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2007 Volume II: Across the Curriculum with Detective Fiction for Young People and Adults

Beyond Criminal Justice: Investigating Social Issues through Detective Fiction

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Overview

Detective fiction, a genre I once considered mostly "fluff," abounds with good writing and trenchant social criticism. Although I am more interested in the latter, teachers of literature should be aware of the former as they consider whether or not to use detective fiction in their classes. Because of the latter, however, parts of this unit could be used in classes of history, sociology, women's studies, African-American studies, or even Native-American studies. The novels in this unit deal with themes of identity, social class, race, ethnicity, gender, assimilation, and discrimination. But for the more traditional teacher of literature, the novels also contain complex protagonists and intricate plots; hence they can be used to study characters and to analyze the structure and conventions of plot and narrative. The settings range from the rural to the urban, including the suburban, and these settings often play an integral role in developing aspects of the characters and the plots. This is to say, all the elements of good literature are here, plus the added bonus of trying to solve a mystery alongside a fascinating detective in a clearly evoked setting.

Detective fiction as a genre is a treasure trove of high interest literature, accessible for high school students of all backgrounds and levels. In this unit, however, I will target 11th grade American Literature students who attend a suburban Vocational-Technical High School that draws teenagers from the city of Wilmington, Delaware and its surrounding suburbs. About 25% of these students are African-American, 3% are Latin-American, and the rest are white of varied ethnicity including English, Irish, Polish, Italian, Greek, and Eastern-European. Less than 1% of the students are of Asian or Middle-Eastern descent. Of the three comprehensive high schools in our district, Hodgson has the fewest students on free and reduced lunch and is not a Title-I school. Since Delaware instituted a state-wide testing program, Hodgson students have done relatively well vis-à-vis students in the rest of the state, but this year our writing scores dropped 12% and our reading scores failed to improve. Because our goal is to attain yearly increases in student achievement on the DSTP (Delaware State Testing Program), this year's test results are very disappointing.

Although Hodgson students are relatively comfortable economically, they are by no means affluent; most of them come from working class families who value a vocational education as a means to a secure future. Some of our students do indeed continue on to four year colleges, but most enter the working world upon graduating and then attend junior colleges part time or apprenticeship programs in the evenings. When designing a

curriculum unit for these students, I must keep in mind their background because it affects the way they view the world and relate to the literature.

The unit revolves around four novels: Walter Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress*, Barbara Neely's *Blanche among the Talented Tenth*, Sharyn McCrumb's *If I'd Killed Him When I Met Him*, and Tony Hillerman's *A Thief of Time*. Students will also read short stories by Dorothy Sayers, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Raymond Chandler when I first introduce the genre because I want them to understand the history of the genre and be familiar with its traditional conventions so that they will better understand how the novelists in the unit subvert or alter many of these conventions for their own purposes. These purposes include social criticism and the creation of an aesthetic that is true to each author's social and cultural identity.

Besides the fact that the novels chosen for this unit all fit under the umbrella of American Literature, a necessary condition to be included in 11th grade English, they all feature a detective who is to some extent marginalized from the American mainstream. None of the protagonists are upper-crust types who solve mysteries from on high. Our protagonists include an African-American war veteran working in urban LA, an African-American maid on holiday among the Black elite in New England, a white woman from the rural south who must disguise herself as a man to pursue her pastime as a civil-war re-enactor among men who wouldn't allow her to participate if they knew her actual gender, and two Navajo Indians, at least one of whom just barely ekes out a living as a tribal policeman. These are characters my students should be able to relate to on some level.

Rationale

One of my objectives in teaching this unit is to get my students thinking about ways in which two of the overarching themes in my American Literature curriculum, The American Dream and Taking a Stand, are relevant to the detective novels we will read, so that this unit will arise organically from what has come before rather than appear as an add-on that breaks away from the continuity of the rest of the course. I think a little context and background about the semester-long American Literature course I usually teach will be helpful here, as I know many high school teachers who are interested in the material presented in this unit probably approach American Literature similarly and may be wondering how to make four works of 20th century detective fiction fit.

I have always taken a traditional approach to teaching 11th grade American Literature. I start with the Native Americans who first inhabited what later came to be called North America, and I work my way through the early European explorers and colonists to the slave narratives and on up to the twentieth century, touching upon the major periods of American literature in between. Everything is taught in chronological order, emphasizing the historical context out of which the literature arises. As mentioned above, a couple of themes I ask the students to think about as the course progresses are The American Dream and Taking a Stand.

