrote to Mr. Leavenworth that one of the nieces has mistreated him. Even the full version of the letter, given in Harwell’s confession, does not say. The narrator learns that Henry Clavering is secretly married to one of the nieces and thinks it is Eleanore. However, when they find a witness to the wedding, the witness identifies Mary from a photograph.

From their childhood entry to the Leavenworth house, the nieces could have been interchangeable. The same accident killed both of their parents. Mary was made the heiress because old Horatio decided arbitrarily that “the light-haired one pleases me best; she shall be my heiress’ . . . [W]him alone had raised this distinction between myself and cousin,” she says (Leavenworth 140). Mary attributes her and Eleanore’s personality differences to that whim; because she has been raised as an heiress, she overvalues money. An arbitrary distinction made years before creates a difference in personalities and leads indirectly to murder. On the other hand, the experience of the novel makes Mary again more like Eleanore in personality and mends their relationship, bringing them back together.

Raymond first hints at the interchangeability of Mary and Eleanore Leavenworth when he says of the portrait that he imagines “one, if not both, of Mr. Leavenworth’s nieces” watched
from the eyes of the painting (Leavenworth 12), although he has not yet met either woman. As in the mystery, the question hinges on which niece, and the painting holds the key in that it much more matches the characterization of Mary. The “beckoning glance and forbidding hand” of the woman in the painting (as well as her fair hair) are similar to those of Mary, of whom he later says, “there never was a woman who could smile and not smile like Mary Leavenworth” (Leavenworth 55). Mary’s changeability in relation to her suitor Henry Clavering and the shifts in her personality echo this figure. Mary and the obsessive watching of Mary by Harwell are keys to the murder. Based on her love of money and luxury, Harwell thought that Mary, like the woman in the portrait, would smile after the murder, and that he would win her by restoring her fortune. Voyeurism and Mary are the keys to unlocking the mystery; voyeurism underlies both the killer’s motives and methods, and the narrator’s detection.

Raymond describes the difference between Mary and Eleanore in terms of the gothic trope of unrepresentability.

I could sit half the day and dilate upon the . . . perfection of form and feature which make Mary Leavenworth the wonder of all who behold her; but Eleanore—

I could as soon paint the beatings of my own heart. Beguiling, terrible, grand, pathetic, that face of faces . . . . (Leavenworth 53)

That is, Mary can be described and depicted. Her “perfection of form and feature” seem almost describable by an equation or list of technical specifications. Eleanor is sublime and organic, with a meta-face that confounds categories and language. Eleanor does not say what she knows at or after the inquest, but will not lie. Her silence is a cipher to be decoded.

The question of “which Miss Leavenworth” throughout the novel dramatizes the arbitrary nature of symbols in language. The way the women function as ciphers may explain why the
romantic culmination for the narrator feels so odd; Eleanore’s character and beauty are mystified. Raymond describes their courtship after the case is solved as “a dream from which I have never waked, though the shine of her dear eyes have been now the load-star [sic] of my life for many happy, happy months” (Leavenworth 409). Perhaps their life together is unreal, “like a dream,” because Eleanore is a symbol.

The effect of communication depends on the audience, which the speaker or writer cannot control. “The Purloined Letter” is the classic example of interception; the letter intercepted by Minister D— is then stolen again by Dupin. Interception is not inherently ethical or unethical; it can be the conduit to blackmail and the destruction of privacy and reputation, or it can be the means by which justice is achieved, when the cover is thrown off of a wicked plot. “The Purloined Letter” demonstrates the symmetry of crime and detection in this way. In The Dead Letter, the path of the eponymous letter is both wrong and right; that is, its path was interrupted and it went to the “wrong” person, but that unlikely interception is providential.

The other critical interceptions are of documentation. In The Leavenworth Case, an intercepted letter leads toward the murder: Harwell, as Horatio Leavenworth’s secretary, has opened a personal letter by mistake and found out that Mary has a secret lover. After the murder, the documentation of the marriage—the marriage license and Mary’s diary entries—become dangerous, as they show Mary to have a motive for murder. These papers are in the possession of Amy Beldon in the upstate region where the marriage took place. Amy Beldon has promised not to do anything with the box of papers without permission from both Mary and Eleanore. After the murder, Mary realizes her position and begs her friend to destroy the papers. Before Amy can do so, however, Raymond has found and taken them. This box is at the center of a series of both failed and successful interceptions nested together, showing how texts can travel in unforeseen
ways. The creation of the box is already an interception; the diary pages are removed from their natural home (her diary), and the marriage certificate is secreted away from her legal husband, putting the marriage in legal limbo.

Eavesdropping is a classic example of interception of spoken language, and is critical to the plot of *The Leavenworth Case*. Harwell listened at a vent to hear Mary’s conversation with her uncle. When Horatio Leavenworth said he would disinherit Mary, Harwell was motivated to act on her behalf. Raymond’s first encounter with the cousins is preceded by a dramatic and accidental eavesdropping. Finally, Gryce uses eavesdropping to test a hypothesis of the case.

Logic has led to the conclusion that Mary is guilty; Gryce has Mary, Henry, and Harwell listen in as he explains that theory of the case. Hearing Mary accused, Harwell confesses. Gryce uses this method to confirm his feeling that the logical hypothesis is not the correct one. “The thing is as clear as A, B, C” he tells Raymond while silently hatching his plan to prove an alternative (*Leavenworth* 362). This disparity of statement and action shows a paradoxical distrust of logic and language by this detective.

**The Materiality of Texts as Clues**

Written language has multiple features exploited in detective fiction. There is the message: the content, itself multifaceted. There is the way the message is expressed. And there is the materiality of the message; that is, the medium. To create puzzles, detective fiction uses both information and physical objects in novel ways, so it is particularly interested in the materiality of communication. This materiality includes the fact that writing is on a surface, usually a plane, whose features are themselves exploited. A classic example of this exploitation is the impression left by writing. Rubbing the underlying page or blotter can then resurrect text, as in *North by Northwest*. Features of texts shade into each other; for example, handwriting can be considered
both an element of interpretation (what it says about the writer) and of physical production. In addition, attributes of objects apply to texts: the necessity of determining context for objects, and the possibilities of determining provenance through physical traits.

Green’s story “A Difficult Problem” initially seems to be a locked-room mystery. Lucy Holmes and her husband live in New York. One day, when her husband is away, Lucy finds in her private rooms a newspaper clipping announcing her husband’s death. The notice turns out to be true; her husband has died in his hotel in Philadelphia. But how did the slip of paper get into her rooms? Who pinned it to her note cushion while she slept?

Lucy describes to the detective how the notice acted on her when she first saw it and alludes to gothic motifs such as dream or insanity, wondering, “Was I dreaming or under the spell of some frightful hallucination which led me to misread the name on the slip of paper before me?” (11) This insecurity comes with physical symptoms, including speechlessness: “My head, throat and chest seemed bound about with iron, so that I could neither speak nor breathe with freedom. . . .” (11). However, she then is able to move into a more rational way of looking at the situation.

She calls newspapers in Philadelphia, and could find none that had run it. Although its information is accurate, she knows that the obituary is a fake, as she tells the detective:

Some persons would give a superstitious explanation to the whole matter; think I had received a supernatural warning and been satisfied with what they would call a spiritual manifestation. But I have not a bit of such follity in my composition. Living hands set up the type and printed the words which gave me so deathly a shock. . . . (15–16)
She implies that a spiritual explanation and a rational one are mutually exclusive. In *The Dead Letter*, however, characters are able to consider these two types of explanations simultaneously. Redfield considers his receipt of the letter an act of Providence. Burton shows its spiritual emanations through the second sight of his daughter. However, their next step is to go to the Peekskill post office and track down the person who wrote the letter. For them, the letter was written by living hands and deposited by a living person; the spiritual information is just the lead. In contrast with *The Dead Letter*, “A Difficult Problem” demonstrates the separation of interpretations of the clue, and a narrowing definition of which are appropriate to this narrative form. Detection is here an inverse practice to spiritualism, not a complement.

The clipping in “A Difficult Problem” is important in content and in its materiality, and also acts powerfully on Lucy Holmes, after being insinuated into her home. Specifically, this clue uses the property of paper as having two symmetrical faces. When the detective, examining the death notice, turns it over,

[i]nstantly a change took place in [Lucy’] countenance. She sank back in her seat and a blush of manifest confusion suffused her cheeks. “Oh!” she exclaimed, “what will you think of me! I brought this scrap of print into the house myself; and it was I who pinned it on the cushion with my own hands! I remember it now.”

(19-20)

The previous night, when she was on her way home from the opera, a man had given her the piece of paper, like any commercial flyer. She had put it into her pocket. That night, she saw that it was a recipe, so rather than throw it away, she pinned it to her cushion, never looking on the obverse. The detective understands, first, that mental state affects one’s ability to receive and interpret information. In her panic on finding the death notice, Lucy did not remember the flyer
from the previous night, much less associate the two. He also understands the tension between mundane form and their power of information and emotion.

“The Purloined Letter” is again an exemplar here. In both tales, the topology of paper takes the place of encryption by hiding the content. Minister D—, like Green’s culprit, uses the dimensionality of paper to fool the police. Both men put content on one face that disguises the other, amplifying the effect by calibrating the kind of text on the back to be different in tone and appearance. The minister uses the attributes of an old personal letter from a lady to disguise a letter of international importance. John Graham of “A Difficult Problem” uses real newsprint with a recipe to make his death notice plausible.

This tension of interpretation by change of context is important to the development of the physical clue in detective fiction. “The Gold Bug” is most famous for its encrypted message. However, the initial mystification arises from the materiality of the object. Legrand initially picks up the scrap to grab the unusual beetle. He then uses the scrap to draw a picture of the bug. The accidental application of heat by the narrator leads to the discovery that the other side of the page has a picture and an encoded message. The mystery of the two sides is enhanced in this case by a third level of mystification, the use of invisible ink. In a less sophisticated moment in *The Leavenworth Case*, Raymond finds an apparent cipher etched on the window of Amy Beldon’s home: reversed, it reads “Mary Clavering,” revealing which niece had the secret marriage. Whether she scratched her new name in reverse or whether she recorded it from outside the house is not apparent. Either way, she seems to have done this out of the combined excitement of her love and of having a delicious secret.

The elegance of physical texts like the scratched window, Lucy Holmes’s newspaper scrap, Legrand’s parchment, and “The Purloined Letter,” is that there is no structural priority of
over/under. In a coded text, the plaintext is conceptualized as underlying and as having truth value (Rosenheim 164). Minister D—’s move, Legrand’s annoyance, and Lucy Holmes’s confusion stem from the symmetry of paper. The double-sided text is the solution to the difficult problem of the title.

Hieroglyphs and the Documentary Impulse

The form of the murder weapon in “A Difficult Problem” is hieroglyphic in the sense that its form looks like a sign and its meaning is difficult to decipher. When the detective finds the wire coil in the victim’s personal effects, the victim’s wife dismisses it as just one of the puzzles her husband loved to solve. “[I]t is of no consequence. My husband was forever amusing himself over some such contrivance.” After pricking his thumb on its tines, however, the detective recalls the autopsy results. “No traces of poison were to be found in the stomach nor was there to be seen on the body any mark of violence, with the exception of a minute prick upon one of his thumbs. . . . This speck was so small that it escaped every eye but my own,” the narrator boasts (29).

The complexity of the object does not convey meaning through its shape but makes it a more successful puzzle and weapon: the victim’s interest in its complexity ensures his poisoning. The solution calls to mind Raymond Chandler’s quip about “curare and tropical fish” ("The Simple Art of Murder" 234) when the killer later reveals, “it was woorali; the deadly, secret woorali. . . . One drop, but it killed my man” (54). A child’s toy, a minute prick, and a single drop of poison2 are the kinds of unprepossessing items in which the detective can read a story.

2 The “one drop” idiom also evokes theories of hypodescent and race toxicity.
The relationship between codes and the documentary impulse in detective fiction is most clear when the text of the story depicts a coded or mysterious text. The beginning of Victor’s *The Figure Eight* not only describes but also reproduces the number scrawled by Dr. Meredith as he died. *The Leavenworth Case* includes a facsimile of the piece of burnt letter retrieved from the grate, in addition to a transcription of the legible text. Raymond pieces them together to infer the whole. In both cases, the documentation is excessive in that it does not provide the reader with further information beyond the description or transcription of the text clue. However, including such physically or textually distinct elements (scraps of paper or reproduction of an object or symbol) reinforces the materiality of these clues. These elements both bring the reader closer to the position of detective and reify certain clues.

The concern about the transmission, interception, and decryption of messages connects Victor and Green to Poe and to Rosenheim’s “cryptographic imagination,” as well as to Arthur Conan Doyle and to later procedure-oriented works through the interest in clues and evidence. Putting certain items outside of the frame of text and words imbues the clue with a greater importance as figures in search of context and interpretation. Some additional value inheres in texts and objects beyond their information. This interplay between semi-magical and purely informational facets of objects and texts parallels the interplay between rational and irrational elements of detection.
Chapter 3.

A Modern Scientist in an Antebellum Court:

Law and Knowledge in Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson*

In his study of *The Newgate Calendar* stories from the latter eighteenth century, Stephen Knight writes that the *Calendar* depicts crime as arising out of ordinary life and community, and as solvable by the “organic” workings of society. Criminals are “ordinary people who reject the roles society and their families offer them,” not monsters or aliens; crimes depicted are straightforward and generally murder and theft within a community, or within the family, the “heart of the social body” (Knight *Form* 11). Karen Halttunen describes stories of murder through the seventeenth century as largely religious and based on the essential sin of humanity. In the late eighteen and early nineteenth centuries, she argues, sensational narratives of murder in the gothic mode were a secular society’s incoherent reaction to actions its philosophy could not fully explain (2-4).

By contrast, Knight writes,

> At the center of modern crime fiction stands an investigating agent—an amateur detective, a professional but private investigator, a single policeman, a police force acting together. Specially skilled people discover the cause of a crime, restore order and bring the criminal to account. (*Form* 8)

The development of detective fiction in the mid- and late nineteenth century to some extent mediated this horror by making crime a puzzle and by creating what Knight calls a “consoling” presence in the figure of the detective, who brings intelligence and order (*Crime Fiction* 55-56).

This chapter considers forms of knowledge and clues in Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson*. 
Twain shows the arbitrariness of racial demarcation using the character of an outsider with scientific knowledge ahead of his time. *Pudd’nhead Wilson* depicts a town and a country in epistemological transition, with forms of knowledge and law interacting: older and newer, local and cosmopolitan, community and individual. In this setting, Twain creates a story of crime and detection interwoven with a tale of twins and doubles. Underemployed attorney David “Pudd’nhead” Wilson is able to raise his status by solving a racial mystery using fingerprints. The final success of Wilson, a long-time outsider, shows the shift from structures of affiliation to those of profession, and from a community-based model of knowledge to an expertise model.

Twain was sufficiently interested in detection that his next novel was *Tom Sawyer: Detective* (1896), and he began or wrote several other detective novels through the decades, although he claimed not to take the genre seriously (Thomas 244). Within an ironic trading-places tale, a murder sets in motion a detective plot and clears the path for Pudd’nhead to become Dawson’s Landing new leading citizen. Although Twain exalts scientific expertise as providing the only clues to hidden plots, his tale also undermines scientific and legal positivism. In addition, Twain portrays the moral ramifications of detection with deep irony, showing how solving a crime does not solve the problem of ethical responsibility. The questions raised in *Pudd’nhead Wilson* set up the issues of Chapter 4, on the ethics and epistemology of erasing the past in *Hagar’s Daughter*, and Chapter 5, on the democratic and stratifying elements of scientific detection.

Although *Pudd’nhead Wilson* is not necessarily considered part of the detective fiction genre, it is a close relative that both imitates and anticipates elements of this genre. Like other works considered in this dissertation, it is not a canonical work of detective fiction, although it is canonical in American literature. Elements important to the development of detective fiction
include having a specially trained detective and the clue serving as the pivot point for the solving of a crime. The order of information for the reader is similar to the “inverted” detective stories popularized by R. Austin Freeman in *The Singing Bone* (1912), in which the actual details of the crime are shown to the reader before the detective finds the truth (Knight *Crime Fiction* 70; Freeman v-vi). Twain’s novel substantiates Freeman’s later comment that yes, there is still a story to tell when the reader already knows the solution, and that story can still be called detective fiction. Further, the novel shows a move to a model of knowledge that is based more on expertise than community knowledge, and also a model of knowledge that considers identity, especially racial identity, as the paradigm of what knowledge can tell. Twain uses a variety of forms of knowledge to introduce these new elements, and these operate in relation to the development of the detective fiction genre in the United States.

The setting of this novel, Dawson’s Landing, has a variety of forms of knowledge that are supplemented and upset in the course of the novel. The crime and detection plot in *Pudd’nhead Wilson* creates a model of expertise new to Dawson’s Landing. As an expert, Pudd’nhead solves the crime and reveals hidden truths. Forms of knowledge in Dawson’s Landing intersect the scientific detective model; they help, change, are changed by, and confound that model. The detection plot, including its racial irony, both girds and confounds social structures of crime and punishment. Different forms of knowledge that operate in Dawson’s Landing—both Pudd’nhead’s knowledge and forms of knowledge shown by other characters and the ambient and established knowledge of the community—create the law and order of Dawson’s Landing, Missouri.

*Pudd’nhead Wilson* was published serially in 1893–94 in the *Century* Magazine. Twain began the story in 1892, originally as a story about “Those Extraordinary Twins,” inspired by
real-life conjoined Italian twins who shared, as Luigi and Angelo do in *Those Extraordinary Twins*, one body below the neck (*Pudd’nhead* 208-09; Emerson 193-96). As Twain describes in what is now a kind of preface to *Twins*, a parallel subplot of black slave and white master switched at birth and the man who reveals them took over the narrative, eventually transformed into *Pudd’nhead Wilson*.

*Pudd’nhead Wilson* takes place primarily in the 1850s. The overarching narrative is the transition of David “Pudd’nhead” Wilson, an intelligent and creative lawyer, from outsider in his small community to its leading citizen. The main instrument of transition is Pudd’nhead’s use of fingerprints, his hobby, to both solve a murder and reveal an exchange of identities across the black–white divide. Within this frame, the critical subplot of the novel is the story of a spoiled scion, known throughout as Tom. This plot is a farce about the arbitrary nature of both racial divisions and legal status (slave or free). Using an obscure hobby he has practiced for more than twenty years, Pudd’nhead shows that a black slave and his white master were switched were switched as infants, and that one is a murderer. The identities of master and slave are set right, the murderer is punished, and Pudd’nhead attains his appropriate position as a leading citizen.

Roxy, a slave, is one-sixteenth black and fair skinned. One day, her master threatens to sell her and her fellow slaves down the river as a punishment. This threat reminds Roxy of how precarious her newborn baby’s life will be as a slave. She considers suicide and infanticide, but ends up changing her child with her master’s infant. Between his mother’s dutiful attentions and his rich-child upbringing, Roxy’s son grows up weak willed and selfish. As young man, he is constantly in danger of being disinherited by his uncle, the respected Judge Driscoll. Tom even tries to rob his uncle. Unfortunately, his uncle awakens during the attempt, and Tom kills him with a jeweled dagger from another recent heist.
Pudd’nhead Wilson, a relative newcomer to Dawson’s Landing, a professional surveyor, a non-practicing lawyer, and an amateur scientist, defends Luigi, falsely arrested for the murder. In the course of his investigations, he looks at bloody fingerprints on the knife and compares them with his collection of the prints of the town’s population, gathered over many years. He realizes that the fingerprints are Tom Driscoll’s, but also finds the old secret: that master Tom and slave Chambers were switched as infants. In the process, Pudd’nhead redeems his own reputation in the town and gains long-awaited respect.

The perverse pleasure and power of reading *Pudd’nhead Wilson* is finding oneself celebrating an ending that is poetically just yet also one that restores a morally abhorrent order. In the abrupt, ignoble ending, Twain marks out the swift calculus of a pernicious order. Neither Roxy nor Tom is a hero; Roxy sentences the first Tom to a life of slavery, and encourages her son’s thefts. Tom has no regret over killing his benefactor, Judge Driscoll, and even sells his own mother down the river, literally. He is completely selfish, and it seems appropriate that he should lose that self he has worked to preserve.

Readers have had various interpretations of the role of knowledge and competing sources of information in the plot and especially the ending of *Pudd’nhead Wilson*. Ronald Thomas considers the novel in the context of historical forensics and its literary depictions. Thomas reads this history in a Foucauldian way, arguing that forensics in history and in the cultural imagination accompanies a change from conceiving of people as having *character* to having *identity*. Identity is the essential and individual qualities of a person through time that experts can read. Detectives, in particular, “read the secret truth of the past in the bodies of the victims and perpetrators of crime” (3), with forensics as the method of making the body write or “speak for itself” (17). This is the context in which Thomas reads *Pudd’nhead Wilson*. 
Susan Gillman, in *Dark Twins*, follows Twain’s interest in twins and doubles through both his many tales of swapped or unclear identity—such as *The Prince and the Pauper, The American Claimant*, and “1002nd Arabian Night”—but also through his letters, unfinished writings, and public persona, itself a kind of twin. Her title comes from Faulkner: “A book is the writer’s secret life, the dark twin of a man” (qtd. in Gillman vi). She sees *Pudd’nhead Wilson* as a study of how arbitrary assignments of law can be, both racial and criminal, as demonstrated by the switching of Tom and Chambers, especially in their role as foils for Angelo and Luigi in the earlier version of the story, in which the Italian twins are conjoined and in which the town must determine legal status for them separately.

In a 2007 article, Simon A. Cole focuses specifically on the fingerprint technology of *Pudd’nhead Wilson* in relation to the discourses about fingerprints in anthropology and criminal justice in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Cole describes *Pudd’nhead* as an instance of “prescience” by Twain in recognizing the utility of fingerprints both for criminal identification and for categorizing people by race (Cole 227, abstract). Specifically, Cole is interested in the ways fingerprint science intersects with racial demarcation in the fiction writing of Twain and nonfiction writing of scientist Francis Galton, pointing out the sometimes surprising intersections between fingerprint technology and biological racism, and the way in which fingerprints were used as a clue in racial contexts. The clues that operate in *Pudd’nhead Wilson* are not all related to the murder, but are part of intersecting systems of knowledge that affect criminal detection, moral control in the community, and legal status. The murder of Judge Driscoll, the theft of goods, and the secret identities of Tom and Chambers show holes in the epistemological systems of Dawson’s Landing. They are also an opportunity for a new form of knowledge. Pudd’nhead represents both the expert and the initiate. His ability to read fingerprints (as well as landscapes
and palms) and his behavior as a detective set him apart from his neighbors and finally transform Dawson’s Landing.

**Community Knowledge in Dawson’s Landing**

Much of the important knowledge in Dawson’s Landing comes from the community. Community knowledge is not inherently right or wrong. It is based on appearances as well as long-term knowledge, and includes people of different levels of intelligence and status. Although there is a strong democratic element, community leaders are especially influential. In Dawson’s Landing, status is based on reputation and heritage. These attributes are themselves connected.

The relationship between status, heritage, and reputation is evident in Twain’s description of York Driscoll, a judge. This “chief citizen” is

very proud of his old Virginian ancestry, and in his hospitalities and his rather formal and stately manners he kept up its traditions. He was fine and just and generous. To be a gentleman . . . was his only religion, and to it he was always faithful. He was respected, esteemed, and beloved by all the community.

