Mary Evans
The Imagination of Evil
Detective Fiction and the Modern World
London, Continuum, 2011
Introduction (9 pages)
Chapter 1 – Making Crime (13 pages)
From its growth in Europe in the nineteenth century, detective fiction has developed into one of the most popular genres of literature and popular culture more widely.

In this monograph, Mary Evans examines detective fiction and its complex relationship to the modern and to modernity.
RESTORING MORAL ORDER

She focuses on two key themes: the moral relationship of detection (and the detective) to a particular social world and the attempt to restore and even improve the social world that has been threatened and fractured by a crime, usually that of murder.
THE DETECTIVE as a SOCIAL OUTSIDER

It is a characteristic of much detective fiction that the detective, the pursuer, is a social outsider: this status creates a complex web of relationships between detective, institutional life and dominant and subversive moralities.
WHO IS THE DETECTIVE

Evans questions who and what the detective stands for and suggests that the answer challenges many of our assumptions about the relationship between various moralities in the modern world.
CRIME FICTION: a subgenre?

Against HIGH CULTURE and LOW CULTURE hierarchy
The value of Crime Fiction

Crime fiction explores "the possibilities of the imaginative about those fractures in society that involve us all" (violence, crime, or at a higher philosophical level: evil)
A HUGELY HEALING and REDEMPITIVE FORM OF FICTION
TENSIONS

Writers of detective and crime fiction inform their novels with debates about the collective world: about those subjects of social order, social morality and the various tensions between rich and poor that may form the context rather than the foreground of more conventional fiction.
Above everything, detective and crime fiction is, by its very subject matter, about morality: its limits, its meaning and its value. We can trace, over the past 200 years of crime-writing, shifting relationships about the relationship of morality to the law.

--> second half of 20th century: widening of the moral space between legal view of crime and crime itself
Shifting Boundaries between legal and illegal
Throughout its history, detective and crime fiction has also recognized the ongoing tension within bourgeois society: the tension between, on the one hand, a moral code, which presents itself as omnipresent and relevant to all, and on the other, the very considerable differences in social power (and social influence), which are consequences of societies divided by class, race and gender.
THE GUILTY PARTY/THE ROTTEN APPLE

No longer do writers maintain the comforting view that the guilty party is merely the one rotten apple in the social barrel; now, there emerges a highly sceptical view about the health of the whole barrel. We are asked, by writers of crime fiction, to think of social questions that many people would rather ignore: questions about the origins of human actions and the social responses to both the merely unconventional and the more dangerous and damaging.
CRIME:
among the poor and among the rich
TRANSGRESSION and RETRIBUTION

Crimes against others (be it murder, theft or fraud) are as ancient as human societies; writing fiction about them is rather more recent. The religions of the book (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) all contain numerous comments about how human beings should live and the kinds of punishments that they would suffer should their behaviour become transgressive.
DETECTION as a form of SOCIAL AGENCY

What this new form of fiction did, quite as much as other new forms of fiction did for other possibilities of the human condition in other contexts, was to elicit in the reading public a tremendous enthusiasm for this novel form of social agency – that of detection. ‘Clues’ and ‘evidence’ became part of public and popular discussions of the world, various attempts were made to identify (before they could commit crimes) the criminal and, perhaps of the most long-term significance, certain social spaces and social relationships became associated with the criminal.
Nietzsche, Marx, Freud as "social detectives"
For Marx, the unspoken ‘fear’ of the bourgeoisie was about the origin of their wealth; those energetic attempts of maintaining the façade of the civilizing process would come to nothing if awkward questions were asked about the ways in which money was accumulated. In much the same way, Nietzsche suggested that the bourgeoisie – as much as it did not like having questions asked about its wealth – did not like to dwell too closely on the origins of ‘modern’ values. The awful possibility, in this latter case, would be that modern values would be exposed as mere rationalizations of social convenience. To Marx and Nietzsche, we might add a third person, Sigmund Freud, who was also to make public connections that were thought to be best left unsaid, in this case that all of us owe our origins to a sexual act and that our sexual identity is made rather than given. This trio – Nietzsche, Marx and Freud – all took on the role of social detective;
DETECTION and the URBAN LANDSCAPE
"the breeding grounds" for criminals

Dark deeds in dark areas of the city
Slums (squalid and poverty stricken areas)
Opium dens
Workhouses
Panoptical view (Bentham) and social hygiene
CONSTRUCTING EVIL

...what is argued here is that the imagination of ‘evil’ played a considerable part in the construction of fears and fantasies about possible threats to both the individual person and the collective way of life of western societies, as a result of which communities have turned to the endorsement of a built environment of separation and constraint. The desire to construct walls, barriers and various forms of safety against wicked outsiders is, again, no new thing in human history.
IDENTIFYING EVIL: a witch-hunt?

But what is perhaps different, from the early years of modernity in the nineteenth century, is the enthusiasm with which considerable general social energy has continued to be devoted to the identification and pursuit of the disruptive, ‘evil’ person or persons in our midst. We have, as Keith Thomas has pointed out, abandoned the pursuit of witches, but instead of witches, we have ‘witch-hunts’, instances where often terrifying amounts of hatred are directed against either non-existent or largely harmless individual or collectivities.
ENLIGHTENED Europe?

It would appear, therefore, that the Europe of the period after the Enlightenment, although in many ways ‘enlightened’ and often moving towards the apparently more humane and thoughtful treatment of social outsiders and deviants, could not abandon its more ancient enthusiasm for ‘imagining evil’. That imagination of evil gave rise, at its most vicious form, to the persecution (among others) of non-white people, Jews and homosexuals. At its most trivial form, it created various forms of social exclusion, from dress codes to bans on the entry of divorced people to elite social occasions.