

CONTROVERSIAL POLITICS, CONSERVATIVE GENRE:  
REX STOUT'S ARCHIE-WOLFE DUO AND  
DETECTIVE FICTION'S CONVENTIONAL FORM

by

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## ABSTRACT

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Rex Stout maintained his popular readership despite the often controversial and radical political content expressed in his detective fiction. His political ideals often made him many enemies. Stances such as his ardent opposition to censorship, racism, Nazism, Germany, Fascism, Communism, McCarthyism, and the unfettered FBI were potentially offensive to colleagues and readers from various political backgrounds. Yet Stout attempted to present radical messages via the content of his detective fiction with subtlety. As a literary traditionalist, he resisted using his fiction as a platform for an often extreme political agenda. Where political messages are apparent in his work, Stout employs various techniques to mute potentially offensive messages. First, his hugely successful bantering Archie Goodwin-Nero Wolfe detective duo—a combination of both

the lippy American and the tidy, sanitary British detective schools—fosters exploration, contradiction, and conflict between political viewpoints. Archie often rejects or criticizes Wolfe's extreme political viewpoints. Second, Stout utilizes the contradictions between values that occur when the form of detective fiction counters his radical political messages. This suggests that the form of detective fiction (in this case the conventional patterns and attitudes reinforced by the genre) is as important as the content (in this case the muted political message or the lack of overt politics) in reinforcing or shaping political, economic, moral, and social viewpoints. An analysis of the novels *The Black Mountain* (1954) and *The Doorbell Rang* (1965) and the novellas "Not Quite Dead Enough" and "Booby Trap" (1944) from Stout's Nero Wolfe series demonstrates his use of detective fiction for both the expression of political viewpoints and the muting of those political messages.

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## Chapter One:

### Stout's Personal Political Activism and Literary-Political Agenda

Rex Stout was a very successful author during the mid-twentieth century who published thirty-nine novellas and fifty-one novels. All of the former and thirty-four of the latter feature Nero Wolfe, a fat, belligerent, and cerebral detective who shares misogyny and brilliance with Sherlock Holmes. The first Nero Wolfe novel, *Fer-de-Lance*, was published in 1934 and the last, *A Family Affair*, in 1975. As time progressed, the series gained popularity and became the only literature, other than war propaganda, that Stout produced; the Wolfe series was and remains by far his most popular fiction. Concerned primarily with storytelling, Stout creates an inspired duo through which his explorations of human nature could unfold. Many critics attribute the popularity of the series to Stout's ingenious juxtaposition of Wolfe with his right-hand man, Archie Goodwin. Goodwin is similar to Conan Doyle's Watson and also to rough, hard-boiled detectives, who sometimes resort to physical interrogation of criminals and often display debonair involvement with women. Stout's Archie Goodwin-Nero Wolfe duo is successful in part because it combines both the lippy American and the tidy, sanitary British detective schools. David R. Anderson asserts Stout's preeminence in establishing this smart combination: "Rex Stout did more than write very fine mystery novels; he permanently altered the course of crime fiction by showing how it was possible to combine the two separate traditions—those of the hard-boiled op and the Great Detective—which had comprised the genre before him" (112). Anderson is not alone in

noting the skill with which Stout merges the two major detective schools. Frederick Isaac claims Stout's successful blend of the British and American forms of detective fiction is as important as his extraordinary storytelling abilities in establishing the enduring popularity of the duo (61-62). Isaac maintains that the genre has not been the same since Stout, "identifying both of these strands and personifying them in Wolfe and Archie, [. . .] challenged the world of detective fiction to analyze itself" (67), while Ross MacDonald observes that "Rex Stout is one of the half-dozen major figures in the development of the American detective novel. With great wit and cunning, he devised a form which combined the traditional virtues of Sherlock Holmes and the English school with the fast-moving vernacular narrative of Dashiell Hammett" (qtd. in McAleer, *Rex Stout* 242). Stout's focus on storytelling, his description of human behavior, and his witty way of working within the detective genre—including his clever culmination of the English and American schools—make him one of the most artful popular detective fiction writers. Stout is a literary traditionalist, but he also involves his characters in telling social commentary—telling because it reveals much about the time period in which Stout wrote, much about his personal political agendas, and much about traditional trends within the logical, social, and moral structures of detective fiction. Thus Stout, with his masterful style, precision, and innovation, demonstrates that detective fiction—with its conventional undertones—can engage in potentially controversial social commentary without alienating readers or becoming didactic.

## THE SERIES'S POPULARITY

For more than four decades Stout published Nero Wolfe stories, but the popularity of the series extends beyond those first four decades. Anderson describes Stout's success, noting that his achievement includes not only several well-written stories but also insightful discussion of a variety of social and political issues:

Few writers, and even fewer crime writers, can lay claim to the sustained excellence of Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe novels. To write one book, excellent in its kind, is a difficult achievement. Having done so marks Stout as a writer with a significant enough vision and supple enough mind to please readers over a period of time marked by great political, social, and cultural change. He could discuss World War II or Watergate, civil rights or women's rights, and do so as cogently in his eighty-ninth year as in middle age. (119)

The discussions are as intelligent and the stories as captivating in the years in which Stout was an elderly author as in the years of political, cultural, and social unrest. Stout retained his readership.

Yet retaining this popularity was not necessarily simple. Stout's sometimes radical political viewpoints—often finding expression in his novels—could easily have alienated him from his readers. Stout was not only a politically active author, but he was also an idealistic and often zealous political spokesman. He served in the presidency of the Writer's War Board, promoted liberal society, participated in radio chats decrying

Nazism, and sought political reform. As early as 1925 Stout was displaying his attraction to the political. In that year he became involved in the Board of the ACLU's National Council on Censorship, with *The New Masses*—a magazine purportedly designed to provide the distribution of arts and letters for the masses, but which Stout soon determined was Communist in its bent and from which he quickly resigned—and with Vanguard Press—which in addition to publishing Stout's first few novels published politically left documents he felt would otherwise not be published (McAleer, *Rex Stout* 197). After beginning his Nero Wolfe series, he did not curtail his political involvement; in fact, at times when Stout set aside writing to dedicate himself to political causes or when his political stances were controversial, as they often were, his political involvement actively overshadowed his writing.

### **PERSONAL POLITICAL ACTIVISM**

In other words, while the Nero Wolfe stories evoked praise, Stout's political involvement brought controversial, if not negative, publicity. Occasionally, Stout's adoring public, eager for more Nero Wolfe stories, complained about the political agendas of some of the stories; when the 1952 stories "The Cop-Killer" and "Home to Roost" were published, one reader wrote a letter to Stout objecting to "those two little stinker anti-Communist stories" (McAleer, *Rex Stout* 389). While these rare and private

complaints were relatively harmless, Stout's political ideals often gained the disfavor of influential citizens. Only a few years after his first Nero Wolfe novel was published, for example, his public image shifted from esteemed author to political sourpuss. In 1940 in conjunction with the Friends of Democracy Stout proposed preparedness for entering WWII, supported Lend-Lease, labored for lifting the arms embargo, and opposed the America First Committee. George Merten, then currently working with the British Secret Intelligence, said of Stout's involvement with these issues that he "deserves honor and credit for exposing himself at that time for a cause which was not too popular in influential, especially corporation, quarters" (qtd. in McAleer, *Rex Stout* 278). Stout wrangled with prominent individuals such as Harvard professor of government Carl J. Friedrich and Senator Charles Lindbergh as well as their supporters. In 1941 Stout pushed Friedrich out of the Council for Democracy because Friedrich resisted Stout's strong antiisolationist stance as well as organized propaganda activities; the German-born Friedrich explained the situation: "I didn't like him. He didn't like me. I left not quite voluntarily" (qtd. in McAleer, *Rex Stout* 294). Stout opposed once-hero Lindbergh because he supported American neutrality rather than involvement in WWII; for this Stout loudly declaimed him as someone whose agenda pleased Fascist and pro-Nazi publications (McAleer, *Rex Stout* 289). Clearly, Stout refused to shirk from controversy simply because people might dislike him.

Stout's political activity certainly eclipsed his writing when in 1942 he temporarily abandoned fiction to focus almost all of his energies on distributing war propaganda that encouraged Americans to support Roosevelt and American involvement

in WWII and to eliminate those government officials who opposed these actions. Stout edited *The Illustrious Dunderheads* in 1942. The book solicited the American public to evaluate isolationists currently in Congress and, if the public found these Congressmen unintelligent or unethical, to vote them out of office in the upcoming election. In addition to editing the book, Stout wrote and included in the book a short message on Nazi propaganda. It describes how Nazi Propaganda Minister Goebbels and other Nazi leaders planned to prevent American intervention in the war by amplifying civil strife in the United States among various social and racial groups and by convincing the United States either to be sympathetic to Germany or uninterested in the war. Stout's assertions most notably implicated many Congressional individuals as being willing or unknowing aids to the Nazis. The New York *World Telegram* responded to *The Illustrious Dunderheads* by accusing Stout of being a "strife promoter and a trouble breeder in wartime" (qtd. in McAleer, *Rex Stout* 310). However, not all responses to the book were negative; the book's call for the evaluation of the reelection of isolationists already in Congress was successful; the November 1942 elections rejected several of these isolationists (310).

One of Stout's most controversial opinions was his stance that the German people themselves were responsible for Hitler's rise to power. Stout tried to unite Americans in an emotional abhorrence of Germans. In 1942 he released his *New York Times Magazine* article "We Shall Hate, or We Shall Fail" in which he argues that only an uncompromising hatred for the evils that undermine world peace can effect the removal of those evils (316). This article incited several rebuttals in the form of letters, lectures, sermons, and articles. Professor Walter Russell Bowie and preacher John Haynes

Holmes each publicly provided formal counterarguments; the dispute was published in the *Times* where the American public could follow the debate (317). Although Stout's friend Pearl Buck tried to smooth over the dispute by asserting that some individuals need an emotionally defined enemy on which to focus their attention, Stout's allegation remained divisive.

In addition to anticommunist, antiisolationist, anti-German, pro-Roosevelt, and prodemocracy positions, Stout aligned himself against practices he identified as socially destructive; these included censorship, racism, Nazism, Fascism, McCarthyism, and the unfettered FBI under the direction of J. Edgar Hoover. Many of these controversial issues not only appear in his literature, but sometimes shape the stories themselves, as in *Too Many Cooks* (1938), *The Doorbell Rang* (1965), and *Not Quite Dead Enough* (1944). Yet both Stout's choice to discuss these issues and his method of discussing them call them to attention, for this intriguing use of detective fiction as the perfect arena for subtle discussions allowed Stout to prioritize and retain good storytelling as his primary agenda. Detective fiction is a genre that affirms conventional ideology, and by muting nonconventional stances it superbly enabled Stout to express a number of controversial views.

## **Censorship**

Anticensorship was one such view that Stout advocated for much of his life. Stout's biographer John McAleer describes how, as early as 1924, he engaged in risky



efforts to undermine censorship. Stout and Egmont Arens reinstated Arthur Machen's barred twelve-volume translation of Casanova's *Memoirs*. Stout's part in republishing the banned book with a new preface and introduction was to provide \$24,000 and to help smuggle the remaining copies of an earlier English translation to Mexico so they could ensure profiting from their dangerous venture (*Rex Stout* 188). The next year Stout began his involvement with the ACLU's National Council on Censorship board. Stout also attacked censorship through his roles as executive editor and, beginning in 1951, president of the Authors' League's *Bulletin* (387). He continued to fight censorship in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1966 he helped form the Committee to Protest Absurd Censorship, which broadly focused on allowing authors to write what they wished and specifically aimed at protecting author and publisher Ralph Ginzburg from imprisonment for publishing allegedly pornographic materials (470). Yet as a member of the Committee, Stout consistently clarified his stance on censorship, rejecting arguments made by colleagues that detracted from the main point that "a man [should not] go to jail for anything he wrote or published, no matter what" (470). Stout stated,

You might say, look at all these writers, using all these four-letter words on every page. Do I like it? No. Offensive? Sure. But for so many years writers couldn't use these words at all, no matter how much sense they would have made to the story, to the atmosphere, that now the damn fools are just using too many of them, and not being sensible about it. But that's no reason to bring the law in on it. (qtd. in McAleer, *Rex Stout* 471)

Stout used simple, logical arguments to make his case. His personal opinion on censorship kept him wary of arguments against it that he considered tyrannical and dictatorial, such as philosopher R. G. Collingwood's assertion that artists must remain uncensored so they can express society's consciousness (470). Stout did not wish to obligate literary artists in any way. Insisting that they must express society's consciousness was as bad as censoring them if they should offend that consciousness.

## **Racism**

Another issue about which Stout felt strongly and on which he subtly commented is racism. Coming from a long line of Quakers and other individuals who denounced slavery, Stout also championed racial equality. His contempt for racism appears in early Wolfe novels. In *Too Many Cooks*, Stout's fifth Wolfe novel, Wolfe advocates racial equality. McAleer suggests that here Stout argues effectively for human freedom through a logical defense of the black race and that this novel's "tribute to the black race remains compelling proof that reason is a surer weapon than emotion" (*Rex Stout* 275). The voice Stout raised for racial equality—nearly thirty years before the Civil Rights movement—was far from negligible; of course, Stout did not rely solely on his detective fiction to bolster the cause of civil rights. Yet he certainly recognized the value of addressing such issues in fiction. In "Learning What it Means to Be a Negro," a May 25, 1947 review of Sinclair Lewis' *Kingsblood Royal* (1947) in the *New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review*, Stout describes Lewis' work as "half novel and half tract" and

maintains that the “peculiar virtue of this book” is its ability to disturb white men by showing them the pervasiveness of racism (1). In the review Stout commends Lewis, whom he praises as “[o]ne of our most eminent men of letters, one of our three living winners of the Nobel Prize in literature,” for undertaking “to handle in fiction one of the hottest and most complex themes in American life” (1). His approval of Lewis’s decision to address “a problem which increasingly concerns our minds and hearts and consciences” is clear (1). Furthermore, the socially corrective significance Stout attributes to Lewis’s novel can also be attributed to Stout’s novels. Stout’s voice of reason against racism, as demonstrated in *Too Many Cooks*, lends credibility to both Gilbert Gabriel’s belief “that Rex was giving his best to the Wolfe novels, and Rex’s own assertion that his idealism was not dead” (qtd. in McAleer, *Rex Stout* 275). However, because of the subtlety with which Stout raises such issues, many of his readers who might perhaps have derided his viewpoint instead give ear to his logical and muted argument. For instance, David Evans suggests that in *Too Many Cooks* Stout “clearly strikes a blow for human freedom so subtly the reader never realizes he is being enlisted for a point of view in the process of enjoying a detective story” (qtd. in McAleer, *Rex Stout* 275). Stout’s continual idealism is apparent in his novels, but the subtlety with which Stout evokes his political agenda prevents many of his readers from taking offense or even recognizing Stout’s agenda as such.

