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He Do the Police in Different Voices: the Influence of Detective Fiction in T. S. Eliot’s Works

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from The College of William and Mary

by

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Detective Fiction reached its “golden age” between the World Wars at the peak of the modernist era. Like the highbrow literature of its day, detective fiction grapples with the pressing questions of the 20th century: Who is responsible for our current state of things? Is there a master narrative that can reconcile contradictory perspectives on the truth? Can human understanding access such a narrative? Jon Thompson, in his book *Fiction, Crime, and Empire: Clues to Modernity and Postmodernity*, addresses some of the overlap between detective fiction and high modernism:

Whether fictional or philosophical, modernist writing is fascinated with uncovering, revealing, decoding, sleuthing. Within the modernist worldview, there is the assumption of a remoter ‘something’—a hidden truth, a concealed clue to existence, a sense that experience is coded, and that ‘beneath’ or ‘within’ the code, there is an underlying pattern of meaning that is capable of resolving ‘the nightmare of history’ into an understandable, stable, coherent narrative . . . Although most modernist literature also expresses severe doubts about the possibility of successfully finding the concealed clue to existence and being able to then confer a hidden order upon it, this hermeneutic desire remains a fundamental dialect within modernism (Thompson 111-12).

It appears that some modernists may have seen these connections themselves. Ezra Pound, who edited T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, said of his own work that “the teasiness of [his] first thirty cantos was meant to suggest the pattern of a detective novel: who got the world into its current mess?” (Wilhelm 36). And Eliot, whose obsession with crime fiction would today be called fandom, certainly employed
sleuth-like themes even more than Pound. Eliot weaves the detective narrative into many of his works, using it as a metaphor for the artist’s quest for truth in the modern age.

Eliot’s love for detective fiction, arguably the pulp fiction of its day, has puzzled numerous critics. Many have commented on Eliot’s obsession with Sherlock Holmes in particular. Growing up, Eliot called his clever older sister Ada “the Mycroft to [my] Sherlock Holmes” (Gordon 37). As an adult, he helped to found a Sherlock Holmes fan club and was also known for being able to recite entire passages of Conan Doyle from memory (Jay 117, Canary 304). In 1927, Eliot famously wrote in *The Criterion* that “perhaps the greatest of the Sherlock Holmes mysteries is this: that when we talk of him we invariably fall into the fancy of his existence” (*Criterion* 553). Holmesian references abound in Eliot’s works, from Macavity, the feline Moriarty in his *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats*, to a direct quote from Conan Doyle in *Murder in the Cathedral*, to *The Four Quartet’s* use of the word “grimen” (as in the famous “Grimpen Mire” in “The Hound of the Baskervilles”) (Preston 397-99, Nicholas 269, Wordsworth 70).

In addition to his love for Holmes, however, Eliot was more broadly interested in the detective genre that Conan Doyle influenced so greatly with his stories. Eliot also enjoyed other Victorian detective writers like Wilkie Collins, as well as many of his contemporary detective writers, including Georges Simenon, Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, Peter Cheyney, and Raymond Chandler (Chinitz 155). So Eliot’s love for Holmes in particular was part of a greater interest in the detective narrative. Furthermore, critics have pointed out Eliot’s peculiar
fascination with crime and sensation fiction. Gregory Jay notes how Eliot studied the “English tradition of popular tabloid gossip about the criminal,” a tradition that led to the sensation fiction that prefigured detective fiction (Jay 117). And David Chinitz posits a possible connection between Eliot’s character Sweeney (of his unfinished play *Sweeney Agonistes* (1932)) and Sweeney Todd, the murderous barber of Fleet Street who first appeared in Victorian sensation fiction (Chinitz 108). (Sweeney also appears in Eliot’s poems “Sweeney Among the Nightingales” (1918), “Mr. Eliot’s Sunday Morning Service” (1918), “Sweeney Erect” (1919), and he even makes a brief appearance in *The Waste Land* (1922).) Eliot was deeply interested, not only by detective fiction itself, but also by its history.

Unsurprisingly, considering this fascination, Eliot wrote a great deal about the detective narrative, trying to uncover what made a detective story good or bad. In one of his articles for *The Criterion*, Eliot reviews and ranks a “fairly representative” list of “the detective fiction of the last few months” (*Criterion* 360). In another, he created a list of “obvious [rules] of detective conduct” that all detective writers should abide by. Interestingly, this list of rules, which Eliot wrote in 1927, actually predates the “Rules of Fair Play” that Christie and her fellow “Detection Club” writers created in 1930 (*Criterion* 141). Eliot also wrote an introduction to Wilkie Collins’ *The Moonstone*, in which he praises Collins’ work for being “the first, the longest, and the best of modern English detective novels” (*Moonstone* v). All of these writings on detective fiction explore the role that the sleuth’s intellect should play in his search for truth. According to Eliot, a detective story should celebrate the intellect while recognizing its limits.
Even though Eliot loved Sherlock Holmes like an old friend, he denounces Holmes’ omniscient intellect as extremely unrealistic in his writings. Eliot writes that Holmes is “never . . . impeccable,” that his “disguises” are “incredible” and that “It was wrong of him to go mountain climbing in Switzerland when he could better have eluded Moriarty in London” (Criterion 554). Eliot even went so far as to say that Holmes “is not even a very good detective” (Criterion 556). Of course, within his own world, Holmes is the best detective there is. Within his own world, Holmes is always impeccable, his disguises are always believable, and his decision to go to Switzerland to avoid Moriarty is sheer genius. Eliot can only have meant that Holmes’ brilliant methods do not apply to the real world. And Eliot was very adamant that detectives should never put any “strain on our credulity” (Moonstone xi). So while Eliot may find it tempting to fall into the fancy of Holmes’ existence, he reminds himself that the reality of Holmes is in fact nothing more than a fancy. No one, not even Holmes, could always succeed in uncovering the truth by using only his or her intellect.

Interestingly, one of Eliot’s very favorite detective stories actually proves the fallibility of the sleuth’s intellect in the real world. Eliot called Edgar Allan Poe’s The Mystery of Marie Roget one of the “standard works” of detective fiction, praising it for its “pure intellectual pleasure” (Criterion 552, 362). In this work, Poe speaks through the persona of his detective, C. Auguste Dupin, as he attempts to solve an actual murder case from his day. Poe’s story shows Dupin drawing conclusions from the real newspaper coverage of a real murder. (Interestingly, Dupin uses newspapers in much the same way that Sherlock Holmes would later use
newspapers to solve his own crimes.) When Poe had published two of three serial installments of his story, however, the police released information that disproved Dupin’s elaborate theorizing. So even though Eliot loved Inspector Dupin because of his intellectual superpowers, he knew that these powers could never work in the real world.

While Eliot praised Poe’s Dupin for his infallibility, he also praised Wilkie Collins’ Inspector Cuff for his ability to make mistakes. Inspector Cuff was Eliot’s ideal detective. Eliot wrote that “modern detective writers have added the use of fingerprints and other such trifles, but they have not materially improved upon either the personality or the methods of Sergeant Cuff. Sergeant Cuff is the perfect detective” (Moonstone xii). He said that the ideal detective should mimic Cuff and be “highly intelligent but not superhuman” (Criterion 142). Although Inspector Cuff does solve the mystery in The Moonstone, his initial theory is wrong. He knows more than the other characters, but he is far from all knowing. And not only is Cuff’s intellect flawed, but it is insufficient by itself. One of Eliot’s criticisms of Holmes is that he has “no rich humanity, no deep and cunning psychology and knowledge of the human heart” (Criterion 556). Unlike Holmes, Inspector Cuff supplements his intellect with his understanding of the human heart. Because he knows how to gain his witnesses’ trust, Cuff can get more information out of them. And because he understands people’s motivations, he can better interpret people’s testimonies. So while Inspector Cuff does solve the mystery with his intellect, he does not solve it with just his intellect. Eliot may have been drawn to Holmes’ sheer intellectualism, but he found Cuff’s approach to be more realistic. When Eliot writes his “rule of
detective conduct,” he writes that, “every detective story, so far as it is a good detective story, observes the detective laws to be drawn from [The Moonstone.] The typical English detective story is free from the influence of Poe; Sherlock Holmes himself, and in spite of his numerous progeny, is in some respects a sport” (Criterion 140).

