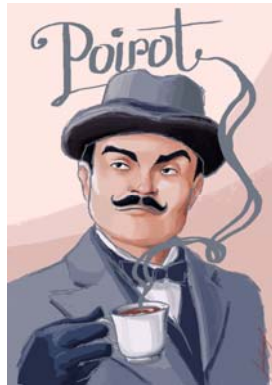


Key points from John G. Cawelti's "The Formula of the Classical Detective Story"

Pattern of Action (Part 2, Week 18)



Recap

- Last week, we discussed the classical detective's rationality and emotional detachment from the crime scene. This week, we will look at the crime.
- How would you describe the classical crime in a conventional detective novel?
- According to Cawelti, the "second major element in the classical detective story's pattern of action is the crime." (The first major element, according to Cawelti again, is the rational detective.)



The crime

“The effectiveness of the crime itself depends upon two main characteristics with a paradoxical relationship to each other. First, the crime must be surrounded by a number of tangible clues that make it absolutely clear that some agency is responsible for it, and, second, it must appear to be insoluble.”



The crime

“Just as the crime and clues must pose a paradox, the parade of witnesses, suspects, and possible solutions, while seemingly moving toward the clarification of the mystery, must really further obfuscate it so that we finally arrive at a total impasse where the reader feels lost in a murky and impenetrable bog of evidence and counterevidence; when this point is reached, the detective is ready to step in. By means of his transcendent intuition, he has been working clearly and rationally toward a solution while the reader sinks into confusion.”



The crime

“Second, the investigation usually threatens to uncover or expose the guilt of a character or characters with whom the reader has been encouraged to sympathize or identify, so that the detective's final solution is not only a clarification of the mystery but a rescue of characters we wish to see free from suspicion and danger.”

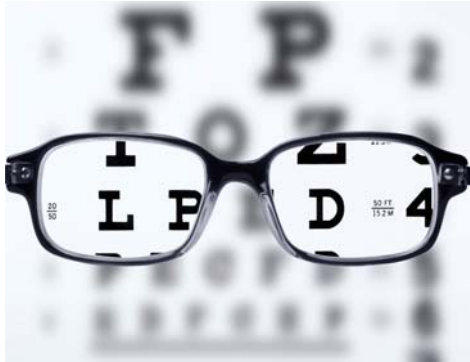


The crime

“The announcement of the solution is as important as, perhaps in some instances more important than, the actual apprehension and punishment of the criminal.”



The crime



“Naturally, since the action of the classical story focuses on the investigation of a mystery, the detective's calm announcement that he has arrived at the solution is a climactic moment. This is also the turning point of the story in another way. As indicated earlier, the reader has been forced to follow the action from the confused and limited point of view of the narrator. From this point of view investigation leads only to obfuscation. But when the solution is announced, though technically the point of view does not change, in actuality we now see the action from the detective's perspective. As he explains the situation, what had seemed chaotic and confused is revealed as clear and logical.”

The crime

“In addition, this is the point at which the detective usually assumes the initiative against the criminal. Throughout the main part of the story the narrator appears to be surrounded by the plots of a mysterious criminal. After the announcement of the solution, the reader joins the detective in his superior position, assuming the role of spider to the criminal fly. Finally, the special importance of the moment of solution presents the classical writer with the opportunity of having two major climaxes or peaks of tension, the moment of solution and the eventual denouement when the criminal is actually captured.”