My take on the American Dream, however, is somewhat untraditional. Because of my own interests and biases, I ask the students to think about people outside the American mainstream for whom the Dream is very difficult or even impossible to achieve. I also ask them to consider what the American Dream might mean to different people. Where do the many goals of a diverse country intersect and where do they diverge? How is success defined by different racial, ethnic, religious, and socio-economic groups? Is the meaning of success

different for a woman than it is for a man? Are all Americans striving for different variations of the American Dream or are there many different American Dreams? (A subtle but real distinction lies in those two possibilities.)

Our second theme, Taking a Stand, is based on the idea that there are people in American society who are alienated from the mainstream and for whom achieving material or economic success (i.e. the conventional notion of the American Dream) is secondary to or completely overshadowed by the struggle for social acceptance, respect, and/or equality. People of color, women, unskilled and undereducated persons, and mentally disabled persons are among those who may fall into this category. Because many of my students and their immediate families are themselves racial or ethnic minorities, and because all my students attend a vocational school that is preparing them to become part of the workforce rather than the intellectual and economic elite, I strongly believe that I must share with these students the stories of Americans before them who had to struggle with some of the same obstacles with which they will have to struggle.

So how does detective fiction fit into this picture? Surprisingly well. The four authors I have chosen to focus on in this unit write about characters that belong to a more or less marginalized segment of the population: Native Americans in the case of Tony Hillerman, African-Americans in the novels of Barbara Neely and Walter Mosley, and women in the rural south in the case of Sharyn McCrumb. While some of these authors explicitly critique mainstream society's treatment of their protagonists, others like Hillerman take a quieter approach to this theme while exposing readers to a marginalized segment of the American landscape (both human and geographical) that, especially for urban and suburban East Coast kids, is normally inaccessible to them. While the mystery element is the hook that grabs and holds the students' interest, the explicit or implicit social commentary on American life presented by these novels is built into the lessons.

As we get into the specific novels, I will ask the students to think about the particular subset of the population with which the novel concerns itself and how the members of that subset, including the protagonists, see themselves in relation to the traditional notion of The American Dream. Regarding our other theme, Taking a Stand, I will ask students how the protagonists in each unit take official and personal stands and if these stands ever conflict with one another. Since our protagonists are outside the mainstream of society, one might expect them to take personal stands that do not necessarily uphold the values, traditions, or conventions of the majority. This is particularly interesting and tricky when our protagonist is acting in an official (i.e. mainstream) capacity as a member of a law enforcement agency or as a professional private investigator or attorney-at-law.

Because they are set in the 20th century, I do envision and recommend focusing on these novels toward the end of the American Literature course if the course is taught chronologically, but the books could also be assigned earlier in the course to be read independently while the class is working its way along the literary and historical timeline to the 20th century. Much of the early American literature I cover consists of excerpts and short stories we read entirely in class, so it should not be burdensome for students to have outside independent reading to do along the way. There is also the question of whether to assign all students all four novels or to divide the class into two reading groups, each of which reads two novels, or four reading groups, each of which reads one. The strategies and classroom activities in this unit are flexible enough to allow for any of these possibilities, and teachers should decide what would work best in their particular circumstances.

Another objective I have in creating and teaching this unit is meeting Delaware's state standards for English Language Arts. Detective fiction is ideally suited to many these standards. I will only list a few of the most obvious and relevant here:

- (a) Students will be able to demonstrate an overall understanding of printed texts by making predictions as needed
- (b)L Students will be able to demonstrate an overall understanding of literary texts by identifying story elements (e.g. characters, setting, plot) and story structures (conflict, resolution, cause/effect)
- (g) Students will be able to demonstrate an overall understanding of printed texts by comparing information between and within texts
- (a) Students will be able to connect their own experience to those of literary characters; explain the reasons for a character's actions; identify with characters
- (c) Students will be able to connect their own experiences to those of literary characters by relating to the feelings of characters of varying ages, genders, races, cultures, religions, and disabilities
- (a) Students will be able to respond to literary texts by making inferences about content, events, characters, setting, mood, theme, tone, and author's decisions such as formatting and use of dialogue, dialect, and figurative language
- (b) Students will be able to understand social and political issues

Strategies and Activities

The Detective Fiction Genre: Traditions and Conventions

While each novel in the unit will be dealt with separately to exploit what is interesting and unique about it, there are certain elements common to most literary works within the detective fiction genre that should be established at the beginning of the unit. These include a detective, a crime or mystery that needs to be solved, clues, suspects, and the positive identification of the culprit or solution to the mystery based on the clues given. I also think students should know about the two traditional types of detective fiction, the genteel and the hard-boiled, and some of the conventions that distinguish them, although it should be noted that most postwar authors blur the distinction between these two types.

