ABSTRACT

EMERSON, KRISTIN AMANDA. Women of Mystery and Romance: Tracing a Feminist Rewriting of the Detective Genre. (Under the direction of Leila May.)

Many critics find that female characters in detective fiction are never entirely successful as either women or detectives. They argue that authors find it impossible to portray women properly in both roles—one persona always eclipses the other. The conflict is generally attributed to the traditionally “masculine” and conventional nature of the detective genre. This study proposes that the recent combination of detective fiction with the conventionally “feminine” genre of romance fiction offers hope for a feminist rewriting of the detective genre. A set of guidelines to subtly re-script detective fiction’s conventions is derived from suggestions by several critics, and is heavily influenced by typical elements of romance fiction. The usefulness of this framework in identifying the characteristics of more empowered and fully developed female detectives is tested by a close reading of three representative works from various points in the history of detective fiction. The three works, which include Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White*, Carolyn Keene’s Nancy Drew series, and Janet Evanovich’s Stephanie Plum series, each incorporate a combination of romance and detective fiction and feature a female investigator. The framework proves useful in assessing the achievements and failures in the characterization of female detectives in these novels. It also offers guidelines that could be considered by authors of future detective works to re-script the most conservative elements of the detective fiction genre so that they no longer prevent the emergence of successful, empowered female detectives.
WOMEN OF MYSTERY AND ROMANCE:
TRACING A FEMINIST REWRITING OF THE DETECTIVE GENRE

by

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DEDICATION

For my parents, who have been unfailingly supportive of all my hopes and dreams, and for my wonderful husband, who is often more confident in me than I am.
BIOGRAPHY

Kristin Emerson is a graduate of Otterbein College in Westerville, Ohio, where she received a bachelor’s degree in English in 2002. She and her husband, Casey, now live in Durham, North Carolina, with their dog, Rocky. Professionally, she has worked in marketing and public relations and as a journalist. Her other interests include travel, horseback riding, and spending time with friends and family. She hopes to continue sharing her love of learning with others by teaching college-level English.
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Introduction

Detective stories and romance novels have been perennially popular styles of genre fiction throughout the past 150 years, and remain two of the bestselling genres on the market today. Considering the high reader demand for these novels, it is not surprising that authors have been attempting to combine the excitement of romance and the intrigue of detective fiction into single works since the genres first became popular. However, according to some critics, the combination of the romance and detective fiction genres has rarely met with success.

Critic Anne K. Kaler is one who believes that the marriage between mystery and romance has failed. She bases her judgments on what she takes to be the opposition between the traditional conventions of each genre. Detective fiction, traditionally viewed as “masculine,” is concerned with a lone male hero succeeding by relying on practicality and ratiocination. Romance, by contrast, is inherently “feminine,” with a female hero whose focus is on emotions, intuition, and relationship-building. Notwithstanding these differences, both genres are widely considered conservative. This judgment can be attributed to the fact that formulaic plots tending to support readers’ expectations and that conclude by re-establishing a traditional status quo form the basis of each genre.

While authors have often tried to subvert these conventional formulas by simply placing a female detective as protagonist in the mixed-genre novel, this strategy often leads to further complications. The female detective is already at a disadvantage by virtue of being dropped into the detective role traditionally occupied by a man. If she is to be successful as a detective based on traditional standards, it becomes impossible for
her to succeed as a romance heroine, because the genres’ conventions for each character are largely in opposition to one another.

The conventions of the traditional detective genre demand that a detective find the final piece to a puzzle and restore external social order (Kaler 70). However, the romance heroine’s goal is to restore her internal emotional order. While the detective hero traditionally relies on reason, the romance protagonist trusts emotion and instinct to guide her decisions. While the detective pursues truth, the romance heroine pursues love (68). Kaler notes that “[t]he ending of both genres centers on the revelation of an unknown fact,” but in romance, that revelation involves previously hidden emotions, while in detective fiction, it is based on empirical evidence (70).

In addition, Kaler finds that a “woman detective combines both masculine and feminine characteristics within her own personality and does not need a man to complete her, as does the romance woman” (66). The detective of the traditional, male-dominated genre is typically independent to the point of being disinterested in romantic attachments (although he may be involved in purely physical sexual liaisons). If the female detective inherits that detached individualism from the male tradition, she does not naturally seek relationships the way a romance heroine does.

Finally, Kaler argues, “Love confuses vision but mystery clears vision” (70). In other words, a major problem in combining the genres is the opposition of the poles of reason and emotion. Emotions cloud the ability to think rationally—therefore, Kaler believes that a detective involved in a romance will necessarily be unsuccessful in her work. As a result, she states bluntly, “The marriage of mystery and romance has become dysfunctional” (72). This failure is due to the impossibility of a single protagonist
fulfilling the traditional scripts of both genres (72). She expresses little hope that the situation can be remedied—at least not while maintaining the traditional conventions of each genre. Kaler argues, “When the two genres are combined, the blend should produce not a mixed genre but a stronger genre, containing the strengths of both. But such is not the case” (70).

I feel less pessimistic than Kaler about the chances of combining the two genres successfully, partially because of the recent explosion in the publishing world of smart, empowered female heroes in both detective and “chick lit” romance novels. Both genres are undergoing revisions and may finally be evolving away from their traditionally conservative scripts. Modern female readers expect more liberated and complex female characters—women who are successful in romantic relationships and in their professions (which, in the case of many detective stories, happen to involve tracking down criminals).

I take particular issue with what I read as Kaler’s assumption that a woman involved in a romantic relationship automatically loses the ability to think rationally. More notably, Kaler’s argument does not consider an important possibility: the idea that one or both traditional generic scripts could be subtly rewritten to allow them to retain many of their defining qualities, while blending the aspects of each genre that best support an empowered female hero.

The failure of combining detective fiction and romance underlines a basic, broader problem with the detective genre in general: the fact that female investigators often fall flat, failing to be convincing or successful as women, as detectives, or both. Many critics argue that not only is the marriage of mystery and romance dysfunctional but that the fictional female detective herself can never be fully functional. Kathleen
Gregory Klein, author of one of the most extensive studies of the fictional female detective, explains why she believes the female detective has always been problematic:

The characteristics identified so closely with the male hero, including violence, sexual activity, and the arrogance which allows him to assume a judge-and-jury role, have not been historically associated with women or with the few women detectives in the genre. Modeling the female protagonist on a male prototype establishes the conditions for her failure as either an investigator or a woman—or both. (162)

There is difficulty in developing a truly empowered female detective, and it is clearly the traditionally masculine script of the genre that leads to these problems. While Kaler finds that the combination of romance fiction into the detective story is unsuccessful in improving the situation, Klein has hope for the success of the female detective. Despite Klein’s dissatisfaction with the incarnations she included in the 1988 edition of her book, she adds a chapter in the 1995 second edition that expresses hope for the future of the detective genre. She believes that despite flaws in the portrayals of most fictional female detectives, the female detectives of the mid-1990s begin to show promise that the detective genre could be rewritten in specific ways to create empowered, feminist heroines. She admires how one recent novelist “reconfigure[s] the genre to make her concerns and her detective primary rather than just adaptations of familiar models” (238). Klein believes in the effectiveness of “keeping what is pleasurable, discarding what is stale, making room for change” (238).

Priscilla L. Walton and Manina Jones endorse the majority of Klein’s ideas, particularly her interest in re-scripting the detective genre to “successfully challenge and
reformulate both the detective genre and gender norms” (88). They further suggest that this re-scripting is possible based on Foucault’s concept of “reverse discourse” or “counter-discourse,” “a discourse that repeats and inverts the ideological imperatives of the dominant discourse in order to authorize those marginalized by it” (Walton and Jones 92). But as the authors indicate, simply reversing a discourse is not sufficient to re-script a genre. The genre still needs to be recognizable as detective fiction, but traditionally masculine conventions must be explained in new ways. Walton and Jones note that this counter-discourse must involve more than just dropping a female into the typical role of a male detective: “Simple gender role reversal . . . is not effective—or even possible” (93). Instead, “feminist detective fiction constitutes a reverse discourse exploring positions of resistance and agency that were offered by previous practices but that were inaccessible to women” (93). The woman cannot be a simple parody of a male detective; as Kaler and Klein both note, elements of the genre will conflict in such a case. As an alternative, certain constructions of the traditional discourse can be continued, but the ideology behind them must be changed (Walton and Jones 94).

So how can this counter-discourse be produced? Neither Walton and Jones nor Klein attempt to suggest a formula for “repairing” the genre. However, Klein does identify several movements in recent feminist detective novels that she believes could help rewrite the traditional detective script to feature a female detective who is both successful as an investigator and believable as a woman. Her suggestions primarily rely on introducing traditionally feminine (and feminist) elements into the historically masculine detective genre. Klein does not directly advise the infusion of romance into the detective genre, but her suggestions draw on many of the most important
characteristics of romance. One example is her advice to portray a variety of diverse women in the novel so that more than just the main character’s voice is heard. Kaler’s discussion of the Great Goddess trope in romantic fiction explores just such a blending of women’s voices and identifies it is a tradition of romance (63). A few of Klein’s suggestions would subvert the conventions of romance that are most derided by current feminist criticism, such as the traditionally beautiful heroine. Klein suggests replacing the common image of the sexy female detective in all-black leather—probably derived from the “femme fatale” of traditional male detective stories—with a realistic, physically imperfect woman. Klein’s recommendations overcome many of the generic limitations of detective fiction by drawing on the most positive of the feminine traits found in romance writing.

I have used Klein’s suggestions to develop a framework, or set of guidelines, to describe the elements that must be present for a female detective to be successful. Some of these guidelines are met simply by introducing a romance sub-plot into a detective story. But there is also a reciprocal effect, because once the two genres meet, they can only blend successfully if the female detective/romance heroine is also a success in both roles. My close reading of several texts suggests that if the fictional female detective does not meet all of the guidelines of this framework, that there will be flaws in the combination of romance and detection. In other words, if the conventions of the romance subplot (including its prescriptions for the heroine) are at odds with those of the detective story, it implies that in at least some aspects, the female detective is little more than woman wedged uncomfortably into a role that was traditionally designed for a man.
The Framework

The framework that I constructed, which draws heavily on Klein’s extensive work on fictional female detectives, is based on six main guidelines. To blend detective fiction and romance successfully, a novel should:

- **Feature a female detective who is believable as a woman.** This guideline is based on Klein’s demand to challenge the standard. She states: “Real women portraying authentic, lived experience are necessary” (228). The female hero may appear physically unusual, meaning that she is not the typical buxom, blonde romance heroine. She must have a sensible and realistic attitude toward her own safety and toward solving crimes. I believe this guideline also would be supported by the incorporation of some conventions of romance, such as realistic emotional reactions and believable relationships.

- **Include a rich presence of other female voices.** Klein explains, “Heteroglossia (multiplicity of voices) undercuts the traditional voice of authority with which only the detective speaks” (237). This argument relates to Kaler’s assertion that a variety of voices representing a range of female experience are a convention of romance (63).

- **Make feminist observations and confront feminist issues.** Klein argues that the detectives themselves must have self-confidence and espouse feminist principles. In addition, the issues of women and other oppressed groups should be raised as part of the novel’s plot. Kaler notes romance’s “increasing use of social justice issues, not just as tacked-on attributes to enhance a character but as real issues” (69). Klein does not directly allude to this development in romance fiction, but
she suggests that the presence of social justice issues in detective novels is important so that “writers can redefine the genre’s boundaries, opening them up to legitimate a wider focus in which a variety of social issues can be explored” (228).

- **Have the heroine work independently of the law and law enforcement, and sometimes in tandem with criminals.** Klein identifies law, an external social order, as highly patriarchal, which means that the empowered female detective is only supporting the patriarchal status quo by catching the criminal and turning him or her over to the police. Based on Klein’s concerns, I suggest that the empowered female detective should constantly question who is really in control and whether the traditional, masculine structures of order can be trusted.

- **Conclude with an open ending** (Klein 228-229). Klein argues that an open ending (with some issues or danger unresolved) subverts the conservative implications of the detective genre’s cyclical return to the status quo. Applying Klein’s argument to my analysis of detective novels with a romance subplot suggests the necessity of a similar resistance to tradition in the romance aspect. For example, instead of marrying off the main characters to achieve the conventional “happy ending,” the novel might portray the primacy of a nontraditional romantic relationship, or even of platonic friendship.

- **Feature a successful detective.** This point seems obvious but, based on Klein’s findings, is too often overlooked by writers of detective fiction. I suggest that the female investigator must clearly demonstrate capability and expertise in solving the case.
I will test this framework by using it to evaluate several works that feature female detectives and a combination of mystery and romance. My goal is for the framework to offer a method of determining why so many examples of this combined genre fail. On the whole, the guidelines imply that breaking with certain traditional conventions in combining the genres, particularly with the aim of developing an empowered, feminist protagonist, will lead to a more perfect union of romance and detective fiction.

Before delving into how these guidelines will be used in my study, it is necessary to acknowledge that any attempt to employ specific characteristics to identify a “successful and empowered woman” runs the risk of essentialism. In the introduction to her study of female detectives, Klein concedes that both gender and genre are “socially constructed and validated” (2), an important point that I would like to recognize in my own work. Constructionist theorists consider gender to be fluid and find that the characteristics associated with the term “woman” are impossible to codify. Judith Butler argues convincingly that what many view as “naturalized conceptions of gender” should instead be seen as constituted by social conditions (415). Because it is unfeasible to set a single standard for the characteristics of a successful woman, Klein compares each female detective in her study to “the most socially advanced women of her historical period” (3). I will draw similar comparisons in my own study to establish whether a woman is successfully and convincingly empowered within the constructs of her society. Klein’s criterion avoids the problem of essentialism by acknowledging the importance of socialization on human identity and performance, and avoids the problem of anachronism by refraining from applying standards to an earlier generation that were clearly developed later.
We are still left with the question of determining whether there can be traits that could ideally identify a female detective as different from a male detective. If, as Klein insists, our subject is not simply a male private eye in female clothing, then what is she? How should she behave differently? For the purposes of this study, my framework tentatively relies on traditional definitions of masculine and feminine traits, in which “masculine” qualities include ratiocination, physical toughness, and intellect, and “feminine” qualities include sensitivity, emotional availability, and intuition. These “masculine” and “feminine” traits will be treated as elastic in order, again, to avoid the problem of essentialism. They will be rhetorical guidelines rather than criteria, so that only the appearance and not the fact of “gender bending” will be recorded if we find a female detective who can displace traditional masculine characteristics (or if we find the unlikely case of a male detective displaying traditional feminine characteristics). By pursuing this strategy, I am recognizing that the conventions of both romance and detective fiction generally rely on these traditional constructs, but I am not encoding these constructs as absolutes. Therefore, I will tentatively assert that a female detective can be considered a more successful and empowered woman if she displays traditionally masculine traits combined in a realistic and convincing manner with traditionally feminine qualities.

The Selected Texts

There has been a recent explosion in the number of novels attempting to combine romance and detective fiction. Rather than conducting a broad-based survey of similar contemporary works, I decided that the best test of my framework would be to perform a
close reading of several very different texts. I begin with works featuring two significant female detectives from different periods in the history of detective fiction. My goal is to use my framework to uncover any limitations in the female investigators’ characters that might contribute to making the combination of romance and detection partially (or totally) unsuccessful. As Klein’s critique of female detectives implies, finding problematically portrayed female investigators was not difficult. Instead, the challenge became finding fictional women who were close to successful in their roles, because I was interested in discovering whether their limiting factors seemed to support the recommendations of my framework. And of course, the works I chose had to have a dominant detective story combined with an important romance plot.

