A Tumultuous Sea of Human Heads: 
Detective Fiction and the Mystery of the Crowd

by

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Introduction

But, as the darkness came on, the throng momentarily increased; and, by the time the lamps were well lighted, two dense and continuous tides of population were rushing past the door. At this particular period I had never before been in a similar situation, and the tumultuous sea of human heads filled me, therefore, with a delicious novelty of emotion.

- Edgar Allan Poe, *Man of the Crowd*

The crowd is an ephemeral form. It builds and dissolves, re-forms and morphs, contracts and expands in endless variation. It is built of component parts, people and places and things, and each component part moves and acts and changes. In detective fiction, it is in this amorphous space that the crime happens, into the crowd that the detective goes to solve his crime. It is the talent of the detective, perhaps, to examine the crowd, to freeze its movement briefly, enough to restore order where crime has occurred. This thesis follows the crowd as it develops in the urban sprawl of early detective fiction, considers how detective characters re-conceive the crowd through detection tools and rational analysis, and explores changes in detective fiction’s representations of the detective in relation to the crowd.

The texts I have chosen to work with span the century between 1840 and 1940. During the first half of this period, inventions like the telegraph and the railroad enabled greater connectivity and rapid urbanization in Europe and the United States. Critics like Franco Moretti have posited linkages between rising, concentrated city populations and anxieties about social control over these vast urban communities.¹ Detective fiction develops, therefore, as a symptom of the city, a

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¹ See Franco Moretti’s *Signs Taken For Wonders*, Chapter 5.
symptom of a middle-class readership, and it is a genre that allows the reader to always be the innocent party. Detective fiction soothes anxieties about social control through the constant restoration of social order, again and again. In the world of detective fiction, every time that a crime disturbs the social order, a detective steps in to reorder things. Edgar Allan Poe wrote the first recognized detective stories, the Dupin stories, during the 1840’s. Drawing on newspaper accounts of real-life police work, Poe developed a model: an everyman narrator-sidekick chronicles the adventures of an eccentric, brilliant, amateur detective with special deductive methods. Poe’s work, set in the hustle and bustle of Paris, wrestles with concerns about individuality, typing, doubling, and anonymity. In Poe’s world, the crowd looms large and limitless, extending its tentacles through the daily newspapers and the city streets. Into the fray comes Dupin to categorize and organize. The detective can divide the crowd into types, sorting the groups into manageable categories—into which individuality also evaporates.

By the time that Arthur Conan Doyle wrote the iconic Sherlock Holmes stories at the turn of the century, the detective had himself become a literary type. Holmes, like Dupin, is an eccentric amateur detective whose adventures are chronicled by an everyman narrator. Unlike Dupin, whose formidable mind organizes the crowd into types, Holmes manages the London crowd through individual-specific analysis. Using rational techniques like mapping and scientific chemical analysis, Holmes contains the crowd by identifying the minute details that distinguish every individual from another. More prominently than Poe, Conan Doyle features novel nineteenth-century technologies like telegraphs and railroads.
Sherlock Holmes draws on the wellspring of emerging inventions that accompanied urbanization to offer the reader a promise of social control: as the crowd grows, so too do technologies to contain the crowd. Yet the specificity of Holmes’s analysis and the precision of his technologies reduce the individual to a collection of minutiae, as surely as Dupin translates the individual to type. Only Holmes rises above the crowd to exist as a defined character, with idiosyncrasies and contradictions that defy summation. Through serialization, the detective character takes on a definition and shape barred to any other character. And yet, as my last chapter will explore, even the detective faces reduction—and even elimination—as the needs of the narrative dictate.

Though the texts I have selected were published before 1940, Agatha Christie’s detective novels dominated the genre for half a century, from the 1920’s to the 1970’s. By 1940, two World Wars had wracked Europe and telephone wires and highways had encircled major cities like London. Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany would powerfully demonstrate the efficacy of technology in executing social control over the masses. It is in this context that Christie discards her predecessors’ concerns with the vastness and the sprawl of the crowd.

Detective fiction had found an entrenched niche in the publication market by the 1920’s. Indeed, Christie’s amateur detective Hercule Poirot competes with several emerging contemporary models of the detective: Raymond Chandler’s professional, un-eccentric Sam Spade wades directly into the action of the crime, and Christie’s own female detective Miss Marple does not claim eccentricity or scientific genius so much as she exudes common-sense awareness. Nevertheless, Poirot retains
many of the key features of the Dupin- or Holmes-style detective, even while limited spatial settings and manageable populations do away with concerns about the size of the crowd. Rather, Christie’s use of first-person narration, free-indirect narration, and verbal evasion leads the reader towards an uncertainty about and a suspicion of the individuals who make up a crowd. Christie uses red herrings and dummies to draw attention away from the murderer. In the process, the innocent characters in Christie’s novels lose their identities, subordinated to Christie’s all-important plot. Innocent individuals exist to mask the murderer, to draw attention away from other—guilty—individuals. During the final count, Christie raises the mask from Poirot’s own face, and the reader is left with the possibility that any individual—even the detective—is expendable.

When detective fiction can do away even with the detective, what is left but a return to the crowd? A little changed, a little altered, sans a criminal or two, but still present and still shifting. And so, into Poe’s tumultuous sea of human heads we go, to find that delicious novelty of emotion.
Chapter 1

The Crime Creates the Crowd

Around the same time that crime and detection led English speakers to coin the term “detective,” Edgar Allan Poe’s Dupin stories introduced many of the conventions that would come to define detective fiction.² The Dupin stories foreshadow the detective genre’s obsession with the guilty individual, its desire to return to the beginning, and its use of material clues, all the while exploring Poe’s own preoccupations about types and originality. Poe wrote three Dupin stories between 1841 and 1844. Heavily influenced by the ideas Poe developed in “The Man of the Crowd” (1840), the Dupin stories produce multiple, shifting descriptions of the crowd. Taken together, the stories present the crowd as an unstable, unreliable, and monstrously large entity. The instability and unreliability of the crowd reflects social anxieties about the growing demographic realities of cities during the mid-nineteenth century. Dupin’s ability to type the crowd provides an outlet for these anxieties. This chapter will focus on two of the Dupin stories, using “The Man of the Crowd” as the basis upon which Poe builds the crowd in the Dupin stories.

Every Dupin story begins in the large, creepy mansion that Dupin and the narrator inhabit. Secluded, dilapidated, and abandoned, the mansion is an island in the city of Paris. Dupin and his companion are the only characters as the story opens. The crime creates the crowd, which then intrudes into Dupin’s placid daily life. The

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² According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word detective first appeared in Chamber’s Journal in 1843. A detective is “one whose occupation it is to discover matters artfully concealed; particularly (and in the original application as short for detective policeman, or the like) a member of the police force employed to investigate specific cases, or to watch particular suspected individuals or classes of offenders. A private detective, one not belonging to the police force, who in his private capacity, or as attached to a Detective Agency or Bureau, undertakes similar services for persons employing him.”
crowd convenes as a set of types for Dupin to cipher, a surface that the crime disturbs, and a blank norm to which the story strains to return. By multiplying the individual, the crowd presents a city where each individual stands in for a type. Poe describes common types and uncommon types, but only types. Analyzing the typologies, Dupin adds and subtracts to come to the criminal type. Poe exercises an inflexible rule about criminals: the criminal type is always uncommon. In the Dupin story, the common types exist to illuminate the criminal type. The city crowd provides a median level brought into existence by the occurrence of an outlier—the crime. The crime depends upon the crowd for context, but so does the crowd depend on the crime.

The Quintessential Clerk

In “The Man of the Crowd”, Poe’s narrator explicitly observes and describes the city crowds, developing a technique of typing that seeks to encompass the entire city. Criminal typology developed at an intersection between nineteenth century social pressures and a renewed interest in the discipline of physiognomy, the study of links between physical appearance and personality traits. Johann Kaspar Lavater’s 1790 book *Physiognomy* popularized the

*Figure 1 Profile of Lavater, from Lavater, *Essai sur la physiognomie* (1781-1803). (Percival and Tytler 86).*
practice of physiognomy (Figure 1). Meanwhile, new property legislation increased the number of criminals (Sellers 47), and the increased state powers enabled European governments to prosecute prisoners on a large scale (Ginzburg 119-120). As prisons proliferated, practitioners of physiognomy and phrenology claimed that the disciplines could identify criminal tendencies through physical features. Many writers of the nineteenth century subscribed to Lavater’s teachings, including physiognomic descriptions in their characterizations (Percival and Tytler 17). Poe had an interest in physiognomy, and he incorporated physiognomic description into his writing. However, as Michael Gamper observes in “‘Er lässt sich nicht lesen”: Physiognomy and the City,” Poe does not straightforwardly endorse physiognomy, nor does he straightforwardly embrace the portrayal of types that emerges from the practice of physiognomy (Percival and Tytler 153).

In “Man of the Crowd,” Poe describes the individual as a type, and the city crowd as an amalgamation of types. Poe’s narrator claims to “descend to details” and “regard with minute interest the innumerable varieties of figure, dress, air, gait, visage, and expression of countenance” (Poe 85). However, instead of listing each of these details, Poe notes “the decent…noblemen, merchants, attorneys, tradesmen, stock-jobbers,” the “tribe of clerks,” “the race of swell pick-pockets,” and the gamblers (Poe 85-86). Poe describes each group in minute detail, offering a description of a representative member of the group to stand in for the whole. For instance, the senior clerks “had all slightly bald heads, from which the right ears, long

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3 For more on Lavater and physiognomy, see Percival and Tytler, *Physiognomy in Profile.*
4 For more on the rise of markets and changes to the legal system in America, see Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846,* Chapter 2.
used to pen-holding, had an odd habit of standing off on end” (Poe 86). Though Poe describes the clerks as a plural, the specificity of his description invokes a singular, quintessential clerk. This quintessential clerk stands in for the whole category of clerks. Poe crystallizes the “innumerable varieties” of the masses into an ideal representative of each type. By ignoring the innumerable varieties in favor of describing one representative type of multiple professions, Poe creates the illusion of multiplicity without in fact “descending into details” as his narrator claims. This technique, describing a type to evoke an individual, is most extensively developed in “The Man of the Crowd,” but Poe also uses this technique to create the mass in his detective fiction.

Published by *Graham’s Magazine* in 1841, “The Murders at the Rue Morgue” introduces Le Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin, an amateur gentleman-sleuth with a preference for the nighttime and an analyst’s keen mind. Two gruesome murders occur in the Rue Morgue, stumping the police force with the crimes’ strangeness and brutality. Dupin’s unnamed narrator-friend follows Dupin through Paris as he reads newspaper reports, receives police reports, and investigates the crime scene. Dupin collates the clues, dismissing suspects type by type, until he identifies the culprit: an orangutan brought to Paris by a Maltese sailor and accidentally let loose.

Twelve witnesses offer depositions in the newspaper in “The Murders at the Rue Morgue.” For each witness, Poe piles details upon details of backstory, mimicking the technique of newspaper reporting. Each witness has a job, a home, a native language, a nationality, a relationship with the victims, a recollection of the crime, and a piece of the story. The wealth of details creates a sense of busyness and
fullness in the story world, indicating a story world with lives and experiences beyond the explicit text. Moreover, some of the information types the witnesses. By labeling witnesses specifically as “laundress,” “tobacconist,” “Spaniard,” or “Englishman,” Poe identifies them as members of a larger profession and implies the existence of more laundresses, more tobacconists, more Spaniards, and more Englishmen. Poe amplifies this abundance by noting each witness’s certainties and uncertainties about their own testimony. Since Poe sets up parallel accounts, he refuses to weight one witness’s testimony with more credibility than any other witness’s. The contradicting certainties and uncertainties amplify the possible truths, and by extension the world of the story. Poe constructs the crowd through an illusion of multiplication. He implies the existence of the many individuals of the type by showing the existence of the individual type.