The most famous genteel detective is Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, an amateur sleuth who solves mysteries through his keen powers of observation and reasoning, often without getting his hands dirty. His almost as famous side-kick, Watson, serves as narrator and to some extent stand-in for the reader, who, like Watson, is given the same clues as Holmes but cannot make the necessary connections among them to solve the mystery. I say "to some extent" because Watson often fails to see the most obvious connections that the careful reader may catch, so he also functions as an enticement to readers to get involved in the mystery and try to solve it, thinking they just may have a chance to do so since, in terms of ability to reason intelligently, they seem to fall somewhere between Holmes's genius and Watson's considerable obtuseness. Subsequent British writers Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers follow Conan Doyle but also write in what came to be known as the "genteel tradition," using amateur sleuths to solve mysteries that take place in circumscribed settings where it is fairly certain from the beginning that the person "whodunit" is a member of the known community and not some strange outsider.

The hard-boiled tradition, on the other hand, is associated with American writers such as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, whose detectives hail from the lower to middle classes and are almost as tainted by society's poisons as the criminals they seek to discover. Theirs is often an underground world of corruption and violence that extends beyond the genteel convention of a single culprit perpetrating a unique crime in an

otherwise ostensibly ordered and pristine world.

Classroom Activity

To introduce these two classical types of detective fiction to my students, I intend to start with short stories, one in the British genteel tradition, and one in the American hard-boiled tradition. For the British genteel, I will use a Sayers Lord Peter story such as the "The Necklace of Pearls," and for the American hard-boiled, I will use a short story by Raymond Chandler, probably "Blackmailers Don't Shoot." The former is a classic closed room mystery, and the latter creates the kind of violent, raw, and vivid atmosphere that is a hallmark of American hard-boiled. The particular choice of stories used for this introduction to the genre, however, is not of great importance, and teachers should explore several until they find two that they think would most readily grab their students' attention and interest.

After reading the two stories, I would have the students work in pairs to create Venn diagrams in which they would list some details and characteristics shared by the two stories and some that are unique to each story. With that exercise accomplished, the students will have generated, on their own, at least partial lists of many of the conventions likely to be found in the detective novels they will subsequently read.

The Blues Detective Framework

At this point, students have several lenses through which to view the novels they will be reading. They can be looking for the common elements of all detective fiction, together with the conventions identified with the two types of detective fiction, and looking also for the overarching themes of The American Dream and Taking a Stand which are being carried forward into this unit from the previous units taught in the American Literature course. There is, additionally, a fourth lens I plan to introduce that will help focus their reading of the three novels dealing with racial or ethnic minorities. This lens is borrowed from the work of Stephen F. Soitos, whose text *The Blues Detective: A Study of African American Detective Fiction* provides what Soitos calls "major tropes" that have "transformed [the detective fiction tradition]" These tropes include: "the detective persona, black vernaculars, and hoodoo" (11). Soitos introduces his thesis by stating:

black detective writers use African American detective tropes on both classical and hardboiled detective conventions to create a new type of detective fiction. Through the use of black detective personas . . . , black vernaculars, and hoodoo creations, African American detective writers signify on elements of the detective genre to their own ends (3).

I would argue that these tropes not only apply to the novels of the African-American writers in the unit, Walter Mosley and Barbara Neely, but, by replacing the words black and African-American with Indian and Native American, they can be shown to apply to the novels of Tony Hillerman. For these tropes to be useful to the students, however, they will need to be explained.

Black Detective Personas

According to Soitos, the fictional black detectives in his study identify strongly with their blackness and "all of them are aware, and make the reader aware, of their place within the fabric of their black society" (29). He further explains that "Black detectives are intimately connected to their surroundings, often involved in family relations, certainly deeply committed to exploring the meaning of blackness in the text" (31). The following passage provides a good summary of what my students might find in at least two of the novels they will be reading for the unit, and, with the substitutions mentioned above, a third novel as well:

[The blues detectives] apply African American consciousness in solving their cases. . . The blues detective first and foremost always delineates the color line as primary in any case or social relation. . . The blues detective creates a different set of priorities than either the classical or hardboiled detective. Rather than focusing simply on the crime and capture of the suspect, the blues detectives are interested in the social and political atmosphere . . . This social and political atmosphere is inscribed by racial prejudice. The blues detective recognizes his or her own blackness as well as what blackness means to the characters in the text (Soitos 31).

