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As most of us here tonight still remember vividly, when the Nazi air blitz was released upon London in the late summer of 1940 a goodly portion of the eight million souls took refuge every night underground. When that vast human burrow settled down into something like normalcy, "raid libraries" were set up to relieve the nerve-wracking tedium. And what type of book was in constant demand? Just one -- the detective story. At the time this form of fiction was exactly one century old.

I shall let the cynical draw the obvious analogy between an age of mass homicide and the popularity of make-believe murder. At any rate, it is a statistical fact, as Howard Haycraft has pointed out, that approximately one out of every four works of fiction printed in English nowadays is a detective story.

No doubt, all kinds of sociological, psychological, and philosophical conclusions may be drawn from such facts. That is not, however, the topic of this paper. I shall talk about the birth and development of the "whodunit," but my main concern is with an intriguing question: Why are so many detective story writers women? More to the point, why are so many of the excellent examples written by women? In other words, what, if any, is the relationship between "whodunits" of quality and skirts?

Not very often does Time Magazine review a detective story. So I was surprised not long ago to read in Time a rave review of a posthumous mystery story by Margery Allingham, whose earlier work, The Fashion in Shrouds, is a masterpiece in its field. In his last paragraph the Time reviewer posed a question that has always intrigued me: What special gift enables females to turn out so many more good detective stories than the male of the species? I have often pondered that question after putting down, with a sense of complete satisfaction, a detective story by Margery Allingham, Dorothy Sayers, Ngaio Marsh, Josephine Tey, Agatha Christie, or any one of a dozen others, after having tossed aside some hackneyed work by a well-known male author.

Time's reviewer supplied an answer, of sorts: "Perhaps," he said, "the endless war between the sexes has taught women the necessary patience, ingenuity -- and the knowledge that the guilty are transparently devious." That's clever but not convincing. The "war between the sexes" is one of those forensic clothes-lines on which you can hang any argument you please. And its meaning is as changeable as April in the Ohio Valley. In literary terms, just what type of sex war do you mean -- George Bernard Shaw's typical conflict between a charming but aggressive female, bent on finding her mate in a male equally bent on preserving his independence, as in Man and Superman? Or the morbid struggle between a sex-ridden snake in female guise and a rabbit-like man who deems himself a genius, as in the plays of Strindberg? The "war between the sexes" is too easy an answer. What is it about the female, at least in England and the United States, that explains her gift for inventing ingenious plots, creating live characters, maintaining a pervasive air of suspense, and winding up the proceedings in a last chapter with all the nicety of a piece of fine embroidery?

Women are notoriously uncreative in the field of music. In poetry, from the time of Sappho down to our own day, men have left them hopelessly in the shade. There have been a number of good female painters but few really distinguished ones, and I can't think of one who created a school. Why the shining exception of the "whodunit?"

Before exploring that question further, I must say something about the nature, the birth and development of the "whodunit" as a literary form. Philip Guedalla once remarked that "The detective story is the normal recreation of noble minds." I would go along with that, provided the emphasis be placed on "recreation" rather than "noble minds." It's true that a number of Presidents of the United States, beginning with Abraham Lincoln, have been detective story fans, as have many more British Prime Ministers. The contemporary English poet, W. H. Auden, who holds the chair of poetry at Oxford, is a devoted fan. So is the current Poet Laureate, C. Day Lewis, who not only reads detective stories avidly but actually writes them, under the pseudonym of "Nicholas Blake." William Butler Yeats, probably the finest poet in English of our time, was a devotee.

Jacques Brazun has written a book on the subject, The Delights of Detection. There is no doubt whatever that the really good "whodunit" holds a special appeal for the sophisticated reader. It acts as both a stimulant and a soothing agent -- a means of relaxation from the pressures of an over-crowded and too-complex society, in which, as Friedrich Durenmatt says, we live "like Gulliver among the giants." Individual human beings are still important in the "whodunit," whether their lot is to be killed off in a few chapters, to serve as innocent suspects, or to solve the riddle in the last chapter. For a few hours we can forget the confusions of today and refrain from thinking about the nightmares of tomorrow, - like the "doomsday machine", predicted by Herman Kahn, which will some day destroy all life on earth.

One point, however, must be made clear: the function of the detective story is recreation. It is not to be confused with authentic literature. There has been entirely too much exaggeration and faddism in this field. The Baker Street Irregulars have carried this kind of exaggeration to a point where Sherlock Holmes is treated not only as a character in fiction but as a man who actually lived. A. Conan Doyle, of course, created a tradition, though I now find many of the Holmes stories pretty hard going. But Doyle never came within hailing distance of creating a work of literature, and certainly he never tried to. A very large percentage of all the detective stories printed are not worth the time required to get through the first page.