## Nazism and Fascism

Other avenues for political expression were harder to miss. Stout believed a battle against Nazi propaganda could best be waged for United States citizens through publicly criticizing fallacious Nazi rationale. He helped launch, wrote, and conducted the network radio series “Our Secret Weapon” from 1942 to 1943. It provided a forum for disseminating the “truth” about Axis propaganda to American citizens; Stout and Sue Taylor White researched hundreds of Axis radio transmissions for each weekly broadcast (305). The program reached the east and west coasts of South America and the British Isles; each week six thousand copies of the program’s script were requested by secondary schools, colleges, army camps, naval stations, and Japanese-American relocation camps (306). Radio shows provided a choice method for Stout to appeal to a large American audience. In his fight against Hitler, Nazism, and Germany’s return to power, Stout frequented Clifton Fadiman’s radio show “Information, Please!” The two thrashed out ways to act on their mutual hostility for Hitler (278). Thus an American public otherwise ignorant of Stout’s political agenda became aware of his views on Hitler and Nazism. More controversial than his dislike of Hitler was Stout’s anti-German stance, which he made sure the American public was informed about as well. In 1944 he directed the Writers’ War Board in persuading Americans that the German people, not merely Hitler, were responsible for WWII (314). The effort was difficult and contentious. Freidrich published in *The New York Times* his complaint about the “highly dramatized and emotionalized messages of hate” raised by the Writers’ War Board (qtd. in McAleer, *Rex*

*Stout* 315). Furthermore, Stout blamed members of the American public for financing Hitler's rise to power. Stout assisted in the production of the pamphlet *Sequel to the Apocalypse: The Uncensored Story: How Your Dimes and Quarters Helped Pay for Hitler's War* (1942). The work was attributed to a fictional John Boylan, but because Stout's name was printed in the foreword, and he was the only identifiable contributor to the pamphlet, he bore the brunt of the criticism the it provoked (McAleer, *Rex Stout* 296). The pamphlet names I. G. Farben and associates and exposes the method through which these businessmen utilized American consumerism to fund the Nazis. In the foreword to *Sequel to the Apocalypse*, Stout claims that Americans must learn about these men and processes and boycott their services and goods, whether the businessmen involved "consciously and willfully betrayed us or are merely supersuckers" (i). The indictment was scalding.

## **Communism**

After WWII, when Hitler and Nazism were no longer a threat, Stout focused his attention on his writing. However, he did not step out of the political scene altogether. He persisted in decrying a threat similar to Nazism: Communism. His literature again became an avenue for political expression: in *The Second Confession* (1949), as McAleer notes, Wolfe rejects communism because it is "intellectually contemptible and morally unsound" (*Rex Stout* 372), and in *The Black Mountain* Stout expounds upon this argument. In 1949 Stout joined the newly formed Writers' Board for World Government

(WBWG) which asserted that the only alternative to world war was world law; by gathering a group of American writers, they hoped to begin to establish world government (373). In response to the 1950 Communist invasion of South Korea, Stout focused WBWG energies on bolstering the United Nations' capacity for managing world peace; he also edited the *Prevent World War III* magazine and helped Freedom House draft a statement urging President Truman and Congress to "outlaw the Communist Party and all its affiliated agencies and publications" (381-82). At the height of the McCarthy trials, such an appeal solicited censure and criticism from those who believed all anticommunism was tainted with the same unrelenting zeal as McCarthyism. Stout's affiliation with McCarthyism seemed apparent.

### **McCarthyism**

Yet Stout carefully denounced McCarthyism as well as Communism. While the scandal surrounding McCarthy's anticommunism soiled Stout's long-standing anticommunist stance, it also created a strong national tension that Stout determined to alleviate by again pointing out the errors of both Communism and McCarthyism. Freedom House's anticommunist statement to President Truman suggested an alternative to the methods of McCarthyism that he believed undermined democracy. Their suggestion was to eliminate Communism "without using the shotgun of unproven charges and the technique of the smear campaign" (382). Stout also used his fictional characters to state that both Communism and McCarthyism were threats to democracy. His long-

time friend Anthony Boucher admitted he wished Wolfe would focus on an opponent other than Communism (389). Stout answered this criticism by reasserting distance between his stance and McCarthyism: he had actively opposed McCarthy's dogma in a 1952 Freedom House publication. In his 1952 story "Home to Roost," Wolfe claims, "I deplore the current tendency to accuse people of pro-communism irresponsibly and unjustly" and hence detaches himself from McCarthyism (*Triple Jeopardy* 59). Stout insisted anticommunist and anti-McCarthyism stances were not incompatible.

### **Unfettered FBI under J. Edgar Hoover**

Stout expressed other seemingly contradictory stances; his dislike of an unfettered FBI seems at first to contradict his ardent anti-Nazi, anti-German, and antifascist stand. Such contradiction again elevated Stout from periods of political anonymity to a controversial return to the public eye. Stout's criticism of the FBI reveals its unfettered reign as being detrimental to democracy. Anderson suggests that Stout's criticism drew popular approval:

*The Doorbell Rang*, published in 1965, attacked pretensions to infallibility by the FBI, in the person of J. Edgar Hoover. Stout deplored Hoover's tendency to shield himself and his agency from criticism—and even from inquiry—on the grounds that such activities were somehow unpatriotic. His most popular novel, *The Doorbell Rang*, struck a chord to which Americans of the sixties responded. (12)

In *The Doorbell Rang* Stout makes FBI agents out to be fumblers, interferers, and rogues. Wolfe agrees, with “some minor qualifications” (6), with the comments real-life investigative journalist Fred J. Cook made in his 1964 book *The FBI Nobody Knows*. Cook’s central claim is that the FBI under J. Edgar Hoover’s leadership posed a threat to democratic ideals. For Hoover was a man whose instigation of the FBI’s Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO), for example, wasn’t exposed as unconstitutional, illegal, and corrupt until the 1975 and 1976 congressional trials headed by Senator Frank Church. Church exposed COINTELPRO for what it was: an arm of the FBI that claimed to protect national security through such dubious methods as fostering anticommunism, challenging the activities and ideologies of the Ku Klux Klan, and targeting and infringing on the constitutional rights of citizens belonging to allegedly threatening civil rights groups. Stout hoped that exposing these threats to democracy, as Cook had done and Church would do, would instigate the sort of social change he sought.

### **POLITICAL EXPRESSIONS IN STOUT’S DETECTIVE FICTION**

Many of the issues Stout felt most strongly he controversially raised in his novels. Stout intentionally and overtly filled the role of wartime propagandist through his Nero Wolfe fiction only three times, from 1942 to 1944, with the publication of the three novellas “Not Quite Dead Enough,” “Booby Trap,” and “Help Wanted, Male” (McAleer,



*Rex Stout* 308). Each of these novellas actively encourages Americans to become personally involved with the war effort. In “Not Quite Dead Enough,” the lazy, overweight Wolfe, frustrated with the United States’s national lag in the war efforts of WWII, abandons detective work and begins physically training his body so he can offer his services as soldier. The story mirrors Stout’s own decision to spur the United States’s war efforts. In 1938 Stout grimly watched Hitler’s rise to power. He began to feel ill and, realizing political involvement was the only way for him to overcome personal and societal malaise, he decided to attack Hitler actively (277). As McAleer intimates, this is reflected in his characters:

Wolfe often would forsake his claustral indulgences to welcome a thorn for justice and truth. Munich showed Rex that the thorn must be his, too. Rex now stepped out from behind his fictional characters, to become a defender of the social order he believed in, and the nemesis of those agencies that menaced it. (277)

Both Stout and his characters demonstrated strong political affiliations; in this case Wolfe’s decision to make personal sacrifices so that the war cause might be served is an obvious encouragement for Stout’s readers to do the same.

Occasionally, the public resented Stout’s impertinent suggestion of political viewpoints. The publication of *The Silent Speaker* in 1946, for example, incited political protest because the book was, according to the *Los Angeles News*, “heavily slanted on the political level” (qtd. in McAleer, *Rex Stout* 365). But Stout’s use of detective fiction for political measures also received positive recognition. With unexpected praise of Stout’s

anticommunist stance, *Daily Worker's* reviewer Robert Friedman reveals the significance of detective fiction as an apt form for political discussion when he commends Stout's inspired ability to discover "the possibilities in fusing the current anticommunist drive with the mystery formula" (qtd. in McAleer, *Rex Stout* 376). Stout utilized the traditional beliefs and patterns central to detective fiction as well as his unique creations, Archie Goodwin and Nero Wolfe, juxtaposing convention with innovation and mainstream politics with controversial calls for reform. Indeed, McAleer notes that "by the howls he [Wolfe] would raise, giving voice to [. . .] Stout's passionate commitment to a just, well-ordered society, he would buy time for free men everywhere so that they might set their houses in order and put to rout whatever fiends lay in wait to devour them" (Introduction xxvii). But Stout softens his characters' howls to alert his readers to what they could do to better society and urges gently enough that he retains his readership. Perhaps this is because, despite his heavy political involvement, Stout was primarily a storyteller. He largely kept his detective fiction unsoiled by negative publicity; his readers were eager to enjoy his novels and quick to forget his political agendas (McAleer, *Rex Stout* 555). As a writer, he prized his stories above his political agenda.

## STORYTELLING VERSUS POLITICAL COMMENTING

Of course Stout felt deeply about his political activities. Yet he tried not to allow his political agenda to overshadow his storytelling. He feared that the novel was endangered by a waning interest in storytelling (210). He valued storytelling immensely and committed himself to excellence. P.G. Wodehouse, whom Stout admired as an exceptional storyteller, maintains, “Nobody who claims to be a competent critic can say that Rex Stout does not write well. His narrative and dialogue could not be improved, and he passes the supreme test of being rereadable” (qtd. in Bloom 182). Yet his concern with good storytelling did not preclude political expression. Stout admitted he was a good storyteller, but also indicated that his success was due to his ability to combine storytelling with commenting on human behavior and social problems: “I was satisfied that I was a good storyteller; I enjoyed the special plotting problems of detective stories; and I felt that whatever comments I might want to make about people and their handling of life could be made in detective stories as well as in any other kind” (qtd. in McAleer, *Rex Stout* 243). Indeed, the opportunity to make social and political comments was one reason Stout enjoyed detective fiction. Anderson contends that Stout wrote detective novels because “They sell well, they require good story telling, and they allow for the kind of authorial comment on character and society to which he was constitutionally inclined” (8). In a 1965 interview with Bill Ryan, Stout stated that he resented those critics who said a detective story was “just a detective story” because to “create real people and make comments on human behavior is worthwhile” (qtd. in Townsend et al.

138-39). His successful exploration of human behavior occurs not despite but because of his unique combination of storytelling and social commentary. Stout's purpose in writing was to do it well and to explore human behavior within the framework of current social issues; detective fiction provided such an opportunity.

The union of his political causes and his regard for the formal conventions of literature is apparent in his early aspirations as a writer—"To write profound things about the human soul" (qtd. in Anderson 8). Furthermore, he recognized that to write such profound things one's "feelings about it have to be very deep, very difficult, as Dostoevsky's were, or Melville's, or Balzac's" (qtd. in Anderson 8). And although his Nero Wolfe series was not necessarily profound, Stout did have strong feelings about many of the issues he expresses in these novels. His focus on plot and character enabled him to comment on human behavior, including the political behavior he sought to influence in the world around him. Significantly, Stout's work was not limited by his social commentary nor was his political expression limited by the conventions of the genre and style in which he wrote. Stout efficiently created the Archie-Wolfe duo and utilized the conventions of detective fiction to produce works that facilitated the simultaneous pull towards good storytelling and his desire to explore the concerns of his day.

## MUTED MESSAGE

The subtlety with which Stout addresses social issues in his fiction is remarkable because it enables his readers to focus on his stories and consider issues in a less confrontational arena than that created by his radio discussions and other public modes of social commentary. For although some readers objected to the political messages in his fiction, such as a Los Angeles *News* reporter who complained that *The Silent Speaker* was heavily politically slanted (McAleer, *Rex Stout* 365), many readers became caught up in the stories Stout provided and apparently forgot that his fiction had at times been controversial. For example, David Evans insists the antiracist stance of *Too Many Cooks* is subtle to the point of convincing the reader he is merely enjoying a detective story (McAleer, *Rex Stout* 275). McAleer indicates that Evan's view is shared by many who find themselves caught up in the pleasure of reading his novels, and he calls attention to Stout's obituaries, which "applaud him for keeping Wolfe 'almost always aloof from politics'" (*Rex Stout* 555). Ironically, Stout's fiction was laden with social references, some of which regarded highly controversial matters; nonetheless, Stout retained his readership. Stout's skillful ability to please his readers is not merely due to the foresight with which he viewed issues such as human freedom in conjunction with civil rights and the United States's responsibility to engage in World War II. His views weren't always prophetic, such as his insistence in 1941 that Japan would not attack the United States (290), and they certainly weren't always well received, such as his strong support of the Vietnam War and his dislike of all Germans. He retained his popular readership primarily

because he muted potentially offensive political messages. The adept subtlety with which Stout mutes his political message is achieved through two primary means: the interplay between Archie Goodwin and Nero Wolfe and the conventions of the genre in which Stout was writing.

First, the realistic banter between Wolfe and Archie draws readers sensitive to fine storytelling and masks the serious tone of potentially offensive moral criticism. The relationship between Wolfe and Archie was one of Stout's favorite aspects of the series. His enjoyment in writing the duo is mirrored by the enjoyment his readers feel reading the duo. Anderson claims, "Few crime fiction writers have been as amusing as Rex Stout" (118). Paramount to the bantering Archie-Wolfe duo is the humor with which Stout portrays their reticently loving relationship. This humor makes Stout's depiction of Archie and Wolfe natural; Wodehouse sums up his description of how Stout's characters are realistic depictions of human behavior: "In other words, there was nothing contrived about [Wolfe's] eccentricities, purely because Stout knew his job" (qtd. in Bloom 182). This humor also brings to detective fiction "a lightness of tone which counterpoints its serious undertone of moral criticism" (Anderson 118). For instance, in *The Doorbell Rang*, the banter between Wolfe and Archie persists as each challenges the other to take on a case against the FBI. The engaging banter lightens the mood of an otherwise serious political commentary. Indeed, Wolfe's heckling of Archie masks what is a serious political complaint.

Second, Stout fuses radical political content with the conventional forms of a conventional genre, which counteracts the potential for radical influence. The

fundamental affirmation of the social order inherent in detective fiction slows its ability to affect social change other than restoring temporary glitches in the sociolegal machinery. Although Stout was genuine in his desire to affect certain types of change, his efforts were sometimes thwarted because his readers did not see all of his claims as congruent with the prevalent social order. The social order Stout believed in seamlessly incorporated abolishing censorship, racism, Fascism in Europe, Communism in Vietnam, and a destructive FBI with the aim of restoring human rights. His novels support any social order that truly offers order; as Anderson explains, “These novels value not so much a particular form of order as order in the abstract, order as opposed to destructive disorder” (22). Ultimately Stout’s opinions, if in conflict with the opinions of his readers, give way to social order and pay obeisance to the genre through which they are voiced. This enables Stout not only to assert political views consistent with his utopian social order but also to express muted views that became, in their muting, consistent with the dominant social order. Rather, Stout’s messages reinforce “the order that gives sense to human community and finally to civilization itself” (Anderson 22).