In fact, I think this passage is sufficiently clear and rich as to be useful as a starting point for a Socratic seminar on one of the novels to which it applies. In other words, after they have read the Mosley, Neely, or Hillerman novel, students would be placed into groups with others who read the same novel and these groups would sit in a circle, novels in hand, and hold a discussion around this passage, using evidence from the text to support their comments. If these groups worked concurrently, I would have trained students to act as mediators ensuring that the guidelines of this type of discussion are followed (e.g. one person speaks at a time, comments are limited to facts and ideas based on and supported by the text, a civil tone is maintained even when differences of opinion emerge).

Vernaculars

Soitos defines black vernaculars as "specific expressive arts of black Americans that form part of their culture and are derived from the folk tradition" (37). He goes on to say "[t]he vernaculars most common to detective fiction are music/dance, black language, and black cuisine" (37). Speaking specifically of black language, Soitos states: "black English (also called black dialect, black idiom, and ebonics) is a definitive cultural attribute used by black writers to help differentiate their detective texts from other detective texts" (39). It should be noted that Soitos uses the term "vernaculars" in a broader sense than is customary, not only using it to refer to language, but also to social customs and behaviors. One can certainly find evidence of these behavioral and linguistic vernaculars in the Mosley and Neely texts, and again, by substituting Native American for black, in the Hillerman text. Students should have no trouble keeping running lists of the different vernaculars that appear as they read through the novels, and these lists could provide the basis for analysis and discussion later.

Hoodoo

As a teacher, I might use words like "magic" and "the supernatural" to explain what Soitos means by hoodoo, but I would also give the students Soitos's own explanation:

"I use the term 'hoodoo' to represent indigenous, syncretic, religions of African Americans in the New World, expanding the term to suggest that it also represents alternative worldviews of some black Americans" (42). Soitos goes on to explain what he means by alternative worldviews:

The most important aspect of hoodoo . . . is the pervasive influence of its combined beliefs in creating an alternative belief system . . . These alternative systems include all of the common African philosophies such as ancestralism, belief in a higher life force, and the concept of full ontological being, which can include aspects of divination, animism, and spiritual awareness, through magic and conjure (47).

I quote so extensively from Soitos because his book brings out so many of the elements found in Mosley's, Neely's, and Hillerman's novels that it is impossible to ignore him. I believe the three tropes that I have

outlined above provide an excellent framework within which to structure analysis and discussion of the novels both during and after the students read them.

The Feminist Perspective

At this point, I would like to turn my attention to the odd novel out on my list, *If I'd Killed him when I'd Met Him*, to which Soitos's tropes do not obviously apply, although it might be interesting to have students determine if this is actually the case and write an essay providing evidence to support their conclusion. In any case, although women, like African-Americans and Native Americans, belong to an oppressed sub-culture of the white male dominated American mainstream, it is my opinion that Sharyn McCrumb's novel is written in the feminist rather than the "blues" tradition.

There are no less than six distinct story-lines in McCrumb's novel, four of which involve women in need of the services of MacPherson and Hill, attorneys-at-law. MacPherson and Hill consists of only two attorneys, Bill MacPherson and his equal partner A.P. Hill, a pretty, diminutive, tough-as-nails female who is referred to as either Powell Hill or A.P. Hill throughout the book. In fact, when A.P. Hill runs into Bob Creighton, an old classmate from law school who insists on calling her Amy throughout their conversation, she at first ignores it, but as Creighton's tone becomes increasingly condescending, Powell Hill sets him straight regarding both her name and her client, whom he has been bashing. All through the book, A.P. is tough, sensible, and razor sharp. She personally likes and cares about her clients but is never emotional or maudlin, and she confronts sexism when she sees it without ever coming off as overly sensitive or defensive.

There is another woman who plays an important role in the law firm of MacPherson and Hill; she is Bill's sister Elizabeth MacPherson, Ph.D., a forensic anthropologist whose services the firm calls upon as needed. In this novel, her training and her detective work are the keys to solving the two murder mysteries that dominate the plot. Her personal letters to her lover who is apparently lost at sea make up one of the six story-lines of the novel, but his disappearance is treated as a mystery that will never be solved.

In addition to A.P. Hill's overt feminism and the fact that a woman, Doctor Elizabeth MacPherson, solves the novel's two main mysteries, the firm's array of female clients also helps make this a distinctly feminist novel. The clients and the female leads represent the range of women's options in life from the career-oriented, happily unmarried A.P. Hill, to the competent, well-educated Elizabeth who is nonetheless emotionally bound to her lost love, to the feisty, unapologetic murderess Eleanor Royden who kills her ex-husband because he has treated her mercilessly in the course of their divorce, to the absolutely devoted Donna Jean Morgan who grudgingly puts up with her husband's bigamy out of love and a sense of duty. Thrown into the mix is Bill and Elizabeth's mother, recently divorced herself, who takes a woman roommate whom she introduces as her lesbian partner. Finally, in one of the novel's most comical subplots, there is the bizarre case of the woman who sincerely seeks the law-firm's assistance in legalizing her upcoming marriage to a dolphin. It seems evident that McCrumb is trying to show the reader that women are as complex and varied in interests and personalities as men.

