

Murder Most Classic: The Influence of Classical Studies on Golden Age Detective Fiction

Classicists are well aware of the many modern murder mysteries set in ancient Rome. The Falco series by Lindsey Davis began in 1989 with *Silver Pigs*. In 1991 Steven Saylor began his *Roma sub Rosa* series in 1991 with *Roman Blood*. Both authors continue to sell well and other authors have joined the popular genre. But there is an older, and perhaps, deeper, example to be seen of the influence of the classics in the development of the entire genre of murder mysteries, especially in authors who wrote in the Golden Age of detective fiction, which roughly spanned the period between the two World Wars.

The proposed illustrated paper will trace the influence of the classics on such authors starting with Poe, focusing on the members of the famed London based Detection Club, and ending with Colin Dexter. The fact that the majority of these authors were British means that most of them passed through the entrenched classical curriculum. G. K. Chesterton (Father Brown mysteries), for example, attended St. Paul's School, a bastion of classical learning as did his friend E. C. Bentley (*Trent's Last Case*). Beyond this basic grounding, many of these famous authors majored in classics. Anthony Berkeley (AKA Francis Iles), who was the force behind founding the Detection Club along with Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers, read classics at University College, Oxford. Sayers not only majored in medieval studies but wrote a forceful defense of using Medieval Latin in the classroom. Ronald Knox, a serious scholar and translator of the Vulgate, wrote six murder mysteries. The famous poet C. Day-Lewis (1904-1972), who had Maurice Bowra as a tutor at Oxford, wrote twenty mysteries under the name Nicholas Blake. Colin Dexter (b. 1930), the creator of Inspector Morse, was a classics teacher, as was his brother.

The paper will provide an overview of these and other authors and will point out examples of overt classical themes, quotations, and references from many of their works. Sayers especially sprinkles Latin throughout her works and, in one memorable short story, Lord Peter Wimsey pretends to be a wizard in a backward village. His spells are cast in ancient Greek. In *Gaudy Night* his proposal of marriage to Harriet Vane is in Latin.

Finally, the paper will discuss reasons the classics seemed so important to so many excellent authors of detective fiction. The first is socio-economic. The fact that so many of the authors came from a class that traditionally was educated in the classics forms a common thread among them. As these authors sought to elevate their type of detective fiction above that of the penny dreadfuls, they included allusions and quotations that appealed to a more highly educated readership. Furthermore, reading inflected languages and doing text criticism demands attention to verbal clues and a logic that seems reflected in detective fiction of the Golden Age. Often, the initial classical training was reinforced by scientific training. A. A. Milne, whose *Red House Mystery* (1922) was almost as famous as his Pooh stories, majored in mathematics. Alfred Walter Stewart, who wrote prolifically under the name J. J. Connington, was a trained chemist.

The paper will end with a brief consideration of whether the detective story actually existed as such in antiquity, concluding that, given the literary constraints of the Greeks, it did.