Nevertheless, provided that the book abides by certain unwritten but generally recognized rules, the worth of any particular "whodunit" is determined by the extent to which it approaches the standards of literature. And in making that approach women have been notably successful. At the same time, they are, as a rule, less likely to confuse suspense stories, spy stories and the like with the detective story. The ladies arrived late on the scene but they have conquered a considerable part of the field and have paid careful attention to what they were about. They have kept in mind, more consistently than the male brethren, that the essential characteristic of the detective story is the professional, or at least semi-professional, detection and solution of crime.

Mystery stories, spy stories, novels of analysis and deduction have been with us for centuries. Stories of crime and criminals were popular in Shakespeare's day. Voltaire wrote a political novel of detection about Zadig. Beaumarchais revealed how an elaborate series of physical and psychological facts about a woman might be deduced from an accidentally found cloak. Alexander Dumas in 1848 had d'Artagnan describe to his King full details of a duel that was witnessed by no one, simply by deductions based upon examination of a bit of moist ground.

Richard Lattimore has said that Sophocles' great play, Oedipus Rex, was the first and greatest of detective stories. The gradual and terrible revelation of events that caused the hero not only to become a murderer but to marry his own mother is assuredly one of the greatest plays ever written. But its theme is the sin of "hubris," overweening pride, and the unravelling of the plot is incidental to making a moral point. Some critics have called Dostoevsky's novel, Crime and Punishment, (1865), the first and greatest of all detective stories. This, I think, is a confusion of categories. Here we have a masterly psychological novel, but its theme is the regeneration of a human soul. The detection is incidental to the moral struggle, and we know the identity of the murderer from the start.

Some excellent novels of espionage were inspired by World War II, as in works of Graham Greene and the very recent novels of John le Carre. In my opinion, the best contemporary work in this field, Eric Ambler's A Coffin for Dimitrios, combines murder and espionage. But the murder is incidental to the spy-work. Incidentally, women writers have shown little interest in spy fiction.

The first authentic detective story was written by Edgar Allen Poe, whose work, The Murders in the Rue Morgue, appeared in an April, 1841, issue of Graham's Magazine in Philadelphia, which Poe was editing at the time. Incidentally, he never earned a penny for this first of the world's detective stories.

In reputation, however, Poe has probably received more than his due. For well over a century

he has not only been properly recognized as the founder of detective fiction: he has also been wrongly credited with remarkable powers of detection in real life. When he wrote his story, The Mystery of Marie Roget, he based it on the actual murder of one Mary Cecilia Rogers. Following his custom, he moved the setting to Paris and permitted his detective, Dupin, to solve the mystery. At the time, however, he boldly claimed that he himself, working only from newspaper accounts, actually solved this murder mystery that had completely baffled the police. Until only about one month ago most of the critics and a multitude of lay readers accepted this theory invented by Poe, crediting him not only with remarkable gifts as a writer but with uncanny skill as an amateur detective. But, unhappily for this delightful myth, the Rutgers University Press recently brought out a book by John Walsh which contends, with a great mass of evidence, that Poe had nothing to do with solving the Mary Rogers case. In fact, he was compelled to make changes in later printings of his story in order to keep pace with the findings of the police which tended not only to lessen his fame as a detective-story writer but to discredit his reputation as a man.

The word "detective" did not appear until 1843, but early in the 1800's criminal investigation departments were active in the great cities of Western Europe. In Paris the work was carried on by the Surete. In London it was the function of the Bow Street Runners, parents of Scotland Yard. In France the best-remembered agent of the Surete was a man named Francois Eugene Vidocq (1775-1857). If we can believe his Memoires, he was accomplished as a thief, circus-performer, galley convict, vagabond, and expert jail-breaker. He made a remarkable bargain with the Paris police: he would place his genius and his unrivalled knowledge of the underworld at the service of the public in exchange for a pardon. As our Club's late member and one-time president, Frank Chandler, expressed it in his fascinating volume, The Literature of Roguery, "It was necessary that a Vodocq should issue his Memoires (in 1820) for the literary transition from rogue to detective to be definitely effected." But the actual transition was made twenty years later by Poe, who was quite familiar with the career and writings of Vidocq. Because of his interest in all things French, the setting of Poe's trail-blazing

story was Paris, and his detective, C. Auguste Dupin, was a Frenchman. The most astonishing thing about Poe's work is that he created, at the very outset, the whole catalogue of traditional requirements of the detective story -- the more or less eccentric amateur detective, the worshipful and more or less stupid foil, the relative stupidity of official law-enforcement agencies, the victim of unjust suspicion, and the surprise solution at the end, with the briefest possible epilogue -- all were here at the start. Women were not on the scene at all in those days. But it was a woman -- to me the best of all detective-story writers, Dorothy Sayers -- who stated the basic principle of the form; "When you have eliminated all the impossibilities, then, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."