At the same time, Poe places boundaries around the crowd. He includes repeating details in each witness account. These repetitions remind the reader that these separate witnesses inhabit the same city. The witnesses provide overlapping, but varying, accounts of the same events. Witnesses repeat certain words and phrases multiple times: “a shrill voice,” “sacre,” “diable,” and “mon Dieu.” These repetitions, even when qualified by uncertainty or incompleteness, create a self-enclosed, self-referential discourse within the city Poe creates. The crime serves as a unifying event around which the crowd forms, and the crowd does not expand beyond the crime. The crowd’s form exists only relative to the crime, a discrete historical event.
**Stargazing and the Superficial Gaze**

A problem emerges from Dupin’s use of types to solve a crime. What happens when data is identical, when clues add up to a clue type that fits many candidates? Carlo Ginzburg notes in his article “Clues” how this problem emerges in early government criminal databases. Human vital data sometimes converges; what happens when multiple suspects have the same vital data? For instance, what if two orangutans had been present in Paris during the Rue Morgue murders? Moretti also observes this problem: “The perfect crime—the nightmare of detective fiction—is the featureless, de-individualized crime that anyone could have committed because at this point everyone is the same” (Moretti 135). Moretti argues that, in the detective fiction, individuality always implies guilt, while conformity always implies innocence. The detective fiction depends on the correlation between these pairs. Only the nails that stick out get hammered, and justice requires that the criminal always get hammered. Poe’s crowds are always a crowd of the normal. Against that normal backdrop, the crime must appear so different, so abnormal, and so manifestly obvious, that the most superficial of glances will reveal its oddity.

In “Rue Morgue,” on the topic of the policeman Vidocq, Dupin says:

He impaired his vision by holding the object too close. He might see, perhaps, one or two points with unusual clearness, but in so doing he, necessarily, lost sight of the matter as a whole. Thus there is such a thing as being too profound. Truth is not always in a well. In fact, as regards the more important knowledge, I do believe she is invariably superficial. (Poe 106)

For example, Dupin points out that stars, looked at directly, do not reveal much. Stargazing is best done, Dupin asserts, through sidelong glances (Poe 106). Dupin
uses this method in “Purloined Letter” through his focus on the superficial obviousness of the criminal’s strategy of concealment.

Poe’s 1844 tale “The Purloined Letter” features Minister D—. This wily politician steals a letter to manipulate another politician. Minister D—‘s ingenuity (the ingenuity of both a mathematician and a poet, says Dupin) leads him to hide the letter in plain sight. Once again, the Paris police force is stumped. This time, the case’s simplicity leads the police to overlook the obvious. “The Man of the Crowd” also features the use of quick, superficial observation to draw conclusions. “The Man of the Crowd’s” narrator labels each type of city-dweller based on a momentary glance. Rather than consider the individual crime, Dupin—like the narrator of “The Man of the Crowd”—contextualizes the crime amongst other crimes and picks out the distinguishing features. The Parisian police look at the individual case and ask, “What has occurred?” (Poe 107). Dupin, by contrast, asks, “What has occurred that has never occurred before?” (Poe 107). Dupin acknowledges the existence of a wider universe of occurrences, and he seeks to identify the facts that distinguish this occurrence from the larger mass of occurrences. Abnormality distinguishes the case. Franco Moretti claims that detective fiction entails “the punishment of one who, willfully or not, trespassed the boundaries of normality. He who distinguishes himself has his destiny marked out. To avoid death (and who wouldn’t want to?) it is suggested that one conform to a stereotype: in this way, one will never be a victim or a criminal” (Moretti 137).

Yet, crucially, Dupin’s analysis requires a context of normality. Dupin claims that the Paris police inhabit only the consciousness of the mass (“their own ingenuity
is a faithful representative of the mass” (Poe 258)). Dupin, on the other hand, claims the ability to inhabit the consciousness of D—: a more ingenious consciousness than the Paris police’s consciousness by virtue of sharing the ingenuity of both poet and mathematician. However, Dupin’s method requires a first step: identifying D— as a more ingenious type than the normal mass. The method assumes the existence of a normal mass. D— cannot be the more ingenious without a less ingenious to compare him to. Like a dialectical movement from thesis to antithesis, the abnormal criminal brings forth the normal crowd.¹

Making the final leap from the crowd’s level of ingenuity to D—‘s level depends on Dupin’s ability to identify with D—. Just as the Parisian police “faithfully represent” the mass ingenuity, Dupin replicates D—‘s ingenuity. Moretti notes the analogy between detective and criminal: “The detective abandons the individualistic ethic voluntarily, but still retains the memory of it. For this reason he can ‘understand’ the criminal” (Moretti 141). The distinction between D—‘s abnormal ingenuity and the normal mass’s has an analogy in Dupin’s abnormal analytical skills and the Paris police’s analytical skills. Arthur Conan Doyle sharpens this analogy in Sherlock Holmes, and this contrast will appear more prominently in chapter two.

¹ Henry Mayhew’s writings on the working poor of London appear in many discussions of Victorian London. Beyond his observations of the poor, Mayhew also wrote extensively about the criminal classes, noting different categories and strata of criminals. David Englander argues in “Henry Mayhew and the Criminal Classes of Victorian England” that Mayhew’s observations of criminals sheds light on civilian life. According to Englander, Mayhew’s The Criminal Prisons of London is “a text that says as much about civil society as about the penal system” (Englander 97).
Aggregation and Combination

The criminal’s abnormality would seem to indicate the triumph of the individual over the normality of the crowd. Yet Poe’s criminal is not the abnormal individual in the city crowd. His criminal is an abnormal type in a world where abnormal criminal types exist, if not in abundance. Poe incorporates abnormality into a specialized type of crowd: the criminal crowd. Since the criminal represents just one more type, Dupin can develop a rational method to solve the crime. Dupin builds a stable of abnormalities, adding up types to develop the criminal type.

Ginzburg’s article “Clues” analyzes the development of clues from tracking in pre-historical times to handwriting analysis in the present day. Ginzburg observes that these processes depend on small, seemingly irrelevant details to reveal larger, highly relevant implications. By combining and analyzing these details, the observer can construct a full story. Freudian

psychoanalysis’s assumption that small, involuntary gestures or comments stem from (and reveal) large, underlying psychological causes provides a good framework to analogize the detective’s attempts to reconstruct the crime from small clues (Ginzburg 101). For instance, small geometrical differences allow fingerprinting and handwriting analysts—or even physiognomists—to identify individuals (see Figure 2). These disciplines use mechanisms

Figure 2 Nine Eyes, from Lavater, Essays on Physiognomy, (1797). (Percival and Tytler 73).
that parallel Dupin’s mechanisms for identifying individuals. Multiple component geometrical shapes comprise the fingerprint. Every person’s fingerprint is different from anyone else’s, but those differences appear as miniscule, geometrical differences. Fingerprint analysts identify individuals through the shapes’ sum appearance, not through the component shapes. Similarly, Dupin employs a set of types, the sum of which identifies the criminal.

Noting the clues left behind by the criminal, Dupin constructs a whole story about the crime. This method appears particularly in Dupin’s construction of types. In “The Purloined Letter,” Dupin assesses D—based upon D—’s proficiency as both mathematician and poet: “As poet and mathematician, he would reason well: as a mere mathematician, he could not have reasoned at all” (Poe 259). Dupin assembles D—as a combination of types: mathematician and poet. This combination of types adds up to a single type: mathematician-poet. By applying his analytical skills to the mathematician-poet type, Dupin can predict D—‘s behavior. Like the multiple witness testimonies, D—‘s ingenuity rises above the poet or the mathematician’s by virtue of addition. However, though D—‘s ingenuity may rise above the poet type and mathematician type, D— is analyzed not as an individual, but as a mathematician-poet hybrid type applied to a specific case. This method of combining types to analyze cases can be seen in “The Man of the Crowd.” For example, the narrator distinguishes between pickpockets and gamblers. Both have a dashing appearance, but pickpockets have voluminous arm-sleeves and excessive frankness, while gamblers have extra-extended thumbs and guarded conversational tones (Poe 86).
Dupin’s critical point comes out of the sum of the witness testimonies. The Italian, English, Spanish, Dutch, and French speakers all agree that the shrill voice shrieks in a foreign language. Together, the witnesses constitute a crowd of languages within which the shrill voice does not belong. Individually, however, no witness testimony can reveal this fact. Only Dupin’s aggregation of the testimonies reveals this fact.

This method of addition or combination complicates Poe’s theories of composition, revealing Poe’s ambivalence towards a practice he claims to despise. Terence Whalen, in *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses*, traces the conditions of an oversaturated literary market in Poe’s era. Whalen posits that Dupin is Poe’s fantasy of “a kind of thinker who was still capable of total knowledge” in such an era (Whalen 13). Aggregation is a mathematical method that implies inclusion and totality, and Dupin’s use of aggregation seems to imbue him with total knowledge. Nevertheless, Dupin’s comments about mathematics underline the problem with Dupin’s type of knowledge. Dupin rejects the applicability of mathematics as an infinite truth: “What is true of relation—of form and quantity—is often grossly false in regard to morals, for example. In this latter science it is very usually untrue that the aggregated parts are equal to the whole” (Poe 260). Poe’s avowed distrust of the aggregated parts reinforces his distrust of the details and his trust in the superficial. However, as Dupin’s comment demonstrates, Dupin does not possess total knowledge. In fact, he has a rather specialized knowledge: Dupin possesses knowledge about the aggregate, but he knows nothing about the individual parts. Dupin is a specialist in the superficial, an expert at dilettantism. In practice, his
analytical approach mirrors that of the industrial writer. Whalen discusses Poe’s claim that novelty arises from unusual combinations and Poe’s denigration of those who practice combination in writing (Whalen 44). Whalen cites “How to Write a Blackwood Article” and “The Literary Life of Thingum Bob, Esq.” to suggest that Poe’s satires “depict the modern writer not as an inspired creator, but as a dim-witted drudge who extracts and reassembles phrases selected randomly from previously published texts” (Whalen 26). Like such a writer, Dupin extracts andreassembles types from a mass of pre-existing types. Dupin embodies Poe’s theory of novelty (novelty is the discovery of unusual combinations), and he also embodies the dim-witted drudge. Dupin’s method demonstrates the impossibility of total knowledge, despite Poe’s attempt to posit otherwise. The trade-off between deep knowledge and superficial knowledge always exists, even for the polymath. Ginzburg discusses the same problem of a trade-off in scientific observation: “assume a lax scientific system in order to attain noteworthy results, or assume a meticulous, scientific one to achieve results of scant significance” (Ginzburg 124). By beginning his analysis from material clues and miniscule tracks, Dupin utilizes a meticulous scientific method. In the science field, Ginzburg notes, this method has accuracy without distinguished results. By contrast, Dupin uses the meticulous scientific method to achieve seemingly significant results within the story—he successfully catches the criminals. Within the story-world, Dupin fulfills Poe’s fantasy of a functional polymath. He synthesizes the whole story-world using a meticulous information system to get

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6 This trade-off may reflect Poe’s ambivalent relationship towards the commodification of literature that occurred during his lifetime. On the one hand, it enables his livelihood; on the other, the expansion of publication leads to the impossibility of total knowledge. Abstracting or synthesizing individual cases into types is the only way to gain total knowledge. See Whalen, Chapter 1.
significant results. In fact, however, these results are not significant at the level of the form of detective fiction. Moretti observes that the detective novel always seeks a return to the beginning, a reinstatement of the innocent and a punishment for the abnormal act, the crime (Moretti 1983, 137). Dupin, then, does not develop significant new observations, but significance in the story allows the return to insignificance, or normality. Based on small material evidence from clues, his observations never reveal general, abstract conclusions about human nature. Clues are always limited in scope to the case at hand, dissolving into Dupin’s information flow. Poe’s general, abstract conclusions develop in his experiments with types and typing. Though clues carry meaning within the information flow, typing allows Dupin to make abstract, general claims about people.