I chose to focus first on Marian Halcombe of Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White* and, second, on Carolyn Keene’s Nancy Drew. In my analysis of these works, I use my framework to discover which elements of the ideal combined-genre novel are missing, and how their absence seems to relate to the parallel failure of the female detective herself. I then compare these two detectives to a contemporary female investigator from a currently popular detective series, Janet Evanovich’s Stephanie Plum.

Marian Halcombe and Nancy Drew are both quite promising, unusually empowered women for their time. Clearly, Collins and Keene (a pseudonym for a collective of primarily female writers) have taken positive steps in developing these strong and impressive characters, whom readers have admired for generations. Klein states that in many cases, the detective genre lags behind social changes rather than leading them, but in *The Woman in White* and *The Nancy Drew Mysteries*, the female investigators are unconventionally liberated in many ways. Yet Marian and Nancy both
fail to fill the role of ideal female detective completely. I will argue that because of their limitations both as women and as detectives, the romance plot only creates more problems for these characters. The limitations of Marian Halcombe and Nancy Drew as heroes illustrate the necessity of rewriting the genre to satisfy fully the framework I have derived from Klein and Kaler.

I recognize that in limiting my study to three major female detectives, my scope is quite narrow. However, I purposely chose these examples from different subgenres, separated throughout the history of the detective fiction genre, to test the universality of my framework for evaluating the combination of mystery and romance. I also find that these three examples are representative and speak for many other similar novels; indeed, the novels by Collins and Keene were so popular as to inspire the publication of hundreds of similar works. Another possible limitation to my analysis of these works is the fact that they combine the conventions of several genres, while my interpretive framework is artificially limited to a focus on romance and detective fiction. For example, the Nancy Drew series is a part of the young adult literature genre, and the Stephanie Plum books are greatly influenced by the conventions of comedic writing. In this study, I attempt to acknowledge and appropriately adjust my focus anywhere that the conventions of other genres might affect my interpretation of the elements of detective fiction and romance in a work.

In the end, my findings validate the use of my framework as a tool for analyzing these novels. The analysis substantiates my belief that the combination of genres can work if the novel is built on guidelines that allow the female detective to be empowered and successful in both of her roles. If these conditions are satisfied, then the addition of
romance only makes her a stronger and better hero. Studying these three examples of fictional women as heroes of mystery and romance opens the door for more questions to be asked about the value of combining aspects of romance and detective fiction.
Chapter 1: The Woman in White

Wilkie Collins’s extremely popular novel The Woman in White offers what appears to be the earliest example of a fictional female investigator contributing to the solution of a perplexing mystery. Typically not classified under the auspices of either romance or detective fiction, The Woman in White was popular and unique enough to establish its own genre. Published in 1859-1860 in Dickens’s literary magazine, All the Year Round, it is considered the first “sensation novel.” This titillating and controversial genre brought excitement, intrigue, and visceral thrills to the often sober lives of Victorian readers. In his groundbreaking essay on sensation in The Woman in White, D.A. Miller notes, “The genre offers one of the first instances of modern literature to address itself primarily to the sympathetic nervous system, where it grounds its characteristics in adrenaline effects” (187). Valerie Pedlar explains that sensation fiction relies on “the subjective experience created by our physical senses” (“Woman” 49). She summarizes the common features of a sensation novel, stating: “The main emphasis is on an exciting plot, constructed round the unraveling of secrets. . . . Doubling . . . plays an important part in the workings of the plot. . . . Since sensation plots tend to deal with extreme situations, commonly involving bigamy, murder, madness, and adultery, the rhetoric veers toward exaggeration” (Pedlar “Woman” 50). As these characteristics suggest, the sensation novel nearly always combines many conventions of both detective fiction and romance.

Patrick Brantlinger locates a clear connection between the sensation novel and detective fiction, which was informed by sensation fiction and came into its own in the late 1800s as a result of it: “Even though ‘sensation novels’ were a minor subgenre of
British fiction that flourished in the 1860s only to die out a decade or two later, they live on in several forms of popular culture, obviously so in their most direct offspring—modern mystery, detective, and suspense fiction and films” (1). Collins’s novel is sometimes considered the first true mystery novel, although Edgar Allan Poe published short detective fiction during the 1840s (Klein 15). Brantlinger notes, “The emergence of the protagonist as detective or of the detective as an aid to the protagonist [in sensation fiction] . . . marks the evolution of a genre of popular fiction which refuses to follow the path of direct revelation prescribed by realism but instead hides as much as it reveals” (2). This discursive game of hide-and-seek became one of the primary conventions of detective fiction, and The Woman in White was among the first works to use it.

Yet unlike later detective fiction, which focused solely on solving a mystery plot using techniques of ratiocination and detachment, Mark M. Hennelly, Jr. finds that in The Woman in White, “emotion, imagination, and intelligence are all equally important talents” (91). As this valuing of emotion and imagination implies, romance also plays a key role in The Woman in White, revealing the influence of an earlier form of popular literature on the emerging sensation genre. Brantlinger finds that the Gothic novel—sometimes referred to as the Gothic romance—prefigured and inspired The Woman in White. However, Pedlar notes that unlike most Gothic fiction, the sensation novel takes place in a familiar domestic environment, and not in exotic locales (“Woman” 50).

A forbidden love triangle and a forced marriage in the familiar environs of the English countryside add realistic suspense to The Woman in White, and also underscore the work’s debt to the more traditional Victorian romance novel. Karen C. Gindele explains, “[T]he sensation novel itself registers the tension between romance and realism,
the strange that happens at home” (67). Hennelly argues that there are “two genres which mutually inform The Woman in White—detective fiction and Victorian fiction” (89). His explanation of how these genres combine implies a meeting of the traditionally masculine traits of detective fiction and the feminine traits of romance. Hennelly argues that the main character, Walter Hartright, “finally discovers that ratiocinative detection by itself becomes a sign of lonely repression. . . . Most significantly, it must be joined with heartfelt love if real detection, if real self-discovery, is to succeed” (96). Although his focus here is on Walter, the male investigator, Hennelly uncovers Collins’s belief in the necessity of combining elements of romance (love and emotion) with the rational thought of detective fiction to fully develop the detective character.

Hennelly and Pedlar both argue that the excessive emotion of melodrama has a strong influence in The Woman in White. Melodrama relies on many of the same conventions as traditional romance, and Pedlar’s argument for the influence of melodrama centers on the inclusion of elements of romance. Pedlar cites Lyn Pykett in pointing out that The Woman in White “is based on two popular plots: the mercenary marriage plot . . . and the romantic marriage counter-plot, in which the true lovers, Walter Hartright (a significant name!) and Laura, meet, fall in love, are torn apart and are finally reunited” (“Woman” 55). These two marriage plots draw on both the Gothic romance and the traditional Victorian romantic novel, respectively. The conflict involved in each marriage plot is characteristic of melodrama.

Walter, the primary narrator of the novel, plays the rather one-dimensional role of “good guy” and becomes the “avenging detective in the mercenary marriage plot” (Pedlar “Woman” 55). Despite the fact that Walter takes credit for compiling the narrative that
comprises the novel, *The Woman in White* actually features a multi-voiced narrative similar to an epistolary novel in form. The only difference between *The Woman in White* and typical epistolary novels is that the narrative includes a variety of media, from diary entries and letters to forced confessions and the testament of a tombstone. Walter narrates the majority of the novel, but the second-largest portion is presented as excerpts from the diary of Marian Halcombe. Marian is a much more interesting and complex individual than Walter, and Miller finds that “the novelist himself unexceptionally portrays Marian as a ‘positive,’ immensely likable character” (209). More to the purposes of this study, she represents the original incarnation of the fictional female investigator. Although there are no professional detective characters in *The Woman in White*, Marian and Walter take on investigative roles on behalf of Marian’s half-sister, Laura. Collins endows Marian with an unusual amount of practical intelligence and pluck for a female hero of her time, and Marian’s bravery and investigative skills meet and often surpass Walter’s abilities.

Because of Marian’s role as the first fictional female detective and because of the combination of mystery and romance that makes *The Woman in White* the first sensation novel, Collins’s work offers an ideal opportunity to use my framework to analyze the portrayal of an important female investigator. A close reading of the novel and of critical work related to Marian’s role in it reveals the power that Victorian gender ideology held over Collins. Despite purposely creating an engaging alternative to traditional femininity in Marian, Collins does not allow her to function as the true hero of the detective plot and he completely isolates her from the romance sub-plot.
Critics have long been interested in Collins’s portrayal of Marian, and not simply in her role as a detective. It is clear from Walter’s first meeting with the spirited spinster that she is an unusual woman who challenges the expected norms for her gender during the conservative Victorian era. His first glimpse of her inverts the reader’s expectations:

I looked from the table to the window farthest from me, and saw a lady standing at it, with her back turned towards me. The instant my eyes rested on her, I was struck by the rare beauty of her form, and by the unaffected grace of her attitude. Her figure was tall, yet not too tall; comely and well-developed, yet not fat; her head set on her shoulders with an easy, pliant firmness; her waist, perfection in the eyes of a man, for it occupied its natural place, it filled out its natural circle, it was visibly and delightfully undeformed by stays. . . . She turned towards me immediately. The easy elegance of every movement of her limbs and body as soon as she began to advance from the far end of the room, set me in a flutter of expectation to see her face clearly. She left the window—and I said to myself, The lady is dark. She moved forward a few steps—and I said to myself, The lady is young. She approached nearer—and I said to myself (with a sense of surprise which words fail me to express), The lady is ugly! (34-35)

In this narrative, Pedlar notes that “the techniques of melodrama are being employed at a point when a convention of melodrama is itself being questioned” (“Drawing” 76). In other words, Marian is not the conventionally beautiful heroine, which initially undermines the reader’s expectation that a traditional romance plot is about to emerge (Pedlar “Drawing” 76).
This subversion of traditional expectations underpins much of the novel, as Collins questions not only plot conventions but the validity of gender stereotypes. Yu-hsiang Bennett Fu argues that “Collins questions Victorian normality by creating ambivalent gender roles/bodies that subvert nineteenth-century sexual stereotypes to promote new icons” (183). Fu believes that Collins accomplishes this goal by “collapsing a binary opposition between masculine and feminine traits” (183). Similarly, Richard Collins argues that *The Woman in White* was intended to overturn Victorian expectations by introducing “an ‘intersexual’ collage that questioned and subverted Victorian notions of gender” (137). Richard Collins explains that the romantic attraction that develops between Walter and Laura establishes them as traditional male and female figures, creating points of comparison with the more extreme variations of gender that appear in the novel. He writes, “Collins knew that he had to have a hero and a heroine, the more commonplace the better, but the wooden Walter and the anemic Laura are poles of standard Victorian notions of gender” used to measure the mixed gender of other, more socially and sexually transgressive characters (144). Marian appears to be Collins’s most positive portrayal of a character who transgresses gender boundaries.

The combination of traditionally masculine and feminine elements of her personality and appearance establish Marian as a particularly realistic woman. She fulfills the first of the guidelines of my previously established framework, which calls for a believable, physically imperfect heroine. Despite the Victorian ideals of women as “angels in the house,” readers (perhaps even subconsciously) recognized that real women could never actually reach such artificial perfection. Marian’s self-deprecating honesty afforded a welcome change, “a wonderful alternative version of womankind” (Fu 192).
As evidence of Marian’s likeability and realism, Hennelly reports that “many bachelor readers . . . wrote to Collins, detailing their desire to marry the extratextual, real-life model for Marian” (104). Unlike Walter, these real-life bachelor readers were not shocked or repelled by the supposedly masculine features of the otherwise appealing Marian.

Perhaps Marian’s most attractive feature is her forthright acknowledgement that she is not an angel of the house. Pedlar notes, “If Walter is at the mercy of his conventional expectations, Marian is playfully aware of such expectations” (“Drawing” 76). She bluntly tells him, “You see I don't think much of my own sex, Mr Hartright . . . no woman does think much of her own sex, although few of them confess it as freely as I do” (W. Collins 36). Marian is also notable for displaying “the quick wit and self-conscious humor that Hartright sadly lacks” (Hennelly 104). She frequently “exhibits more manly composure than Walter,” who appears “feminized,” immature and vacillating throughout the first half of the novel (Fu 190). Examples of her composure abound, but it is particularly notable in the scene in which she exhorts Walter to give up his devotion to Laura and leave Limmeridge House. She lays “her hand firmly on [his] arm” and:

“‘Crush it!’ she said. ‘Here, where you first saw her, crush it! Don’t shrink under it like a woman. Tear it out; trample it under foot like a man!’” (W. Collins 72).

In addition to her impressive composure, Richard Collins suggests that the “dark down on her upper lip” (W. Collins 35) makes her more authentic and therefore more pleasing to readers, who “were able early on to look beyond Collins’s defacement of his heroine to see her moustache for what it was: a defect that made her all the more appealing, just like the moustache painted by Marcel Duchamp on the lip of the Mona
Lisa was an encouragement to take women and art off their pedestals” (132). With no pedestal on which to stand, Marian seems approachable and realistic.

Although Walter rejects Marian as the heroine of the romance plot due to her overtly “masculine” qualities, Marian is not desexualized as a result. In fact, some critics imply that her moustache suggests over-sexuality (Miller, R. Collins). Marian is clearly attracted to the novel’s fascinating villain, Count Fosco. Ann Gaylin argues that “their similarities and attraction to each other provide a distinct counter-example to the traditional couple represented by Laura and Walter” (312). As Gaylin suggests, Fosco is a male double of Marian, matching her in wit and intellect. Just as Marian is the antithesis of a romance heroine, “Fosco is everything the conventions of romance do not allow the romance hero to be” (Taylor 297).

Fosco also challenges gender boundaries. Despite his inexplicable ability to control women, he himself is frequently feminized. His love of sugar and of fine clothing, and his almost motherly concern for his pets were marks of femininity in the Victorian era. Fosco is often directly compared to a woman. According to Marian, “He is as noiseless in a room as any of us women” and he appears to be “as nervously sensitive as the weakest of us” (W. Collins 217). She adds that he “devours pastry as I have never yet seen it devoured by any human beings but girls at boarding-schools” (220). It is not surprising, then, that Pedlar identifies “a mutual attraction between [Marian], a masculinized woman, and [Fosco], a feminized man” (“Drawing” 88).

According to Michael Taylor, Fosco is most irresistible to her when he is at his most effeminate, reciting Dante while he “struts before her in his role as ‘Man of Sentiment’”
Marian’s attraction to Fosco is always against her will. Upon meeting him, she writes in her diary, “I am almost afraid to confess it, even to these secret pages. The man has interested me, has attracted me, has forced me to like him” (W. Collins 213). She admits that the glitter of his eyes “forces me to look at him, and yet causes me sensations, when I do look, which I would rather not feel” (215). Fosco is quite overt about his admiration of Marian, however. Miller finds that “Walter’s aggressive indifference to Marian as a relevant sexual encounter is eventually belied when Count Fosco . . . takes a pronounced, even violent erotic interest in her” (207). Marian may not be as unattractive as we are led to believe; Miller suggests that Walter’s being “almost repelled” (W. Collins 35) by her face is due to his insecurity at confronting such a confident woman. Gindele agrees, stating, “The shock at Marian’s appearance comes only from Walter. Fosco is unreservedly attracted to her” (70).

