The Murder Game: De-Realization and the Uncanny in Golden Age Detective Fiction

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Abstract

The Golden Age theorization of detective fiction lays the emphasis on the clue puzzle as an intellectual pastime, akin to crossword puzzles and chess. Narratives are conceptualized as a game in which the writer competes with the reader. This period is characterized also by publications such as *The Baffle Book* (1928)—which challenges readers to turn into armchair detectives—and by the vogue of murder-themed party games. This Golden Age penchant for games will be discussed as amounting to a "de-realization" of crime and detection, as testified by novels such as Ngaio Marsh's *A Man Lay Dead* (1934), where the country house setting combines with the staging of a parlor game during which a guest is killed, with an uncanny overlap between play-acting and reality. An aspect of the Golden Age sanitation of crime narratives, this form of de-realization pivoting on games recurs in Golden Age texts with different nuances, from the comic to the sinister, notably when coupled with the uncanny, arguably providing a substitute for the sublime that marked the Gothic and early crime fiction.

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Golden Age detective fiction is arguably "the most noticeably self-referential branch of crime fiction," as claimed by J. C. Bernthal. The Golden Age literary theorization of detective fiction famously lays the emphasis on the clue puzzle as an intellectual pastime, akin to crosswords and chess. Narratives are conceptualized as a game in which the writer and their literary figment—the detective—compete with the reader for the solution according to the principle of fair play. In the 1920s Ronald Knox's and S. S. Van Dine's rules articulated this view of the genre, which was both conducive to and strengthened by the creation of the Detection Club—with its famous oath and initiation rituals—in 1930. Members of the Club, moreover, engaged in collective, game-like forms of authorship, resulting in serial radio plays like *Behind the Scenes* (1930) and *Scoop* (1931), and in collaborative novels like *The Floating Admiral* (1931).

This "ludic conception," which Jesper Gulddal and Stewart King describe as exemplifying the "contract theory of genre," was central to the commercial success of novels that proved "cozy" despite their emphasis on murder, and that could be trusted to fulfill the expectations of an increasingly female public (Knight 81). The present article will explore both the multiple roots of this Golden Age narrative ethos and its translation into authorial praxis through the quintessentially self-reflexive fictional treatment of murder-themed party games. An effect of "de-realization"—an undermining of immersive reading, a reminder of the fictive nature of texts—was thus achieved, shielding detective fiction from the accusation of sensationalism and detaching it from the morally ambivalent field of true crime, but also tapping into the energies of a resurgent game culture in the aftermath of World War I.

Escape from Reality

At the beginning of the twentieth century, detective authors engaged with critical writing in the attempt to vindicate the literary status of narratives that were commonly regarded as inferior, if not potentially dangerous. G. K. Chesterton's "A Defense of Detective Stories" (1901) and A. B. Reeve's "In Defense of the Detective

Story" (1913) both attempt to contrast the prejudice that surrounded this genre due to its proximity to the realm of crime. The strategy writers adopted to circumvent the question of "ethical propriety" (91)—as phrased in the editorial note that introduces Reeve's essay—was that of distancing detective fiction from reality, downplaying its referential dimension and presenting it as a game.

When in 1907 Julian Hawthorne launched his six-volume *Library of the World's Best Mystery and Detective Stories*, he wrote an introduction titled "Riddle Stories" in which this genre is theorized as actually based on an *unfair* competition, since "Reader and writer sit down to a game, as it were, with the odds, of course, altogether on the latter's side" (10). Hawthorne also mentioned a concomitant premise, that is the genre's restraint in terms of realism, due to its focus on the plot:

> Our detective, or anyone else, may of course meet with haps and mishaps on his way to the solution of his puzzle; but an astute writer will not color such incidents too vividly, lest he risk forfeiting our preoccupation with the problem that we came forth for to study. (11-12)

Carolyn Wells' seminal *The Technique of the Mystery Story* (1913), which extensively quotes Hawthorne's text, also elaborates on the idea of detective fiction as a game or a conjuring trick, conflating it with a rejection of realism:

> in the plot of a detective story, or in the mental makeup of the detective, realism finds little place—as much as you wish in the material details, the clues, the inquest, or the suspected butler, but the key-note of the story itself is that of pure fiction. It must *seem* to be true as fairy tales *seem* true to children. (51)

The issue of reception soon comes to the fore, and the reader of detective stories is unequivocally absolved from showing a morbid interest in crime news, thus effectively detaching detective fiction from true crime:

> The uninitiate say, "You're so fond of detective stories, I suppose you read all the murder trials in the newspapers." On the contrary, a true lover of detective fiction never reads detailed newspaper accounts of crimes. (52)

While inviting the prospective author to "let the magic of the unreal detective twinkle through it all as fairies dance in real moonlight," Wells positions the prospective reader as "an antagonist at chess" (52). These critical texts—which appeared at the very dawn of the Golden Age, or even earlier, according to those who regard Agatha Christie's *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920) as marking its beginning—enunciate critical stances that would fully ripen in the following years. The 1920s saw the publication of R. A. Freeman's "The Art of the Detective Story" (1924) and E. M. Wrong's introduction to his anthology *Crime and Detection* (1926), where detective fiction is contrasted with the sensationalism of newspapers, thrillers, and films. According to Freeman, what detective fiction conversely provides is "intellectual satisfaction" (11), a statement Wrong echoes when he defines its appeal as "chiefly intellectual" (24). The issue of realism resurfaces in Wrong, who claims that "What we want in our detective fiction is not a semblance of real life . . . but deep mysteries and conflicting clues" (25).

This pervasive conflation of gaming and anti-realism recurs in the introduction Willard Huntington Wright (aka S. S. Van Dine) wrote for yet another anthology, *The Great Detective Stories* (1927). After claiming that "the detective novel does not fall under the head of fiction in the ordinary sense, but belongs rather in the category of

riddles," Wright presents its appeal as due "to the same factors that give popularity and interest to the cross-word puzzle" (35). Although a "sense of reality" (37) is essential to the detective novel, "atmospheres, in the descriptive and psychic sense, have no place in this type of story," for the reader's energies must be directed "to the working out of the puzzle" (38).

Detective Fiction and Play Culture

While the trope of detective fiction as a game was synergic with the Golden Age rejection of sensationalism, literary detection came to be regarded as akin to mind games also because both were the expression of the modern episteme. Pleasurable forms of intellectual exercise famously feature already at the beginning of E. A. Poe's foundational "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), where analytical skills are described first and foremost as a source of enjoyment:

> As the strong man exults in his physical ability, delighting in such exercises as call his muscles into action, so glories the analyst in that moral activity which *disentangles*. He derives pleasure from even the most trivial occupations bringing his talent into play. He is fond of enigmas, of conundrums, of hieroglyphics. . . . (411)

The following paragraphs of Poe's story expand on a comparison between chess, draughts, and whist in which chess is paradoxically downgraded to the sphere of ingenuity, while draughts and whist are presented as marking the triumph of analysis, setting the ground for a story that posits the investigation of murder as a legitimate intellectual pleasure.

Poe was an enthusiast of games, and enjoyed discussing the strategies they entail, as shown by "The Purloined Letter" (1845), where we are confronted with children playing "even and odd," and with a game of puzzles that involves a map with place names. Moreover, already in December 1839, before writing the Dupin trilogy, Poe's interest in cryptography had led him to challenge the readers of *Alexander's Weekly Messenger* that he could solve any simple substitution cipher they would send him.

These reflections remind us of the increasing popularity parlor games and mind games acquired in the course of the nineteenth century. Like detective fiction, crossword puzzles developed in the second half of the century. *Cassell's Book of In-Door Amusements, Card Games, and Fireside Fun* (1882) includes not only a number of "Round and Parlour Games" (5-6), but also a final section on "mental games and pastimes" (185). While crossword puzzles as we know them had not been invented yet, we find here examples of "Word Squares" (191-92) and "Diamond Puzzles and Word Puzzles of Various Shapes" (196-97), which are their antecedents.

The first full-blown crossword puzzle seemingly appeared in December 1913, when Arthur Wynne created a "Word-Cross Puzzle" for the Sunday edition of the *New York World* (Augarde 52). The popularity of this pastime increased in the aftermath of World War I, which Martin Edwards describes as marked by a "play fever" (7) revolving around games such as contract bridge and mahjong. This period is characterized also by publications such as Lassiter Wren and Randle McKay's *The Baffle Book* (1928), in which readers are challenged to solve cases, turning into armchair detectives. The multimodal nature of the book—which includes sets of fingerprints, sketches from photographs, maps, diagrams, and samples of handwriting—reminds us of the composite nature of contemporary detective novels,

where the setting is often described through visual supports. Right from its opening, Wren and McKay's introduction projects readers into an ambiguous territory, where literary detection and parlor games overlap:

> How often have you been week-ending at the Duchess's place only to have the butler break in on the festive company with the tragic announcement that the master has been found slain in the billiard room, an Oriental dagger driven through his breast? (1)

The book itself is presented as conducive to accrued proficiency in observation and deduction intended as skills that can be applied to games: "Solve a few dozen of the hypothetical crime mysteries that follow and you will be equipped to work out any given crime at any given house-party" (2). The connection between the book and the murder-themed party games that were the rage in those years—from Wink Murder, in which the murderer kills their victims by winking at them, to Murder in the Dark, which is played with the lights off—recurs at the end of the text: "*The Baffle Book* grew out of a game. It lends itself well to use at any gathering or party. . . . the game is sometimes called 'Clues' or 'Baffling Mysteries'" (7).

The popularity of this volume is proved by the fact that a jointly authored *Second Baffle Book* was in print already in 1929, which also saw the publication of Wren's *Masterstrokes of Crime Detection*. While Wren and McKay wrote in the US, it was in the UK that in 1936 Dennis Wheatley and Joseph Gluckstein Links started working on *Murder Off Miami* (1936), the first of four "Murder Dossiers" that exemplify the overlap between reading and gaming we have been tracing. These publications went a step further than *The Baffle Book* in despoiling the case of any fictional travesty, presenting the reader with a matter-of-fact dossier of clues to be analyzed in order to solve the mystery, for *Murder Off Miami* includes telegrams, notes, photographs, hair, and even a bloodstained piece of curtain.

As the author of bestselling novels, murder dossiers, and even board games (starting from *Invasion*, 1938), Wheatley exemplifies the interwar convergence of mass fiction and game culture that would ultimately result in the creation of murder-themed board games on both sides of the Atlantic. It was in 1937 that US-based Parker Brothers launched *The Jury Box*, which casts players in the role of jurors, confronting them with six cases on which they have to pronounce their verdict after studying the evidence. In contrast with this American approach to the investigation, *Cluedo* (which was invented in 1943, and produced only in 1949) is set in a country house—originally named Tudor Close—and recreates the typical Golden Age setting, with its circle of likely suspects.

The Game Is Afoot

Given the popularity of game-culture in the aftermath of World War I, it is not surprising that Golden Age detective fiction soon came to thematize party games, variously connecting them with the act of murder, as shown by Margery Allingham's *The Crime at Black Dudley* (1929), which interestingly combines a ritual and a game. By the 1920s, rituals were part and parcel of the tradition of literary detection, together with legends, curses, and other relics of the past. Sherlock Holmes behaves a bit like a cultural anthropologist in "The Adventure of the Musgrave Ritual" (1893), where the challenge to decrypt the meaning of a mysterious ritual conflates with the investigation into the disappearance of two house-servants.

Past and present clash with deadly results also in Allingham's novel, where a ritual pivoting on an ancient weapon—the Black Dudley Dagger—is reenacted during a country house weekend party leading to the murder of the host. Three time-levels interact in the book. The first is the period around 1500, when a guest was murdered with the dagger, and an "investigation" was carried out by placing the weapon in the hands of each suspect, until it was covered with blood through supernatural intervention, revealing the culprit. The second level spans the following centuries, when this process lost its original meaning, turning into a Christmas festive opportunity: "All the lights in the house were put out and the head of the family . . . handed the dagger to the first person he met in the darkness" (25). This person was expected to hand the dagger on to another, until the dinner gong rang, lights were lit, and the person discovered with the object "lost the game and paid a forfeit" (25). The third level coincides with the present, in which the ritual is once again performed, purely as a party game. When halfway through the game the host is taken to his room after seemingly suffering from a heart attack, this seems plausible, until one of the guests reveals that in the dim light of a window she saw the blade of the dagger was covered with blood.

The Crime at Black Dudley responds to the prevailing game culture on two levels, for it thematizes a party game, creating a circle of likely suspects, while positing the reader as a solitary gamer. This contrived overlap of ritual, game, and murder amounts to a "de-realization" of crime and detection, simultaneously evoking a sinister *mise en scène*. Susan Rowlands rightly calls our attention to the dark side of the book, which deploys "gothic aesthetics in a horrified reaction to corporate modernity" (29), pitting aristocracy against a gang of criminals until "the self-conscious gothic players prove to have been on the side of justice and individuality" (29).