Dupin’s interest in aggregate information indicates a shift during Poe’s era, from information as inherently valuable, to perishable information. Whalen observes that, in Poe’s time, control over the flow of information became increasingly more valuable than control over the information itself (Whalen 43). The Dupin stories reflect this shift in information value. Poe dedicates a significant proportion of each Dupin story to description of Dupin’s discursive technique. Dupin emphasizes his method, his technique of crime solving, far more than he emphasizes the facts of the case at hand. Whalen would call the facts of the case at hand “perishable.” Perishable information has no value in and of itself. It has value only as part of an information flow. In this respect, an individual in a Dupin novel is a piece of perishable information—relevant only as an example of a larger type. Dupin uses his method to control the information flow, manipulating the perishable information as
needed. Dupin does not much care what the perishable information contains. Dupin will process the information, no matter what information he receives. Such a method, which rejects content as such, creates a problem: “The irrelevancy of the content is not an ‘assumption’ but a problematic datum, a fact which calls for explanation. And it is a cultural – not a syntactic – fact, which betrays the aspiration to a completely formalized and therefore interchangeable humanity: where what one ‘is’ is completely irrelevant, because the only thing that counts is what the social syntax compels one to do” (Moretti 141). Dupin’s tendency towards superficiality and aggregation vacates individuals of their own identities, diluting the individual to a type. The type is not a substance, but a placeholder, the absence that some individual (and who cares which one?) must fill. When the social syntax desires an individual as a placeholder, to fill an absence in the larger flow, the individual as such dissolves. Only the absence matters.

Absence Reveals the Thing Itself

Prior to the crime, Dupin and the narrator live enclosed, solitary lives. They meet at an “obscure” library, and then move to a deserted mansion in a “retired” and “desolate” part of town. Their seclusion is “perfect”, and they admit no visitors (Poe 95). Poe does not describe Paris or its inhabitants until after the crime. In the Dupin stories, the Paris crowd does not exist until the murders occur. Additionally, Dupin’s eccentricity leads to a life lived quite literally in the dark. He closes the curtains from daylight and ventures out only at night because “if there is any point requiring reflection, we will examine it to better purpose in the dark” (Poe 249). This comment
suggests that absence of the thing reveals what the thing itself is. After the crime occurs and the city reveals itself, Dupin retreats to his bizarre, un-crowded home to puzzle out the peculiarities of the crime. Absences—of the crowd, of the innocent, of the individual—reveal the criminal type.

Dupin insists that the peculiar aspects of the crime are the aspects most likely to lead to its solution, but his mechanism of deduction is elimination, not oddity. In “Rue Morgue”, Dupin notes the peculiarity of the shrill voice: though the witnesses heard it, they all described the voice as foreign. Dupin identifies the shrill voice through his elimination of a bunch of types:

“While an Italian, an Englishman, a Spaniard, a Hollander, and a Frenchman attempted to describe it, each one spoke of it as that of a foreigner…Now, how strangely unusual must that voice have really been, about which such testimony as this could have been elicited!—in whose tones, even, denizens of the five great divisions of Europe could recognize nothing familiar!” (Poe 108-109).

Interestingly, Dupin’s method depends less on a peculiarity than it does on the crowd. By eliminating whole sets of people—English speakers, Spanish speakers, Dutch speakers, and so forth—Dupin’s method begins from an array of types and narrows down through elimination of types. Dupin also uses a similar method of elimination when he observes that “ordinary assassins employ no modes of murder” involving so much unnecessary brutality (Poe 114), when he comments that the crime would require “strength superhuman” (Poe 115), and when he finally concludes that the fingermarks left on the victim’s throat are not human (Poe 115). With each observation, Dupin acquits a specific set of suspects in a series of widening criteria: ordinary assassins, the weak or less-than-exceptionally-strong, and humans. He never works by eliminating individual suspects. Rather, he eliminates types of suspects.
Additionally, Dupin never pursues named suspects. In “Rue Morgue” Poe provides the witnesses’ names, but the names do not have a function in the narrative, except as a reality effect. Far more relevant are the professions of the witnesses, which usually demonstrate the witness’s connection to the crime. The culprit is an orangutan, with no characteristics to distinguish it from any other orangutan. In “Purloined Letter,” the only story where Dupin pursues an individual villain (as opposed to dismissing innocent suspects to find the guilty party), Poe withholds the minister’s name. The reader knows the suspect only as D---. Poe describes D— as “a desperate man, and a man of nerve” and “the monstrum horrendum, an unprincipled man of genius” (Poe 265). D— also fills the roles of mathematician, poet, courtier, and “bold intriguant” (Poe 261). Though the reader learns about D—‘s habits and ingenuity, D— remains profoundly typological. The individual identity of D--- is drained away, leaving the reader with only his profession as a minister and his practice of mathematics and poetry.

The draining of D—‘s individual identity echoes a perennial theme in Poe criticism. Poe has a recurring concern with the loss of the individual self. Whalen discusses how an oversaturated publishing market forced Poe towards a capitalist understanding of literature. While his contemporary, Lucian Minor, attempted to remedy the overproduction of texts by developing a centralized intellectual canon, Poe developed a capitalist view of literature as product. Poe, like Minor, feared the homogenizing and generalizing impulses of mass production (Whalen 3-21). That fear appears thematically in Poe’s work through depictions of doubling and palimpsest in works like *William Wilson* and depictions of absence in works like *The
It also appears explicitly in Poe’s critical book reviews; Poe often complains of unoriginality (Amaral 229-231). Poe’s body of work reveals a conscious fear of the interchangeable system Moretti describes, wherein one’s self matters less than one’s social syntax.

Poe explores how the contents of individual identity dissipate into the social syntax in “The Man of the Crowd” when he says, “the essence of all crime is undivulged” (Poe 84). Though the narrator is convinced that the man has committed a legal crime, the narrative implies that the man’s true crime is his unknowability.

“This man,” says the narrator, “is the type and genius of deep crime. He refuses to be alone. He is the man of the crowd” (Poe 91). The narrator initially follows the man because he cannot immediately type on a superficial level. However, as the days pass, the man never leaves the crowd, and the narrator can only define him by what he is not, just as Dupin defines the orangutan by what he is not. This inability to classify the man indicates the problem of the superficial and the type: by aggregating and typing, the investigator can only develop a negative or a generalized identification. The narrator cannot develop a positive identification of the individual. In fact, when the narrator finally gives up the attempt to understand the man, he must fall back on a type—“the type and genius of deep crime”. But unlike the common categories of types, like the pickpocket, the gambler, or the clerk, the type of deep crime tells the reader nothing about the thing—deep crime—itself. Poe’s portrayal of the man reveals Poe’s complicated stance towards physiognomy. Though the narrator

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7 Poe publicly accused the celebrated poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow of plagiarism in what has been called the Poe-Longfellow War. According to Poe, Longfellow had gained his reputation through imitating other poets. For more on the Longfellow plagiarism controversy, see Kent Linquist’s “The Little War and Longfellow’s Dilemma”. 
successfully types the rest of the city, the narrator’s inability to type the man “seems to question the validity of physiognomy by suggesting that the impossibility of reading the old man’s face has much to do with the steady loss of identity and individuality that is brought by city life” (Percival and Tytler 153).

Absence, not presence, describes the criminal. Poe defines the criminal by *what he has done*, but the reader discovers *who he is* by *who he is not*. Poe’s inability to describe the criminal illustrates a larger tendency in detective fiction: the desire for repression, for a return to absence. Moretti, in “Clues”, argues that detective novels only consider history as a violation (Moretti 137). The crime is the only important history in a detective novel, and the only reason to go over that history is to repress the crime. Innocence, or the possession of an alibi, implies absence; the innocent suspect is *not* present at the crime. Thus, Moretti claims, detective novels champion a negative ideal of absence (Moretti 139). For this reason, Moretti categorizes detective novels as a profoundly conservative fiction, a fiction always seeking order.

Yet in the absence of a crime, the detective story has no story. Poe’s development of types demonstrates this tension in detective fiction. Since the individual represents only one instance of a type, vanquishing an individual criminal case creates a vacancy that another individual of the criminal type will fill. Conversely, since the individual represents the entire type, the triumph over an individual criminal case vanquishes the entire criminal type. This is the paradox of Poe’s crowd. Types expand the individuals into a crowd, creating a realist sensation of the city, but they also order the crowd into manageable units. It is the presence of the crime, the violation of the norm, which brings forth the story. Likewise, the
presence of the criminal brings forth the presence of the crowd. But just as the
criminal’s presence can be described only by absence, so only can a crowd’s presence
be described only by absence. When the reader attempts to define the criminal, the
criminal dissolves into a type. When the reader attempts to define the crowd, the
crowd dissolves into a surface of types.

Conclusion

Edgar Allan Poe’s portrayal of the crowd reveals his own ambivalence
towards the crowd. Writing during a period of expansion—in publishing, in capital,
in population, in ideas—Poe worried about the impossibility of total knowledge. In
this sense, Poe’s Dupin stories, and thus the foundation of all detective fiction,
developed out of a specific moment in literary history: a moment when production
seemed to overwhelm literature and the market seemed to have no limit. Detectives
fiction, in its unremitting attempt to return to innocence and consistent insistence on
the criminal’s guilt, absolves the reader of guilt and denies society’s culpability in the
crime (Moretti 137). Detective fiction is a symptom of the city, the expanding,
irrepressible mass that Poe feared; it attempts to order the over-saturated, over-
producing market. Moreover, by placing the reader in a position of innocence—of

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8 Thomas Reinert’s *Regulating Confusion: Samuel Johnson and the Crowd* discusses how, for Johnson, the logic of the crowd tends to isolate and demean individuals (Reinert 3). Johnson’s concern is that “the crowd is not properly an object of experience; rather, it dissolves self-consciousness…People prepare themselves by finding ways, not to help their impressions enter experience, but to prevent them from doing so. The need to ward off shocks is so great that an urban poet like Baudelaire registers the city primarily in the ways he avoids referring to it” (Reinert 5).

9 For more on this topic, see Whalen, *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses*, Chapter 2.
not knowing about the crime—detective fiction allows a return to innocence, even if only for the span of a single story.

Poe dreamed of a polymath who could encompass all knowledge. Yet he never realized the polymath he theorized about. Poe constructs a complex and nuanced portrayal of types as the building blocks of the crowd. Together, the common types create a smooth surface against which the uncommon types stand out. Through aggregation and combination, Dupin arrives at a type that describes the case at hand. Types and aggregates construct and contain the crowd. Ultimately, however, the superficiality of types and aggregates renders the component parts unreadable and absent. Despite a nuanced and complex portrayal of types and masses, Poe never manages to describe the individual and the crowd as anything but absence. Poe allows the reader a quick insight into the individual and the crowd when the reader looks sideways, as though stargazing. But examine straight on, and both disappear. Poe’s individuals always dissolve into the anonymity of surfaces and aggregates. His crowd always dissolves into an amalgam of types.

