

WINDOW DRESSING: ISOLATION IN CORNELL WOOLRICH'S SHORT FICTION

by

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## DEDICATION

For my mom Marie and my dad Bill, who have always supported and encouraged me. For my sisters Elizabeth and Emily (and nephew Kingsley—I can't forget you!), who always have confidence in me even when I don't. For my dog Sawyer, who has provided me with 10 years of unconditional love. For my husband Ben, who is a recent addition but stands by me like the family he now is.

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## ABSTRACT

Cornell Woolrich was a prolific American noir detective fiction writer. Though recognized by some as the father of noir fiction, he is often overshadowed by other writers of his era, such as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and James M. Cain. Many of the themes found in Woolrich's writing, particularly isolation and the associated fear and anxiety, are as palpable today as they were in the times he was writing. In this thesis, I argue that Woolrich's continued relevance is the result of his unique portrayal of American city life. Woolrich utilizes recognizable themes from the noir, mystery, and thriller genres in his short fiction but dresses them up in such a way that he not only comments on life but encourages his readers to live their lives to the fullest, to avoid the dangers his characters face. There are a number of gaps in the scholarship on Woolrich, and I attempt to fill a few of these by focusing on his short fiction rather than the film adaptations of his works or his novels. Each chapter focuses on different aspects of isolation portrayed in the stories: physical isolation ("New York Blues"), emotional isolation ("Rear Window" and "Fire Escape"), and alienation associated with police ("Rear Window," "Murder at the Automat," and "Detective William Brown"). While Woolrich's fiction is permeated with a sense of isolation, it is impossible to feel that isolation without also showing some form of community. Woolrich's protagonists are not originally part of their neighborhood, but by the end of each story, there are hints that they might become active members in their communities of neighbors and friends. For a man like Woolrich who did not have a lasting marriage and very little is known about his

romantic relationships, it is quite possible that he was highlighting friendships over romantic relationships for a reason. In an age when social media superficially aids the formulation and ability to maintain friendships yet really inhibits meaningful friendships, Woolrich's appeal to his readers not to isolate themselves stands out as even more critical than it may have been at the time he was writing.

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## INTRODUCTION

Cornell Woolrich (1903-1968) was a prolific American noir detective fiction writer. Though recognized by some as the father of noir fiction (Nevins “Introduction” x), he is often overshadowed by other writers of his era, such as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and James M. Cain. He is perhaps best known in the United States for writing the short story that was adapted by Alfred Hitchcock into the 1954 film *Rear Window*. Despite a lack of scholarship on Woolrich’s other fiction, his depiction of urban American life in the 1930s and 1940s (and to a certain extent the two subsequent decades) is still relevant to modern-day readers. As David Platten’s research suggests, “the emergence of the ‘hard-boiled’ flipped a switch...inaugurating a new era of social realism within the genre” of detective fiction (117). Many of the themes found in Woolrich’s writing, particularly isolation and the associated fear and anxiety, are as palpable today as they were in the times he was writing.

In this thesis, I argue that Woolrich’s continued relevance is the result of his unique portrayal of American city life. Woolrich utilizes recognizable themes from the noir, mystery, and thriller genres in his short fiction but dresses them up in such a way that he not only comments on life but encourages his readers to live their lives to the fullest, to avoid the dangers his characters face. With 80.7 percent of Americans living in cities today compared to 64.0 percent in 1950 (U.S. Census Bureau 13), Woolrich’s emphasis on life in American cities allows for social commentary that is relevant to more people today than at the time he was writing. The scholarship on Woolrich focuses

heavily on his portrayals of gender and sexuality, and my goal here is to look instead at underrepresented short fiction (including the short story “Rear Window,” rather than the typically studied film adaptation) and how Woolrich’s portrayal of isolation, which may be tied to gender and sexuality but could have broader applications, may impact a current urban audience.