First to follow in the footsteps of Poe was William Wilkie Collins (1824-1889), who began to publish in 1868 his monumental story, The Moonstone, in a magazine called All the Year Round, which was edited by Charles Dickens. T. S. Eliot has called this novel of some 900 pages, "the first, the longest, and the best of detective novels." Every detective novel since Collins has been indebted to him, not only for his surpassing use of the element of mystery and his logical deductive powers, but also because he created real characters and introduced the ingredient of humor -- so important today -- into the form. He also made the official detective, Sergeant Cuff, a far less convincing and less successful sleuth than the unofficial hero, Ezra Jennings -- another device that has been used almost invariably ever since Sherlock Holmes showed up the plodding blunders of Scotland Yard. In the judgment of an eminent "whodunit" fan, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Collins' The Moonstone is "the best there is."

A few words must be spared for Charles Dickens' Mystery of Edwin Drood (1870). Here we have no discernible detective and the story was never finished. This left a permanently unsolved mystery, which Edmund Pearson called "the foremost problem in fiction." "The only one of Dickens' novels which he did not finish was the only one that needed finishing. He never had but one thoroughly good plot to tell; and that he has told only in heaven."

The first full-fledged and full-time writer of detective fiction was A. Conan Doyle, creator of the best-known of all detectives. The Baker Street saga began in 1887 with A Study in Scarlet and was to continue for forty years. The characterization of Sherlock Holmes was developed from the character of a man in real life, Dr. Joseph Bell of Edinburgh, but his surname was borrowed from that of an American poet, the elder Oliver Wendell Holmes. The combined narrator and foil, Dr. Watson, was of course the prototype of innumerable characters who follow, with open-mouthed wonder, the elucidation of the mystery by the master-brain. The detective story, more or less as we know it today, was finally launched. And the sensational success of the Holmes stories in the late 1880's, '90's and early 1900's inspired a wealth of detective fiction, of which Trent's Last Case, by E. C. Bentley (1913) was the most famous example of its day.

The other sex finally showed up in England, in 1894, with Catherine Louise Perkis' Experiences of Loveday Brooke: Lady Detective. As anyone might have guessed from that title, the lady detective experiment did not pan out. Neither have various other attempts to create sleuths in skirts. Mrs. Belloc-Lowndes wisely steered clear of her own sex: her analysis of the Jack-the-Ripper murders in The Lodger (1913) became famous and still is. The most celebrated of the Nineteenth Century women writers was an American, Anna Katharine Greene. It's astonishing to realize that the most famous of her books, The Leavenworth Case, appeared in 1878, a decade before the Sherlock Holmes stories. She was the first woman to tackle the genre on either side of the Atlantic and thus may be called the grandmother of the detective story. In 1908 Mary Roberts Rhinehart scored a great success with The Circular Staircase and went on to become the highest paid author, of either sex, in the United States. Carolyn Wells brought Fleming Stone on the scene with The Glue (1909), and Stone went on, in a total of seventy-four novels, to become the hardest-working detective in American fiction. Stone was only a yearling, however, compared to Georges Simenon's French sleuth, Inspector Maigret. Simenon, who was born in Belgium, produced, between the ages of 20 and 30, a total of 200 novels under 16 different pseudonyms.

In every sense but the financial, the ladies got off to a rather bad start in the U. S. A. But in England the sex had a fairly brilliant beginning with Agatha Christie and her detective, the little Belgian, Hercule Poirot, after World War I. Her novel, The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, which had a pretty hard time finding a publisher in 1920, is now recognized as a classic in its field. The fame of Agatha Christie owes something to a rather mysterious incident in her private life. I happened to be in England in December of 1926 when she vanished, without warning, from the scene. A nation-wide search began at once. Policemen and detectives scurried about over the countryside more energetically than in any of her novels. Amateur detectives offered all kinds of theories to explain the disappearance. The press had a field day. Eventually she turned up in a Yorkshire health resort and her disappearance was officially classed as the result of amnesia. But no one will ever convince millions of Englishmen that this was not a brilliant publicity stunt.