In order to maintain the widespread popularity of his Nero Wolfe series and because he was a literary traditionalist, Stout resisted using his fiction as a platform for often extreme political agendas. He seamlessly combines in his detective fiction the seemingly contradictory aims of seeking social reform and telling a good story. As McAleer asserts, “[T]he dual careers of Rex Stout were not mutually exclusive. He was not a champion of civil liberties who also wrote detective stories for profit or diversion. The Wolfe saga all along had served him as a vehicle for stringent social commentary”

(*Rex Stout* 459). Stout recognized the potential of fusing social commentary and good storytelling in detective fiction, of exemplifying good storytelling as manifested in the bantering Archie-Wolfe duo, and of utilizing the conventional form of detective fiction as seen in conventional ideologies. Stout's popularity is also a token of his ingenuity.



## Chapter Two:

### Criticizing Values and Traditions, Reinforcing Values and Traditions

Stout's emphasis on storytelling makes his detective fiction all the more successful in exploring social issues because it mutes his more extreme political messages. The exploration of social issues, which is inherent in detective fiction, both subverts the dominant culture's traditions and values and reveals a larger ideological stability. While Stout examines particular controversial social issues, the restored stasis of the basic and conventional attitudes shapes his fiction to reaffirm a recognizable social order. Traditional values—the bases for the moral, intellectual, financial, legal, penal, racial, and gendered hierarchies through which society supposedly secures stability—are prevalent in Stout's detective fiction. Catherine Nickerson sees the prevalence of social patterns in the genre as indicative of its cultural relevance (744). Analyzing how these traditions are portrayed in detective fiction reveals how cultural attitudes function in it. This, in turn, reveals how Stout's Nero Wolfe series mutes his political messages.

On the one hand, detective fiction reflects social trends; on the other hand, it is shaped by these trends. As Nickerson suggests, the relationship between detective fiction and cultural attitudes is neither simple nor unidirectional. She asserts that “the genre is deeply enmeshed with [. . .] gender roles and privileges, racial prejudice and the formation of racial consciousness, the significance and morality of wealth and capital, and the conflicting demands of privacy and social control” (744). Detective fiction, including Stout's, explores these problems from a highly conventional position (Grenander 48;

Leonardi 122; Nickerson 752; Paul 7<sup>1</sup>). What Nickerson calls “the significance and morality of wealth and capital” is identified by Stout and those who responded to him as capitalism and the protection of property or of economic codes. Particular values remain central to much detective fiction and to Stout’s in particular. For example, the Nero Wolfe series defends the constitutional protection of the pattern of economic inequality and its preservation; the right to guard democracy and individuals from threats of Fascist, Communist, and other self-serving, despotic systems (including McCarthyism and the FBI); the legal mode of policing and penalizing criminals; the justice of the penal code; the culpability of criminals for both their thoughts and their actions; and the stability of logical, rational reasoning. The series criticizes personal ego manifested within Nazism, Fascism, Communism, the United States Senate and Congress, and the FBI. Yet Stout’s exploration of social problems and the belief structures that support them worked within prevalent social traditions:

Recognizing [. . .] that the detective story had to be, by its very nature, supportive of the existing social order, Rex never repudiated that order. He drew on the strengths of hard-boiled detective fiction [. . .] to generate forms, but, holding firm to the tradition of the novel of manners, he worked for peaceful change within the existing social order, rather than opting for that order’s violent overthrow. (McAleer, *Rex Stout* 6)

As demonstrated by an analysis of the social issues Stout explores, even his opposition to certain social beliefs and institutions did not threaten social patterns. An affront to minor beliefs is different from an assault on the overall pattern of belief. Furthermore, Stout’s

criticisms of minor social practices ultimately affirmed larger, more fundamental value systems.

### **OVERT CRITICISM OF INSTITUTIONS AND ATTITUDES**

Stout examined several social institutions and found them lacking. His Nero Wolfe series points out potential flaws with social codes and with how individuals interpret these codes to the greater social disadvantage. McAleer observes that “Wolfe does not champion the establishment as a matter of course. He realizes that extremism of the right menaces civilization fully as much as extremism of the left does. When the establishment encroaches on fundamental human rights—even those of obscure citizens—Wolfe raises a mighty howl” (*Rex Stout* 7). In an effort to rid society of destructive elements, Stout tried to debunk values that enabled the persistence of corrupt governmental agencies, self-serving agendas, and racism. This criticism was guided by the conventionality of detective fiction; Stout never threatened the sanctity of storytelling in order to pursue his own political agenda. His social criticism also worked within conventional values, which enabled him to oppose not only Fascism and Communism but also unpopularly to oppose isolationism and anti-Vietnam War stances because he framed his arguments within prevalent social attitudes. Both Stout and his opponents shared a reliance on the most conventional of society’s belief systems. Stout’s social criticism

threatened to overthrow only superficial elements of social attitudes and not core traditions and beliefs.

### **Fascist and Communist Governmental Agencies**

Stout frequently reveals Fascism and Communism as inherently evil social institutions. This condemnation is conventional and thus finds social acceptance more easily within the prevalent political codes of detective fiction, which favor capitalism, democracy, and legal codes demanding the protection of threatened individuals—systems that preclude beliefs that facilitate Fascism and Communism. The stories' settings, outcomes, and both major and minor characters express this anticommunist and antifascist position. The most notable instance of such anticommunist expression is *The Black Mountain*, first published in 1954. As Wolfe and Archie travel through Eastern Europe searching for the murderer of Wolfe's longtime friend Marko Vukcic, they find themselves in the midst of a power struggle among Russian Communists headed by Tito, native Montenegrin revolutionaries, and Albanian spies waiting for civil strife to weaken Yugoslavia and allow the Albanians to seize power. They enter the country disguised as a wealthy father-and-son pair purportedly trying to decide to which group they wish to offer financial help: the Communists who recently came to power or the revolutionaries who repeatedly fail to reclaim their nation. The reader knows they find the Communists contemptuous and the revolutionaries courageous yet foolhardy; indeed these characters prove themselves to be so.

The setting for *The Black Mountain* reveals the practical and intellectual failure of Communism. The social unrest and inequality prevalent in the novel are described as a result of Communist reign. For example, Wolfe protests that the once noble and tough citizens of Montenegro have had the “sap [. . .] sucked out of their spines” (90). He also describes the effect of Communism on one representative Montenegrin: “In ten centuries the Turks could never make him whine. Even under the despotism of Black George he kept his head up as a man. But Communist despotism has done for him” (107). These descriptions confirm the failures of Communism. Furthermore, the storyline itself emphasizes the failures of Communism because the Communists cannot maintain the well-ordered structures of civil society. The apparent inequality, civil strife, and lack of a secure state apparatus, effective governing institution, and fairly enforced penal code reveal Communism to be ineffective in protecting civilians.

While Archie and Wolfe are in Yugoslavia, the barrage of conflicting political regimes renders government leadership senseless, and the native citizens—demoralized and poverty-stricken—suffer under the power struggle. Social corruption creates inequality, and some individuals receive much more financial aid than others. Citizen George Bilic, for instance, somehow procured a 1953 Ford sedan from the fifty-eight million dollars the United States lent Yugoslavia. Montenegrin local official Gospo Stritar reveals that only one million of the 58 million dollars is spent in Montenegro—purportedly for a dam and power plant. Wolfe recognizes that the potential for corruption extends to Stritar and his assistant Peter Zov, and, claiming he’d like the money to help local Communist efforts, he tempts the two with an amount somewhere

between one thousand and eight thousand American dollars he has hidden in the nearby mountains. Archie suspects that none of the money will be distributed in a way that would help either the Communist cause or the local community; he also suspects that both Stritar and Zov are conspiring to keep the largest portion for themselves. The failings of the current Yugoslavian government are also exacerbated by the external and internal threats faced by local leaders of various regimes. Danilo Vukcic, nephew of Marko, is admittedly a spy for Belgrade, the Russians, and the revolutionaries. Although he is in reality helping the revolutionaries, also known as the Spirit of the Black Mountain, he keeps the other two groups guessing as to where his true loyalties lie and uses this to his advantage to fight against Yugoslavia's current government.

Finally, the story unfolds so that justice is not achieved until the key characters escape Communist Yugoslavia, where centralized and reliable political, legal, and punitive power is absent. Not until Wolfe and Archie return to the United States are they able to deliver punishment—which, by the way, is legal, lawful, and perfectly in line with American sensibilities. The apparent inequality, civil strife, and lack of a secure state apparatus, effective governing institution, and fairly enforced penal code reveal Communism to be ineffective in protecting civilians.

Other clues found in *The Black Mountain* that Communism is a failed governmental system are more obvious; characters themselves express their disdain of Communism. Of the minor characters, leading local Communist Stritar makes the most revealing judgments. To convince Stritar he is sincere about his loyalties, Wolfe offers him several thousand dollars and asks, "Would you advise us to join the Communist

Party of the Untied States and try to influence them in your favor?” (169). Stritar’s answer reveals his dislike of American and Russian Communism. He complains that the American Communists “belong to Moscow, body and soul, and they’re a nest of slimy vermin” as he contemptuously differentiates Yugoslavian Communism from the worst Russian brand of Communism (169). As in other Wolfe novels, Communists neither trust nor esteem one another.

Wolfe—perhaps the kingliest of all the characters—expresses an opinion shared by the other major character of the series, namely, Archie. Wolfe condemns Communism and Fascism in several instances in *The Black Mountain*. He declares, “I condemn clichés, especially those corrupted by fascists and communists. Such phrases as ‘great and noble’ and ‘fruits of their labor’ have been given an ineradicable stink by Hitler and Stalin and all their vermin brood” (24). He claims that the leaders of such groups, particularly Hitler, Yugoslavian Socialist Tito, Franco, and Georgi Malenkov, are responsible for the majority of the monstrosities that occur under despotic reign. When Wolfe’s adopted daughter is killed by Albanians eager to benefit from the Yugoslavian civil unrest, Wolfe places blame for the death not on the Albanians nor on the civil unrest, but on Communist Russian Premier Georgi Malenkov. Wolfe states, “Many men are responsible for Carla’s death, but if I were to name one it would be Georgi Malenkov. He is the foremost champion of the doctrine that men and women must be subjected to the mandates of despotic power” (139). Stout corroborates Wolfe’s assertion with the instances of Communistic despotism in the novel.

## **Despotism in the Senate—the Dunderheads and McCarthy—and in the FBI**

The despotism of Communism is mirrored in certain despotic entities within the United States. Any leaders who take advantage of their power for personal gain are to blame for the social ills that occur under despotic reign. Stout speaks against personal ego whether those abusing power are United States Senators or Communist and Fascist leaders; these powerful individuals allow selfish motivation to jeopardize society for their own gain. Indeed, this is the course of all Nero Wolfe criminals: each one murders another to serve himself. Yet particularly heinous crimes occur when powerful individuals—purported protectors of society—misuse their power and then resort to violence (murder, blackmailing, or other infringements on basic human rights) to cover up their actions and silence their opposition. Wolfe claims Fascist Hitler, Socialist Tito, and Nationalist Franco, as well as the United States controversial Senator McCarthy, who exploited the United States citizens' fear of Communism, were driven by personal ego. These individuals utilized personal ego as a doctrine that subverts a belief in freedom by “masquerading as a basis of freedom” while permitting tyranny to drain liberty, freedom, and agency from society; thus personal ego “is the oldest and toughest of the enemies of freedom” (*Black* 153). Stout attempted to expose as faulty the basic values and traditions upon which exploitative governments and individuals rely. Because these groups and individuals were clouded by personal ego, they undermined the values inherent to democracy and thus threatened the beliefs and behaviors they ought to have been upholding.



**The Senate fails to protect and even threatens democracy.** His Nero Wolfe story “Booby Trap,” depicts as villains high-ranking army officials and senators “who jeopardized the outcome of the war by seeking their own gain” (McAleer, *Rex Stout* 330). In his personal life Stout also saw those who jeopardized the outcome of the war as threats to democracy. He considered the members of Congress listed in *The Illustrious Dunderheads* to be individuals who actively threatened the outcome of the war by giving “currency to Nazi propaganda which is designed to bring about the defeat of the United States, the creation of a fascist America subservient to Hitler’s Germany” (15). He adamantly rejected isolationist arguments made by members of Congress who parroted, “intentionally or nonintentionally, [. . .] the very same Nazi-Fascist lines” used by Nazi Germany to dissuade and distract the United States from entering World War II (14). Although he recognized much of the damage was unintentional, at least so far as promoting Nazism was concerned, Stout encouraged Americans to deny these men and women further personal gain and to vote them out of office.

In “Booby Trap” Stout provides another, more extreme alternative to voting corrupt individuals out of office: the leading villain, Senator Shattuck, is a man who proves impious, devious, and murderous in both the public sphere and his private life, and Wolfe convinces him to commit suicide rather than uncover his involvement in leaking war resources to Hitler. Shattuck’s sellout to Nazism is intentional and direct and warrants a harsh penalty; his severe implication resonates the more subtle involvement of members of Congress “who give expression to Hitler’s propaganda [and, perhaps unwittingly] are serving to accomplish Hitler’s aims towards the United States”

(*Dunderheads* 15). Neither Shattuck nor these individuals admit their involvement to their constituents. (Shattuck has been selling top secret new weapons to Germany and he has murdered two army officials—one a boyhood friend—to protect his secret.) Shattuck exploits his mantle as public servant to pursue his own glory at the expense of the social liberties of the American public. So does, as Wolfe points out, Senator Joseph McCarthy (*Black* 153).

“Booby Trap” not only reflects Stout’s opinion of United States Senators described in *The Illustrious Dunderheads*, it also reflects his opinion that Senator McCarthy was a threat to democracy. Like his counterparts of the previous decade, Senator McCarthy exploited the American public’s fear of Communism, not to criticize partnership with Russia against Germany as some of the so-called dunderheads did but to follow the alternative other “dunderheads” proposed (*Dunderheads* 13-14): to fight the enemy within national borders (*Dunderheads* 10). Speaking of McCarthyism, Stout said, “Wild exaggerations and inexcusable inaccuracies [. . .] serve to divide and confuse the country when we should be united in the task of resisting Communist aggression abroad and Communist subversion at home” (qtd. in McAleer, *Rex Stout* 387). In 1954 McCarthy’s investigations were received both favorably and unfavorably by an American public fearful of Communist infiltration. But, again risking controversy, Stout saw McCarthy’s self-promotion not as an attack on Communism but on human rights consistent with Communist and Fascist despotism; Stout’s personal fight for human rights outside the realm of his career as a fiction writer also finds voice through his characters. Although Wolfe was ardently anticommunist, McAleer points out that “Wolfe

disassociates himself from McCarthyism” when he insists he deplores irresponsible and unjust accusations of Communist affiliation (*Rex Stout* 387). In 1938, long before McCarthy’s controversial inquisitions, Wolfe points out that senators often gather dirt on prominent individuals, and he suggests that this is filthier than the collection of physical garbage: “A garbageman collects table refuse, while a senator collects evidence of the corruption of highly placed men—might one not prefer the garbage as less unsavory?” (*Too Many Cooks* 11). McCarthy’s garbage collection was even more unsavory because it was irresponsible and unjust, especially if, in his desire for self-promotion, McCarthy condemned innocent individuals. Wolfe clearly links McCarthy with prominent Communist and Fascist leaders and the corruption inherent in the institutions and policies under their influence.