When working with the fiction of a lesser-known author, it is important to learn as much about his life as possible. By all accounts, Woolrich led a very unusual and reclusive life. His childhood was spent with his father in Mexico during that country’s violent revolution (“Cornell Woolrich, Author” 47) and his adulthood was spent living with his mother in New York City hotels prior to her death (Nevins and Greenberg x). Seclusion and voyeurism were parts of his life or at least behaviors that he must have contemplated, since they found their way into his writing. Woolrich scholarship often connects his personal hardships, particularly the loss of his mother and health issues later in his life, with the darkness of his writing. In an introduction to one of Woolrich’s short stories in an anthology, Joel Lane writes that Woolrich’s “best work is characterised [*sic*] by a driven intensity, a sustained use of paranoia and psychological suspense, and a bitterly pessimistic worldview” (94). While this is one view of his work, I see a lot of hope in Woolrich’s short fiction. Woolrich may have led an isolated life, but the negative consequences of such a life are highlighted in his short fiction and discourage his readers from following in his own footsteps.

Woolrich’s success in the ’30s and ’40s has not carried forward along with the other crime fiction writers of those decades. In fact, much of his work is out of print. As such, there is not much scholarship discussing his work. The majority of Woolrich

scholarship can be found in books about crime fiction and mysteries or journal articles that often focus on adaptations of his work. Woolrich's only biographer of note, Francis M. Nevins, Jr., primarily wrote in the 1980s and based his evaluations of Woolrich's work on a combination of Woolrich's fiction and second-hand biographical information. Nearly every article written about Woolrich cites Nevins's biography, and Nevins edited at least two anthologies of Woolrich's fiction. There is little known about Woolrich despite the fact that he left behind a fictionalized autobiography as part of his estate (Bassett xii). Although the title of this posthumously published work is *Blues of a Lifetime: The Autobiography of Cornell Woolrich*, the editor calls the five chapters "personal stories" and cautions the reader that Woolrich "opts...for a transcendent, a metaphorical truth in relating" them (Bassett xi). Nevins takes these personal stories with a grain of salt and relies heavily on answering the questions surrounding Woolrich's life and writing by examining the world that he lived in as well as a number of his stories.

Nevins is an unusual biographer, in that he oscillates between calling Woolrich "a genius" (Nevins *Night* xix) and criticizing him and his style, writing that it "is often undisciplined, hysterical, sprawling with phrases and clauses crying out to be cut and sentences without subjects or predicates or rhyme or reason and words that simply don't mean what Woolrich guesses they mean" (Nevins *Night* xxii). Most notably, Nevins popularized the idea that Woolrich was a homophobic gay man. Nevins assumes an allegation made by Woolrich's ex-wife is fact and even goes so far as to say that a "veiled suggestion that [Woolrich's] marriage was never consummated is in fact the truth" without providing proof beyond opinion (Nevins *First* 73). Nevins, however, does not bother to address Woolrich's own tale of loving three women (Woolrich *Blues* 31).

Woolrich's identity as a homophobic gay man is a popular discussion topic, and many subsequent scholars have championed the idea.

Woolrich's sexuality, and how that might impact his writing, is the most commonly addressed topic in the scholarship. While Nevins may be correct about Woolrich's sexuality, my goal in this thesis is to offset the scholarship that relies on potentially unreliable biographical information by focusing instead on how Woolrich's fiction might inform us of his personal life and what we as readers can take away from it. This is not to say that the other scholarship can be discounted, however, which is why I feel it is important to provide an overview of it. No one disputes Nevins's claim that Woolrich was gay (many agree with him), but some leave the question unanswered. The editor of Woolrich's autobiography, for example, asks, "What is the truth behind his unconsummated marriage to actress Gloria Brackton?" (Bassett x). In his book *Hard-Boiled Sentimentality: The Secret History of American Crime Stories*, Leonard Cassuto states that "Woolrich...published florid and compelling femme fatale stories that are essentially sociopathic romances" (117). Cassuto adds that they "highlight Woolrich's suspicion of the reliability of the social institutions that encode and support domestic values" (118). It is clear that scholars are interested in how Woolrich's personal life might have impacted his stories' unhappy romances and characters. While the personal life of an author, particularly one who (from what little is known) lived such a unique life, is a tantalizing topic of study, my goal in this thesis is not to apply a biographical lens to his short fiction, but to identify prominent themes in the fiction itself, which likely inform us about the author himself. For example, the themes of isolation, fear, and anxiety in his short fiction could corroborate Nevins's assertion that Woolrich was a

closeted gay man.