(*Pudd'nhead* 3-4)

In these attributes, Judge Driscoll resembles Twain’s own father (Emerson 2). This structure has a hierarchy of community leadership, with an expert whose wisdom is respected because of his community standing. Judge Driscoll’s community standing and his legal authority (that is, as a judge) are entwined, although not entirely coterminous. Ronald Thomas defines character as “representing . . . the romantic-autonomous individual of a revolutionary period . . . who generated and expressed the romantic spirit of the nation” (11). This is Judge Driscoll and his
cohort. These are the First Families of Virginia (F.F.V.s), associated with the first colonies. Tom Driscoll’s status comes from his F.F.V roots as a Driscoll.³

However, above the leading citizens’ opinions is a community consensus. The community’s knowledge incorporates both the opinions of leading citizens and general gossip. The introduction of Pudd’nhead to the town of Dawson’s Landing is an early and important example. Mr. David Wilson, as he had previously been known,

was twenty-five years old, college-bred, and had finished a post-college course in an Eastern law school a couple of years before. . . . But for an unfortunate remark of his, he would no doubt have entered at once upon a successful career at Dawson’s Landing. But he made his fatal remark the first day he spent in the village, and it “gaged” him. He had just made the acquaintance of a group of citizens when an invisible dog began to yelp . . . and make himself very comprehensively disagreeable, whereupon young Wilson said, much as one who is thinking aloud:

“I wish I owned half of that dog.”

“Why?” somebody asked.

“Because I would kill my half.” (Pudd’nhead 5-6)

This response seems nonsense to the “group,” and they deem him a pudd’nhead. The power of a single incident to set one’s reputation for decades or a lifetime—to “gage” him—shows the power of community knowledge and particularly the democratic element of it. Judge Driscoll, who has both informal and formal civic status, has a high opinion of the newcomer. Yet even

³ Tom’s biological father was also an F.F.V., but under the pervasive racial logic, this paternal heritage is irrelevant because his mother is categorized as black.
Judge Driscoll’s friendship and high opinion does not redeem Pudd’nhead in the eyes of the town. Pudd’nhead does not have a case as a lawyer for twenty years. His life and livelihood are set.

Community opinion need not be unfavorable. Soon after the Italian twins Angelo and Luigi arrive in Chapter 5, the village descends on their hosts, and everyone who attends is charmed, “all agreeing that it would be many a long day before Dawson’s Landing would see the equal of this one again” (51). Nor is the wisdom of the community as unchangeable as it seems in Pudd’nhead’s case. Tom is able to change community perception of the twins. After he steals their distinctive jeweled dagger, he is able to undermine them by starting a rumor about a rumor. He tells his uncle that “the town is beginning to sneer and gossip and laugh. Half the people believe [the twins] never had any such knife, the other half believe they had it and have got it still. I've heard twenty people talking like that today” (Pudd’nhead 140). In fact, Tom still has the knife, and starts the rumor himself. But as the twins lose their luster, the rumor is “diligently whispered around that it was curious—indeed, VERY curious—that that wonderful knife of theirs did not turn up—IF it was so valuable, or IF it had ever existed” (Pudd'nhead 147). The effectiveness of Tom’s rumor shows both the power and the mutability of community knowledge, and the importance of gossip as an engine of that knowledge.

In addition to gossip, appearance is an important feature in community knowledge and opinion. When Wilson arrives in Dawson’s Landing, Missouri, in 1830, he has the merits to become successful. Twain describes him as a “homely, freckled, sandy-haired young fellow, with an intelligent blue eye that had frankness and comradeship in it and a covert twinkle of a pleasant sort.” The narrator concludes from Wilson’s appearance that “but for an unfortunate
remark of his, he would no doubt have entered at once upon a successful career at Dawson’s Landing” (*Pudd’nhead 5*).

The reaction of the group to Wilson’s comment shows the importance of appearance or impressions more broadly.

One said:

“’Pears to be a fool.”

“ ’Pears?” said another. “Is, I reckon you better say.” (*Pudd’nhead 7*)

This distinction of 'pears versus *is* is important. When Pudd’nhead makes his remark about the dog, “the group searched his face with curiosity, with anxiety even, but found no light there, no expression that they could read” (*Pudd’nhead 6*). It is important to “the group” that they be able to see Pudd’nhead’s character in his face. On searching his face, they found no expression *that they could read*. It is not only what is visible but what is legible that provides clues absorbed by the community. The interpreters and their powers of interpretation make the content. There is nothing in Wilson’s face for them; but this is an ambiguous measure. Is the failing his face or their literacy? Dawson’s Landing does not speak Wilson’s dialect. They understand neither his verbal nor his facial idioms of expression. Appearance as a means of knowledge can be used as a good guide to reality as long as everything is known and familiar. However, the plot of this novel will put stress on this system that it cannot incorporate. When truth is no longer either known or visible, there is a need for experts.

The combination of appearance, interpretation, gossip, and community memory form a person’s reputation within Dawson’s Landing. Wilson’s physical appearance is in his favor. However, the group cannot read his expression, either verbal or facial. Furthermore, he does not have roots in the community. At the beginning of *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, knowledge is based on a
stable community in which people are their histories and their family’s histories. Community knowledge is literally *common sense*: impressions held in common throughout Dawson’s Landing.

**Uncommon Sense**

Although community memory is a powerful force in Dawson’s Landing, it does not affect each individual’s knowledge. Some characters show individual intelligence that can be at odds with community memory, yet coexist with it. Judge Driscoll’s high opinion of Pudd’nhead is one example. Another is the specific wisdom of Roxy, Percy Driscoll’s former slave and Tom’s mother. Tom proves to have a talent for spinning facts and for putting thoughts in others’ minds so casually that they can neither shake the idea nor pin its genesis on Tom.

Roxy’s sense is a combination of life knowledge and her own savvy. Later in the novel, she and Tom have teamed up. Roxy has been legally free for many years, but suggests that Tom sell her so that he can pay some of his debts and stay in his uncle’s good opinion. Tom agrees to sell her locally, but instead sells her down the river, thinking she won’t notice at first. Yet she has spent decades working on steamboats and knows the river. As soon as she sees the direction of the water along the side of the boat, she recognizes Tom’s betrayal.

Roxy also shows her specific intelligence in her initial idea to switch the identity of master and slave infants. Although the babies are known to look similar, the racial logic of black and white is so engrained in the culture that Roxy’s idea to actually switch the babies is a leap of imagination that she only arrives at during a desperate moment. She also formulates a Biblical justification for her actions. Most important, Roxy recognizes Pudd’nhead’s intelligence and understand his thinking.
Pudd’nhead’s ways of thinking and access to knowledge are unique. Besides his expertise and knowledge as a scholar, Pudd’nhead also has a kind of sense as a higher-context thinker. The incident when Pudd’nhead gets his name shows the difference in his thinking from others’. His listeners take literally his comment that if he owned half of the yawling dog, he would kill (only) his half. They try to determine whether there could be some hidden plausibility, and have a lengthy philosophical discussion about possible interpretations of Pudd’nhead’s remark based on the assumption that he would want to kill exactly his half of the dog. In their Talmudic discussion, they miss the point that in this very hypothetical situation, Wilson wouldn’t expect the other half of the dog to live, any more than Solomon would expect that a baby cut in two would live. In this way, Pudd’nhead is like the famous judge of the Bible.4

Pudd’nhead is arguably an authorial surrogate here, as in his famous Calendar. (Many of the quotations attributed to Twain in general culture and quotation books are from Pudd’nhead Wilson’s Calendar.) Wilson’s comment about the dog echoes on several levels both the content and the composition story of Pudd’nhead Wilson. It foreshadows the division of the quasi-brothers Tom and Chambers; the eventual revelation and punishment of the false Tom also punishes the true Tom, exiled from black society and miserable in white society. The real Tom is, in the end, a stateless person without even a story. Gillman gives a good explication of the dog story as a metaphor for hypodescent, the doctrine of biological racism that underlies the plot of the novel (81). If Pudd’nhead Wilson is taken together with Those Extraordinary Twins, more authorial parallels emerge. The narrative of Those Extraordinary Twins is based on the problem of assigning responsibility, both legal and moral. Twain explores this question by describing

4 I am grateful to Peg Boyle Single for noting this connection. Twain also refers to Solomon in Huckleberry Finn, but with Jim explicating the (il)logic of the judge in threatening to divide the contested baby. Susan Gillman discusses this incident in Dark Twins (80).
conjoined twins, one body with two heads corresponding to different personalities, beliefs, and actions. In the end, one of the twins is hanged. As with the other half of the dog, whether general or hindquarters only, we would not expect the other twin to live, nor do the people of the town, although they profess naïveté (Gillman 68). Furthermore, Twain also ponders the arbitrariness of legal divisions in *Life on the Mississippi*. In its first chapters, he stands in awe of the Mississippi, above any other river, in its ability and tendency to make cuts in its course that alter the fortunes of whole towns and counties by moving them from one state to another. This “sidewise” motion changes a town from dry to drinking or, in the time of slavery, from slave to free (*Life* 13).

In the well-known “Author’s Note to *Those Extraordinary Twins*,” Twain describes the novels *Pudd’nhead Wilson* and *Those Extraordinary Twins* as originally created as something like conjoined twins, “not one story, but two stories tangled together; and they obstructed and interrupted each other at every turn. . . . I pulled one of the stories out by the roots, and left the other—a kind of literary Caesarean operation” (*Pudd’nhead* 208). Thus, as he is establishing his name in Dawson’s Landing, Pudd’nhead is displaying to readers the wit of Twain and the wisdom of Solomon. Yet when his audience “fell away from him as from something uncanny,” it is not only because he is strange but also because he is not canny: not knowing in the ways of Dawson’s Landing. This sense he lacks at this decisive moment. However, Pudd’nhead’s outsider status allows him to act as detective in this world (Gillman 87).

Pudd’nhead and Roxy each see the other’s intelligence but misrecognize each other’s aims because their knowledge is different. Roxy is superstitious and does not know anything about science. When Roxy is freed in 1845, she leaves Dawson’s Landing to become a chambermaid on a steamboat. Pudd’nhead offers her copies of Tom’s and Chambers’s fingerprints. His offer reminds her that she could still get caught for switching the babies, so she
becomes anxious, and then declines. Wilson, seeing her reaction, thinks, “The drop of black blood in her is superstitious; she thinks there’s some devilry, some witch business about my glass mystery somewhere; she used to come here with an old horseshoe in her hand . . . ” (36).

Pudd’nhead attributes her superstitious nature to the “drop of black blood”; that is, the invisible one-sixteenth. This shows a mix of tropes, because the novel overall depicts the arbitrariness of legal distinctions by blood. Wilson is the voice of rationalism in the plot, but he also uses the “one drop” idiom of hypodescent. Wilson understands Roxy’s thinking but also misapprehends her fears in this instance.

For her part, Roxy knows that Pudd’nhead is one of the smartest men in town, and groups him with two leading lights, Judge Driscoll and Pembroke Howard (24). She is able to see his intelligence, despite his low social standing among the white inhabitants. In her recognition of his merit and power, she is ahead of the town and her time, even as her understanding of that power is flawed. When she initially switches the babies, she wants to see if he can tell. If he doesn’t notice the difference, she reasons, no one will. She attributes his sense to some kind of “witch work.” Her excuse for bringing the babies to Wilson is to provide their fingerprints for his collection. She has no idea that the “witch work”—Pudd’nhead’s power—*is* the fingerprints.

**Expert Knowledge**

In contrast to community knowledge, there is also expertise in a more modern sense, held by Pudd’nhead. In his introduction, Twain makes fun of expertise as marshaled by other writers. Wilkie Collins, in his preface to the one-volume edition of *The Woman in White*, writes that he has subjected the matters of law, related to identity and inheritance, to multiple rounds of legal review. Twain sends up this trope in his own preface, or “Whisper to the Reader”: “I was not willing to let the law chapters in this book go to press without first subjecting them to a rigid and
exhausting revision and correction by a trained barrister—if that is what they are called” (Pudd'nhead xiii). Yet despite his parody, Twain makes expertise a central feature of Pudd’nhed Wilson as a character and Pudd’nhead Wilson as a novel. Wilson’s neighbors dismiss the training and expertise of David “Pudd’nhead” Wilson for much of the book. But the plot of Pudd’nhead Wilson is based on the power of expertise. Experts have the power to interpret information. They have access to forms of knowledge that are inaccessible to others. Experts can thus wield a special power to provide knowledge to others. They can expand and influence others’ worldviews, as Wilson does.

Pudd’nhead Wilson has legal expertise from his college education and “Eastern law school.” Pudd’nhead has various useful skills including accounting and surveying. He also has scientific expertise, especially including fingerprints. He keeps up with ideas in science and is always working in his own way; his “idle time . . . never hung heavy on his hands, for he interested himself in every new thing that was born into the universe of ideas” (Pudd’nhead 9). This is not necessarily called science, but rather “every new thing.” Wilson doesn’t have only modern knowledge; he also can read palms. His is a model of knowledge that is wide ranging and includes not only the modern but many sources that are not known in the community.

Within Dawson’s Landing, Pudd’nhead’s expertise is not recognized. That Pudd’nhead practices both palm reading, which is familiar, and fingerprinting, which is not, reinforces that for these people, his reading of fingerprints is magic. Pudd’nhead is far ahead of his time in his knowledge of fingerprints, their use in science, their use with race, and especially their use in solving crimes.

One of his pet fads was palmistry. To another one he gave no name, neither would he explain to anybody what its purpose was, but merely said it was an amusement.
In fact, he had found that his fads added to his reputation as a pudd’nhead; therefore he was growing chary of being too communicative about them. The fad without a name was one which dealt with people’s fingermarks. (Pudd’nhead 9)

Fingerprinting here has less status than palmistry, so little that Pudd’nhead does not give it a name. He is developing expertise in the new, but this expertise, far from raising his status in the town, actually threatens to lower it further. This paragraph establishes both Pudd’nhead’s scientific expertise and the ignorance of that expertise—ignorance to the point of hostility, for his merits have no name in this world. It is not only that community wisdom doesn’t recognize Wilson’s expertise, but that it doesn’t recognize expertise in general.

Judge Driscoll, the leading voice of community knowledge, is not anti-expertise. He is the president of the Freethinker’s Society and respects Pudd’nhead. However, Pudd’nhead is an outsider where knowledge is based on community and affiliation. He’s not from Dawson’s Landing, and he is not understood. People think he has no common sense. He has uncommon sense. Neither this nor his expertise in science and law are initially relevant to the town.

Clues and the Law

The law in the community is related to its kinds of knowledge. The community, or “the group,” is one form of law. We see a law-like structure and impact in Pudd’nhead’s first appearance, when he gets his nickname. Pudd’nhead Wilson arrives in Dawson’s Landing in February 1830, within a month of the birth of Tom and Chambers. After he comments that he would kill his half of the dog, the group “fell away from him as from something uncanny, and went into privacy to discuss him.” In his phrasing, Twain implies that the group is like a jury retiring to deliberate. In the discussion, Twain then labels the members of the group “No. 3, No. 4,” again with the anonymity and force of jurors. Here, the jurors are first determining the merits
of Wilson’s comment. Once they have decided that it does not make sense, they then must
determine how to characterize Wilson.

No. 3 said: “Well, he's a lummox, anyway.”

“That's what he is;” said No. 4. “He's a labrick—just a Simon-pure labrick, if
there was one.”

The discussion concludes, “If he ain’t a pudd’nhead, I ain’t no judge that’s all.” Wilson has been
tried and sentenced in an informal, but binding, court. The scene ends with another legal action:
“Mr. Wilson stood elected . . . . That first day's verdict made him a fool, and he was not able to
get it set aside, or even modified” (6-7).

Another kind of law is based on an ancient code of honor. Judge Driscoll, with his
Virginia heritage, epitomizes these “unwritten laws . . . as clearly defined and as strict as any that
could be found among the printed statutes of the land. . . . Those laws were his chart; his course
was marked out on it; if he swerved from it by so much as half a point of the compass, it meant
shipwreck to his honor; that is to say, degradation from his rank as a gentleman.”

These laws are higher in priority to religion; Judge Driscoll is part of the Freethinker’s Society
and not conspicuously religious.

Honor stood first; and the laws defined what it was and wherein it differed in
certain details from honor as defined by church creeds and by the social laws and
customs of some of the minor divisions of the globe that had got crowded out
when the sacred boundaries of Virginia were staked out. (Pudd’nhead 102)

More impressive is that this law is above both social and civic law. Although York Driscoll is a
judge, he places honor above the written law. The best example of this occurs when his nephew
Tom has a public argument with Count Luigi (half of the Italian twins). Rather than challenging
Luigi to a duel, Tom presses charges of assault. Tom wins, but Judge Driscoll is horrified. He disowns his nephew in shame that Tom used the civic law rather than the rules of honor.

All of the available types of knowledge contribute to setting people’s legal status. Pudd’nhead’s name and effective status in the town are determined by a jury of the community based on perception. However, actual legal status is also based on a system of appearance combined with community memory. Roxy is one-sixteenth black, and, in contrast to “coal-black Jasper,” Roxy’s black heritage doesn’t show (11). Brown-haired and rosy-cheeked, Roxy is “to all intents and purposes . . . as white as anybody, but the one-sixteenth of her which was black outvoted the other fifteen parts and made her a negro” (12). For what intents and purposes can she be white, when she is legally black and a slave? Roxy’s son, born Chambers, is even fairer than Roxy. Baby Chambers is blond haired and indistinguishable from his master’s son except by Roxy. Roxy’s son is “thirty-one parts white, and he, too, was a slave, and by fiction of law and custom a negro” (Pudd’nhead 12). Roxy is clearly black in her speech, dress, and behavior, however. When, years later, she suggests that her son sell her to raise cash, she comments that although she does not look black, people will know she is black because of her speech. Legally, she is free, but it is easy for Tom to forge a bill for her. Her status as “black” is clear although she looks white, but her legal status as free is not evident without community knowledge.

Law in Dawson’s Landing goes with its forms of knowledge. One kind of law is based on confession. Historian Katharine Ramsland, in her study of forensics, describes pre-scientific criminology as based on “logic, snitches, and confessions,” the latter often obtained through torture (xiv). In another scene of crime-solving early in Pudd’nhead Wilson, Percy Driscoll (Tom’s supposed father and Roxy’s original owner) wants to catch a thief in his household. He
calls together his four house slaves. When none will confess, “he added these words of awful import”:

“I give you one minute”—he took out his watch. “If at the end of that time you have not confessed, I will not only sell all four of you, but—I will sell you DOWN THE RIVER!”

It was equivalent to condemning them to hell! No Missouri negro doubted this. Roxy reeled in her tracks and the color vanished out of her face; the others dropped to their knees as if they had been shot; tears gushed from their eyes, their supplicating hands went up, and three answers came in the one instant. . . .

(Pudd’nhead 16)

Roxy has not taken any of the money in this instance. However, the other three slaves confess, and the master condescends to sell them in Missouri, rather than in the deep South (17). This incident is described like a pre-modern courtroom scene. As the legal owner of the four suspects, Percy Driscoll is lord and magistrate. The threat of being sold down the river has dramatic physical effects on the suspects. Roxy “reeled . . . and the color drained out of her face,” and the others fall “as if they had been shot.” To be sold down the river would be torture, but the threat itself also acts as torture, seeming to physically injure the suspects. It has the desired effect: the confessions of three thieves. This form of law is based on a pre-modern method of gathering knowledge through threat and torture. Gillman sees the societal structure as an aping of “an archaic feudal society,” populated by “imitation whites” (78). The F.F.V.s, including Percy Driscoll, imitate their colonial history, itself an imitation of an older England, and the means of gathering knowledge in this scene fall within that imitation.
Judge Driscoll goes by rules on information different from either Roxy’s or Pudd’nhead’s. Based on his code of honor, information not obtained by honorable means must not be shared, and a promise must always be kept between gentlemen. Tom reveals to his uncle that Luigi once killed a man—information Pudd’nhead read in Luigi’s palm and Luigi verified. Tom uses this fact to justify not challenging Luigi to a duel when Luigi kicks him publicly, and tells his uncle that he wanted to avoid revealing this fact. This placates the judge, who had been ashamed of his nephew for taking Luigi to court. The judge agrees that “a man's secret is still his own property, and sacred when it has been surprised out of him like that” (139). Nonetheless, politics can overrule honor; Judge Driscoll later alludes to this secret in public to win an election.

The death of Judge Driscoll allows the code of honor that holds that a man’s secret is his property to dissipate. When Luigi is charged with murder, Pudd’nhead uses a modern clue to prove Tom’s guilt and racial identity. Pudd’nhead gets his clue by accident, when Tom is in his workroom. Because witnesses saw a woman on the night of the murder, Pudd’nhead has been poring over the fingerprints of all women in the town, white and black.

[Tom] took up another strip of glass, and exclaimed:

“Why, here's old Roxy's label! Are you going to ornament the royal palaces with nigger paw marks, too? By the date here, I was seven months old when this was done, and she was nursing me and her little nigger cub. . . .” Tom held out the piece of glass to Wilson. . . .

[Wilson] took the strip of glass indifferently, and raised it toward the lamp.

(Pudd'nhead 183)

When Pudd’nhead sees Tom’s own fingerprint, left on the edge glass from Tom’s inspection, he recognizes the fingerprint of the murderer. He goes pale and gets Tom to leave without saying
any more. Pudd’nhead then reveals the killer’s identity and race in front of the town in court. These two scenes, in which Tom leaves his fingerprints unwittingly, and Pudd’nhead uses them to reveal his secrets, clearly show the use of a secret “surprised out of” somebody. The secret written on Tom’s body is not treated as his property at all, but as public or state property, with the scientist/detective as its guardian. The death of Judge Driscoll, as F.F.V. representative, hastens the transition to a different conception of knowledge about people that is not based on family history or rules of honor. In addition, both Tom’s general bad character and his acts of deceit justify the use of new tools to pry open his secrets.

**Identity, Character, and Responsibility**

In *Those Extraordinary Twins*, Twain stages a scene in which laws of evidence in the courtroom engender questions into the nature of knowledge. “How do you *know*? That is the question. Please answer it plainly and squarely,” the Judge instructs a witness. She replies with an unintentionally Cartesian argument, “How do I know, indeed! How do *you* know what you know? Because somebody told you. You didn’t invent it out of your own head, did you?” (*Pudd'nhead* 265). Gillman writes,

> A number of legal premises particularly fascinated [Twain]: that innocence and guilt are two separate categories; that proofs in the form of legal evidence exist to back up that distinction; and that legal evidence is so rigorously defined as to constitute nearly “absolute” knowledge. (5)

Gillman emphasizes the way Twain shows that complete legal knowledge by which one can fully assign responsibility is impossible. Twain had previously written about the famous Siamese conjoined twins Chang and Eng (1869), putting them in fictional situations where their physical unity and mental separateness confound law and society. For example, Twain plays with the
brother-against-brother trope of Civil War journalism to set up farcical situations in which military justice conflicts with logic (Gillman 57-59).