Although Marian and Fosco are initially drawn to each other, there is never any hope of a relationship. Fosco is too obviously the villain of the piece, and Marian is too righteously angry at him—particularly after he takes advantage of her illness to read her private diary. Not only does Fosco violate her by reading her thoughts, but he adds his own inscription at the end, thanking her for the “unexpected intellectual pleasure” of reading her narrative and praising her as an “admirable woman” and “a person of similar sensibility” (W. Collins 330, 331). Miller suggests that Fosco literally rapes Marian while she is unconscious, but I do not find enough evidence to support actual rape. As Gindele argues, Fosco “lets her alone exactly because it’s her mind that is necessary to
him,” not her body (73). Indeed, the rape of Marian’s secret text may be viewed as an equally egregious violation. After that point, Marian’s story is told secondhand by Walter, and she no longer speaks for herself. Fosco’s invasive act succeeds in silencing her, at least to some extent, and her attraction to him gives way to fury and dread in the second half of the novel.

Because of Walter’s rejection of Marian and Marian’s subsequent rejection of Fosco, she is repeatedly ousted from the role of romance heroine. In fact, although the scene in which Walter meets Marian initially subverts reader expectations, it ultimately upholds tradition. The reader’s expectations of romance are briefly foiled when Marian is revealed to be “ugly;” yet his or her confidence in the conventions of the genre is quickly restored when Walter is repelled by Marian’s face. Marian does not look like a romance heroine, but based on Walter’s reaction to her, readers need not fear that she will fill that role. Instead, Walter soon finds the true object of his desires when he meets Laura, who is exactly the beautiful, passive, childlike woman expected by readers of conventional romance.

Hennelly questions why Laura, the traditional romance heroine, was necessary: “What is not understandable, especially in light of Collins’ usual candor regarding the themes of detecting and actualizing the secret self and of revitalizing Victorian mores, is his reluctance to satisfy the wishes of most of his readers by providing for the eventual union of Marian and Hartright” (102). It is true that if Marian and Walter were to become romantically involved, the romance genre would be neatly subverted. The beautiful Laura would be left to her own devices, while the mannish, spinster sister would find true love. It seems that Collins was not bold enough to subvert the romance genre
completely—perhaps he did not feel, as Hennelly does, that most Victorian readers would wish to have their expectations of the romance heroine disappointed. Ann Gaylin argues convincingly that while Collins hoped to use subversive situations “to critique normative gender ideology,” he is hindered by his simultaneous attempt to court “the more conventional readership he needed for popular success” (326).

The angelic Laura seems to be the obvious choice to fill the role of romance heroine, especially because Walter foreshadows his attraction to her within the first pages of the novel. Pedlar explains that in melodrama, “as in Gothic or sentimental romances, it is the heroine who is emblematic of virtue; typically young, beautiful, innocent, powerless, she is placed in danger and figures in the plot as the victim of oppression, which may be sexual” (“Drawing” 74). Walter describes Laura as:

[A] light, youthful figure. . . . Her hair is of so faint and pale a brown—not flaxen, and yet almost as light; not golden, and yet almost as glossy—that it nearly melts, here and there, into the shadow of the hat. . . . Lovely eyes in colour, lovely eyes in form—large and tender and quietly thoughtful—but beautiful above all things in the clear truthfulness of look that dwells in their inmost depths, and shines through all their changes of expression with the light of a purer and a better world. (52)

Laura appears to be a nearly ideal romance heroine. But in contrast to Laura’s bland beauty, Taylor finds Marian to be “a far more interesting free spirit . . . Laura’s dark but liberated counterpart, as unconstrained—apparently—by the traditional role of heroines of romance as she is by stays” (290). Marian is granted freedom from convention, while
Laura becomes, in Taylor’s words, “the traditional wilting heroine of romance” with Walter as “her nineteenth-century surrogate for the medieval knight errant” (291, 289).

In splitting the role of the heroine of the romance plot and the heroine of the detective story among two separate (and starkly opposite) female characters, Collins’s novel embodies the exact problem with the female detective protested by Kathleen Gregory Klein. Marian may offer a realistic portrayal of a relatively empowered woman, but the emphatically masculine aspects that make her strong also make it impossible for Collins to allow her romantic and sexual satisfaction. In Collins’s mind, and in the minds of Victorian readers, “masculine” women—while interesting and admirable for their boldness—are not proper wives or lovers.

Despite the limitations inherent in splitting the role of heroine, it is worth considering how the different strengths of the two women complement each other. They often appear as two halves of a couple, giving rise to suggestions of lesbianism in some critical work (see for example Fu and Miller). When Marian contemplates Laura’s impending marriage to Sir Percival Glyde, she writes, “Before another month is over our heads, she will be his Laura instead of mine! His Laura!” (W. Collins 182). In addition, Marian always “speaks for both of them,” much as a man would speak for his wife in a Victorian marriage. Laura is not given a narrative voice in the novel. Although there is certainly a basis for a retrospective reading of the women as lesbians, I agree with Pedlar’s argument that a more accurate point of view is to see them as another iteration of the many ‘doubles’ that are inherent in sensation fiction.

Pedlar also explains that “Marian and Laura are doubles in the sense that either could stand as the heroine of the novel,” because they are opposites both physically and
in personality. As “half-sisters, together they make a whole” (“Drawing” 78). In fact, Pedlar believes a more ideal heroine of melodrama would be developed through a combination of the two women: “Laura’s passivity, then, is the counterpart to Marian’s activity, and if Laura comes closest to the melodramatic convention in terms of physical appearance and moral purity, Marian is a more obvious candidate for a different understanding of the role of heroine in terms of action” (“Drawing” 75). Similarly, I argue that the combination of those traits is necessary for the heroine of detective fiction to succeed.

Richard Collins notes that the oppositions between Marian and Laura also are reflected in their activities throughout the novel, “especially in the arts that Walter associates with them”:

Laura’s talent is for music, the least material art, and is associated with watercolors, the least material of painting media; Marian does not know ‘one note of music,’ but at such mathematical and geometric pursuits as ‘chess, backgammon, ecarte, and (with the inevitable female drawbacks) even at billiards as well,’ she claims to be able to ‘match’ Walter, who associates her with the most material of arts, sculpture. (147)

Collins highlights additional points of contrast between the two women, noting that the opposite of Marian’s supposed masculinity, suggested by her darkness and hairiness, is the childish asexuality displayed by Laura’s lightness and simplicity (155).

The contrasts that Wilkie Collins establishes between Marian and Laura support the idea that he purposely split the two main female characters in his novel in an attempt to achieve his goal of overturning stereotypes about gender roles, while still satisfying the
conventions of romance. A single heroine could not have accomplished both of these aims, and Collins was unwilling to go so far as to break the conventions of romance. However, as Hennelly asserts, “Collins’s actual admiration for Marian over Laura seems quite obvious in the text” (103). Certainly, Collins had little admiration for the typical, transparent heroine of romance.

As noted earlier, one of the main differences between Marian and Laura is their agency in the narrative—while Marian speaks, Laura is merely spoken for by other characters. Laura’s story of her experiences at the asylum is conveniently “locked away” in Laura’s subconscious, just as Laura herself was locked away in the asylum. But Marian is not the only female narrator in *The Woman in White*. Other women who take temporary control of the narrative include housekeeper Eliza Michelson, cook Hester Pinhorn, and Jane Gould. Since one guideline of my framework suggests the importance of hearing more than one female voice, it is important to consider what these female narrators add to the story, and whether anything close to Klein’s heteroglossia emerges from the otherwise male-dominated text.

These other voices share the common characteristic of being working class, and all have severe limitations placed on their narratives. Hester Pinhorn begins her statement by acknowledging, “I have never learnt to read or write. . . . I humbly beg the gentleman who takes this down to put my language right as he goes on” (W. Collins 392). This statement confirms that Walter himself has actually written the narrative for Hester, and she grants him permission to take liberties in editing her statement as he chooses. Therefore, Hester’s narrative must be disqualified from consideration as a truly separate female voice.
Jane Gould’s statement about preparing Anne’s body for burial is merely a single paragraph and reveals nothing of her character, which leaves only Eliza Michelson’s story to be considered as an additional female’s voice in *The Woman in White*. Mrs. Michelson’s narrative persona is convincing as that of a household servant and pious minister’s wife: practical, straightforward, and often unselfconsciously humorous. The major limitation of her narrative is that she is one of the least involved characters in the novel. She is completely detached from the action of the plot, serving simply as a convenient observer to fill in missing details. In addition, Mrs. Michelson proves to be useless in actually helping the main characters solve the mystery. She cannot aid Walter by recalling the exact day that Laura left for London. Significantly, it is a male cabbie who is finally able to help Walter, and he remembers not only the date, but every detail of Laura’s appearance and her luggage. It seems that it is not Mrs. Michelson’s working-class position in society that is to blame for her uselessness in aiding Walter—it is her gender. All three potential alternative women’s voices prove to encumber rather than support the position of women in the novel.

Marian herself has already been identified as the primary female narrative voice in *The Woman in White*, although she loses her control of the narrative at the midpoint of the novel and never regains it. Richard Collins finds it significant that at the end of the novel, “Walter does not have the last word but gives it to Marian” (159). But he also notes that this noble gesture only proves that Walter achieved what he views as his rightful place at the head of the household, subordinating both Marian and Laura (159). Marian’s voice is only allowed into the narrative by Walter’s permission. Gaylin observes: “Women have very different narrative opportunities than men do in the novel.
Although it seems Marian and Walter contribute equally to solving the mystery, Walter ultimately controls what is told to whom” because he compiles the narrative and is empowered to edit the contributions of all the other narrators (305).

Because Marian’s diary provides satisfying insight into her character and emotions, if only for a portion of the novel, readers may question why the voices of Anne Catherick, her mother, and Madame Fosco are never heard directly. Their points of view would have made intriguing additions. Anne is labeled “mad” and is literally or figuratively shut up for most of the novel. *The Woman in White* might have been far more subversive had Collins given a supposedly insane woman a narrative voice, much as Charlotte Perkins Gilman did at the turn of the century in *The Yellow Wall-paper*. Anne’s mother Mrs. Catherick is restricted in much the same way as her daughter, but the only story she tells is through a cagey, guarded letter to Walter.

Madame Fosco also is an enigma. Marian describes the Countess as an unpleasant but powerful woman before her marriage. Now, “[f]or the common purposes of society, the extraordinary change thus produced in her, is, beyond all doubt, a change for the better, seeing that it has transformed her into a civil, silent, unobtrusive woman, who is never in the way. How far she is really reformed or deteriorated in her secret self, is another question” (W. Collins 213). Marian’s criticism of Victorian mores leads the reader to believe that she considers Madame Fosco to have “deteriorated” as opposed to “reformed.” The Countess spends her days rolling cigarettes—and spying—for the Count. Because readers are never told what Madame Fosco is thinking, the mystery of Fosco’s thrall over her remains just that. Despite Marian’s concerns that the woman’s pent-up rage might burst forth at any moment, it never does, and she seems content to
continue to worship Fosco even after his death. Again, Collins might have told a much more subversive story, and answered many questions, by allowing readers to hear directly from Madame Fosco.

By stifling several of the more interesting female voices, Collins participates in Victorian gender ideology rather than subverting it. By choosing which voices can be heard, he plays the traditional patriarchal role, permitting access to the stories of women who provide the practical information typically valued by men, and shutting up the emotional stories of those women who seem to suffer the most torment in the novel: Laura, Anne, Mrs. Catherick, and Madame Fosco. Although I would argue that Collins’s intentions to subvert gender expectations are clear, he repeatedly falls back on them in spite of himself. Heteroglossia is never achieved. Gaylin agrees, stating, “The story becomes one of male pens competing to write women’s stories, as well as their own” (319). This conflict is exactly what Klein argues is wrong with many detective stories featuring female investigators.

Despite his failure to let women tell their own stories, the feminist issues placed within the text support the idea that Collins intended to criticize Victorian gender ideology. As my framework suggests, the presence of feminist issues is necessary to creating an environment in which the female hero—and the romance/detective fiction combination itself—can succeed. Pedlar finds that many of the novel’s issues were not only feminist, but quite topical: “[B]y focusing on the problems of an unsuccessful marriage and the wrongs committed with regard to female ownership of property, Collins was dealing with matters that were the subject of contemporary interest” (“Woman” 57).
Laura’s plight as a wealthy woman being tricked into marrying a debt-ridden fraud is a melodramatic illustration of the very real problems of Victorian property law.

The difficulty in properly defining “feminine” and “masculine” is another important issue addressed in the novel through characters like Marian and Fosco. Fu notes that in *The Woman in White*, Collins “intertwin[es] characterization analysis with gender politics” by blurring gender boundaries between men and women (184). Victorian society was extremely interested in gender confusion during the mid-1800s, making this concern a contemporary issue (R. Collins 132). In addition to Marian and Fosco, the effeminate Frederick Fairlie provides another example of mixed gender. Even Sir Percival Glyde seems to be locked in a constant struggle to prove his manhood, with symbols of impotence surrounding his characterization (Miller). Although Collins creates a variety of androgynous/mixed-gender characters, he certainly shows less tolerance for womanish men than for mannish women. While Marian is admired, Frederick Fairlie and Glyde are repeatedly mocked and derided (R. Collins 143).

In addition to the confusion of gender roles in the novel, Collins explores whether a definition of “woman” actually exists. Even the novel’s title, “the woman in white,” implies woman as a blank. Anne is the obvious referent of the title, and she is completely defined by what others say about her. She embodies very different ideas to different characters. Pedlar points out that she represents a threat to Fosco and Percival, she symbolizes hope to Marian and Laura, she is an object of desire to Walter, and she is a beloved child to kindly Mrs. Clements. She literally stands for the blank page in the register at Welmingham church, and—like that page—she must be removed from the story. Pedlar finds that Madame Fosco functions as another woman in white. She states,
“The remodeling that Fosco has achieved with his previously ‘wayward’ wife is similar to that achieved by the moral management of the insane. . . . What is remarkable is how completely Madame Fosco’s personality is obliterated. She has become almost as much a blank as the woman in white” (“Drawing” 84, 86).

Collins is progressive simply by virtue of his choice to confront these feminist issues, but once again, he is unable to throw off convention completely. Although he seems to regret and critique the oppression of women such as Anne Catherick and Madame Fosco, the second half of the novel reveals that Walter and Marian treat Laura in much the same repressive way. Miller notes that themes of sequestration of women abound in the novel. He writes, “The novel does not of course approve of these restraining orders, which originate in unambiguously criminal depravity, but . . . it is not above exploiting them as the stick with which to contrast and complement the carrot of a far more ordinary and acceptable mode of sequestration” (199).

This ordinary and acceptable sequestration occurs when Laura is recovering from her experience in the asylum. The daily walks and busy-work provided for her by her supposedly loving friends “is effected by moral management in all but name”—the same moral management used in the asylum and by Fosco (Pedlar “Drawing” 86). Perhaps the most objectionable portion of Laura’s recovery is Walter’s infantilization of her. Walter lies to her outright, making her feel useful by assigning her sketches to complete and tricking her into thinking she is being paid for them. He exploits the very sense of independence that he claims to be trying to foster. Taylor states that Walter and Marian “seem to be the ringleaders of a larger conspiracy at work in the book to ensure that all
the proprieties—social, sexual, literary—are properly maintained” (291). Laura is kept “locked into her stereotypical romance role” as a childlike woman.

