

Suspicious Characters: Postmodern Detectives and Critics

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“Literary critics make natural detectives.”

- A. S. Byatt, *Possession*



The Big Lebowski. Dir. Joel and Ethan Coen. Gramercy Pictures, 1998. Film.

Should we be suspicious of what we read? Where might we look for evidence? And, wherever we find our clues, how should we assemble them? In engaging these questions, this tutorial will examine a key genre in postmodern fiction: the metaphysical detective novel, which asks us not just to solve the crime but also to understand the process of reading and interpretation behind any solution. The “theory of the novel” justifiably continues to spark debate, but we will turn our attention instead to what I would call “novels of theory”: experimental works that self-consciously exploit the mystery genre to interrogate textual interpretation and hermeneutics writ large.

In short, we’ll examine detective work and literary theory from *The Big Sleep* to *The Big Lebowski*. After a brief introduction to classic detective fiction, we will turn to Agatha Christie’s *The A.B.C. Murders* (1936) and five postmodern detective novels, all similarly engaging with textuality, instability, historical recursion, and “mad” reading: Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965), Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* (1980), Paul Auster’s *City of Glass* (1985), A. S. Byatt’s *Possession* (1990), and Orhan Pamuk’s *My Name Is Red* (1998).

One of the most pressing debates currently unfolding across the humanities is whether we should read suspiciously, distantly, or symptomatically; at the surface, or in the depths. Taking up the postmodern detective as a foil for our own critical practices, we will investigate possible methodologies—not only to deepen our understanding of the novels at the center of the course and to work towards an ambitious and informed Junior Essay but also to trace the long roots of the ways we read now. Each week, literary theory from the Middle Ages to the present will provide a crucial counterpoint to the fictional archives and scriptoria on display—and to the modes of reading, writing, deciphering, and critiquing at work in each of our novels. So, this course will focus on mentally ill, unreliable, and accidental detectives; postmodern experiments; plot twists; and red herrings, but it will also take stock of still-unfolding debates about *what* and *how* to read in the twenty-first-century academy—and how we can enter the conversation ourselves.

COURSE GOALS:

- To enter into the discipline and practice of English literary studies at an upper-division level and to craft a 20–25-page research paper in preparation for an honors thesis. You will be able to:
 - Design a research question
 - Develop a critical bibliography around that question, including diverse methods and viewpoints
 - Put secondary criticism in conversation with your own ideas and with other criticism
 - Write with greater clarity and precision
- To reflect critically on the interrelationship between postmodern detective fiction and literary criticism. You will be able to:
 - Outline the tenets of both traditional detective fiction and postmodern experimentation with the form, from Sherlock Holmes to *The Big Lebowski*
 - Analyze complicated literary experiments and theoretical concepts—as well as how fiction and theory inform each other
 - Explain recent trends in literary criticism from Fredric Jameson to Rita Felski
 - Intervene in ongoing debates about the long history of hermeneutics and how to read works of literature

REQUIRED BOOKS:

- Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep* (ISBN: 0394758285), \$11.50
- Agatha Christie, *The A.B.C. Murders* (ISBN: 0062073583), \$10.50
- Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (ISBN: 006091307X), \$9
- Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose* (ISBN: 0544176561), \$9.50
- Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy* (ISBN: 0143039830), \$11
- A. S. Byatt, *Possession* (ISBN: 0679735909), \$10.50
- Orhan Pamuk, *My Name Is Red* (ISBN: 0375706852), \$10

All other readings will be distributed as the semester progresses. Please bring hard copies to class along with your books.

Recommended Resource: Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, eds., *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story From Poe to Postmodernism* (ISBN: 0812216768), \$20, or available free online through Hollis

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS:

Because we will be forming a writing community, timely attendance is imperative along with careful reading and regular, informed participation. You will be asked to come each week with a “seminar starter,” consisting of an intriguing quote from the reading (either primary

or secondary) along with an argument that explains something interesting, counterintuitive, or unexpected about the relationship between your excerpt and the whole. You will also pick one novel to introduce and will present on literary criticism throughout the semester.

After a library visit to discuss archives and methods in week 2, you will complete a short paper (5–7 pgs) in week 4 before setting up an individual conference with me to discuss potential topics and further reading for your Junior Essay in week 6. An annotated bibliography (10 sources minimum) and prospectus (2–3 pgs) will be due in week 8, followed by a draft in week 10, and the final Junior Essay of 20–25 pages at the end of reading week. Assignment sheets and rubrics will be provided for all longer projects, but you can find a brief overview in the week-by-week schedule below.

All Junior Tutorial General Meetings are required, with dates TBA. You must also schedule a meeting with the Departmental Writing Fellow.

You are encouraged to choose a specific area of interest (genre, period, movement, author, theoretical framework, etc.) early in the semester so that weekly discussion and supplementary reading can be tailored to your individual projects.

GRADING:

Active attendance, preparation, and participation	10%
Short exercises and presentations	10%
Short Essay	20%
The Junior Essay	60%
Annotated Bibliography and Prospectus (10%)	
Draft Outline (10%)	
Essay Drafts (10%)	
Final, Polished Essay (30%)	

N.B. If you do not submit an essay, you will automatically fail the course.