Nevins's biography and anthology introductions are the only consistently cited sources on Woolrich. This may, in part, be because many scholars agree with Nevins's interpretation of Woolrich's writing abilities. As one author discussing hard-boiled detective fiction wrote, "although Woolrich had a genius for inventing extraordinary situations (Raymond Chandler called him 'the best idea man'), he wrote in a bloated purple prose that thuds like overemphatic movie music" (O'Brien 91). Additionally, many of the scholarly articles that discuss Woolrich are based on close readings (or close viewings of adaptations) of his work, which do not rely much on other sources. Both Christine Photinos and Currie K. Thompson wrote articles that do not explicitly discuss Woolrich's sexuality but touch on the subject of gender stereotypes, with Photinos saying that "Woolrich playfully disrupts the naturalized connection between tough-man writers and tough-man protagonists" (63). Some scholars, such as Anna Woodhouse, base important claims on Nevins's work, such as the viewing of *Madame Butterfly* when he was a child (described in Woolrich's autobiography) having such an impact on Woolrich because he identified with the female character of Butterfly (392).

While it is commonplace for the scholarship to focus on gender and sexuality in Woolrich's work because of the biographical assertions Nevins makes about Woolrich's homosexuality and homophobia, it is important to recognize that this is at best an opinion backed up by Woolrich's ex-wife's testimony and Nevins's own subjective readings of the primary texts. Moreover, this belief pervades the scholarship by connecting his personal hardships with the darkness of his writing. Perhaps a bleak life impacted his writing, but Woolrich was not the only noir writer impacted by both World Wars and the

Great Depression; the bleak lives of noir writers are not inherently tied to their sexuality but to any number of other factors. Just as Nevins's biography must be recognized as not completely unbiased, Woolrich's own autobiography, as indicated by its editor, is not wholly reliable either. Because the biographical information available about Woolrich is not necessarily reliable, my approach for this thesis is to offset the current scholarship that relies heavily on the biographical and instead study short stories that are underrepresented in the scholarship.

Woolrich's short fiction straddles many genres and can be difficult to categorize. Some of his stories fall within the genres of crime or detective fiction, sometimes more specifically the hard-boiled variety, while others like 1935's "The Corpse and the Kid" align better with the thriller or horror genres. However, he is most often called a noir writer, because of the dark and bleak nature of his stories. While it can be challenging to pin down the definition of noir itself, the unifying theme of isolation in all of Woolrich's work is common to noir. James Naremore argues that the French intellectuals who first analyzed American film noir recognized the use of "tough, Hemingwayesque dialogue and American production values to bestow a kind of glamour upon the dark emotional moods favored by Continental artists" (27). Much of the scholarship on noir focuses on the films, but the same dark tone is evident in the fiction, particularly since many of the most familiar film noirs (*The Maltese Falcon*, *Double Indemnity*, etc.) are adaptations of books and short stories. Mark T. Conard claims that the recognizable film noir features are "the tone of dark cynicism and alienation, the narrative conventions like the femme fatale and the flashback voiceovers, and the shadowy black-and-white look of the movie" (10). He goes on to argue that it is the tone and mood, rather than the specific details such

as a femme fatale character, that make a text recognizably noir (Conard 17). Woolrich's short stories may not include all of the features specified by Conard, but the sense of alienation (Telotte 121), "the rejection of traditional ideas about morality" (Conard 7), and the urban locale (Prakash 6) set the dark mood that makes them recognizably noir.

It is not surprising that much of the scholarship explains the darkness of Woolrich's work by looking to his personal life. With a brief, failed marriage in his early years, a small immediate family, and eventually being left alone following his mother's death, there is no doubt his experiences tinged his writing. However, Woolrich himself acknowledges his desire for being alone in one of the stories in his fictionalized autobiography. He states that "I was born to be solitary, and I liked it that way" and goes on to say that the appeal of a solitary life was not just because he happened to be alone but because he made purposeful decisions to remain alone and thus provide "a wonderful background for [his] work" (Woolrich *Blues* 4).