Senator McCarthy’s fear-inspired investigations into the lives of alleged Communists in the United States were fueled by information provided by the FBI under the command of McCarthy’s friend J. Edgar Hoover. For Stout, this was the first sign that Hoover might also be corrupted. In a 1965 interview with Haskel Frankel of *Saturday Review*, Stout said of Hoover, “I got my first idea [of the kind of man he is] from the newspapers years ago when I read that he frequently went to the races with Senator McCarthy. I was astonished that a man—Hoover—whose function is to preserve and uphold the law would take as a social companion a man who was so obviously a threat to the very basis of democracy” (qtd. in McAleer, *Rex Stout* 458). Hence Stout saw democracy threatened by Fascism, Communism, and Nazism; United States Senators and Representatives opposed to fighting these governmental systems; and McCarthy and

Hoover, who stirred up suspicion and irrationality within the United States and exacerbated or incited national crises.

**The FBI threatens democracy.** Stout, through Wolfe, debunks the claim Hoover advanced that he could best ensure national freedom and civil liberties through an uninhibited employment of all the FBI's resources. Stout asserts, "Hoover is a megalomaniac. . . . He appears totally egocentric, and in addition to other things he is narrow-minded. I think his whole attitude makes him an enemy of democracy. . . . I think he is on the edge of senility. Calling Martin Luther King the 'biggest liar in the world,' or something like that, was absurd. He is getting sillier and sillier" (qtd. in McAleer, *Rex Stout* 457). Although the FBI was designed to protect the liberties, rights, and civil interests of citizens across the nation by securing national security, Hoover—instigator of such dubious FBI organizations as COINTELPRO, which aimed to incite paranoia and murder among and within various civil rights groups—threatened democracy by infringing on these rights at least as much as he protected them.

As with many issues he hoped to resolve, Stout believed making the public aware of the FBI's corruption would result in the resolution he sought. Although he maintained he didn't intend for *The Doorbell Rang* to be an attack on the FBI, he said to Haskel Frankel, "Now I'm beginning to think that the book may lead people to stand up and speak out against the FBI" (qtd. in McAleer, *Rex Stout* 458). In this novel various characters promote the idea that public awareness results in positive social solutions. Wealthy and politically idealistic Mrs. Bruner reaches out to individuals of power and

publicity in an effort to make known the truth about Hoover and the FBI under his control. Mrs. Bruner and Wolfe agree that “members of the cabinet, the Supreme Court, governors of all the states, all senators and representatives, members of state legislatures, publishers of newspapers and magazines, and editors, heads of corporations and banks, network executives and broadcasters, columnists, district attorneys, educators, and [. . .] chiefs of police” need be made aware of the action of the FBI under Hoover (*Doorbell* 5). These are individuals of wealth and influence who have the ability to harness public opinion and power against Hoover; educating them is of chief importance.

Mrs. Bruner, discouraged that only 20,000 copies of Fred Cook’s *The FBI Nobody Knows*—a real-life book which reveals the corruption inherent in the FBI with Hoover at its head—had been purchased in a country of 200 million people, decides to take action, not via advertisements, but by purchasing and mailing 10,000 copies of the book to prominent and influential individuals across the nation. The actions of other characters also condone this sort of active political involvement. Lon Cohen, editor of the local New York *Gazette*, believes in publicity as a means of political action. His profession leads him to see the dissemination of knowledge to the public as a right protected by democracy. For instance, “Lon thought that was a disgrace to journalism and to the *Gazette* personnel in particular” that no one at the *Gazette* “had known, before the murder, that [the murdered Morris Althaus] had been collecting material for a piece on the FBI” (63). Hence Cohen believes Hoover’s actions ought to be publicized and hopes Wolfe might “perform a public service” by revealing the FBI’s dirty deeds (15-16). After all, Mrs. Bruner presumably had sent her 10,000 copies “as a public service” (15). Cohen

also buys “five copies” himself, sends “them to people who should read them but probably won’t,” and knows a man who “gave thirty copies as Christmas presents” (15). Furthermore, because Wolfe approves of an actual (not fictional) book—a tactic Stout commonly employs to ground his novels in current social issues—Stout, too, encourages his readers to become aware of Hoover’s corruption.

Yet Wolfe himself opts for a more private sort of tutelage; he’ll put the FBI in its place on his own terms, in his own house, and to his own satisfaction. Although Wolfe is not exactly Mrs. Bruner’s ally in this endeavor, he understands her compulsion to send 10,000 copies of *The FBI Nobody Knows* to these people, and he agrees with the author’s opinion of the FBI and Hoover “with some minor qualifications” (6). He does not “disapprove” of her decision (8), and for a man who uses “satisfactory” to compliment actions of outstanding execution and merit, claiming he does not disapprove constitutes, in fact, significant approval. Furthermore, Wolfe’s disdain for the FBI under Hoover is strongly stated throughout the novel. Wolfe asserts that “it will certainly be in my interest to discredit their [the FBI’s] pretension that they are faultless champions of justice” (79). Wolfe’s indictment in *The Doorbell Rang* is a reflection of Stout’s opinion that “In a democratic country, J. Edgar Hoover is a completely impossible person to be in a position of authority” (qtd. in McAleer, *Rex Stout* 458).

Additionally, purging the FBI of corrupt practices, excuses, beliefs, and individuals—such as Hoover—is a completely impossible task for a private citizen. Almost as impossible is Wolfe and Archie’s “preposterous” and “futile and fatuous” attempt to “compel the FBI to stop annoying” Mrs. Bruner (*Doorbell* 7-8). As Archie and

Wolfe pursue their investigation, Archie admits the FBI could destroy Wolfe. He notes the FBI's ability to tail him; to tap the phone lines of Wolfe and of each of the regular visitors to the brownstone—Saul Panzer, Fred Durkin, Orrie Cather, Lily Rowan, and Nathaniel Parker; to monitor their mail; to break into their house; and to frame them so it sticks. At one point he fears the FBI might actually be framing him. Archie thinks it might be Hoover himself waiting for him in that room, and he considers the possibility the FBI might frame him by leading him to a room with a naked female or corpse and taking his picture with it. Archie's paranoia is reminiscent of the pervasive paranoia among civil rights leaders during this era of COINTELPRO. The FBI secretly aggravated existing tensions between various leaders and groups within the civil rights movement and also invited new threats; the secrecy was designed to make people in the civil rights movement seem paranoid and eventually discredit the movement. Based on the FBI's real-life activities and other activities throughout the novel, Archie's concerns seem reasonable. Other characters share this concern; Mrs. Bruner, for instance, is frightened that the FBI will vengefully dig up dirt on herself or her acquaintances. Even the novel's top FBI official Richard Wragg suspects three of his agents of corruption and murder. Wragg believes his own agents—sent to confiscate all the files on an article on the FBI that Morris Althaus is writing—murdered Althaus and confiscated the bullet and gun used to kill him. Furthermore, Archie knows the FBI has now targeted him and Wolfe. The FBI is pushing New York state licensing department official Jim Perazzo to confiscate their licenses. Although this threat seems minor compared to Althaus's murder, this first step towards discrediting and immobilizing the detective duo is foiled

by Cramer, and Archie fears the FBI may resort to other, less legal methods. Indeed, by the end of the novel, the FBI is deeply interested in Wolfe and Archie and their interference with FBI operations. The “*big fish*”—J. Edgar Hoover—arrives on Wolfe’s doorstep; Archie and Wolfe do not answer the door (186).

The FBI’s respect for legality seems in *The Doorbell Rang* to be contingent upon convenience. Wolfe claims, “The FBI likes to oblige local cops when it doesn’t cost them anything—prestige, for instance” (60). Yet when disregarding the police apparatus protects their freedom to operate as they wish, FBI agents are quick to do so. For instance, the FBI breaks in and enters Althaus’s apartment and takes the bullet as evidence they didn’t kill him. Wolfe explains this and the subsequent negligence of the FBI to comply with the law and to assist the police; Wolfe asserts that although their removal of the bullet that murdered Althaus “violated a law of the State of New York” and that by breaking and entry “they had already violated one [law], why not another?” (167). Hence Wolfe’s objections to the FBI actually affirm the policing apparatus.

Elsewhere, Stout contends,

The FBI has enough in its files to wipe out democracy in this country. Wow, do I personally think Hoover will use his power to do something like that? No, I don’t think so. But the *potential* is there, and any potential is a threat. . . . If I were president, I’d appoint a commission to go through all the FBI files carefully, and destroy every single bit of information that doesn’t pertain to U.S. national interests *right now*. (qtd. in McAleer, *Rex Stout* 458-59)



Thus Stout expresses a controversial but not unique opinion that the FBI, as Mrs. Bruner states, “is getting too big for its britches” (*Doorbell* 35). If true, this stance reveals the frightening reality of a powerful and corrupt national institution undermining the tenets of democracy. Whether true or false, this stance stung and offended a public hesitant to believe such allegations and eager to support the FBI as defender of the American nation and the rights and liberties upon which the American nation is built. However, Stout’s prodemocratic stance was clear; the clarity with which he supported democracy softened his anti-FBI stance and revealed an underlying support of conventional social beliefs and patterns that is consistent throughout the Nero Wolfe series.

### **AFFIRMATION OF DOMINANT INSTITUTIONS AND ATTITUDES**

Ultimately, Stout’s politically controversial inquiries affirm dominant trends in democracy. His enemies abroad certainly noted this. When the Russians began distributing several of his most political novels, including *The Doorbell Rang*, *Too Many Cooks*, and *A Right to Die*, they did so because they thought the books revealed flaws in capitalist society. Yet Gogo Anjaparidze, critic for the *Literary Gazette*, grew alarmed that affirmations of democracy and capitalism were indoctrinating Russian citizens who were oblivious to these conventional American undertones. “Most detective fiction,” he objects, “defends the foundation of capitalist society—the ‘sacrosanct’ right of private

property—and expresses warm feelings toward the propertied classes. Do you call this exposing capitalist society?” (qtd. in McAleer, *Rex Stout* 501). As Stout’s critique of the FBI in *The Doorbell Rang* demonstrates, his exposure of flaws (such as the unfettered FBI) in capitalist society ultimately protects alternative methods (such as the state and city police apparatus and private investigators) of maintaining and restoring social order; his exposure also defends beliefs prevalent in capitalist society and democracy.

His fiction became the powerful proponent of capitalism and democracy that individuals such as Anjaparidze feared. McAleer asserts that the depiction of one wealthy and comfortable individual risking his personal comforts and freedoms to procure and protect those same comforts and freedoms for other individuals preaches the tenets of democracy quite persuasively:

Increasing numbers of readers behind the Iron curtain would ponder the motivations of the affluent Nero Wolfe, who relinquishes his comfort, suffers the rebukes and harassments of others, and endangers his life to uphold ethical standards, remedy social abuses, and see that the ends of justice are served, even when men of power and means must be humbled to bring about that result. (*Rex Stout* 501)

Whatever social criticisms Stout made in his fiction, such as the confrontation of real-life and fictional but socially symbolic men of power and means, Stout’s fiction champions democratic tenets. For instance, McAleer also demonstrates how Stout’s unpunished critique of the FBI defends the freedom of speech: “No Soviet writer could attack with impunity the head of the KGB. In America, Rex Stout could lay the director of the FBI

under severe reprimand, and go unpunished” (501). Furthermore, even as Stout criticized one portion of capitalist society, he reinforced other beliefs and behaviors at the basis of American values. This complex critical relationship, then, enabled Stout to assert controversial viewpoints and discuss complex codes fundamental to American society.

### **Affirming the Economic Codes of Capitalism and Individualism**

In the United States of the mid-twentieth century, the dominant economic trends sustained the wide gap between upper and lower classes (Levy 923).<sup>2</sup> Complex beliefs enabled some citizens to retain financial security and even affluence, while a growing number of citizens found themselves impoverished. For instance, political scientist R. Allen Hays asserts that the pervasive desire to help the poor within American society is consistently superseded by the uglier aspects of individualism (370). And political philosopher Almaz Zelleke contends that mainstream Americans believe in “the basic fairness of the capitalist economic system” and thus also believe in the basic fairness of a system “in which property and assets can be privately acquired, concentrated, and handed down in ways that lead to vast economic inequality among citizens” (3). Other beliefs also promote economic inequality. For example, the belief in “individual responsibility for one’s condition” and the belief that “wealth is a just reward for hard work” can be (mis)applied to restrict assistance to the poor (Hays 370). Economic attitudes are further complicated by the conflicting rejection of economic inequality and the recognition that if the capitalist economic model is just, one must “hold that overall the system rewards (and

penalizes) its participants according to fair rules that apply equally to all” (Zelleke 3). The vast support for an economic framework that goes so far as to allow economic inequalities to continue to separate American society is evidenced by Zelleke’s contention: “Most defenders of capitalism acknowledge that its greater efficiency and productive power come at the cost of consigning some participants to economic insecurity and even poverty, even when it functions well, creating the need for some kind of redistributive safety net” (4). Thus Americans accept an economic structure they recognize is flawed. Failure to repair the system, to successfully create what Zelleke calls a “redistributive safety net,” reveals that also inherent in the social code is the acceptance of the unjust allocation of wealth.

Although Stout does not overtly discuss his political view of economical distribution, the economic status of the staple characters; the moral code his characters accept to justify their economic status, their lifestyles, and their actions; and his silence on issues of unequal economic statuses prevalent throughout the United States indicate that he supports the status quo. Wealth is also key to the success of Stout’s key characters. Wolfe’s status as a wealthy member of the upper class emphasizes the dominant economic code and its various components: the right to protect personal property and liberty, the responsibility to work within the socioeconomic framework, the right to make money through whatever legal means present themselves, and the justness of acquiring wealth through the current system of economic distribution, which favors already educated, employed, and generally socially integrated members of society.

**Defending the right to protect personal property, liberty, and other tenets of democracy.** True to the impulses of democratic and capitalist society, the Nero Wolfe novels defend the notion that individuals ought to be allowed to protect their personal interests and private properties. Furthermore, this liberty is extended to the detective, who protects the interests and property of his client. In *The Doorbell Rang* Mrs. Bruner employs Wolfe to protect the privacy and property of herself and her friends from annoyance by the FBI. In *The Black Mountain* freedom of speech is protected; Wolfe avenges a man who was murdered for financially supporting and verbally expressing his political affiliations. In “Not Quite Dead Enough” Wolfe takes on a case with no client but himself in order to prevent Archie from going to jail, to protect his personal interest in maintaining Archie’s companionship, and to protect his business operation by once again securing Archie in his employ. Finally, in “Booby Trap” Wolfe literally defends the basic tenets of democracy; he has no client but at his own expense challenges the enemies of American democracy. Through the fundamental protection of the infringement of rights and the punishment of any who breach these rights, detective fiction supports the right to establish and protect personal property and liberty to live as one wishes within the legal and economic constraints of capitalistic, democratic society.

**Asserting responsibility to work within the socioeconomic framework.**

Indeed, Stout’s detective fiction also reflects support of the legal constraints and socioeconomic framework of capitalism. For instance, Wolfe is a willing taxpayer. Wolfe contends that paying taxes is a duty no American should shirk. Nevertheless,

Wolfe wiggles within the framework of the system. If possible, he avoids paying exorbitant taxes; yet his method functions well within the legality defined by the taxing apparatus. Wolfe simply incurs no more labor: “In a November or December, when he was already in a bracket that would take three-quarters—more, formerly—of any additional income, turning down jobs was practically automatic” (*Doorbell* 4-5).