Poe’s ambivalence towards the crowd extends further than ambivalence towards dissolution. Poe writes two polymaths into his story. He valorizes Dupin and denigrates D—, but in denigrating D—, Poe unveils a fraud. D— is a mere criminal mastermind type—but Dupin is a mere detective mastermind type. And the difference between criminal mastermind and detective mastermind is razor-thin. In the end, even the polymath is a masquerader. He is only a dilettante (albeit a megalomaniacal type of dilettante, capable of typing others) wearing the mask of a polymath.
Chapter 2

Mapping the Crowd: Minutiae and Morality

Whereas Poe describes a quintessential, identity-less type to construct the mass, Conan Doyle depicts the crowd as a multitude. Conan Doyle juxtaposes two Londons: amateur detective Sherlock Holmes’s London and his assistant Dr. James Watson’s London. Watson’s London is amorphous, impenetrable, and expansive, and the threat of the crowd develops from the inability to organize the crowd into a system. Like Dupin, Sherlock Holmes functions as a mechanism to manage the mass. Unlike Dupin, Holmes does not attempt to reduce the crowd to categories through typing. Rather, Holmes embraces the crowd’s size and controls the crowd through extreme attention to difference. Holmes’s method focuses on deep details, preserving individual differences and distinctions. Even so, while Holmes holds the threat of Watson’s London at bay, Holmes’s method, like Dupin’s, presents its own threat to the individual. The threat of Holmes’s method lies, not in the reduction to a type, but in the reduction to minutiae. Though Holmes orders the crowd and preserves difference, his method reduces individuals to the functional details that distinguish them from others—details that, though distinct, diminish the individual to minutiae.

Is Anybody Out There?

Watson represents the crowd as an amorphous, unknowable mass. In every Sherlock Holmes story that Watson narrates, Holmes can always call upon some nameless “Arab boy” to run his errands. The incompetent police of Holmes’s London can always find some innocent man to arrest. Holmes can always find some public
house where he will learn the local gossip. Watson can always open a newspaper to read about some new tidbit of city happenings. Each individual Sherlock Holmes story assumes the existence of innumerable street boys, innumerable innocent men, innumerable public houses, and innumerable city happenings. The city refuses to disclose names to Watson, creating a sense of anonymity and obscurity about the individuals in the crowd. At the same time, the constant supply of people implies a vast expansion of people beyond the immediate. As in the Dupin stories, individuals imply the existence of more individuals like them, though, unlike in the Dupin stories, the specific individual is still important. This assumption creates the sense of an unbounded expansion of anonymity. The obscurity of the represented crowd increases the reader’s impression of limitlessness and uncontrollability—perhaps beyond the actual delimitations of the crowd.

Surface assessments of the crowd have no stability in the Sherlock Holmes stories. Nowhere does this instability appear more prominently than in Watson’s everyman narration of Holmes’s adventures. Viktor Shklovsky suggests that Watson functions to provide a layman’s eye against which the expert eyes of Holmes can correct (Shklovsky 104). Holmes repeats, in several variations, the fact that, “You see, but you do not observe. The distinction is clear” (Conan Doyle 10). Watson, in other words, takes in the surface details, while Holmes interacts with what he sees. In “The Adventure of the Red-Headed League,” a redheaded client, Jabez Wilson, comes to Holmes and explains how he applied for a job copying the encyclopedia. Funded by a League of Red-Headed Men, the job has no apparent rhyme or reason, but only redheads can take the job. Several months later, the League shut down, and
Wilson lost his job. Watson describes the investigation using language that underscores the chaotic and convoluted city of London:

The road in which we found ourselves as we turned round the corner from the retired Saxe-Coburg Square presented as great a contrast to it as the front of a picture does to the back. It was one of the main arteries which conveyed the traffic of the City to the north and west. The roadway was blocked with the immense stream of commerce flowing in a double tide inward and outward, while the foot paths were black with the hurrying swarm of pedestrians. It was difficult to realize as we looked at the line of fine shops and stately business premises that they really abutted on the other side upon the faded and stagnant square which we had just quitted. (Conan Doyle 61)

Watson’s description of the London setting includes no road names, no business name, and no personal names. Watson’s eyes skip over names, creating a sense of anonymity and obscurity. His observations situate each road, each business, each shop, and each pedestrian within a larger, limitless world of roads, businesses, shops, and pedestrians. The road is “one of the main arteries,” implying that many other main arterial roads exist. The traffic of the city moves towards “the north and west,” cardinal directions that have no geographic boundaries. The “line of fine shops and stately business premises” has no discrete beginning and end; Watson does not mention how long the line stretches or how many shops sit on the line, generating the possibility of an infinite line of infinite shops. Similarly, Watson’s phrasing of “immense stream of commerce” and “hurrying swarms of pedestrians” refuses to offer concrete, finite units. Roads, shops, and pedestrians are in abundant supply, with every individual implying the existence of more individuals. Unlike Dupin, who finds representative individuals to manage a crowd, Watson lacks the ability to distinguish the individual and instead piles masses on top of masses to build a crowd.
Conan Doyle also uses the technique of piling masses at a micro-level. Watson’s aimless, wandering descriptions echo Conan Doyle’s larger tendency to emphasize insignificant details, and even insignificant characters. In “The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle,” a chance encounter on the street leads Holmes to a goose containing a blue carbuncle, a famous and recently-stolen gem. Holmes embarks on an in-depth analysis of the intellectual but hard-on-his-luck Henry Baker, who turns out to be an innocent bystander. Baker “was highly intellectual…fairly well-to-do within the last three years, although he has fallen on evil days…is a man who leads a sedentary life, goes out little, is out of training entirely, is middle-aged, has grizzled hair which he has had cut within the last few days, and which he anoints with lime-cream” (Conan Doyle 201). Conan Doyle spends more ink on Baker than any other detail in the story—more than the villain and even the titular blue carbuncle—but Baker’s only relevance to the story lies in the fact that he accidentally received a goose. Holmes underscores the arbitrariness of the description by adding, “These are the more patent facts which are to be deduced from his hat. Also, by the way, that it is extremely improbable that he has gas laid on in his house” (Conan Doyle 201). Holmes tosses in his last observation with a careless “by the way,” but its placement at the end of his analysis, in its own sentence, and slightly separated from the earlier list of traits, gives it heavier weight. Despite the heavier emphasis, the gas information is an insignificant secondary fact about Henry Baker, an insignificant secondary character. But Holmes’s method gives equal weight to the gas and Baker’s moral character. Serendipity gives Baker the goose-wrapped carbuncle, and Holmes’s design quickly eliminates Baker from the list of suspects. This expansion of
details, people, and places threatens the identity of the individual because it refuses to differentiate between the important—primary characters, crucial clue facts, and main roads or shops—and the unimportant—secondary characters, serendipitous facts, and minor roads or shops. Watson’s observation of the crowd—and the reader’s understanding of the crowd—threatens to destroy the possibility of significance and level individual entities.

Unlike Poe, Conan Doyle has an answer for the expansion of the mass. Writing fifty years later, Conan Doyle creates a culture in which the crowd can be numbered and counted. Even though society expands, the tools for social control also expand. In a Sherlock Holmes story, Holmes’s messages always arrive at the intended destination, unless it serves the plot for them to fall astray. For instance, Holmes frequently places ads in the newspaper to draw people out, and his targets nearly always answer the ad. The ads’ success assumes that, even in the enormous city of London, an audience exists to read the news and answer Holmes’s ads. Moretti comments, “Carriages, trains, letters, telegrams, in Conan Doyle’s world, are all crucial and always live up to expectations. They are the tacit and indispensable support of the arrest” (Moretti 143). Moretti concludes that these items create a framework that enables social control, even as society expands. However, it is Holmes himself who creates the framework that enables social control. Conan Doyle uses the particularity of Holmes’s method and the precision of his work as a controlling force to reduce the crowd to a manageable size. By pinpointing individuals, Holmes restores the possibility of signification and differentiates individual identities.
Watson, observing the crowd as an amorphous mass, sees only the threat of the infinite, endlessly expanding mass. In Watson’s London, individuals call up more individuals, and the amorphous mass grows into a larger amorphous mass. In Sherlock Holmes’s London, though, understanding the crowd hinges on specific, single-minded observation. Holmes’s power is his ability to observe the deep details and eliminate the irrelevant details. In this sense, Holmes’s method differs significantly from Dupin’s method. Dupin’s power lies in his ability to accurately type and aggregate; Sherlock Holmes’s power lies in his ability to eliminate and associate. Dupin aggregates his witness testimonies—foreign shriek, unrecognizable language—and types his suspects—extremely strong, not human; these approaches bring Dupin to the culprit. Holmes uses specific details to eliminate suspects like Henry Baker, and he makes the correct associations between details to find his culprit. Yet both detectives provide similar functions for their stories. Like Dupin, Holmes orders the crowd, containing the innumerable people and places through his methodical categorizations and deductions. Holmes provides a central, organizing force in the proliferation of stories, and he also provides an organized, defined center within the stories. Immediately following Watson’s observations of the crowd in “Red-Headed League,” Holmes weighs in:

“Let me see,” said Holmes, standing at the corner, and glancing along the line, “I should like just to remember the order of the houses here. It is a hobby of mine to have an exact knowledge of London. There is Mortimer’s, the tobacconist, the little newspaper shop, the Coburg branch of the City and Suburban Bank, the Vegetarian Restaurant, and McFarlane’s carriage-building depot. That carries us right on the other block. And now, Doctor, we’ve done our work, so it’s time we had some play.” (Conon Doyle 61)
Sherlock Holmes, like Dupin, acts as a processing machine that reads the crowd as Watson the layman cannot. His “exact knowledge of London” places boundaries around London and limits the expansion of the city. In contrast to Watson’s unbounded line of shops, Holmes notes the specific shops and their proprietors: Mortimer’s, Coburg branch, McFarlane’s. Sherlock Holmes delineates the line and the road by observing where the other block begins. The city blocks divvy up the city into manageable units. Holmes further minimizes the crowd by calling his exactitude a “hobby,” rather than an occupation. More importantly, Holmes claims, “we’ve done our work.” By making this claim, Holmes provides closure to the exercise of observation; instead of an endless stream of commerce, Holmes separates work from play with a discrete boundary.

Moretti argues that “Holmes’s culture resolves the deep anxiety of an expanding society: the fear that development might liberate centrifugal energies and thus make effective social control impossible” (Moretti 143). Holmes’s method of mapping and labeling particularizes techniques of social control. By divvying up the crowd into manageable, readable units, Holmes’s maps and labels give the illusion of control over the space of the city—for the reader as much as Watson.

**Wrong Address: The Crowd at Bay**

The Sherlock Holmes stories’ certainty that messages arrive at their destinations echoes a larger certainty in detective fiction: namely, that the detective can follow the criminal’s footsteps to arrive at the criminal. Peter Brooks argues in *Reading for the Plot* that detectives repeat the criminal’s story, crafting the most
logical story (Brooks 25). In Moretti’s terms, history is the only story, and detective fiction deals only with violations of history (Moretti 138). Holmes’s cases require him to visit the scene of the crime, to trace the footsteps of the criminal, and to build a narrative that holds together the signifiers that do not fit into an orderly society. In “Red-Headed League,” this retracing is doubly apparent in the description of the road. Watson comments on how difficult it was to remember that the shops and businesses “really abutted on the other side” the shop of Jabez Wilson (Conan Doyle 61). At that time, Holmes mentions the presence of the Coburg branch of the City and Suburban Bank. Although Holmes notes both of these facts, Conan Doyle buries the significance of these two facts in his descriptions of the crowd and the contrasting analytical eyes of Watson and Holmes. Only later does Conan Doyle place the facts side-by-side: “The only remaining point was what they were burrowing for. I walked round the corner, saw the City and Suburban Bank abutted on our friend’s premises, and felt that I had solved my problem” (Conan Doyle 72). Brooks notes that detectives can only plot the most plausible story, that “verification of the fabula lies in its plausibility, its fitting the needs of explanation” (Brooks 25).¹⁰ Once Holmes crafts a story that satisfies orderly society’s understanding of the order’s violation, he has completed his work. Holmes felt “that [he] had solved [his] problem” after connecting the bank and Wilson’s shop—he did not need to catch Clay to solve his);

¹⁰ Tzvetan Todorov has noted that the work of detection that we witness in the detective story, which is in prasentia for the reader, exists to reveal, to realize the story of the crime, which is in absentia yet also the important narrative since it bears the meaning. Todorov identifies the two orders of story, inquest and crime, as sjuzet and fabula. He thus makes the detective story the narrative of narratives, its classical structure a laying-bare of the structure of all narrative in that it dramatizes the role of sjuzet and fabula and the nature of their relation. Plot, I would add, once more appears as the active process of sjuzet working on fabula, the dynamic of its interpretive ordering” (Brooks 24).
problem. Holmes can never verify the truth unless the criminal or a witness verifies
the truth. A detective’s solution is a set of facts that create a consistent narrative—but
a consistent, plausible narrative is not the only narrative. Though Conan Doyle
downplays the plausibility of Watson’s chaotic, limitless narrative of the city,
Watson’s crowd pushes in on the reader at moments when Holmes fails.