In *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, the epistemological problem focuses on the “social and legal fictions of slave society,” “exposing a number of these fictions in the course of exposing a murderer” (Gillman 72). When Roxy exclaims, “Dog my cats if it ain’t all I kin do” to distinguish the infant Tom and Chambers (21), her expression is a better metaphor than she may intend. By legal fiction, black and white are supposed to be as distinguishable as dogs and cats, yet they can be interchanged.

In this novel, the archetype of the spoiled-scion interacts with a positive view of character as developed through black social mores. Chambers (born Tom and legally white) grows up modest and good, and Tom (born Chambers and legally black) grows up dissipated and selfish. However, much of the complexity of the novel is the result of Twain’s portrayal of these characteristics as due to social circumstance rather than inborn qualities. Like Aurelia Madison in Hopkins’s *Hagar’s Daughter*, Chambers will never have a place where he is at home. Aurelia is too cultured to fit in among black people, but cannot be accepted in the white world once her identity is known; Chambers (born Tom) would prefer to stay among blacks, with his little education, poor diction, and unease with luxury—but cannot be accepted there any more once the community knows that he is legally white.

Tom Driscoll fits Stephen Knight’s description of a criminal from an earlier era, having grown up within the most entrenched part of the community. He is an ordinary man who is capable of some deeper thoughts and some sense of guilt, but whose character is spoiled in three ways: he is both coddled and worshipped by his supposed father, Percy Driscoll; by his secret mother, Roxy; and, later, by his guardians, Judge Driscoll and his wife (37). Pudd’nhead Wilson,
on the other hand, is the kind of “specially skilled” person Knight describes as characteristic of modern crime fiction. As Ronald Thomas points out, the need of the public and the state to control individuals corresponded to new technologies for doing so, and new technologies required experts, especially detectives to track down and identify criminal bodies. In addition to a shift from reputation to expertise, we see features of a shift from character to identity as described by Thomas. Thomas contrasts character, which is based largely on that family and personal history within a known community, with identity, which is based on physical indicators and documentation, and which is a basis of the new kind of knowing narrative. He writes,

This transformation of characters into identities represents a crucial shift in our understanding of modern persons . . . . The fictional detective is the popular-culture figure most explicitly engaged in negotiating this transaction and in monitoring this transformation. Usually operating within the confines of the law but independently of the law’s official policing agencies, the literary detective—the private eye—is perfectly positioned to perform this task.” (11)

_Pudd’nhead Wilson_ does not exactly show a shift to identity as Thomas describes it: “the alienated, bourgeois agent of the state in the industrial and post-industrial age of capital” (11). This world is not yet found in the time when the novel is set. These elements are to some extent split between Pudd’nhead and Tom and perhaps Chambers. Pudd’nhead is the unattached bourgeois individual—mobile, skilled, trained, with no family connections to Dawson’s Landing. As an officer of the court, Wilson operates “within the confines of the law but independently of the law’s official policing agencies.” Tom, on the other hand, becomes capital of the most literal kind when he is revealed to actually be Chambers. Chambers is then alienated from any kind of coherent life story when he is restored to his rightful place as Tom.
Gillman describes how fears of racial amalgamation in the antebellum period were related to a fear of “the blurring of social divisions, and the general leveling process . . . ; it was the first step to becoming ‘cogs in a mass society’” (85). This novel shows the challenge to the romantic, revolutionary-era conception of character discussed by Thomas, both from the institution of slavery and from the ending of that institution. This romantic conception requires that one can know who one is and know who others are: where they came from, where they belong.

Character is based on actions in the past and present and being known in a community. Identity requires verification through external signs that might be physical traits or state documents; the overlap of these categories is in law enforcement tools like the “rogue’s gallery” of mug shots. Detective fiction as invented in the nineteenth century was “centrally concerned with the act of investigating bodies, exposing and submitting for scrutiny the most carnal of secrets, and offering as evidence brutal facts about the body in order to control its functioning” (Thomas 17-18). These facts are both used and questioned in Pudd’nhead Wilson.

Reading “God’s Language”

Pudd’nhead’s expertise in fingerprints both restores order and turns community knowledge upside down. It also upends social status, turning him from tried and convicted “pudd’nhead” to the new leading citizen. Fingerprint knowledge is the main embodiment of Pudd’nhead’s expertise. It turns on its head the forms of knowledge that were dominant in the town. The way Pudd’nhead describes fingerprints shows what is considered important and relevant.

Every human being carries with him from his cradle to his grave certain physical marks which do not change their character, and by which he can always be
identified—and that without shade of doubt or question. These marks are his signature, his physiological autograph, so to speak, and this autograph cannot be counterfeited, nor can he disguise it or hide it away, nor can it be illegible by the wear and mutations of time. . . . [T]his signature is each man’s very own—there is no duplicate of it among the swarming populations of the globe! (192).

Pudd’nhead introduces the fingerprint as a man-made artifact, an autograph or signature. However, unlike a signature, which is a mark of man’s agency and name, both conscious and social, this mark is unintentional and uncontrollable by the person whose fingerprints by linguistic convention they are. This ownership is belied by the inability to hide the signature. The uniqueness of fingerprints is underscored by the image of “swarming populations of the globe,” an image that takes the courtroom audience’s perspective and zooms it out in powers of ten, situating each man as an individual, one among many of one species among many in the world. The character of the marks does not change through time, but also important, the marks are unrelated to the character of the person. Identification is not only complete, but also subtly compared to racial categorizations, which are in shades. In his capacity to use fingerprints, Wilson is a midcentury man with late-century science and outlook. In this, he is a bit swapped himself, like the Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s court, or the pauper who becomes a prince.

Although Dawson’s Landing in the 1830s to 50s shows little direct evidence of industrialization, the fingerprint technologies of Pudd’nhead Wilson belong to the industrial and post-industrial age in which Thomas locates the shift from character to identity, with fingerprints as the epitome of unique identification, theoretically detached from any notion of affiliation or history. Twain, in his depiction of the F.F.V.s, also shows that the nature of character as
manifested in Dawson’s Landing has become impoverished and removed from its revolutionary roots, and is now an imitation of Old World graces as laughable as “the old deformed Negro bell ringer . . . tricked out in a flamboyant curtain-calico exaggeration of [Tom’s] finery, and imitating his fancy Eastern graces” (38).

The social forces in the transition from character to identity relate to the form of law enforcement. In the late nineteenth century, men in different places, both medical and civil, were working on identification through finger and palm prints. Acceptance was slow, but there was some popular knowledge. Twain included a plot about identification of a murderer using a thumbprint in *Life on the Mississippi*, published in 1883, a decade before *Pudd’nhead Wilson*. Ramsland notes this inclusion as evidence that “fingerprinting was in the air” (75-76). Twain knew about fingerprinting in the early 1880s, and he made his main character have this knowledge as well.

Understanding of fingerprints and their potential for criminal identification were developing unevenly in different places in this period. In the late nineteenth century (starting in the 1880s), identification was by a system of metrics and descriptors developed by Alphonse Bertillon in France, known as anthropometry. These metrics included measurements of hands and feet, shapes of ears and noses, and dozens of categories of eye color. Henry Faulds, a Scottish doctor, had previously been working on fingerprints and linking them with race and species, publishing his results in *Nature* in 1880. Faulds told Charles Darwin, his cousin, about trying to link fingerprints to heredity, and Darwin told Francis Galton (Cole 231, 31n).

According to Simon A. Cole, Galton was “one of the pioneers of fingerprint identification.” Galton, who coined the term *eugenics*, was “an intellectual ancestor of biological racism.” He thought that fingerprints would “be the key to unlocking the code of heredity,”
particularly racial, and he maintained this idea throughout his life and work (228). Although some fingerprint patterns are more common among some groups of people, Galton was fundamentally disappointed.

Twain may have been prescient in recognizing the usefulness of fingerprints in both criminal identification and determining legal categories (here, of race) at a time when they were just being considered more than a scientific curiosity. However, he created a title character who was much more prescient. Pudd’nhead Wilson is taking and categorizing fingerprints in 1830, and uses them in a criminal case in the early 1850s. By contrast, Sherlock Holmes, in “The Adventure of the Cardboard Box” (1892), solves a case using an analysis of ear shape, commenting that “there is no part of the body which varies so much as the human ear. Each ear is as a rule quite distinctive and differs from all other ones” (Doyle 896). Carlo Ginzburg draws attention to the connections between Holmes, art history, and medicine as shown in “The Cardboard Box. In this story, ears are described as unique, whereas thumb prints on cardboard box are noted by Holmes and then ignored. However, both Holmes and Pudd’nhead are able to make strong hypotheses about a chain of events based on their deep observational familiarity with the minute detail of an anatomical feature—one which others disregard. For Ginzburg, “The Cardboard Box” shows an example of a “‘semiotic’ approach, a paradigm or model based on the interpretation of clues,” which he sees as becoming more dominant in sciences in the 1870–80s ("Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes" 87-88). In setting his novel in the past, Twain creates an expert whose specific knowledge and whose type of knowledge is so far ahead of those around him that his expertise appears as magic.

Ginzburg connects the “semiotic approach” to the divinatory methods of Mesopotamia, which extended from the tracking of animals in hunting to medical diagnosis to case law to
fortunetelling and astrology; that is, conjectural knowledge based on specifics: the reading of
signs or symptoms to understand an otherwise hidden reality. In connecting this ancient
framework with the scientific thinking of the late nineteenth century, Ginzburg writes,

> It might be tempting to distinguish between “pseudosciences” like divination and
> physiognomy, and “sciences” like law and medicine, and to explain this bizarre
> contiguity by the great distance in space and time from the society that we have
> been discussing. But it would be a superficial explanation. There was a real
> common ground between these Mesopotamian forms of knowledge. . . .

("Morelli" 90)

The great difference is in scientific content, but structurally these different types of knowledge
are on a continuum that also includes writing, in which things signify, and which is essential to a
conception that clues can lead one to underlying truths.

Roxy is perhaps the only person in Dawson’s Landing who sees how powerful Wilson’s
fingerprint collection is, but she does not understand how it is powerful. That is, she
misunderstands how that power works. In 1830, when she has first switched the infant Tom and
Chambers, she thinks about Pudd’nhead,

> Blame dat man, he worries me wid dem ornery glasses o’ his’n; I b’lieve he’s a
> witch. But nemmine, I’s gwine to happen aroun’ dah one o’ dese days en let on
dat I reckon he wants to print de chillen’s fingers ag’in; en if he don’t notice dey’s
> changed, I bound dey ain’t nobody gwine to notice it, en den I’s safe, sho’. But I
> reckon I’ll take along a hoss-shoe to keep off de witch work. (24)

There is a mutual recognition and misrecognition here. Pudd’nhead sees Roxy’s anxiety and
talisman, and attributes them to her superstitious beliefs about the fingerprinting, when she is
instead anxious about his intelligence. She is anxious about the fingerprinting encounter because she sees magic in Pudd’nhead, but not the magic he possesses. She asks him to fingerprint the children as an excuse for an inspection. When they pass his inspection, she believes she is secure. Although attributing some magic to the glass, she entirely fails to anticipate that it is the glass itself that will reveal her secret.

By setting his novel in the early 1850s, Twain makes solving the crime easier for Pudd’nhead Wilson and magical to the inhabitants of this world, who don’t know about detective fiction. Pudd’nhead is able to make the invisible visible:

To the untrained eye the collection of delicate originals made by the human finger on the glass plates looked about alike; but when enlarged ten times they resembled the markings of a block of wood that has been sawed across the grain, and the dullest eye could detect at a glance, and at a distance of many feet, that no two of the patterns were alike. (186-87)

The expert detective in this semiotic model is one who takes something most people cannot see or interpret—whether because it is small, because it is encoded, or because most people lack the observational skill. That hidden or misinterpreted thing, whether an object, an event, or a text, is the clue. Fingerprints combine several of these elements. They are difficult to see with the naked eye and require interpretation by an expert. They are also permanent and resemble writing, creating a sense that this is “God’s finger print language” (qtd. in Thomas 203).

The cosmic writing of fingerprints is not a man’s autograph, but Nature’s herself, “with which Nature marks the insides of the hands and the soles of the feet. [. . . ] [Y]ou will observe that these dainty curving lines lie close together, like those that indicate the borders of oceans in maps, and that they form clearly defined patterns (192). Nature is personified as doing the
marking. Nature is also like a draftsman, a cartographer. In a map, the lines mean something —
they are not just patterns but indices or representations. Here it is like man aspires to read
Nature’s writing. Pudd’nhead compares the lines to the edges of oceans, but he could also be
Twain talking about rivers on a map—the Mississippi, whose shape and motion he sees as so
determinant in the fortunes of men and nations.

Chapter 5 discusses at more length the idea of making the invisible visible, including, as
here, enlarging what is microscopic so that it becomes not only visible but dramatic – and
incontrovertible. Wilson makes an analogy to wood grain markings. The idea of fingerprints as
similar to geologic or botanical shapes aligns fingerprint analysis with the analysis of nature that
Ginzburg discusses—the signs of nature that are the basis of both language and detection, such
as the telltale tracks of a specific animal. Fingerprints include the idea that not only group
identity can be determined but that one can see through physical signs unique individual identity.
By the end of the trial, the racial identities of Tom and Chambers will be swapped back, and at
the end of the novel their legal and commercial statuses reworked on this basis.

**Scientists and Showmen**

Referring to the early advocate of fingerprint science, Thomas calls *Pudd’nhead Wilson*
“the first post-Galtonian novel” (240). Pudd’nhead uses his expertise in a scientific way. He is
methodical as he takes and labels samples. Pudd’nhead uses the method of abduction as
described by in Eco and Sebeok’s *The Sign of Three*; that is, make a hypothesis that fits the
evidence, determine what other effects would occur were the hypothesis true, and see if they
occur. If they have, they strengthen the hypothesis. Pudd’nhead uses this strategy as he produces
his evidence in court. “He had made up his mind to try a few hardy guesses, in mapping out his
theory of the origin and motive of the murder—guesses designed to fill up gaps in it—guesses
which would help if they hit, and would probably do no harm if they didn’t” (188-89). Wilson says in court that the woman coming out of the Driscoll house after the murder was a man in women’s clothes. “Wilson had his eye on Tom when he hazarded this guess, to see what effect it would produce. He was satisfied with the result, and said to himself, ‘It was a success—he’s hit!’” (191) in a straightforward following of the method of Charles Sanders Peirce described by Eco and Sebeok, and familiar to anyone who has watched Perry Mason or Matlock.

Tom Driscoll uses some tropes of detection as Ginzburg describes them, namely the semiotic approach as hunting. Tom gloats,

Nearly always in cases like this there is some little detail or other overlooked, some wee little track or trace left behind, and detection follows; but here there's not even the faintest suggestion of a trace left. No more than a bird leaves when it flies through the air—yes, through the night, you may say. The man that can track a bird through the air in the dark and find that bird is the man to track me out and find the judge's assassin—no other need apply. (181)

So far, the testimony of witnesses has been the basis of Luigi’s trial for murder. He was arrested based on his history with Judge Driscoll, and because he was the first at the scene of the murder. However, Pudd’nhead inverts the hierarchy of knowledge when he brings in the fingerprints. He is the man that can track a bird through the air. When “Wilson was informed that his witnesses had been delayed . . . he rose and said he should probably not have occasion to make use of their testimony. . . . Wilson continued—“I have other testimony—and better,” he says, referring to his fingerprint enlargements (Pudd'nhead 187). The courtroom is surprised, for what could be better? This novel clue supplants witness testimony. Neither eyewitness accounts nor knowledge
based on character could solve a mystery of origins as posed in the novel, nor could systems of anthropometry in use at the end of the century, discussed briefly below.

Thomas describes fingerprinting and palm-reading, two of Wilson’s “fads” as “on a continuum” that includes science and magic (251). To the inhabitants of Dawson’s Landing, in the old order, fingerprinting has less standing than palm reading; Pudd’nhead does not advertise it widely, as it might be seen as further evidence of eccentricity (9). When Twain originally conceived of the tale, as centering on Angelo and Luigi, he considered palmistry as a means to identify the perpetrator of a crime. Once he brought in the pseudo-twins Tom and Chambers, he planned to include their baby footprints as a similar form of identification. However, during a break in the writing, he read Francis Galton’s *Finger Prints* (1892), and was inspired to instead center his narrative on establishment of identity and criminal acts using Galton’s idea (Emerson 193-94). To Twain, this new scientific discovery was “absolutely fresh, and mighty curious and interesting to everybody” (qtd. in Emerson 196).\(^5\)

Palm reading does not have the same significance in the narrative as it was eventually published. It does not solve the mysteries or lead to courtroom revelations. No character even suggests palm reading as a way to solve the mysteries of the thefts and murder, or that information from palm reading could be useful in court. However, in the facts presented by the novel, palm reading has the same truth value as fingerprinting. Pudd’nhead correctly sees in his palm that Luigi has killed a man, just as he correctly sees in Tom’s fingerprints that he killed Judge Driscoll.

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\(^5\) Twain might have been especially interested in Galton’s opinion that fingerprinting work would be best done by printers (Thomas 204), as Twain had apprenticed as a printer (Emerson 3-4). The technical similarity between typesetting and fingerprinting is another reason fingerprints sometimes seem to be a kind of coded writing, whether by God or Nature.
There are two fundamental differences between fingerprinting and palmistry in *Pudd’nhead Wilson*. One is that as part of the old order, information read in a palm is subject to the honor code of that order; one does not reveal a confidence, and a man’s secret is his property, as Judge Driscoll says. This is very different from the model of the body as fair game as discussed by Thomas and as used by Pudd’nhead. Tom Driscoll did not *intentionally* provide his prints to Pudd’nhead for the murder investigation. When Pudd’nhead demonstrates his palm reading on Luigi, Tom thinks, “Why, a man's own hand is his deadliest enemy! Just think of that—a man's own hand keeps a record of the deepest and fatalest secrets of his life, and is treacherously ready to expose himself to any black-magic stranger that comes along” (91).

Another way of saying this is that “palm-reading . . . functions as a means to gauge character while the second acts to establish identity” (Thomas 252).

The other difference is that, as part of the old order, palmistry is known and accepted. Tom refuses to let Pudd’nhead read his palm, because he believes it can be revelatory. Fingerprints, however, can be effective in this novel only because no one besides Pudd’nhead understands them. Tom drops the bloody knife with which he has killed his supposed uncle and thinks he has gotten away because no one saw him. He sneaks out in disguise as a woman. Nor does Roxy understand the importance of fingerprints as means of identification, even if she guesses that they are powerful. No one understands this until Pudd’nhead’s courtroom demonstration. Fingerprints, therefore, are more effective in this tale as a clue *not* because they are more truthful or scientific than palmistry, but because they are novel. This complicates the idea of Twain as forerunner in seeing the importance of fingerprints and also suggests a fine line here between scientific demonstration and magic show. Twain was moved by his interest in Galton’s *Finger Prints* to change the whole structure of *Pudd'nhead Wilson/Those
Extraordinary Twins. Yet he already knew something about fingerprints as unique identifiers when he wrote Life on the Mississippi a decade before. Horst H. Kruse suspects that Twain was inspired by Henry Faulds’s earlier, more speculative article (cited in Thomas 319n); in the process of researching fingerprints as identifiers on Japanese pottery, Faulds was able to help solve a crime in which a thief left a handprint (Thomas 226). This is in a framed narrative as convoluted, morbid, and sensational as a tale by Poe, whom Jonathan Raban claims Twain is mocking (xv). The narrator of Life tells us of a man he met in Germany who had lived in the South at the end of the Civil War. This man, Karl Ritter, saw his wife and daughter murdered by soldiers during a robbery. He seeks justice using a bloody thumbprint left at his home. He has heard from an old Frenchman about the uniqueness of fingerprints and their usefulness and permanence as a mark of (criminal) identity. Ritter poses as a fortune teller who “reads” thumbprints.

In this narrative, fingerprints are presented as a kind of antique curiosity; in this part of the story, which takes place during the war, Ritter recalls having learned in his childhood from a French prison guard who seems to be retired at that point—placing the Frenchman’s working knowledge in the early nineteenth century. Ritter muses,

In these days, we photograph the new criminal, and hang his picture in the Rogues’ Gallery for future reference; but that Frenchman, in his day, used to take a print of the ball of a new prisoner’s thumb and put that away for future reference. . . . Future disguises could make [pictures] useless. . . . (210; emphasis added)

Tom in Pudd’nhead Wilson bears out this observation; he has effectively been in disguise since he was just over five months old, when his mother dressed him in a white man’s clothes. Once
Ritter finally locates a thumb print matching the killer’s, he confirms by confronting the murderer’s unwilling accomplice. However, he presents his knowledge of the murder in his own guise as fortune-teller—as if he read it in the print without other information. He tells the accomplice, “a part of your fortune is so grave that I thought it would be better for you if I did not tell it in public” (*Life* 210). This scene is similar to that in which Pudd’nhead reads Luigi’s palm and offers to tell him privately what he has seen.

What Ritter pretends to read in a thumb print, Pudd’nhead *does* read in Luigi’s palm. This suggests an element of showmanship in Pudd’nhead’s actions that is clouded for contemporary readers. This also complicates somewhat the image of Twain as prescient, even as he recognizes fingerprints’ great utility. This showmanship is part Ritter, part Pudd’nhead, and part Twain himself (Gillman 90). *Life on the Mississippi* also complicates the eureka element of Pudd’nhead’s composition. *Life* was a combination of material from “Old Times on the Mississippi,” published in the *Atlantic*, with new material, which was written and compiled in less than a year during 1881–1882 (Emerson 132). Everett Emerson notes that that the interior story of Karl Ritter had been written years earlier (133).

It is possible that the Ritter tale was only a gothic tale of mistaken revenge in its original draft, without the thumb print identification. This chronology raises its own epistemological question. Twain clearly knew about the possibility of fingerprint identification for crime solving when he wrote *Life*. Yet he discovered it again, with great excitement, in 1892, and, as he wrote, it changed the whole course of *Pudd’nhead Wilson/Those Extraordinary Twins*. This is another illustration of the shifting and ambiguous status of fingerprint identification in its early decades, which is hard to see because, like DNA, it subsequently became a paradigmatic clue.
Thomas writes that in the mid 1890s “the introduction of fingerprinting had revolutionized the accepted method for monitoring the identity of criminals and law-abiding citizens alike” (201). Cole, however, shows that although histories have created origin myths for the triumph of fingerprinting over anthropometry, its full acceptance was slower and more gradual. Anthropometry was still perceived as more scientific than fingerprinting by criminal justice professionals a decade after *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, and used in major prisons until almost 1920, if not later (Cole 242-48). In Europe as well, methodology was controversial. Fingerprinting was not officially adopted in France until after Bertillon’s death in 1914, but England, inspired by its own thinkers and administrative needs in its colonies, adopted fingerprint identification in the 1890s (Thomas 204).

Cole writes that we think of fingerprints as being almost the opposite of race-based identification because they are individual. We see previous systems of categorizing criminals, specifically Bertillon’s measurement system, as being more racial and stereotyping, with its racial overtones in skin tone and face shape. For Cole this is a false dichotomy. Although fingerprints aren’t significantly different by race and are thought of as individual, Cole describes how two of their early advocates, in science (Galton) and fiction (Twain), linked them to race.

