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Response to the Affective Turn in Literary Studies

I was pleased at this year's reading selection for our symposium because it gave me a chance to learn more about affect studies—a field that has been growing in my primary area of scholarship (Victorian literature). Despite Brian Massumi's insistence that affect and emotion are two separate entities ("emotion and affect [...] follow different logics and pertain to different orders") affect studies seems to generally include scholarship on all areas that fall under the umbrella of feeling, including affect, moods, emotions, and sympathy.¹ Investigations of this kind are a natural fit to Victorian studies, since so much of its literature deals with the emotional development of characters or works to elicit an emotional response from its readers. A prime example of this is the field of sensation fiction, which notoriously gets its name from the involuntary bodily responses its readers experienced. Accordingly, Victorian scholars like Ann Cvetkovich (*Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism*) have done much work on this genre of crime fiction.

With a healthy focus on affect in sensation fiction, I was surprised that affect studies has made much less an impact on another genre of crime fiction: detective fiction. For the rest of this paper, I want to focus on an area that has not been touched by affect studies: detective fiction. A brief search of available scholarship revealed very little work done on the place of affect in this genre.² Therefore, I examine both why detective fiction has so far escaped the affective turn as well as suggest what affective studies may have to offer scholarship in this field.

In *The Sign of Four*, when Watson mentions to Sherlock Holmes that he has written up their last adventure as *A Study in Scarlet*, the famous detective has this withering response: "Detection is, or ought to be, an exact science and should be treated in the same cold and unemotional manner. You have attempted to tinge it with romanticism, which produces much the same effect as if you worked a love-story or an elopement into the fifth proposition of Euclid." Sherlock's point that detection is an unemotional science that should have no congress with "romanticism" is our first clue why affect studies have yet to take hold in scholarship on detective fiction. Past criticism's focus on the logic of detection places it at odds with Massumi's brand of affect studies. If, as Massumi posits, cognition happens first in the body rather than the mind and "the brain [is] a center of indetermination," this has major consequences for the logical foundation detective fiction is built upon. Even when affect studies focus primarily on emotion, detective fiction's general lack of the character development and emotional resonance would make these readings challenging.

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² There are a few articles examining affect in more contemporary detective fiction, and a dissertation on affect, detection, and Victorian literature. Jill Gavin's book *The Sympathetic Medium: Feminine Channeling, the Occult, and Communication Technologies, 1859-1919* includes a chapter on the medium as detective.

This is not to suggest that affect studies have no place in criticism on detective fiction. After all, as Watson retorts to Holmes: “But the romance was there [...] I could not tamper with the facts.” Watson is right that one of the “facts” of detective fiction is that affect is present in tandem with logic within the process of detection. Wilkie Collins’s novel *The Moonstone* is an excellent example of affect in detective fiction. Along with figuring out what happened to the titular diamond, the protagonist/detective figure, Franklin Blake, must come to terms with the emotional impact of discovering that he is, in fact, the thief. Moreover, Blake’s emotional state the night he unconsciously steals the diamond is a keystone to reproducing and understanding the crime. *The Moonstone*, then, seems like a rich site for affective readings, and I suspect that affect studies may be able to do much important work in undermining the supposed dominance of logic in detective fiction.