Eliot saw art itself as a form of detection, a quest for order and truth amidst the chaos and confusion of modernity. In 1923, Eliot wrote a commentary on James Joyce in which he describes his fellow modernist as a kind of sleuth. He says Joyce writes Ulysses as an attempt “[to control], [to order], [to give] a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (Ulysses). In 1931, Eliot wrote that Pascal’s Pensées were a similar attempt to find a “theory” that will explain “the disorder, the futility, the meaninglessness, the mystery of life and suffering” (Pensées xii, xix).

Within his own works, Eliot often uses the detective narrative as a metaphor for his own search for truth. As Eliot’s biographer Lyndall Gordon points out, Eliot frequently alludes to the detective mysteries that were so popular during his day in order to raise the “profounder [mysteries]” that he explores in his works (Gordon 334). Just like the detective fiction Eliot loved so much, the detective themes that he incorporated into his works raise similar questions about the limits of his own massive intellect. Though Eliot was well aware of his Holmesian tendencies, he strove to be more like Pascal, who, according to Eliot, had an “intellectual passion for truth” that “was reinforced by his passionate dissatisfaction with human life unless a spiritual explanation could be found” (Pensées xi).
This thesis explores three of Eliot’s major works in which detective narratives and language play a particularly large role: *The Waste Land* (1922), *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), and *The Family Reunion* (1939). As I have already pointed out, detective imagery plays a role in many of Eliot’s writings; in these three works, however, that role is especially significant. I examine each of these works separately, tracing the evolution of sleuth themes in light of Eliot’s spiritual journey towards Anglo-Catholicism. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot uses the detective narrative to represent humanity’s quest for the redemption of death, in *Murder in the Cathedral*, the exploration of Christ’s death that yields spiritual understanding, and in *The Family Reunion*, the examination of sin that is necessary for said understanding to take root.
The Search for a Master Narrative: *The Waste Land*

Eliot’s most famous work, *The Waste Land*, illustrates his initial concept of the artist as a detective. The poem’s working title, “He Do the Police in Different Voices,” (a borrowing from Dickens’ *Our Mutual Friend*) names Eliot’s attempt throughout the poem to play the sleuth, to deduce some unifying truth from the profound fragmentation of society. In his essay “Discovering the Corpus,” Gregory Jay points out the detective themes in *The Waste Land*, noting how the poem embodies Eliot’s own description of “the poet’s mind” as one that “is constantly amalgamating disparate experience” and “forming new wholes” that unite both the “chaotic, irregular, fragmentary” life of “the ordinary man” with the artist’s more transcendent experiences of “[falling] in love, or [reading] Spinoza” (Jay 127). But while Jay argues that this search for meaning and unity inevitably leads to more fragmentation and destruction, I argue that Eliot really did see the potential for wholeness within the artist’s vocation. Rather than questioning the act of detection itself, Eliot questions his own ability to be a good sleuth. The many detective figures that Eliot places throughout the poem represent Eliot’s belief that proper detection could string the disparate voice of the Modern Age into some kind of master narrative, as well as his anxiety about living up to such a task. By comparing himself to a detective, Eliot also raises questions about his method of deduction. He questions whether his detection resembles that of Holmes or Inspector Cuff. He asks whether he can distinguish relevant clues from red herrings. Ultimately, he questions whether he is capable of identifying and effectively communicating a unifying narrative.
The Waste Land contains many detective figures. All of the clairvoyants in The Waste Land make their predictions by synthesizing a collection of fragments the same way that a detective synthesizes a series of clues to reach his or her own truth. Eliot prefaced The Waste Land by referencing the Cumaen Sibyl, a prophetess known for her ability to tell the future by analyzing scattered leaves (Donaldson). Madame Sosostris, the “famous clairvoyant” in “The Burial of the Dead,” makes predictions by interpreting the random group of images that she draws from her “wicked pack of cards” (*Waste Land* 43, 46). (And indeed, her statement “I do not find / The Hanged Man,” while it refers to a tarot card, also sounds remarkably like a central clue in a murder mystery (*Waste Land* 54-55).) In “The Fire Sermon,” the prophet Tiresias is able to “foretell” the future when he “[perceives] the scene” of the typist’s apartment (*Waste Land* 229). Thus all three of these characters function as detective figures who draw predictions from fragmented clues the same way that an artist draws meaning from a jumble of signifiers.

Besides their ability to synthesize a series of disjointed clues into a single truth, all three of these figures further resemble detectives in their need to explore death. In Virgil’s *Aeneid*, the Cumaen Sibyl is a guide to the underworld and leads Aeneas through Hades. Like the Sibyl, Tiresias has “walked among the lowest of the dead” (*Waste Land* 246). And besides their ability to see into the future, clairvoyants like Madame Sosostris often claimed to be able to communicate with the dead. By using detectives who are associated with investigations of death itself, Eliot implies that death itself is, in fact, the mystery that he wishes to solve. His realization of just “how many” “death” has “undone” leads him on a quest to find some kind of
meaning, some kind of redemption in mortality (*Waste Land* 63). He “[shores]” up the “fragments” of his poem in the hopes of creating a narrative that will resolve the death and destruction of WWI the same way that a detective’s narrative resolves the death and destruction of a murder (*Waste Land* 430).

Jay argues that the poem’s “effort to unravel the mystery and restore order” actually ends up “compulsively [repeating] the crime” and that by “transgressing the inherited rules of writing,” Eliot “dismembers the unity” of the Western literary tradition. Jay claims that, in *The Waste Land’s* effort to piece society together and redeem death, it actually dismembers the Western Canon and transforms this corpus of work into yet another corpse (Jay 116, 132). I, however, argue that Eliot did see the reintegration of society into a master narrative as a real possibility that could actually redeem the death that so afflicted it. Most of the death imagery in *The Waste Land* contains the implied question of the possibility of rebirth. Furthermore, this implied rebirth is often connected to detection. In “The Burial of the Dead,” the narrator wants to know if the “corpse” in the “garden” “has . . . begun to sprout” (*Waste Land* 71, 72). Not only does this image represent rebirth, but it also evokes the atmosphere of a detective novel, of a hidden murder. Critic Hugh Kenner points out some of the other hidden murders that haunt *The Waste Land* and notes how many of these deaths are the result of drowning. Kenner claims that the hyacinth girl in “The Burial of the Dead” is another corpse in a garden because her “arms” that are “full” of hyacinths and “hair” that is “wet” evoke Ophelia, whose last words are repeated at the end of “A Game of Chess.” Because of these similarities, Kenner says that the astute reader will infer that the hyacinth girl “has been drowned.”
Furthermore, “The Fire Sermon” contains what Kenner calls “despairing fingers clutching and sinking into a wet bank” and “Thames-daughters singing from beneath the oily waves.” Even the “controlling hands” at the end of the poem’s final section sound rather murderous, since they compel the “[obedience]” of a “beating” “heart.” Because the owner of these hands is on a boat, Kenner argues that Eliot raises the question of whether or not this person pushed someone overboard, just as Eliot would raise the same question years later in his play The Family Reunion (Kenner 16-17). All of these images portray the poem’s central theme of “death by water” as a murder mystery. And since Eliot connects these murder mysteries to water, which is a symbol of both death and the possibility of new life in this poem, he implies that the mysteries of the poem contain both death and, if they can be solved, the possibility of new rebirth.

This presentation of “death by water” as a mystery also emphasizes Eliot’s particular attraction to Christianity as a “theory” that could solve life’s mysteries and redeem death. Although Eliot wrote The Waste Land before he converted to Anglo-Catholicism, and although he certainly presents many religions as possible master narratives (and ancient fertility rituals also connect water to new life), the phrase “death by water” clearly bears a particularly strong association with the Christian rite of baptism. In the waters of an Anglo-Catholic baptism, the baptized dies to sin (a kind of drowning) and is born to new life. It is noteworthy that, in order for the baptized’s newness of life to continue, he or she must investigate the faith as they grow up and eventually come to an intellectual understanding of his or her own death by water. Furthermore, as Jay points out, Anglo-Catholic
incarnational theology is the ultimate detective narrative, since it unites divinity, or meaning, with the disjointed physicality of everyday life (Jay 134).