When Sherlock Holmes makes a mistake, or messages go astray, his ordering
capacity fails to hold the crowd at bay, unveiling the menace of the crowd. Holmes’s
failures reveal the threat of the crowd and reinstate the reader’s fear of the crowd. In
“The Blue Carbuncle,” Watson assumes, based on his familiarity with Sherlock
Holmes, that Henry Baker’s hat has a crime attached to it:

“I suppose,” I remarked, “that, homely as it looks, this thing has some
deadly story linked to it – that it is the clue which will guide you in the
solution of some mystery, and the punishment of some crime.”

“No, no. No crime,” said Sherlock Holmes, laughing, “Only
one of those whimsical little accidents which will happen when you
have four million human beings all jostling each other within the space
of a few square miles. Amid the action and reaction of so dense a
swarm of humanity, every possible combination of events may be
expected to take place, and many a little problem will be presented
which may be striking and bizarre without being criminal.” (Conan
Doyle 198)

Watson’s assumption reflects the anxiety of the layperson in regards to the
crowd: that elements of the crowd, “homely” as they may look, have a “deadly story”
attached to them. Holmes’s comment about whimsical accidents reminds the reader
that masses produce a normal and an abnormal, but abnormal does not always
threaten the normal. Crime is a breaking of social order, but not all breakings of
social order threaten society. Problematically, though, the layperson may have
trouble prioritizing the abnormal or assigning significance to it. Nevertheless, as it
turns out, the hat is a clue towards solving the crime, and even Sherlock Holmes does not know it, initially. Moretti suggests that clues are signifiers than have multiple causes, and the detective’s power lies in his ability to accurately diagnose the correct cause (Moretti 146). The criminal’s guilt is therefore a crime against human communication and interaction. Yet, as Holmes’s comment reveals, sometimes the bizarre is simply the bizarre.

The threat of uncertainty appears in moments when Holmes disappears. In *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Holmes initially declines to accompany Watson to the Baskerville home. While waiting for Holmes’s arrival, Watson encounters a shady man in the moors. Seen from a distance, the man appears after Watson and the client, Sir Harry Baskerville, have unsuccessfully chased a convicted murderer through the moors. The man is demonstrably not the convict, but his unknown status renders him menacing:

> There, outlined as black as an ebony statue on that shining background, I saw the figure of a man upon the tor...the figure was that of a tall, thin man. He stood with his legs a little separated, his arms folded, his head bowed, as if he were brooding over that enormous wilderness of peat and granite which lay before him. He might have been the very spirit of that terrible place. (Conan Doyle 118)

Watson’s observations highlight the threat of the stranger. The stranger is outlined in black, associating him with both darkness and the unknown, and he seems to embody the spirit of the moors, a space described as “terrible”. In fact, Watson has no knowledge of the stranger, and he has no evidence to support his assertion that the stranger is terrible or dark. Indeed, as it turns out, Holmes has been hiding out on the moors, and the shady man is Sherlock Holmes. Holmes’s transformation from hero
to villain underscores the problem of uncertainty linked to the abnormal. Just as Dupin thwarts D—by faithfully representing the criminal’s ingenuity, Holmes’s success derives in some part by identifying with the criminal. Later, still unknowing, Watson tracks Holmes to his lair:

Always there was this feeling of an unseen force, a fine net drawn round us with infinite skill and delicacy, holding us so lightly that it was only at some supreme moment that one realized that one was indeed entangled in its meshes...I understood how strong and immutable must be the purpose which had kept him in that inhospitable abode. Was he our malignant enemy, or was he by chance our guardian angel? (Conan Doyle 146)

Watson here reveals the problem with Conan Doyle’s solution to the expanding masses. Watson describes the organizing force of a “fine net” which entangles the individual in its meshes. In some respects, this is exactly Holmes’s method. Fortunately, Holmes is on the side of angels. In Moretti’s terms, Holmes abandons the individualistic ethic. But, equally possible, the stranger could have been Holmes’s antithesis, a “malignant enemy” organizing the crowd for his own nefarious gains—because Holmes retains the memory of the individualistic ethic. The inability to distinguish between the harmless and the harmful is the threat of the crowd, and that knowledge gap creates a suspicion of everything irregular—again, for the reader as well as Watson.

Not That Type

In the Sherlock Holmes stories, types do not lead the detective to the individual. Indeed, typological assessments often prove uninformative and unreliable, leading readers away from the relevant clues and individuals. In “The
Adventure of the Red-Headed League,” the culprit’s type and appearance do not correlate with his identity. Police officer Jones has chased young, educated, and criminal John Clay up and down the streets of London. Jones states of the man:

John Clay, the murderer, thief, smasher, and forger. He is a young man, Mr. Merryweather, but he is at the head of his profession, and I would rather have my bracelets on him than on any criminal in London. He’s a remarkable man, is young John Clay. His grandfather was a Royal Duke, and he himself has been to Eton and Oxford. His brain is as cunning as his fingers, and though we meet signs of him at every turn, we never now where to find the man himself. He’ll crack a crib in Scotland one week, and be raising money to build an orphanage in Cornwall the next. I’ve been on his track for years, and have never set eyes on him yet. (Conan Doyle 65)

John Clay belongs to the gentleman type. The grandson of a royal duke and an educated college man, he is physically a “bright-looking, clean-shaven young fellow” with a “clean-cut, boyish face” (Conan Doyle 59, 69). Nevertheless, his appearance and social class belie his criminal identity (see Figure 3). Jones types John Clay as a murderer, thief, smasher, and forger, but he offers these categories without ever having set eyes on the man. Holmes also admits that he has never seen Clay (Conan Doyle 72). His identification of Clay does not derive from a physiognomic analysis of his features. Physically, Clay partially matches his criminal background; he “has a white splash of acid upon his forehead” and ears pierced by gypsies (Conan Doyle 56). These descriptions point
towards a dissipated, criminal type, but Clay acquired the acid splash and the pierced ears. The acid splash and pierced ears are features that Clay wills onto his own body. However, none of this physical description or social background contributes to Holmes’s ability to solve the case. Holmes solves the case by observing the worn trouser knees, indicative of burrowing. He “hardly looked at his [John Clay’s] face” (Conan Doyle 72). The pierced ears and acid splash do not forward the case’s resolution, but they do offer an accurate moral comment on John Clay. The acid evokes ominous, nefarious science experiments gone wrong. The pierced ears link Clay to the gypsies, a community that nineteenth-century Europe frequently associated with crime. Watson and the reader can read the cumulative effect of Clay’s disreputable lifestyle in his disreputable looks. Importantly, though, Watson and the reader do not read an essential identity or inevitability about John Clay. Whereas Poe describes the appearance of a type as inevitable, without considering cause and effect, Conan Doyle describes the appearance of an individual as an effect. As J.L. Cranfield discusses in “From Baskerville to the Moon,” disreputable looks do not cause the disreputable lifestyle; rather, the disreputable lifestyle causes the disreputable looks (Cranfield 19). John Clay’s body shows his moral history, not his moral destiny.

When typing provides reliable information, it offers a moral comment on the individual. For instance, in “The Blue Carbuncle,” Watson assumes that Henry Baker, the owner of a seedy, disreputable, cracked hat, is involved in the theft of the carbuncle. Holmes’s examination, undertaken with scientific precision, reveals minutiae that belie Watson’s assessment of the hat’s condition: lime-chalk dust in the
brim of the hat, ink blots on the hat, and quality materials (Conan Doyle 201-203). Holmes acquits Henry Baker because these details indicate an intellectual, dignified man of declining fortunes, not a seedy, disreputable crook—a typing of Baker, based upon his moral history. Holmes notes in “The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist” that Violet Smith has a “spatulate finger-end,” indicative of a typist or a musician. He concludes that Violet has “spirituality” about her, so she must make music. The assessment depends on an amorphous definition of “spirituality” which is apparent only to Holmes; Watson’s narration does not suggest that he reads special spirituality in Violet’s face. The spatulate finger-end illuminates a problem already noted in chapter one: overlapping clues. As Ginzburg observes, clues lose significance when one clue points to multiple individuals (Ginzburg 120). Holmes’s conclusion—musician—comes from a moralist’s subjective judgment, not a physiognomist’s supposedly scientific judgment.

Holmes’s processing capacities make specific individuals, places, and relationships crucial to discovery of the crime. Nevertheless, his meticulous, specific process often perseverates on minutiae. Whereas Dupin’s superficial typing process drains individuals of identity by reducing the individual to a type, Holmes’s focus on the specific often values details over identity. As in Poe’s work, the irrelevancy of identity demonstrates the desire for a “formalized and interchangeable humanity,” where “the only thing that counts is what the social syntax compels one to do” (Moretti 141). For instance, Holmes does not care about John Clay’s identity in “Red-Headed League.” The plot of the story does not depend on John Clay’s identity; Conan Doyle sketches Clay’s background as a royal-blooded aristocrat, but
his aristocracy has no bearing on the crime. When Holmes visits Clay, he “hardly looked at his face” because Holmes’s theory depends on the state of Clay’s trouser knees (Conan Doyle 72). Holmes’s detecting hinges on a removable item, not a stable identity marker like the face. John Clay matters because he wears the trousers with stained knees, not because he is John Clay. The interchangeability of John Clay is apparent in Holmes’s comment that John Clay “is, in [Holmes’s] judgment, the fourth smartest man in London, and for daring I am not sure that he has not a claim to be third” (Conan Doyle 59). By listing smart men and daring men, Holmes creates pools of people—types, even—any one of whom can fill any ranking on the list. Unlike Dupin, Sherlock Holmes cares about which man sits in which spot. But he cares because of the situational differences that the rankings reflect, not because of the individual’s unique identity. Holmes builds his rankings by evaluating his history with the individuals. In this sense, the individual’s history matters, but the individual’s identity does not. By focusing on minutiae, Holmes engages in a process of disaggregation that reduces the individual to functional fragments, rather than a whole identity. Holmes trades in characteristics at the expense of character. The reader identifies John Clay through his daring, his smarts, his aristocracy, his education, and his crimes, but Conan Doyle makes no attempt to reconcile the inconsistencies between, for instance, John Clay’s upbringing and his crime. Poe would describe John Clay as the sum of many consistent types, but Holmes’s attention to the specific details of John Clay fails to describe an identity. Conan Doyle describes John Clay as an inconsistent individual, but the details do not add up to a whole.
This problem of inconsistency demonstrates the problem of the crowd. Just as Clay gets characterized as a disparate whole, Holmes’s crowd gets characterized as a disparate entity. Although Holmes breaks down the crowd into manageable parts, he does nothing to reconcile the parts into a cohesive whole. At the macro level, the crowd remains the amorphous, unpredictable mass that Watson sees. This amorphousness and inconsistency contributes to the problem of uncertainty that presents as the crowd’s main threat.