Cole notes also that because fingerprints are unique, they require additional layers of classification and organization to narrow the scope of a search. Pudd’nhead himself falls into this trap when he searches for a match for the bloody fingerprint of a murderer among the women of the town, because witnesses had seen a woman leaving the scene of the crime. “Idiot that I was!” he exclaims, “nothing but a girl would do me—a man in girl’s clothes never occurred to me” (Twain *Pudd’nhead* 184). Furthermore, Bertillon’s system, at least as practiced by Bertillon and the clerks he trained, was highly differentiating and could therefore not coexist with blunt racial
categories. *Pudd’nhead Wilson* is a good example of this and in this way was ahead of its time. In *Pudd’nhead Wilson* the individual markers are used to set right a racial misidentification. However, this misidentification of race shows that the distinction of race is arbitrary, as Twain has hinted from the beginning of the novel.

**Unfixing Fingerprints**

Pudd’nhead’s expertise makes his name and changes the legal status of those involved in the case, but also his own legal status. He goes from “pudd’nhead” to elected mayor. Fingerprints are a code that never fade and can always be read by an initiate, and Gillman notes that Pudd’nhead’s expertise, like the eye in the Pinkerton insignia or the observational powers of Sherlock Holmes, is “notably ocular.” She draws attention to the glass on which he takes prints, which she connects to the magnifying glass in popular depictions of detectives, while noting that these powers are not merely ocular but also interpretive: they comprise “the reading and interpreting of signs that are visible (to the interpreter) traces of the past in the present” (87). As that privileged interpreter, Pudd’nhead is more than accepted by the town; he converts the town and upends the social order. He is no longer the town pudd’nhead, but, as one person remarks, the position “isn't vacant—we're elected” (*Pudd'nhead* 201).

In writing about the “fundamentally opposing views” on *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, Thomas writes that “Twain’s explicit disdain for the elitism of scientific methods like those practiced by Sherlock Holmes sheds some light on the controversy” (247). For Thomas, the motif of textuality and the relationship between body, property, and text throughout the novel and the conspicuously ironic take on text, including legal texts and the book itself, points out an ironic perspective on body as text (Thomas 247-48). Nonetheless, Twain’s excitement about fingerprints comes through. Pudd’nhead is initiate to secrets; further, technology is an instrument
of economic and political fairness. Here, Pudd’nhead is finally able to gain status based on his merits. This represents both a personal victory after more than twenty years of getting neither his name nor any work as a lawyer, and a possible victory for meritocracy among the white population of Dawson’s Landing versus the aristocracy of the F.F.V. However, even beyond the obvious racial unfairness left in place by the conclusion, there is also the fact that it works because Pudd’nhead alone holds the key. This tension between expert as initiate and expert as instrument of democracy is especially evident in the stories of Balmer and MacHarg (Chapter 5).

Galton writes in *Finger Prints*:

To *fix* the human personality, to give to each human being an identity, an individuality that can be depended upon with certainty, lasting, unchangeable, always recognisable and easily adduced, this appears to be in the largest sense the aim of the new method. (qtd. in Thomas 201; emphasis added)

Although Galton failed in his hope to find a map of racial lineage in the fingerprint, he succeeded in finding a unique identifier for each person. Yet what Twain circles around *Pudd’nhead Wilson* and, according to Gillman, throughout his writings, is the problem of that fixity. In the instant before Pudd’nhead recognizes Tom’s fingerprint as that of the murderer, he explains to Tom a scar on Roxy’s print, acquired in her lifetime. A scar as an identifier on a fingerprint undermines the notion of fingerprints as unchangeable. We are our personal histories as well as our lineages—the whole of them. Nor are our bodies always evidence against us, as Twain shows in *Those Extraordinary Twins*, in which no person can assign responsibility to one individual. For law or science to “give” any person an identity “that can be depended upon with certainty”—this continues to be a “fiction of law and custom” (Twain *Pudd’nhead* 12). Nor is there a complete transition between forms of law as described by Ramsland. In both the real-life case described by
Henry Faulds and the fictional murder trial in *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, the legal basis of guilt is still confession (Thomas 224; Twain *Pudd'nhead* 200).

The arbitrariness Twain makes clear in the ironically legalistic resolution of *Pudd’nhead Wilson*:

> Everybody granted that if “Tom” were white and free it would be unquestionably right to punish him—it would be no loss to anybody; but to shut up a valuable slave for life—that was quite another matter.

> As soon as the Governor understood the case, he pardoned Tom at once, and the creditors sold him down the river. (*Pudd'nhead* 203)

The idea of human value is reversed here. A white and free man has status but no value. A slave, however, has value because he is saleable. Although Emerson considers this novel unsatisfactory, both Thomas and Gillman believe that Twain emphasizes the deficiencies in law and science; they cannot keep their promises of fixity. What does it mean when forms of knowledge produce results at odds with one another? What does it mean when they lead to untenable conclusions? Despite the success of science and law in this novel, it is clear that neither can create a consistent, logical, and ethical system.

Gillman concludes of *Pudd’nhead Wilson*,

> How we know has replaced what we know as the object of inquiry. When the novel ends, its various scientific and legal bodies of knowledge—definitive means of identification and differentiation—result in no certainty at all. (93)

In the end, this novel is neither a victory for scientific positivism nor an undermining of it; it is both. Twain deconstructs the truthfulness and usefulness of scientific revelation, and also is enthralled by it, as is evident both in the narrative momentum and in his writings about the
creation of this novel. Legal knowledge he is more skeptical of in this novel, yet in his life he also put his hope in the law as a means of establishing fairness for writers and other artists (Gillman 181-84). Morally, Tom is depicted as having a character ruined by circumstances and as experiencing some guilt over his worst crimes. In this, he is something like the gothic killer among us. Twain’s solution is similar to the gothic strategy of separation from society (Halttunen 6); the legal fictions that create his character also provide a permanent penitentiary in slavery—a sidestepping by Twain of his thorniest ethical questions.

In the post-Reconstruction era, the social fictions continued, new legal fictions were reified through Jim Crow laws, and scientific fictions sprung up with great force into the twentieth century to justify the divisions and disenfranchisements of former slaves, their descendents, and immigrants. The end of Pudd’nhead Wilson sees order restored in some ways. Revealing the truth of the two men’s switched identities also reveals the “truth” of their racial and legal status. Pudd’nhead’s merit, unfairly invisible for so long, is also recognized. But this represents a fall for community knowledge and memory and an acceptance of outsider expertise that changes the town’s character. Twain also alludes to the unsettled life of the man known as Chambers, whose story, we’re told, this is not. In “Chambers,” restored to white society with none of its background and tools, and Tom, raised with every element of high culture, we see foreshadowed the mixed-race person in the post-Reconstruction period, stateless in a segregated world.
Chapter 4. “Unseen Forces”: Forms of Knowledge and Disrupted Identities in Pauline Hopkins’s *Hagar’s Daughter*

*Pudd’nhead Wilson* is kin to *Hagar’s Daughter* by Pauline Hopkins, published serially in *Colored American Magazine* in 1902–03. Although the novels are stylistically different, they share both plot and structural features. The plot elements are obvious and part of the literature on racial passing; in each a character is passing as white without knowing it until adulthood, which affects how he or she grows up and interacts with the world. Both novels begin before the ending of legal slavery, and in each the child passes into the white world after his or her enslaved mother considers infanticide over a life of slavery for her child.

*Hagar’s Daughter* tells a story of profound disruptions in social knowledge between the Civil War and post-Reconstruction periods. Forms of knowledge in *Hagar’s Daughter* mix the sentimental and domestic of the older genre with more recent detective elements. Hopkins uses and changes the emerging idea of the detective. Twain’s political intentions are ambiguous, whereas Hopkins brings together the sentimental forms of knowledge and the figure of the detective to strengthen her political points. In addition, Hopkins makes black Americans the custodians of historical knowledge.

In *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, Twain shows the instability of but also the excitement about the possibilities of forensics. He also leaves racial categories, though arbitrary, as an essentially important fact about a person, comparable to presentation of gender. In *Hagar’s Daughter*, Hopkins employs a detective figure who mediates changes in communities and families. However, Hopkins reveals the ways bodies don’t speak that knowledge and just how arbitrary that essential knowledge is.
Pauline Hopkins, born in 1859, was an African American writer and one of the foundational minds of the *Colored American Magazine*. During the magazine’s early years in Boston, 1900–1904, Hopkins wrote fiction, nonfiction, and opinion pieces for the magazine, as well as being an editor. She was a creative force in the magazine, which aimed to combine intellectual uplift and political spirit for black Americans (Carby “Introduction” xxxvii). In her role as black intellectual, Hopkins saw herself as heir to “a neglected New England tradition of radical politics” (Carby “Introduction” xxxii). Radical New England writers in the antebellum and Civil War period included free African Americans such as Nancy Prince, Harriet Wilson, Harriet Jacobs, and Frederick Douglass, as well as white writers and abolitionists such as Lydia Maria Child, who edited Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and William Lloyd Garrison (Carby *Reconstructing* 47). Hopkins’s novel also follows Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy*, also a novel about the quandary of passing, by a decade; the women were of different generations. Harper was already lecturing and writing when Hopkins was born and wrote *Iola* in her sixties. Hopkins’s connection with political aims in literature and especially the use of sentiment and popular forms comes through in the tropes and forms of knowledge she foregrounds in *Hagar’s Daughter*.

The “unseen forces” of this chapter’s title are the providential—and sentimental—interconnectedness that distinguishes this novel from much other fiction of the time period. In addition, race in this novel is paradoxically unseen, as are other important attributes of identity and history. This focus contrasts with the emphasis of observation in detective fiction of the turn of the century and later. This novel merits description as part of the development of detective fiction in its convergence of sentimental, detective, and political elements around the idea and limits of the expert detective.
*Hagar's Daughter* was published serially, but as a whole it divides into three acts, in which different modes and elements dominate. The first act ends with an image of curtains closing, the second with the revelation of a conspiracy. The first act of *Hagar’s Daughter* is set in 1860–1862 in the world of two old Southern families, the Sargeants and the Ensons. Ellis Enson, the upright, serious heir to his family’s fortune, marries beautiful young Hagar Sargeant and they have a baby. However, Ellis’s dissolute brother St. Clair envies them and, more important, needs money. His associate, a slave trader named Walker, provides the means: he knows that Hagar Sargeant Enson was born a slave. At the end of this section, Ellis Enson’s body is found, an apparent suicide. His estate, including Hagar and their child, goes to wicked St. Clair Enson, who sells Hagar and her baby. Hagar attempts to escape but is cornered. She chooses to kill herself and her child rather than live enslaved, and jumps with her baby into the Potomac.

This act includes both white and enslaved black characters, both in separate scenes and in scenes where they interact.6 No free black characters are depicted, but there is a wide range of how slaves are treated, even by the same owner. The division between white and black is breached when Hagar and her household learn that she not white and free. Yet she does not enter the black world. Rather she is in the interstice between white and black, with the appearance and refinements of a white woman and the legal status of a slave. Hopkins emphasizes Hagar’s white appearance in description, where the shock of Hagar’s situation makes her appear even more fair,

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6 The word *white* and the phrase *white society* in this chapter, without quotation marks, indicate characters thought to be entirely of European descent by their acquaintances. Often, these characters are also described as fair skinned, whatever their heritage. Thus, Jewel Bowen and Aurelia Madison are white for much of the novel. *Black* characters are those whose skin is described as brown or black and who are thought to be of some African descent by their acquaintances. The use of quotation marks for the racial identifications in this novel would impair readability and perhaps suggest that these terms on their own have a stable meaning. One of Hopkins’ main points in *Hagar’s Daughter* is the permeability of these designations.
with “white lips” and a face “like snow in its pallor” (60-61). In an element of special pathos, the slaves of Hagar’s household pity her (63)—an ironic result of the good mistress—devoted slave dynamic that Hagar has previously held as typical of the slave system.

The second act begins in Washington, D.C., 1882. It is set exclusively in white society, with black servants appearing on the sidelines. Like the first act, it is also a melodrama, but of romance and greed in white Washington society. New characters are introduced: Senator Zenas Bowen, his wife Estelle, and Zenas’s daughter from his first marriage, Jewel. The family is wealthy, and Jewel is notably beautiful. She is engaged to Cuthbert Sumner, a Northeastern manufacturing heir. However, a trio of adventurers, Major Madison, his daughter Aurelia, and General Benson, attempt to break up the pair to gain access to their fortunes. These three manipulate the two lovers.

Another character becomes important toward the end of this section, Elise Bradford, who works in the treasury department with both General Benson and Cuthbert Sumner. Before Benson and Aurelia Madison can marry into their fortunes, Elise Bradford brings their machinations to a halt by telling Sumner everything she knows about General Benson, Major Madison, and Aurelia Madison. Chapter XXII serves as a kind of transition between the second and third acts, with a major shift in tone. At the beginning of the third act, Cuthbert Sumner is arrested for the murder of Elise Bradford. The romantic plot is resolved quickly, but characters’ lives and fortunes are endangered, with Sumner going to trial, Jewel kidnapped, and a witness missing. A new character is introduced, government detective J. Henson.

The third act features black characters prominently. Immediately after Sumner’s arrest, the action shifts to the kitchen of a black household, where Hopkins shows the family of Venus Johnson, Jewel’s maid. Venus’s mother and grandmother had been slaves in the Sargeant
household, and her father was St. Clair Enson’s slave in the first act of the novel. Once again we see black characters in their own spaces, now truly their own, and interacting with each other.

The contrast is stark after almost one hundred pages of high-society melodrama and the feverish tone and pace of the revelations, murder, and arrest. Suddenly there is color and fragrance, “red vases . . . filled with paper sunflowers,” steaming coffee and hot corn pone, and a woman speaking in dialect and singing gospel songs (168-69). This woman is Marthy Johnson, and the narrator explicitly reminds the reader that we met her years ago as a slave in the Sargeant household. In this act, the black and white worlds become entwined again, and Hopkins gradually reveals the connections among all of the characters from the first and second acts, using the figure of the detective. This act also has more geographic motion and adventure elements in a fast moving plot involving the murder, two kidnappings, and a forged will. Hopkins brings together the black and white characters, the action of the first and second acts, and forms of knowledge from both sentimental and detective traditions.

Hopkins emphasizes the black skin color of the slaves and servants and has them speak in dialect. Although this novel was published in a magazine for black Americans, Hopkins’s decisions to have the tale “unravel” in white society (Carby “Introduction” xxxviii) and to provide separation between the passing characters and those in the black world by way of dialect and tone indicates a hope that she would reach readers across color lines, and that white readers might even identify with the passing characters. Although the main plot points are around passing, passing is not the essential theme; rather the difficult position of light-skinned black characters reveals the cruelty and arbitrariness of the persisting racial hierarchies. Furthermore, the difficulty of knowing the truth of race undermines the structure of white society.
Objects and Faces

Hopkins uses and repurposes elements of earlier sentimental and domestic literary traditions, in part because of her connection to the abolitionist writers of previous generations. She marshals these elements for both narrative and political purposes. These elements include a sentimental relationship with objects; emphasis on affect and expression in observation; and affirmation of intuition, superstition, and dreams.

At the beginning of her novel, Hopkins depicts the utopian claims of southern slaveholding ideology, describing in the first act the “happy household” of Ellis Enson and Hagar Sargeant, in which “the sting of slavery, with its demoralizing brutality, was unknown,” with happiness “from the master in his carriage to the slave singing in the fields at his humble task” (44). What is remarkable is that Hopkins is writing these lines not in 1850 but at the turn of the century and for an immediate audience of black Americans. It is as if she is channeling a sentimental novel from decades before, such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* or Metta Victor’s ameliorationist work *Maum Guinea* (1861). These novels, written for a white audience before abolition, begin with the kindest view of slavery and show how it is always part of a brutal system.

Chapter 2 showed how objects seem to speak to and act on people in domestic detective novels. In the period of Hopkins’ writing and later, the idea of the clue becomes more atomized and specific. However, in *Hagar’s Daughter*, objects are a source of knowledge about oneself and one’s place in the world. There are three scenes in particular where we see how Hagar interacts with objects in this capacity. Hagar, when she is still Hagar Sargeant, a Southern aristocrat, has a ritual of cleaning her family’s antiques. Only she does this, not the slaves who do the rest of the cleaning.
It was her duty to wash the heirlooms of colonial china and silver. From their bath they were dried only by her dainty fingers, and carefully replaced in the corner cupboard. Not for the world would she have dropped one of these treasures. Her care for them, and the placing of every one in its proper niche, was wonderful to behold. (33)

These colonial heirlooms remind Hagar that she is part of a long American lineage. This scene of ritual is described with similar care and detail to one in The Wide, Wide World, showing how Ellen makes her mother’s tea, a scene described as a repeated tribute (qtd. in Tompkins 169).

Hagar’s care for her family heirlooms tells the reader—and Ellis Enson, who sees her through the window—that she identifies with the pre-Revolutionary Sargeant family history. The scene also tells us that Hagar is a young woman for whom everything has a place, and that the placing of “every one in its proper niche” is a source of joy and comfort for her. Hagar’s colonial china is an example of how objects give information to characters and readers on multiple literal and associative levels.

Hagar’s relationship to her possessions changes when she learns of her slave origins. She paces her room with fevered thoughts and sees her “wedding finery. She touched an article here and there with the solemnity that we give to the dead” (57), like the dead letters that aroused so many imaginings in the journalists of the mid-nineteenth century. A parallel scene occurs in the end of the novel, the night before Hagar (alive after all) is to again marry Ellis Enson. Hagar recalls Zenas Bowen’s dying words, directing her to a “shabby” trunk. She goes into his room and looks at his possessions, “each bearing the personality of the man who had gathered them about him” (274). Hopkins captures the way objects can seem imbued with events and memories in the sentimental mode.
Faces also provide important information in *Hagar’s Daughter*. However, the ways in which faces give information is different from the objective study of physiognomy and identity that Ronald Thomas describes. Here, the clues faces give about emotion, character, and history are reliable, whereas they are unreliable as indicators of racial category or even identity. This begins when Hagar discovers that she is legally black and a slave. She touches her slave Marthy’s face and hair and is overwhelmed with the paradox that her own grandmother might have had similar black features, while her own are so different (56). At the end of the chapter, St. Clair Enson identifies his brother’s body, but the face of the body is not visible. In *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, Tom asks about a mark on Roxy’s fingerprint that Pudd’nhead says is the sign of a scar. This moment belies the idea that even a fingerprint is constant across time. Bodies bear the signs of their histories as well as their identities, and Hopkins includes this in her plot. The way in which character and history appear on the body is epitomized in the face of J. Henson, chief of the secret service, who “had expressive dark eyes and a pleasant face which might have been handsome in youth, but for a long livid scar that crossed his face diagonally. A saber might have made that deep, dangerous cut” (Hopkins 188). Although the “pleasant face” and “expressive eyes” are a hint to his identity as Ellis Enson of the first act, the scar divides his past from his present, not only in time and experience but also in affiliation. Enson went from being a slave-owning Southern gentleman to being kidnapped and forcibly conscripted into the Confederate army, to deserting and eventually enlisting in the Union army, which led to his current position working for the government.

Visual cues of race become increasingly irrelevant in the course of *Hagar’s Daughter*. A reader might suspect Hagar based on Walker’s description of her dark hair and eyes, despite her “cream-colored skin” (29). Aurelia is described as golden, with “dusky eyes” and in terms of fire
and hunger (91). However, part of Hopkins argument is the difficulty of discernment, and therefore the arbitrariness of discrimination; Jewel Bowen has fair skin and hair and grey eyes. Zenas has dark skin while his wife and daughter have very fair skin, but they are of African descent and he is just a sunburned Westerner. The emphasis on faces in this book is not scientific but rather in the realm of intuition, where aesthetics and emotion come together.

In the sentimental mode, facial expressions are often described to show undercurrents of feeling and hidden truths. Throughout the novel Hopkins emphasizes the informational power of physical expression, especially facial expression, both to the reader and among characters, capitalizing on what Isabelle Lehuu calls the mid-century notion of “the theatricality of social relationships” (81). Hopkins uses this power of faces from the beginning of the novel, when young Hagar’s flush, first soft, then deep, shows Ellis Enson that she returns his love (38). It is also a play of faces that shows that Hagar is a slave, however. Walker has the bill of sale, but to determine whether Hagar is the slave referred to, her husband brings her to Walker and asks if she knows him. “Walker stepped to the mantel where the wax-light would fall full upon his face. . . . Hagar put her hand to her head in a dazed way. . . . She looked at Ellis, put out her hand to him in a blind way, and. . . . fell fainting to the floor” (54). Later, Benson is described as wearing a “wolfish” expression that visibly terrifies Mrs. Bowen (206-07). Similar interplays of shock, love, hate, and recognition, whether subtle or dramatic, occur frequently throughout the three acts of the novel and in each of its settings. Hopkins uses facial expressions and physical reactions as much as dialogue to convey both emotion and plot.

Although Soitos and Nickerson both discuss spying and surveillance in *Hagar’s Daughter*, both focus on surveillance in the detective portions late in the novel, where Venus and Billy are acting as agents. However, two scenes of social surveillance are key to the Washington
society plot. Aurelia and General Benson create a situation where Jewel enters a “curtained recess” to find Sumner embracing Aurelia. Later, Benson and Aurelia reverse the trap: they trick Sumner into walking in on Jewel at the moment General Benson is proposing to her. Other scenes of surveillance and eavesdropping are not orchestrated by the characters and instead help the protagonists. The power of these moments to convey information and provide clues to both characters and the reader is an element of sentimental and domestic fiction that Hopkins brings into the twentieth century and uses with the detective genre.

**Intuition and Superstition**

The importance of superstition, intuition, and providence as information in *Hagar’s Daughter* brings together elements of domestic detective fiction, sentimental literature, and African American spirituality. As Lynn Wardley suggests, there is crossover and influence between African American folk beliefs and sentimental tropes in mid-nineteenth century literature (220). Henny and Marthy use a charm to try to protect Hagar on her wedding day. The scene where this is shown depicts the use of charms and the role of a conjure-man as important in slave culture. Hopkins also uses superstition in the black characters as a narrative element to create suspense and continuity. Aunt Henny claims, “My young Miss will be all right ef dat St. Clair Enson keeps ‘way from hyar,” a comment that both shows Aunt Henny’s second sight and foreshadows St. Clair’s appearance at the happy home. A moment later, Aunt Henny notes a chill in the air, and just then “a shadow fell across the doorsill shutting out the light for a moment” as Isaac, St. Clair’s slave, appears (41). Narrative devices, Hopkins’s description, and Aunt Henny’s beliefs all point in the same direction.
The crossover between African spiritual beliefs and veneration of objects is the subject of a bitter passage at the beginning of the book. Hopkins writes of Southern politicians in autumn, 1860:

Cotton was not merely king; it was God. . . . Drunk with power and dazzled with prosperity, monopolizing cotton and raising it to the influence of a veritable fetich, the authors of the rebellion did not admit a doubt of the success of their attack on the Federal government. (4)

Hopkins’s use of the word fetich ironically connects the Confederates’ materialism with African religion. Fetich or fetish comes from French anthropologists referring to the worship by nonliterate peoples of objects thought to have spiritual power, and comes from feitiço, “false,” the Portuguese word used to describe charms and talismans worshipped by Africans of the Guinea Coast—a region heavily represented in American slave heritage ("Fetish, n."). Hopkins shows that rich white landowners, especially because of their wealth, could be as frenzied and misguided as any imagined voodoo doctor. In this world view, cotton is worshipped as a god, while African people become objects. This powerful passage is the first of several in which Hopkins portrays white views of slavery and social segregation as irrational to the point of absurdity or insanity.