Woolrich's own words suggest he craved isolation, and he clearly believed that the loss of friendships in his personal life impacted his short fiction. He returns to the theme with a variety of characters grappling with their own isolation in a range of settings, and while Woolrich may have died alone, not all of his characters did. Perhaps it could be argued that helping his characters escape their confines was meaningful to Woolrich. However, relying on scant biographical information to look at fiction critically limits what can be said about Woolrich's legacy. I would like to move away from this mainly biographical method, despite the intrigue of writing about a reclusive writer. Instead, I will argue that Woolrich is worth reading today because the sense of isolation in American cities portrayed through his short stories is varied and remains relevant to

contemporary readers.

When Woolrich first began writing his darker fiction in the '30s, he was doing so amidst a group of other hard-boiled authors. The origins for dark crime fiction are sometimes tied to the impact of World War I on American culture (Trott ix–x), and it is likely that the Great Depression also influenced the general tone of fiction. Eventually the fear, anxiety, and paranoia around World War II and the Cold War would influence his and other writers' work too. The importance of such work today is that it opens our eyes to similar issues in our own time, issues that we might blind ourselves to just to get by. In a time of great political and ideological upheaval, many of us feel that we are alone in a frightening new world. Woolrich does not always paint the picture of a happy ending in his stories, but we learn from his characters how we might begin to break free of various types of isolation.

There are a number of gaps in the scholarship on Woolrich, and I hope to fill a few of these by focusing on his short fiction rather than the film adaptations of his works or his novels. Scholarship tends to focus on the film adaptation of "Rear Window" rather than the story itself. While it would be difficult to write about Woolrich's work without some inclusion of "Rear Window," each chapter will include discussion of one or two other short stories that may be less well known. Each chapter will focus on different aspects of isolation portrayed in the stories: physical isolation, emotional isolation, and alienation associated with police.

The first chapter centers on the physical isolation portrayed in Woolrich's last story, published posthumously in 1970, "New York Blues." The protagonist of this short story has physically isolated himself in a hotel room to avoid capture by the police for a



crime he cannot remember but is certain he committed. The isolation one can feel in a city and surrounded by people is an overwhelming theme of this and other stories by Woolrich, such as 1937's "The Heavy Sugar." Woolrich commonly employs first-person narration, and his use of lighting and windows is prevalent throughout his stories, and yet we as the audience, through the perspective of the narrator, get a clearer picture of the city than of the crowds of people surrounding the narrator. I argue that this emphasis on the city rather than its inhabitants, in effect, shines the light back on the narrator and, through his experiences and thoughts, the reader. With so many Americans currently living in cities, causing that slice of the population to reflect on how they interact with one another, or how they avoid that interaction, is something worth considering.

The second chapter expands on the first by focusing on the emotional isolation evident in 1942's "Rear Window" and a similar short story from 1947 titled "Fire Escape." While the protagonist of "Rear Window" is also physically isolated due to a broken leg, there are indications throughout the story that he has emotionally isolated himself from friends, family, neighbors, and even the houseman who works for him. In "Fire Escape," the protagonist is a young boy with a penchant for lying who finds that he is without allies when he needs them the most. The additional theme of voyeurism in these stories serves at least two purposes in Woolrich's short fiction: to allow the reader to see the world from the protagonist's point of view, which is not necessarily trustworthy, and to allow the protagonist (and perhaps the reader) to further isolate himself while feeling like he is part of society. Voyeurism, though, turns out to be dangerous in these stories, and one cannot help but feel that Woolrich's stories act as a reminder to us all to get out there and live, to not only lift our heads up and look around

but to actively participate in the world before us.

The final chapter focuses on alienation associated with police. Kevin G. Karpiak notes that a “new framework is needed, one that takes the relationship of police and others in the urban social environment as contingent and emergent, rather than automatically casting police as the antiheroes, as the agents of” social instability and alienation (24). Woolrich’s police begin to give us an idea of what this new framework, or at least a transitional framework, could look like. This chapter utilizes Woolrich’s representation of the police detective fulfilling different roles, based on three of Woolrich’s short stories: as hero in 1937’s “Murder at the Automat,” as villain in 1938’s “Detective William Brown,” and as helper in “Rear Window.” While the first two short stories include antiheroic (and even villainous) police detectives, “Rear Window” begins to complicate our ideas about police as an alienating force. By contrasting characters against each other in his stories, Woolrich shows us that not all police are alike, so it is important to reconsider the alienation and the ideological isolation we may feel as a result of our complex understanding of the police. There is, in fact, very little about police detective Boyne in “Rear Window” that could be characterized as alienating, and it is Boyne that begins to break in on the emotional isolation that the protagonist Hal Jeffries seems to have imposed on himself prior to the events of the story. It is a friendship that could act as that transitional framework of a new understanding of police in society.