Although he is wealthy enough that increased income is actually burdensome, Wolfe defends taxation. Thus Wolfe seems to validate national codes of taxation as well as the social institutions that are funded by tax monies, such as national defense, education, and welfare.

Furthermore, the Wolfe novels suggest that it is the duty of each American citizen to take advantage of the opportunities offered within the socioeconomic framework and Wolfe claims financial success only by working within that framework. Wolfe seizes opportunities to utilize the sort of skill and work he is best adapted to. In “Not Quite Dead Enough,” Archie encourages Wolfe to serve his country through his brains not his brawn. Wolfe makes his living and supports his lifestyle by repeatedly asserting his logical and moral superiority. Wolfe never usurps the authority of the police but takes advantage of the sort of investigation he and Archie are suited to when the sort of investigation the police are suited to fails. This opportunism suggests that capitalism is the best source for personal and social success; within capitalism individuals can choose their own—if legal, ethical, and more or less socially acceptable—occupations.

**Defending the right to make money by any legal means.** This defense of opportunism includes the defense of the right to make money by whatever legal and ethical means are presented. Wolfe is entitled to the wealth he earns by utilizing his greatest asset—his intellect—to identify and punish criminals. He does not charge negligible fees to do so. In *Too Many Cooks*, Wolfe tolerates insinuations that his work is somehow dubious because he hopes to persuade French chef Jerome Berin to give him a delicious sausage recipe. Wolfe explains his profession: “I am not a policeman; I am a private detective. I entrap criminals, and find evidence to imprison them or kill them, for hire” (*Too Many Cooks* 11). When the delighted Berin accuses Wolfe’s profession of being one of dirty work, Wolfe admits that his work is perhaps dirty, but responds that he is entitled to whatever work he can legally and ethically stomach:

Each of us finds an activity he can tolerate. The manufacturer of baby carriages, caught himself in the system’s web and with no monopoly of greed, entraps his workers in the toils of his necessity.[ . . .] Only the table scavenger gets less pay; that is the real point. I do not soil myself cheaply; I charge high fees. (11)

Wolfe ought to be allowed to pursue any job he begins, and he ought to be allowed to charge any price he desires.

**Defending the distribution of wealth.** The undisturbed system of wealth distribution is a key feature of detective fiction. Frederick Isaac describes American literary predecessors to Wolfe: “They were all wealthy. Even those without obvious

means, such as Ellery Queen and his father the inspector, were well aware of propriety, and dealt with high society as knowledgeable insiders” (61). The wealthy Nero Wolfe follows this tradition. He not only understands society, but he belongs to it. He is comfortable enough financially to enable an unfettered lifestyle of reading, gormandizing, and orchid growing. In *The Doorbell Rang*, for instance, the promise of a hefty fee—100 thousand dollars—convinces Wolfe to take the job; he knows that this fee would maintain his reading and orchid growing habits for several months (9). The structure of Stout’s Wolfe novels relies upon the financial security of his major characters; Wolfe and Archie must be financially free from the dependence which would increase their cupidity and decrease their sense of morality. Wolfe and Archie must also be free to pursue the activities they enjoy—Wolfe his orchid tending and Archie his dancing. P.G. Wodehouse describes how Wolfe’s adamant protection of his lifestyle is seamless where the inability to protect it would be incongruous.

Does the ordinary reader realize how exactly right those Nero Wolfe stories are? There are no loose ends. One could wonder why Sherlock Holmes, fawned on by kings and prime ministers, was not able to afford rooms in Baker Street—price at the turn of the century thirty bob a week including breakfast—unless he got Doctor Watson to put up half the money, but in Nero Wolfe, a professional detective charging huge fees, you can believe. Those orchids, perfectly understandable. He liked orchids and was in a financial position to collect them. He liked food, too. Again perfectly understandable. He refused to leave his house on



business, and very sensible of him if his wealth and reputation were such that he could get away with it. In other words, there was nothing contrived about his eccentricities, purely because Stout knew his job. (xv)

Indeed, Stout knew his job and did it well. The protection of Wolfe's and Archie's upper-class lifestyles protects his role as detective. It also enables a continuity within the series and the characters themselves that draws readers to it.

The continuity of the social class of other characters is also important in the novels. Although Wolfe's chef, Fritz Brenner, relies on Wolfe for his income, he lives in his house and there pursues precisely the kind of lifestyle he desires. Being a chef is his one love in life, and his concern for Wolfe makes his specific duties only dearer to him. All of his physical needs and many of his emotional and social needs are met within the walls of the brownstone. Characters outside the brownstone also uphold the sanctity of the distribution of wealth in the series. For instance, Lily Rowan's status as Archie's independently wealthy lover is central to the maintenance of relationships. Lily's father made eight million dollars; this supports her nicely ("Not Quite" 7). Her lifestyle enables her to be precisely the sort of character the novel calls for: she is able to help the detecting duo on call, and her romantic interest in Archie poses no serious threat to the companionship of the duo because her wealth keeps her preoccupied and financially independent—which means she won't be relying on Archie to marry and support her.

Although for the most part neither the structure of the novels nor the staple characters themselves belittle lower-class individuals, the ultimate financial stability, security, and success of the key characters suggest that the unequal distribution of wealth

is justifiable. Occasionally, characters reveal critical attitudes toward lower classes; an unusually petty Lily, for example, tries to insult Archie by calling him a stenographer and dissolving whatever prestige he has (“Not Quite” 83). And in “Not Quite Dead Enough” the economic distinction between two attractive women whose independent company Archie enjoys reveals the economic inequality sustained by the novels. Ann Amory has a quick wit and is a fine dancer. Although engaged to be married, she enjoys her time with Archie, and he his with her. This mutual enjoyment provokes in jealousy Archie’s long-time romantic interest Lily. The financial differences between Ann and Lily are extreme. Ann earns thirty dollars a week, and Lily is flabbergasted by the financial position of her friend: “Think of it,” she cries, “thirty dollars a week! Of course, that’s no worse than thirty dollars a day; you couldn’t possibly live anyhow” (8). Indeed, Lily would not be able to live on thirty dollars a week or thirty dollars a day. Lily’s actions throughout the novel, although unusually jealous and spiteful, demonstrate the significance of her financial status as a prerequisite to the lifestyle on which she relies. Desperate for Archie’s attention, Lily follows Archie to Washington, D.C. It is her financial freedom that enables her to do so. She also arranges to have her picture on the front cover of *Life* magazine so she can harness her publicity to board Archie’s plane. When her connection to Ann’s murder is discovered, Lily relies on personal, financial clout, using her intimate relationship with Archie and Wolfe and her father’s influential ties with Inspector Cramer to keep her from being pestered by the police. Because these characters persist and are consistent, and because they become real for many individuals<sup>3</sup>, the conventionality and persistence of the values they imbibe are telling. Thus, although lower-class individuals

are not denigrated by the novel, the sanctity of the financial status of the key characters indicates the larger sanctity of unequal economic distribution.

The moral code accepted by Stout's characters justifies their economic status, their lifestyles, and their actions and ultimately favors dominant social trends. The suggestion to work within the limitations of the traditional economic framework enables financial success and personal liberties only insofar as possible in a system in which economic inequalities persist.

### **Affirming the Conventional Democratic Governmental Code**

Ultimately, Stout's political agenda peaks at his fervent support of American democracy. Detective fiction, with ties to the democratic behaviors and beliefs of both British and American politics, is a prime medium through which Stout proclaims the superiority of democracy. Stout himself explicates Howard Haycroft's assertion that detective fiction best supports democratic attitudes: "I think the detective story is by far the best upholder of the democratic doctrine in literature. . . . There couldn't have been detective stories until there were democracies, because the very foundation of the detective story is the thesis that if you're guilty you'll get it in the neck and if you're innocent you can't possibly be harmed" (qtd. in McAleer, *Rex Stout* 298). In his personal life and his work, Stout challenges those who threaten a properly operating American democracy. Stout claims that "there's only one damn thing in the world I have any faith in. That's the idea of American democracy, because it seems so obvious to me that that's

the only sensible way to run human affairs” (qtd. in McAleer, *Rex Stout* 466). Perhaps Stout’s sharpest comparison between the powerful integrity he saw in democracy and the corruption he saw in Nazism, Fascism and Communism occurs in *The Black Mountain*. Much of his support of democracy is apparent in comparisons of democracy to Communism. Indeed, Stout contends, “In Germany, for instance, there couldn’t be a detective story because the officials don’t know anything. The amateur ‘dick’ is the one” (qtd. in McAleer, *Rex Stout* 298). In Nazi Germany and other Communistic states, power is centralized among despotic officials in a way that excludes the possibility that exists as a fact in detective fiction: that it is a private citizen—the detective—who knows what officials don’t. For Stout this clearly pitted Nazism, Fascism, and Communism against democracy.

The contrast between corrupt Communists and proponents of democracy is clear. Stout praises the tenets of democracy and their ability to free men. In *The Black Mountain* Wolfe recites the Preamble and the Bill of Rights, focusing on the fourth article, which he believes legally and morally entitles him to seek the murderer of his friend. Wolfe states:

The right of the people to be secure in their personal houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no warrants shall issue but upon probably cause, supported by oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized. (162)

The relationship between these detective stories and dominant social attitudes is reciprocal. As detective fiction suggests a conventional route for the stories, so the stories reinforce democratic codes. While the Bill of Rights justifies Wolfe's actions, Wolfe's actions reinforce for the reader the superiority of the Bill of Rights, which symbolizes the accepted American code of conduct. Finally, justice does not and cannot prevail while Archie and Wolfe remain on Communist soil. In Yugoslavia Marko Vukcic's murderer would have been tortured to death, but he would not have been punished for the crime he committed in New York City in a manner deemed just and deserved by the dominant American culture. Therefore, Wolfe and Archie are constrained—by a desire to restore the American, democratic social order—to rescue this man from and return him to the proper *American* officials.

### **Evaluating the Prevalent Policing Apparatus**

**Criticizing the prevalent policing apparatus and promoting alternative criminal investigators.** At first glance Archie and Wolfe consistently seem to rebuke the same American officials to whom they hope to deliver Vukcic's killer. In many cases it seems that, as Archie admits he has thought “[n]ot more than a thousand times,” Wolfe has “sometimes been high-handed in dealing with the hired protectors of freedom in [his] adopted land—the officers of the law” (*Black* 153). For instance, in *The Doorbell Rang*, Wolfe keeps his suspicion about who the murderer of Morris Althaus is to himself. He is reluctant to share his suspicions about Miss Sarah Dacos with Cramer, although he feels

doubly obligated to do so—because the law dictates he cannot withhold evidence and because he feels personally indebted to Cramer, who has tried to help Archie and Wolfe foil the FBI. Instead, Wolfe first chooses to fulfill his obligation to his client, Mrs. Bruner.<sup>4</sup>

Frequently in the series Inspector Cramer and Sergeant Stebbins are agitated by the way in which Wolfe and Archie collect evidence. They see Wolfe's refusal to facilitate the easy capture of the criminal by the police when *he* has done the work as an obstruction of justice. As Paul points out, when a detective fiction writer chooses for his hero a private detective, as opposed to a police detective, he immediately confronts the codified authority of the police:

Even the selection of private eyes as the primary kind of detective employed in the hard-boiled school was itself significant. In the very nature of the trade they practiced, professional private detectives were skating on very thin ice as soon as their investigations uncovered a serious crime like murder. They were pledged to protect their clients (who might be the culprits), and yet they were also required to cooperate fully with the police to the point of calling them without delay and handing over all the evidence they had collected. Hence, almost inevitably they were in the ambivalent position of being required both to affirm the lawful authorities of the prevailing society and yet at the same time implying, through their own activities, the inadequacy of those same agencies. (144)

Hence, the police are easily aggravated by the progress Wolfe and Archie make. This tension is further exacerbated because Wolfe and Archie frequently criticize foolish or incompetent police officers for impeding their work. In the series even competent policemen—notably Cramer—often fail to interpret the evidence accurately, and Wolfe feels no qualms about reserving victory for himself; he is not inclined to hand them the solution on a platter, not, at least, until he fills his pocketbook and his ego. Furthermore, both Archie and Wolfe reject typical police methods of apprehending criminals. Wolfe often refuses to submit to the same investigative tactics the police use, not because the tactics are ineffective but because tactics thoroughly covered by the police need not—and cannot so exhaustively—be recovered by Wolfe and Archie. Often, if police as competent as Inspector Cramer fail to uncover the murderer, evidence cannot readily be found by the means available to the police. Wolfe can more efficiently discover a murderer by using intellect and suppositions to solve a case the police are trying to crack with manpower. Wolfe, as hero, succeeds and the police fail to restore social order on their own.

**Supporting the prevalent policing apparatus.** Yet key to the social order restored by detective fiction is the assurance that the policing apparatus is, in fact, effective. Although Stout's detective fiction—like all detective fiction featuring a private detective and not a police inspector—offers an alternative to the conventional method of criminal investigation, it often praises the official policing apparatus. Certainly, Stout's defense of the official policing apparatus is less obvious than his praise of capitalism and

democracy, largely because the tendency of a detective novel featuring a private eye hero (or pair of them, as the case may be) is to downplay the role the police play in solving crime by showing them to be bunglers, either innocently ineffective or maliciously corrupt. Nevertheless, Stout's detective fiction strongly reinforces the policing apparatus. As Stout contends when he points out that people seldom consider a Sherlock Holmes story an attack on Scotland Yard (McAleer, *Rex Stout* 458), detective fiction's emphasis on an investigator independent of the police is not necessarily a critique of the policing apparatus. Offering an alternative method for restoring social order does not necessarily discount widespread state-sanctioned and state-financed methods of criminal investigation and law enforcement.

Additionally, at times Archie and Wolfe's actions actively reinforce the policing apparatus. Wolfe never interferes with the code itself; that is, he never delays for the police what he doesn't do himself: exposing criminals. Wolfe is himself, after all, a legal, responsible, cerebral, and most effective alternative to the police. Indeed, in *The Black Mountain* Wolfe maintains that he has "never flouted their [the police's] rightful authority or tried to usurp their lawful powers" (153). This defense of the American legal code also reinforces the broader American social code.

Moreover, though occasionally Wolfe and Archie suggest either incompetence or corruption in the police, they also ultimately show respect for society's policing apparatus. When asked for his response to those critics who argue that by portraying the police unsympathetically Stout encourages disrespect for law enforcers, Stout responded, "I am much kinder to the police than most writers of detective stories. My two main



police characters, Cramer and Stebbins, are neither stupid nor brutal, and judging from letters I get from readers, they are likable” (qtd. in McAleer, *Rex Stout* 492). Wolfe and Archie share this sentiment in that they, too, recognize intelligence and compassion in Stebbins and, especially, Cramer. Their respect is particularly apparent in *The Doorbell Rang* when Wolfe and Archie team up with the police to catch the FBI doing something crooked. Past contentions are set aside first by Archie, who contends that Cramer is not so much of a bungler as to neglect other leads on Althaus’ murder if even one had been at all hot. Archie runs through the likely reasoning that led Cramer to pursue the FBI and abandon other possibilities, noting the logic of Cramer’s alleged thought process: Archie asks, “[I]f Althaus were dead when [the FBI] entered, why didn’t they report it? Anonymously, of course, after they left. They might have preferred not to, but it’s a fair question” (59). Archie’s assertion that this line of logic is fairly sound is supported by his similar assertion that Cramer is “a good cop” (59).