The character of Isaac also shows the overlap of white and black beliefs. When Isaac appears at Ellis Enson’s house, Aunt Henny tells her master, “dar’s allers truble, sho, when dat lim’ o’ Satan turns up; ‘deed dar is” (46). Ellis rushes out to his wife and explains, “My dear, the slaves all look upon him [Isaac] as a bird of evil omen; for myself, I look up it as mere ignorant superstition, but still I have a feeling of uneasiness,” evidenced by his “grave” and “troubled look” (46). To him, Isaac is an omen of his brother’s impending appearance. Yet the result is the
same. On one hand, it is an “ignorant superstition”; on the other hand, Ellis agrees. This suggests an equivalence of intuitive knowledge with superstition.

As in domestic detective fiction, intuition plays an important role. Jewel’s “woman’s intuition” warns her about Benson; Henson has “confidence in intuitive deductions” (Hopkins 190). Intuition is an important form of knowledge in *Hagar’s Daughter* and itself takes many forms. One kind of intuition is physical responses that give characters knowledge about each other. The characters and narrator do not typically connect these reactions to specific facts or make explicit hypotheses; these tasks are left for the reader’s speculation. The sensations and intuitions the characters feel add layers of mystery.

For example, in Washington, Jewel is uncomfortable around General Benson. Zenas Bowen, Jewel’s father, initially thinks Benson has “a hang-dog look about that off eye which tells me he’s a tarnation mean cuss on occasion. He’s all good looks and soft sawder. However, that don’t worry me any; it’s none of my funeral” (86). However, Bowen later claims that Benson must be trustworthy, because Benson works for the Treasury and “Uncle Sam never employs rascals to transact his business” (139-40). Bowen is right in his first instinct but wrong in his conclusions; it is, in a way, his funeral: Bowen dies suddenly, and Benson forges his will. This irony implies that in matters of character, to ignore one’s intuition can be imperiling.

The mysterious, beautiful Aurelia Madison is also a source of vague, sometimes bodily knowledge in other characters. Jewel sees Aurelia across the theater and has a strange heartthrob before recognizing her as a schoolmate (90). Perhaps this is a response to Aurelia’s rich beauty

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7 Soitos writes that Benson actually poisons Bowen (Soitos 64). Hopkins creates suspicious circumstances around Bowen’s sudden illness and death while in New York with Benson. However, the other characters do not accuse Benson of the murder, including in the courtroom scenes. In the end, Benson is convicted of murdering Elise Bradford only.
or a presentiment of their competition for the same man. Estelle Bowen also has an early intuition that Aurelia Madison is trouble and later she says she has a negative presentiment about her (107, 37). Jewel and Aurelia also share a special connection that is revealed much later: these two most desirable women in the D.C. elite both have mixed blood. The reason for Jewel’s heartthrob is not explicit in the narrative, but Jewel’s body is reacting to something in Aurelia, which the reader can tell is an important clue. With so much social disruption, represented by Hopkins by the disruption in characters, location, and time between the first and second act, we have little guidance except characters’ intuitions, sensations, and expressions.

Because the reader makes the speculations about the factual reasons behind the feelings, there can be multiple explanations as the story unfolds and even after the reader has completed the book. A reader might speculate that Jewel’s disgust for General Benson is a sign of Benson’s deception and general wickedness, or might connect her feeling to Benson’s identity as St. Clair Enson, a villain from the 1861 part of the book. Yet another reason for disgust, however, never spelled out by Hopkins, is that this man wooing Jewel Bowen is her uncle. A moral reaction dovetails with the taboo against incest. Thus, forms of knowledge that are less fact-based and presented more vaguely, as sensations and intuitions, can be especially powerful, leading to multiple true conclusions throughout the book and varying each reader’s experience of gradual enlightenment.

**Unseen Forces**

In its coincidences, resurrections, and melodramatic revelations, *Hagar’s Daughter* is similar to a nineteenth century sentimental novel, “not unfold[ing] according to Aristotelian standards of probability, but in keeping with the logic of preordained design” (Tompkins 135) in the lineage of sentimental and domestic detective novels. Hopkins melds this structure with a
political rather than spiritual design and also presents characters that are in between sentimental and realistic, where characters are not only “saved or damned” (Tompkins 135) but at times ambiguous and capable of change.

Where sentimental novels pointed to self-mastery, love, and trust in God as the highest good, Hopkins is overtly political. Susan Hays Bussey emphasizes this difference in her reading of self-determination in *Hagar’s Daughter*; she refers positively to Hopkins’s “exploitation of domestic fiction” (307). However, Hopkins preserves a notion of providence and design. In the epistemological model of detective fiction in particular (and, some might argue, narrative in general), Hopkins portrays an underlying truth that connects seemingly disparate events. Elise Bradford, General Benson’s secretary, lover, and murder victim, voices this idea right before she tells Sumner about Benson and Aurelia’s marriage scam. “I feel impelled to tell you what I am about to disclose, by an unseen power. Do you not believe in unseen forces influencing our acts?” she asked wistfully. Elise’s wistfulness might suggest that this “unseen power” is in question, but the novel itself shows that what is lost or obscured will be found in time.

In its elements of mystery, *Hagar’s Daughter* takes advantage of the American Renaissance trope of piercing the veil or lifting the curtain to access some underlying reality; in antebellum fiction, that reality was often an evil soul (Reynolds 86). After Zenas Bowen has died and Benson has financial control over his wife and daughter, Estelle Bowen is described as looking intensely, “her eyes strained as though striving to pierce the veil which hides from us the unseen” (202); she is trying to penetrate the conspiracy of General Benson and Major Walker, who have pursued her in some guise throughout her life.

Yet the veil has multiple meanings in this novel. At the same time as she uses the veil as a symbol of mystery and obstruction of vision, Hopkins also includes the folk belief that children
born with the caul (fetal membrane) over their eyes have special insight. The venerable Aunt Henny explains in the first act, “yer Aunt Henny was born wif a veil. I knows a heap o’ things by seein’ ’em fo’ dey happens. I don’t tell all I sees, but I keeps up a steddyin’ ’bout it” (43). Soitos focuses on the veil or caul as a metaphor for double consciousness. He defines this through a passage by W E. B. Du Bois, who writes in The Souls of Black Folk (1903) that “the Negro is . . . born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,” a second sight due to seeing the world through both black and white sign systems (qtd. in Soitos 33).

Imagery of masking and curtains appears throughout the novel. This parallels the dramatic, three-part structure of the novel. When Ellis is taken for dead, it says that “in midnight solitude and shadowed by mystery the curtain fell on the tragedy” (68). A few pages later, Hagar and her child “sank beneath the waters of the Potomac river” (75). The image of the waters closing over these characters is also a masking or curtain image; this imagery emphasizes the theatrical nature of the novel. The conceit of narrative as theater is very appropriate for Hagar’s Daughter, with its reappearances in different guises, with many characters wearing masks, intentionally or unintentionally. A curtain closes on Ellis (Enson), and he is assumed to be murdered, at the end of the first act. At the end of the second act, Elise (Bradford) makes a revelation and is then murdered. Jewel seeks out the best detective, and then Detective J. Henson is introduced. When he reveals Elise’s murderer in court, Henson also reveals his own identity as Ellis Enson. The curtain that closed on his life was just an intermission.

Along with second sight, dreams are occasionally presented as another non-fact-based mode of information and of transition across the curtain or veil. Dreams come from outside the literal space of the story; they are a rift in the space of causality where other information gets in. The night Elise tells Sumner about the conspiracy, he goes home to dark dreams “bearing a
shadowy relation to the scenes through which he had just passed” (165). When he wakes up, he finds out that Elise is dead, and he is arrested for the murder. This ushers in the third act, which is different in tone, content, and characters from the first two. The same night, Aunt Henny’s daughter Marthy has a prophetic dream as well (172). Sumner’s and Marthy’s dreams, like the superstitions in the first act, suggest the similarity or equivalence of extrasensory knowledge across cultures.

**Disruptions in Identity**

In *Hagar’s Daughter*, Hopkins depicts a world in which community and moral knowledge—knowledge of affiliation and character and rights and wrongs—has been profoundly disrupted in the Reconstruction period because of emancipation, the disruptions of war, westward expansion, and money. In the first act, the antebellum white society of *Hagar’s Daughter* is already somewhat disrupted by political turmoil and geographic mobility. When Ellis Enson comes upon Hagar Sargeant washing her heirloom china, he does not recognize her. The Sargeants had lived in St. Louis during her early life and rented their estate out for financial reasons. However, the structure of landowning gentry is still present, with the Enson house next to the Sargeant house, two respectable old families, known quantities.

In addition to racial crossing, Hopkins depicts the period between 1861 and 1880 as one in which many Americans have the opportunity to remake themselves. She introduces Senator Zenas Bowen as an example of “the possibilities of individual expansion under the rule of popular government.” However, there are factors specific to this period. One is westward expansion. Hopkins describes Zenas Bowen as “one of those genial men whom the West is constantly sending out to enrich society.” The Civil War provided another opportunity. Zenas enlisted and “was mustered out as ‘Major Bowen.’” Financial growth in the United States and
the western mining industry provided yet another means for Zenas Bowen’s change from one of “the great unwashed” to Honorable Senator; after the war, he invested in mining, which made him rich (80).

Zenas Bowen’s remaking is an example of American opportunity. However, for others, the disruption of the postwar period is an opportunity to shed past crimes and Confederate affiliations (Bussey 305). One of the men, Major Madison, is, it seems, the slave trader Walker from the first act. Major Madison’s partnership with General Benson and other clues lead to the inference that General Benson is actually St. Clair Enson, who had been involved in Confederate politics and even, we learn, was involved in the Lincoln assassination. When Benson is reintroduced in the 1881 portion, he comments, “if it were known I am my father’s son, they’d hang me even now” (79). His servant is named Isaac, like St. Clair’s slave twenty years before. We later learn that he went to Europe after the war to change his identity.

Aurelia Madison and her father Major Madison also change their identities. Aurelia Madison was known to Jewel in school as Aurelia Walker; she explains to Jewel (106), and Major Madison explains later in court, that the major used the name Walker for a while to evade creditors. Actually, Walker is the name by which he was called in the first act of the novel—as a cruel, crass slave trader. Aurelia also may or may not be his daughter. Names and reputations are not stable in this period of geographical, historical, and financial change. Changes in identity mean that some forms of knowledge do not work the way they are supposed to. Appearance, reputation, and gossip are suspect forms of knowledge. Although Madison/Walker is as ugly as his soul, Aurelia and General Benson are attractive yet immoral; other characters are homely but good.
Using and Changing Elements of Detection

The United States and Britain have in common a change in subjectivity that “emerged from the conflict that occurs within any modern democracy when an understanding of the nation as ‘the people’ (as a collection of individual citizens with discrete and independent wills) gives way to the conception of it as ‘the state’ (a bureaucratic system of order and enforcement that governs the individual impulses within the nation” (Thomas 11). *Hagar’s Daughter* is in the in-between place where communities are turning into nation.

*Hagar’s Daughter* shows profound disruption in affiliative knowledge after the Civil War and Reconstruction; both old and new kinds of clues are required to parse identities and character. In the third act, Hopkins then uses the new private detective to tie these elements together and to complete the connection with her political message. The information from this act validates the information characters have gotten through less modern forms of knowledge in the novel. In both the United States and Europe, the professionalization of law and its enforcement has been reflected in detective literature. The American model, however, is unique in its engagement with challenges of simultaneous explosions in land use and corporate power. Allan Pinkerton, creator of the Pinkerton Detective Agency, inaugurates the American private eye in fact and fiction. His agency was hired by companies to investigate fraud and theft. Pinkerton had a team of agents whose strengths were in their number and their ability to blend in. In cases such as *The Expressman and the Detective* and *The Molly Maguires and the Detective*, the agents are able to follow criminals all over the country, taking responsibility for detection out of the hands of local communities and working with law enforcement at local and national levels. Pinkerton’s chronicles of detection differ greatly from the tales of Dupin (and Holmes), emphasizing movement rather than armchair deduction, and using a flexible team of detectives.
rather than a single genius. The Pinkerton model emphasizes induction, observation, and legwork, in contrast to either an amateur savant or a scientific expert.

In the third act, Hopkins introduces J. Henson of the Secret Service, a detective very similar to a Pinkerton detective. Pinkerton calls himself “Chief of the US Secret Service” in his 1879 semi-factual *The Gypsies and the Detective* (qtd. in Knight *Crime Fiction* 54). Pinkerton and his agents helped investigate threats to Abraham Lincoln; Detective Henson/Ellis Enson also reveals in court that his brother had been one of the conspirators against Lincoln (Hopkins 261; Carby “Introduction” xl).

Detective J. Henson is depicted as a well-regarded freelancer who works almost exclusively for the government. He uses the assistance of agents but also of Venus Johnson, Jewel’s servant, an important witness who becomes an amateur agent. Venus dresses as a boy and goes with a black detective agent, who gets himself added to the town’s black memory, to go find Jewel and her grandmother, Henny Sargeant. Soitos writes that Venus has inherited her grandmother’s second sight and intuits where Henny and Jewel are being kept (66). This is not clear, but Venus does uses observation, intelligence, and her family and community connections.

The use of disguise fits in both with the lineage of detective fiction as a trans-Atlantic genre in the tradition of François Vidocq and the American obsession with hidden origins that allowed both social mobility and racial masquerade. As Hazel Carby writes, “the disguise of whiteness enabled Hopkins to write a ‘black’ story that unravels in the heart of elite Washington society. . . . And, indeed, as the story begins, the only characters that are obviously black are the servants” (Carby “Introduction” xxxviii). This observation brings together the form and content of the novels. The servants in the second act are on the sidelines, but then become involved in the third act.
Venus Sargeant’s disguise as Billy, with one of Henson’s operatives as her drunken Uncle Henry, shares features with disguises taken on by Pinkerton’s agents as they track suspects. Race adds a further layer of commentary. “Uncle Henry” and Venus’s race becomes a camouflage, allowing them to blend in to the old plantation town where Henny and Jewel are being kept. Pinkerton’s agents blended in sometimes by using disguises, but sometimes by taking advantage of certain kinds of invisibility. In *The Expressman and the Detective*, Pinkerton describes how an agent (originally from Germany) pretended to be a recent immigrant, dirty and speaking little English, which made the mark ignore him, just as he ignored the black passengers in the same car (52). The first woman Pinkerton agent, Kate Warne, got the job when she convinced Pinkerton that a woman would have access to places and information men would not (Ramsland 47-48). (Both Arthur Conan Doyle and Amanda Cross have made use of the idea that no one looks closely at an older woman.)

The third act of *Hagar’s Daughter* adds more elements of sensational fiction, another stream of literature that fed into the making of detective fiction in the second half of the nineteenth century. Novels such as *The Moonstone*, *The Woman in White*, and *Lady Audley’s Secret* feature hidden truths and characters who are trying to discern those truths, but the characters are not detached, and are not necessarily present throughout the novel; in addition, the detection might be split between a professional police officer or detective and an involved amateur. The mystery typically reaches into a past shrouded in obscurity, and involves the early life or heritage of the main characters. The secret then has repercussions in the present for inheritance or marriage plots (Knight *Crime Fiction* 41-43). Elements of sensational literature combined with detective fiction are therefore appropriate for Hopkins, as “questions of heritage and inheritance shape the political direction of all her stories” (Carby “Introduction” xxxv).
Here the secret is not madness but race, which ironically creates a situation in which characters themselves become tangible inheritance—“despised chattel,” as Hagar describes slaves in her mind (57).

Hopkins connects her professional detective directly to the racial melodrama and carnival of identities. Henson refers to detection as a riddle (190), which makes him seem detached. However, he is in some ways very unlike the developing idea of the private detective. When he takes Cuthbert Sumner’s case, Jewel gives him a retainer, which he doesn’t notice on the desk. From the moment of their meeting in his office, Henson and Jewel feel a strong sympathy, although they do not yet know they are father and daughter (188), and he has taken the case more due to his sympathy and his interest in the matter than as a businessman. It also turns out that he has a lot of personal history and knowledge about the case, not just his agents and skills. Detective J. Henson is also an important witness himself. Only he can tell what happened to Ellis Enson in 1861.

Detective Henson of the Secret Service is none other than Ellis Enson, believed dead in 1861—the honorable, brave, and loving father of Hagar’s daughter. Sentimental elements can cross over as detective elements as well. The objects and expressions that tell the story are also clues. Henson’s involvement and authority are problematic, however. His authority is problematic because he has also changed his identity, like the black characters and like the bad white characters. His authority also underscores the lack of authority given to black characters in law. Aunt Henny has authority in the novel and her family, and Jewel trusts her, but in court she is threatened with lynching. Henson needs her testimony but she needs his authority.

In this novel, objects hold information about identity. Near the end of the novel, after Hagar/Estelle is reunited with Ellis Enson/Detective Henson, she finds in her late husband Zenas
Bowen’s possessions a chest with baby clothes and a locket. She is mystified, even entranced, as she recognizes the hand stitching on the baby dress as her own work and the locket as her mother’s (276). In the locket is a piece of paper, a scrap from Zenas Bowen’s journal. It relates the day he and his first wife found a baby in the river wearing these clothes and this locket, with no clue of its origins. Objects in this book are one way you know who you are, with mixed consequences. The same evidence that reconnects Hagar (Estelle) and her birth daughter Jewel also reveals Jewel’s mixed blood.

_Hagar’s Daughter_ is not strictly a detective novel, or not only a detective novel. The crime and detection elements take up less than half of the novel’s pages. However, the forms of knowledge Hopkins picks up from different literary and cultural streams become bound up with her more contemporary detection plot. After the murder of Elise Bradford, there is very little attention given to the space in which she died (an office at the Treasury), her body, or the objects around her. (The poison used even changes during the novel from prussic acid [167] to arsenic [251].) Only Henny Sargeant’s family seems to notice that this possible witness is missing. Hopkins directs interest instead to the movement, disguise, and revelation elements of detective fiction rather than to observation or puzzle solving. This parallels the unreliability of observation in many areas, including individual identity and racial lineage. The puzzle here is more than one person can solve; it is: what are we, as a nation, to do?

In the mystery of origins, the space of causality reaches into the past and incorporates coincidence. The role of coincidence in _Hagar’s Daughter_ is clearly reminiscent of sentimental novels, but also, as in those novels, makes a larger symbolic point. When Zenas Bowen ignores his negative impression of General Benson, he puts his beloved wife and daughter in danger. This underscores Hopkins’s depiction of people as interconnected.
Unreliable Evidence

Ronald Thomas writes that the detective can “read the secret truth of the past in the bodies of the victims and perpetrators of crime” (Thomas 3). However, the bodies in *Hagar’s Daughter* create only illusions. The secret truth of the past lives in the memories, documents, and possessions of the participants, and must be unearthed through their testimony. In the course of Sumner’s trial, it is revealed through testimony that Aurelia Madison is an octoroon. This is elicited through an act of eavesdropping. The warden at Sumner’s cell overheard Sumner tell Aurelia, in anger, that he would never marry “one of colored blood” (251)—a fact about Aurelia that Sumner learned from the murdered woman, Elise Bradford. On top of testimony about her deceitful acts, this revelation about her racial identity undermines Aurelia entirely.

At the same time, the discrediting of Aurelia on the witness stand is a precursor to the eventual revelation of Jewel’s mixed blood. From the beginning of the second act, Aurelia has been a foil for Jewel. General Benson has even described her in these terms, as “a fine foil for Miss Jewel,” when soliciting an invitation for the Madisons (86). Sumner has said he would never marry one of colored blood, so when Jewel learns that she is Hagar’s daughter, she leaves for a year. Knowledge of identity is powerful in the pursuit of criminals. However, it equally discredits those of good character and actions. Thus, this knowledge is useless on a higher ethical level.

The body identified as Ellis Enson does not belie his brother’s false identification. Only Detective J. Henson’s testimony speaks truth. It is the words that can speak truth in this novel (although often don’t), for bodies deceive. Aurelia’s identity is revealed through a double eavesdropping rather than through physical evidence, and Estelle’s/Hagar’s is revealed again in the third act by her own words. Even young Hagar’s racial identity, the revelation of which sets
the whole novel in motion, is left very slightly uncertain. After Walker establishes that Hagar was a slave as a toddler, St. Clair Enson asks Walker, “Is this thing true?” Walker replies, “True as gospel. The only man who could prove the girl’s birth is the one I took her from, and he’s dead” (55). These two sentences seem at odds, but perhaps they suggest that as gospel is just words that are believed, words can create a heritage. The slave Marthy asks her mother, “Do you b’lieve Miss Hagar got nigger blud in her?” Henny replies, “Course not, honey. Somebody roun’ hyar done conjured her” (65). Racial identity here is performative rather than factual. A piece of paper, an overheard conversation, or a third-hand rumor can give someone colored blood or even change their legal status. If words can make someone black or white, it is no more than a spell. The faint possibility that Hagar, and therefore Jewel, is entirely white is never addressed by any other characters or by the novel, which makes the novel more powerful in showing the arbitrary nature of identity by blood. Zenas Bowen’s penultimate words, “no difference—just the same,” about his daughter, point to the irrelevance of origins (198).

Hagar’s use of the sentimental and detective genres changes how she uses the trope of text objects as well. Objects and documents can work in both the sentimental and detective modes. They can simultaneously invoke emotions and bear specific information. In the 1861 portion, documents include the will in which St. Clair and Ellis’s father disowns St. Clair so long as Ellis has a reputable heir; the documents that show Major Walker’s ownership of Hagar; and the papers that would have freed Hagar and her daughter—papers Ellis Enson was never able to sign. In the 1880s part of the novel, legal documents include Zenas Bowen’s will, which initially seems genuine and makes General Benson the guardian of Jewel Bowen. Nickerson discusses the importance of texts as objects in domestic detective novels (Web 10)—an interest that carries over into classic detective fiction to such an extent that there were experiments with novels that
contained no outside text at all but only those documentary elements needed to solve the puzzle. By contrast, most of the documents in *Hagar’s Daughter* have plot importance but are not dwelt on as objects. The biggest exception is the scrap of paper in the locket that reveals to Hagar that Jewel is her daughter. The various wills and documents are not described in detail. The documents bear information in a straightforward way to move the plot and are not subjected in the narrative to a deep reading, even a suspect will by Zenas Bowen.

The decipherment element is not present in this novel. The model of knowledge based on code cracking is not relevant because the relationship between knowledge in documents and reality is shown to be tenuous. Documents reflect legal realities in some cases but not the intentions and lives of those they affect. Hagar and Ellis Enson have been married a year when they learn their marriage is not a marriage, because Hagar is legally black and a slave. Their vows were a classically infelicitous utterance in J. L. Austin’s sense; the difference between their lived and felt relationship and their legal relationship registers as tragic. Hagar’s legal status as shown in Walker’s papers is at odds with her life and the knowledge of those around her. This discrepancy between legal and felt reality is highlighted when Walker discusses with Ellis Enson the matter of his child whom he must buy.