ATTENDANCE AND TARDINESS:

Your attendance in tutorial is vital to your own success as well as to the success of the class as a whole; so is your attendance in Junior Tutorial General Meetings and at other required events. I will allow each student one “free” tutorial absence to be used in case of sickness, travel, etc: no explanation necessary, though a quick note would be appreciated. Missing more than one class will decrease your participation grade, and excessive absence could result in failing the course. Also, being late really disrupts the work we’re doing together: 2 late arrivals = 1 absence. If you have attenuating circumstances, you must communicate with me in a timely manner so that we can discuss possible solutions.

DEADLINES:

Late assignments will be docked 1/3 letter grade per day late, except for the final paper, which must be turned in before the final deadline. Students failing to turn in a final paper, or turning it in late without an official excuse, will fail the tutorial. If, well in advance of an assignment, you expect you will need an extension, please talk with me.

ACADEMIC HONESTY POLICY:

Please exhibit generosity and integrity in all of your endeavors. See the full mandates of the Harvard College Honor Code here: <http://honor.fas.harvard.edu/honor-code>. When in doubt, cite generously, following MLA style.

DISABILITY POLICY:

I strive for an equitable and inclusive classroom. If anything is hindering you from doing your best work, please don't hesitate to speak with me.

SCHEDULE:

N.B. Please skim the frames first then work your way through the week's fiction and criticism.

WEEK 1: The Detective and the Critic, Or, What Is Detective Fiction and What Is Postmodern?

Frames:

- S. S. Van Dine, "Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories" (1 pg)
- Excerpt from Hans-Georg Gadamer on the hermeneutic circle (3 pgs)
- Dorothy L. Sayers, "Aristotle on Detective Fiction" (12 pgs)

Fictions:

- Edgar Allen Poe, "The Purloined Letter"
- Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, "A Scandal in Bohemia"

Theories:

- Come prepared to give a 2-minute overview of **both** Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" **and** Rita Felski, "An Inspector Calls"

Recommended Further Reading:

- Michael Holquist, "Whodunit and Other Questions: Metaphysical Detective Stories in Post-War Fiction"
- Patricia Merivale, "Postmodern and Metaphysical Detection"

- Shawn Rosenheim, "The King of 'Secret Readers': Edgar Poe, Cryptography, and the Origins of the Detective Story"
- Jean-François Lyotard, "Note on the Meaning of 'Post-'"

WEEK 2: Dangerous Reading: The Hermeneutics of Suspicion

Frames:

- Michel de Certeau on the secret as "the precondition for hermeneutics" (1 pg)
- Excerpt from Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (5 pgs)
- Excerpt from Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (5 pgs)

Fictions:

- Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep*

Theories:

- Come prepared to give a 2-minute overview of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You"

Recommended Further Reading:

- Raymond Chandler, "The Simple Art of Murder"
- Frederic Jameson, *Raymond Chandler: The Detections of Totality*

WEEK 3: Traces and Archives: High/Low Culture and Popular Fiction

Today we will visit the Houghton Library to examine traces of pre-modern critics, asking: How does detective work unfold in the archive? And, more broadly, what *is* an archive and how do we assemble one? In the second half of class, we will discuss Christie's *The ABC Murders*.

Frames:

- Excerpts from Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (5 pgs)

Fictions:

- Agatha Christie, *The ABC Murders*

Theories:

- Eliot A. Singer, "The Whodunit as Riddle: Block Elements in Agatha Christie"

Recommended Further Reading:

- Shannon McSheffrey, "Detective Fiction in the Archives"

- Michel Foucault, “The Historical *a priori* and the Archive”

WEEK 4: On Misreading: Possible Conspiracies

Frames:

- Excerpt from a medieval treatise on the “discretion of spirits” (i.e. how to tell if your visions are demonic or legitimate) (2 pgs.)
- Excerpt on misreading from Paul de Man (5 pgs.)

Fictions:

- Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*

Theories:

- Jon Simons, “Postmodern Paranoia? Pynchon and Jameson”

Recommended Further Reading:

- Esme Miskimmin, “The Act of Murder: Renaissance Tragedy and the Detective Novel”

This Friday: Short paper due (5–7 pages, incorporating 1 new secondary source from JSTOR along with a close reading of a passage from Poe, Conan Doyle, Chandler, Christie, or Pynchon)

WEEK 5: Going Incognito: Selves and Disguises

Frames:

- Excerpt from Hegel on the “Other” in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (5 pgs.)
- Excerpt from Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self” (5 pgs.)

Fictions:

- Paul Auster, *City of Glass*

Theories:

- William Lavender, “The Novel of Critical Engagement: Paul Auster’s *City of Glass*”

Writing:

- Compile a list of possible essay topics to discuss. The last half-hour of class will be devoted to group discussion of your emerging research interests.