In *The Doorbell Rang* Cramer also seems to admit he respects Wolfe and Archie. Between Cramer and the duo is a mutual respect that is often underplayed as mere toleration, a respect all parties are at times hesitant to admit. Yet in *The Doorbell Rang* each realizes nothing is to be lost by cooperation, although everything is to be gained by it. When the FBI pressures the Commissioner to take Archie’s and Wolfe’s licenses, Cramer wants to help the duo by making “a report to the Commissioner that will make it tough” (50). He is willing to go a step further as well and personally convince the Commissioner to let Archie and Wolfe keep their licenses, if they can hang something on the FBI. Cramer knows Wolfe well—“I know you and Wolfe cut corners, I ought to, but

I also know what your limits are” (47)—and hence he presses Archie for the details of their involvement with the FBI. Cramer’s hope is either to warn Wolfe and Archie of danger or facilitate their endeavors.

Wolfe and Archie reciprocate this respect. Additionally, they feel obligated to obey and support the laws of the land and to repay Cramer for the personal favor he has paid them by providing them with information about the FBI, by defending their licenses and by thoughtfully accommodating Archie’s physical needs when Cramer anonymously calls him to a secret rendezvous: “I have no objection to playing games with cops, sometimes you have to, but this was different. I owed Cramer something personally” (130-31). Archie breaks and enters “according to the statutes of the State of New York” (he has keys from Mrs. Althaus) to find “something that would help, no matter what was going to happen Thursday night, to square it with Cramer for that carton of milk” (133). Archie is torn between his conflicting desires to help Cramer immediately and in the end to prove his loyalty to the client, Wolfe, and Cramer, who will ultimately be most pleased by Wolfe successfully putting the FBI in their place. Archie wants to help Cramer by giving him the murder weapon he found in a hatbox in Sarah Dacos’ apartment, but he can’t without spoiling their case because the FBI will know they are off the hook and won’t take the bait that will satisfy the client, Wolfe, and Cramer. Wolfe wants to help Cramer—he has an “obligation” (167). Indeed, Archie’s recognition of the legal peril he places himself in when he challenges the distinctions between withholding evidence and withholding conjectures is the first step in recognizing the legitimacy of the policing apparatus. For instance, he realizes he will be up against it if Sarah runs: “If she’s gone

and I tell Cramer about the gun I'll be up a tree. If I don't tell him I'll lie awake at nights" (137). The respect and obligation Archie and Wolfe feel for Cramer demonstrate their support of proper legal means of criminal apprehension. While they primarily affirm the roles of private detectives, they also assert the prevalence of the policing apparatus.

The local and state police are described as the best legitimate public mode of punishing criminals—much better than Communists or the FBI—in *The Black Mountain*, for example. In this novel Archie and Wolfe hunt their captive in order to turn him over to the rightful *American* police. Again the comparison between the corrupt Communist-Fascist code and the American code subtly reclaims the authority of the latter. Wolfe claims that “being temporarily in the domain of dictatorial barbarians gives me no warrant to embrace their doctrines and their methods. Marko was murdered in New York. His murderer is accountable to the People of the State of New York, not to me. Our part is to get him there” (153). The policing apparatus is commended as Wolfe and Archie strive to facilitate the legal capture of the criminal by the official policing apparatus. In *The Doorbell Rang* Wolfe's support of the official police apparatus is again amplified by its favorable contrast to the FBI. For instance, Wolfe corroborates Cramer's authority; he tells leading FBI agent Richard Wragg, “Mr. Cramer has good reason to suppose that you have on your person an essential item of evidence in a homicide which occurred in his jurisdiction. Under the statutes of the State of New York he may legally search you, here and now, and get it” (183). Wolfe also agrees with Cramer that New York isn't the FBI's town but falls under the jurisdiction of the New York Police

Department. He is sympathetic when Cramer complains, “They’ve had us gritting our teeth for years. Now, by God, they think they can break and enter people’s houses and commit homicide in *my* territory, and they laugh at me!” (53). So Wolfe persuades Wragg to give Cramer the bullet that killed Althaus because the bullet belongs to Cramer. Thus the policing apparatus is shown to be a valuable institution for the restoration of social order.

### **Culpability**

The Nero Wolfe series also reinstates conventional beliefs about crime and punishment because every murderer is responsible for his or her actions (McAleer, *Rex Stout* 210). Culpability, as is implied by the demonstrated sanity of each of the murderers in the series, is necessary to justify the type of punishment (usually capital punishment) detective fiction asks readers to accept. According to the M'Naughten rule, the first legal description of sanity and legal culpability, individuals who are—even if only temporarily or in certain instances—incapable of determining right from wrong cannot be held responsible for crimes they do not recognize as such when they are committing them. The M'Naughten rule was during Stout’s lifetime a hotly contested criterion for determining criminal culpability (Smith 867, Ploscowe 314, Harrison 9). By assuming the relative sanity of each of his criminals, Stout bypasses the cultural controversy surrounding determining criminal culpability and restores the conventional view that criminals are responsible for their crimes. In fact, as Smith points out, at one time

insanity itself was a basis for punishment as extreme as capital punishment (865). The conventionality of Stout's position in this case increases the overall conventionality of the political messages presented in his Nero Wolfe series.

Furthermore, Stout's focus on sane criminals allows him to explore the type of human behavior in which he was most interested. Anderson claims, "A crime novel that emphasizes individual psychology cannot talk about social order and disorder as well as it can about private reason and passion" (21). Karl Menninger also believes Stout's focus on people rather than psychiatry is one of his strongest points:

One thing I like about Nero Wolfe is that he never dives into the realm of psychiatry; all of his murderers seem to be quite 'normal people' who are over-tempted by the circumstances of everyday life. Somebody steps on their toes, or threatens to get ahead of them and impulsively they act. He never pretends to believe that murderers are mostly sick. (qtd. in McAleer, *Rex Stout* 210)

As McAleer points out, Stout did occasionally "mold a character's behavior around a disturbed psyche," as he did with Paul Chapin in the 1935 *The League of Frightened Men* (*Rex Stout* 210). However, Chapin is absolved of guilt, and the true murderer—a psychologically "normal" person overtempted by the circumstances of everyday life—is exposed. The insistence that criminals are sane and culpable reaffirms the belief that criminals deserve their penalty.

## **Penal Code and Retribution**

Likewise, the conventional attitudes that justify punishment and retribution are elements central to detective fiction. The resolution of crime at the end of many detective novels is inherently tied up with the punishment of the criminal and the restoration of the social order that has been breached. However, the resolution of crime is complicated by various penal codes that contend for authority in the same ideological space. Bruce Beiderwell notes that Stout's fiction aptly describes the complex relationship between the penal code and literature: "Stout's detective novels clarify the workings of the drama [of capital punishment] and in so doing uncover the principles upon which it operates as well as the desire it attempts to satisfy" (21). Beiderwell suggests that the logic governing this resolution is particularly complicated, and that "Stout's detective novels reveal [this logic] with unusual fullness" (15-16). He believes Stout's success lies in his ability to merge two primary but conflicting penal codes. The first focuses on the justifiability of retribution. In much detective fiction criminals are dealt with according to the old eye-for-an-eye code; they receive their just desserts. The second code maintains that penalties ought to be reformative, correctional, and deterring, no matter what is deserved or merited by the crime. Beiderwell notes that these two penal trends are incompatible and offers a third, synthetic resolution which he claims generally describes Stout's fiction: the suicide of the murderer (14). Yet because many of the Nero Wolfe novels do not end in the murderer's suicide, Beiderwell's conclusions fail to account for the penal codes prevalent through the whole of the series. The type of punishment confirmed by the

series is neither suicidal nor reformative; it is based on the highly conventional ideals of retribution, deserved penalty, and justice in which the death of the murderer avenges his wrongful act.

This is true of much detective fiction. Criminal culpability and the rightness of punishment are central to detective fiction's ability to justify detection. One way punishment is justified in Stout's fiction is that the retribution is no harsher than the crime. Marshall McLuhan claims detective fiction is particularly concerned with the reestablishment of social order through criminal retribution: "In the literature of crime detection the concentration of specialized thrill is crudely focused on the hunt and the kill" (34). Detective fiction's popularity stems from the middle-class's desire to see socially expected punishments for the unexpected and unwarranted crimes presented in the narrative.

### **REFLECTING AND CHALLENGING TRADITIONAL VALUES**

Detective fiction mirrors social traditions and also examines the morality of such traditions. Alvin Kernan suggests that the link between literature and social attitudes is not to be dismissed. He states, "Marxist criticism need not be accepted at full face value to recognize the correctness of its underlying argument that [. . .] there is and always has been a close working connection between literature and its parent society" (25).

Furthermore, the complexity of the relationship between detective fiction and its portrayal and examination of conventional practices and patterns is not to be dismissed. Marxist scholar Raymond Williams, who argues for an understanding of ideology as a complex, changing system, indicates that “most writing [. . .] is a form of contribution to the effective dominant culture” (45). However, he also concedes that some literature reflects residual or emergent meanings and values and that occasionally oppositional practices—those expressed by “someone who finds a different way to live and wants to change the society in its light”—can be potentially revolutionary (Williams 41-42, 45). In many ways Stout’s work suggests potentially revolutionary residual or emergent meanings and values; his anti-FBI stance indicates a staunch return to democratic tenets that in its extremity resembles an older, residual value system, for instance. Yet such revolution is difficult to effect, particularly in a genre which, according to Knight’s supposition, resists reforming society in favor of restoring stasis.

The difficulty in reforming society is exacerbated by the complexity of sustaining both confrontational stances and trends that denounce such movements and events as the accumulation of national power by the FBI and the scare tactics employed in McCarthyism and other traditional stances and beliefs that confirm dominant trends of democracy, the economy, criminal culpability, and penalty. Stout at times, as Nickerson and Williams suggest is possible, oscillates between conservatism and radicalism. Indeed, Anderson maintains that Stout’s fiction reinforces social hierarchies inherent in community and civilization (22). In *Crime Fiction, 1800-2000: Detections, Death, Diversity*, Stephen Knight asserts detective fiction is concerned with restoration more



than reformation. He suggests that any one detective novel “recreate[s] order very much like the stasis that was disturbed at the start of the story” (47). Knight supports his claim with a comparison of detective fiction to other fiction that makes social commentary. For instance, he claims that the “stasis underlying the sensational form—and indeed the patterns of crime fiction as a whole” distinguishes detective fiction from the fiction of Charles Dickens, “who seems to have circled around crime fiction a great deal and for all of his career, [but] never wrote a text that could fairly be allotted to the genre: he always sought movement, reform, not stasis restored” (47). Stout’s detective fiction is no exception, in this sense, to the general trend of restoring stasis.

Many of his most controversial and radical stances were softened by the intellectual and moral conservatism at the heart of detective fiction. Detective fiction allows for social criticism and restores social order. For instance, Williams contends, “The arts of writing [. . .] contribute to the effective dominant culture and are a central articulation of it” (45); he also admits that not all of the residual meanings and values embodied by the arts of writing are incorporated by the dominant culture. This complex process of sometimes defending, sometimes interrogating elements of the dominant beliefs, and reflecting sometimes dominant, sometimes emergent beliefs is evident in Stout’s work. Some of his stances, such as his antiracist position regarding American ethnic minorities, were eventually incorporated by most segments of American society while others, such as his adamant German-hating, were not. Thus detective fiction became for Stout a genre through which he could express his desires for social change and even propose methods of social change, as he does with his awareness campaigns for

the evils of Fascism, Communism, and the FBI. The restoration of the social order enabled Stout's fiction to find a muted political expression and hence retain its popularity.

Thus two trends in Stout's fiction are worth exploring. The first is the popularity of his stances or, rather, the ability of the prevalent trends in social thought to incorporate these often controversial stances. The second is his oscillation between defending and criticizing prevalent trends (such as his criticism of racism, isolationism, Fascism, Communism, McCarthyism, and the FBI and his defense of the Vietnam War, democracy, capitalism, the penal code, and rational thinking). Of the first it may suffice to say that those stances not incorporated were rejected and resulted in little harm to the dominant social trends and attitudes. Of the second it is essential to understand how Stout was able to oscillate between defense and criticism of social trends while maintaining his popular readership. His focus on storytelling remained a polestar for Stout, enabling him to achieve in his fiction a balance between the existing social order and the social reforms for which he hoped. As McAleer notes,

Rex's decision to work within the existing traditions of the detective story parallels the resolutions he had taken, after tempestuous encounters in the twenties with the radical left, to bring about meaningful reforms in society while working within the framework of the existing social order. The detective story was, for him, an advanced base from which he could promote realizable reforms. As he worked to save the genre, he was engaged in the larger labor of saving the existing social order which that genre showed forth, by urging on it, even as he upheld it, those reforms it

had to undertake if it was to be healed of corruption and made fit for salvation. (*Rex Stout 7*)

Recognizing what his ultimate political aims were is helpful here. Stout did not wish to overthrow the dominant culture with all of its values. He did hope to encourage social reform. His detective fiction allowed him to call for reform (not revolution) through existing social and cultural channels.

## Chapter Three:

### Muting the Message: Storytelling, Dialog, and Character Interplay

Speaking of detective fiction, Raymond Chandler claims that “one of the qualities of this kind of writing is that the thing that makes people read it never goes out of style” (3-4). One reason detective fiction never goes out of style is that certain elements of detective fiction confirm order that is challenged by modern and postmodern crises. And though postmodern detective fiction such as Paul Auster’s *City of Glass* speaks to postmodern crises, it does little to alleviate them. Traditional detective fiction, on the other hand, does offer solutions to the social crises of the last two and a half centuries. It is linear and conventional, and its problems are marketed as rational, solvable problems of “logic and deduction” (Chandler 6). In the case of his fiction, Stout both confronts head-on social and political dilemmas and confirms conservative attitudes and values.

#### **THE CONVENTIONAL, LINEAR FORM OF DETECTIVE FICTION**

Detective fiction allows for social reform more readily than it suggests social revolution. This is because detective fiction proceeds through a story in a way that suggests a real-life validity of cause and effect, rationality, and logical, linear progression from one event to the next. In “The Simple Art of Murder” Chandler claims that A. A.

Milne's *The Red House Mystery* fails as a detective novel because under close scrutiny it lacks accuracy and hence is about nothing. He states, "If the problem [of logic and deduction] does not contain the elements of truth and plausibility, it is no problem; if the logic is an illusion, there is nothing to deduce" (7-8). Chandler's argument is meant to demonstrate the failure of Milne's novel to be a detective novel, but his assertion that the detective novel cannot exist without affirming logic and deduction suggests that detective fiction is essentially about logic, order, and rationality. Detective fiction affirms ideals of order, in both its form and its content. The form of detective fiction is as important as the content in reinforcing or shaping political beliefs. The medium of detective fiction reflects linear progression and order, as do its specific patterns, such as the way the detective pieces together the clues of a mystery.