To me the grande dame in the field is England's Dorothy Leigh Sayers, a superb craftswoman in whose hands the detective story approaches the status of a fine art. She grew up in the East Anglian fen country, which she used as the setting for her detective story, The Nine Tailors. She attended Somerville College at Oxford, scene of her Gaudy Night, and was one of the first women to receive an Oxford degree. In fact, she took a First (highest honors) in medieval literature. Her hero, Lord Peter Wimsey, is one of the most famous amateur detectives in fiction, and his foil is no nincompoop but a superior Scotland Yard character, Inspector Parker. Much of the Sayers characterization is Dickensian and her style as a writer is outstanding. She had the prescience to realize that the detective story in our time must be a novel of psychology as well as deduction. She wandered away from the traditional form, however, in Gaudy Night (1936), which not only offered a mystery without a murder but subordinated the mystery to the love interest. And in Busman's Honeymoon the following year, she frankly sub-titled the book, "a love story with detective interruptions" -- which is pure heresy among the "whodunit" faithful. Some critics argue that Dorothy Sayers had the misfortune to fall in love with her detective hero. Others argue that she saw this type of fiction approaching its limits and

conducted some bold experiments to save it. She did not fail even in the boldest because she was a truly distinguished writer.

Dorothy Sayers was also a deeply religious woman, and what might be called her "serious" books are thoughtful probings of theological problems. Yet she never allowed her two main lines of interest to cross or become confused. As a writer she inhabited two different worlds, in which respect her detective stories resemble those of the distinguished English economist, G. D. H. Cole and his wife.

Quite a different type of contrast between private life and writing career may be seen in the distinguished "whodunit" author, Margery Allingham. Here was a woman of most gentle disposition, who loved horses, dogs, gardening, and even housework. Yet she wrote more than two dozen detective stories, including some of the most blood-curdling of them all.

Another English writer, Georgette Heyer, emphasized the element of humor in her detective stories, while still another, Doris Caroline Abrams (writing under the pseudonym of "Caryl Brahms") introduced sheer farce.

England also produced that old reliable, Agatha Christie, who, when she tired of her dapper little detective, Poirot, invented Miss Marple, an aging maiden lady with a sweet disposition and razor-sharp perceptions. Outstanding among the later authors in English is New Zealand's Ngaio Marsh, whose first name is that of a New Zealand flowering tree. Her detective, Inspector Roderick Alleyn, is something of a rarity: he has an able mind yet is a member of Scotland Yard, traditionally, since Sherlock Holmes, the denizen of dim-wits. Alleyn may be rated a less brilliant and less witty version of Lord Peter Wimsey.

The female detective story writers in our land do not equal their British counterparts. Dorothy B. Hughes, Mignon G. Eberhart, Mabel Seeley, Elizabeth Daly, and Helen MacInnes are all competent authors, but, with the exception of Helen MacInnes, they do not display the imagination or style of a first-rate talent. An unfortunate trend on this side of the Atlantic has

been toward the realistic or hard-boiled school of detective fiction. This is seen at its best in the novels of the first realist, Dashiell Hammett, especially in his The Thin Man, and reached its lowest depths in Mickey Spillane. We have developed a type, the profane and blatantly sexy "private eye." Reading, or trying to read, of the exploits of these characters I have found myself wishing the detective were the victim, not the pursuer of the murderer. America has also produced more than its fair share of pure pot-boilers, like the output of Ellery Queen and Erle Stanley Gardner.

It is curious that many women on both sides of the water have written under a male pseudonym. "A. E. Fielding" enjoyed a wide vogue for a number of years before it was discovered that the author's real name was Dorothy Fielding. The well-known "David Frome" is really Mrs. Zenith Jones Brown. "Leslie Ford" is another pen-name. "Allis Tilton" is the admired American writer, Phoebe Atwood Taylor. The type of man who hides behind a woman's skirts has been familiar throughout history. But what prompts so many competent female writers of "whodunits" to use a male pen-name? Frankly, I don't know. Perhaps it is a publisher's device to increase sales of books by too-prolific women.

But this is an aside, and a matter of no particular importance. A matter of real interest, during the past couple of decades, has been the trend of the English detective story more and more toward an amalgamation of the murder mystery with the "legitimate" novel of character and psychology, whereas in the United States the trend has been more and more toward the novel of manners, especially humorous. Whatever the trend, however, the female authors in England are still leading the way, while in the United States they more than hold up their end in the craft.