So what does a teacher do with a complicated novel like this? I should point out that while there are many plots and subplots in the novel, the writing style is quite accessible to average high school readers, though some of the subject matter definitely makes it more appropriate for the upper grades. To introduce this novel, I would give my students the names of the major and some of the important minor characters in a sort of chart or "family tree" that shows the relationships among them. The students can stay engaged with the text by filling in details about each of these characters as they encounter them.

Classroom Activity (part 1)

After reading, rich discussions can be facilitated around the different choices made by the women in the novel, especially those choices that involve these women's relationships with men, as that is a recurring theme. I can imagine my students having very strong reactions, in some cases positive and in some negative, to many of the women's choices, and I would have them journal about one or two of the characters before opening the floor to comments. The boys in the class will not be as drawn to the novel or the issues it raises, but they can be engaged in several ways. I might ask them to imagine that Eleanor, the woman who murdered her ex-husband, is their mother and the ex a second husband who is not their father (so as not to make them feel they are choosing between two parents). Do they feel sympathy for Eleanor? Would they want to support or distance themselves from her? Why? I would also have them put themselves in the place of Bill MacPherson, who is the lead attorney in the case of Donna-Jean Morgan. What advice would they give Donna-Jean regarding her bigamist husband? If their level of maturity is not sufficient to empathize with her, I will ask the boys to imagine Donna-Jean is their sister and to then journal about what they would advise her to do.

Classroom Activity (part 2)

Moving beyond classroom discussion, a good essay prompt requiring thoughtful analysis would be one that asks the students to choose two of the six story lines and explain why they belong in the same novel. Besides the relatively superficial similarities that will have been discussed in class, what other connections might be made between and among the various plots and subplots presented in the novel? What does a young single woman marrying a dolphin have to do with a late middle-aged divorced mother posing as a lesbian to help a friend? What does an uneducated young backwoods wife wishing to remain married to her bigamist husband have to do with an elderly, sophisticated divorcee who proudly boasts of murdering her ex-husband for something that most would consider less egregious than bigamy? Answering these questions with supporting textual evidence would require those higher order thinking skills we want the students to exercise as often as possible.

The Overarching Themes

I started my Rationale by mentioning the two overarching themes of my 11th grade American Literature course, and I would like to return to those themes now. One of those themes is The American Dream, and at this point I have a confession to make. I do not dwell much on the American Dream in my course because I find it to be an extremely problematic construct, both outdated and limiting. I understand and I try to make my students understand that there are many important American literary works to which the theme applies, but we don't read the most well-known of those works in class. I am thinking of novels such as *The Great Gatsby* and the play *Death of a Salesman*, but the characters in these works are so far removed from what my students see in their own homes and all around them that I hardly find them relevant and cannot justify teaching them. Yes, the protagonists in stories like these have the same emotions that the rest of us do and have to overcome obstacles to get what they want, and yes, they end up defeated, but they start with so much more than my students start with in life that creating empathy for them is very difficult. For that reason, I teach far more obscure works by minority writers like Charles Waddell Chesnutt and Richard Wright because I think even my suburban working class white students can relate better to the more obvious struggles the protagonists in these stories face than the struggles of middle-aged white men with intact families or loads of money, no matter how ill-gotten. My students live in a far more diverse world than these canonical works describe, their families seldom fit the model of the 1950s style nuclear family, and their parents don't go to work wearing suits and carrying a briefcase, let alone host wild, expensive parties in mansions on Long Island.

So, while it may be an ELA standard in my state to get students to be able to put themselves in the place of people different from themselves, I prefer to do that with works about people who have more obstacles or bigger obstacles than they and their families do, rather than people who simply have different ones. I also prefer to meet that standard using works about people my students can relate to more easily so as to hook them into reading the books and stories, beginning to end. All teachers know that we cannot just assume the students will do the reading homework, so we have to use literary sources that will grab and hold our students' attention and interest. Otherwise we will be reading everything aloud with them in class, and few teachers have time to do that if they have to cover everything in the prescribed curriculum.