**Replicating Stories: Detective Charisma and the Serial Format**

To some extent, the problem of uncertainty, amorphousness, and inconsistency can be resolved through the form of the Sherlock Holmes serial stories. Conan Doyle wrote during a period of expanding readerships, anonymous markets, and increased appeals to the common, working man. Richard Altick’s classic *The English Common Reader* describes how, as nineteenth-century populist reformers fought political battles to improve access to knowledge, print-related taxes were lifted and printing costs declined (Altick 332). Lower costs led to a wider reading audience and an expanding print market—reading audiences expanded in an echo of the social expansion of the period. In *A History of Reading in the West*, Reinhard Wittmann’s article “Was There a Reading Revolution at the End of the Eighteenth Century?” observes that the print market expanded rapidly during the second half of the nineteenth century (Wittmann 300). The market expansion groomed an anonymous, heterogeneous reading public with special, overlapping interests, but printers had to balance meeting reader demand with social concerns about radical moral and political
views associated with cheap literature (Wittmann 302, Altick 333). Altick follows the fate of several cheap periodicals through the mid-nineteenth century and concludes that the surviving periodicals successfully enlivened a “panoramic program” of instruction, human interest, and politics, with fiction (Altick 333). The reading public wanted “specialist books for advancing their professional careers and political information…bloody stories and spiritual comfort” (Wittmann 302).

Sherlock Holmes goes one step further: he brings together (or appears to bring together) science and crime, adventure and politics. Conan Doyle published the Sherlock Holmes stories in the *Strand* magazine. The *Strand* carved a niche in mediating the gap between science and popular understandings of science. In an era when science increasingly became opaque to the public, the *Strand* attempted to construct an understanding of harmonious interaction between science, government, writers, artists, the press, and the public (Cranfield 5).

Paradoxically, however, as the reading public became more heterogeneous, it developed homogeneous reading tastes. Homogeneous reading tastes created an anonymous, but powerful, collective with the ability to demand certain kinds of print. Concurrently, efforts to rouse political consciousness among the working classes found methods of utilizing the print medium (Wittmann 302). Though Baker serves no individuated purpose, he epitomizes to some degree the everyday, working man. Baker provides a space for the individual reader to imagine himself inside the ebb and flow of the city.

While the readers may have wanted an everyman, they also wanted the strange and bizarre. And so Conan Doyle offers Sherlock Holmes, the strange and
bizarre detective. Moretti argues that Holmes sacrifices his individuality “to serve this impersonal thing, detection” (Moretti 142). Since Holmes detects for his own decadent, dilettante pleasure (rather than for work), the plausible reconstruction of the crime takes precedence, even over catching the criminal. Creating a coherent story of the crime matters more than finding the perpetrator. Yet, more than any other character—more than everyman narrator Watson, more than the goose-bearing Baker, more than criminal John Clay—Sherlock Holmes is a defined character and an unmistakable individual.

Even as individuals developed special interests, the expanded reading market homogenized tastes (Wittmann 302). The homogenizing of tastes allowed the reading collective to make market demands. Conan Doyle created the Sherlock Holmes character as a compromise between the dominant magazine story forms: the serial story and the disconnected short story (McDonald 19). The serial story drew readers back, week after week, because it followed the same characters and the same plot in a single narrative—but as a trade-off, the serial story did not permit casual readers to pick up a newly released magazine and start reading halfway through the serial. The disconnected short story could draw in casual readers, but it did not draw readers back for more. Sherlock Holmes was a recurring character in unconnected stories. The stand-alone story format allowed casual readers to pick up Holmes without prior knowledge of the character, but his distinct character traits drew loyal readers back, the same way a serial drew readers back (Chan 3). The new Sherlock-centered form offered the potential for limitless stories, related but separate, expanding and expanding as Conan Doyle continued to write. Similarly, each story aimed to
increase the readership, again with the notion that an growing, infinite readership existed for the magazine to capture. In this sense, Sherlock Holmes organizes the reading form of the serial in the same way that he organizes the chaos of the London crowd.

**Conclusion**

Despite the organizing potential that Sherlock Holmes offers as a remedy to the amorphousness of the crowd, Holmes’s method raises problems about individual erasure similar to the problems of Dupin’s type making. Nevertheless, Holmes’s method of organization sheds light on the anxieties of contemporary readerships of the *Strand*. In both the text and the contemporary social concerns, Sherlock Holmes provides a stable base to assuage the fear of the crowd. The appeal of Sherlock Holmes does not end with the changing social concerns of a changing society, however. Since the first appearance of Sherlock Holmes over a century ago, the charismatic detective has drawn audiences back, again and again, in new mediums. Most recently, the BBC series *Sherlock* updated the classic detective, placing Holmes in a modern, though undated, setting. As chapter three will elaborate, the detective story fails to depict fully fleshed-out suspects and secondary characters, but the detective characters emerge, through the process of serialization, as the most developed characters. Charismatic, affable, or eccentric, the detective figure weaves among each story’s cast of pallid characters, the only common denominator for each serial. Yet even the detective character succumbs to the problem of missing identity.
Chapter 3

Dummies and Dolls

Dame Agatha Christie, the Queen of Crime, centered her classic novels *And Then There Were None* (1939), *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), and *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) around a narrative trick. Except for *Roger Ackroyd*, each of these novels takes place in a limited spatial setting, usually established through a narrative plot trick. In *None*, a mysterious stranger draws ten individuals to Soldier’s Island. *Murder* finds Poirot among the ridership of the Orient Express. Christie’s crowd exists within a limited setting and cast of characters. This limited crowd is countable, with discrete boundaries. Both *Roger Ackroyd* and *None* include lists of suspects (*Roger Ackroyd* 82-83, *None* 47). To distinguish between the limitless crowds of the previous stories and the bounded crowds of Christie’s novels, I will use the term “population” to describe the limited settings and casts of Christie’s stories.

Despite such limits, the populations of Christie’s stories manifest all the diversity of Holmes’s or Dupin’s worlds, diversity more appropriate to a city than to Christie’s settings.

While numerically limited, Christie’s populations contain member categories that Holmes’s and Dupin’s crowds exclude. Christie’s novels feature non-human, dummy members of the population. A Dictaphone provides Dr. Sheppard with an alibi. A gramophone speaks in a “disembodied voice” to deliver the accusations against *None*’s ten islanders. *Murder*’s twelve witness-murderers attest to the existence of two made-up characters, a Wagon Lit conductor and a scarlet-kimono-clad lady.
The population poses a new threat to the individual. Unlike the previous two detectives, Poirot does not face the problem of finding the guilty party. The guilty party is always present and known to the detective from the beginning of the Christie novel. The problem is discovering and revealing the guilt. The possibility of Moretti’s completely formalized and interchangeable humanity preoccupies Christie even more than it did Poe or Conan Doyle. In searching for a culprit, the Christie novel raises a question about how one can go beyond knowing details about other individuals to knowing them.

Christie dispenses with the everyman narrator in these novels. First-person narration and free-indirect narration typically serve to provide insight into characters’ minds, but Christie uses these forms to withhold insight into characters’ minds. In *Roger Ackroyd*, the first-person narrator’s double status as narrator and murderer blocks the revelation of guilt by engaging reader sympathy and omitting important details. The other two novels use free-indirect narration, but Christie manipulates the free-indirect form to sharpen and refine the technique of blocking the revelation of guilt. By granting the reader direct access to the characters’ minds, Christie engages reader sympathy for the suspects and interferes with the reader’s ability to know about the characters. Thus the characters become mere distractions, roadblocks to prevent knowledge about the murderer—in some respects, the human characters are as much dummies as non-human actors like the Dictaphone and the gramophone.

Once again, as in the Sherlock Holmes stories and the Dupin stories, the criminal threatens the existing social order, and Poirot, Christie’s premiere detective, restores order through detection. In *None*, the single exception, there is no detective.
None will shed light on the function of Poirot in the rest of the Christie novels, as well as the function of the detective in the detective story more generally. Though serialization creates a sense of Poirot as a multi-dimensional character, he remains a mystery to the reader. A comparison between None and the other two novels demonstrates that Poirot, as much as any other character, is a dummy character.

Head Count

In And Then There Were None, self-righteous martinet Miss Brent receives an invitation to Soldier Island signed illegibly, “U.N.----”. The indecipherable scrawl demands an explanation, just as clues demand explanation in Dupin or Holmes’s cases. Yet when the writer’s surname is discovered—Owen—the clue proves to lead nowhere: “UN Owen”—“Unknown”—is a provocation, a demonstration of the murderer’s genius, not a clue. Whereas in Sherlock Holmes and Dupin, the reader fails to find the individual because the detective’s method does not value the individual, in Christie the reader gains access to the individual and the individual’s mind but comes up empty because the individual often does not exist. Christie raises suspicion about other individuals and questions the knowability of others. The first-person narration in her novel Roger Ackroyd gives the reader access to the individual, but the reader—either because of the multi-layered nature of the individual which Christie refuses to fully flesh out or because of Christie’s intentional refusal to reveal the individual as anything but a code—constantly ends up with a reminder of how unknowable the individual is. In Roger Ackroyd, the first-person narrator’s double status as narrator and murderer provides a gateway into the larger question of how
detective story narrative functions as an obstacle to knowledge and a concealment of action. Robert Bernard argues in *A Talent to Deceive* that Agatha Christie develops “strategies of deception” that include omitting certain time periods and the use of double-speak (Bernard 64). In *Roger Ackroyd*, for example, the murderer-narrator, Dr. Sheppard, conceals his deed to the reader by omitting certain time periods and referring to his crime in cryptic language or double-speak. Sheppard opens the story by recounting the suicide of Mrs. Ferrars:

Mrs. Ferrars died on the night of the 16th-17th September—a Thursday. I was sent for at eight o’clock on the morning of Friday the 17th. There was nothing to be done. She had been dead some hours. It was just a few minutes after nine when I reached home once more. I opened the front door with my latchkey, and purposely delayed a few moments in the hall, hanging up my hat and the light overcoat that I had deemed a wise precaution against the chill of an early autumn morning. To tell the truth, I was considerably upset and worried. I am not going to pretend that at that moment I foresaw the events of the next few weeks. I emphatically did not do so. But my instinct told me that there were stirring times ahead. (*Roger Ackroyd* 7)

Bernard suggests that “we exclude a character from our suspicions because we see the action through his eyes,” and therefore the reader feels sympathy with Sheppard (Bernard 64). However, Sheppard’s narration also deliberately misdirects the reader’s attention. When Sheppard comments, “There was nothing to be done,” the text implies that Sheppard regrets his inability to save the woman from death. The reader also assumes that Sheppard’s “considerable” upset and worry comes from a general foreboding about death and dying. Sheppard’s real meaning is different. He has been blackmailing Mrs. Ferrars, and his upset and worry derive from the possibility that she has told someone that he is blackmailing her. The “nothing” which he cannot do is to prevent her from sharing that information. Beyond
encouraging the reader to incorrectly decode these comments, Sheppard’s narration also focuses the reader towards examination of the death. The spectacle and oddity of death attracts the reader’s attention, drawing it away from Sheppard’s humdrum account of returning home and hanging his hat and coat.

Bernard offers a second strategy of deception: he argues that Christie uses “the sinister possibilities behind things that the ordinary reader sees and handles every day of his life” (Bernard 73). Ordinary concern for a dead woman and ordinary exhaustion after a hard day’s work gain sinister meanings in *Roger Ackroyd*, but the reader does not pick up on these underlying meanings because of the ordinariness of these phenomena. By using ordinary clues and double-speak, Christie reverses the presentation of the clue. Conan Doyle and Poe clearly signaled their clues to the reader: the mystery of a League dedicated to red-headed men or the mystery of the inhuman, unidentifiable shriek of the orangutan reveal themselves early and demand an explanation. In Christie’s novels, however, clues, especially material clues, do not offer themselves explicitly as clues.