All this is not to say that Eliot saw all detection as redemptive. Even as Eliot’s three detective figures represent his own effort to play the sleuth, they also represent his fear of doing so poorly. Tiresias in particular bears a striking resemblance to Sherlock Holmes when he examines the typist’s apartment. He enters the world of the typist through all the minute characteristics of her apartment, from her “food” “[laid] out . . . in tins,” to her “drying combinations touched by the sun’s last rays,” to the “stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays” that are “piled” “on the divan” (Waste Land 223, 225, 227, 226). Tiresias’ ability to guess the typist’s plans and the arrival of her “expected guest” just by surveying her apartment resembles Holmes’ ability to deduce facts about people just by looking at them or their surroundings (like when he first meets Watson and immediately “[perceives]” that Watson “[has] been in Afghanistan” just by looking at him) (Waste Land 230, Doyle 10).

Tiresias further resembles Holmes in his asexuality. Because he is both male and female, Tiresias truly belongs to neither gender. Holmes is also known for distancing himself from sexuality. Conan Doyle says that any influence of “softer passions” on Holmes’ character would be like “grit in a sensitive instrument” and “introduce a distracting factor which might throw a doubt upon all his mental results.” Sexuality is only useful to Holmes in as far as it helps his “[observation]” by “drawing the veil from men’s motives and actions” (Doyle 187). When Tiresias observes the typist having sex as part of his investigation, he uses his asexuality to
set himself apart as a detective figure, saying that he has “foresuffered all / Enacted on this same divan or bed” (*Waste Land* 243-44).

In fact, all three of these detective figures somewhat resemble Holmes in that they all assemble their clues while remaining completely aloof from society. The Cumaen Sibyl was a prophetess who lived apart from normal society in a cave, where she could read her leaves. Within Eliot’s work, she is so far removed from the society that Eliot depicts that she does not even enter the body of the poem, but remains literally outside of its context. Within mythology, Tiresias is similarly cut off from society, both because of his role as a prophet and because of his hermaphroditic state. Within the poem, Tiresias is so far above the other characters that none of them even sense his presence; Eliot himself said that Tiresias is “a mere spectator and not indeed a ‘character’” (*Complete Poems* 52). Madame Sosostris, as a clairvoyant, is similarly an outsider, one whose claim to special knowledge separates her from the very society that it enlightens her about. And although Madame Sosostris does interact with other characters, she is an observer and not a participant in the “crowds of people” that she sees and thus she has enough distance to notice that they are “walking around in a ring” (*Waste Land* 56). So Eliot chooses detective characters for his poem that must distance themselves from society in order to make their predictions about it.

Perhaps because of their Holmesian methods, all of these sleuths fall short of their goals of detection. Jay points out how Tiresias actually becomes a kind of antidetective when he views the typist’s scene, since in it he sees “physical life (or signifiers) unredeemed by spirit (or a transcendental signified).” So when Eliot
claims that “what Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem,” he means literal substance, sheer unredeemed physicality (Jay 129). And by cutting himself off from the worldly realm by his aloofness, Tiresias also cuts himself off from the world of true meaning. Both the Sibyl and Madame Sosostris similarly cut themselves off from true meaning when they distance themselves from the world. In Eliot’s epigraph, the Sibyl is so old and wasted that she lives in a jar. She can no longer make predictions or help people in any other capacity. Thus, rather than redeeming death with her prophesies, she actually perpetuates the power of death, by saying that she “[wants] to die” (Complete Poems 37). Madame Sosostris is similarly unhelpful, for she is a fraud. Eliot sarcastically calls her “the wisest woman in Europe,” just as he would go on to mock mediums and their magic in later works (Gordon 478-79). Ultimately, all of these detective figures are useless. None of them restore any level of justice or clarity to society. While their struggle to piece their world together resembles Eliot’s own artistic quest, they ultimately represent Eliot’s fear of failure on such a quest.

Perhaps it is this fear of distance from the people and consequently from meaning that led Eliot to speak so deliberately through the voices of society in his poem. His working title, “He Do the Police in Different Voices” draws attention to the fact that Eliot conducts his search for truth by taking on the voices of various characters. And if The Waste Land’s prophets and clairvoyant represent the Holmesian method that Eliot sought to avoid, its working title represents the method of Inspector Cuff that Eliot sought to carry out in his poem. Wilkie Collins’ The Moonstone is narrated through the voices of various narrators, so each section
of the story is told from the point of view of a different character. The detective narrative of *The Moonstone* synthesizes these disparate voices into a cohesive whole. Furthermore, as critic D. A. Miller points out, the detective voice of the novel is similarly dispersed. Miller notices how “the mystery would never be solved” without the “practical collaboration” of the non-detective characters of the novel and that “the work of detection is carried forward by the novel’s entire cast of characters.” In the novel’s first section, Inspector Cuff initially implicates the innocent Rachel Verinder and ignores the voices of the community who protest that she is innocent. Although Miller goes on to downplay Inspector Cuff’s role in the story, claiming that “the work of detection is prosecuted in large degree as a result of chance and coincidence,” I do not think that Eliot would have agreed with this dismissal of the man he called “the perfect detective” (Miller 42, *Moonstone* xii). Rather, I expect that Eliot attributed Inspector Cuff’s ability to correctly solve the mystery to his increased contact with the voices of the community. Just as the narrator of the novel compiles and edits the stories of each section’s author into a cohesive narrative (cutting Mr. Betteredge off when he deviates from the story, for example, and prompting characters for more when they fail to cover all the necessary information), so Inspector Cuff is only successful when he synthesizes his conclusion from the opinions of the people. Eliot’s working title for his poem alludes to his own attempt to ground his quest for the truth in the voices of the people.

To Eliot, this connection to society’s voices was just as important in art as it was in detection. The same year that he first published *The Waste Land*, he also published a letter in *The Dial* magazine in which he praised the recently deceased
music hall singer Marie Lloyd for her Cuff-like relationship with her audience members. Eliot calls her “the expressive figure of the lower class” and says that “no other comedian succeeded so well in giving expression to the life of that audience, in raising it to a kind of art.” He goes on to say that she gave her audience members “the artistic expression and dignity of their own lives” (“London Letter”). So like Inspector Cuff, Marie Lloyd takes the speech of those around and represents it in a way that gives it more meaning. As a writer, Eliot sought to elevate not just the voice of the lower class, but all the voices of society, from Marie at the beginning of the poem, who sleds in the mountains, to the friend of Stetson, who walks among the “crowd” that “[flows] over London Bridge,” to Lil, who waits for her husband to return home from the Great War (Waste Land 62). Eliot believed that the good artist must reject any Holmesian tendencies towards aloofness and instead mix his own voice with those of society at large.

Eliot’s skepticism about the methods of Holmes becomes apparent in another of his revised titles. The original title for the poem’s second section, “A Game of Chess,” was “In a Cage.” Not only does this title refer to the detective figure of the Cumaen Sibyl who opens the poem (and her removal from society), but it also shares its name with Henry James’ novella about a girl who works in a telegraph office cage. James’ protagonist makes her own attempt at sleuthing, connecting the snippets of stories that she overhears into elaborate stories. As Jay points out, she thinks that she is “exercising her ‘instinct of observation and detection’ in guessing ‘the high reality, the bristling truth’ of the fragmentary messages that pass before her.” Jay even points out how James connects her failed sleuthing to the act of
writing when he says that her fabricated narrative “came to her there . . . that she held the whole thing in her hand, held it as she held her pencil” (Jay 118, 119). But while Jay argues that Eliot uses this reference to critique the Romanticism of his own detective aspirations, I argue that Eliot actually criticizes his own removal from the society. Like James’ young woman and the Cumaen Sibyl at the beginning of Eliot’s poem, Eliot experienced the Holmesian temptation of isolating himself, of allowing his solutions to become purely theoretical instead of based in reality.