When Ellis is supposedly found dead while making arrangements to move his family to Europe, he has made no formal provision to “free” his wife and child. They are legally his slaves; he has purchased them in order to stay a family, but until he has the papers drawn up, they are his property and so pass to his brother. Again there is a discrepancy between the recognized status of Hagar and her child as she and others (such as the family attorney) understand it, and her legal status. Finally, Zenas Bowen’s will turns out to be a clever forgery, not reflecting his intention at all. Besides the paper in the locket, the bill of sale Walker holds is
perhaps the most powerful text object; by holding it, he controls the Enson family. However, it is memory, not this document, that makes Hagar swoon and proves that she is a slave. Hopkins gives texts as objects less power than they often hold in either domestic detective novels or clue-puzzle novels. That power is based on an idea that the text can hold truth, which Hopkins seems to dismiss, for even felicitous documents can inscribe falsehood.

Although race is the explicit subject of this novel, one can argue that in *Hagar’s Daughter*, money changes the impact of racial knowledge. As Zenas Bowen says, “Money changes the complexion of things” (87). The depiction of white individuals who “symbolize the power of white society to oppress” is a twist on what Nickerson says in *Web of Iniquity* about the issue of greed, especially male greed. Here, racial discrimination is used for economic exploitation. After all, the initial reason that St. Clair Enson and the slave trader Walker reveal Hagar’s ancestry is because St. Clair wants to get his brother’s inheritance. St. Clair does not initially even know how Walker will manage to ruin his brother; that it is through an illegal and scandalous marriage is not important to St. Clair. However, once Ellis Enson is dead, St. Clair does become angry at Hagar’s pride, maintained even though he has legally inherited her as his property. At this point he does use her legal status as a slave and sells her in Washington.

The social disruption portrayed by Hopkins creates a world where what is thought to be evident is unreliable. Although Elise Bradford’s disclosures, prompted by what she has heard about their breakup, help Cuthbert Sumner and Jewel Bowen, gossip is also the main way that Benson and his conspirators manipulate the lovers. Jewel believes the gossip she hears about Cuthbert Sumner’s relationship with Aurelia Madison (126). A society based on reputation has justice endangered when there is rapid change and geographic and social mobility, as in the whirlwind of 1880s Washington. Hopkins presents two scenes that are specifically staged as
tableaus, where one character happens on an important exchange between others. In these scenes, Hopkins shows how appearances of things can be manipulated. Both scenes have a lover finding himself or herself betrayed, but the scenes are part of a conspiracy by General Benson, Major Madison, and Aurelia Madison to get access to both Zenas Bowen’s and Cuthbert Sumner’s fortunes (123, 146). By making these scenes nothing but theatrics, Hopkins undermines what appears obvious.

False impressions go with Hopkins’ larger point that what should be, culturally, the most obvious signifier of racial heritage, one’s appearance, is only shadows. This is also true with speech and dialect. Zenas speaks slangily because he’s from the West. Venus Johnson speaks in somewhat black dialect when she’s talking to detective Henson, and Henny speaks in dialect in court. Speech and dialect of characters in this book match what their appearance indicates about their origins and status, which means that they are sometimes misleading. Hopkins emphasizes the black skin color of the slaves/servants and has them speak in dialect. But this also shows how speech, like appearance, is not reliable as a way of knowing who someone is, certainly in their race as defined by culture in this period.

Unlike Green and Twain, Hopkins ignores the focus on scientific and forensic clues. However, the plot of Hagar’s Daughter also exemplifies the exposure and scrutiny to which black bodies are subject under slavery, and the model of knowledge that privileges race as the central fact about a person. The intermixture of races under slavery poses an intractable problem for this kind of knowledge at this time, as Elise Bradford explains to Cuthbert Sumner, and as Hopkins shows in her frequent descriptions of how white some of her revealed-as-black characters are, with Jewel’s grey eyes, Hagar’s creamy skin, and Aurelia Madison’s gold-flecked
hair. The difficulty of discerning an intermixed past is both an inducement and a frustration to what is depicted as the most important form of knowing.

The difficulty presented in this novel of knowing race is used to undermine the importance or usefulness of race as a category. Blackness in the narrative is characterized by dress, décor (169), and dialect. The discrepancy presented over and over between these signifiers and blood creates dissonance. When Hagar finds out that she is legally black and a slave, the slaves of “her” household pity her (63). She is their mistress yet one of them, both and neither.

**Witnesses and Memory Keepers**

In the face of vast social disruptions and unreliable identities, dark-skinned black characters emerge as the keepers of personal and familial history for society. In the white Washington scenes of the 1880s, the servants are on the sidelines for nearly a hundred pages. They sometimes interact with their employers, but other times are invisible witnesses. Isaac, General Benson’s servant, is referred to at one point as being noiseless (93) and also as making himself invisible. When Venus becomes Jewel’s personal maid, she is only mentioned briefly. The black characters appear in their homes and interacting with each other in the first portion of the book and after the murder. In between, they appear as if from the perspective of white society—on the sidelines.

However, these characters have a continuity of identity across the two time periods. Their legal status has changed but they have kept their names more than the white characters in the novel, and they have kept their allegiances. Hagar had been adopted into the Sargeant family as a child, in the 1840s. She is inadvertently passing as Hagar Sargeant, the daughter, when she is not even their slave but belongs to Walker. When she disappears into the river, she loses her identity and her assumed name. Henny Sargeant, however, is a slave of the Sargeants at the beginning,
and she is still Henny Sargeant in the last portion of the book (182). The black characters keep their identities and names, although they have gone from being slaves to servants. Cole notes that in the Reconstruction period and after, concern about being able to identify black Americans was crucial to fingerprint mythology in law enforcement, in part because even names were considered not real (Cole 246-47). Hopkins turns this distrust upside down. Because of their continuous presence and because of their partial invisibility to the white characters, her black characters become critical witnesses and historians.

The continuity of black identity allows the servants to play an important role in the 1880s portion of the book. Isaac was St. Clair Enson’s slave in 1861. Now he has married Marthy, Henny’s daughter, and he works for General Benson in Washington. Only Isaac and then Aunt Henny know that General Benson is St. Clair Enson (177), although Henny might suspect magic. In the Bowen household, Venus is Jewel’s new maid, and we see little of her until after the murder. But then Jewel is kidnapped, and we see that Venus is taking in all the events around her (221). Soon after, she brings information to Detective Henson, and then goes in disguise to rescue her grandmother and Jewel.

Henny Sargeant plays a special role, although she only has a few pages in the first and third acts of the novel. Henny is a witness to the family history—Hagar’s, Jewel’s, and the Ensons’—as well as literally a witness for the defense of Cuthbert Sumner. She is the only person who can testify that General Benson killed Elise Bradford. Hopkins throughout enjoys layering on idioms of black and white, and at one point Sumner refers to the “blackest evidence against me” (185). In the end it is the “blackest” evidence that frees him: the testimony by Aunt Henny Sargeant, described as “coal-black” when she is first introduced (33). Madison exclaims to himself, “justice never sleeps, the old fogies tell us, but I’ll be dog-goned if the old woman
ain’t in a dead swoon when Benson’s on the rampage” (204). Henny got her lifetime job at the Treasury after staying up all night guarding some money that had been left out. Like justice, Henny has a veil, but the veil indicates not blindness but a deeper sight. This dark-skinned cleaning woman and grandmother is the embodiment of Justice in *Hagar’s Daughter*.

*Hagar’s Daughter* is the most overtly political work in this dissertation, a sentimental novel that is a political argument. The lines of demarcation between black and white create a shadow world that undermines democracy and continues the legacy of slavery. In writing it, Hopkins consciously used the narrative strategies of popular literature such as detective fiction, as well as the structure of a serial novel to engage her readers over time. She saw the power of popular fiction to make a political argument from the antebellum period and marshaled it to resurrect that emotional and intellectual energy around the problem of race in 1900. In this novel, the use of knowledge is disrupted by the lack of solutions to the ethical problems of Emancipation and the Reconstruction era. Names lie, bodies lie, documents lie, even what one sees can be no more than theater. All that’s left, perhaps, is character, yet character is hard to discern in the culture Hopkins depicts. Hopkins is being exhortative—we must improve the character of a nation whose identity is disrupted. What remains is character and family, neither of which can be easily known except through one’s own experience and actions.

Some critics have argued that the detective story, at least in its later development, is inherently conservative in its return to order and purging of the outside (Grossvogel 254; Nickerson *Web* 57). As Nickerson notes, this novel shows how the epistemological concerns of detective fiction allow it to disrupt world views as well. *Hagar’s Daughter* purges the morally foreign element but does not resolve its plots happily, as a return to status quo and a happy
ending cannot happen together. Hopkins makes the point that a conventional happy ending cannot happen to this story because of the inherent unfairness of society.

In detective fiction of this era and later, racial knowledge supplies the underlying secrets that motivate plots in works such as *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, Hugh C. Weir’s “The Purple Thumb Print” (1914), Ellery Queen’s *Roman Hat Mystery* (1929), and Walter Mosley’s forties-era *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990). Inspector Queen’s explanation, “He just has a drop in his veins—just a drop, but it would have been more than enough” (*The Roman Hat Mystery* 233-34) could sum up many works. In scientific detective fiction of the early twentieth century, determining hidden racial heritage becomes a paradigm of what detection can do, *the* mystery of American origins and model for unearthing the invisible. By contrast, Pauline Hopkins in this novel houses information about identity in the minds of her black characters, a maneuver that constitutes a reframing of American historical knowledge.
Chapter 5. Scientific Detection

Scientific detection, as found in stories of the 1900s and 1910s, involves a set of disciplines. However, it is more usefully characterized as an approach, or set of approaches, to information. The detectives in these works may be chemists or psychologists, or may have no particular scientific specialty. However, types of clues are often different from those in domestic detective novels. Detectives of the 1900s are interested in measuring what is thought to be unmeasurable and in putting together puzzle pieces. Furthermore, the detectives are figured as experts or professionals in a new, more efficient industrial society. Some of these figures are—like Poe’s Dupin and Legrand of sixty years before, or their contemporary across the Atlantic, Sherlock Holmes—loners who operate as amateurs in a kind of twilight antisociality. However, others follow the trend of David “Pudd’nhead” Wilson. They are fully integrated into society, credentialed and invested in working within the context of the law and civic institutions.

The idea of the clue becomes increasingly atomized and focused on small physical objects. Yet these works also rely on elements of magic, sensation and domestic values, and they are often motivated by protecting the common man and middle-class families. These elements show the variety of forms of knowledge that are considered possibly valid, while strengthening a new model of society through reference to an older one. The rational and the domestic merge in another strain of detective fiction beginning around 1900. This chapter considers several collections of stories from the early years of the twentieth century, as detective writers continued to explore the sweeping changes in the United States due to expansion, immigration and industrialization.
In a foreword to *The Achievements of Luther Trant* (1910), authors Edwin Balmer and William MacHarg share their belief that soon psychological tests will take the place of employment interviews and trial by jury. In most of the Balmer and MacHarg stories, a person is falsely accused of a crime or scandalous action, often related to business or banking. The young psychologist, Luther Trant, finds the truth, and in doing so restores a threatened nuclear family. Thus, physical objects and physiological symptoms are used to protect financial assets, but they are portrayed as simultaneously protecting families. Scientific detectives in early twentieth century combine elements of genius and expertise with appeals to fairness and family.

In her introduction to the sentimental movement of the nineteenth century, Shirley Samuels writes that “sentimentality appears as a national project: in particular, a project about imagining the nation’s bodies and the national body” (3). Domestic detective fiction is part of that project for the period of American sentimental literature. In the works covered in this chapter, however, the use of science and expertise, in unsteady collaboration with local and federal law, shows a different project for the national body, a desire to shape and modulate it, to subject it to law and regulation for the sake of fairness toward the nation’s bodies.

In the early twentieth century, a new type of detective appeared: the scientific detective. Ronald Thomas describes detective fiction, beginning with Poe, as “centrally concerned with the act of investigating bodies, exposing and submitting for scrutiny the most carnal of secrets, and offering as evidence brutal facts about the body in order to control its functioning” (17-18). With the invention of the lie detector in 1895, science seemed increasingly useful for law enforcement, and literature reflected this interest. Early twentieth-century story collections in the United States, including Balmer and MacHarg’s *The Achievements of Luther Trant* and Arthur B.
Reeve’s *The Silent Bullet* (1912), portray a range of physical and psychological signatures, with detectives as their master interpreters.

**The Sensational Science of Arthur B. Reeve**

One goal of scientific detection is to make the invisible visible. In his ability to do this, the scientific detective has qualities of a magician. He or she also displays intuition and imagination that evoke the sensational, even while appealing to reason and data. Craig Kennedy is the best-known creation of journalist Reeve. Between 1910 and 1918, Kennedy appeared in more than eighty stories in *Cosmopolitan* magazine, then a family magazine owned by William Randolph Hearst. Kennedy was nicknamed the “American Sherlock Holmes,” presumably because Holmes was the most famous model for fictional detectives. Like “A Study in Scarlet,” in which Arthur Conan Doyle introduced Holmes, as well as “The Murder in the Rue Morgue,” Poe’s first story featuring Dupin, “The Silent Bullet” begins with a dialogue that shows the main character’s philosophy of detection. Kennedy, a professor of chemistry, tells his friend Walter Jameson that crime should be pursued like a science, and that professors can help. Jameson scoffs that professors could be involved in something as gritty as crime, saying, “police headquarters . . . is no place for a college professor. Crime is just crime” (Reeve 2). Kennedy, however, defends academia, saying that “colleges have gone a long way from the old ideal of pure culture. They have got down to solving the hard facts of life.” The role of the academic has changed:

The silk-stockinged variety is out-of-date now. To-day it is the college professor who is the third arbiter in labour disputes, who reforms our currency, who heads our tariff commissions, and conserves our farms and forests. (2)
In *The Incorporation of America*, Alan Trachtenberg describes the shift to “scientific management” of industry, and how this idea bled into government and into culture generally (92). The detective/professor would then be another type of expert, who might be found in industry, government, or agriculture. Kennedy’s defense of the modern professor describes him as a technical expert and advisor for industry and government. The types of clues such a detective would trace would be “hard facts,” for this detective would be new, “really practical” type of college professor (Reeve 2).

Although Kennedy might share with Holmes the job title of amateur detective, his discussion with Jameson also hints at some of the ways he might go about this job differently from either Holmes or Dupin. If there is a “silk-stockinged” typed of detective, Holmes and Dupin would belong to that type. They are leisured, without obvious means of support, pursuing their hobbies—Holmes’s violin; Dupin’s poetry. They are antisocial figures. Dupin keeps up with the news as when he solves “The Mystery of Marie Roget” from newspaper accounts, but this also shows the extent to which he is antisocial, as he solves the crime from his apartment. Holmes has impressive knowledge, but lacks modern information in other areas, as seen when Watson exclaims that Holmes did not know the Earth revolves around the sun. Where “silk-stockinged” brings to mind not only old-fashioned but also leisured, perhaps decadent or effeminate, Kennedy has “clean-cut features” and is characterized by his “earnestness” (1).

Kennedy wants to apply the strategies of science to crime: “the same sort of methods by which you trace out the presence of a chemical, or run an unknown germ to earth” (3). This statement refers to both the thorough procedures of science, and to its specific content; in the stories to come, he will trace chemicals used in crimes and track a killer whose weapon is
typhoid. Jameson is worried, however, that what Kennedy’s methods gain in effectiveness, they lose in drama. He jokes,

What would become of my business if they did? How would you ever get a really dramatic news feature for the Star out of such a thing? ‘Dotted line marks route taken by fatal germ; cross indicates spot where antitoxin attacked it’—ha! ha! not much for the yellow journals in that, Craig. (65)

Jameson’s comments portray the scientific and technical as dull and entirely lacking in sensational matter for the public and the newspapers. Kennedy has given him grounds for these fears when he says, “Half the secret of success nowadays is organization. The professor of criminal science should be merely what the professor in a technical school often is” (5). In this formulation, the thorough, step-by-step labor of finding and understanding clues emphasizes the dull, the quotidian nature of detection. Working with these “hard facts” seems to have little opportunity for genius or showmanship.

The stories, however, will show that the “yellow journals” and the detective fiction reader can still find sensations. The clues and knowledge in these stories show the power, intuition and magic of scientific detection. In his role as a public-minded scientific expert who works cooperatively with the police, Kennedy is quite different from Dupin and Holmes, but shows his own genius and sorcery through his interactions with different kinds of clues.

**Invisible Ink**

By this period, the power of invisible clues was not novel. At one point, Kennedy describes a technique that is fairly well known in his time. “If you place your dry thumb on a piece of white paper you leave no visible impression. If grey powder is sprinkled over the spot and then brushed off a distinct impression is seen” (78). Mark Twain’s unlikely detective,
Pudd’nhead Wilson, astonishes a packed courtroom by showing the power of fingerprints, invisible to the eye, to provide positive identification. In a more abstract sense, the fingerprint takes an intangible idea—a person’s unique identity—and represents it in a small but spectacular sign, the landscape of ridges that silently embosses the physical world wherever we touch it.

In the Kennedy stories, however, Reeve extends the spectrum of phenomena that are perceptible to the scientific detective and not to others. “The Silent Bullet,” the first story in the collection, presents a mystifying situation. Inspector Barney O’Connor describes the scene of a shooting: “We have any number of witnesses of the whole affair, but as far as any of them knows no shot was fired, no smoke was seen, no noise was heard . . . Yet here on my desk is a thirty-two-calibre bullet” (Reeve 10). To the unaided senses, this crime was impossible: invisible, inaudible to a group of people. Kennedy reveals the secret to each trick. First, he realizes that the action and the smoke were hidden because the killer held the gun in his pocket and shot through it. (Reeve 11). This story provides an illustration of Kennedy as the reader of a hidden message.

Every leaden bullet, as I have said, which has struck such fabric bears an impression of the threads which is recognizable even when the bullet has penetrated deeply into the body. It is only obliterated partially or entirely when the bullet has been flattened by striking a bone or other hard object. Even then, as in this case, if only a part of the bullet is flattened the remainder may still show the marks of the fabric. (Reeve 26-27)

The bullet is inscribed at the microscopic level with information that can positively identify the killer. Find the fabric, find the killer. The bullet can be unseen, buried in the victim, but it still bears this information. Even if the bullet hits bone, Kennedy believes he still has a good chance of being able to read the facts of the crime from its surface. The clue in this passage is an
invisible inscription that is legible to the expert who has the right tools and knowledge. Although the killer has stifled the sound of the shot with a new invention, the silencer, the bullet speaks to Kennedy.

Kennedy is proudest of his pursuit of things that are not visible, or too small to be visible to the naked eye. Like the fabric marks on the bullet, evidence is often microscopic. In order to be legible, clues must first be made visible. At the beginning of this story Kennedy has recently solved a case where he was asked to analyze a blood stain on a handkerchief, the only clue left by the killer. Based on a “minute, careful and dry study” of blood published by the Carnegie Institute, he is able to determine the race of the killer. Only one person involved is of that race, so he has positively identified the culprit (6).

Several elements of this case stand out, certainly including the element of racial science (and pseudoscience). However, for the moment, we should note a much smaller element: the importance of the minute. In the case of the handkerchief, the “minute” study he reads enables Kennedy to solve the case at the macro level. He has been given a “deep blood stain” as his only clue. The study, dry but deeply detailed, gives him the tools to interpret a clue that is itself dry and deep and otherwise hard to fathom. The information that appears to be dry in the sense of being boring is actually what is needed to understand a clue that is both microscopic and deeply embedded. Kennedy’s specialized knowledge gives him that power.

Jameson’s joke about the newsworthy drama of germs—“Dotted line marks route taken by fatal germ; cross indicates spot where antitoxin attacked it”—also implies that what is too small to see cannot be sensational. His complaint is based on the importance of the visual in journalism. Although the text is read, it relies on images, whether pictures, evocative language, or the crime diagrams that allow readers to feel they are there, tracing the path of a killer.
Kennedy transforms the idea of the microscopic as dull and inaccessible into the idea of the microscopic as deep writing or invisible information, legible with his arcane knowledge and special tools. This then becomes a new image of power.

The original clue need not be visual to be enlarged and made legible. In “The Deadly Tube” Kennedy puts the main players together in a room, makes some provocative statements about the case, then leaves. He returns with a transcript of the conversation whispered between the victim’s husband and lawyer. He then describes to his surprised audience “a little instrument called the microphone”:

> It will magnify a sound sixteen hundred times, and carry it to any given point where you wish to place the receiver. . . . A fly walking near it will make a noise as loud as a draft-horse. . . . A whisper, I say, is like shouting your guilt from the rooftops. (Reeve 120)

Actually, a whisper near this device is better than shouting guilt from the rooftops, because it is targeted, in this case by the receiver of the information. That is, Kennedy controls where he, the human receiver, places the mechanical receiver. Kennedy is at hand with pen and paper to record the conversation, thus magnifying and documenting what is otherwise elusive. To the unfortunate plotters who do not know about this new technology, it must seem as if Kennedy can read the air.

Both the journalist and the police become amazed at the possibilities for Kennedy’s scientific knowledge. Jameson had scoffed at the idea that a bacteriological crime could be sensational. However, in a later story, he is infected by its narrative power even while he is elbow-deep in its labor.
Shirt-sleeves rolled up, I was deeply immersed in my work when I heard a shout
in the next room, and the bath-room door flew open.

“Hurrah, Walter!” [Kennedy] exclaimed. “I think I have it, at last I have just
found some most promising colonies of the bacilli on one of my slides.”

I almost dropped the pan of acid I was holding in my excitement. (Reeve 79)

Jameson is the narrator of the stories, which ran in magazines, and is a journalist, so on several
levels, he stands in for the news-reading public. His claim that there is “not much there for the
yellow journals” has been implicitly renounced. Kennedy also works closely with the police,
rather than trying to scoop them. In “The Silent Bullet,” Kennedy tells the police inspector that
he can get a conviction just from just that bullet. The inspector, skeptical, says that that would be
“like a storybook” (Reeve 11). He, too, sees the power of Kennedy’s interpretative eye.

When Kennedy describes how he can read the killer’s identity from marks on a
supposedly “silent” bullet, a striking feature of his description is the sense that such clues,
though deeply buried, are positive with their inscription. This writing in metal can only rarely be
erased, even if the bullet has penetrated to the bone. Scientific clues accessed by Kennedy are
definitive, even implacable. This brings to mind a comment at the start of the collection.
Kennedy complains: “As for running the criminal himself down, scientifically, relentlessly—
bah! We haven’t made an inch of progress since the hammer and tongs methods of your Byrnes”
(Reeve 2). Kennedy contrasts scientific detection with older methods that were based on torture,
but he portrays scientific evidence as equally pitiless. In the racial case mentioned above,
Kennedy has eliminated all but one suspect based on the blood stain on a handkerchief and has
informed the police that “it must be the negro waiter.” Jameson, however, is incredulous:

“But . . . the negro offered a perfect alibi at the start, and—”
“No buts, Walter [said Kennedy] . . . Here’s a telegram I received at dinner:

‘Congratulations. Confronted Jackson your evidence as wired. Confessed.’”

(Reeve 7)

The microscopic evidence in a spot of blood outweighs more conventional information and provides unarguable evidence: “no buts.” The microscopic speaks louder and is firmer than the suspect’s “perfect” alibi.