From the 1950s to the 1970s, McLuhan argued that the medium is the message, asserting that an analysis of the form or medium of a text also reveals modes of persuasion inherent to the text's message. The most fundamental of the messages presented by the form of detective fiction is a linear, sequential pattern of thinking and constructing meaning. The emphasis on order is persuasive in that it provides readers with the neat illusions that knowledge is linear and that life is rational rather than chaotic and hopeless. Margery Allingham contends that detective fiction began as "a sign of a popular instinct for order and form in a period of sudden and chaotic change" (qtd. in Paul 9). McLuhan, too, suggests that the period preceding the rise of detective fiction was chaotic. The news reports in the early 1800s reflected rising political, religious, racial, and gender tensions. The changing form of newspapers—which began to portray

developments in women's suffrage, slavery, and the Civil War with much less categorization or contextualization than earlier newspapers—and the invention of the telegraph incited sudden informational chaos. In other words, the newspaper presented multiple news bits simultaneously and in a format independent of the sort of linear progression typical of traditional printed materials; readers could scan the newspaper, stopping to read bits and pieces here and there and at any order or pace they desired. The new media challenged comfortable, linear, rational progression. McLuhan proposes that the detective story arose in response to this chaos (McLuhan 291). It alleviates the informational chaos and social crisis incurred by the newspaper by offering a detective who sorts through chaotic data of a murder mystery and presents it in a linear sequence.

Linearity—or the logical and sequential progression from one fact or idea to another so as to suggest a causal or rational relationship—is especially important for a literate society used to collecting information sequentially, one word at a time. At the most basic level, detective fiction is printed always from the left to the right and down the page. Print itself is linear, leading the eye from one symbol or word to the next. Letters and words are not read simultaneously, as are the shapes, colors, and brush strokes in paintings, but instead progress in a predictable, orderly fashion. Of course, all modern printed books in codex form are, with rare exception, printed in this manner. However, detective fiction in particular speaks to a cultural need for order, linearity, and logic because it arose at a time in which the news media was disrupting the sense of society's well-being. McLuhan claims the modern newspaper “is not intended to provide rational schemes or patterns for digesting the news” but is instead “written to release feelings and

keep us in a state of perpetual emotion” (291). It presents all headlines in a single spread so all are visible and available simultaneously; it deems the most emotionally charged news-bits the most newsworthy.

Detective fiction, on the other hand, operates under the semblance of rationality; it organizes data to create a sense of order amidst the chaos the newspaper has engendered. Paul points out that order always prevails in detective stories:

However complicated and inane the circumstances seem to be, there *is* order and rationality, if only we can find the clue that will unlock the mystery: given the right thread, the hopelessly tangled skein can be unraveled. [. . .] At the center of this story and every other detective story, there is the unspoken assumption that, given the facts, meaning exists which can be understood by our reason. (17)

At its essence detective fiction affirms rationality. The detective collects information, weeds out the misleading and irrelevant, and makes sense of a mass of often contradictory information for the reader. The success of this deductive process reaffirms a world where rationality and order persist. Detective fiction asserts that individuals can make sense of an assortment of facts and data—that reasonable explanations can account for the contingencies of a mystery.

Furthermore, detective fiction emphasizes reason because it so blatantly tries to contrive rationality. In other words, detective fiction does not begin out of order but out of the chaos of a crime. The Nero Wolfe stories, for instance, do not focus on the events as they happen to the victim or the murderer, but as they happen to Archie and Wolfe.

Detective fiction is unique in telling the story of a murderer without letting the story unfold in the chronology of the crime committed. Instead, the story progresses through the chronology the detective experiences. This chronology is at first chaotic, because the detective uncovers clues in a random order, one that does not match the linear progression of the murderous events. But the crux of the story is really where the detective creates a complete, logical picture of the crime and explains how the pieces fit together to his audience, thus recreating order. Detective fiction ultimately highlights the process of creating order.

Such an emphasis is essential in societies confronting opposing values. Anderson suggests that “Crime fiction dramatizes the clash between reason and emotion, but it also emphasizes the clash between order and disorder, between community and anarchy” (21). Detective fiction spoke to American society of the early 1800s as well as of the mid-1900s, the latter a time plagued with various social crises from racism and the Civil Rights Movement to World War II and the epidemic fear of Communism. Stout perceived misrepresentations of data leading up to WWII and used various media to debunk what he felt were false claims and arguments. For instance, his radio chats were aimed at exposing deceptive Nazi rhetoric. Although Stout actively used nonfictional essays and radio chats to expose false data, no genre itself accentuated clear, reasonable interpretations better than detective fiction. Detective fiction also provided him the opportunity to explore his beliefs through the apparently logical and rational voice of Wolfe. Thus Wolfe, with supreme calm and careful reasoning, exposes fallacies in the rhetoric of Communists in *The Black Mountain*. Wolfe’s lucidity *overtly* lays bare the



fallacious Communist rhetoric while *subtly* affirming the stability of logical reasoning. Indeed, the constant emphasis of rationality by logical patterns within detective fiction speaks as loudly as any explicit message.

### **A LITERARY TRADITIONALIST’S EMPHASIS ON STORYTELLING**

Despite his strong political beliefs, Stout believed literature was not the forum for overt political work. Instead, he focused on storytelling. Stout seems to adhere to his own admonition: “Let an artist keep to his business and forget ideas” (qtd. in McAleer, *Rex Stout* 182). Certainly, Stout was aware of Chandler’s 1934 essay “The Simple Art of Murder” in which Chandler contends that the detective story can ultimately only claim to be about storytelling—“an effect of movement, intrigue, cross-purposes, and the gradual elucidation of character” (Chandler 19). A literary traditionalist, Stout muted his political messages by ascribing to them only secondary roles in his detective fiction. Stout’s emphasis on storytelling is significant to his success: “Through his incisive play of mind and bright, clean prose, he held and satisfied readers around the world—and continues to do so today” (Anderson 113). Several aspects of the Nero Wolfe novels reveal Stout’s talent and indicate the readability that made the series a success. First, Archie naturally fits the role of the master detective’s confidential assistant as well as the series narrator, which eliminates the problems inherent in using an omniscient narrator who must resort

to hiding clues from the reader. Thus details significant to the plot are given with ease at a pace that does not give away the ending too soon and also in a way that feels honest, straightforward, and natural. Second, Stout describes and redescribes characters and setting with variety. Certain habits, behaviors, personality quirks, routines, moods, and relationships are described in nearly every novel; yet the descriptions remain fresh, fitting, and delightful. Third, characters interact and communicate realistically, believably, and humorously. The Nero Wolfe series is the finest of its class because of Stout's ability to create mysteries in which clues are feasibly given and withheld from readers through the natural interactions of believable characters.

### **Archie: The Essential First-Person Narrator**

First-person narration poses unique difficulties in detective fiction, where divulging logical connections between clues before the final moments of the story can subdue the suspense that has been building throughout the course of the novel. Providing an assistant to the master detective solves this dilemma; by letting the detective explain the clues to a less cerebral accomplice who fails to note special connections or by telling the story from the underling's perspective or in the underling's voice, the author can save case-cracking information for the ending without elaborate tricks or double-handedness. In a 1969 interview with John McAleer, Stout pointed out that Poe first saw the biggest advantage of using a first-person narrator who is not the detective: "Since in a detective story the reader must not be inside the detective's mind, third-person omniscience is

impossible, and the best way to avoid it is to have someone else tell it” (*Rex Stout* 491). Thus Stout points to the long tradition of creating a first-person narrator who is the detective’s assistant rather than the detective.

Many detective fiction writers supplied such assistants to their cerebral superstars. Yet unlike other detective duos, such as the tagalong journalist Nigel Bathgate, created and eventually abandoned by Stout’s contemporary Ngaio Marsh, or Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s affable but clueless Dr. Watson, Archie is essential to the process of detection. Readers do not wonder why he is allowed to tag along behind the genius, because his legwork is essential to the detection and his role as Wolfe’s privileged assistant is perfectly justified. Even in this Stout does not push Archie’s privileged position too far. Archie knows just the right amount of information to tell a good detective story. He always has enough inside information to make his story most exciting, but he rarely knows enough to give too much away. For sometimes Archie, too, is left in the dark by Wolfe’s caprice, convenience, or necessity. Stout’s handling of Archie’s sometimes in-the-know, sometimes in-the-dark position adeptly permits Stout to reserve the clues that crack the cases without deceptively shielding readers from available clues. Stout always provides a plausible explanation for why Wolfe conveniently refuses to tell Archie his tactics, and though readers may like this little, Archie likes it less.

The form of Archie’s reporting also enables Stout to reserve the case-breaking clues for the end: each story is presented as a case file in which Archie presents the information as he got it. Stout presents the stories as reports written by Archie, and hence Archie’s personality becomes central to the telling and reception of the story. As the

series's narrator, Archie's voice moves the reader through each story. Archie's moods, values, and attitudes shape the type of clues that are divulged and also shape the readers reception of those clues. Furthermore, Archie's status as assistant rather than cerebral genius shapes and limits the connections drawn between various clues so that Wolfe can reserve his finale. Stout relies on Archie's reticence to provide for readers the extra information he does not have until Wolfe reveals the murderer: Archie is unwilling to give readers the chance to show him up. Readers get what Archie got when he got it. He doesn't provide additional clues or point out connections he couldn't make as the case unfolded. And although Archie admits that he's not above withholding information, he assures readers he would tell them if he were withholding information. His straightforwardness itself seems honest and assuring. Thus readers don't feel that Stout is playing tricks on them by providing a bumbling sidekick-narrator who conveniently misses major clues to set up the punch line. As Wolfe's assistant, Archie is witty, intelligent, capable and natural; as narrator he is reliable.

### **Retelling Details**

Equally natural is Stout's ability to incorporate in every novel of the series compelling depictions of the essential ingredients, such as the familiar brownstone, the orchids, the office, and the roles and personality quirks of Wolfe, Archie, Fritz, and Cramer. Stout introduces them with flair. Stout's exemplary storytelling draws newcomers to the series and makes rereading a joy because descriptions of these

important details feel fresh and important to the story at hand. These details could become repetitive, yet with Stout they never do. In a series as long as the Nero Wolfe one, variety is essential in maintaining a reader's interest from one novel to the next.

Again and again, Stout describes essential character traits of Wolfe and Archie in a way appealing to both first-time readers and returning fans. In *The Doorbell Rang*, for instance, as Archie realizes that Wolfe is going too far in enjoying the possibility of a big fat check, the reader notes Wolfe's aversion to working as well as Archie's ability to read Wolfe: "Knowing him, I knew what he was considering. Not the job; as he said, it was preposterous; he was looking at the beautiful fact that with a hundred grand in the till on January fifth he would need, and would accept, no jobs at all for the rest of the winter, and the spring, and even into the summer" (9). The next lines reveal Wolfe's hobbies: "He could read a hundred books and propagate a thousand orchids. Paradise" (9). Archie concludes, "A corner of his mouth twisted up; for him that was a broad grin. He was wallowing. That was okay for half a minute, a man has a right to dream, but when it got to a full minute I coughed, loud" (9). This description communicates Wolfe's facial expressions and habits, Archie's attempt to check Wolfe, and Archie's disapproval of Wolfe's departure from his typical hesitance to take a new case, especially when this case involves the formidable FBI. The beauty of this description lies in its concision, its uniqueness, and its humor. Archie's assumed seriousness is humorous, and both his seriousness and the humor that undercuts it are highlighted by the brevity of sentences such as "He was wallowing" (9). Readers do not take Archie any more seriously than he takes himself, or anyone else for that matter. Returning readers find comfort in the

familiar played-up tensions and friendly bantering between Archie and Wolfe. And readers, recognizing the possibility that Wolfe is, in fact, considering accepting this preposterous case, are tantalized by the sense of impending trouble. Hence this description of behaviors typical to the series becomes important to the story. Furthermore, it is clever and humorous, and invites readers to enjoy the telling.

By integrating these details seamlessly into the stories, revealing them at moments appropriate to the plot, and introducing them in ways consistent with moods of the characters and tones of the story at various moments, Stout utilizes the retelling of details to further convey meanings specific to various stories. For instance, in *The Black Mountain* it is Wolfe's adopted daughter Carla Britton who announces—belligerently, because she is frustrated with Wolfe's uninvolved involvement with Yugoslavian politics—that Wolfe plays with orchids, eats Fritz's fine cuisine, and is fat, rich, and reliant upon Archie. She announces, "Here you are, rich and fat and happy with your fine home and fine food and your glass rooms on the roof with ten thousand orchids for you to smirk at, and this Archie Goodwin for a slave to do all the work and take all the danger!" (24). Carla's angry description both sets the familiar scene and describes the unique setting for this story. Thus even familiar details shed insight into the particular unfolding of each story. Furthermore, Stout frequently upsets the dependable routines at the brownstone to highlight crises as well as set forth these routines for beginning Nero Wolfe readers. Archie's bewilderment at the untidy states of the office and kitchen in the brownstone in "Not Quite Dead Enough" mirrors the shock readers feel upon finding these familiar routines upturned. Stacks of neglected mail sit on Wolfe's undusted desk, and the kitchen

is nearly bare, with only oranges, prunes, lettuce, tomatoes, and applesauce (9). The description of the brownstone in unusual disarray affirms Archie's suspicions, so that readers also suspect that Wolfe or Fritz or both are hurt. In this way Stout uses the retelling of standard details to interest his readers and propel his stories forward. Just as Archie looks forward to returning to the brownstone with its familiar inhabitants and its familiar routines, so do many readers open the pages of a familiar Nero Wolfe novel, eagerly rereading depictions of familiar characters, settings, behaviors, and interactions.

### **Consistency and Comedy in Dialog**

Another reason rereading the Nero Wolfe novels appeals to readers is that the dialog is smooth and natural. Each character says what seems appropriate for him or her. At times characters say things that are catty, sarcastic, angry, poetic, brilliant, or pompous. None of this feels contrived with Stout's characters, and even eloquent comments, such as Fritz's Montaigne-like statement, "Starving the live will not profit the dead," as he serves Wolfe his first meal since hearing of Marko Vukcic's death, are fitting (*Black* 26). In this instance Fritz explains that he knew he would be needed and wanted to have "an appropriate remark" ready for Wolfe (*Black* 26), which fits with Archie's frequent observation that Fritz fusses over and tries to please Wolfe. Finding an unusual or ill-fitting comment in the series is especially difficult, for the dialog is smooth and realistic. The dialog is not only consistent with the characters, but is consistent with the plot of each story.

Carla's criticism of Wolfe's lifestyle in *The Black Mountain* is likewise an example of believable and fitting dialog. Ever disdainful of his lifestyle and dissatisfied with his aloofness from Yugoslavian politics, she attacks Wolfe and then becomes infuriated at his nonverbal response: "What do you care if the people of the land you came from are groaning under the heel of the oppressor, with the light of their liberty smothered and the fruits of their labor snatched from them and their children at the point of the sword? *Stop making faces!*" (24). Wolfe's reply is likewise appropriate to his character, from his pedantic concern over her grammar and diction to his failure to be loving and warm towards his daughter. "'Apparently,' he said dryly, 'I must give you a lecture. I grimaced neither at your impudence nor at your sentiment, but at your diction and style'" (24). Though understandably infuriating to Carla, this comment momentarily deflates the tension of the moment. The comment is absurdly serious and perfectly appropriate to Wolfe's character. Yet its placement is disruptive and comical, dismissing the heavy concerns at hand in order to emphasize Wolfe's ever dogmatic stress on diction. Thus this minor digression becomes the comic relief to mute the political message that follows. Wolfe continues: "I condemn clichés, especially those that have been corrupted by fascists and communists. Such phrases as 'great and noble cause' and 'fruits of their labor' have been given an ineradicable stink by Hitler and Stalin and all their vermin brood" (24). This lesson on enemy rhetoric is meant to remind readers of threats abroad and at home, to encourage them to hunt out and convict despots everywhere. Yet the lesson seems to come from the cool and cerebral Wolfe, not Stout, and is simultaneously emphasized by Carla's angry vehemence towards it and softened by



the realization that her anger is in part justified. The dialog seems smooth and natural, not forced by an author seeking to infuse his novel with statements that confirm his own political agenda.