The mood of this novel, however, is definitely humorous, as Bruce Shaw remarks, claiming that Allingham "perceives herself as a writer of comedy rather than as a crafter of detection puzzles" (119). The first part of the action is filtered through the eyes of George Abbershaw, a pathologist who happens to be a guest at Black Dudley, while Allingham's serial detective hero Albert Campion is initially presented as "'quite inoffensive, just a silly ass'" (Allingham 17). Through a combination of gothic trappings and self-deflating commentaries, this novel undermines any emotional excess and any temptation of hero-worship, thus effectively turning into a game also at a rhetorical level.

De-realization through game playing recurs in Ngaio Marsh's *A Man Lay Dead* (1934), where an unprecedented degree of self-reflexivity is achieved through a similar combination of gothic elements, narrative nonchalance, and humorous touches. Sir Hubert Handesley is famous for the "delightfully original house-parties" (2) he organizes in his country house at weekends. The diversion that Sir Hubert has planned on this particular occasion is no less than a Murder Game:

> Tonight at dinner one of us will be handed a little scarlet plaque. . . . He has between five-thirty tomorrow afternoon and eleven tomorrow night as the time allotted for the performance of his "murder." He must try and get one of us alone, unknown to the others, and at the crucial moment tap him on the shoulder and say "You are the corpse." He will then switch off the lights at the main behind the stair wall. The victim must instantly fall down as though dead, and [he] must give one good smack at that Assyrian gong there behind the cocktail tray and make off to whatever spot he considers least incriminating. (11-12)

The lights will be turned on at the end of two minutes and the trial will start. Various elements, however, clash with the festive ambience, inspiring ominous forebodings, starting from the fact that Sir Hubert owns "one of the finest collections of archaic weapons in England" (5). A mysterious Russian—Doctor Tokareff—is present among the guests, while another guest—Charles Rankin—brings to the house an ancient ritual dagger he has received from Tokareff himself, who describes it as the symbol of a Russian secret brotherhood. When the voice of the gong—"primitive and threatening" (30)—echoes through the building, the game begins, only to reveal, in the space of a few minutes, a man lying on his face, around whom the others assemble, until somebody notices "the hilt of his Russian dagger jutting out like a little horn between his shoulder blades" (32).

Once again, the conflation of role-playing and reality amounts to a de-realization of murder, turning the text into a metafictional "reading game," but also triggering a psychological effect akin to what Sigmund Freud termed as the uncanny, that is a disquieting overlap between the familiar and the unfamiliar. Following in the footsteps of E. A. Jentsch, Freud describes the uncanny as associated with uncertainty "whether an object is alive or not" (233). After touching upon the sphere of playing—"in their early games children do not distinguish at all sharply between living and inanimate objects" (233)—Freud argues that the double owes its uncanniness precisely to its "being a creation dating back to a very early mental stage . . . in which it wore a more friendly aspect" (236).

The Murder Game we witness in Marsh's book likewise engenders an uncertainty between a semblance of death and the reality of death. A short-circuit occurs between play-acting and crime, creating an uncanny, sinister interference. Boundaries become blurred. As readers, we find ourselves in a liminal position, on a cognitive and emotional threshold, inhabited by contending drives, unable to experience this death through an unproblematically immersive form of reading, and yet deeply disturbed by it. Moreover, while murder turned a game into harsh reality, the ensuing police investigation is paradoxically presented by Chief Inspector-Detective Alleyn as part of the interrupted game: "I think the Murder Game should be played out . . . I propose that we hold the trial precisely as it was planned. I shall play the part of prosecuting attorney" (45).

De-realization and the uncanny recur in other Golden Age texts, either alone or in conjunction with other effects. In Agatha Christie's *Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), de-realization is associated with a comic register and intertextuality through the Vicar's teenage nephew, Dennis, who pictures himself as a young Sherlock Holmes, and "spends his entire time looking for footprints and cigarette ash," alternating this pastime with tennis. Dennis is absolved—together with readers—from any accusation of callous behavior by the Vicar himself when he comments:

> At Dennis's age a detective story is one of the best things in life, and to find a real detective story, complete with corpse, waiting on one's own front doorstep so to speak, is bound to send a healthy-minded boy into the seventh heaven of enjoyment.