That being said, I do expose my students to the theme The American Dream early in the course and together we do construct a definition based on the historical examples that we read about, such as the first colonists and the early settlers, and later the various waves of immigrants, but we quickly begin to move away from the traditional notion of material comfort as the object of that dream to notions of identity and social acceptance that fit perhaps more neatly under our other overarching theme, Taking a Stand.

Issues of identity and social acceptance that lead the protagonists to take stands abound in the two novels in this unit written by African-American writers Walter Mosley and Barbara Neely, and are present, albeit to an extent that is less critical of mainstream American society, in Hillerman's novel about Native Americans as well.

One need read no further than the first sentence of *Devil in a Blue Dress* to see that Soitos's claim "[t]he blues detective first and foremost always delineates the color line as primary in any case or social relation" (31) applies to Mosley's first person narrator Easy Rawlins. Rawlins begins his narration, "I was surprised to see a white man walk into Joppy's bar," and ends the first paragraph still talking about the same man: "I felt a thrill of fear, but that went away quickly because I was used to white people by 1948" (Mosley 45). Throughout the book the reader knows which characters are black and which are white because Rawlins tells us when they are white. When Rawlins does not mention a character's color, that character can be assumed to be black, which makes this a novel written from a distinctly black perspective. Similarly, in novels written by whites about whites, the narrator does not tell us when a character is white because it is assumed, but if a character belongs to another race or even a white minority ethnicity, the narrator always lets the reader know somehow. In the same way, Mosley's Easy Rawlins does not specifically state the color of black characters, but he does identify the color and/or ethnicity of all the non-black characters, sometimes distinguishing between Northern-European Christian whites and whites belonging to some other marginalized group within the majority culture: Abe and Johnny, Polish Jews, and Primo, born and raised in Mexico, are among Mosley's cast of characters. Interestingly, Easy conveys an affinity with these marginalized non-black characters, suggesting a shared experience of alienation within the majority white society. In reference to the Jews, some of whom he had helped liberate from the Nazi camps in WWII, Easy states: "That was why so many Jews back then understood the American Negro; in Europe the Jew had been a Negro for a thousand years." And speaking of Primo, Easy says:

Primo was a real Mexican, born and bred. That was back in 1948, before Mexicans and black people started hating each other. Back then . . . , a Mexican and a Negro considered themselves the same. That is to say, just another couple of unlucky stiffs left holding the short end of the stick (Mosley 225).

Easy Rawlins's willingness to identify with the social standing of non-black characters makes him seem a fair-minded and likeable narrator, so that we trust his instincts and consider him reliable. He is also willing to point

out the disturbing traits of black characters, such as his friend Mouse, with whom he has a very complicated relationship. Finally, he lets the reader know who the real criminals in the cases he gets involved in are, and most of them are black, but with the outsider's characteristic rebelliousness, he protects at least one black culprit from discovery by the police—who, of course, represent a system that is and has historically been unfair to racial minorities. With this ending, the narrator snubs his nose at institutionalized racism and corruption while admitting, at least to the reader, that some fault still does lie with the oppressed minority and with individual choices that arise from personal loyalties. By leading the police to the wrong "bad guy" at the end of the novel (though he too is guilty), Easy Rawlins takes a stand for friendship over the law, but it is an uneasy stand.

Students will have a field day debating the morality of that decision, given the entire social context within which the decision was made. Taken out of context, it might seem obviously wrong to protect a guilty friend from the official justice system, but considering everything Rawlins has been through in dealing with the official system, the question of right and wrong becomes very complicated indeed, and for that reason, the students will be able to take different sides and defend their positions with different pieces of evidence from the text and with, in many cases, their own experiences and perceptions of law enforcement.

No discussion of *Devil in a Blue Dress* can be complete without mention of Ruby Hanks, a.k.a. Daphne Monet. Her true identity is perhaps the most shocking mystery that is solved by the end of the story. In a classic case of appearance versus reality, white-skinned Daphne Monet, the beautiful French femme fatale, turns out to be black sister Ruby Hanks from Lake Charles, Louisiana. After Ruby is exposed for who she is, Mouse says something to Easy that ties back to two of our themes, Identity and The American Dream:

'She wanna be white. All them years people be tellin' her how she light-skinned and beautiful but all the time she knows that she can't have what white people have. So she pretend and then she lose it all. She can love a white man but all he can love is the white girl he think she is' (Mosley 253).

When Easy asks Mouse why this speech is relevant to him, Mouse replies:

'That's just like you, Easy. You learn stuff and you be thinkin' like white men be thinkin'. You be thinkin' that what's right fo' them is right fo' you. She look like she white and you think like you white. But brother you don't know that you both poor niggers. And a nigger ain't never gonna be happy 'less he accept what he is' (Mosley 253).