Additionally, Wolfe immediately turns the conversation to food. This move reminds the reader that Wolfe is, as always, idiosyncratic. The sudden return to the familiar and comfortable from the highly charged and political is laced with humor; the juxtaposition of the mundane with the suspenseful, the earthy with the cerebral creates comic relief. Amid the tension of Carla's adamant insistence that neither she nor Vukcic was so idiotic as to rely on distant, uncontrollable, and possibly traitorous Yugoslavian contacts, Wolfe abruptly rises. "You may not be an idiot," he tells Carla, "but I am" (25). Wolfe insists he was letting a matter that is becoming increasingly important to Carla "become a pointless brawl," and instead he leads the way to the kitchen where he and Archie dine; Carla refuses (26). The situation is certainly tense, but it is also funny. Archie suspects that Carla refuses the meal simply to irk Wolfe: "I admit it could have been that she was too upset to eat, but I suspected her. She knew damn well that it irritated Wolfe to see good food turned down" (26). The mutual antagonism of Carla and Wolfe is laughable; both are too stubborn and insistent on having things their own way for their differences to seem truly imperative.

The juxtaposition of the serious and the absurd also creates comedy in *The Doorbell Rang*. Here the potential corruption of the FBI is undercut by the absurd aberration of typical behaviors at the brownstone. Initially, the scene is suspenseful: the FBI has bugged the house, and mere chatter becomes action under the threat of being

spied on. But the situation quickly becomes comical. Wolfe and Archie retreat to Fritz's den in the basement to discuss mostly innocuous contingencies of the death they are inspecting—a death in which the FBI is either more or less involved. The blasting television drowns out the sound of their voices in case the basement, too, has been bugged. Archie's own point of view, the vantage point from which all is described, paints this scene, like so many in the series, in humor. Thus the conversation is sprinkled with humor. Wolfe has been considering a plan for several minutes as he leans back “with his eyes shut, and his lips [. . .] pushing out and then in” (90). Archie refers to his plan as “what your lips squeezed out” (91). Yet soon the mood again intensifies, with Wolfe asking Fritz to turn the television “a little louder” (91). This gesture signals care against the harm the FBI could potentially inflict on Wolfe and Archie, yet it also is itself ridiculous. Archie and Wolfe are hiding in their basement like naughty children, resorting to juvenile tactics of maintaining privacy. That Fritz, amid all their efforts, has fallen asleep highlights the situation's ludicrousness. The scene ends comically with Archie first noting that Fritz is “probably snoring” and shortly assembling for himself a makeshift bed on the couch where he can keep guard over the house (92). In fact, much of the humor of the series comes through Archie, either in his frank but slightly biased narration or through what he says to other characters. In this case Archie's humorous commentary on the events at hand marks a distinction between Wolfe's intensity and the absurdity of the situation. Sometimes, the situations are unavoidably comical, and Wolfe has his funny moments, but Archie largely guides the humorous tone of the stories. For instance, this scene is set up by Archie's conversation with fellow orchid-lover Lewis

Hewitt, who demands, “But good heavens, if you know your phone is tapped—isn’t that illegal?” (92). Archie replies in his typical sarcastic manner: “Sure, that’s why it’s fun” (92). From beginning to end, this scene features infantile maneuvers that soften the suspense and mock the very real threat the FBI poses to Wolfe and Archie. This mockery exemplifies the “lightness of tone which counterpoints [detective fiction’s] serious undertone of moral criticism” (Anderson 118).

### **CHARACTER INTERPLAY: ARCHIE AND WOLFE’S BANTER**

Indeed, central to the smooth and easy dialog and the light humor which permeate the novel is the friendly banter that occurs between Archie and Wolfe. This banter serves three vital purposes: developing interest in relationships between key characters, propelling the story forward by pushing Wolfe into the action, and softening potentially harsh social commentary.

First, the interest in the Archie-Wolfe relationship developed by the byplay between the two provides a second motivation for reading the mysteries. Many mystery stories are impelled simply by plot, suspense, and a desire to see justice restored. The Nero Wolfe mysteries, however, are not only propelled by the satisfaction of seeing the heroes escape death and uncover the solution to the puzzle. Additionally, readers are equally interested in seeing the heroes interact. Anderson asserts that Stout brings

maturity and depth to detective fiction by broadening its scope and pretensions: “In the Nero Wolfe novels Stout created a world of characters, places, and ideas so fully imagined that it can accommodate far more than just the crime plot” (112). Characters, relationships, and interactions are especially well-developed in Stout’s fiction because he creates two distinct and strong-willed people who frequently rub against each other. This friction produces tensions that, suggests Anderson, “contribute to the richness of texture that Rex Stout contributed to the mystery novel” (114). “Not Quite Dead Enough” provides one of the richest examples of heightened reader interest in Archie’s ability to push Wolfe into taking a case, because, after bragging that he is the only man who can handle Wolfe, Archie at first fails to do so. Archie’s quick oscillation from affection to animosity for Wolfe is humorous, understandable, and less than heroic. When Wolfe asks Archie how he slept, Archie warms up to a question that is typical of the good old days when Wolfe was fat and lazy and not in training to become a soldier. But after one look at Wolfe, he turns hard and cold. Hoping to make Wolfe “mad enough to forget himself and enter the office,” Archie admits he has come home to coerce Wolfe into investigating a new case on behalf of the U.S. Army and cruelly reminds Wolfe of the arena in which he can best help: “You are wrong if you think your sudden appearance in the front lines will make the Germans laugh themselves to death. They have no sense of humor” (34). But Archie’s attempt fails, and another aberration from the normal follows when Wolfe’s sure logic slips as he assumes Archie is on furlough. Wolfe responds with his typical “Pfui,” a gesture that assures readers that although the situation is unique, these are their familiar, beloved characters (34). Eager to find a restoration of the

convivial and less exasperating relationship, readers are drawn to the story because of the wheedling that threatens to disrupt amicability between Wolfe and Archie.

Stout's attention to intercharacter relationships encourages readers to invest in the stories and care what happens next not only because of compelling plots but because they want to see familiar relationships and interactions. It becomes satisfying and exciting to watch Archie goad Wolfe into taking the next case, to wonder how Wolfe will pull off his next big shenanigan without pushing Cramer over the edge, to enjoy Archie and Wolfe likewise placating Cramer after wheedling him with their refusals to spill the beans, and to see how the imperturbable Wolfe will pressure the murderer into revealing himself or herself by exposing facts fit together by undeniable logic. Readers are interested in the series because of these relationships, not simply by the appeal of the plot. The enjoyment of familiar relationships, the humor of Stout's text, the natural flow of dialog, and the moral consistency of the stories invite readers to read and reread the novels. The combined interest in plot and intercharacter relationships, or what Anderson calls "the business of fighting crime [. . .] seen through the complex domestic staging of the Wolfe-Archie relationship," is what "gives the novels a broader interest and a wider range" (114). This is what makes the stories re-readable.

Second, this banter propels the action of the stories forward. Without Archie's careful manipulation and goading, Wolfe would rarely take a case. Anderson suggests that the differences between Archie and Wolfe "produce comedy, as they do when Archie deflates Wolfe's rhetoric or chastises his inactivity" (104). Indeed, the banter is perhaps funniest when it fulfills this role of pushing the inactive Wolfe into activity. For instance,

in “Not Quite Dead Enough” Wolfe refuses to act when action would—according to Archie—be most prudent. Archie’s attempt to shake Wolfe back into action is impetuous: he plants his fingerprints and hairs at the scene of Ann Amory’s death to get himself arrested and bring Wolfe back into reality. In this case Archie’s rashness inadvertently becomes the catalyst for tragedy. However, this recklessness humanizes the characters, enhances the story, and strengthens the relationship between Wolfe and Archie, whose complementary differences, according to Anderson, “actually bring them together” (104). Both Archie and Wolfe are known to be fallible which exacerbates conflict; frequently, Wolfe’s pigheadedness rams against Archie’s stubbornness, and the smooth workings of the brownstone are thrown into chaos. As Anderson describes them, “Wolfe is stubborn, petty, and vain, and Archie foppish, sentimental, proud” (118). The humor and tension created by this byplay are natural, feel consistent with the characters, and arise under tenable circumstances.

Third, the goading between Archie and Wolfe mutes political messages in the novels. Archie or Wolfe often rejects or criticizes one another’s opinions; in this way Stout sufficiently mutes political viewpoints to appeal to the largest possible readership. For instance, in *The Doorbell Rang*, a cajoling banter between Wolfe and Archie occurs as one and then the other balks and then challenges the other to take on a controversial and dangerous case against the FBI. The banter lightens the mood of an otherwise serious political commentary. Indeed, Wolfe’s heckling of Archie masks a political, not practical, complaint. Neither is willing to accept outright the preposterous case, but then again, neither is willing to admit defeat. Thus Wolfe accuses Archie of cowardice:

You are moving your legs around because your tail is between them. This is what you said, in effect: I am offered a job with the largest retainer in my experience and no limit on expenses or fee, but I should decline it. I should decline it, not because it would be impossible—I have taken many jobs that seemed impossible—but because it would give offense to a certain man and his organization and he would retaliate. (*Doorbell* 19)

The underlying point here is that the FBI is out of control. Yet because this point is made in the context of Wolfe's pushing Archie, of two stubborn and proud characters hesitating to support this stance with action, and of an ultimately humorous situation where purported honor and rightness are juxtaposed with reluctance, the poignancy of this stance is dulled. The reader is discouraged from taking either Wolfe or Archie (and the political agendas they support) too seriously. Anderson's suggestion that Stout did not take his heroes too seriously holds true: "His portrayal of Wolfe and Archie is not colored by hero-worship, sentiment, self-identification, or self-abasement. His ability to be funny about them shows that he did not take them too seriously" (Anderson 118). Thus the humorous banter undercuts the solemn authority of either character, and it mutes the serious political complaint against an unbridled FBI; readers who might be offended by the political messages Stout's characters assert do not take either character too seriously.

Sometimes, disagreement between the two central characters casts doubt on the validity of a certain stance or opinion. Anderson points out that in *Fer-de-Lance* Archie "rejects all of Wolfe's self-justification at the end of the case" where "Wolfe permits a man to be murdered [. . .] just as he permits the murderer to kill himself rather than

surrender to the police” (103). Anderson claims, “This sort of conflict occurs rarely in the novels” (103). Yet in “Not Quite Dead Enough” Archie suggests to Wolfe that it may have been partly his fault that Ann Amory died: “I went down there and stirred it up,” admits Archie (63). He continues: “Otherwise it might not have happened.” But Wolfe insists neither he nor Archie is responsible for a person’s choice to take someone’s life: “A murderer doesn’t sprout overnight like a mushroom,” he testily explains (63). Archie seems to be persuaded by Wolfe’s argument, and this conclusion persists as Archie and Wolfe reject responsibility for the murders they come across in the course of the series. Yet occasionally the question resurfaces. Thus disagreement and difference between Archie and Wolfe soften the blow of controversial claims. Furthermore, in creating in his detecting duo a witty, bantering relationship that fosters exploration, contradiction, and conflict between political viewpoints, Stout not only achieves great storytelling, but he also mutes his potentially offensive political messages.

## CONCLUSION

The emphasis on storytelling rather than social commentary effectively attracts readers interested primarily in a good mystery. The constant attention to details, relationships, plot, suspense, dialog and humor distract from background concerns about political and social workings. Anderson contends, “With their amusing, interesting, and



often edifying byplay, Wolfe and Archie often distract from the actual case at hand” (115). Though the byplay may detract from the case, it enhances the story. Likewise, though the byplay may detract from the political agendas presented in the novel, it reveals much about the political inclinations of the society it describes. As Paul insists, detective stories are “such significant testimonies to the prejudices and presuppositions of the society out of which they spring” (6), perhaps because the detective fiction author’s primary aim is to entertain. Yet Stout did not limit himself to reflecting the social trends of his day. Many of the controversial political opinions Stout expresses in his fiction are masked by the conventional form of his novels. Because Stout worked in a pre-Marxist, pre-feminist, pre-structuralist, and pre-deconstructionist era, a more traditional view of literature as an aesthetic entity enabled him to separate a didactic, propagandistic message from the art form containing that message. This became an asset to him; as a man intent on weaving a masterful story, expressing urgent political messages, and eliminating any sociopolitical sting that might lessen his readers’ enjoyment, Stout could with the conventional form of detective fiction meld three distinct objectives into one seamless picture. In addition, the conventional form of detective fiction mutes, without squelching, the diverse sociopolitical traditions presented in what these novels claim to be about. Thus the tension between the form of enjoyable storytelling and the content in which social commentary pervades becomes rich and lively. Analyzing how a literary traditionalist primarily concerned with good storytelling struggled against or utilized the conventional grain of detective fiction suggests that a rich tension can not only produce a

balance that effectively sidesteps confrontation and assures readers but can also produce a thriving arena for a compelling discussion of ideas, attitudes, and traditions.

## NOTES

1. Grenander states, “The classic detective solves a puzzling crime set in the framework of a society’s fundamental values.” Leonardi concurs that “the ‘classic’ detective novel may restore and so reinscribe old hierarchies.” Nickerson, who argues for the scholarly inclusion of the early women’s tradition in detective fiction, admits that “the inherent conservatism of the genre is clear.” And Paul asserts “the writer of detective fiction, without conscious intent, appeals directly to those moral and spiritual roots of society unconsciously affirmed and endorsed by the readers.”

2. Frank Levy, emeritus professor of public affairs at the University of Maryland, suggests that although from 1947 to the late 1960s certain indications of families’ economic well-being demonstrated a drift toward economic equality, other factors reveal that long-run *inequality* in fact increased (923).

3. Donald Westlake asserts his own interest in the characters of the Nero Wolfe saga, describing how even secondary characters come to life for him. He claims that “Stout is a far better writing craftsman than Doyle, and a much more scrupulously fair *mystery* writer. Beyond that, the Holmes-Watson world was rather smaller and rather fuzzier at the fringes than the Wolfe-Goodwin world; I almost think, for instance, that I would recognize Orrie Cather on the street, and of what secondary Holmes character could one have the same feeling?” (qtd. in McAleer, *Rex Stout* 321).

4. Wolfe’s obligation is not merely to his client. He also feels obligated to meet his own caprices and to deliver to the police their desired result. He hopes that by waiting to divulge his conjecture, he might make culpability stick to the FBI, which is what Cramer himself is after. In this way Wolfe delays telling the police of his suspicions for their own benefit.

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