With meaning encoded in the ordinary and the everyday, stable clues develop from accurate reading of the text. Frank Green’s *Ten Little Soldier Boys* rhyme presents itself as *None*’s most pressing clue. After the death of Dr. Armstrong, Vera misinterprets the rhyme: “Four little soldier boys going out to sea; / A red herring swallowed one and then there were / Three” (*None* 247). Vera assumes that the rhyme implies that Armstrong’s death is a red herring: that Armstrong remains alive and faked his own death to continue killing. In fact, the rhyme states, “A red herring swallowed one,” not “one set a red herring”. Armstrong and Wargrave faked
Wargrave’s death together, and Armstrong assumes that Wargrave is his ally. The red herring lies in Wargrave’s fake alliance with Armstrong to smoke out the murderer. Armstrong dies because he falls for Wargrave’s red herring—a false alliance to fake Wargrave’s death. Vera’s misreading of the rhyme matters little, however. Despite the copious attention Christie devotes to the rhyme, the rhyme only reveals the effects of Wargrave’s machinations. The true clues of the case lie in Wargrave’s language, both for himself and in the gramophone message.

A true verbal clue appears in the gramophone message. A disembodied voice announces, “You are charged with the following indictments” and ends with the question, “Prisoners at the bar, have you anything to say in your defense?” (None 47). The court and trial lingo reflects the legal background of the murderer: Justice Wargrave, the judge. A more explicit linkage appears in Wargrave’s own language, spoken in the aftermath of the gramophone message: “At the moment I am not prepared to give an opinion” (None 50). The verbal clues are doubled for the reader, who sees the language on the page (Christie’s narrator calls him “Mr. Justice Wargrave”) rather than merely hearing the clues spoken aloud. Most of Christie’s material clues—the clues that solve the mystery, rather than the red herrings—do not demand an explanation. Rather, Christie slips her clues in unnoticed within the language of her stories. So when Ackroyd mentions the purchase of a Dictaphone to Sheppard, the significance of the Dictaphone is obscured in the casualness of the conversation.
Dummies

During Poirot’s initial investigation in Roger Ackroyd, Christie’s dialogue shifts focus towards a discussion of the oddities of the case. Poirot asks about strangers who had recently visited the small country town. Raymond, the secretary, downplays the significance of a visiting salesman as an everyday encounter:

“Oh! yes, I remember, but that is not the kind of stranger this gentleman means.” He turned to Poirot. “Mr Ackroyd had some idea of purchasing a Dictaphone,” he explained. “It would have enabled us to get through a lot more work in a limited time. The firm in question sent down their representative, but nothing came of it. Mr Ackroyd did not make up his mind to purchase.” (Roger Ackroyd 79)

The exchange appears to be no more than an ordinary encounter of buyer and salesman. Raymond’s certainty leaves the reader in no doubt that the Dictaphone representative is “not the kind of stranger” that Poirot wants to know about. Added to the absence of a Dictaphone in Ackroyd’s room, these negative phrasings point the reader away from the Dictaphone as a significant object. Instead, the reader attends to the items that are positively present. Yet it is significant that Raymond emphasizes the kind of stranger that Poirot means. Raymond is correct to say that the Dictaphone representative is unimportant. He fails to recognize a different, but far more important, “kind” of stranger: the Dictaphone. With its technological capability to record and repeat the spoken word, the Dictaphone mimics the behavior of listening and speaking, both human activities. The Dictaphone’s ability to perform these activities transforms it into a stranger. A dummy stranger, manipulated by the murderer, but present and active nevertheless. At the conclusion of the conversation, Poirot sums up his findings, making no mention of the Dictaphone but using language that indicates his suspicion:
“A tongue is not enough,” he said. “They would have to have also eyes and ears. But do not be too sure that these dead things,” he touched the top of the bookcase as he spoke, “are always dumb. To me they speak sometimes - chairs, tables - they have their message!” He turned away towards the door.

“What message?” I cried. “What have they said to you today?” He looked over his shoulder and raised one eyebrow quizzically. “An opened window,” he said. ”A locked door. A chair that apparently moved itself. To all three I say ‘Why?’ and I find no answer.” (Roger Ackroyd 80)

Poirot gives the furniture eyes, ears, speech, and even (in the chair’s case) individual autonomy. Poirot’s personification of the furniture expands the size of the town’s population. The ability to listen and speak seems to imbue even inanimate objects with the capability to belong to the population. Just as the Dictaphone is a dummy actor, these objects are dummy witnesses. Importantly, Poirot’s language reverses Raymond’s dismissal of the Dictaphone and offers a clue to his conclusion; by foregrounding the speech of “dead things” like the chair, the bookcase, and the window, Christie raises the notion of speaking, inanimate objects—like the Dictaphone. Within the text, only Poirot has the deductive capacity to realize that the Dictaphone permitted the murderer to replay Ackroyd’s voice post-murder, falsifying the time of death (Roger Ackroyd 227). No matter how agile the deductive capacity of Poirot, however, the presence of the dummy actor and dummy witness complicates the population makeup. If dummies can enter the human population, then the distinction between human and dummy gets lost.

None opens with brief incursions into each character’s mind. The first incursion into a character’s mind starts with a news report. As Justice Wargrave opens the newspaper to read the rumors about Soldier Island, the narration shifts from
an omniscient narrator into Wargrave’s musings about Soldier Island and the newspaper gossip columns:

Various glowing advertisements of it had appeared in the papers. Then came the first bald statement that it had been bought—by a Mr. Owen. After that the rumors of the gossip writers had started. Soldier Island had really been bought by Miss Gabrielle Turl, the Hollywood film star! She wanted to spend some months there free from all publicity! Busy Bee had hinted delicately that it was to be an abode for Royalty??! Mr. Merryweather had had it whispered to him that it had been bought for a honeymoon—Young Lord L... had surrendered to Cupid at last! Jones knew for a fact that it had been purchased by the Admiralty with a view to carrying out some very hush hush experiments!

Definitely, Soldier Island was news! (None 2)

Wargrave’s newspaper does not function as a social mechanism to organize society. Unlike Holmes’s newspaper, where messages always reach their intended destination, or Dupin’s newspaper, where witness testimony provides accurate evidence, Wargrave’s newspaper plunges the reader into the confusion of rumor and gossip mill. “Various” advertisements appear (no precise number). An authoritative “first bald statement” appears, but then counterstatements from multiple sources appear. By placing the rumors, subjects, and sources in immediate succession, the text implies an expansion of the rumors. The newspaper introduces multiple dummy characters: Mr. Owen, Gabrielle Turl, Busy Bee, Mr. Merryweather, and Lord L. exist only within the pages of the newspaper, and the expanding feel of the rumors indicates the existence of even more dummy characters. These names help to construct a social world outside the island. They also help to establish a fundamental question about who owns the island and why. By opening None with an unreliable gossip column, the narrator sets up an ongoing tension between details (and detailed minutiae) about the suspects and knowledge of the suspects. Whereas Holmes’s or
Dupin’s newspaper advertisements fish for individuals based on characteristics and clues, Wargrave’s newspaper identifies individuals by name. Wargrave’s newspaper embeds the island in the larger crowd of England, but the crowd works differently in Christie than in the previous authors. The crowd is large enough to generate uncertainties, hence the need for gossip columns, yet small enough for writers to identify individuals by name. The problem is not that individuals are unknown; it is that, unless these individuals participate in the action of the story, these names do not exist as anything but dummies. The problem is figuring out which individual is not the dummy.

Wargrave, we learn in about two pages, is a judge and a newspaper reader, wealthy enough to afford a first-class smoking carriage and apparently well connected enough to know the subjects of the gossip columns (*None* 1-2). His dominant characteristic seems to be his observational skills. He sums up the news article in an apparently balanced way, and he limits his personal commentary to the observation that Soldier Island is “definitely” news. These characterizations—balanced summations and low-key observation—remain consistent throughout the novel. Christie repeatedly describes Wargrave watching his fellow guests and listening to their speculations, assertions, and rumors, all the while apparently reserving judgment. Christie treats the other island guests similarly; they receive a small, numbered introduction section where free-indirect narration gives the reader insight into the basic background of the guest and one dominant personality trait. Christie’s allotment of a numbered section to each character is a form of social organization. Like a census, the numbered sections divide the individuals and give
them brief snippets. These snippets briefly explain how the character got an
invitation to the island and why the character accepted, as well as their speculation
about the island’s owner (None 1-17). In the process, Christie establishes each
carer’s job, social class and attitudes. Yet, critically, Christie’s characterizations
rarely delve any further. Bernard and York note the stereotypical characterization of
most Christie characters (Bernard 66, York 60). When Wargrave’s confession
surfaces, no previous clue or characterization suggests that Wargrave has a “secret
instinct” that gave him “exquisite pleasure” to watch criminals “squirming on the
deck” (None 287). Rather, Wargrave appears to be a stereotypical judge, listening
carefully and seeking out facts. Most of the other characters get similar treatment.
Emily Blunt is an old-fashioned religious stickler. Anthony Marston, a careless
playboy. Vera Claythorne, a working secretary. The shallowness of Christie’s
characterizations allows her to create many characters, but stereotypical characters.

The very fact of the characters’ stereotypical natures lends a sense of
universality to the stories. Christie’s characters might be located in any small country
town or drawn from any part of England and plopped onto an island (another island:
not Britain), or dropped into a train. Indeed, Wargrave claims to have “collected” his
victims from across England (None 289). Wargrave mentions that Anthony Marston
was “selected from a large group of people who had committed similar offenses”
(None 289). The population does not draw its threat from its expansiveness or
amorphousness, the way Watson fears London. Rather, the threat of the population
lies in the accessibility and universality of these characters. All the stereotypes are
potential criminals, but most of them are merely dummies distracting from the
murderer. Christie’s novels raise the question of who is dummy, and who the real thing: Who is the owner of Soldier Island? Who is the killer?

**Collection**

The question of dummies is explicitly discussed in terms of the ten dolls in the Soldier Island dining room. As the murderer kills guest after guest, Christie embodies this elimination process through “some little china figures” (*None* 44). The characters watch in alarm as the dolls disappear one by one, murder by murder. Though the dolls provide no clues toward the murderer, they do give insight into how Christie represents individuals. Since the figures are soldiers, a certain degree of conformity is implied. The figurines have no individual distinguishing characteristics; “some” and “little” as descriptors of the figurines do not distinguish the particularities of the china figures. Quite the opposite—these descriptors diminish the value of the figurines and minimize them to collection pieces. Indeed, Wargrave says, “I began, secretly, to collect victims…” (*None* 289). Wargrave thus converts the guests into a collection, for his own amusement and play. The collectiveness of the guests becomes apparent as fear takes hold of the guests.

As murder follows murder, the individuals degenerate from light sketches and easy stereotypes, losing their meager individuality altogether as fear takes hold. Christie writes about the degeneration of the remaining individuals in animalistic terms:

> Five people—five frightened people. Five people who watched each other, who now hardly troubled to hide their state of nervous tension.
There was little pretense now—no formal veneer of conversation. They were five enemies linked together by a mutual instinct of self-preservation.