So in spite of Eliot’s optimism about Cuff’s method of investigation, he retained grave doubts about his ability to carry it out. As much as The Waste Land engages the voices of the people, it remains self-consciously intellectual, acutely aware of its profound distance from the masses. Eliot’s many obscure and intimidating references (which he drew even more attention to with his addition of the notes) indicate his sense of his own Holmesian elitism. Thus Eliot’s poem embodies the tension between his sense of superiority and his desire to abandon this superiority.

Besides this concern about his Holmesian tendencies, Eliot’s other worry about his role as sleuth was whether or not he could distinguish empty clues from those with meaning. For if the detective imagery in The Waste Land implies a comparison between the signifiers of Eliot’s poem and the clues of a detective, it also implies that some of Eliot’s signifiers are red herrings that hold no meaning. Miller writes about the importance of irrelevant information in the detective narrative:

Though the detective story postulates a world in which everything might have a meaningful bearing on the solution of the crime, it concludes with an
extensive repudiation of meanings that simply “dropout.” It is often argued that
the detective story seeks to totalize its signifiers in a complete and all-
comprising order. On the contrary, it is concerned to restrict and localize
the province of meaning: to guarantee large areas of irrelevance (Miller 34).

As Sherlock Holmes himself puts it, “It is of the highest importance in the art of
detection to be able to recognize, out of a number of facts, which are incidental and
which are vital” (Aydelotte 136). Eliot’s detective imagery also raises questions
about whether or not he can sift relevant signifiers from the irrelevant ones. Critic
Harriet Davidson points out that Eliot uses both the allusions and random images in
his poem to tempt the reader with a “search for final meanings in a poem which
suggests these meanings but then denies them any stability.” The Waste Land’s
many allusions seem to be clues that will, if properly followed up, unlock the poem’s
elusive meaning. In reality, following the trail of these allusions only sends the
reader on what Eliot himself called “a wild goose chase after Tarot cards and the
Holy Grail” (Davidson 124-25). The poem’s many seemingly significant details serve
as a similar kind of red herring, for “not only the coffee in the Hofgarten, but also the
overheard line in German, Madame Sosostris’s bad cold, Lil’s teeth, the typist’s
stockings, all seem to function as metonymic details from the culture of the time,
and they generate a context and a chain of associations which tend to disperse clear
meanings” (Davidson 127). Even the detective figures themselves are a bit of red
herrings, claiming to contain meaning that they do not have. And Eliot’s claim that
Tiresias is “the most important character in the poem,” when he is ultimately a
failed detective, seems to be its own kind of false clue (Complete Poems 52). Eliot
feared that his poetry would become its own kind of red herring, misdirecting its readers towards misinformed narratives.

Eliot would continue this exploration of clues and their significance in his first completed play, *Murder in the Cathedral*. Written after his baptism into the Anglo-Catholic church, this play shows less anxiety about whether or not the artist (or anyone, for that matter) can reach the significance behind earthly matters. In this play, Eliot portrays the deep spiritual meaning of a martyr’s death as a definitive fact. The question lies in whether the Holmesian intellect can reach this significance or whether another method is necessary.
Christian Mysteries: *Murder in the Cathedral*

Eliot wrote *Murder in the Cathedral*, which depicts the martyrdom of St. Thomas à Becket, to be performed in 1935 at the yearly Canterbury Festival in Canterbury Cathedral, the very place where St. Thomas died. The first act portrays Thomas’ internal struggle as he decides to resist the King’s orders, even though such resistance will surely result in his death. Four spiritual tempters visit Thomas during this act, each offering him a different reason for disregarding his conscience. The second act focuses on Thomas’ encounter with the four knights who, by the order of their king, must kill Thomas. The play culminates with the martyrdom of Thomas and the lamentations of his flock.

This play is full of detective language. Not only does the first act include an excerpt from Conan Doyle's short story “The Adventure of the Musgrave Ritual,” but the entire play is also charged with a sleuth’s vocabulary. At the play's opening, the chorus states three times that it comes to the cathedral “to witness” (*Murder 175, 177*). At the play's closing, the knights who kill Thomas try to defend their actions by using courtroom jargon. One of the knights even goes so far as to ask, “*Who killed the Archbishop?*” in what critic David Chinitz calls an “[attempt] to recast the assassination of Thomas Becket as a murder mystery” (Chinitz 135). Even the play's title sounds like that of a murder mystery. (Its original title, *The Archbishop Murder Case*, is even more explicit.)

Eliot connected Thomas à Becket’s martyrdom to a murder mystery, not because he had any doubt as to who killed the saint or why, but because he believed that an exploration of St. Thomas’ death would lead him to a greater understanding
of spiritual truth. Interestingly, he also uses the detective narrative to show the
dangers of over-intellectualizing this search for spiritual truth. The evil characters in
this play are all-too-quick to confuse the facts of Thomas’ death, to turn Thomas à
Becket’s murder into a mental puzzle that distracts from its spiritual significance.
Many of the detective voices in this play embody the danger of attempting to satisfy
one’s hunger for spiritual mystery with the intellectual mysteries of Conan Doyle
and the like.

The knights who kill Thomas are just such an example of characters who
attempt to turn the murder that they commit into an intellectual experience for the
audience. It is these knights who ask, “Who killed the Archbishop?” and attempt to
hide their own guilt with courtroom jargon (Murder 218). The knights try to pin
their crime on a variety of innocent parties. The first knight “[appeals]” to the
audience not to “judge” him “without hearing both sides of the case . . . in accordance
with our long established principle of Trial by Jury.” The second knight argues that
they only killed the Archbishop out of “duty,” thus implying that the blame lies
solely with the king who gave him orders (Murder 215). But Eliot refutes this claim
by showing not only the unnecessary brutality that the knights use to kill Thomas,
but also the second knight’s belief that “the Archbishop had to be put out of the way”
(Murder 216). Thus, despite what he says, the second knight participates in his
king’s guilt both in his action and his opinions. The third knight, on the other hand,
blames the audience for his crimes. He claims that he and his band furthered “the
welfare of the State” and tells the audience: “We have served your interests; we
merit your applause; if there is any guilt whatever in the matter, you must share it
with us” (Murder 217-18). The fourth knight then concludes that, because Thomas chose to return to Canterbury despite his probable death, the only sound “verdict” is one “of Suicide while of Unsound Mind” (Murder 219). By alternately attempting to blame the King, the audience, and the Archbishop himself, the four knights collectively create the multiplicity of suspects that the culprits of murder mysteries always try to hide behind. And by showing how the play’s villains attempt to manipulate the audiences’ intellects, Eliot cautions the audience against relying too much on a deductive mindset.

But the knights are not the only evil characters that Eliot associates with detective language. Eliot’s second tempter actually quotes an entire section of Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes story “The Adventure of the Musgrave Ritual.” After Thomas rejects the first tempter’s offer to trade his religious responsibilities for the pleasures of the flesh and a hedonistic lifestyle, he receives a visit from the second tempter, who offers Thomas the political power of the chancellorship he held before he became a bishop. When the tempter presents Thomas with the “temporal power” of his chancellorship, the bishop and the spirit engage in the following exchange:

Thomas: Whose is it?
Tempter: His who is gone.
Thomas: Who shall have it?
Tempter: He who will come.
Thomas: When shall be the month?
Tempter: The last from the first.
Thomas: What shall we give for it?
Tempter: Pretense of priestly power.

Thomas: Why should we give it?

Tempter: For the power and the glory (Murder 191, 186).

In Conan Doyle’s story, the instructions read as follows:

Whose was is?

His who is gone

Who shall have it?

He who will come

What was the month?

The sixth from the first

... 

What shall we give for it?

All that is ours

Why should we give it?

For the sake of the trust (Nicholas).