This brings me back to the question posed early in this paper: How explain the comparative excellence of women in the field of detective fiction? It can hardly be argued that women are more logical than men, that they have better deductive powers, though anyone might argue, after taking a hard look at the contemporary world in which males make the political, economic, and military decisions, that women

do have more common sense. Perhaps the answer is that women are more interested in people as individuals, as creatures impelled by a variety of motives. To express this interest in fiction does not require the colossal canvas of a Balzac or the interminable winding by-paths of a Marcel Proust. Jane Austen limited her fictional world, as she did her life, to a small area. Yet within that area she was incomparable. On the other hand, if women have a superior insight into the motives that impel some men to kill and others to track down clues, why have so comparatively few of them been good dramatists?

One answer to my question was given by a charming female companion at a dinner party after we discovered that both of us were detective story fans. When I put my question to her she replied promptly: "That's easy. Women are by nature more devious and deceptive than men." Shakespeare undoubtedly thought so when he created Lady Macbeth, and Lucrezia Borgia had a deftness in dealing with poisons unmatched by any male of her time or of any time.

This line of reasoning, which might be called "slandering the sex", brings me finally around to Freud -- the end of so many avenues of thought and discussion. Could it be that the outstanding talent of women in the "whodunit" field results from a suppressed desire to kill? Thanks to their biological function, women have been denied the traditional male preoccupation with killing off, *en masse*, other members of the species. They worry enough, Heaven knows, about the Bomb, but precious few of them devote their lives to inventing more deadly forms of the weapon. As wives and mothers they have more constructive things to do with their time -- such as keeping Johnny from being crushed to death under the wheels of a car, or preventing John from working himself into a nervous breakdown. With the possible exception of the Amazons, who were probably creatures of mythology, some contingents of the ancient Spartan army and of the West African kingdom of Dahomey, no nation has ever permitted females to bear arms for more than a limited time. Soviet Russia still has some battalions under arms, but I understand plans are afoot to reduce their number or even eliminate them. Modern Israel, with its precarious geographic position, also has some armed females but

would like to get them out of arms as soon as the Arab pressure declines, if ever. The role of women as wife and mother is deeply ingrained in the male consciousness, so the right to kill, legally, has been reserved to the male. Since they lack this emotional outlet, women may turn to the detective story as a means of giving vent to suppressed desires. Since they cannot kill in fact they do so in fiction. Hence, the astonishing preoccupation of female writers with murder mysteries may be an example of sublimation.

Of course, it is true that murder is only an incident, necessary but not in itself important, in the detective story. The essential business is tracking down the murderer. But here women may be carrying out their function, since the most primitive times, as the censors of society. In the ancient Greek tragedies, the Furies, who relentlessly pursued the sinner in order that justice be carried out, were women. The matriarchal instinct in the female has by no means disappeared. So, carrying out the Freudian line of reasoning, the magnetic attraction to murder as a literary theme is a sublimation of the desire to kill, while the tracking down of the murderer fulfills an age-old demand that the crime be expiated.

A simpler explanation, no doubt, would apply the theory of Betty Friedan in her book, The Feminine Mystique -- that the female is now bent on bursting the bonds of male supremacy. Betty's thesis, by the way, is somewhat tardy: Ibsen expressed the same thought in his play, A Doll's House, 90 years ago. The source of this notion is not Sigmund Freud. The great Viennese trail-blazer tended to regard woman as a doll-like creature or even as the appropriate target of the ancient Jewish prayer: "We thank Thee, Lord, that Thou hast not created me a woman!"

It could be that the magnetic attraction of the "whodunit" for female writers lies in its value as a symbol of sexual emancipation. Certainly there are far more of them today in all fields than there were during the heyday of Mrs. Pankhurst. But I am thinking less in terms of quantity than of quality. What is the specific attraction of the "whodunit" for the female writer, and wherein lies the specific talent that enables her so often to outshine the male? Freud might

attribute it to one form of what he was so fond of calling "penis-envy." But somehow this seems to be more applicable to the activities of a gangster's moll than to the surprising number of gentle housewives and mothers who decide to turn their attention to producing murder mysteries and succeed better even than their mates in the same field.

One might go on theorizing in this vein for hours, but, frankly, I have never found a convincing explanation for the superiority of the "whodunit" author in skirts. This could be a suitable topic for an M.A. thesis in these days of breath-taking changes in American higher education. The question is intriguing and, in its way, as puzzling as any murder mystery.

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