

CHess IS FOR HEAVIES
Images of Chess in Detective Fiction

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Chess, like no other game, has served authors of sophisticated and popular literature in manifold ways. A substantial number of writers admit to being chess players themselves and it is quite natural for these aficionados to include the game in their works, either as background material, as a means of characterization, as a structural device, or as metaphor. High-brow literature, indeed, has made extensive use of the game of chess, in one or more of the above-mentioned ways, as I am sure you will be informed of in another session, but I should still like to mention several prominent examples of the not-too-distant past.

One of the most sophisticated uses of the game as a structural device occurs in Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking Glass, where the playing card Kings and Queens of Alice in Wonderland made the transition to chess pieces and the knaves were replaced with knights. In addition, the asymmetric arrangement of the pieces very neatly fits the mirror theme. While chess was played with human pieces on enormous fields in the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance (see Gargantua and Pantagruel, Book 5, chapters 24 and 25), Carroll was surely the first author to attempt to base a narrative on the movements of animated chess pieces.

Other famous literary examples involving the game of chess include Stefan Zweig's Schachnovelle (Engl. transl. The Royal Game, 1941), James Whitfield Ellison's Master Prim (1968) based on the Bobby Fisher-Samuel Reshevsky conflict, as well as several of Vladimir Nabokov's novels, such as King, Queen, Knave, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Lolita, and above all, The Defense (1929, transl. into English, 1964). The second part of Eliot's Waste Land, with its reference to Thomas Middleton's play Women Beware Women, which itself contains a focal chess game, should be mentioned, as must Samuel Beckett's play Endgame, which in the best thought-out productions has been performed on a stage designed to look like a chess board, with the characters moving according to the laws of the game, the characters in the trash cans having performed a sort of castling manoeuvre.

But on to our topic: There is, as far as I have been able to determine, only one semi-scholarly treatment of the use of chess in the detective story, published by R. W. Hays in The Armchair Detective, (1971):

Chess offers a number of possibilities for detective story writers. Relatively little use has been made of these possibilities, probably because of the difficulty encountered by writers who know the game, in explaining its technicalities without verbosity, and the even greater difficulty, for writers who are not chess experts, of avoiding absurd blunders. Some writers...would have done better to forgo attempts at technical discussions.

Clearly, in many critics' and chess experts' opinion, the inventor of the detective story, E. A. Poe, falls into the latter category. Not only did he write the first detective story, according to the now accepted definition of the genre, The Murders in the Rue Morgue (1841), but he also felt called upon to make invidious comments on the game of chess in the introduction to this story, comparing it unfavourably with the game of draughts (checkers). A sad day for chess, indeed, to be ranked below checkers, then rated lower than whist or bridge, and called frivolous to boot! In defense of Poe it must be said that he probably was not more than a beginner at the game, and that he does state that he is not writing a treatise on chess, but is only making remarks "at random." It is interesting that Poe had the mistaken image of the master chess player, the machine-like, coldly rational, semi-human, which many writers of popular literature of the most unsophisticated kind continued to propagate.

Confirmation for this attitude, and support that, in the view of many people, chess is indeed for "heavies", can be found in the work of the first Grandmaster of commercial detective fiction, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. While it is not at all clear that Doyle's attitude toward chess was entirely negative, he certainly was very astute in catering to his reader's preferences and prejudices. The example which concerns us immediately occurs in the story "The Adventure of the Retired Colourman" (ca. 1898). In it, Mr. Amberley, the title hero, is a passionate chess player whose favourite partner is young Dr. Ray Ernest, who, as Holmes explains, plays "chess with Amberley, and probably the fool with his wife." When Amberley appeals to Holmes to find the young doctor and the former's wife, the great detective is equal to the task. He finds the two lovers sealed and suffocated in a newly-painted room (the paint serves to mask the odour), obviously murdered by Amberley himself. What was it that set Holmes on his track? We should have guessed all along:

"He (Amberley) was a miserable miser who made his wife so wretched by his niggardly ways that she was a ready prey for any adventurer. Such a one came upon the scene in the person of his chess-playing doctor. Amberley excelled

at chess--one mark, Watson, of a scheming mind."