While these words are revealing of the Golden Age's flippant attitude towards murder, in other Christie novels, de-realization takes on a sinister tone, veering towards the tragic. *And Then There Were None* (1939, originally titled *Ten Little Niggers*) is a case in point. Eight persons are attracted to a house on Nigger Island—which owes its name to its resembling the head of "a man with negroid lips" (15)—and are welcomed by two servants. The total sum makes ten. Guests soon discover that a framed copy of "an old

nursery rhyme" (27) titled "Ten Little Niggers" can be found in every guest's room. As if to underline the theme of what might be defined as a macabre country house party game, ten little China figures decorate the dining room table. After supper, a gramophone record is played, accusing each guest of being a murderer. Little by little, all the guests disappear through murdering techniques that imitate the sequence of the rhyme. The unrealistic nature of this grotesquely elaborate murder plot is apparent. What remains to be underlined is its uncanniness, for we can assume that at the time of publication many readers were more or less acquainted with the nursery rhyme—or counting-out game—from which the book takes its title. This familiar element, however, becomes unfamiliar when it provides inspiration for serial murder, and the realms of childhood and death coalesce in a sinister way.

Agatha Christie's imagination of evil is deeply connected to the world of childhood games and fears, folklore and fairy tales, as revealed by novels such as *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* (1940), *Crooked House* (1949), and *A Pocket Full of Rye* (1953). This oppressive sense of evil similarly pervades the first chapters of Christie's *Cards on the Table* (1936), which thematizes a different kind of game. From his first appearance, Mr. Shaitana is described as somebody who "deliberately attempted a Mephistophelian effect," but due to his being also immensely rich, clever, and imaginative he provides his London acquaintances with the right form of thrilling entertainment:

> He gave wonderful parties—large parties, small parties, *macabre* parties, respectable parties and definitely "queer" parties.
>
> He was a man of whom nearly everybody was a little afraid.

The contrasting notes of fun and fear are craftly combined in this novel, where Shaitana's cult of murder as an art translates into his collecting not objects but human beings—the finest criminals, those who got away with it. Unable to resist temptation, Shaitana keeps pushing the boundaries of entertainment until his passion proves fatal to him. When he invites Poirot, together with three other specialists in detection, to a dinner, confronting them with four specimens of undetected criminals, Shaitana is killed during the following game of bridge.

De-realization is again achieved through a contrived overlap of gaming levels. The first is the game of bridge itself, in which Shaitana does not participate, claiming that "Bridge is not one of the games that amuse me." The second is Shaitana's psychological experiment—a cat and mouse game in which he confronts four detectives with four criminals, in order to ignite fear in the latter and spy on their reactions. The third is the investigation that ensues from Shaitana's murder. What the resulting game of mirrors produces is yet another self-reflexive narrative, which triggers the reader's admiration of neatly unrealistic symmetries and designs.

Christie's unceasing interest for games is proved once more by *A Murder Is Announced* (1950). Written at the twilight of the Golden Age, in the aftermath of World War II, when social changes were keenly felt, this novel looks nostalgically backward to the heyday of the murder game, gesturing towards that party ritual without actually reviving it. When the inhabitants of Chipping Cleghorn read a mysterious announcement in the local *Gazette*—"A murder is announced and will take place on Friday, October 29th at Little Paddock at 6:30 p.m. Friends, please accept this, the only intimation"—most of them think a Murder Game is going to take place. An atmosphere of expectation builds up, as family after family reads the paper at breakfast, until several people gather at Little Paddock at the appointed time. When the crowded house is suddenly shrouded in darkness, however, the guests do not

experience a game, but rather what looks like a holdup, at the end of which the supposed criminal seemingly commits suicide. Needless to say, appearances prove misleading, and a complex detective plot will uncover a different criminal agency as being at the origin of this bizarre chain of events. As often happens in Christie, identity is presented here as a construct, reality as an actual make-belief.

The Pervasiveness of De-Realization

This multi-level thematization of gaming is but a facet of a wider tendency, since Golden Age detective fiction pursues de-realization through various forms of performance. As Joanne Drayton reminds us, "The theatre remained a lifelong passion" for Ngaio Marsh, who thematized drama in novels such as *Enter a Murderer* (1935), *Vintage Murder* (1937), and *Death and the Dancing Footman* (1941). In this last book Jonathan Royal invites eight guests to spend the weekend at his country house in order to conduct "an experiment" (5). After describing himself as "the unsatisfied and inarticulate artist" (13), Royal reveals to young dramatist Aubrey Mandrake that he has at last got an interesting idea, inspired by Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921): "I would summon my characters to the theatre of my own house and the drama would unfold itself" (15). This cruelly organized clash of personalities, past traumas, and interpersonal conflicts will predictably result in murder.