The treatment of Laura by the paternal Walter and the patriarchal legal system already suggest difficulty with the next requirement of my framework for the ideal detective novel/romance: having the heroine work independently of the law and sometimes in tandem with criminals. Yet Collins does repeatedly challenge legal authority in *The Woman in White*. Hennelly states, “Significantly for detection, the Law is also untrustworthy and misleading if used alone to solve Life’s mysteries because in Fosco’s employ of the Law against Hartright it works ‘with the customary exaggeration and the customary perversion of the truth’” (W. Collins qtd. in Hennelly 95). Collins subverts the patriarchal establishment by showing how easily Fosco and Glyde pervert the law. Hennelly points out that Hartright acts for himself, going around the law to find answers, while “Fosco works within the law” to do his evil: “The criminal becomes the ‘secret self’ of the oppressive police force” (101).

Many critics believe that Fosco speaks for Collins during his rant about crime and society in the summer house at Blackwater Park. Gindele states, “Fosco celebrates the victory of the criminal over Society . . . and so assumes a Romantic opposition to a stolid status quo” (74). The Count undermines the patriarchal rule of law by manipulating the system to his own uses. True to form as his double, Marian also uses manipulations within the law to achieve her goals: “When Marian writes a second letter to the lawyer informing him of Sir Percival’s physical abuse of and threats to his wife, she considers her writing as a surrogate male power. . . . Marian refuses the role of feminine passivity in favor of linguistic, legal, and later, physical action” (316). She asserts herself using
the rule of law as a tool. Therefore, she does satisfy my framework in part: rather than surrendering to the patriarchal legal system, Marian is intelligent enough to make the law work for her cause.

Overall, it appears that Collins finds the mechanisms of the law outmoded. He shows that intelligent individuals can find success in working around and within the law, manipulating it to their own uses. Miller observes that in *The Woman in White*, the “characters who rely on utterly unlawful standards of evidence like intuition, coincidence, [and] literary connotation get closer to what will eventually be revealed as the truth” (194). Indeed, intuition and coincidence are introduced into *The Woman in White* through the influence of the romance genre, and represent a positive result of combining romance elements into the mystery plot.

The penultimate aspect of my framework that must be considered in evaluating *The Woman in White* is the novel’s ending. Ideally, the ending of a novel combining romance and detective fiction and featuring a female detective should be left somewhat open. Klein’s work implies that an open ending subverts the conservative implications of the romance genre’s predictable happy ending and the detective genre’s cyclical return the status quo. Unfortunately, Collins’s novel fails to overcome the conventions of the romance and detective genres, as many critics note. Miller states, “The novel needs to realize the normative requirements of the heterosexual ménage whose happy picture concludes it. This conclusion, of course, marks the most banal moment in the text” (198). Typical of the Victorian novel, Collins’s work ends with a picture of a traditional family, with all gender questions apparently resolved. Gaylin finds that what began as a novel with “a space of female narrative activity and mobility” becomes “contained and
enclosed in reassuring, conventional, patriarchal structures,” which “ultimately reaffirms the social and institutional status quo” (305, 306). In fact, Gaylin observes that all of Collins’s novels retreat toward convention in their endings, suggesting “a critical but not radical attitude toward gender ideology” (327). Collins wants to suggest change, but he is not yet fully committed to it himself.

Having considered every other element of my framework, it remains to be decided whether Marian is successful in her dual role as detective and realistic woman. Because she is clearly excluded as the heroine of the romance plot, her realism as a successful, fulfilled woman is already limited. If she appeared asexual throughout the novel, it would be easier to imagine that she is completely fulfilled in her final role as a spinster sister, the desexualized member of a ménage a trios. But Marian is portrayed in the first half of the story as much more highly sexed than Laura, and it is hard to view her eventual nun-like fate as a convincingly “successful” outcome. Still, Gindele believes Marian deserves some credit for turning Fosco’s romantic interest against him: In allowing Marian and Laura to escape, “Fosco’s one good action is attributable to her influence and she must therefore recognize her power in a role she has previously rejected—that of passive romantic heroine” (75). Perhaps Marian comes through as a non-traditional romantic heroine after all, though it seems to be an inadvertent success.

Marian’s final accomplishments as a detective are also questionable, despite the promise she shows in the first half of the novel. Before condemning her weaknesses, however, it is important to consider her successes. Gaylin notes that Marian’s ambiguous gender identity helps her in her quest to discover the truth about Percival Glyde’s intentions: “Neither completely masculine nor feminine, Marian’s indeterminate status
places her in an intermediary position between the men and women in the novel” (315). This intermediary position proves to be the perfect location for asking questions and uncovering secrets. Marian insists on extracting details from a little boy in Limmeridge who claims to have seen a ghost, ignoring the schoolmaster’s protests and confidently “question[ing] him directly” (W. Collins 86). She also questions housemaids on several occasions and her knowledge of household management (as well as her gender) enables her to make the most probing questions seem innocent and natural. After ascertaining that all servants had been accounted for during the appearance of a mysterious figure, Marian reflects, “Putting together what I observed for myself in the library and what I have just heard from Laura’s maid, one conclusion seems inevitable. The figure we saw at the lake, was not the figure of Madame Fosco, of her husband, or of any of the servants” (W. Collins 261-262). This combination of observation, interrogation, and deductive reasoning is typical of a successful detective of either gender.

Marian’s attention to detail in her observations is remarkable. Her diary itself substantiates this skill—its comprehensive accounts of daily life record important details that help unravel the novel’s mysteries. At one point, Marian correctly surmises that Count Fosco has tampered with a letter she wrote, noting, “I had originally closed the envelope, in the usual way, by moistening the adhesive point and pressing it on the paper beneath; and, when I now tried it with my finger, after a lapse of full three-quarters of an hour, the envelope opened on the instant, without sticking or tearing” (W. Collins 251). Her awareness of minute detail is also evident in Marian’s ability to interpret human reactions and read facial expressions accurately. She judges that Count Fosco knows little about Anne Catherick simply by “the eager curiosity of the Count’s look and
manner. . . . There are many kinds of curiosity, I know—but there is no misinterpreting the curiosity of blank surprise” (W. Collins 236).

In addition to her skills as an observer and interrogator, Marian has a bold propensity to take risks. Hennelly argues that of all the characters in the novel, “Marian is perhaps the most dramatic example of the true detective, one who illustrates both risk and self-control when she crawls along the veranda roof to eavesdrop on Fosco and Glyde” (104). This moment is one of the most exciting and suspenseful scenes in the novel. In an important symbolic gesture, Marian removes her petticoats, leaving the exterior limitations of her womanhood behind, before crawling out on the veranda roof on a stormy night. Unfortunately, the entire scheme is wasted because Marian falls ill after being soaked with rain, and Fosco reads her diary and realizes that she was eavesdropping. Gaylin views Marian’s illness as punishment for her “transgression of the unwritten laws of proper female behavior” (309).

After discovering Fosco’s violation, Marian seems cowed into a more traditional role, taking on “woman’s work” and remaining in the background for the remainder of the novel. Miller states that at this point, “women cease being active participants in the drama that nonetheless remains to be played out (for over a hundred pages) ‘man to man’” (210). It is Walter who puts the missing pieces of Laura’s identity into place and confronts Fosco. Although Marian begs to help him, she is denied the chance to complete her investigative work. Instead, she is relegated to a purely domestic role. Gaylin states, “Just as Fosco’s writing in and on her textual body punishes her liminal act, it also removes from her the status of a liminally gendered subject” (318). Fosco’s
act of textual rape has completely “feminized” Marian, and as a detective, she is basically taken off the case.

Each guideline within my framework has been partially satisfied and partially complicated by the characters and events of *The Woman in White*. Those complications support my argument that unless all guidelines of my framework are satisfied within a work, the female detective fails to be believable as a woman, fails to be successful as a detective, or both. This analysis of *The Woman in White* also shows how the inclusion of conventions of romance can both help and hinder the development of a truly empowered female investigator. While Marian displays pioneering individualism and unusual agency, she does not ultimately succeed. Of course, as the first in a long line of female investigators, we might ask too much of her to be perfectly in accordance with post-feminist guidelines for an empowered heroine. As noted in the Introduction of this study, the guidelines of the framework must be interpreted within the limitations of the era. But as Gaylin points out, although the novel ends with Fosco dead and Marian put back in her “proper place” as a Victorian woman, “it is the defiant Marian and Fosco who linger in our minds, long after we close the book” (327).

Marian leaves a legacy for future female detectives to fulfill. For this reason, it is necessary to move ahead in the timeline of the development of the female detective and examine how the situation develops in more modern incarnations.
Chapter 2: The Nancy Drew Mysteries

Since debuting in 1930, Nancy Drew books have sold more than seventy million copies worldwide, and remain popular among young readers who enjoy the books passed down by their mothers and grandmothers. Nancy has been touted as “a cultural icon and a household name” (Cornelius 111). Stepping beyond the boundaries of children’s literature, Melanie Rehak identifies Nancy as “one of the bestselling characters of all time” (xii). Nancy is a foundational fictional detective who has profoundly influenced every female detective coming after her (Calhoun-French 15). Her name has become almost synonymous with “female detective.” Due to the incredible popularity and the longevity of the Nancy Drew series, it is important to include the famous girl detective in any study of the detective genre, particularly when considering the role of the female sleuth.

Although the original Nancy Drew books focus on mystery plots with only tantalizing hints of Nancy’s growing romance with boyfriend Ned Nickerson, the updated Nancy Drew Files series introduced in 1986 has an equal focus on detection and romance. In both series, there is a clear effort to portray Nancy as an empowered female detective. Comparing the two sets of books using the framework established earlier in this study offers an interesting analysis of the changes that an increased focus on romance brings to the depiction of the popular girl detective.

Before comparing the details of the original and Files series, it is important to summarize briefly the unorthodox history of the Nancy Drew character. She has evolved considerably since the 1930 publication of The Secret of the Old Clock, the first book in the original series. Nancy was created by Edward Stratemeyer of the Stratemeyer
Syndicate, an enormously successful publisher of books for children and young adults. The series’ predecessors were dime novels, domestic and Gothic fiction, and popular children’s series fiction (Christian-Smith 89). In a thorough synopsis of the history of the Nancy Drew series, Linda Christian-Smith points out that the female hero was still relatively unusual in juvenile series fiction until the Stratemeyer Syndicate began publishing (88). She notes that Nancy Drew was the “first major full-time detective in American girls’ series books” (90). Stratemeyer had high hopes for the series about the spunky girl detective, but he died in 1930 just before the publication of the first Nancy Drew book. His daughter Harriet then oversaw production of the series through the late 1970s.

Although the pseudonym Carolyn Keene appears on the cover of every Nancy Drew book, the Syndicate hired several different authors to write the books, providing them with a detailed plot outline for each volume. Mildred Wirt Benson was the author of most of the early Nancy Drew mysteries, producing book numbers 1-7 and 11-25 in the series (Christian-Smith 91). A spunky young woman in her own right, Benson described herself as “a journalist, aviator, explorer, and early commentator on women’s rights” (91-92). Benson once stated of Nancy: “I sort of liked the character from the beginning. Now, that kind of woman is common, but then it was a new concept, though not to me. I just naturally thought that girls could do the things boys did” (qtd. in Christian-Smith 105). Harriet Stratemeyer was also considered a feminist for the era, running her late father’s company at a time when other women stayed at home with their families. However, Harriet often served as the conservative hand keeping Benson’s more vivacious Nancy Drew in check (92). Still, Christian-Smith identifies both Harriet and
Mildred as the source of the feminist tendencies that many readers see in Nancy, stating that Nancy emerges “from the traditional and independent sides of these two women and their struggles to transcend some of the confines of the traditional femininities of mid-twentieth century America” (92). Nancy’s roots seem to lie in feminist ground, but critics still find many instances where the series betrays more conservatism than can be justified even by its period of publication.

The first critics writing about the series in the 1930s were divided over Nancy’s character just as modern critics have been. Deborah Siegel explains, “While some lauded what they saw as images of more active and adventurous girls in books, others complained about the relative dearth of satisfying story lines” (166). To some critics of the 1930s, books featuring boy adventurers were still more complex and interesting. But most critiques of the original Nancy Drew series are post-second-wave-feminist reflections. Carolyn G. Heilbrun admits, “Certainly Nancy Drew cannot speak for women of color or poor women” (66). But Heilbrun, a writer of mystery fiction herself, is also among Nancy’s most passionate defenders. She calls the influential female detective “a moment in the history of feminism” despite the limitations of the series (63). Heilbrun insists that the original books must be considered within the historical period that they were written: “To understand [Nancy’s] significance we must look at her as she appeared in 1930 and the years immediately following, and not as we look back on her now with all our newfound sensibilities and critical sophistications” (63). Heilbrun’s identification of Nancy as a feminist role model is based mainly on the character’s freedom and independence for a girl of her era. But even as Heilbrun celebrates Nancy’s feminism in the mid-1900s, she admits that Nancy’s “class and the fact of her ready
money and upper-middle-class WASP assumptions are what make her an embarrassment today” (66).

Many critics find race and class biases in the original series that seem extreme even for the 1930s and 1940s. Rehak explains, “As far back as 1948, concerned mothers and fathers had been writing in to Grosset & Dunlap about the prejudice and racism they saw scattered throughout the [Stratemeyer] Syndicate’s books” (243). Readers protested the use of uneducated-sounding dialects for nonwhite characters, and villains who were often either foreigners or non-Caucasians. The period in which the books were written does not provide an adequate excuse for some of the problems in the portrayal of Nancy as an empowering feminist role model for her impressionable young readers.

In 1958, the publishers responded to the growing criticism by initiating a major revision project on all previously published Nancy Drew stories. The books were rewritten extensively, both to eliminate racism and to make them more action-packed (Rehak 246). The edits were rushed and, according to Rehak, removed many of Mildred Benson’s more liberal characterizations of Nancy. Instead, they portrayed a conservative 1950s-era world for women, in which “everyone gets married, some just more happily than others” (Rehak 249).

Interestingly, Nancy’s famous blue roadster has become a central symbol for the arguments surrounding empowerment in the Nancy Drew books. Heilbrun states, “The blue roadster was certainly for me, in my childhood, the mark of independence and autonomy; the means to get up and go” (65). By contrast, Ellen Brown argues, “The convertible thatprotects, propels, and surrounds Nancy—on the surface a sign of mobility, freedom, and independence—the machine culturally associated with male
sexuality, is in reality the thing that entraps her. Nancy’s cruising around in her blue roadster is the symbol of her inability to dislodge herself from the masculine world” (8). She is driven by “the phallus of patriarchy” as she obeys speeding laws and traffic codes in a car given to her by her wealthy father (Brown 8). This debate over a single symbol within the series underscores the variety of interpretations that the Nancy Drew books inspire.