In Conan Doyle’s story, this passage forms the instructions for the “Musgrave Ritual,” a mysterious riddle that contains the directions to the hidden location of the golden crown of Charles I. And while the “month” in Conan Doyle is the month that the crown was concealed (and thus the optimum time to retrieve it, since the one must find the end of a tree’s shadow to find the crown), the “month” in Eliot’s play is the month of Thomas’ death (Nicholas). When asked in a letter about this clear borrowing from Conan Doyle, Eliot replied, “my use of the ‘Musgrave Ritual’ was deliberate and wholly conscious” (Wordsworth).
Interestingly, in both Eliot and Conan Doyle, this passage gives instructions to find political power (or the symbol thereof) that is not rightfully one's own. By using this passage, Eliot characterizes this temptation as the dangerous pursuit of stolen political power. And since the victim of the “Musgrave Ritual” dies in his attempt to find this crown, it is possible that, by tempting Thomas with worldly power, the tempter hopes to rewrite Thomas’ martyrdom as a struggle over the King’s power. This attempt to reframe Thomas’ story mirrors one of the knights’ many attempts to justify their actions. When the knights confront Thomas, they accuse him of “[arrogating]” the King’s “powers” by disobeying his wishes (Murder 213). Like the knights, this tempter attempts to create an explanation of Thomas’ murder where the knights are not fully guilty.

Indeed, all of the tempters try to reduce the knights’ guilt in their attempt to make Thomas less innocent. If the first tempter were to succeed in luring Thomas to the pursuit of worldly pleasure, the knights would be killing a philanderer instead of a saint. If the second or third tempters were to succeed, the knights’ murder would be protecting the king’s power from one who was conspiring to take it from him, either alone, as in the case of the second tempter, or with the help of France, as in the case of the third. The fourth tempter even goes so far as to try and make Thomas actively seek out his own martyrdom, thus presenting his own form of a “suicide theory.” Rather than trying to make Thomas steal the King’s power, the fourth tempter lures him with the “enduring crown” of sainthood (Murder 192). The four tempters and the four knights share the same evil intent. They all try to rewrite Thomas’ martyrdom, a martyrdom that both Thomas and the audience anticipate,
into a kind of murder mystery by attempting to change the facts so that they deflect the guilt of the murderers onto the innocent. And they both do so by intellectualizing a spiritual matter. The riddle that Eliot’s second tempter quotes is, in the Holmes story that it comes from, so tricky that even Sherlock Holmes struggles to unravel it. So just as the knights intellectualize their crime with courtroom language, the second tempter also intellectualizes Thomas’ moral dilemma by quoting a riddle that, in Conan Doyle’s story, challenges Sherlock Holmes himself. The only difference between the tempters and the knights is that the tempters attempt to change the story before it happens, whereas the knights try to do so after the fact.

Furthermore, during Thomas’ temptation, his tempters are obsessed with the kind of circumstantial evidence that detectives use to formulate their theories. After they have each approached Thomas, the tempters, together with the chorus and some priests, ask a series of questions that sound more like they belong in a Poirot novel than a modernist play. They ask, “Is the window-bar made fast, is the door under lock and bolt? / Is it rain that taps at the window, is it wind that pokes at the door?” (Murder 194). One of the questions, “Does the mastiff prowl by the gate?” probably refers to a critical clue in Conan Doyle’s The Hound of the Baskervilles. In this crime novel, Holmes must prove whether or not a dog which “[is] not pure mastiff” has killed the victim by determining whether or not it had access to a specific “gate which leads out to the moor” (Murder 194, Doyle 685, 584). Thus the tempters use detective language to confuse Becket morally and lead him away from the truth that he seeks. Thus while the sleuthing mindset moves Holmes towards
intellectual clarity and truth, it moves Becket towards spiritual confusion and falsehood. The earthly clues with which the tempters present Thomas are red herrings, implying a meaning that they do not have.

According to Gordon, “the murder in The Cathedral is not what we are there to detect. The title itself spoofs the act of detection as it invites us to it . . . everything in the play points to a kind of sleuthing that shifts from murder to the inner life” (Gordon 277). Not only does the mystery that the knights and tempters generate around Thomas’ murder distract from the facts of Thomas’ murder, but it also distracts from the mystery towards which Thomas actually intends for his death to point. I would argue that the true mystery Eliot wishes his audience to contemplate is not, as Gordon would argue, one of the inner life, but one of theology. Robert Ayers’s article on Eliot’s play points out that Murder in the Cathedral mirrors the liturgical form of an Anglo-Catholic service (Ayers). So more specifically, the play points to the mysteries of the liturgy. The play centers on a sermon, a soliloquy that Thomas begins by encouraging the audience to “ponder and meditate the deep meaning and mystery of our Masses . . . For whenever Mass is said, we re-enact the Passion and Death of Our Lord” (Murder 198). The Mass is a mystery because, in some unknowable way, it recreates Christ’s death under a different form. And Becket’s death is a mystery for precisely the same reason; it too recreates Christ’s death, but within the form of Becket’s own death rather than the form of a wafer. Later on in his sermon, Becket reinforces the connection between a martyr’s death and that of Christ: “Just as we rejoice and mourn at once, in the Birth and in the Passion of Our Lord [at Christmas Mass]; so also, in a smaller figure, we both rejoice
and mourn in the death of martyrs” (*Murder* 199). Thus Becket’s death ought to mysteriously contain Christ’s sacrifice the same way that the Eucharist does.

So Becket’s murder is not the earthly mystery that the knights and tempters would make it out to be, but rather it is what Thomas calls the “Christian [mystery]” of Jesus’ life, most specifically the mystery of Jesus’ life in Eucharaist (*Murder* 199). The knights and tempters wish to keep the audience focused on the political mystery of why Thomas died. Indeed, even Thomas’ temptation to seek out sainthood is a political one, for the last tempter lures him with the earthly power that sainthood would give him: “Saint and Martyr rule from the tomb. / Think, Thomas, think of enemies dismayed, / Creeping in penance frightened of a shade” (*Murder* 191). But in his sermon, Thomas urges the audience to ponder not the political, but the theological mystery of why he dies. If the audience ponders the Eucharistic mystery of Thomas’ murder, it can access the transcendent death of Christ. The earthly mystery of Thomas’ murder, however, contains the audience’s focus to earthly things.

Interestingly, some of the play’s language that seems to refer to the earthly mystery of Thomas’ death actually refers to the spiritual mystery of his martyrdom on closer examination. Eliot changed the play’s title from *The Archbishop Murder Case* to *Murder in the Cathedral* in order to illustrate how Thomas’ martyrdom points towards the Eucharist. While the working title refers only to Thomas’ murder, the final title refers both to the murder of Thomas and the murder of Christ, which reoccurs every time that the Cathedral celebrates Mass. At the play’s opening, the word “witness” has a similar double meaning. The chorus states three times that
it comes to the cathedral "to witness" (*Murder* 175, 177). These women of the chorus do not fill the role of the “eye-witnesses” that the fourth knight refers to at the end, but rather, that of Christian witnesses, for by testifying to Thomas’ martyrdom, they testify indirectly to Christ’s death (*Murder* 218). At the end of the play, the chorus explains how Thomas’ death points to the mystery of the Eucharist, stating that “a martyr [gives] his blood for the blood of Christ” (*Murder* 221). Indeed, the word martyr literally means “witness.” So their words are like Thomas’ death, for both are a witness to the sacred mystery of the Eucharist and Christ’s own death. The knights and tempters try to confuse this witness by attempting to create an earthly mystery that will occupy the place of this heavenly one.

Therefore, to some extent, *Murder in the Cathedral* pits the intellect against the spirit. In order to uncover spiritual truth, one must resist the temptation to analyze Becket’s death within its historical and political context. Interestingly, the two Conan Doyle stories that Eliot references in his play both suggest the insufficiency of Holmes’ intellect. After Holmes has explained the main mystery in “The Musgrave Ritual,” he admits that there is “one point [of the mystery] which we shall probably never be able to clear up” (Doyle 474). (According to Holmes, we may never know why Charles II did not manage to retrieve the golden crown around which the entire plot of “The Musgrave Ritual” centers.) Similarly, after Holmes has explained his method for solving the crime at the end of *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Watson asks his friend one final question that stumps even the great mind of Sherlock Holmes. When Watson asks Holmes how the villain would have chosen to execute his plan, Holmes replies, “I fear that you ask too much when you
expect me to solve [that]” (Doyle 695). So in this play, Eliot evokes two of the few Conan Doyle stories that ever suggest the limits of Holmes' intellect. Like these stories, *Murder in the Cathedral* evokes greater mysteries that are beyond the intellect's reach.