As it turns out, there is some truth to what Mouse says. Easy *is* trying to achieve a version of the traditional American dream, what Mouse might consider a white man's dream, and Easy sums up this dream himself when he reveals the following thoughts to the reader:

The thought of paying my mortgage reminded me of my front yard and the shade of my fruit trees in the summer heat. I felt that I was just as good as any white man, but if I didn't even own my front door then people would look at me like just another poor beggar, with his hand outstretched (Mosley 53).

Is Mouse right or wrong? I might ask my students. Easy's desire to own his own modest home with its shady fruit tree certainly seems reasonable enough, and who would dare say a black man shouldn't strive for the simple stability of a safe place to lay one's head? Yet Mosley ingeniously plays with even this innocent assumption, because it is Easy's desire for money to pay the mortgage that [makes him] accept the job that

leads him into all the violence and trouble that ensue throughout the story.

Finally, to touch upon the remaining two tropes identified by Soitos, vernaculars and hoodoo, one can see the former in Mouse's quote above and the latter comes into play when Easy talks about the inner voice that often guides his decisions, especially in crucial moments of danger.

If there is one novel in this unit to which all of Soitos's tropes apply decisively, it is Barbara Neely's *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*. In fact, with very little guidance from me, the students should have no trouble simply listing examples of each trope as they come across them in the novel. Blanche is very much a female version of the "blues" detective—she is dark-skinned, full-figured, smart, unpretentious, and acutely aware of how she is perceived not only by whites, but, especially in this novel, by the black economic elite. With the help of her own mother, she is raising her niece and nephew as a single mother-figure, she has no steady boyfriend, and although she came into a considerable sum of cash through her adventures in Neely's previous novel, *Blanche on the Lam*, she works as a domestic in the homes of rich whites. She can speak standard white English, and does so when appropriate, but she also uses the black vernacular, especially when talking with her best friend Ardell. Finally, Blanche's spiritual beliefs include ancestor worship and animism, the latter of which is revealed in her relationship with the sea. She also has a sixth sense that often guides her or tells her someone is about to approach or call. The last paragraph of the novel captures all three aspects of Blanche's hoodoo sensibilities:

[Blanche] held out her arms and thanked Mother Water and the Ancestors for safe passage and lessons learned. She took Stu's brooch from her pocket and raised her arm to throw it out to sea. But at the last moment, something told her it might best be put to a different use. She slipped it back in her pocket and went to collect the children (Neely 230).

In this novel, Blanche finds herself at a fancy beach resort for wealthy African-Americans who are living out their versions of The American Dream, which, unfortunately, come with many of the same prejudices and biases usually associated with the white majority. Blanche takes several stands throughout the novel, defending herself against those who look down on her for her dark skin or for her profession. She also takes a firm stand against the entire idea of discrimination based on the darkness of one's skin, taking pains to enlighten both her niece and Tina, a new friend whom she meets at the resort.

Neely's novel is also an excellent example of what Soitos means in saying that "black detective writers use African American detective tropes on both classical and hardboiled detective conventions to create a new type of detective fiction" (3). In *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* we find a seamless interplay among the conventions of both hardboiled and genteel detective fiction. On the hardboiled side, the novel has political and social overtones regarding color and class prejudices within a single racial group, some direct and some oblique references to racial discrimination between different racial groups, and finally, a few feminist thoughts thrown into the mix, as when Tina asks: "How can we stop men from battering women if we don't press charges" (Neely 228)? Additionally, some of the characters can be a bit raw and unrefined, including Blanche herself, who retains her "street smarts" in spite of the genteel setting. For example, Blanche is candid about her sexual desires and the way her body responds to sexual arousal, and she also takes the opportunity to give Stu a good strong punch in the stomach in retribution for his manhandling her earlier in the story. At the same time, the setting is prototypically genteel—it is, by its very nature as an exclusive seaside resort, a closed community where everyone knows everyone else, and nearly everyone is guilty of some small or large peccadillo that forces him or her to fall under suspicion at some point or other. This last fact is made concrete by the box of secrets Faith keeps in her room, secrets that give Faith power over many of the major residents

at Amber Cove.