Due to the popularity of the original series, a variety of efforts to create spin-offs have been undertaken, most with limited success. The Nancy Drew Files series is a relatively recent attempt which few critics have considered in analyzing Nancy Drew. It is the longest-running and most popular spin-off, published between 1986 and 1997. In the Files, the Nancy Drew detective novel is infused with elements of the teen romance in an attempt to make Nancy a more updated, realistic character—and perhaps to compensate for the problematic nature of contemporary readings of the original series. Siegel quotes an advertisement for The Nancy Drew Files which reads:

Nancy Drew is back, transcending the decades to land in the 1980s. While the details have been updated . . . the essential Nancy is the same level-headed, good-girl heroine earlier generations of readers loved and admired. In retrospect, Nancy was always an independent, take-charge young woman long before it was fashionable to be one. She still is today. Returning in a new era and likely to be as popular as ever, Nancy Drew is proving herself a girl for all seasons as well as all readers. (161-162)

This advertisement highlights the company’s effort to market the new Nancy as the same old character with a modern twist. However, the actual changes reflected in the series
were fairly dramatic. The vice president of Simon & Schuster said of the original Nancy Drew books, “The characters are showing signs of age and need updating. Nancy, for example, does not reflect the reality of 1980s girlhood” (qtd. in Rehak 300). This frank statement reveals the extent to which S & S felt the need to reinvent Nancy for the new series. The publishers included many aspects that Rehak believes the original creators would have disapproved, such as “a flashy car, designer jeans, credit cards, and even the occasional foray to a rock concert” (300).

As previously mentioned, one of the biggest differences between the original Nancy Drew series and the Files is the latter’s drastically increased attention to romantic relationships. While solving mysteries is still Nancy’s main focus in the Files series, the mysteries often involve her own love life or the romantic entanglements of others. The 1980s marked an explosion in the popularity of romance fiction, leading to a particularly intense interest in combining romance with other genres. Kristin Ramsdell explains the skyrocketing sales of teen romances in the same decade, which may explain why S & S chose to combine genres to sell their updated Nancy Drew series:

In 1980, noting the popularity of its light, innocent romances sold through its school book clubs, Scholastic launched the Wildfire Romance series, and in doing so, changed the way books were marketed to young adults for the foreseeable future. . . . The series approach was as popular with YAs as it was with adults, and the young adult romance consumers soon added appreciably to the sudden romance boom. (10-11)

The Files books entered the market along with many other YA series as part of this romance boom.
Romance in the original Nancy Drew series is extremely limited. Bobbie Ann Mason finds that “the books affirm a double-standard for female sexuality: attention to beauty and clamps on virginity” (65). Nancy is always glamorous and charming, but she is shut off to emotional and physical desires. Cornelius laments, “Poor Ned Nickerson! It took him over forty years to even get to first base. Ned and Nancy’s dates are constantly interrupted by car chases, stake-outs, and breaking and entering” (120). Ned first enters the scene in the 1932 book *The Clue in the Diary*, and has provided the muscle to complement Nancy’s brainpower ever since.

Nancy’s relationship with Ned grew perceptibly in the mid-1940s as a result of fan mail demanding more information on their vague romance. According to Rehak, Harriet Stratemeyer chose to make romance more central as the series progressed. Harriet eventually gave to Benson “the task of trying to make modest Nancy’s interest in the opposite sex a bit more overt” (Rehak 205). Harriet requested in a letter, “Please give a modern twist to the conversation and actions which have to do with this angle of the plot” (qtd. in Rehak 205). As a result, the courtship of Nancy and Ned progressed slightly in *The Secret of the Old Attic*, in which Nancy anxiously hopes for Ned’s invitation to a big college dance (206).

Mason complains about Ned’s consistently flat character. She writes, “Ned is a college football star who is as bland as Nancy is blonde” (62). The *Files* series does not do much to enliven Ned. But as Rehak notes, “The tension between Nancy’s sleuthing and her boyfriend [is] now front and center” (302). Rehak quotes one unnamed reviewer of the new series as saying, “It is the 1980s. Men can wear jewelry. Women can run for vice-president. And Nancy Drew can finally feel tingly when she gets kissed” (302).
Overall, the romance subplot of the *Files* books seems to add realism to the portrayal of Nancy as a normal teenage girl.

Although the *Files* series sold moderately well, it did not live up to the popularity of the original books. In 1992, *Ms.* magazine complained that Nancy Drew was “currently evolving toward a Barbie doll detective” (qtd. in Rehak 306). However, in another article questioning the feminist subtext of Nancy Drew, Ellen Brown refers to Nancy as “Barbie with brains” and intends it as a compliment (7). With such a variety of definitions as to what is appropriate feminist behavior, and with two very different Nancy Drew series to consider, a standard is required to determine whether Nancy was ever a successfully empowered female detective, and whether she improves or falls apart in the “modernized,” romance-infused series.

Each of the guidelines of my framework provides a basis of comparison between the original and the 1986 Nancy Drew series. The original series will be evaluated bearing in mind that, as Heilbrun indicated, it can be comparatively assessed solely within the standards of its time. Only elements of Nancy’s character and experience that could have been labeled as conservative in the 1930s and 1940s can be criticized fairly. Likewise, expectations of the *Files* series will be based on the social consciousness of the 1980s.

The first guideline to be considered is the idea that the heroine should be a believable woman. In this area, Nancy’s physical appearance immediately sets her apart from the earlier analysis of the fictional female investigator Marian Halcombe. Unlike Collins’s female detective, Nancy Drew is frequently described as being appealing and attractive. On the first page of *The Clue of the Tapping Heels* (1939), readers find a
typical portrayal of the original Nancy Drew: “Her deep blue eyes sparkled with excitement and her golden curls shone” (1). Fifty years later, the first page of the *Files* book *Last Dance* (1989) includes a similar description of how “Nancy’s shoulder-length reddish blond hair took on a metallic glow” under nightclub lights (1). Nancy is always blonde with blue eyes, and always sparkling and glowing (both in appearance and personality). Her hair is never out of place and she never gets a run in her stockings, making her seem a bit too perfect to be realistic. Her portrayal as a traditionally attractive, blonde, blue-eyed heroine limits the ability of readers to relate to Nancy, even though they may still admire or live vicariously through her. Her appearance could be alienating to young women who do not conform to the traditional blue-eyed, blonde standard of beauty that the books celebrate. For example, Christian-Smith’s sociological study of readers of Nancy Drew investigates the response of readers from minority backgrounds to the original Nancy Drew series. One African-American former reader reported that she “was put off at first by the pictures of Nancy—you know, blonde and light skin. I had trouble identifying with Nancy” (qtd. in Christian-Smith 104). Still, most of Christian-Smith’s African-American respondents were able to identify with Nancy’s adventurous spirit, if not with her physical appearance. While Nancy’s looks might be too flawless to be believable and too traditional to appeal to all readers, her bold attitude may be realistic enough to compensate.

Many of Nancy’s critics pinpoint another aspect that leads to lack of realism in the books. As Christian-Smith states, “Despite being clubbed, knocked out, and imprisoned, Nancy rebounds unscathed, solves the mystery, and restores order” (89). In both the original series and the *Files*, Nancy seems to bounce back unharmed from an
incredible variety of physical injuries. Certainly, this invincibility is more a convention of the hardboiled detective than of the wilting romance heroine. Her fortitude may not be entirely believable, but at least Nancy is not slowed down by the stereotypically female weakness that hinders Marian Halcombe throughout *The Woman in White*. Nancy could eavesdrop in the rain for hours with impunity.

Heteroglossia, or the rich presence of a variety of voices, is a second guideline identified in my framework as important to a successful blending of detective fiction and romance. Instead of focusing on one female detective, Kathleen Gregory Klein argues that a variety of diverse female voices and debates should exist. The major limitation to heteroglossia in both the original Nancy Drew and *Files* series is simply the third-person narrative voice. Although the narrative is nearly always limited to Nancy’s point of view, none of the women in the series actually speak for themselves, as Marian does in *The Woman in White*. Instead, the disembodied third-person narrator (composed of the various authors representing “Carolyn Keene”) indirectly controls the depiction of women in the series.

In her discussion of Nancy Drew, Brown argues from a feminist perspective that discourse needs multiple voices for women to be truly heard in a patriarchal society. She describes this heteroglossic speech as “Messy. Multivoiced, multigendered, multidiscoursed, multicultural . . . colloquial” (17). Interestingly, Benson was specifically criticized by the Stratemeyer Syndicate for using colloquialisms when she introduced Nancy’s best friends, cousins Bess Marvin and George Fayne, to the series in 1931. Benson clearly identifies with George, a brash tomboy. In a letter to Benson, Syndicate editor Edna Stratemeyer wrote, “Among the changes we were forced to make
was to soften the boyish glibness and swagger of George Fayne . . . as well as to . . .
delete a number of colloquialisms” in George’s speech (qtd. in Rehak 173-174). This
letter reveals that some early attempts to bring less traditional voices into the Nancy
Drew series were censored.

Bess and George appeared for the first time in The Secret of Shadow Ranch. Rehak calls them, along with Nancy, “the three female musketeers—pretty, timid Bess; rough, athletic George; and, indescribably, almost inscrutably fascinating Nancy” (142). Rehak believes the introduction of the two less-perfect friends makes it easier for young readers to identify with the characters of the series. Bess and George are nowhere near as stereotypically faultless as Nancy, and are likable for their flaws. Christian-Smith performed a sociological study of adults who read Nancy Drew books as children, and she notes that women often specifically mention George as a favorite. She writes, “Several of the present and past readers of Nancy Drew comment that Nancy Drew and George Fayne taught them that a girl can be intelligent, brave, and resourceful: in other words, a hero” (102). Apparently, Benson was not the only woman to identify with the tomboy.

In contrast to Christian-Smith’s findings, Mason argues that Bess and George are too passive in the original series. She states, “Nancy sleuths virtually unaided. George and Bess spend most of their time hanging around, wringing their hands, window shopping or drinking tea, while Nancy figures and figures. They are recognizable only by their loyalty and as mirrors of Nancy’s two halves, demonstrating the extreme options open to females—tomboy and fluff-head” (56).
While critics disagree about the portrayal of Bess and George in the original series, any passivity in the cousins’ characters certainly disappears in the Files, where they provide indispensable aid to Nancy. For example, Bess saves the day in Trial By Fire, published in 1987. Nancy and Bess are caught snooping and held prisoner by criminals in an underground garage. Thinking quickly, Bess signals to Nancy to remind her that she is carrying a whistle. Nancy uses it to distract her captor. Meanwhile, Ned Nickerson tracks them down and provides the muscle for the rescue, tackling the villains. But it is Bess who actually puts the criminals behind bars—she had conveniently thought to switch on her hidden mini-recorder and tape their confession. Nancy admits after their escape, “If it hadn’t been for Bess . . . I’d probably still be standing there like an idiot” (140). This scene shows that in the Files series, not only is Nancy fallible, but when she does falter, other women have important roles to play.

Heteroglossia is limited in the original Nancy Drew series due to the class bias and racism that critics note. Christian-Smith points out, “Nancy’s interactions with individuals and groups across race and class differences reinforce her social position as superior knower to the dangerous and mysterious other” (101). In addition, “The mysteries until 1959 are overt tales of class and race supremacy where the poor and minorities are evil and to be feared” (100). I find this observation to be true in the 1930 book, The Hidden Staircase, in which an African-American housekeeper is repeatedly referred to as a “fat, slovenly-looking colored woman” (108) or a “negress,” and proves to be a villain. Mason also observes that in the original Nancy Drew books, “Criminals are dark-hued and poor” (68). She notes, “In the first eighteen books there are seventeen
blacks—all servants. They speak, grinning, in *Gone With The Wind* language, and they are often unpleasant” (Mason 69).

Christian-Smith’s study of readers of Nancy Drew questions why the books were so popular with a broad audience, despite these problems of race and class (Christian-Smith 87). She interviewed both adults who were former readers and current adolescent readers of the original series. One participant, Louise Jamison, an African-American woman who grew up in the 1950s, recalls that “reading Nancy Drew posed many contradictions around race and class” (103). Jamison read the books with the daughter of a white family for whom her mother worked as a housekeeper. Christian-Smith notes, “Nancy Drew was the vehicle for Louise to cross race and class boundaries in the imagination,” despite Jamison’s admitted dislike for the characterization of African-American in the novels (103). Louise Jamison’s mixed feelings reveal that many women categorize the original Nancy Drew as a hero, but that she is a flawed one. I find it interesting that despite the absence of diverse voices in the original Nancy Drew books (and the inclusion of patent racism), African-American readers were able to identify with many aspects of Nancy’s character. As mentioned earlier in my discussion of Nancy’s appearance, the girl detective’s bold, adventurous attitude is clearly appealing to all young readers, regardless of race or class. An audience that would have appreciated the incorporation of more diverse female voices has been in place since the Nancy Drew series began. These young women may have viewed Nancy’s adventures as escapist fantasy, and imagined her boldness as a level of empowerment that only a white, upper-class woman could enjoy. If the novels had portrayed diverse, alternative pictures of
empowered women, these readers might have been inspired by the idea that Nancy’s level of empowerment was possible for them as well.

The *Files* series includes a marked increase in positive portrayals of ethnic and socioeconomic diversity. Cornelius observes that in the 1980s series, Nancy is open and accepting. He focuses his evaluation on the *Files* book *The Key in the Satin Pocket*, in which Nancy helps two women who quite clearly appear to be a lesbian couple (123). Cornelius states, “One gets the sense that, in the revised series and the later paperback books, a diverse culture becomes an integral part of River Heights, and that Nancy, whose own high sense of morality sometimes acts as a center for those around her, would not tolerate intolerance” (122). The criminals in the *Files* series are nearly all Caucasian, and the names of minor figures are culturally diverse (Cornelius 122). In *Trial By Fire*, Nancy assists a female African-American reporter who is a particularly fully developed and interesting character. The reporter receives death threats as a result of a story she writes. When Nancy suggests she might want to enter protective custody until the case is solved, the reporter tells her firmly, “My parents risked their lives in the early sixties, marching for their civil rights. Now it’s my turn to risk mine to protect my first amendment rights. End of speech” (58).

Diverse women’s voices are plainly valued in the modernized *Files* series. Although greater recognition of the value of diversity is to be expected in a series published during the late 1980s than in the 1930s, I believe that this change in the Nancy Drew books is the result of more than a shift in cultural attitudes. Instead, the diverse female voices may be the result of the incorporation of elements of the romance genre into the Nancy Drew books. In her discussion of the “quaternity of goddesses” trope in
romance fiction, Anne K. Kaler explains that heteroglossic women’s voices are a traditional element of romance (63). She explains that in the archetypal pattern of the Great Goddess, the goddess is subdivided into female figures representing the various aspects of human personality and experience. Kaler notes that romance novels often have “secondary characters assume the particular qualities of the quaternity” (63). In modern romance novels, Kaler states, this archetypal pattern explains the variety of female characters that often advise, mislead, or otherwise affect the behavior of the heroine.

Consideration of heteroglossia leads into another of the guidelines of my framework: the consideration of feminist issues from the heroine’s point of view. In addressing women’s issues, the original Nancy Drew series is often quite successful. In the 1930s-era books, Nancy is not afraid to command action from those around her, an unusual trait in a woman of the time. In *The Hidden Staircase*, Nancy is home alone when the aggressive Nathan Gombet arrives and demands to see her father. Nancy is polite at first but begins to lose patience with his persistence: “‘Can’t you understand that my father is out of town?’ Nancy asked a trifle tartly, for she was beginning to be irritated’” (3). When Gombet still refuses to leave, Nancy loses her temper: “Although frightened at the man’s strange conduct, she faced him boldly. ‘I’ll not give you anything! Now get out of here!’” (6). She refuses to be intimidated, even when faced with an older, physically stronger man. Nancy’s firm, fearless words hark back to the quick temper of Collins’s female detective, Marian Halcombe.