The Golden Age penchant for self-reflexivity and de-realization reaches a peak in J. H. Wallis' *Murder by Formula* (1931), the title of which hints precisely at the formula of detective fiction. The novel thematizes both game playing and uncanny symmetries right from the opening. Novelist Andrew Wingdon is on board a train from New Haven to New York, having witnessed the defeat of Yale in a football game against Harvard. Outside Grand Central Station, he is in for a second unwelcome surprise, since he sees a group of people surrounding the corpse of a man who closely resembles him. When Wingdon reaches his club, which is housed in a replica of a Florentine palazzo, readers realize that they have entered a fictional hall of mirrors. Suspension of disbelief is further undermined through a long discussion of murder mysteries, which are placed under the aegis of the unreal. Despite being an author of what might be defined as "literary fiction," Wingdon becomes interested in this genre to the point of wanting to write a detective novel himself. Only, the conversation is followed by his murder, against the backdrop of a room that is aptly full of ancient weapons.

Wallis' book invites readers to adopt a jocularly meta-literary attitude that anticipates John Dickson Carr's famous chapter on the locked room mystery in *The Hollow Man* (1935), where an effect of de-realization is achieved also through the use of stage magic. In this and other Golden Age works, the formula of the locked room combines with misdirection, drawing inspiration from the stage illusions performed by early twentieth-century magicians such as John Nevil Maskeline, Harry Kellar, and Harry Houdini (Serafini). Two interpretative levels coexist here—a semblance of impossibility that either defies understanding or invokes supernatural agencies, gesturing back towards the Gothic, and a final rational explanation, following the detective's revelation of the murderer's conjuring trick.

As we can see, both the prevailing trope of detective fiction as a game and the thematization of party games are facets of a wider strategy of de-realization that marks the Golden Age, when a pervasive sanitation of crime narratives took place. At the same time, the ensuing combination of gaming levels provided writers with new narrative opportunities, ranging in tone from the comic to the sinister. The uncanniness that transpires from many a Golden Age novel arguably provided a

substitute for the sublime that had previously marked gothic and crime fiction. In a world that had been divested of supernatural fears, in which vampires and ghosts were used by detective writers as carnivalesque travesties of truth, the emphasis was now on the psyche. This did not prevent Christie from reviving the sublime in *And Then There Were None*, where the vivid contrast between past and present is symbolized by the "modern-looking" (24) house that provides the setting for a retributive chain of murders. The sublime agency behind the scenes is that of a God-like, all-powerful, invisible judge who pronounces sentences with a disembodied voice (the record) and feels entitled to condemn others to death while surviving the "death" of his own flesh and blood avatar.

Both the Golden Age emphasis on the uncanny and its occasional revival of the sublime compensated for the specialization of the clue-puzzle as a rational reading experience, reinvigorating its emotional appeal. Although the concentration of a gamer or a mystery reader has in itself an escapist dimension that proved welcome in the aftermath of World War I and the 1929 economic crisis, Golden Age authors also pursued the power of a gripping underlying narrative, appealing to the readers' psyche at a deeper level than rational enigmas. While aiming to play safe, Golden Age fictions take readers to inner places no murder dossier could reach, retaining the entrancing ability to resonate with multiple layers of our psyche, exciting our curiosity but also putting us into contact with the dark inner forces we courted in our childhood games.

According to anthropologist Thomas M. Malaby, one can hardly "sustain claims that play is essentially about 'fun,' 'pleasure,' or other positively charged sentiments" (205). Malaby redefines play as "an attitude characterized by a readiness to improvise in the face of an ever-changing world that admits of no transcendently ordered account" (206). These words allow me to introduce yet another layer of meaning Golden Age fictions conveyed at the time of publication, in a society that was still struggling to cope with the heavy human losses it had suffered during the war. As argued by Annika Houwen, Golden Age novels—with their focus on the time between the rift of violent death and the rebirth of community through therapeutic purging—can be regarded "as rituals in themselves, rewritings of the experience of millions of people in wartime who were forced to accept the reality of death" (7). Despite the strategies of de-realization that delimit this literary territory from the contemporary chronicles of crime, Golden Age fictions may actually reconnect with the reality of those years at a different level, turning into a ritual of bereavement, a working through of loss and a reassertion of stability, thus proving that playing can be a serious activity indeed.

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