And all of them, suddenly, looked less like human beings. They were reverting to more bestial types. Like a wary old tortoise, Mr. Justice Wargrave sat hunched up, his body motionless, his eyes keen and alert. Ex-Inspector Blore looked coarser and clumsier in build. His walk was that of a slow padding animal. His eyes were bloodshot. There was a look of mingled ferocity and stupidity about him. He was like a beast at bay ready to charge its pursuers. (None 211)

Christie emphatically insists on the reduction of the population to five, while noting their reduction from human beings to “more bestial types.” The process of diminution creates a collective. Again, Christie does not particularize individuals through extended descriptions, though she briefly describes each individual. Blore becomes a “slow padding animal,” Vera a bird (None 212), and even Wargrave, the murderer, takes on the aspect of a tortoise. Like their initial stereotypes, these descriptions provide defining, yet shallow labels. Even these bestial types are variations on a single theme of fear, though, and fear has turned the individuals into a collection. Except for Wargrave, who continues to observe with “keen” and “alert” eyes, all the islanders are frightened, all have nervous tension, all have self-preservation instincts, and all transform into animals. It is significant that all of them looked “suddenly” like animals. The guests shift at the same moment, a collective change. Upon entering the island, the guests were a diverse population. Through the process of murder, the guests are transformed into a collection. By contrast, in Murder, the murderers appear to coalesce into a collective, rather than a collection. It is perhaps worth noting that the victims in None are, in fact guilty of murdering other innocents. Their degeneration accurately reveals them to themselves and to each
other. The degradation to collection and collector’s items seems linked to the novel’s commitments to social order and justice. Whereas Moretti argues that the detective story always resolves in a restoration of the social order and a realignment of justice (Moretti 137), Nancy Wingate offers a variation on this argument. Exploring the justice of a multitude of classic detective stories, Wingate finds that readers care less about whether justice rules the day than if the truth will out (Wingate 583). *None* resolves itself through an unconventional justice. Everyone dies, and Wargrave commits suicide. The reader is satisfied, nevertheless, because the victims are themselves murderers. Discussing the phenomenon of ten dead bodies on the island, two police officials debate about the murderer’s motivations. Maine contends, “He was out to get people who were beyond the reach of the law. He picked ten people—whether they were really guilty or not doesn’t matter—” (*None* 277). According to Wingate, though, the Assistant Commissioner rightly objects, “Doesn’t it? It seems to me—” (*None* 277). Equally important, Wargrave dies and leaves a confession.

Confession and truth: these are the requirements for a satisfactory detective story, and the island guests’ transformation into a collection of beasts aids in the recognition of guilt. Conversely, *Murder*’s ridership participates in a collective, and the collectivity redefines guilt.

**Collective**

As in *None*, the victim of *Murder* is himself a murderer. However, in *Murder*, all the suspects kill Ratchett together, and Poirot chooses to let all the murderers go free. *Murder* draws attention to how the breaking of the social order is attached to
specific social anxieties. In Wingate’s terms, *Murder* provides a satisfactory resolution because Poirot discovers the plot—the truth comes out—and adjudicates in favor of the twelve murderers—the detective’s justice is served. York suggests that the train creates a micro-society where all the population (except Poirot) is involved in the murder (York 121). Through the incorporation of the whole society, a new social order develops, one in which the act of murdering Ratchett does not break the social order. In *Murder* the killing of Ratchett creates a collective, not a collection.

Wargrave and Poirot both analogize the crimes to dramas, casting actors and events (*None* 287, *Murder* 302). Whereas Wargrave orchestrates the drama of his novel, the collective murderers orchestrate the drama of their novel. The initial frustration of the investigation on the train develops from the multitude of directions in which the clues point. In Dupin, a multitude of witnesses offers an aggregated testimony, the overlapping details of which lead to the conclusion. By contrast, *Murder’s* multitude of witnesses offers overlapping clues that contradict each other. The characters’ misleading stories and overlapping details distract Poirot from the larger conclusion of their united complicity in the crime. A multitude of clues exist, but some are specifically engineered to point in multiple directions. A pipe cleaner at the scene of the crime points to Colonel Arbuthnot—but Mr. McQueen provides an alibi for the Colonel (*Murder* 277, 306). A true clue, an *H* monogrammed handkerchief, points to Helena Andrenyi—but the Russian Princess Dragomiroff throws a wrench in the works when she reveals that *H* is a different letter in the Cyrillic alphabet (*Murder* 270). Each rider provides an alibi for another rider. The problem with the clues is that they point in the direction of a collective, not an
individual murderer. One method of overlapping and distracting Poirot involves the riders’ claim to have witnessed two unknown persons active the night of the murder: a scarlet kimono-clad lady and a Wagon Lit conductor. The introduction of these unknown characters has similar effects as the introduction of the Dictaphone as a character: the characters expand the potential population of the Orient Express and create an amorphousness and uncertainty analogous to the crowd of Watson’s London. Just as the Dictaphone directs the investigation towards an unknown stranger, the scarlet kimono-clad lady and Wagon Lit conductor are dummy characters, distractions from the true murderers.

The case’s resolution, as Poirot recognizes, lies in the twelve train riders’ shared guilt. Poirot reaches this conclusion because the heterogeneity of riders—American, Russian, English, high-class, low-class, educated and uneducated—seemed highly improbable on the Orient Express during the off-season for tourists (Murder 301). Though Poirot identifies this heterogeneity as a distinctly American trait, this heterogeneity is also appropriate for the city and the crowd. Certainly, such variety of individuals is not appropriate for the Orient Express. Of course, this variety is artificial. The riders selected themselves, and the population is not random. Rather, the riders are a community centered on the Armstrong family. The community transforms itself into a collective with the goal of punishing Ratchett.

Of course, the population of None is also artificially selected by Wargrave. The difference lies in the moral justifications for or against the murders. As already noted, the None victims’ degradation to animality reflects the guilt of the victims. By contrast, Murder features no such degradation. Instead, Linda Arden, the mother of
Ratchett’s victim, volunteers to take the blame for the murder. The collective’s moral status allows this resolution of the plot. Twelve jurors make up the English jury. By setting the collective’s number at twelve, Christie indicates the moral justification of the collective. Moreover, the victim’s name, “Ratchett,” plays on the word “ratchet,” a mechanical device that tightens screws. The name suggests that Ratchett attempts to manipulate his surroundings through a mechanical process—while not fully developed, this theme does correlate with Ratchett’s role. As a kidnapper, Ratchett manipulates the Armstrong family by holding Daisy Armstrong hostage. Thus, it is the character of Ratchett who is reduced to flatness—to a mechanical device, rather than an animal. The collective’s justice wins the day, and the collective breaks up willingly to return to their heterogeneous and separate individual lives.

And Then There Were None

Amongst the hubbub of distracting characters, the detective rises as the only defined individual, discovering truth and meting out justice. Poirot slips in and out of the populations of Christie novels, a foreigner clad in garish suits with a distinctive accent. Nevertheless, as None demonstrates, even the detective is unnecessary to the clean working-out of an Agatha Christie mystery.

Roger Ackroyd introduces Poirot as a mystery. Dr. Sheppard’s sister, an inveterate gossip, brings news of a new, retired neighbor who enjoys gardening. At first, the townspeople mistakenly believe that Poirot’s name is “Mr. Porrott” and identify him as a retired hairdresser (Roger Ackroyd 20). Caroline Sheppard expresses frustration over her inability to read the mysterious neighbor: “He was most
polite, but I couldn’t get anything out of him. I asked him point blank at last whether he was a Frenchman, and he said he wasn’t” (Roger Ackroyd 21). Poirot himself acknowledges that he prefers to remain incognito and purposefully avoids correcting the naming mistake (Roger Ackroyd 24). Initially, then, Poirot is as unreadable as any other character in the population. The reader knows Poirot through the serialization of Christie’s novels, but within the narrative, Poirot is an unknown. Moreover, although Poirot’s reputation is acknowledged in most of the other Christie novels, Poirot the character remains something of a mystery.

In Murder, Poirot sits down with M. Bouc, an employee of the Orient Express, and Dr. Constantine, who shares Bouc’s cabin, to review the evidence. M. Bouc leads the session, offering theories about the clues but reaching no unified narrative about the crime (Murder 242-244). Poirot, on the other hand, confines himself to echoing certainties and posing questions. Poirot asks, “Ah! And of those three?” “So you both eliminate the maid?” and “And you think that two murders make sense?” (Murder 242-247). His comments include “You reason well,” and “As our old friend Euclid says” (Murder 242-247). Poirot merely observes the proceedings and articulates the important questions. At the same time, Poirot keeps his cards close to his chest, preferring to listen to other characters’ musings—just as Sherlock Holmes stays silent about his theories and listens to Watson’s. Until Poirot sits down with the entire train to offer his narrative of the crime, Poirot refuses to reveal his internal thought processes. After his conversation with Bouc, he says:

“We know all that can be known—from outside… It has been a little joke between us, has it not—this business of sitting back and thinking out the truth? Well, I am about to put my theory into practice—here
before your eyes. You two must do the same. Let us all three close our eyes and think.” (Murder 247)

Poirot’s comment rejects the validity of talking through the crime. To him, thinking aloud is a little joke. Discussion reveals only what can be known from outside. To think, suggests Poirot, one must close one’s eyes and go inside, developing a narrative of the crime in one’s own mind. The free-indirect narrator rarely focalizes through Poirot, so the reader does not get Poirot’s inner (or inside) thoughts. As a result, however, Poirot participates little in the action of the story. Poirot’s only necessary functions are in articulating the questions about the crime and in presenting the solution of the crimes. Yet a non-detective character can fill Poirot’s role as articulator of the investigation’s focus.

In None, Wargrave takes on Poirot’s role of questioner and thinker, holding his cards close to his chest. After the gramophone accuses each island guest of murder, Wargrave begins to ask questions of his fellow islanders: “Who put that record on the gramophone?” “Whose orders?” and “Was there a title on it?” (None 50-53). He refrains from offering an encompassing theory or narrative of the crime, confining himself to comments like “So you think it’s a joke, do you?” “That is probably true,” and “A very remarkable story,” (None 50-53). None emphasizes the judicial nature of this language by including phrases like “Wargrave took charge of the proceedings” and “the room became an impromptu court of law” (None 55). However, this language matches Poirot’s language very closely (another example of identification between detective and criminal, similar to the identification between Dupin and D--’s ingenuity) and emphasizes the potential for a non-detective character to provide the function of articulating the questions of the crime. The second
function of the detective, the discovery of the solution, can also be filled through other means. As Wingate concludes, the revelation of truth is important for the reader’s satisfaction (Wingate 581), but *None* reveals the truth through a confession that Wargrave leaves in a bottle. Thus the function of the detective is filled, and the narrative continues without a sense of something missing, sans a detective.
Conclusion

It was well said of a certain German book that “er lässt sich nicht lesen” – it does not permit itself to be read...

-Edgar Allan Poe, *The Man of the Crowd*

And so, there are none. From Poe to Conan Doyle to Christie, detective fiction begins with the crowd, which flows together just long enough to create a momentary whole. To detective fiction, the crowd is a source of anxiety, a ball of size and chaos. To excise the anxiety produced by the crowd, detective fiction creates the criminal, an individual whose transgression can be identified and controlled. The detective fiction ends with the elimination of the criminal, singled out from the crowd through the detective’s unerring method. Whether through types or details or dummies, detective fiction attempts to impose order on the crowd, to identify the individual (the criminal) who attempts to subvert the social order. The process breaks down the crowd, divides it and numbers it. But in breaking it down, the crowd as a whole remains unknown.

And so it is the crowd, and not the crime, which does not permit itself to be read. The identification of the criminal tends to reduce the other members of the crowd—to types, details, or dummies. Once typed or detailed or dummied, the innocent are thrown back into the crowd, a threat to order no more. The crowd continues to ebb and flow, until the next moment when detective fiction swoops in to freeze the crowd and pluck out a new transgressor.

And thus, to paraphrase Poe, the essence of all crowds is undivulged.
Works Cited


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Works Consulted