As Kennedy sums up his conclusions in “The Silent Bullet,” he again describes his philosophy of detection. In this instance, however, he does not focus on the detective-professor as technician or consultant.

I will begin what I have to say by remarking that the tracing out of a crime like this differs in nothing, except as regards the subject-matter, from the search for a scientific truth. The forcing of a man’s secrets is like the forcing of nature’s secrets. Both are pieces of detective work. (25)

Here, Kennedy uses the image of detection to show that both science and criminology have a deep power, nothing less than “forcing” the secrets of the natural world and the soul of man. The “hard facts” are as hard as bone or metal, and their inscribed information is as relentless as the torture chamber. Neither god’s world nor humanity can hide information from the scientific detective.

Tell-Tale Hearts

In a passage from 1913, G. K. Chesterton uses his clerical detective, Father Brown, to mock the use of biometrics—measuring biological effects—in ascertaining truth. In particular, he mocks the lie detector, which measures changes in blood pressure, indicating stress or emotion: “‘What sentimentalists men of science are!’ exclaimed Father Brown, ‘and how much
more sentimental must American men of science be! Who but a Yankee would think of proving
anything from heart-throbs?’” (Chesterton 76) Father Brown’s comment points out the
connection between the ostensibly objective science of biometrics and the sentimental
tradition—in particular, the American sentimental tradition. In “The Silent Bullet,” Kennedy
uses a variation of this idea to confirm the culprit. He has chairs wired to register grip pressure,
so that “though it may be concealed from the eye, even of one like me who stands facing you,
such emotion is nevertheless expressed by physical pressure” (Reeve 32). Emotions are then
another invisible phenomenon that Kennedy is able to not only see, but measure.

Emotion is a special case of information that may be “concealed from the eye.” There is a
clear tradition of emotion peeking through the body in ways that are accessible to many people,
although in varying degrees. When Evelyn Bisbee first visits Kennedy in “The Bacteriological
Detective,” Jameson modestly notes that “She was in a state almost bordering on hysteria, as
even I, in spite of my usual obtuseness, noticed” (66). Jameson’s observations mix the language
of medicine with the tropes of nineteenth century sentimental and sensational literature, in which
emotion is read on the body through eyes, skin color (flushing or pallor), breathing, and tone of
voice, and in which these signals are available to all. In “The Bacteriological Detective,” the
final identification of the killer (who has poisoned a household with typhoid) rests on a heart test.
From a handwriting analysis, Kennedy knows that the killer suffers from a heart defect that
causes uneven blood flow. He gathers the people involved in one room and asks the health
commissioner to listen to their hearts. A stethoscope is used to magnify the sound. Here, the
scientific test is literally one of heart beats, but Jameson extends this imaginatively in his own
observations.
One person after another was examined by the health commissioner. Was it merely my imagination, or did I really hear a heart beating with wild leaps as if it would burst the bonds of its prison and make its escape if possible? Perhaps it was only the engine of the commissioner’s machine out on the campus driveway. (91)

This passage combines the medical—the health commissioner listening to heartbeats—with immediate observation—Jameson’s hearing of a heartbeat—and the fanciful, where the heart of the guilty person is in a prison (as the guilty person soon will be), and also the heart is imagined to betray its owner, as, of course, it most famously does in Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart.” The confusion between a heartbeat and a car engine outside is comically literal coming at the end of this overwrought passage. However, it also suggests an affinity between the mechanisms of the body and those outside that is a new feature of this interpretation compared to the language of blushes and flashing eyes in the nineteenth century, and in particular, the domestic detective novel.

This scene and in particular Jameson’s narration mixes together different types of information relating to the heart. Kennedy is displaying handwriting that shows the pulse, a feature only present in someone with a heart defect. This is a specifically medical reading of a sample taken in the past. Jameson, on the other hand, is in the current scene listening to or imagining that he is listening to the heartbeats of those present, accelerated by the stress of guilt and revelation. These two associations connect at the end. As the heart commissioner gets the family lawyer to listen to his heart, the lawyer has a heart attack and dies. This dramatic conclusion accords with Jameson’s fanciful projection that one heart in the room might leap out of the guilty chest. However, it is justified because that person had a heart defect in the first place. The defect made him vulnerable to both scientific identification and sentimental justice.
This again shows the relentlessness of Kennedy’s scientific detection as it “force[s] man’s secrets.”

The techniques by which Kennedy makes biometric information accessible are similar to those from “The Silent Bullet.” Some biological clues are microscopic—like the bloodstain referred to early in that story. In “The Bacteriological Detective” as well, Kennedy sees his role as one who magnifies to then measure and document. To look at the handwriting samples he enlarges them and displays them for the room. Only when they are enlarged can the sample be seen as coming from someone with heart disease. He also enlarges the fingerprints he finds on the water bottles in the same story and explains his deductions to the people involved “as a huge thumb appeared on the screen” (Reeve 85). Jameson’s illusion of being able to hear the heartbeats of the guilty person in the room, a gothic and sentimental trope, also recalls Reeve’s description of the microphone as magnifying a fly’s step—or criminal’s whisper—into a sound as loud as a draft horse.

Emotional information such as skin shading is widely available and well recognized in this period even as it references the previous century. Kennedy is able to leverage the power of those associations with his own capacity to show the invisible—magnify and measure those effects to create an inescapable conviction. In this story, he “runs an unknown germ to earth” (the intentional typhoid infection), but it is at the same time the visibility of the human heart to the expert. Although Craig Kennedy says that detection should operate “scientifically, relentlessly” based on “the hard facts of life” (Reeve 2), the stories connect his examinations to both the sentimental tradition alluded to by Chesterton and the reading of invisible effects described in the previous section.
Isabelle Lehuu writes on the visual culture of the late nineteenth century that “images were ‘telling stories,’ and fashion plates represented as conversation pictures when labeled with captions such as ‘it is a secret’” (Lehuu 77). In the scientific detection of the early twentieth century, the idea of the body telling stories is separated from the idea of the body as an image. That is, the body speaks, but in ways that are not visible. The invisibility of signs of falsehood or emotion to the naked eye supports the need for expertise and equipment.

The Sorcerer/Apprentice

In justifying his interest in criminology to Jameson, Kennedy pointed out that the modern professor/scientist “is the third arbiter in labour disputes, who reforms our currency, who heads our tariff commissions, and conserves our farms and forests” (2). Trachtenberg describes the initial stages of this shift, which occurred several decades before, with engineers, who “served a chronic need of the industrial system: to impose system and order, through improved machinery, for the sake of assuring a reliable return on investments” (Trachtenberg 64). In addition, this knowledge came not from an apprentice system, but from books and schools (Trachtenberg 64). At this early stage, before the vogue for order fully encompassed trade and land use, came a corresponding myth of genius, embodied in Thomas Edison. In the persona of a “wizard and natural genius” (Trachtenberg 67), Edison “seemed to hold together the old and new, the world of the tinkerer and the world of modern industry” (Trachtenberg 66).

Kennedy dramatizes a similar transition in detective fiction in his relationship to clues. On one hand, in the introduction he emphasizes use of technical knowledge in solving crimes versus older methods. He also, in several instances, refers to obscure readings where he has gleaned a critical piece of information, such as the Carnegie Institute study in “The Silent Bullet.” He and Jameson in multiple cases take part in tedious technical tasks, such as
developing fingerprints, testing for bacteria, or photographing and comparing tire treads. On the other hand, these stories make clear that Kennedy has a natural ability or intuition when it comes to solving crime. Like the journalists’ idea of Edison, Kennedy symbolizes both natural genius and control over the forces of man and nature, part of the idea of progress.

There is a dual meaning when Kennedy says that criminals should be pursued “scientifically [and] relentlessly.” One is that the conclusions of the scientific detective are presented as unarguably true. However, the labor of science is also relentless. The comprehensive gathering of data is emphasized in many of these stories. In “The Silent Bullet,” Kennedy has the police gather a full list of a certain kind of gun purchased in New York City. In “The Bacteriological Detective” and several other stories, he has Jameson wading through newspaper clips and correspondents’ letters. In one story, he meticulously takes and compares photographs of tire treads. His discourse is around the material elements of science—measurable effects—and the work of science.

Abductive reasoning, as developed by Charles Sanders Peirce and developed by Umberto Eco and Thomas A. Sebeok, entails coming up with explanations for an occurrence and then predicting other occurrences that would follow from that explanation, and testing to see whether they take place, or have taken place. In other words, it is the scientific method: observe, hypothesize, experiment. Kennedy describes the method as follows:

One shouldn’t let any preconceived hypothesis stand between him and the truth.
I’ve made a guess at the whole thing already. It may or it may not be right.
Anyhow she will fit into it. And if it’s not right, I’ve got to be prepared to make a new guess, that’s all. (Reeve 22)
Kennedy himself emphasizes measurable things, not genius. However, he does frequently make guesses. Kennedy may minimize the role of his “guess,” but it is what makes him part of the detective tradition and not just a technician of germs and chemicals. He also uses the language of enlightenment, as does Jameson. In “The Silent Bullet,” he makes a rare comment about his own abilities: “Why, Walter, you’d never do as a detective. You lack intuition. . . . Why, I had only to put two and two together and the whole thing flashed on me in an instant” (Reeve 22).

Responding to Jameson’s confusion on a point, Kennedy replies “‘It is perplexing,’ with the air of one who was not perplexed, but rather enlightened” (Reeve 109). The moment of enlightenment and the trope of light for the moment of knowledge coming together are important in these stories. In “The Bacteriological Detective,” Kennedy sends Jameson to the health commissioner to find out something about a missing maid. Jameson describes his increase in knowledge from this meeting in the language of enlightenment: “I didn’t understand it, but I took the card and obeyed implicitly. . . . I hadn’t talked to [the health commissioner] long before a great light struck me, and I began to see what Craig was driv[ing at]” (Reeve 83, emphasis added). The use of this language coming from the narrator about his own comprehension highlights the continuing relevance of this quasi-religious image of understanding. Genius and intuition in these stories are used with the trope of light, whether Kennedy’s intuition or Jameson’s. When Kennedy finds the lady in “The Silent Bullet,” he says that “the whole thing flashed on me in an instant” (Reeve 22). This is his definition of intuition: a simple mathematical combination of data points (“I had only to put two and two together”) followed by the moment of enlightenment.

Abduction is useful in describing the Kennedy stories because of the way it brings together logic, science and intuition. It is the scientific model and linked by analogy to logic, but intuition takes the logician from the clue—the single instance—to the hypothesis and predictions
which can be true or false. (The extent to which this form of logic can be faulty is shown in many works of detective fiction, including Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone.* ) With his newspaperman’s hyperbole, Jameson says that abstruse chemical compositions are as “unfamiliar to me as Kamchatka, but as familiar to Kennedy as Broadway and Forty-second Street” (65). Here, Kennedy is an initiate into the secrets. Jameson uses this idea again when he says that Kennedy “had a microscope and slides and test-tubes and chemicals for testing things, and I don’t know what all, for there was not time to initiate me into all the mysteries” (Reeve 75). Like some conclusions of Sherlock Holmes, Kennedy’s analysis appears to another as sorcery. Kennedy is an initiate because his knowledge seems to an outsider (Jameson) to come from nowhere.

At the beginning of “The Bacteriological Detective,” after hearing the circumstances of a typhoid outbreak, Kennedy comments, “I may as well tell you right now that I have already formed two theories—one perfectly natural, the other perfectly diabolical” (Reeve 70). In this phrase, Kennedy exposes the dangerous edge of knowledge. The ambiguous syntax, where the theory (rather than the plot) is described as diabolical, emphasizes the fearsome nature of some knowledge. It is if the theory itself is dangerous. Metaphors of enlightenment and the fearsome aspect of knowledge come together in “The Deadly Tube.” Where “The Bacteriological Detective” instantiates “running an unknown germ to earth,” “The Deadly Tube” is about “trac[ing] out the presence of a chemical.” This story clearly illustrates how dangerous knowledge can be. Kennedy is investigating the illness of a woman who has been having medical treatments. Kennedy concludes that what is causing her symptoms is not the low-level X-rays that the doctor administered, but the element radium, hidden in the woman’s bedroom. In a pivotal scene,
Craig drew on a pair of gloves and carefully opened the casket. With his thumb and forefinger he lifted out a glass tube and held it gingerly at arm’s length. . . . My eyes were riveted on it, for the bottom of the tube glowed with a dazzling point of light. . . . “No infernal machine was ever more subtle,” said Craig, “than the tube which I hold in my hand. The imagination of the most sensational writer of fiction might well be thrilled with the mysteries of this fatal tube and its power to work fearful deeds.” (Reeve 112)

The police inspector had previously said that Kennedy’s scientific detection was “like a storybook.” Here, Kennedy not only places the power of this substance beyond the marvels of mechanization (“No infernal machine. . . .”), but even beyond fiction. In this story, the phenomenon of radioactivity gives back to the clue what science and technology might have taken from it, a sense of power and magic that is both visible and invisibly contagious. In this way, “The Deadly Tube” prefigures the nuclear fetish decades later in movies such as D.O.A. (1945) and Kiss Me Deadly (1955).

After the introduction of telegraphic news dispatches in the 1870s, newspapers struggled to differentiate themselves, as they increasingly printed the same base content (Trachtenberg 124). In Trachtenberg’s analysis, the very act of reading the newspaper, this mass produced item, was an alienating experience of mechanization. The text needed to be especially personal and gripping to overcome this effect (Trachtenberg 125). In the 1890s, Joseph Pulitzer had emphasized news that was “distinctive, dramatic, romantic” to arouse interest (qtd. in Trachtenberg 124).

The scientific detective as a figure undergoes a parallel trajectory to the news. On one hand, his scientific thinking and apparatus, especially that related to biometrics, serves to
undermine the aura of unique insight that had characterized the detective, and the aura of magical polysemy that had characterized the clue. However, the discourse of science expands to encompass genius, insight, and magic, serving to negate the impression of automaticity in detection.

Reeve makes the case for the new model of expertise by showing it in terms of the old models of genius and sentiment. This debt of influence shows both the tenacity of older models and the degree of variety in American detective fiction. The clues pursued by Kennedy, though often “hard facts,” operate in sensational, emotional, even fearsome ways. The diverse and dramatic ways that Kennedy interprets and presents clues are similar to those of his predecessors, including the “silk-stockinged” type of detective created by Poe and the domestic detective of Metta Victor and Anna Katharine Green. The Kennedy stories show the merging of magic and sentiment with the idea of controlling nature.

“A Tiny Clue”: Molecular Detection

In the early twentieth century, some writers experimented with how small or seemingly insignificant a clue could be, using a string, a thread, or a little silver ball. This approach might have been called molecular detection, in that it sought to locate the smallest possible unit of meaning. These clues did not resonate on multiple affective and cryptographic levels like Metta Victor’s dead letter or the portrait in *The Circular Study*. Rather, they were discrete objects out of place. The brilliance of the detective was in identifying, through observation and imagination, the proper context for the object.

Carolyn Wells’s 1909 novel *The Clue* pointedly illustrates this idea. Two amateur detectives and lovebirds, Rob and Kitty, explicitly decide to search for clues at the scene of the crime. “Oh, pshaw! I don’t suppose we’ll find anything,” says Rob (223) after making fun of
cigar ashes in Sherlock Holmes stories. “I think in detective stories everything is found out by footprints,” replies the ingénue. “I never saw anything like the obliging way in which people make footprints for detectives” (224). The two find nothing, “‘with one insignificant exception; in the drawing room I found this, but it doesn’t mean anything.’ As he spoke he drew from his pocket a tiny globule of a silver color,” so small Kitty must pick it up with her fingertips (229).

Rob claims repeatedly that this object is “insignificant,” and not “anything,” although he identifies it as a cachou, or men’s breath mint. In the end, the crime is solved by a professional detective and “proved by means of a tiny clue” (341), the silver globule that justifies the novel’s title. Wells, like Rinehart, is an “immediate successor” to Anna Katharine Green (Maida 51), and her debut novel represents a refinement of the concept of the clue and of detective fiction in response to the intervening growth in the genre and its available conventions.

Similarly minute and spherical clues are found in Miss Madelyn Mack, Detective (1914). Miss Mack is the creation of journalist Hugh C. Weir, although she was said to be inspired by a real woman detective (Greene 9). In “The Missing Bridegroom,” a hollow silver ball turns up at the scene of the disappearance. Here again, the detective asserts the significance of what seems insignificant, exclaiming, “How often must I tell you that nothing is trivial — in crime?”(68) The solution involves the act of determining context for this matter out of place, in this case an ornament from the bride’s dress. In “The Bullet from Nowhere,” a locked-room mystery, the minute sphere is jade, and Mack identifies it as an ornament from the piano. Interestingly, in both cases, her reasoning also requires observation within the domestic realm—clothing and furniture.

Mack also displays the bi-part soul and antisocial tendencies of a classic detective such as Dupin or Holmes, as described by Stephen Knight in Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction. She
swings from charming and relaxed to sharp and single-minded, sometimes pushing her friend (the narrator) off onto a servant for feminine sympathy, and she is more interested in the stimulus of a puzzle than in justice. The narrator comments, “there was even a bored note in [Madelyn’s] voice as though the glamour of the problem had left her — with its solution” (96). Perhaps as an analog to her divided personality, Mack wears all white or all black (5). Like Mack, Professor Augustus S. F. X. Van Dusen, created by Jacques Futrelle, is not an integrated member of society; he is credentialed like Kennedy, but the five degrees after his name set him apart, as does his appearance. The stories—“The Scarlet Thread,” “The Silver Box,” and “A Piece of String”—that feature “the thinking machine” often focus on visible but tiny objects that the detective must contextualize.

**The Sentimental Science of Balmer and MacHarg**

Scientific detection, although presenting an image of future and progress in knowledge, supports its project by appeals to other types of knowledge, and presents its relevance in industry through appeals to the unity. The writing team of Balmer and MacHarg was much less well known and less prolific in detective stories than Reeve. Their stories featuring psychology student Luther Trant are also less sensational than the Kennedy stories. However, Balmer and MacHarg address some of the same themes as Reeve, with a different and more wishful focus. As in the Kennedy stories, there are echoes of the domestic embedded in the rhetoric of scientific positivism. They emphasize expertise, but exalt family, character, and community as the most essential and *truthful* features of modern life.

The authors introduce Luther Trant on the campus of a Chicago university, where he has excelled in psychology. We see that he is a star student. The beginning of the story also shows that Trant feels that science has wide possibilities beyond the campus. Specifically, he calls
policing practices of his time old and ineffectual, and he says that psychological tests could revolutionize criminal detection. Trant is portrayed as youthful, enthusiastic, and optimistic, no ivory tower academic or antisocial scientist. Although a scientist, he is ethically and socially integrated within his society.

Whereas the stories depict science used on behalf of middle-class workers, the foreword positions science as primarily beneficial on the other side of this relationship, to employers, in a way that to modern readers seems a bit Orwellian. From a theoretical standpoint, we can read this tension as an illustration of the narrative form of ideology. In Between Men, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick provides a useful paraphrase of Marx, that “one important structure of ideology is an idealizing appeal to the outdated values of an earlier system, in defense of a later system that in practice undermines the material basis of those values” (Sedgwick Between Men 14). The statement “a man’s home is his castle,” for example,

reaches back to an emptied-out image of mastery and integration under feudalism in order to propel the male wage-worker forward to further feats of alienated labor, in the service of a now atomized and embattled, but all the more intensively idealized home. (Sedgwick Between Men 14)

In each story, Trant helps make right a reputation that has been unfairly maligned. In “The Man in the Room,” the victim is the kind, old treasurer of Trant’s university. The killer makes it appear that the treasurer was embezzling from the university funds. Trant must clear the treasurer’s name for the sake of the man’s dutiful daughter. In “The Fast Watch,” the prosecutor is assumed to have been having an illicit affair. Finding the truth saves his reputation, especially for his fiancée. In “The Empty Cartridges,” Trant clears a man of killing his fiancée’s father’s friend so that the two young people can marry. In “The Man Higher Up,” he saves the life of the
young checker and also clears his reputation, as he had been accused of alcoholism—enabling a marriage yet again. Those who are saved are not high-profile people. They may be middle class clerks or managers, or they may have country homes and inheritances, but they are depicted as kind and ordinary. Over and over, Trant, through the use of science, save the lives, loves, and reputations of these ordinary people caught in a web of corruption or unfortunate circumstances. Science, in the hands of an expert, is the recourse of everyman. It saves families at risk, and it protects the middle-class worker against consolidated power: the man higher up.

The motivations depicted in the stories are a bit surprising in light of the authors’ stated thoughts about the possibilities of science. In their foreword, Balmer and MacHarg assert the plausibility and existence of the science in the collection. In addition, they exhort the readers to see how such information will change the operation of society.

The hour is close at hand when [these tests] will be used not merely in the determination of guilt and innocence, but to establish in the courts the credibility of witnesses and the impartiality of jurors, and by employers to ascertain the fitness and particular abilities of their employees.

Whereas the stories focused on the usefulness of a galvanometer, for example, primarily in clearing an innocent man, this passage depicts science as benefiting a de-individualized kind of justice. Science here puts a barrier between witnesses and their testimony; jurors and their verdicts. The authors imagine a radically simplified criminal justice that would largely replace conventional methods with science.

The stories in The Achievements of Luther Trant also depict certain idealized home relationships, particularly between fathers and daughters and between husbands and wives. In each case, Trant’s interventions, using psychology and science, preserve these domestic bonds.
We can combine this with Ronald Thomas’s discussion of the shift from character to identity, where character is associated with community standing and narrative, and identity with the unchanging marks of an individual (Thomas 11).

**The Lie Detector**

Trant operates on hypothesis and test, where the tests are based on the idea that people’s thoughts and emotions react in predictable ways under certain circumstances. The hypothesis is how Trant explicitly defines the space of causality, because a hypothesis is an answer to the question: What could have lead us here? The second story in the collection, “The Fast Watch,” gives Trant a chance to put his principles into action with a high-profile case. A prosecuting attorney has been murdered on the street late at night. Because he had recently prosecuted a gambling ring, the 16 members of the gang are suspects, including a man named Kanlan. Kanlan has no alibi, but there is no specific evidence against him or any of the others. Although the temperamental police captain, Crowley, thinks that Kanlan is guilty, the detective on the case, Inspector Walker, knows Kanlan and believes it is not the type of crime he would commit. In addition, the circumstances of the killing—the hour and location—give the impression that the prosecutor was having an illicit affair. His fiancée does not believe it and wants to clear his reputation.

As Trant enters the world of law enforcement, he has a foil in Captain Crowley. “[Crowley] saw a young man with hair indeed as thick and red as his own; and with a figure, for his more medium height, quite as muscular as any police officer’s” (41). The men look alike, and the comparison belies any notion of Trant as an egg-headed academic, reinforcing the notion that the scientist can work as part of, not apart from, his society. However, the character of Crowley seems to back up Trant’s claim that law enforcement has stagnated, not keeping pace at all with
scientific knowledge. When Trant says that he is a psychologist, Crowley thinks he means a psychic, and when Trant describes the galvanometer, which uses the suspect’s palms on the sensors, the captain confuses it with palm-reading.

