Nabers

EL 0760P

The Simple Art of Murder

Fall 2014

This course surveys the history of criminal enterprise in nineteenth- and twentieth-century American culture. Three sets of interrelated questions will command our attention and organize our discussions:

1) What exactly is a crime? How does criminal activity differ from other activity with unfortunate consequences? Do crimes necessarily have victims? In what ways is the criminal a moral category and in what ways is the criminal distinct from the moral? What social values are most effectively advanced by way of legal interdiction? Are there limits to the criminal law’s ability to shape social life? If there are such limits where are they found? What conception of personhood or justice organizes the seemingly counterintuitive features of our criminal justice system?

2) How is criminal behavior represented in art? What is the relationship between narrative form and the idea of crime? Why should crime play such a large role in the history of the American novel and in the history of Hollywood cinema? Why is it that art devoted to the representation of crime so often assumes highly stylized forms? What is the best way to make sense of literary works addressed to mass audiences rather than elite readers? How should we approach individual texts within the generically emphatic fields called mystery, thriller or noir? Does so-called genre fiction demand a different sort of interpretive attention from the material one usually encounters in college English classes?

3) What is the relationship between American crime fiction and American liberalism? Does it matter that the heyday of the American crime novel and crime film, the years surrounding World War II, is also the heyday of what historians often identify as a liberal consensus in American politics? How do the crime novel and the crime film engage the salient social and political issues of their day--integration, the Cold War, the growing corporatization of American economic life? Should we think of the hard-boiled novel or film as a liberal form? A conservative one? What would be at stake in so identifying them?

We will approach these questions by way of paired readings of novels and films. Our archive will be eclectic, consisting of pulp novels as well as their high-browed literary cousins, B-films as well as features. In working through it we will develop a set of interpretive techniques for grasping the aesthetic complexity and intellectual interest of popular art. If all goes well, by the end of the semester you will be able to say how and why crime would assume its prominence in American cultural life; you should also be able to produce more interesting readings of any thriller you read or see than the rest of your friends.

The course requirements are simple. You must write four short papers of about three pages (50% of the final grade) and one longer paper of about ten pages (30% of the final grade). You must also show up at each class session ready to participate in a vigorous discussion of the assigned material (20% of the final grade). As a part of your preparation for class discussion I will ask that each week you post brief comments or questions on a course message board. I will circulate specific assignments and due dates for the various papers as the semester progresses. Papers will likely be due on or near the following dates: September 22, October 6, October 27, November 17 and December 9.

**[Note: There are no texts for this course in the campus bookstore. The Poe is in the public domain and will be available electronically. You can order all of novels, at a considerable discount from campus store prices, from any of a number of etailers. You should purchase the items marked with single asterisks below. You should also purchase the two volumes published by the Library of America entitled, *Crime Novels: American Noir of the 1930s and 1940s* and *Crime Novels: American Noir of the 1950s* (these works are also bundled as *American Noir: 11 Classic Novels of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s*.]**

1. Beginnings

Edgar Allan Poe, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” “The Purloined Letter,” “The Black Cat” (photocopies)

\*\**The Big Sleep*\*\* [September 10]

2. Blood Simple

 Dashiell Hammett, *Red Harvest*\*

 \*\**The Big Heat*\*\* [September 17]

 Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep\**

\*\**Murder, My Sweet*\*\* [September 24]

 James M. Cain, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*

 \*\**Double Indemnity*\*\* [October 1]

3. Crimes of aspiration

 Cornell Woolrich, *I Married a Dead Man*

 \*\**Out of the Past* \*\* [October 8]

Patricia Highsmith, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*

 \*\**Vertigo* \*\* [October 15]

 Dorothy Hughes, *In a Lonely Place\**

 \*\**The Letter*\*\* [October 22]

 Richard Wright, *The Long Dream\**

 \*\**Phenix City Story*\*\* [October 29]

4. Deeds and rewards

Kenneth Fearing, *The Big Clock*

 \*\**No Way Out* \*\* [November 5]

 Flannery O’Connor, *Wise Blood\**

 \*\**Seven*\*\* [November 12]

Chester Himes, *The Real Cool Killers*

 \*\**In the Heat of the Night* \*\* [November 19]

 Octavia Butler, *Kindred\**

 \*\**Memento*\*\* [December 3]

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