Despite the strikingly feminist actions that Nancy regularly performs in the original series, some critics believe there are limits to her feminist voice. Christian-Smith finds that her authority is somewhat undermined by her close relationship with her father,
the famous criminal lawyer Carson Drew. In both the original and modernized series, Nancy frequently uses her father’s name to give her power that her age and gender might otherwise restrict. As Christian-Smith notes, “when it becomes known that Nancy is Carson’s daughter, any doubts about her credibility are dispelled” (97). This reliance on her father’s reputation subtly reveals Nancy’s dependence on male authority—although it also reveals her awareness of it, because she is able to exploit it. In *The Clue of the Tapping Heels*, published in 1939, Nancy finds herself at odds with the petulant Fred Bunce. When Bunce continues to threaten her, Nancy announces that her father, Carson Drew, might need to step in. The scene continues: “The girl found it difficult not to smile, for Fred Bunce appeared stunned when he heard her words. Only too well did he know the reputation the attorney had earned throughout the state. ‘Perhaps I spoke too hastily,’ he said uneasily” (18). Nancy gains respect in this scene for little more than mentioning her father’s name—a move which discloses the patriarchy inherent in her society. However, she is able to use her father’s name as a means to accomplish her own ends, which could also be interpreted as an appropriation of some of her father’s masculine power for herself. She does not step away from patriarchal conventions in the original series, but she does learn to work within them to accomplish her goals.

In contrast to the original series, the *Files* are largely silent on overtly feminist issues. They fit into a trend in late-1980s adult fiction described by Maureen Reddy as the “‘girls just want to have fun’ or ‘tart-noir’ sub-genre” of mystery fiction (205). Reddy explains that from this post-feminist standpoint, “all legitimate feminist gains have already been made and it is time for women to stop being so serious and start having fun (with men) again” (205). Therefore, the interests of the modernized Nancy are typically
“girly,” centered on meeting boys, dressing up for dates with them, and going to parties. Although she is allowed freedom to the degree that most teenagers would have expected in the 1980s, the bold feminist attitude that regularly emerges in the original series is lacking. Certainly, readers might expect more from her in the wake of 1970s feminism.

However, the series does succeed in making the post-feminist point that Nancy can be a fully, traditionally “feminine” young woman and still be tough. She embodies the conventional hero of both the romance and detective genres: beautiful, girlish, and also mentally and physically strong. She can beat up felons, leap from moving vehicles, and land airplanes. Yet at one point, Ned complains about a spot of nail polish that Nancy left on his dashboard. Nancy apologizes with some sarcasm, “My fault for trying to fix a nail in a moving vehicle” (Keene Trial 3). Though she does not constantly confront groundbreaking feminist issues, the Nancy of the Files series does seem more realistic and less intimidatingly perfect to modern female readers. Her new interest in traditionally “feminine” pursuits seems to be a direct result of the influence of the romance genre.

The quality of Nancy Drew’s relationship with police and authority is the next important consideration with regard to the framework. Klein believes this relationship should ideally be complicated, and the female detective should display “both the regard for authority and a reasonable suspicion of it” (237). Nancy generally shows a high regard for the morals behind the law, and respects her attorney father as the physical representation of it. But both the original and Files series show Nancy’s ability to stand up to law enforcement authorities. The Stratemeyer Syndicate critiqued Benson during the 1930s for allowing Nancy to “get beyond the bounds of respect for [her] elders. After
all, [she is] a bit young to order around police officers and doctors!” (qtd. in Rehak 182).

Benson was surprised by these comments, and she resisted by continuing to place Nancy in situations in which she challenges masculine authority. Sally E. Parry finds that “authority figures are often subverted. This is due in large part to the fact that young women are shown to be more clever than male police officers, detectives, and lawyers. Despite being the best lawyer in the state, Carson Drew never beats Nancy to the solution of a mystery” (152). Everyone, including the police, learns to respect the girl detective.

As a result, Nancy is clearly situated above the law at certain points in both series. In *The Hidden Staircase* (1930), she is guilty of breaking and entering. In *Trial By Fire* (1987), she slashes a suspect’s tires. In neither case does she meet with any repercussions for her illegal investigative methods. In fact, the police often end up apologizing for doubting her. This negotiation with authority shows the extent of the power and influence that Nancy possesses.

Unlike Klein’s concept of the ideal female detective, Nancy never teams up with criminals or seems to identify or sympathize with them. Rather than connecting to the conventions of romance or detective fiction, this limitation may be due to the intrusion of the principles of yet another genre, children’s fiction. “Good” and “bad” are clearly delineated in children’s books, a false dichotomy that tends to limit character development. One would expect the *Files* series, which aims at a more mature young adult audience, to complicate this contrast, but the novels seldom seem to challenge it.

Another convention of many formulaic novels like the Nancy Drew series is a lack of the open endings that my framework demands. The original Nancy Drew novels are extremely episodic and could be read in any order. Few details change from novel to
novel, and relationships remain largely unaffected by the events of each story. The books satisfy the conventions of detective fiction by restoring the status quo, and the romance between Nancy and Ned always remains peripheral but steadily present. The *Files* series also tends to conclude the mystery plot with a return to status quo, but evolution does occur in Nancy and Ned’s relationship. Over the course of several novels, the couple is tested by Nancy’s devotion to solving mysteries. Feeling neglected, Ned demands a breakup. The two go their separate ways for several novels before eventually reuniting. This plot thread also acknowledges what the original books ignored—Nancy finds that working full-time as a detective often interferes with her relationship with Ned. The unresolved elements of the romance plot in the *Files* series offer a slight deviation from the conventions of formula romance and provide a taste of the realistic struggles empowered women must face when they juggle a career and a relationship.

Having considered Nancy Drew in two series and analyzed each from several points of view, it seems clear to me that Nancy is successful at her job as a detective, satisfying the final guideline of the analytical framework. She is resourceful, intelligent, almost never makes a mistake—and indeed, is almost too perfect to be believable. In the *Files* series, Nancy is more likely to make an occasional misjudgment, but Bess and George always back her up, proving themselves to be successful female-detectives-in-training. Unlike *The Woman in White*, Nancy Drew mysteries never allow Ned or the police to step in and take over the investigation. Nancy always solves the case and brings the criminals to justice, while Ned is “doggedly useful, but only up to a point” (Rehak 169). Ned may occasionally provide the muscle, but Nancy provides the brains and capability.
The greatest limitation to combining romance and detective fiction in the *Files* series has little to do with Nancy’s success as a detective. Instead, the issue is that some of the original Nancy’s self-sufficient independence must be given up if her love of solving mysteries can be realistically challenged by her love for her boyfriend. Therefore, to loyal fans of the original books, the girl detective of the updated series may seem disappointing and shallow as she vacillates in deciding which passion is more important. Still, Nancy’s struggles to maintain both her detective career and her relationship with Ned add realism and authenticity to Nancy as a woman. Even when Nancy and Ned are separated temporarily for several books of the *Files* series, Nancy’s sensitivity and desire for emotional connection remain an important part of her personality—confirming that it is not the actual success or failure of the love relationship that determines the female detective’s success as a woman, but merely that fact that the romance elements inspire realistic emotions and conflicts in her character.

Not only is Nancy more believable as a woman in the updated series, but the *Files* books satisfy the majority of the guidelines of my framework, and—from a feminist point of view—represent a general improvement over the original books. They make important revisions to reverse the racial prejudice of the original series, presenting a variety of alternative role models for young female readers. Nancy has always questioned patriarchal authority and followed her own moral code, and that moral independence continues in the *Files* series. While the novels’ endings do follow the typical formula of the detective genre, the romance sub-plot allows some deviations from the reader’s generic expectations: Nancy and Ned’s relationship is repeatedly tested in the *Files* books, and they do not always end up together. Of course, there is never much
doubt that the pair will eventually reconcile, and perhaps this predictability is the weakest aspect of the *Files* books.

Despite the fact that the *Files* series does have its limitations, the introduction of a substantial romance sub-plot helps resolve one of the major conflicts of the fictional detective heroine, which is the incongruity that Klein identifies between being both a realistic female and a successful detective. Christian-Smith notes of the original series, “Throughout the novels, Nancy Drew represents the epitome of male heroic qualities” in her success as a detective (88). Nancy’s attention to the concrete, her reliance on calculated deduction, and her physical strength are all qualities traditionally ascribed to men. In the original books, Nancy is often at risk of being reduced to a male hero in a dress. In the *Files*, due to the new focus on Nancy’s love life and her related emotions and conflicts, I argue that she is more convincing as both a young woman and an excellent detective.
Chapter 3: The Stephanie Plum Series

“‘Uh-oh,’ Ranger said. ‘You been reading those Nancy Drew books again?’” (Two 38).

If Nancy Drew is on the edge of what Maureen Reddy calls the “tart noir” subgenre, then the dark humor and romance of Janet Evanovich’s Stephanie Plum series appears to push it directly into the “tart noir” category—the subgenre in which “it is time for women to stop being so serious and start having fun (with men) again” (Reddy 205). However, although the Plum series often has plenty of fun with Stephanie’s exploits (both in her love life and on the job), it is not so “post-feminist” as to discount feminist concerns or prematurely assume gender equity. Critic Sue Turnbull refers to the Plum series as “genre-bending: a scarcely past the post post-feminist investigator does romantic black comedy with soapratic undertones” (68).

Evanovich’s Plum series features the adventures of a female bounty hunter (or bond enforcement agent) and a madcap cast of her friends and family. The two major focuses are crime-solving and Stephanie’s complicated love life. The series premiered in 1994, although it did not hit the New York Times best seller list until the fifth book was released in 1999. Since then, many of the novels have debuted at number one (evanovich.com). Evanovich published romance novels before writing the first Stephanie Plum book. In the typically flippant style of her novels, Evanovich describes her decision to leave romance writing behind: “It was a rewarding experience, but after twelve romance novels I ran out of sexual positions and decided to move into the mystery genre” (evanovich.com). The influence of her experience with the romance formula is clear in the Plum books. Turnbull describes Evanovich’s efforts to “play with form” in the
novels, which begin with a basic crime-fiction formula: “Overlaid on this basic crime narrative structure is the formula of the romance novel, in which a feisty female hero engages in a series of erotic adventures, producing an escalating rhythm of excitement” (79). But as Turnbull is quick to point out, despite (or perhaps because of) the two formulas at work in the novels, the culmination of this excitement is usually unexpected: “Evanovitch [sic] is playing with the rules here . . . closure is only ever an illusion” (79).

The combination of detective fiction and romance takes center stage in Evanovich’s series, making it ideal as a final point of analysis in the development of the female detective. The Stephanie Plum books are also notable for their current popularity—at the time of this writing, Evanovich’s latest Plum book is leading the bestseller lists, and the next book is due to be released in summer 2007. This chapter seeks to utilize the same framework used to assess Marian Halcombe and Nancy Drew in order to analyze a currently popular incarnation of the fictional female detective.

The Plum series bends the conventions of detective fiction in ways that reveal the influence of the romance genre. Stephanie and the other colorful characters resist conventional expectations that detective fiction must be driven by plot more than by character. Although the mysteries are interesting, the characters are more memorable than the crimes. Barbara Lawrence describes the best recent portrayals of female detectives as “sensitive, realistic characters” (44), and this description fits Stephanie perfectly. Lawrence praises novels in which the female detective develops a romantic relationship in a realistic manner and “remains an attractive, believable, competent person” throughout (46). The Plum series features just such a protagonist, as Evanovich clearly strives to present Stephanie as a character with which every woman can identify.
Stephanie’s realism is perhaps her strongest advantage as an empowered female detective. She resists the prescriptive qualities of both the typical romance heroine and the typical detective.

The presence of a realistic hero, the first guideline in the framework for the successful blending of detective fiction and romance, becomes apparent simply through a description of Stephanie’s character. Like Collins’s Marian Halcombe, Stephanie is not a traditional beauty. She describes herself in candid terms in *One For the Money*: “I’m 5’7” and rawboned from the Mazurs’ good Hungarian peasant stock. Perfectly constructed for laboring in the paprika fields, pulling plows, and dropping babies out like bird’s eggs” (51). Her long, curly hair is often “a frenzy of frizz and snarls” (*One 5*). She struggles to maintain her weight at 130 pounds and admits to exercising with “the same amount of enthusiasm I could muster for self-immolation” (*Two 6*). Although she is occasionally concerned by the need to unbutton the top of her jeans after a big meal, Stephanie rationalizes her love of junk food: “I figured if you had to breathe New Jersey air there wasn’t much point in getting carried away with always eating healthy food” (*Two 13*). Furthermore, her physical realism is apparent in her activities as a detective. While running at top speed to escape a potential rapist, Stephanie reflects, “Kathleen Turner would have made it look good on the big screen. I was something less than glamorous. My nose was running, and I think I was drooling” (*One 56*). Evanovich insists on a protagonist that is believable as a woman, constantly reminding readers that Stephanie is just like them. Stephanie’s candid, self-deprecating, first-person narrative voice is reminiscent of Marian Halcombe’s forthright narrative in *The Woman in White*. Stephanie’s narrative contrasts markedly with the more formal, third-person narrator of
the Nancy Drew series. The blunt, often humorous narrative persona developed by both
Marian and Stephanie adds to the familiarity and realism of their characters.

It seems to me that Stephanie, as a realistic woman, is much less likely to be
mistaken for a female dropped into a man’s role, like so many of the female detectives
critiqued by Kathleen Gregory Klein. She resists the conventions of male-dominated
detective fiction by using “female” intuition as often as ratiocinative methods to solve
crimes. Stephanie is frequently grateful for the influence of “a little voice in my head” in
saving her from trouble (One 305). Another traditionally “feminine” characteristic that
Stephanie brings to her detective role is sensitivity. While Stephanie denies having
maternal instincts, she does own a beloved pet hamster named Rex, whom she refers to as
her roommate. (What hardboiled male detective would ever admit to carrying on one-
sided conversations with a hamster?) She is also frank in admitting her aversion to gore
and violence: “I’d fainted flat out watching Reservoir Dogs and had no illusions about
my blood-and-guts comfort level” (Two 4). Unlike many traditional private eyes, she
prefers to outmaneuver her opponents mentally, although she is generally able to stand
her ground in physical confrontations. Finally, Stephanie handles the inevitable biases
against a female bounty hunter with characteristic pluckiness. When a thug refers to her
as “a pussy cop,” Stephanie reflects, “Any intelligent woman would have made a
dignified retreat, but this was New Jersey, where dignity always runs a poor second to the
pleasure of getting in someone’s face” (Two 77). Stephanie refuses to be belittled or to
ignore chauvinist jokes as a way to gain acceptance among the men in her field.

Just as she defies expectations of the detective hero, Stephanie challenges
conventions of the traditional romance heroine. Indeed, the romance elements that do
appear in the series are handled in a consciously tongue-in-cheek way by an author who
is clearly experienced writing within the conventions of the genre—and who seems
happy to be free to write outside them. An example of Evanovich’s play with the
romance genre occurs in Seven Up, when Stephanie receives a bouquet of flowers. She
assumes they are from her boyfriend until she reads the lewd note attached to them and
realizes that she is being stalked. Naturally, her first reaction is revulsion, but as she
begins to throw the flowers away in disgust, she changes her mind: “I had a hard enough
time throwing dead flowers away, much less flowers that were all fresh and hopeful and
pretty” (67). A truly non-traditional romantic, Stephanie keeps the flowers and tears up
the threatening note.

Evanovich also allows Stephanie, as a realistic character, to acknowledge her own
sexual needs. But while Klein criticizes the treatment of sexually active female
detectives by most authors as an excuse “for stories of sexual exploitation and
adventurism” (175), this pattern does not hold true in the Plum series. Stephanie’s
occasional sexual encounters in all twelve books of the series are strictly confined to her
two major love interests. In keeping with her generally responsible nature, Stephanie
never uses seduction as a strategy for capturing criminals. She is interested in love over
simple sexual gratification, and has enough loyalty to her current partner to condemn the
use of sex as a weapon.