We must note that not only is Amberley, the chess player, a scheming-minded criminal, but his victim, who is nearly his equal in chess-playing ability, an "adventurer" and a cad. In an article well-gearred to the usual idiosyncratic brilliance of the Baker Street Journal, Mr. Nathan L. Bengis convinces us that the whole tragedy was foreshadowed in two chess games played between the two foes--but mercifully not described in the story itself. In them, Dr. Ernest won Amberley's queen (his wife), and in retaliation Amberley sacrificed his queen in the next game to achieve a "smothering mate" (for the detailed positions see p. 550 of vol. II of the Annotated Sherlock Holmes).

On even more uncertain terms with the royal game than the father of detective fiction is the "Mistress of Mystery," Agatha Christie. In what has to be one of her less distinguished efforts at crime writing, The Big Four (1927), four master criminals, a Chinese, an American, a Frenchwoman, and an Englishman, who is a master of disguise, plot to take over the world. In one of the loosely connected episodes, called "The Chess Problem," Savaronoff "who beat Rubinstein and thus became Russian Champion"--an ethnic joke, if ever there was one--meets the American Wilson, "a second Capablanca", who drops dead at the third move of his Ruy Lopez opening. He was murdered, it turns out, by an electrical connection, ingeniously rigged from the apartment below through the floor and the table to the square on which the white bishop will be moved on the third move of the above-mentioned opening. It turns out, of course, that Savaronoff is the fourth master crook in disguise, trying to get at the dead grandmaster's fortune. Note that the whole plot depends on a grandmaster's invariable use of the Ruy Lopez opening, which can only be played with the white pieces (the choice of colors usually determined by lot!!)

Equally tenuous is the chess involvement in S.S. Van Dine's The Bishop Murder Case (1929), in which the Black Bishop plays a central role, but the novel introduces another facet of the game, the two-faced tournament clock, as a focal clue, which Ian Fleming again put to good use in his book From Russia, With Love (1957), in which one of the criminal henchmen is a Russian Grandmaster but in which the description of the actual chess is sheer nonsense.

We will have to forsake discussion of several otherwise interesting stories, such as Percival Wilde's "Slippery Elm" (1929), Ellery Queen's The Tragedy of X (1932), written under the pseudonym of Barnaby Ross, (considered by many to be one of the detective genre's "classics"), and Hugh Walpole's "The Perfect Close" (1939), all of which contain references to chess, or are even based on the game and would prove entertaining to the chess player, particularly "Slippery Elm," but yield nothing for our purposes. We must also be content with only giving a passing reference to Dorothy Sayers' Gaudy Night (1936) and John Dickson Carr's The Nine Wrong Answers (1952), as they limit their interest

in chess to short descriptions of expensive chess sets, which, unfortunately, in every instance are smashed by the criminals.

Several detective heroes are chess players--in fact, there are so many of them that it is safe to say that, at least in more recent detective fiction there has been a distinct trend away from the chess-playing villain to the chess-playing detective. In most of these cases, chess does not serve as a vital plot feature, but is used more to assist in the characterization of the detective hero, or a suspect. Thus, Simenon's Inspector Maigret at times retreats to the library with a friend and relaxes over a brandy and a game of chess, and Nero Wolfe, Rex Stout's obese genius knows how to play the game, in spite of the fact that the author almost verbatim repeats Poe's negative opinion of the game, particularly in the novel Gambit (1962). The plot revolves around the murder of Paul Jerin during a simultaneous blindfold chess exhibition at the Gambit Chess Club in New York. In an interview with one of the suspects, the conversation turns to Botvinnik, who is referred to as "lusus naturae," i.e. a freak. A little later, Wolfe and the same suspect, a fanatic chessplayer have the following conversation:

Suspect: "...I'd like to play you a game of chess.