Eliot’s next play, *The Family Reunion*, presents another mystery that demands a spiritual rather than an earthly explanation. But while the intellect distracts from spiritual understanding in *Murder in the Cathedral*, it can lead towards said knowledge in *The Family Reunion*. Although Holmesian powers of deduction are not necessary to mystical understanding in this play, they are capable of leading one towards a quest for spiritual truth.
Investigating Guilt: The Family Reunion

The Family Reunion presents the detective narrative as a metaphor for the examination of sin that is necessary for spiritual understanding and wholeness. The play focuses on the psychological and spiritual journey of Harry Monchensey, who returns to his childhood home with the uneasy feeling that he bears some guilt in the drowning accident that killed his wife. This guilt manifests itself in the Eumenides, vengeful deities of Greek mythology who traditionally haunt the guilty to remind them of their crimes. Eliot borrows the idea of the Eumenides for his own play and has them appear periodically to Harry as an embodiment of his own perceived guilt. At the end of the play, Harry achieves inner peace by deciding to follow the Eumenides away from his home and to seek relief from the guilt he bears.

Like Murder in the Cathedral, The Family Reunion juxtaposes two kinds of mysteries: an earthly mystery that demands a factual explanation and a theological mystery that demands a moral explanation. In Gordon’s words, “the play teases us with the superficial mystery of murder” whereas “the deeper drama is the mystery of sin and redemption” (Gordon 334, 326). But while The Family Reunion acknowledges that the detective mindset can distract from theological mystery, it also claims that earthly detection, even Holmesian detection, can sometimes initiate spiritual understanding.

Like Murder in the Cathedral, The Family Reunion self-consciously takes on the form of a detective novel. Eliot’s setting of a “country house in the North of England” mimics the “secluded country house” that critic Stephen Knight identifies as “the archetypal setting of the English [detective] novels” (Complete Poems 224,
This secluded house also gives the play the feeling of the closed circle that characterizes most Golden Age mysteries. Furthermore, this play’s victim bears an uncanny resemblance to the typical detective novel victim, whom Knight describes as:

- a man or (quite often) a woman of some importance and wealth, though that position is rarely long-standing or antique respectability: instability is constant. The victim is also a person of little emotive value: he or she is not mourned, nor is the pain and degradation of violent death represented.

The audience never learns the name of Harry’s wife. She is a member of the characters’ family, but only by marriage. Most of the characters have never even met her and everyone, even her own husband, dislikes her. Violet calls Harry’s wife’s death “providential” (Family Reunion 229). Furthermore, as the death of Harry’s wife remains unresolved, it perpetuates harm to those within the Monchensey circle, just as the unresolved murder in detective fiction perpetuates the death of other characters until the sleuth catches the killer. The two car accidents that injure Harry’s brothers through the course of the play suggest that the accident that killed Harry’s wife may not have been an accident. They indicate a guilty party, a harmful force within the Monchensey circle.

Furthermore, it cannot be a coincidence that Harry’s aunt, Agatha, bears the name of Agatha Christie, the queen of crime herself. And indeed, Agatha does to some extent preside over her nephew’s story, offering her own insights on the family gathering while maintaining more emotional distance than any of the other
characters. Her statement that “What we have written is not a story of detection” acknowledges the similarities between Harry's story and that of a detective novel even as it refutes them (Family Reunion 275). It also implies her own role as a kind of “writer,” as the one who facilitates Harry's story and ensures that it unfolds as it ought. And Amy’s statement that “Only Agatha seems to discover some meaning in death / Which I cannot find” further reinforces Agatha’s position as the overseer of this murder mystery (Family Reunion 227).

With all of these clear allusions to detective fiction, it comes as no surprise when Harry's uncle, Charles, begins his own private “investigation” and attempts to figure out whether or not Harry killed his wife (Family Reunion 238). Like any good detective, Charles questions any available witness (in this case, Harry's butler) and attempts to deduce an explanation from his statement. However, Charles’ investigation resembles that of the knights in Murder in the Cathedral, not because he is trying to lead the audience astray, but because he is focused on the earthly explanation for Henry's wife's death. Charles pays no attention to the theological dimension of murder at all. For this reason, Agatha, with characteristic perceptiveness, says that Charles’ investigation “is all quite irrelevant” (Family Reunion 239). At the play's climax, Agatha states that

What we have written is not a story of detection

Of crime and punishment, but of sin and expiation.

It is possible that you have not known what sin

You shall expiate, or whose, or why. It is certain

That the knowledge of it must precede the expiation (Family Reunion 275).
When Harry comes home with a huge sense of guilt, both he and Agatha look for a spiritual explanation. They conclude that Harry probably does bear guilt, not because of what he has done, but because of who he is. He feels as though he has killed his wife because his father attempted to kill Harry’s mother. Harry is a type of the fallen man because he carries the guilt for his father’s sins.

Interestingly, Harry’s expiation of his father’s sin does have parallels with the detective narrative. Critic William Aydelotte notes how the convicted murderer of a detective novel functions as a kind of societal scapegoat, clearing other characters from guilt, even those who wanted the victim to die and thus bear guilt “in thought and feeling, if not in action” (Aydelotte 141). Harry takes on this role of scapegoat, taking on the guilt that his father initiated by attempting murder and that Harry’s whole family (including Harry himself) has participated in by desiring the death of Harry’s wife. Therefore Charles’ questioning of Harry’s guilt is not so much wrong as it is misguided. Harry does bear the guilt of a murderer, but that guilt is spiritual, not factual; and Charles’ investigation is largely irrelevant because it searches for a factual, not a spiritual, explanation. Like *Murder in the Cathedral*, *The Family Reunion* demonstrates that the only relevant explanation for a mystery is a theological one.

Furthermore, as both the archbishop’s murderers and Harry’s family demonstrate, people who follow earthly mysteries often do so to insulate themselves from the important questions. At the end of the first scene, as Harry’s family is discussing their investigation, they say that “any explanation will satisfy: / We only ask to be reassured / About the noises in the cellar” (*Family Reunion* 243).
They do not want to discover the truth so much as they want to explain away the spiritual implications of Harry's guilt and their own gnawing sense of a greater evil.

Interestingly, Amy's attempt to coddle Harry parallels Charles' attempt at sleuthing. When Amy learns that her son is returning home, she does everything in her power to guarantee that “everything” at his home “is kept as it was when he left it” so that Harry will not have to think about the time that has passed and his wife who has died (*Family Reunion* 228). Both Amy and Charles wish to contain the death of Harry’s wife: Amy to erase it entirely, and Charles to reduce it to something he can understand. Both try to rewrite this death and all its implications so that it does not threaten their worldview. And, like Charles, Amy tries to control Charles’ narrative by manipulating the everyday details of his life. Harry notices how she keeps “the same hangings . . . the same pictures . . . even the table, / The chairs, the sofa . . . all in the same positions” (*Family Reunion* 246). Thus Amy treats the details of her son’s life as clues, as signifiers of his personal story. Agatha also describes Amy’s plan to erase the evidence of Harry's past with language reminiscent of a detective. She says that Amy convinces her family to use “precise attention / To detail” in order to “reflect a pocket-torch of observation / Upon each other’s opacity” (*Family Reunion* 230, 231). Amy and her family use a detective’s observational skills, not to penetrate the truth, but to reflect their own world-views back to themselves. Like the tempters and the knights in *Murder in the Cathedral*, Harry’s family uses a detective mindset to remain focused on the earthly realm and shut off from the spiritual.
But while detective language in *The Family Reunion* can indicate a preoccupation with the earthly realm, it can also stand as a metaphor for the investigation of sin that is necessary for spiritual understanding. As Gordon points out, the “superficial mystery of murder” that Charles is so bent on investigating draws attention to “the profounder mystery of guilt” that lies at the heart of the play (Gordon 334). Even though Harry is the only character who actually knows whether or not he killed his wife, he maintains throughout the play that he “[feels] an overwhelming need for explanation” (*Family Reunion* 259). Of course, Harry desires an explanation not for his wife’s death, but for his own sense of guilt. But on his search for an explanation, Harry must explore the death of his mother the same way that Charles explores the death of Harry’s wife. And on this exploration, he questions Agatha the same way that Charles questions Henry’s butler. Harry phrases his questions for his aunt in the language of interrogation (“I want you to tell me about my father,” “Tell me now, who were my parents,” “In what way did he wish to murder her” (*Family Reunion* 273, 274)). It is only by playing the sleuth and investigating the attempted murder of his mother that Harry can begin to reach spiritual understanding. Instead of contrasting earthly and spiritual knowledge, Eliot connects the two.