Despite Stephanie’s desire for love, she resists commitment. Her views of
marriage remain atypical compared to those of most romance-novel heroines (but perhaps
seem realistic to many contemporary readers). Not only does Stephanie’s problematic
love life contribute to her believability as a real woman, but a thorough overview of her
romantic entanglements is necessary to understanding her character. Carol Ricker-Wilson refers to marriage in the typical romance novel as “the sine qua non of female experience” (58). By contrast, Stephanie has already had that particular experience and is not eager to repeat it: she has been married once and divorced. Stephanie insists, “I don’t want a man. I had one, and I didn’t like it” (One 9). But in One For the Money, Stephanie’s childhood crush re-enters her life. Joe Morelli was a troublemaker as a teenager, and “he’d grown up big and bad, with eyes like black fire one minute and melt-in-your-mouth chocolate the next. He had an eagle tattooed on his chest, a tight-assed, narrow-hipped swagger, and a reputation for having fast hands and clever fingers” (One 3). It becomes clear that this description of Morelli as a classic romance “bad boy” is purposely over-the-top when Stephanie describes what a high school friend told her about Morelli: “He specializes in virgins! The brush of his fingertips turns virgins into slobbering mush!” (One 4). At moments like this, Evanovich is poking fun at the traditions of romance, with its typical virginal heroine and irresistible yet dangerous hero. Morelli did manage to seduce 16-year-old Stephanie and then never called her again. Three years later, Stephanie sees him walking down the street and promptly runs over him with her father’s Buick.

Due to these events, Stephanie and Morelli distrust each other for the first two books of the Plum series (and no sex takes place at all—disappointing romance readers who might expect the typical formulaic romance ending). The two begin dating in the third book of the series. Morelli is more interested in commitment than Stephanie, and she finally agrees to marry him in Seven Up. When she realizes that she is actually engaged, she panics: “Married. Shit! I was excited, right? That’s why I felt like I might
throw up. It was the excitement” (Seven 179). Her panic-stricken reaction is atypical of the romance genre, but characteristic of Stephanie’s self-reliant personality.

The opposition between Stephanie and the typical romance heroine is even clearer (and funnier) when her mother forces her to try on wedding gowns. Mrs. Plum plans Stephanie’s wedding attire in breathless excitement, while Stephanie’s thoughts are notably unromantic: “I wasn’t sure what I felt like. I tried bride on for size and found it didn’t fit as well as big fat dope” (Seven 101). Eventually, the engagement is broken off when Morelli insists that Stephanie choose between him and her work as a bounty hunter. Morelli, “raised in a traditional Italian household with a stay-at-home mother and domineering father,” has asked too much of the willful Stephanie and she refuses to be manipulated (Seven 302). She declares, “I’m not spending the rest of my life with someone who gives me ultimatums. . . . If he wants a wife who will fit into that mold, I’m not for him” (304).

Further complicating the romance plot, a love triangle develops when Stephanie begins to act on her long-standing attraction to her professional mentor, Ranger. The expert bounty hunter is consistently described in terms of a fantasy figure: “Ranger is Cuban-American with skin the color of a mocha latte, heavy on the mocha, and a body that can best be described as yum” (Eight 14). He is also a man of mystery who keeps his home address, job, and personal life completely secretive. Stephanie’s realistic imperfections are often humorously contrasted with Ranger’s apparent physical perfection. For example, Stephanie finally allows herself to be seduced by Ranger, but suddenly changes her mind when she realizes she has not shaved her legs. Furious with herself for being a slave to feminine propriety, she wails, “Why am I the one worrying
about the hair on my legs? Why is it always the woman worrying about the freaking hair?” (*Seven* 164).

As descriptions of him suggest, Ranger is merely a fantasy for Stephanie. His unrealistic perfection is underscored by his frequent comparison to superheroes. He refers to his unknown home address as the “bat cave,” his car looks like the Batmobile, and Stephanie wonders if he can fly like Superman. His dark clothes also draw frequent comparisons to Rambo. Stephanie goes as far as stating in *Hard Eight* that Ranger “might not be human” (169). Stephanie summarizes her as-yet-unresolved romantic dilemma in *Seven Up*: “Ranger was fire and magic, but he wasn’t real. Morelli was everything I wanted in a man, but he wanted me to be something I wasn’t” (276). After twelve books, Stephanie remains without serious commitment to either of these love interests. Apparently, she cannot be satisfied with the conventional men of romance; however, her unrelenting confidence and positive attitude reflect the fact that she does not equate her lack of a fairytale romantic partnership with failure.

While Stephanie’s romantic encounters are significant throughout the Plum series, her relationship with her family and friends is always equally emphasized. Considering the richness of their depiction, particularly the female characters, it is no surprise that they are all based on real people from Evanovich’s life (Evanovich qtd. in Turnbull 79). The many diverse female characters that interact with Stephanie provide a better example of heteroglossia than either of the earlier detective works considered in this study. Each novel is narrated in the first person by Stephanie with a distinctive narrative voice. Although none of the other characters is allowed narrative privilege, Evanovich succeeds
in writing lively dialogue that allows a variety of other female voices to be heard.

Among the strongest of these is that of Stephanie’s grandmother, Grandma Mazur.

Turnbull describes Grandma Mazur as many readers’ “favourite comic character . . . she of the electric blue bicycle shorts and all-consuming interest in cosmetics” (79). Grandma Mazur is a former housewife who has become something of a rebel since her husband’s death. She moves in with Stephanie’s parents in the Burg, a conservative, blue-collar section of Trenton, New Jersey. Grandma admires everything about her independent granddaughter and frequently begs to accompany Stephanie on bounty hunter business. After packing her gun in her purse and insisting on joining Stephanie on a stakeout in a bad part of town, Grandma Mazur says, “Here it is a perfectly good night, and we haven’t seen any crime. Stark Street isn’t what it’s cracked up to be” (Two 93). Grandma is always hoping for a chance to use her gun.

In addition to living vicariously through Stephanie’s job, Grandma Mazur tries to imitate her style of dress. According to Stephanie, “Grandma Mazur was seventy-two and didn’t look a day over ninety” (Two 25). Grandma dresses in clothing that is far too young for her: “Grandma Mazur was wearing Doc Martens. She was also wearing a new hip-length, downfilled ski jacket, jeans that she’d rolled and pegged, and a flannel shirt to match mine. We looked like Tales From The Crypt does the Bobsey [sic] Twins” (Two 263). Usually Grandma Mazur seems cartoonish, but there are moment in which realism breaks through. After she tries to capture the violent fugitive Kenny Mancuso and is subsequently rescued by Stephanie, “Her eyes clouded behind a film of tears. ‘He made me feel like a silly old woman,’” she admits (Two 257). Grandma Mazur is desperately
trying to reclaim her lost youth, a fact that Stephanie takes as a warning to avoid falling into the trap of becoming another Burg housewife.

In contrast to Stephanie and Grandma Mazur, Mrs. Plum seems to be the ideal housewife. Stephanie’s mother is plagued by the social embarrassment of her daughter’s work as a bounty hunter. Upon learning of Stephanie’s new job in *One For the Money,* she sighs, “Stephanie, Stephanie, Stephanie, what are you thinking of? This is no kind of work for a nice young lady” (41). She constantly nags Stephanie about everything from her clothing to her love life. For example, she hates Stephanie’s beloved Doc Marten boots: “Women interested in getting married to a nice man do not wear shoes like that. Women who like other women wear shoes like that. You don’t have any funny ideas about women, do you?” (*Two* 251).

Despite Stephanie’s frequent friction with her mother, their loving relationship becomes obvious when their family bonds are challenged. Mrs. Plum fully supports Stephanie’s work after Grandma Mazur is kidnapped by Kenny Mancuso, telling Stephanie in a low voice, “I want you to catch that son of a bitch. I want you to get him off the streets. It’s not right that a man like that is free to hurt old women” (*Two* 265). She is fiercely proud of Stephanie’s success but usually refuses to admit it.

As the series progresses, cracks in Mrs. Plum’s housewifely perfection begin to appear. When graphic discussion of Stephanie’s latest case once again interrupts Sunday dinner, she explodes: “You all make me crazy! Just once I’d like to have a dinner without talk about private parts, and aliens, and shooting. And I want grandchildren at this table. I want them next year, and I want them here legally. You think I’m going to last forever? Pretty soon I’ll be dead and then you’ll be sorry” (*Seven* 76).
Stephanie is perhaps most annoyed by her mother’s tendency to compare her to her angelic sister, Valerie. Mrs. Plum frequently asks, “Why can’t you be more like your sister, Valerie? . . . She’s happily married with two beautiful children” (Seven 24). Although Valerie is occasionally mentioned, she does not make an appearance in the series until Seven Up. She soon proves to be one of the more interesting characters.

Valerie and Stephanie have always been opposites, as Stephanie explains: “When we were kids Valerie was vanilla pudding, good grades, and clean white sneakers. And I was chocolate cake, the dog ate my homework, and skinned knees” (Seven 79). In Seven Up, Valerie and her two daughters suddenly arrive on the scene. Valerie’s husband has run away with the babysitter, and her perfect life is suddenly a bigger disaster than Stephanie’s in the judgmental eyes of the Burg. She sobs, “I thought we had a good marriage. I made nice meals. And I kept the house nice. I went to the gym so I’d be attractive. I even got my hair cut like Meg Ryan. I don’t understand what went wrong” (Seven 81). Valerie’s predicament demonstrates in a humorous way why the ideology of the Burg can be dangerous.

In usual madcap Evanovich style, Valerie soon declares that she is done with men and is going to become a lesbian—much to Mrs. Plum’s horror. She announces with grim enthusiasm, “I’m going to get on with my life and I’m going to be happy. I’m going to be so goddamn happy Mary Sunshine’s going to look like a loser” (Seven 117). Stephanie asks, “Have you ever had any . . . um, experience as a lesbian?” Valerie replies, “No, but how hard can it be?” (Seven 185). Although her attempt to become a lesbian fails, Valerie does become increasingly self-reliant due to her separation from her husband. The apex of Valerie’s empowerment occurs in Hard Eight, when the newly
divorced, newly independent woman smashes a van through a plate-glass window to rescue Stephanie from a kidnapper, cursing and screaming the entire time (*Eight* 322-323).

Stephanie’s immediate family provides four interesting women, but they are all average, middle-class, white females. A very different alternative voice is offered by Stephanie’s sidekick, a 200-pound, black ex-prostitute named Lula. Stephanie meets Lula in *One For the Money* while interviewing witnesses in a bad part of town. Lula’s description is intimidating: “She’s what is gently referred to as a big woman, weighing in at a little over two hundred pounds, standing five-foot-five, looking like most of her weight’s muscle” (*Five* 4). Her clothing is equally difficult to overlook: “She buys her clothes in the petite department and then shoehorns herself into them. This wouldn’t work for most people, but it seems right for Lula. Lula shoehorns herself into life” (*Eight* 19). Lula is at least as strong-willed as Stephanie, and often braver. She has the street-smarts that the more sheltered Stephanie lacks.

The small amount of information that Evanovich provides about Lula’s history contrasts sharply with Stephanie’s typical middle-class childhood. In *Hard Eight*, Lula states, “I don’t know nothing about kids. I never even was one. I was born in a crack house. Being a kid wasn’t an option in my neighborhood” (153). The most important effect of Lula’s background is her relationship to the law. As an ex-hooker, Lula has few qualms about occasionally breaking rules. When she becomes Stephanie’s assistant in *Two For the Dough*, Lula encourages Stephanie to begin questioning the system.

Prostitution is one of many women’s issues that the Plum series tackles, which leads to consideration of the next category for analysis in the framework: the novel’s
attitude toward confronting feminist questions. Feminist issues are apparent in each book of the Plum series, despite their comedic tone. Although the novels are humorous, the comedy is often black and there are few difficult topics that Evanovich avoids.

Stephanie’s case in One For the Money involves a professional boxer, Benito Ramirez, who has gotten away with rape and physical abuse due to his fame and wealth. He begins to stalk Stephanie, leaving telephone messages in which she can hear him abusing a woman. She is “rocked with rage and horror that Ramirez hadn’t been punished, and that he was free to mutilate and terrorize other women” (One 198). Later, Ramirez rapes Lula and beats her nearly to death, but she refuses to press charges against him. Stephanie finds Lula unconscious on her fire escape. Lula’s friend and fellow prostitute, Jackie, explains to Stephanie, “You think people gonna believe a whore? They gonna say she got what she deserved and probably her old man beat her and leave her for you to see. Maybe they say you been doing some whoring and not paying the price and this be a lesson to you” (One 237). The novel addresses grim realities, demonstrating that no woman—whether a drug-addicted prostitute or a college-educated white female in a suburb—is safe from violence.

The physical setting of the Plum series leads to the confrontation of another feminist issue: the changing role of women in society and its effects on the family. Stephanie has spent her life alternately embracing and resisting the Burg’s conservative value system. She explains, “No one ever really leaves the Burg. You can relocate to Antarctica, but if you were born and raised in the Burg you’re a Burger for life. Houses are small and obsessively neat. Televisions are large and loud. Lots are narrow. Families are extended. . . . Life is simple in the Burg” (Eight 6). The family structure of
the 1950s is alive and well, with husbands working blue-collar jobs and wives taking care of children and working in the home. Stephanie reflects on the impact that growing up in the Burg has had on her own independence:

There are certain expectations of girls from the Burg. You grow up, you get married, you have children, you spread out some in the beam, and you learn how to set a buffet for forty. My dream was that I would get irradiated like Spiderman and be able to fly like Superman. My expectation was that I’d marry. I did the best I could to live up to the expectation, but it didn’t work out. (Eight 28)

The typical expectations of women from the Burg highlight just how empowered Stephanie has become. Her mistakes earlier in life have made her strong and independent enough to pursue her childhood dream of breaking the Burg mold.

Chauvinism also is frequently addressed in the Plum series. Klein critiques Arthur Kaplan’s Charity Bay detective series because “police teams casually and repeatedly tell gender-related, sexually explicit jokes which demean women. . . . Their behavior is explained, excused, [and] tolerated” (164). By contrast, Stephanie Plum does not tolerate sexist remarks. When one of Morelli’s colleagues sees her on the firing range and tells her that she is better at shooting single-action because she’s a girl, Stephanie replies, “You don’t want to say stuff like that when I’ve got a gun in my hand” (One 201). Stephanie’s dealings with the police are often fraught with competition and “friendly” mockery. Bond enforcement agents are considered civilians, and therefore Stephanie must often work with the police to gather evidence and make arrests. However, if the police locate a fugitive before she does, she is not paid for her bond enforcement work. Therefore, she walks a delicate line between relying on the police and
working behind their backs. The fact that she is dating a police officer only intensifies
the taunting she receives from other cops.

In her relationship with Morelli, Stephanie is constantly aware that “he was sort of
chauvinist” (Two 71). She manages Morelli’s occasional sexism by being aware of the
fact that he thinks he is better than she is at tracking down criminals. Stephanie explains,
“What was important was that I look like a doormat at appropriate moments” (Two 48).
By hiding information from him, Stephanie often outsmarts Morelli and makes a capture
first. Although Stephanie is anything but a passive romance heroine, she is able to
assume that guise to manipulate Morelli. Stephanie is also willing to assert her authority
when necessary. Morelli occasionally demands that she share information with him, and
that it is his right to have it. In Two For the Dough, Morelli states, “Give me a break.
I’m a cop. I have a job to do” (164). Stephanie replies, “I’m a bounty hunter. I have a
job to do too” (165). She refuses to be intimidated by Morelli’s status as a police officer.