Recommended Further Reading:

- David Mazzucchelli and Paul Karasik, *City of Glass: The Graphic Novel*

WEEK 6: Secret Passages and Hidden Signs

Frames:

- Excerpt from *The Rule of St. Benedict* (5 pgs)
- Excerpt from William of Ockham, *Summa logicae* (2 pgs)
- Excerpt from Roger Bacon, *Letter on the Secret Workings of Art and Nature and on the Vanity of Magic* (5 pgs)

Fictions:

- Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, pgs. 1–178

Theories:

- Werner Wunderlich, “Monastic Thrillers: Detecting Postmodernity in the Middle Ages”

Recommended Further Reading:

- Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*

Individual conferences to discuss Junior Essay topics and explore research directions

WEEK 7: Inquisitions and Investigations

Frames:

- Excerpt from Bernard Gui, *The Conduct of the Inquisition of Heretical Depravity* (5 pgs)
- *Revelation*

Fictions:

- Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, pgs. 181–357

Theories:

- Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction”

Writing:

- Bring a draft of your bibliography with at least 5 sources (not necessarily annotated) and a description of your overall project.

WEEK 8: Imagined Libraries, Enormous Corpora

Frames:

- Jorge Luis Borges, “The Library of Babel”
- Excerpt from Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (5 pgs)

Fictions:

- Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, pgs. 358-502

Theories:

- Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?"

Recommended Further Reading:

- Roland Barthes, "The Metaphor of the Labyrinth"

This Friday: Annotated bibliography (10 sources minimum) and prospectus (2–3 pgs.) DUE

WEEK 9: Readers, Writers, Illuminators: Theorizing Media

Frames:

- John Mullan, "Talking Pictures" and "The Name of the Game" (4 pgs)
- Excerpt from Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (5 pgs)

Fictions:

- Orhan Pamuk, *My Name Is Red*, pgs. 1–204

Theories:

- Leah Price, "From The History of a Book to a 'History of the Book'"

Recommended Further Reading:

- Fedwa Malti-Douglas, "The Classical Arabic Detective"

This Friday: Expand your prospectus into a thorough outline of at least 10 pages, writing in complete sentences and working toward full, organized paragraphs as much as possible. I should be able to see the line of your argument, with supporting evidence from the primary text and with secondary analysis included, even if not yet fully incorporated.

Draft copy DUE by midnight. Now is also the time to make an appointment with the Departmental Writing Fellow.

WEEK 10: Red Herrings

Frames:

- John Updike, "Murder in Miniature" (5 pgs)

Fictions:

- Finish Orhan Pamuk, *My Name Is Red*

Theories:

- Heather Love, "Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn"

Recommended Further Reading:

- Barish Ali and Caroline Hagood, "Heteroglossic Sprees and Murderous Viewpoints in Orhan Pamuk's *My Name Is Red*"

This Friday: 15-page draft of your Junior Essay DUE by midnight

WEEK 11: Multimedia Pastiche: Postmodern Noir

Frames:

- David Larsen, "*The Big Lebowski* as Postmodern Posterboy (or How I Learnt to Stop Worrying and Love Baudrillard)" (4 pgs)

Fictions:

- Screening in class: *The Big Lebowski* [Use the extra time to work on your writing.]

Theories:

- Excerpt from Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*

This Friday: Full draft of your Junior Essay DUE by midnight

WEEK 12: Ecologies, Adjacencies, Networks

Frames:

- Brief excerpt from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari on the rhizome (3 pgs.)
- Excerpt from Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social* (4 pgs)

Fictions:

- A. S. Byatt, *Possession*, pgs. 1–149

Theories:

- Ann Marie Adams, "Dead Authors, Born Readers, and Defunct Critics: Investigating Ambiguous Critical Identities in A. S. Byatt's *Possession*"

This Friday: Postmodern Revision Exercise - Using a *single-sided* hard copy of your essay draft, cut your essay into paragraphs. Scramble the

cutouts and see if you can reassemble the pieces. Does each paragraph follow logically? Are you missing transitions anywhere? Do your paragraphs hold together as discrete units? Focus on streamlining your argument.

This Sunday: First Revision DUE by 5 p.m.

WEEK 13: **No class, but keep reading *Possession*. Happy Thanksgiving!**

WEEK 14: Coda: How We Read Now

Fictions:

- Finish A. S. Byatt, *Possession*

Theories:

- Emily Hodges Anderson, “Why We Do (Or Don’t) Argue About the Way We Read”

End of Reading Period: Final Essay DUE (20–25 pgs.)

POSSIBLE SUBSTITUTIONS:

- Daniel Clowes, *Ice Haven*
- Sarah Waters, *Fingersmith*
- Alain Robbe-Grillet, *The Erasers*
- Muriel Spark, *The Driver’s Seat*
- Italo Calvino, *If on a winter’s night a traveler*
- Mario Vargas Llosa, *Who Killed Palomino Molero?*
- Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire*
- Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *The Pledge*
- Tom Stoppard, *Arcadia*
- E. L. Doctorow, *The Waterworks*
- Thomas Bernhard, *The Lime Works*
- Roberto Bolaño, *2666*
- Michael Chabon, *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*
- Umberto Eco, *Foucault’s Pendulum*
- Haruki Murakami, *Kafka on the Shore*
- Joyce Carol Oates, *Mysteries of Winterthurn*
- Edmund Wilson, “Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?”