The use of the galvanometer in this story is the first in the collection where physical responses are measured directly. Electrical current flows between the metals when sweat is present—a sign of stress and guilt. However, Trant is careful to show that not all reactions are signs of guilt. Crowley pushes photographs of the body toward Kanlan, accusing him of the murder, and the galvanometer reacts. Trant points out that anyone would show stress under those circumstances. The stimulus has to be something that would only affect the guilty and be inoffensive to the innocent. In this story, the killer waited near a photography studio for the victim to come by. Trant uses the scent of banana oil as a stimulus, because banana oil smells like one of the chemicals used in developing photographs at that time. This shows the idea of a control in the scientific sense. The narrative also includes a control in that two men are tested: the man whom the police captain suspects, and another man, who is actually guilty. The difference in their responses helps Trant make his point. Trant sets up the galvanometer as a chair with a metal knob. The suspect does not know he is being tested; his emotions speak through his body without his knowledge.

The test on Kanlan also helps Trant demonstrate his method through an accident. When Kanlan initially reacts to the crime scene photographs pushed on him by Captain Crowley, Crowley comments that if Kanlan were black, the device’s evidence alone would be enough to get him lynched. This comment puts Crowley in a negative light and shows racism as a function of his class, ignorance, and temperament. However, the comment causes the galvanometer to register a reaction from Kanlan, who blushes to the roots of his dark curly hair. Trant
hypothesizes that the olive-skinned suspect is part black, and Inspector Walker, who grew up in the same neighborhood as Kanlan, confirms that Kanlan is in fact one-eighth black. Thus, the incident proves the efficacy of the galvanometer, and gives race as a prime example of the type of information scientific machines can provide, while also depicting science as fair across boundaries of race. The incident also makes a similar point to Chesterton’s story about such devices; their utility is limited by the imagination of their operators.

Although some writers have looked at the racist use of code-breaking motifs in the detective story (Maureen T. Reddy) or the expulsion of what is foreign, such as in the English country scenario, Thomas takes a Foucauldian approach. The detective story may buttress authority, but it might also undermine and resist authority through exposure (Thomas 6). The Achievements of Luther Trant lives at this junction.

Trant also uses a type of lie detector in “The Eleventh Hour,” which is the least compelling story in the collection, but interesting for its armchair anthropology. Trant uses his detector to determine the guilt of two Chinese men whom he suspects of murder. They keep silent in interrogation. However, Trant’s machine tracks their physical reactions. To the honor-bound Chinese assassins, the confession of their bodies is as bad as a confession of words, and they kill themselves from shame. (This story fulfills Ronald Knox’s prediction about “Chinamen”: it is bad.) This is the most explicit example in the book of a body “speak[ing] for itself” (Thomas 17).

“The Man Higher Up” is the most polemical story in The Achievements of Luther Trant. A man is missing: an inspector for the American Commodities Company, whose job is to supervise the weighing of freight at the docks. The man’s superiors suggest that he is missing work because of drinking, but the man’s fiancée worries—the previous inspector died in an
accident. Trant determines that the company has found a way to alter the weights shown on the customs scales. He hypothesizes that the inspector has been kidnapped and is being held aboard a boat. Although Trant has enough information to pursue the dock superintendent and find the missing man, that is not enough. Trant believes that the company president, Welter, is behind the fraud and kidnapping, along with the murder of the previous inspector. To get “the man higher up,” Trant uses scientific means.

Trant employs a lie detector and the help of another scientist, a professor at Stuyvesant High School. The company president is a benefactor of the school and has often visited the classrooms of Professor Schmalz, an affable professor from Germany. Trant invites the president to participate in a demonstration of a lie detector, much as described by Cesar Lombroso (Thomas 22). The president and his corporate cronies only vaguely comprehend the biology of the machine, however, and understand nothing of its purpose. The device “was only partly understood by the big men. It had not been explained to them that changes in the breathing so slight as to be imperceptible to the eye would be recorded unmistakably by the moving pencil” (Balmer and MacHarg 167).

Trant first uses stimulus words in the course of conversation that relate to kidnapping. As Trant mentions these phrases, he looks for reactions in the instruments. The responses show him that Welter does know about the kidnapping, as Trant suspected. Once Trant confirms for himself that the company president is behind the fraud, kidnapping, and murder, he uses more obvious cues. The records of Welter’s breathing and blood pressure, which are reproduced in the book, show the psychologists that he has a strong emotional association with each stimulus. Welter, “by immense self-control,” is able to control his voice and gaze, but cannot keep his body from telling the truth (Balmer and MacHarg 172). When Welter leaves the building in
anger, Trant and a customs agent follow him to the docks, where they confront and arrest him and his men.

Of the stories in this book, “The Man Higher Up” provides the most compelling progressive social justification for scientific detection. Using conventional methods, Trant implies, he could have found the people immediately responsible for the fraud, murder, and kidnapping, such as the dock superintendent. In a way, however, these criminals are depicted as victims as well. “[I]t’s some advance, isn’t it,” he asks the federal customs agent, “‘not to have to try such poor devils alone; but, at last, with the man who makes the millions and pays them the pennies— the man higher up?’” (Balmer and MacHarg 185). Trant implies that the lie detector is what allows this investigation to get to the root of the crime— big business corruption.

**Syncretism and Science**

The operation of scientific knowledge is different in “The Chalchihuitl Stone.” This story suggests connections to both the domestic detective fiction discussed in Chapter 2 and works discussed in Chapter 5, mixing multiple sources of knowledge that reinforce or complement one another. Trant is asked to help solve a break-in and theft of research papers from an archeologist of Latin America, Dr. Pierce. However, it is not only a theft. At the time of the break-in, residents of the house heard strange, high-pitched voices, and when the papers disappear from the study, a stone is left in their place. The mysterious incident has had a strange effect on Iris Pierce, the archeologist’s ward, who is also his fiancée. She slept through the break-in, but afterwards, on seeing the stone, she changes her mind about marrying Dr. Pierce and cannot be swayed. There is both a concrete mystery—who stole or destroyed the papers?—and a psychological one—why has Iris changed her mind so resolutely and with no explanation?
Trant first comes to several conclusions based on the physical evidence and information provided by people in the house: Dr. Pierce, his mother, and an elderly black maid. He realizes that there were two people in the study: one who broke in, and one who disposed of the papers. He hypnotizes Iris—his expert strategy—and discovers that she actually hid the papers from a man named Penol, who broke in to destroy them. Under hypnosis, she retrieves the papers.

Trant decides to use hypnosis when he finds out from the maid, Ulame, that Iris has the mark of “the devil’s claw” near her shoulder. People with such a feature, which Trant describes as an anesthetic spot, are particularly susceptible to hypnosis. The stone, he realizes, triggers a shift in Iris back to herself as a young child. In this persona, she actually speaks in the high-pitched voice of a child. Iris’s past is the site of the solution. She was born in Central America when her father was doing archeological research, and married in a native rite, symbolized by the Chalchihuitl stone. When the husband of her youth read the engagement announcement, he came to stake his claim on Iris’s secret inheritance. He also wanted to destroy her father’s papers for superstitious reasons. He left the stone, which symbolized his claim to Iris. Trant’s intervention, getting the husband to release his claim and hypnotizing Iris to find the papers, returns the household to its presumptively natural state, where Iris’s inheritance is intact and she again wishes to marry her fiancé, who is also her guardian.

Trant’s information about Iris’s special psychology is suggested to him by Ulame. She believes in voodoo—not hypnosis—or what we might think of as multiple personality disorder. “The old negress’s eyes blazed wildly. ‘It’s a’caze yo is voodoo!’” she says to Iris, as if Iris herself were an emblem akin to the stone (187). Ulame is broadly drawn and speaks in dialect, but Trant does not present his solution as a debunking of Ulame’s knowledge, but rather a complement. Thus Trant’s involvement reinforces the authority of Ulame’s explanatory system,
even while presenting a parallel scientific explanation and filling in the specific causality of who
did what when and why. Furthermore, in describing the “devil’s claw,” Trant references a variety
of medical and mythical points. It is both a mark of clairvoyance and of a “nervous disposition.”
He does not specify that it is a female quality, but he connects it across the ages with witch,
sibyl, and hysteric (224-25).

This story presents science as a syncretic discipline, able to take different forms for
different people in different places. A stone considered sacred to the Aztec and the symbol of a
promise to a Spaniard is a trigger for hypnosis for a young woman in Chicago. A physical area is
a sign of Voodoo for an elderly black woman and a sign of hypersensitivity to Trant. The
contingency of clues extends to racial logic. Iris’s father married her to his servant Penol because
the latter, a Spaniard, was the only “white” man available in the jungles of Central America
where he was studying. When he comes to assert his claim, however, Penol is coded as dark and
dangerous, a

very tall, slender, long-nosed man, with an abnormally narrow head and face, coal
black hair and sallow skin. . . . a momentary flash of white teeth under Penol’s
mustache, which was neither a smile nor a greeting, met Pierce’s look of inquiry,
and he cast uneasy glances to right and left out of his small crafty eyes. (212)

That is, Penol is white and not white, depending on context.

By reconciling these types of information—without debunking any—Trant is able to
restore appropriate domestic order to this household, where the unusually strong and redundant
bonds of family and class are reaffirmed. Penol gives up his claim to Iris, made when she was a
child according to the Aztec custom. Iris will marry her father’s friend’s son; her guardian, Dr.
Pierce. “The Chalchihuitl Stone,” with its complex, geographically distant back story and
multiple forms of knowledge encircling a domestic drama, resembles earlier and contemporaneous works of detection and mystery by women, such as Victor’s *The Figure Eight* and Pauline Hopkins’ *Hagar’s Daughter*. By including *Hagar’s Daughter*, we can especially see the importance of past or far-off histories.

The importance of a past narrative as essential knowledge for making sense of the present is a larger theme, of which a person’s character as known in the community is a subset. In addition, the dovetailing of magical, narrative, and scientific knowledge foreshadows the alternative epistemologies present in later detective fiction.

**To Protect and Regulate**

In “The Fast Watch,” the scientific proof of Kanlan’s innocence confirms the validity of another type of information, which it might be thought to conflict with, which is local and community knowledge. Inspector Walker never fully believed that Kanlan would hide in a nook and ambush a man late at night. Although Kanlan was a criminal, he was always straightforward and, in a way, honest. Walker, who has known Kanlan all his life, could believe he might kill someone in righteous anger, but never in a sneaky way. Trant’s evidence confirms Walker’s knowledge. At the same time, it is Walker who is able to confirm that Kanlan is one eighth black. The results of the investigation also confirm the victim’s character, which is known in the community and by his fiancée to be very good. Trant reveals that the prosecutor’s late-night errand was getting a doctor for his landlady’s sick child. It wasn’t a sly affair that had the man out so late, but an act of goodness.

“The Fast Watch” shows a scientist as having access to information that others do not. At the same time, his information works harmoniously to support, not undermine, character-based understandings of society. In addition, his skill in abduction, perhaps the mainstay of detection,
is shown to be superior to that of the police captain. This story depicts the scientific detective as significantly supplementing, rather than replacing, other forms of knowledge.

In “The Man Higher Up,” the ingénue is the step-daughter, not biological daughter, of the corrupt dock superintendent. This presumably insulates her from his corruption. Moral position in these stories breaks neatly along legitimate family ties, even defining those that are legitimate. In “The Chalchihuitl Stone,” Dr. Pierce’s engagement to Iris Pierce, witnessed by an engagement notice in the papers, is legitimate; Penol’s marriage to Iris, witnessed by an Aztec ritual and a stone, is not. In “The Axton Letters,” the heiress’s love for an unaffiliated young man is legitimate; her promise of marriage to her disinherited step-brother is not.

Throughout the collection, Trant’s talents are continuously exercised on behalf of the family, especially fathers and daughters and young lovers. These relationships are often layered on top of one another: in “The Man Higher Up,” the fiancée of the missing docks inspector is also the step-daughter of the corrupt dock superintendent; in “The Chalchihuitl Stone,” Iris Pierce is both the ward and the betrothed of young Dr. Pierce. In “The Private Bank Puzzle,” one young woman is the daughter of a bank employee, the sister of another, and the fiancée of a third, each of whom are at some point suspected of planning to rob the bank. Throughout The Achievements of Luther Trant, the title character interests himself not only in cases, but in people and relationships, often clearing an innocent person’s name or making a path for two people to marry.

Although Trant’s tests are not directed toward identification in the narrowest sense of fingerprints or foot size, they are strongly directed toward making the body and sometimes the brain speak for itself, apart from the volition of the person. The parts of a person become separated into distinct components that might tell different stories, read in different media. Trant
uses his tools of identification to preserve specific manifestations of character: relationship, affiliation, and moral reputation. This reading of Trant’s science fits in with the noticeably idealized representations of the domestic in these stories.

*Scientific Sprague* (1912) shows another scientist-detective who has the benefits of both expertise and strong social relationships. This collection by Francis Lynde takes place in a railroad town in Nevada and shows a government chemist whose experiments save a short-line railroad company from the machinations of New York speculators. Sprague, like Trant, has the physical attributes of a hero, as well as the scientific and societal credentials of a government-sponsored agricultural chemist. The stories depict science as a tool for protecting new businesses and their owners from newer, bigger businesses, which are depersonalized. Science is used to advance progressive aims, such as challenging large financial entities that act irresponsibly (Milkis 6; Hamby 43).

Newspapers are an important conduit of information between experts and the masses. Many authors of detective fiction in the early twentieth century have a narrator or supporting character with qualities similar to Watson, but who is also a newspaper reporter. In *Miss Madelyn Mack, Detective*, narrator Nora Noraker is a reporter, as is Jameson, the narrator of the Kennedy stories, and Hutchinson Hatch in *The Thinking Machine*. In this role, they have a clear role in documenting the work of the detectives. They are also occasionally able to help the detectives by providing a wealth of information, or even by controlling what information is printed. These depictions of newspaper reporters as protectors of the public, assistants to detectives, and surrogates for readers clearly contrast the negative depiction of a newspaper reporter in *The Leavenworth Case* and also advance progressive values (Milkis 7). Newspapers,
experts, and the government are depicted as acting in complementary ways to protect civic life from both individual and corporate lawlessness.

These stories claim that we can read people’s pasts, racial and otherwise, through psychological tests, chemical reactions, and observation. The scientific reading of objects and people becomes a model for what knowledge might mean in an incorporated United States. Science and forensics are another way “to convert disturbing historical fact into a new kind of narrative” (Thomas 2). These authors are not cynical when they depict science as preserving individual character and familial relationships. Rather, these collections show a determined hope for what science can do, anchored by a hope for what government can do as it grows to combat crime and corruption. Two stories feature a mysterious character hovering around the fringes who is revealed to be an extremely helpful federal agent. At the end of “The Man Higher Up,” the undercover federal agent makes this impassioned speech, comparing himself to patriots of the Revolutionary era:

[I am] a spy, if you wish to call me, but as truly in the ranks of the enemies to my country as any Nathan Hale, who has a statue in this city. To-day the enemies are the big, corrupting, thieving corporations like this company; and appreciating that, I am not ashamed to be a spy in their ranks, commissioned by the Government to catch and condemn President Welter, and any other officers involved with him, for systematic stealing from the Government for the past ten years . . . . (150-51)

Balmer and MacHarg thus present a future where the federal government mediates the needs of business, the courts, and individuals. Their idealized federal government fills the gap between the science of their foreword and the science of their stories.
Samuels writes that “the paradox of sentimentality . . . is this combination of the national symbolic and particular embodiments, an obligation at once to national respectability and to a private virtue removed from national power” (Samuels 4). In the professionalized sphere of these stories, however, private virtue is no longer considered separate and removed from national power, but is closely linked with it. The use of scientific detection in the Kennedy and Trant stories argues that families, marriages, and even the public good are best protected by this technocratic project of codification and regulation.
Conclusion

As the genre develops, so do ways of knowing and the ability of the detective to know. At the same time that Ellery Queen and S. S. Van Dine created their first famous puzzles, other writers were crafting detective fiction that falls into neither the fair play nor the hard-boiled category and that addresses metaphysical and sometimes magical phenomena. Rudolf Fisher, T. S. Stribling, and William Faulkner wrote works that used the form and conventions of detective fiction to question the systematized ways of reading the world on which modern industrial America was based. They define kinds of knowledge that are gendered, racial, and local, and they create fictional worlds in which that knowledge is essential to determining matters of fact. In *The Conjure-Man Dies* (1932), for example, Fisher shows his ability to write in multiple voices and to use the logic of magic alongside the logic of detection. Faulkner’s *Intruder in the Dust* (1948) posits different forms of knowledge across race, sex, and age, using the interplay to bring truth to the surface in that internal frontier, the American South. Stribling’s stories (1929–1947) juxtapose rational, situational, and spiritual data. John Irwin writes of the character of Arthur Gordon Pym that he “has begun, in the very act of asserting his beliefs, to subordinate those beliefs in crucial and irrevocable ways to his knowledge by allowing that knowledge to dictate the discursive form and logical status of his assertion” (223), but he could be writing about the detectives created by Fisher, Stribling, Faulkner, and C. Daly King. These writers and others push detective fiction beyond an incorporated, assimilated United States. In that aim, they are the predecessors of contemporary ethnic and ontological detective fiction.
Beyond Facts and into the Page

Like those of C. Daly King, the detective stories of T. S. Stribling spin into the metaphysical or supernatural. In addition to including paranormal content, Stribling also makes the boundaries of the story itself affect the detective’s thinking, as if the detective knows that the boundaries of his reality are the boundaries of a story. Stribling presents fallibility in his detective in addition to sources of knowledge beyond the world of realism, extending both into the metaphysical and past the confines of the printed page. Stribling and Jorge Luis Borges both play with the flow of causality by making the solving or writing of the mystery implicitly or explicitly affect the crime itself in a kind of retroactive way.

Faulkner, in *Intruder in the Dust* (1948), uses the detective genre to present *facts* and *truth* as separate, sometimes antithetical spheres of knowledge. Faulkner presents ways to know more in *Intruder in the Dust*, knowing beyond knowing. Both the conception of the crime and its solution depend on community knowledge of individual idiosyncrasies – that is, their character. For Faulkner, the question raised by Nancy Harrowitz of “what ‘truth’ is being sought after” is paramount (194).

Throughout the novel, facts present problems. *Intruder* presents facts and truth as separate kinds of knowledge and privileges truth. Facts are straightforward and the province of men. Ephraim, the elderly father of the Mallisons’ black maid, tells Chick that men—that is, the middle-aged white men who run the town—“they works on what your uncle calls the rules and the cases” (Faulkner 111). “Grounds” or evidence are other terms for facts. The voices of the novel grant facts a general usefulness. Ephraim’s explanation implies that the knowledge men use, “facts,” is useful for situations that are “common” because they can be addressed based on general principles and precedent—“rules and cases.”
This access to truth is not on or off but on a continuum. Ephraim has cited women and children as particularly useful for solving difficult problems, because they think differently from men. Both Chick and his “boy” Aleck Sander are able to understand things that others are not. But Aleck also has the ability to perceive more than Chick. Chick is in a push-pull between facts and truth, where facts are linked to the rational or intellectual and principle or belief and truth to emotion and something beyond sensing, which we might necessarily call a higher power. This trust in truth is similar to what Ephraim articulates about the capacity for women and children to solve problems like the missing ring: “If you got something outside the common run that’s got to be done and can’t wait, don’t waste your time on the menfolks. . . . Get the womens and the children at it; they works on the circumstances” (Faulkner 110-11).

Objects cannot be understood in isolation. They circulate throughout the community and have information attached to them beyond any physical attribute. This novel does not assert a void of all knowledge. Rather, it reiterates knowledge that is apart from any verifiable perceptions by the senses. This knowledge is related to a kind of ambient medium rich with community information.

In his fiction, Chandler emphasizes obstacles to information: opacity, and the fallibility of the detective. In hard-boiled, the realist and the rational come to clash, as the realm of the hard-boiled often comes from its engagement with the sense of senselessness, of evacuation of purpose and meaning. “Just another shine killing,” writes Chandler famously, meaning that the killing of one black person by another is irrelevant—whether to him or to white society; the level of irony is not clear. Dashiell Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon* deals explicitly with the poverty of symbols: the black bird that only stands in for value, giving false purpose to the lives of those who seek it. Spade sees through its myth as well as that other myth of purpose, romantic love.
Particularly in *Farewell, My Lovely*, the detective is knocked unconscious multiple times, and also dosed with morphine. Marlowe experiences hazy perceptions and unclear thoughts. This is a different kind of realism, not fantasy but rather the reality of subjective experience. The hard-boiled narrator combines the experiential, confused element of the unknowing narrator with the knowledgeable detective.

**Rending the Veil**

In Chandler’s “Simple Art of Murder,” the general body of detective writers and their works are figures of dread, like cadavers or creatures of folklore. “The good detective story writer,” Chandler writes, “competes not only with all the unburied dead but with all the hosts of the living as well” (224). Because of the unchanging nature of the form, works by these authors do not seem to age; they linger on the shelves, their construction “utterly unreal and mechanical” (225). “There is nothing new about these stories and nothing old. . . This, the classic detective story, has learned nothing and forgotten nothing” (230). The man fighting sleep is a metaphor of the whole of “The Simple Art.” The writer and his character must fight the death-without-death that is the classic detective novel. Echoing the writers of the American Renaissance, Chandler claims, “Everything written with vitality expresses that vitality”:

> All men who read escape from something else into what lies behind the printed page; the quality of the dream may be argued, but its release has become a functional necessity. All men must escape at time from the deadly rhythm of their private thoughts. ("Simple Art" 232)

Where sleep can be a kind of death, it is also the place where we escape death, the “deadly rhythm” of our minds.
Chandler makes clear his distrust of narratives of origins when he describes the importance of Dashiell Hammett. “How original a writer Hammet really was, it isn’t easy to decide now, even if it mattered,” he writes, tracing elements of Hammet’s genius to Hemingway, Dreiser, Ring Lardner, and others. “You can take it clear back to Walt Whitman, if you like” ("Simple Art" 233). Finding the kernel, the true origin, is both immaterial and impossible. Chandler is a transcendentalist about the relationship of language to meaning (233). He writes of quality:

Other things being equal, which they never are, a more powerful theme will provoke a more powerful performance. Yet some very dull books have been written about God, and some very fine ones about how to make a living and stay fairly honest. It is always a matter of who writes the *stuff* and *what he has in him to write it with*. As for literature of expression and literature of escape, this is critics’ jargon, a *use of abstract words as if they had absolute meaning*. (Chandler "Simple Art" 231-32; emphasis added)

Like literary inspiration, words cannot be traced and rooted back to a meaning. For this reason, Chandler’s own aesthetics do not use artificially bound phrases. Rather, he writes of literature as “stuff” and its inspiration as “what [the author] has in him.”

The misogyny and violence of Chandler’s “Simple Art” is also his attempt to protect life from the mechanical, the sleeping, and the false. This forms continuity with Poe in terms of the idea of live burial or unconsciousness. In addition it has to do with the American Renaissance in terms of trying to break through falsity to a real experience, to rend the veil. This is the real violence of Chandler’s essay and his novels. The dilemma for Chandler as for the writers of the American Renaissance is getting to reality through language, where “through” indicates language
as a means but also as a barrier. This continuity shows the problem detective fiction creates and then sets itself to solve, a desire to purify the relationship between outer trace and inner truth in tension with the desire to *find* that truth.
Works Cited