Wolfe: Very well, I have no board or men. Pawn to Queen Four.

Suspect: Pawn to Queen Four.

Wolfe: Pawn to Queen Bishop Four.

Suspect: Pawn to King Three.

Wolfe: Knight to King Bishop Three.

Suspect: You mean Queen Bishop Three.

Wolfe: No. King Bishop Three.

Suspect: But the Queen's Knight is a better move! All the books say so.

Wolfe: That's why I didn't make it. I knew you would expect it and know the best answer to it.

I do not presume to judge the wisdom of Wolfe's move Knight to King Bishop Three, but the whole exchange sounds suspiciously like the famous "Dog in the Night" episode from "Silver Blaze." A little later in the novel another suspect picks up the theme of the practical uselessness of the good chessplayer, first voiced by Poe, when the detective asks him "Are you a chess player?":

"I play at it (he says). I'm all right the first three or four moves, any opening from the Ruy Lopez to the Caro-Kann,

but I soon get lost. My uncle got me started at it because he thinks it develops the brain. I'm not so sure. Look at Bobby Fisher, the American champion. Has he got a brain? If I've developed enough to handle a hundred-million-dollar corporation, and that's what I've been doing for two weeks now, I don't think playing chess has helped me any. I'm cut out to be a top executive, not to sit and concentrate for half an hour and then push a pawn."

While Wolfe does nothing to contradict this statement, he is obviously a chess player himself, and the novel contains good, villainous, foolish and intelligent chess players.

Another keen chess player is Harry Kemelman's English Professor-Detective, Nicky Welt. (Kelman is better known for his "Rabbi" books). Two stories in particular, "The Man on the Ladder" and "End Play", use chess to illustrate a man's character by making deductions from his style of play. Where in the former story the murderer alone is a chess player, whose style of play shows parallels to the crimes committed, in the latter both the criminal and the victim are players--and college professors--who met regularly for a friendly game.

In "End Play" it appears that on the night of the crime, Prof. McNulty, at whose home the two were playing, went to answer the doorbell. There was a pistol shot and McNulty died. Later tests show that McNulty himself had fired the gun, since the relevant tests were positive. His death is presumed to be suicide.

Prof. Albrecht reconstructs to the detective the games they had been playing, but his explanations are weak and he turns out to be the murderer--what else can one expect from a chess player with a German name!?! What is more disconcerting to chess players is the rather cavalier way in which some basic aspects of the game are treated. McNulty, the author asserts, has been using his Logan-Asquith Gambit which he discovered in Lowenstein's book Endgames; both the hyphenated gentleman and Lowenstein are imaginary chess authorities, but surely the more dubious of the two must be Lowenstein, who is including the theory of gambits in a work on Endgames. Kemelman's weakness for and about gambits is also revealed in "The Man on the Ladder", in which he described the move:

1.P-KR4:

as a gambit. As Hays rightly points out, no opening move can all by itself constitute a gambit.

Another number of fictional narratives employ the game of chess as a symbolic and structural device. One of the most sophisticated of these in the general area of detective fiction has to be William Faulkner's collection of stories, Knight's Gambit (ca. 1943), which begins with Gavin Stevens, County Attorney of Yoknapatawpha County, playing chess with his young

nephew Charles, and which is full of highly involved chess metaphor. For example, Stevens sets up a chess problem with the horses and rooks and two pawns and gives his young nephew a beautiful piece of advice:

"Nothing by which all human passion and hope and folly can be mirrored and then proved was ever just a game."