In spite of her dismissal of “Charles” and “his own methods,” Agatha wants Harry to use these very methods in his own quest for truth (*Family Reunion* 239). She initiates the conversation that leads to Harry’s interrogating her. And throughout the play, she encourages Harry to investigate his situation. At one point she tells Harry, “I am . . . convinced / That you only hold a fragment of the
explanation / . . . / There is more to understand: hold fast to that / As the way to freedom” (*Family Reunion* 236). Agatha claims that Harry must find more evidence and piece his clues together in order to attain the clarity that he seeks. She does not criticize Charles for using the detective method, but for using it for earthly rather than spiritual purposes. In fact, Agatha censures the Monchenseys for ignoring the spiritual clues around them. She says that they are

Neglecting all the admonitions
From the world around the corner
The wind’s talk in the dry holly-tree
The inclination of the moon
The attraction of the dark passage
The paw under the door (*Family Reunion* 231).

This list of “spiritual clues” sounds uncannily like a similar list of earthly clues in *Murder in the Cathedral:*

Is it the owl that calls, or a signal between the trees?
Is the window-bar made fast, is the door under lock and bolt?
Is it rain that taps at the window, is it wind that pokes at the door?
Does the torch flame in the hall, the candle in the room?
Does the watchman walk by the wall?
Does the mastiff prowl by the gate?” (*Murder* 194).

Like this passage in *Murder in the Cathedral,* Agatha’s list of circumstantial clues evokes the detection of a Golden Age sleuth. And Agatha’s “paw under the door” may be her own Holmesian “mastiff by the gate,” her own critical clue for which she
searches. But in *Murder in the Cathedral*, these clues appear at the climax of Thomas’ temptation as an earthly perversion of the spiritual mystery that Thomas ought to pursue. In *The Family Reunion*, however, these clues are signifiers of “the world around the corner.” Rather than distracting from spirituality, they point one towards it. In *The Family Reunion*, earthly clues and earthly mysteries have spiritual implications.

This deep connection between spirituality and physical signs in *The Family Reunion* is somewhat at odds with the ideology that underpins *Murder in the Cathedral*. The goal of *Murder in the Cathedral*, as Gordon puts it, is to “make interior action visible.” Thus Eliot represents Thomas’ spiritual temptations with physical tempters that the audience can see (Gordon 272). In *The Family Reunion*, by contrast, interior action is already visible. While the audience takes for granted the fact that Thomas’ temptations have no real physical manifestation, Henry’s spiritual visitors actually are physical in that they have a physical impact on his story. After Harry decides to “[follow]” the Eumenides, he begins a physical journey away from his family and into the unknown (*Family Reunion* 278). And rather than walking vaguely onto the stage like Thomas’ tempters, the Eumenides are connected to the physicality of Harry’s house, for they always appear in the window of the Monchensey’s drawing room. The last time that Harry sees the Eumenides, after he has decided to leave his family in search of absolution, he says that they have become “real,” entities that exist “outside” of himself. They are not just visible; this time they have a “scent” (*Family Reunion* 278). It remains ambiguous whether Harry is just now appreciating the physicality of the Euemenides or they have actually
developed a physicality that they did not have beforehand. But regardless, Harry's spiritual growth reaffirms the importance of the physical.

It is also noteworthy that Eliot gives more weight to the physical details of *The Family Reunion* than he did to those of his previous play. *Murder in the Cathedral* has minimal stage directions and never mentions any props. *The Family Reunion*, on the other hand, has very detailed stage directions. On his first entrance, “Harry stops suddenly at the door and stares at the window” (*Family Reunion* 231). At one point Mary “enters” the stage merely to show that she “passes through to dinner” (*Family Reunion* 257). Agatha and Mary end the play by “[walking] slowly in single file round and round the table, clockwise” (*Family Reunion* 292). This play also calls for oddly specific props, from the fact that “Charles takes sherry and Gerald whisky,” to the fact that the drawing room “window” has an “embrasure” (*Family Reunion* 226, 278). In order to explain Harry’s spiritual journey, Eliot must present all the specific physical clues that surround it.

Thus, within *The Family Reunion*, meaning is much more grounded in physical signifiers than it is in *Murder in the Cathedral*. Rather than existing on two different planes, spiritual and physical truth are integrated with one another. Agatha’s character further solidifies the possibility for spirituality in earthly detection. By making the character who shares her name with Christie, the ultimate detective mastermind, the character who is also closest to what critic Grover Smith calls “the world of vital spirituality,” Eliot suggests that investigation of earthly matters can, if conducted properly, lead towards spiritual understanding (Smith 198).
But while Eliot implies that investigation of earthly matters can lead towards knowledge of the soul, he does not claim that this process by itself can ever allow someone to actually reach said knowledge. Like the death of Harry’s wife, the mystery of Harry’s spiritual guilt remains unresolved at the end of the play. And Agatha makes it clear that her diagnosis of Harry’s spiritual state is nothing more than a theory. She tells Harry, “It is possible / You are the consciousness of your unhappy family / Its bird sent flying through the purgatorial flame. / Indeed it is possible” (*Family Reunion* 275). The play encourages the audience to accept Agatha’s theory, just as it encourages the audience to accept Charles’ theory that Harry has merely “let this notion” of his responsibility for his wife’s death “grow in his mind,” but it offers the reader no certainty about either of these claims (*Family Reunion* 237). As Philip Horton, a critic from Eliot’s day, points out, Eliot “has cloaked the nature both of [Harry’s] sin and . . . expiation” in “deliberate ambiguity” (Horton 333). Near the end of the play, Agatha tells Harry that his spiritual investigation is itself nothing more than “a clue” that Harry must follow up in a different realm (*Family Reunion* 279). Within the earthly realm of the play, there is no full understanding. Thus earthly detection is simply the best tool available to begin a journey towards a deeper understanding.

The flip side of this dark view of human understanding, however, is that any detection, if done with some degree of spiritual openness, can initiate a spiritual awakening. Because Charles does not close himself off to “surprises” (unlike Amy, who rejects anything beyond her worldview), even his irrelevant investigation yields a sense of something greater than that which he studies (*Family Reunion* 288).
At the end of the play, he states that "I am beginning to feel, just beginning to feel /
That there is something I could understand, if I were told it. / But I'm not sure that I
want to know" (Family Reunion 288). Thus Charles too opens himself up to at least
the possibility of spiritual understanding through his factual detection.

Interestingly, Eliot claimed to create Charles as a partial representation of
himself (Smith 197). This identification with Charles is especially interesting
considering Charles' Holmesian reliance on newspapers. At the beginning of the
play, Charles dismisses Harry's feelings of guilt, saying, “Of course we know what
really happened, we read it in the papers” (Family Reunion 235). And when the
family hears about Arthur’s car accident, Charles is the one who has a newspaper on
hand and who consults it to verify Arthur's story. This dependence on newspapers is
reminiscent of Holmes' methods. And like Holmes' methods (or at least like Eliot's
view of Holmes' methods), Charles' methods are not particularly effective since they
yield no useful insights. By identifying himself with Charles, a character who, like
Holmes, is not even a very good detective, Eliot suggests the limits of his artistry. He
implies that his writings are themselves largely irrelevant investigations of earthly
mysteries that lead his readers only to a point where they might feel as though they
could understand spiritual matters if they were told about them.
Thus, in all three of these works, Eliot attempts to “do the police.” In *The Waste Land*, he searches for a master narrative that will redeem death, in *Murder in the Cathedral*, he explores a martyr’s death in search of spiritual understanding, and in *The Family Reunion*, he investigates the nature of sin itself. And while many of Eliot’s works reflect his lifelong obsession with detective fiction, these three works all place a special emphasis on detective language and narratives.