Interestingly, however, there is no evidence that Faith actually uses the residents' dirty secrets to blackmail them for financial gain; rather, she is guilty of a kind of psychological blackmail that makes everyone treat her deferentially because they are afraid of what she might reveal about them. And just as there is no overt blackmail, only the fear of it (a fear Faith helps instill by hinting at what she knows), there is also no murder. Faith's death is an accident, but because Hank thinks otherwise, he kills himself and takes the blame to protect his wife, whom he erroneously believes to be guilty of murder. These irregularities are all ways in which Neely plays with the conventions of the typical country genteel detective novel, where there actually is a murder or other heinous crime, and the murderer is discovered and brought to justice so that the rest of the members of the community can feel exonerated of their own, relatively minor sins and go on living in peace and harmony. By contrast, at the end of *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth*, it is hard to imagine Amber Cove will ever be the same again.

As compared to the other novelists in the unit, Hillerman, in *A Thief of Time*, is far less critical of the injustices found in society, but does deal with issues of one's minority identity within a white majority culture. His Navajo protagonist Jim Chee shares many characteristics found in Soitos's description of the "blues" detective: he identifies strongly with his Native American heritage, he is acutely aware and makes the reader aware of the ethnic status of the various characters with whom he comes into contact, he is interested in ancient Navajo religious rites and is in fact a practicing medicine man whose services can be called upon for certain rituals, and he is adept at using Indian vernaculars (in Soitos's broadest sense of the term) when dealing with reticent Native American witnesses who might have useful information. For example, he knows not to shake hands with traditional Navajos and to allow moments of silence to linger rather than force information with more questions and words.

Chee also struggles with issues related to identity. Mary Landon, Chee's love interest at this stage of his development in Hillerman's series, does not want to live on the reservation. To be with her, Chee would have to leave the reservation, but to do so would be to give up a part of himself he cannot leave behind:

She would marry him if he left the reservation. And he could do that. He'd had offers. He could go into federal law enforcement. Work somewhere where their children could go to school with white kids and be surrounded by white culture. Mary would be happy. Or would she? He could still be a Navajo in the sense of blood, but not in the sense of belief. He would be away from family and the Slow Taking Dineh, the brothers and sisters of his maternal clan. He would be outside of Dineh Bike'yah—that territory fenced in by the four sacred mountains within which the magic of the curing ceremonials had its compulsory effect. He would be an alien living in exile (Hillerman 205).

Chee's more recent (but not the most recent) love interest, Native American Janet Pete, struggles with a similar problem with her non-Indian lover.

There is another tribal policeman in *A Thief of Time*, Joe Leaphorn, and although he doesn't identify as strongly as does Chee with the traditional Navajo ways, he proves in the end of the novel to be a bit of a rebel himself, willing to withhold information from other authorities about a known murderer just as Mosley's Easy Rawlins withholds information about a murderer at the end of *Devil in a Blue Dress*. Although many traditional detectives ignore the official justice system and administer justice according to a personal code, it seems likely that one might find this tendency most often among minority detectives in works of fiction.

Classroom Activity

Something to alert students to as they read *A Thief of Time* is the dramatic irony created by the reader knowing more than either Leaphorn or Chee know until almost the end of the novel. This is made possible by the narrator's omniscient point of view, another good literary term to spring on students in conjunction with this novel. An activity that might keep students engaged while reading, and that would also help them keep track of clues, would be to have them keep a two column chart with Chee's name at the top of one column and Leaphorn's at the top of the other. As each of these investigators learns something about the case/cases to be solved, the students could jot down the clues in the corresponding column. Presumably, by having both sets of clues in front of them like this, the students could solve the mystery before either of the protagonists does. Certainly, they'd enjoy the challenge of trying to do so. A variation on this activity would be to have half the class keep track of Chee's investigation and the clues he uncovers while the other half keep track of Leaphorn's. After every ten chapters or so, groups of four (two who followed Chee and two who followed Leaphorn) could meet, compare notes, and begin to formulate their own theories as to "whodunit."

Conclusion

Predicting who did it, analyzing and evaluating clues, making inferences about characters and their possible motives, deducing from evidence, inducing from experience, identifying with protagonists of different ages, genders, races, and ethnicities, comparing cases and investigators' techniques, synthesizing all the information given to determine who had motive, means, and opportunity—these are all higher order skills that students will naturally use while reading detective fiction. And in this particular unit, students will also be exposed to different cultures and regions within the United States as we jump from urban L.A. to a seaside resort along the northern East Coast to the Virginia mountains to the Southwest's Four Corners. Hooking the students with a mystery that is bound to arouse their curiosity and then holding them with the challenge of solving the mystery before the detectives do, a teacher can have her students exercising their little grey cells without even realizing they're becoming better readers and thinkers along the way. Detective Fiction, precisely because it is often entertaining to read, is an ideal genre to break down the defenses of resistant readers and to get all students to enjoy learning.

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