Early in the series, Stephanie is still learning the basics of bounty hunting and is
forced to rely on Morelli’s help. She is humiliated to have to call him to her aid: “Being
rescued by Morelli had been damned embarrassing. And grossly unjust” (One 63). Her
confidence and self-reliance increase in the second book of the series. When Stephanie
and Morelli arrive at her apartment and find the door open, Stephanie insists on taking
over: “He motioned for me to step aside, his eyes locked on the door. I pulled the .38
out of my pocketbook and muscled my way in front of him. ‘My apartment, my
problem,’ I said, not actually anxious to be a hero, but not wanting to relinquish control”
(Two 97).
Stephanie’s determination to do her job as much as possible without the aid of the police directly addresses the next point in the framework for the ideal detective/romance novel. Stephanie is a prime example of a protagonist who brings criminals to justice based on her own moral code, which does not always conform to the laws of the land. Although her job involves returning criminals to the justice system, she relies on her instincts to tell her whom she can trust, and she works in tandem with criminals if that becomes the necessary means to an end. As a bounty hunter who blackmailed her cousin to give her a job at his bond agency, Stephanie is basically her own boss. Klein argues that “radical feminism cannot work within even the broadest boundaries of the detective genre. The private eye who is licensed by the state has made an official and silent contract with the system; he or she is part of the power structure” (220). But Stephanie is not part of the official system, a point she often makes when people request her help in solving a crime: “I’m not a private investigator. I’m not licensed” (Two 33).

The main reason for Stephanie’s desire to avoid involving the police in her cases in the early books of the series is a desire for respect. After she is nearly raped in connection with a case she is working on, she asserts, “I considered filing a report with the police, but immediately shelved it. Whining to Big Brother wasn’t going to win any points for me as a rough, tough bounty hunter” (One 63). The reference to “Big Brother” reveals Evanovich’s awareness of the patriarchal “power structure” that Klein describes. In later books, the influence of Stephanie’s mentor, Ranger, leads her to question the authority of the law. Ranger “has a moral code that isn’t entirely in sync with our legal system” (Seven 159). He explains to Stephanie in High Five, “I don’t do things I feel are morally wrong. But sometimes my moral code strays from the norm. Sometimes my
moral code is inconsistent with the law. Much of what I do is in that gray area just beyond legal” (21). Stephanie gradually adopts a similarly critical view of the legal system. Stephanie’s indifferent regard for the law often puts her at odds with Morelli. While examining evidence that Stephanie collected from a fugitive’s home, a typical exchange takes place: “Morelli looked pained. ‘You broke into his apartment and stole his little black book.’ ‘I didn’t steal it. I copied it.’ ‘I don’t want to hear any of this’” (Two 20). Morelli usually overlooks Stephanie’s escapades, most of which are minor infractions.

Ironically, Stephanie’s first case as a bounty hunter requires her to capture Morelli, who had been arrested on what turns out to be a false charge. In the process of tracking Morelli, she finds herself beginning to believe in his innocence. She reflects, “Turning him back in to the court would feel mean. He wasn’t my favorite person, but I didn’t hate him enough to want to see him spend the rest of his life in prison” (One 38). Even in her first weeks as a bounty hunter, Stephanie refuses simply to turn innocent people over to the court. Despite her initial dislike of Morelli, she begins secretly working with him to prove his innocence.

Stephanie not only resists the patriarchal power of the legal system but she disagrees with many of its methods of enforcement. Violence occurs in the Plum series, but it is never initiated by Stephanie. Although she owns a gun, she normally keeps it at home in a cookie jar, unloaded, with the bullets in her sugar bowl. She never shoots until all else fails. In High Five, Stephanie does contract work for Ranger, and he insists she carry her gun. She reluctantly complies: “My .38 was in my black leather shoulder bag.
And for this special occasion, I’d taken the time to put bullets in the stupid thing. . . . Just in case Ranger showed up and gave me a pop quiz” (Five 87).

Just as Evanovich’s protagonist resists legal authority, Evanovich herself defies the conventions of both the romance and detective fiction genres with the open endings the Plum books usually feature. Sandra Tomc refers to several of the most celebrated authors in the history of detective series fiction when she states, “A ‘satisfactory’ ending of at least some kind is a convention that neither Hammett and Chandler nor Grafton, Paretsky, and Muller are prepared to forgo entirely” (52). But Evanovich’s combination of mystery and romance allows for each book to end with the expected satisfactory resolution of one plot thread and an unexpected total lack of resolution in another. While Stephanie solves the case and captures the criminal, her love life remains complicated. The lack of closure in the romance plot is directly opposed to even the most recent advances in romance fiction. Ricker-Wilson indicates that “popular feminism has had just enough impact on the romance market to encourage its writers to create a ‘new’ type of heroine—superficially more independent, assertive, and career-oriented. . . . At the same time, the genre demands that ‘Beauty’ get her ‘prince’” (60). Stephanie has her choice of two typical romance “princes,” but repeatedly finds herself dissatisfied with both of them. Therefore, she resists pressure toward commitment and remains content with her friends and family as her most important relationships.

Although the mystery plot is largely resolved in each book of the series, Evanovich always leaves a few loose ends to imply that Stephanie’s future safety is not a guarantee. This lack of complete resolution even in the detective plot adds realism to the series. For example, at the end of One For the Money, Benito Ramirez is still alive and
headed for a trial. In Two For the Dough, Ramirez has been released from jail on parole and reappears to threaten Stephanie once again. There is never any illusion that the status quo has been restored simply because the fugitive in one book has been apprehended. The final chapter of each novel merely assures the reader that Stephanie is no longer in immediate danger.

Turnbull finds the lack of closure in the Plum series to be the defining feature of Evanovich’s work. She highlights the difference between “reading a bleak [Patricia] Cornwell novel about the very serious and beleaguered forensic pathologist Kay Scarpetta” and “reading an Evanovitch [sic] sex-comedy caper with an unresolved conclusion” (69). Besides the obvious addition of comedy, it is perhaps the unresolved conclusions that are the most notable difference between the Stephanie Plum series and many other contemporary detective novels. Turnbull cites the novels’ frequent “use of romance without the orgasmic conclusion” as an unusual and surprisingly successful strategy (79). Considering the fact that a majority of the books in the series have spent time in the New York Times bestseller list’s top 10, it seems that these unresolved conclusions have not disappointed Evanovich’s readers.

The final guideline of the framework demands that a judgment be made as to whether Stephanie is a successful detective. In the most obvious sense, Stephanie is successful: she always captures the criminal, finds the missing child, solves the crime. But Klein demands more of the modern female detective. In her analysis of early-1990s popular fiction featuring female detectives, Klein finds that a major problem with Fran Huston’s detective, Nikki Sweet, is that she is too emotional. Excessive emotion is traditionally considered “feminine,” and therefore, Klein notes that once again a
character’s gender prevents her from success as a detective. Nikki loses her professional detachment, leading to the shooting of her lover. Klein argues, “while her behavior as a feeling, emotional woman is validated, what is left unmentioned is her status as a detective. . . . She is a good woman, therefore she need not be a good detective” (163). While a similar charge might be leveled at the emotionally-charged Stephanie Plum, she learns to channel emotion and use it to her advantage. While wrestling with armed murderer Kenny Mancuso, who kidnaps her grandmother in *Two For the Dough*, Stephanie narrates her struggle to replace her panic with a more useful emotion:

> How about cool reasoning? Nope. I didn’t have any of that available. How about cunning? Sorry, low on cunning. How about anger? Did I have any anger? . . . I had so much anger my skin could hardly contain it all. Anger for Grandma, anger for all the women Mancuso’d abused, anger for the cops who were killed. . . I pulled the anger in until it was hard and razor sharp. (301)

Stephanie is not emotionally detached from her job, but this works to her advantage.

Stephanie’s emotional involvement in her work also leads to a different self-definition of success. She does not measure her own achievements based on the number of fugitives she apprehends. In fact, she often finds herself torn between turning in the falsely accused and helping them escape. Michael G. Cornelius finds that Stephanie is quite open to “the emotional appeal” (112). Stephanie’s first capture as a bounty hunter is a rather pathetic, overweight, middle-aged drunk who is barely able to stumble to her car. She states, “I’d expected to feel satisfaction for my success, but now found it was difficult to get elated over someone else’s misfortune” (*One* 109).
Stephanie achieves an alternative version of success in *Hard Eight*, when she allows her conscience to guide her decisions. While searching for a missing child whose mother violated a child custody bond and disappeared with her, Stephanie discovers that the woman was an abused wife. The husband and father is working with dangerous, possibly Mob-connected businessmen to track them down. When Stephanie finally locates mother and daughter at the airport about to board a flight to Miami, Stephanie simply lets them go. She chooses to make a moral rather than a legal judgment, allowing the pair to escape while making sure the husband and his associates are brought to justice. Rather than supporting Klein’s criticisms of women’s detective fiction by restoring the status quo and turning a fugitive over to the police, Stephanie’s success as an investigator often lies in her courage to resist the patriarchal aspects of the law that might otherwise dictate her behavior.

Stephanie’s skills as a bounty hunter improve and she becomes more daring as the series progresses. Even Morelli learns to respect her tenacity, exclaiming, “You’ve got the temperament of a pit bull with a soup bone when you’re on a case” (*Two* 9). Klein critiques mystery writer P.D. James for not following through on the “rite of passage” that her character, Cordelia Gray, experiences in her debut novel: “The second novel shows only a superficially changed woman” (157). Stephanie, on the other hand, continues to learn and develop. On her first case in *One For the Money*, Stephanie is clearly a neophyte. After several disasters, she regroups, telling herself, “Okay, so I was learning. Rule number one: don’t underestimate the enemy. Rule number two: think like a felon” (*One* 114). She quickly realizes that her job is not for amateurs: “I’d have to establish a self-employed mind-set. And I’d have to invest in martial arts coaching and
learn some police techniques for subduing felons” (*One* 150). Because she is willing to work hard and learn all that she can, Stephanie begins to gain a reputation as an accomplished bounty hunter.

Stephanie offers a reasonably well-rounded, well-executed portrayal of an empowered fictional female detective. Unlike Marian Halcombe, Nancy Drew, and other female detective heroes before her, Stephanie avoids many of the pitfalls to which feminist critics object. Her success as a detective and bounty hunter seems clear. Likewise, her success as a believable, realistic woman is apparent. She demonstrates both traditionally “masculine” and traditionally “feminine” qualities, and the success of her personal life does not rely solely on the outcome of her romantic relationships. Klein finds that “more than half” of the modern female detectives she reviews “are visibly caught in the contemporary quarrel between the Playboy philosophy of sexual emancipation without commitment and the women’s movement manifestos of equality. . . . Their private lives are failures” (169). Although Stephanie continues to be torn between two different men, neither of whom can offer her unconditional love, this does not make her private life a failure. Instead, Stephanie’s fulfillment as a woman is based on the support and friendship of a diverse and vibrant group of women. The series repeatedly shows that despite romance-novel conventions, the perfect husband does not exist. Any woman who devotes herself to finding the idealized perfect romance will only find herself in Valerie’s position—facing a divorce and wailing, “I did everything I was supposed to do and it was wrong. How can that be?” (*Seven* 170). Evanovich successfully subverts the expectations of readers of both the detective genre and romance,
delivering a series of books that generally bring out the best in both genres and bring awareness to the importance of an empowered, feminist message in popular fiction.
Conclusion

Janet Evanovich’s success in combining romance and detective fiction suggests that the counter-discourse that Priscilla L. Walton and Manina Jones recommend is already taking hold in popular fiction. The framework developed in this paper to analyze both past and current embodiments of the female detective is intended to draw out the necessary characteristics of this counter-discourse. The framework’s guidelines were designed with the idea that developing an empowered female detective and successfully combining romance into the detective genre would work reciprocally. Therefore, the guidelines make recommendations that would bring the most feminist characteristics of the romance genre into detective fiction, and would allow detective fiction conventions to be rewritten in a way that empowers the female detective. Thus the protagonist is able to convincingly and realistically negotiate personal relationships and crime solving.

The framework has proven to be successful in identifying a number of key strategies for combining the two genres to produce an empowered female detective. As evidence of its viability, the guidelines of the framework worked well to identify limiting factors (as well as positive innovations) in Wilkie Collins’s portrayal of Marian Halcombe and of two adaptations of Carolyn Keene’s Nancy Drew. The framework also highlights the strongest points of Janet Evanovich’s feisty Stephanie Plum character, the protagonist of a series that represents one of the more successful combinations of detective fiction and romance to date.

Of course, Evanovich’s series is not the only contemporary detective/romance work that has found success by modifying the original rules of both genres, nor is “tart noir” the only stylistic option that satisfies the goals of my framework. Although this
study involves analysis of the Stephanie Plum series, it would have been equally instructive to perform a close reading of the work of mystery writer Laurie R. King, or to analyze the recently concluded television miniseries *Prime Suspect*. King writes a series in which the protagonist, Kate Martinelli, is a police officer who is also involved in a lesbian relationship. In 1993, the opening novel of King’s Martinelli series was among the first novels of the lesbian detective sub-genre to be published by a mainstream publishing house, and the series has been quite popular. Its popularity may be partly due to King’s careful avoidance of didacticism in her consideration of feminist issues. King states that she avoids “a conscious choice of axes to grind or soap boxes to stand upon. . . . [I]t takes a great deal of skill to remove the whiff of the pulpit from the pages” (qtd. in Walton and Jones 285). Kate’s realistic struggles to deal with the prejudices inherent both in her work as a female police officer and in her status as a lesbian reveal that she, like Stephanie Plum, is a believable woman and a competent detective.

*Prime Suspect*, a British television miniseries that debuted in 1991, offers a very different portrayal of a female police officer. The series, created by Lynda La Plante, features alcoholic, workaholic police DCI Jane Tennison (played by actress Helen Mirren). La Plante purposely breaks with convention in crafting her problematic heroine as she “transcends many of the traditions of the British police series” (Jennings). Tennison consistently struggles against the phallocentric structure of the police system, and also battles personal demons that affect her relationships with men and with her family. Ros Jennings notes that “it is the institutionalized performance of masculinity and femininity within the police force which dictates the often considerable dramatic tension” in each installment of the miniseries. In addition, Jennings states that each
individual drama in the series confronts some type of important social issue. La Plante’s fascinating portrayal of a woman who devotes herself almost entirely to her work—and the regrets and triumphs that result from her dedication—is yet another noteworthy recent depiction of a female detective.

These contemporary examples suggest that further consideration of the fictional female detective is necessary, particularly in light of recent positive developments in her representation. The guidelines of my framework suggest a set of values that writers of detective fiction might take into consideration in the future if they desire to develop increasingly empowered female detectives—particularly in novels that combine mystery and romance. As I have attempted to demonstrate, this combination does not have to be the dysfunctional marriage that Anne K. Kaler describes. With proper attention to the reasons behind the successes and failures in past and contemporary fictional female detectives, the relationship between romance and detective fiction can be a mutually beneficial creation.
Works Cited


----. *Two For the Dough*. New York: St. Martin’s, 1996.


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