Although Eliot wrote *The Waste Land* before his conversion and *Murder in the Cathedral* and *The Family Reunion* after it, these three works all also come from what is arguably a middle place in Eliot’s spiritual journey. Even though Eliot published *The Waste Land* five years before he officially converted to Anglo-Catholicism, Gordon argues that the real “turning-point” in Eliot’s spiritual life was not his baptism in 1927, but rather when he began immersing himself in the lives and spiritualties of the saints, a process that he began as early as 1914 (Gordon 3). And critic Barry Spurr similarly claims that Eliot demonstrated an infatuation with Anglo-Catholicism as early as 1911, when he told his cousin that he decided to forgo the traditional tourist sites on his visit to England in favor of visiting numerous Anglo-Catholic churches, which he then excitedly listed for his cousin’s benefit (Spurr 34). As Eliot himself said several years after his baptism, “what appears to another person to be a change of attitude and even a recantation of former views must often appear to the author himself rather as part of a continuous and more or less consistent development” (Spurr 114). Therefore Eliot’s ‘conversion’ to Anglo-Catholicism was actually much more of a progression. And this progression had already begun when Eliot was writing *The Waste Land*. 
Furthermore, many of the doubts that Eliot struggled with while he was writing *The Waste Land* persisted even after his baptism. Spurr notes that much of “Eliot’s poetry from his Christian period, beginning with ‘Journey of the Magi’ (1927) focuses, repeatedly and profoundly, on the difficulties of faith and the elusiveness of transcendental experience” (Spurr 113). Critic Peter Lowe points out that Eliot was still full of these “spiritual anxieties” when he wrote *The Family Reunion* and that evidence of a “more fully realized faith” only appears in works written after this play (Lowe 65). Thus, even though Eliot had fully committed to Anglo-Catholicism when he wrote *Murder in the Cathedral* and *The Family Reunion*, he was still struggling to reconcile his religion with his anxieties in much the same way that he had struggled to reconcile his attraction to Anglo-Catholicism with his doubts in *The Waste Land*. When he wrote these two plays, Eliot was still on a progression towards the more confident faith of his later life.

It makes sense that in this period of anxiety, in the tension between Eliot’s love for the Anglo-Catholic master narrative and his fears about such a master narrative’s success on earth, that some of Eliot’s works would demonstrate a particular preoccupation with a genre of literature that intrinsically unites meaning to the chaos of everyday life. As Jay points out, the union of the human and the divine in the Incarnation is mirrored by the union of the signifier and signified in detective fiction (Jay 134). By examining these three works through the lens of their detective themes, one can see how Eliot’s spiritual journey mirrors its own detective plot as Eliot adopts a more Incarnational theology.
Eliot joined the Anglican Church during the height of the Anglo-Catholic movement towards a more Catholic theology and style of worship. Eliot expressed the view of many Anglo-Catholics of the time when he said “I prefer to think of the Church [of England] as what I believe it is more and more coming to be, not the ‘English Church,’ but national as ‘the Catholic Church in England’” (Spurr 44). One of the main ways in which Anglo-Catholics differentiated themselves from “lower church” Anglicans was by their emphasis on the Incarnation, on the physical embodiment of the divine. This focus on theIncarnation led to a belief in the physical significance of the sacraments (e.g. Baptism as providing physical and spiritual redemption and the Eucharist as containing the “Real Presence” of Christ). It also led to a focus on the physicality of Churches themselves, for, as Spurr points out, the “beauty” of Anglo-Catholic churches was not merely artistically satisfying. More importantly, it was expressive of Anglo-Catholic teaching about the extension of the Incarnation in the sacraments . . . and the appropriate beauty of the architectural and richly liturgical setting of their celebration, in consecrated buildings with solemn worship, as outward and visible signs expressing the inward and spiritual grace of God (Spurr 40).

Thus the rich liturgy and aesthetics of Anglo-Catholicism functions as its own set of “clues” that signify theological meaning and thereby bridge the gap between the worshiper’s physical senses and spiritual understanding. The three works that I examine in this thesis demonstrate Eliot’s increasingly incarnational theology, his increasing reliance on physical clues to impart theological meaning.
Moving from *The Waste Land* to *Murder in the Cathedral* to *The Family Reunion*, one can see how the physical world takes on more and more spiritual significance. In *The Waste Land*, Eliot questions whether any person is capable of finding spiritual significance in the world. In *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot demonstrates his belief in Incarnational theology by showing that Thomas’ death (an earthly event) does have enormous spiritual significance for many people. At the same time, however, the earthly impact of Thomas’ death is totally irrelevant to any spiritual question. In *The Family Reunion*, however, Eliot presents a more developed Incarnational theology by showing that the earthly and spiritual meanings of Harry’s wife’s death are, in fact, intertwined. Of course, even the Incarnational vision of *The Family Reunion* is laced with skepticism, since Harry must leave his earthly home in order to achieve anything beyond hints of meaning. (This stands in direct contrast with his later play *The Cocktail Party*, where characters like Edward and Lavinia achieve spiritual growth by reinvesting themselves in their earthly life (Lowe 82)). But despite this skepticism, *The Family Reunion* presents a world where the physical has real meaning and where meaning leaves physical signs. Over the course of these three works, Eliot plays the detective, working to unite signifier and signified, physical and spiritual.

This redemption of the earthly also extends to a redemption of the intellect. At the beginning of his career, Eliot was extremely skeptical of the intellect. Gordon comments on Eliot’s frequent usage of the word “known” in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and notes how it implies that Prufrock’s knowledge does nothing more than “[lead] him into dark corners, [wind] him in question marks, [and] finally
abandon him in an intellectual maze.” This, according to Gordon, is a reaction against Eliot’s Unitarian upbringing, which claimed that all spiritual understanding stems from that of the intellect (Gordon 65). In the deep skepticism of The Waste Land, Eliot expresses a similarly dark view of the intellect, demonstrating grave doubts about its ability to facilitate the transcendence that it seems to promise. He suggests that the mind is yet another divisive force on earth, one that separates the artist from the common man and thus creates fragmentation when it promises unifying truth. And Eliot maintains his concerns about the intellect in Murder in the Cathedral, where he shows the mind to be an earthly tool that produces nothing of spiritual significance. In The Family Reunion, however, the intellect’s earthly understanding can lead towards spiritual knowledge.

Taken together, these three works also show Eliot’s reconciliation to his own Holmesian intellect. From his childhood onwards, Eliot had always identified with Conan Doyle’s famous sleuth. He too had a nearly photographic memory, a certain aloofness from society, and a tremendous drive to find a definitive master narrative. Yet Eliot also feared that Sherlock Holmes’ methods would never work in real life. Eliot feared that his own impressive intellect could never uncover the spiritual understanding that it sought out. It would either fail to produce anything definitive, or, like Dupin in The Mystery of Marie Roget, lead him astray. Yet, as Eliot continued on his career, he adopted a much more Anglo-Catholic view of his mental powers. Although Anglo-Catholicism does not view the intellect to be necessary for divine understanding (unlike Unitarianism), it does rely on a rich corpus of scholarly commentary in order to support its theology. It holds that the intellect can facilitate
spiritual understanding. Over the course of his career, Eliot became both less ambitious and less anxious about the capabilities of his Holmesian mind. He no longer sought to uncover the whole truth with sheer intellectualism, but merely to lead himself and his readers to the precipice of the truth. And while Eliot accepted that his mind would never hold all the answers, he also became confident that it had a real role to play in his own spiritual journey.
Works Cited