All the talk about queens and horses (knights) has direct bearing on the events, as becomes evident in a conversation during which the "detective" asks his young protegee to solve a problem involving the central personal relationships of the story in chess metaphor:

- Stevens: "A knight comes suddenly out of nowhere--out of the west--if you like--and checks the queen and the castle all in that same one move. What do you do?"
- Charles: You save the queen and let the castle go...You bet him the girl...And he lost.
- Stevens: Lost? A princess and half a castle, against some of his bones and maybe his brains too? Lost?
- Charles: He lost the queen.
- Stevens: The Queen? What queen? Oh, you mean Mrs. Harriss. Maybe he realized that the queen had been moved the same instant he realized he would have to call the bet. Maybe he realized the queen and castle both had been gone over since the moment he disarmed the prince with that hearth-broom. If he ever wanted her...
- Charles: What was he doing here?
- Stevens: Why was he waiting?"
- "Maybe it was a pleasant square," Charles said, "For the pleasure of being able to move not only two squares at once but in two directions at once."

A novel which uses chess as a structural metaphor, is Ellery Queen's The Player on the Other Side (1963). The book is divided into three parts: Irregular Opening, Middle Game, and End Play. All the chapter titles have to do with the game itself, e.g. Attack, Self-Block, Gambit Accepted, etc. Chapter 24, "Queen's Countergambit," is a 6-page dreamlike description of the book's characters and the crime as a chess game and the various chess pieces, punctuated by Thomas Huxley's well-known quotation:

"The chessboard is the world, the pieces are the phenomena of the universe, the rules of the game are what we call the laws of Nature. The player on the other side is hidden from us. We know that his play is always fair, just, and patient..."

Without making too many demands on the chess prowess of his readers, Len Deighton uses excerpts (some very basic indeed) from a chess manual as mottos for each one of the chapters of his ingenious spy-novel Funeral in Berlin. Thus, when the action moves to the infamous corridor which keeps open the surface link with Berlin from West Germany, one of the mottos reads:

Corridor mate: when a king can only move along an expected route, he can be trapped by closing the corridor.

And even the comparative novice at the game gets a good idea of what to expect in a chapter of a spy-novel headed by:

Pawns can only move forward. They can never retreat.

Two stories, which leave the realm of the detective story proper and approach the psychological horror story, are Dorothy Sayers' "Striding Folly" (first published in 1972, but written much earlier) and Stanley Ellin's "Fool's Mate" (1951). In the latter, as in Ellery Queen's The Player on the Other Side, the "murderer" turns out to be the alter-ego of a schizophreniac, but this time the split-personality is induced by playing chess and having to play both sides of the board for lack of an opponent--a fate which Philip Marlowe, Raymond Chandler's solitary chessplayer-detective was luckily spared. Gentle George Hunecker's assertive alter-ego, Mr. White, named for his preference in chess color, "does in" Mrs. Hunecker, the shrewish wife. While we can hardly call George a "heavy"--his wife does rather fit the bill more neatly--it is fair to say that his disturbance and subsequent murderous activity is induced by too heavy a dose of chess.

In "Striding Folly", however, the criminals are, according to Lord Peter Wimsey, two men, one of whom is clean-shaven and plays brilliant chess.

In the most recent example of chess in detective fiction which I was able to find, Sjowall & Wahloo's The Terrorists, (1975) chess playing ability is evenly divided between the "Goodies" and the "Baddies." Chief Inspector Beck's friend, Kollberg, is seen as pondering over a chess problem, in neglect of his paying job, but the limelight goes to a chessmatch between the boss of the "heavies" and one of his companions, while they are biding their time in an apartment. The French radioman was badly beaten by his leader, Heydt, and took his defeat as an offense. "The only loss their revolutionary organization approved of was loss of life."

Thus we have come full circle. Heydt, the unemotional, coldly calculating killing machine is also an expert chess player.

In summary, then, it can be said that in the more sophisticated literature, chess is used as a symbolic structural or parallel theme ingredient with either the moves or the pieces of the game illustrating human character or action. Popular literature here represented by detective fiction has probably intensified to an extent a widely held image of the chess player, i.e. that of a ruthless machine-like schemer on one side, on the other side that of the pathologically eccentric genius, who may be an expert at chess but is useless for any practical activity. In all cases, however, the chess playing character, whether "good" or "bad", has been endowed with intellectual gifts of a highly superior nature.

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