While isolation is an overarching theme of Woolrich’s short fiction, it would be difficult to show this without the contrast compared to its antithesis: friendship. Just as Karpiak says that the hero is defined through the contrast with a more villainous character or set of characters (the police, in his article), isolation is defined by Woolrich through

the depiction of friendship. Woolrich's protagonists may be lonely, but they all interact with other people and, as I show in the following chapters, tend to improve relations by the end of the stories, by relying on other people, by convincing others of their credibility, or by trying to help each other. It is the relationships that define Woolrich's characters, just as they define Woolrich himself and his readers. It is fitting, then, that the last of his stories ("New York Blues") works backward by focusing on a character's attempts to trace how the relationships in his life crumbled, leaving him completely isolated.

CHAPTER ONE: “LONELINESS, OUTGOING”: THE CITY FROM A FIXED  
VIEWPOINT

While aspects of noir fiction and its film counterpart are recognizable to audiences, the genre is not an easy one to define fully. One recognizable mechanism that is often used, however, is first-person narration. The narrator is often the detective character, generally in the form of a private detective or a private citizen enmeshed in a mystery they are compelled to solve. J.P. Telotte notes that the detective character in noir fiction “controls both our perspective and our sympathies[,] for...all that we see...is what the detective himself sees; his experiences—and his thoughts—are ours” (6); the point of view becomes the audience’s perspective. Furthermore, noir generally takes place in a city. Andrew Dickos discusses the relationship between film noir and cities, which can also be applied to noir fiction: “Urban America, as a panorama of the anonymous, emerges as a moody set piece of human anxiety. Most often depicted at night and often in the rain, the city is where human motivations find action” (xi–xii). Woolrich uses first-person narration to allow the audience to view not only the story but the city through the detective’s eyes, and the physical isolation that the detective feels in his city draws the reader’s attention to their own isolation.

The character who often narrates Woolrich’s work is isolated physically or emotionally, or both, yet lives in a city full of people. Those other people, however, are often not fully fleshed out, with the emphasis instead on the narrator and on the city itself. Voyeurism is another common theme of Woolrich’s short fiction, which will be

discussed in more detail in the next chapter. However, the observation of others by the narrator is critical to analysis of Woolrich's portrayal of his protagonists and of the city in which they live, and Jean-Paul Sartre's definition of the other works well here. While the protagonist or observer is watching, he does not really see those he watches. In Woolrich's work, the use of lighting and windows is prevalent, and yet we as the audience, through the perspective of the narrator, do not get a clear picture of the people, shadows silhouetted against the backdrop of the vivid city. I argue that this emphasis on the city rather than the people, in effect, shines the light back on the narrator and, through his experiences and thoughts, the reader. The narrator is often alone, not just emotionally but physically. With an effective barrier between himself and those he observes, the observer is isolated, and the reader is left considering how they might also be isolated within their own city full of people.

A prime example of Woolrich's use of first-person narration that includes a depiction of the city is "New York Blues," which was published posthumously in 1970. The story is set from a fixed viewpoint: a man in a hotel room. The descriptions used in this story make it an obvious choice for illustrating how Woolrich was able to paint the picture of a city from one room, from a fixed viewpoint. Walter Benjamin says that the detective story "does not glorify the criminal, though it does glorify his adversaries and, above all, the hunting-grounds where they pursue him" (41). Woolrich's focus on the hunting-grounds of the city in this story illustrates the Urban America that Andrew Dickos outlined, particularly the "panorama of the anonymous." The setting, however, is different from other noir narratives. While many noir narrators are private detectives, or gumshoes, known for their stealth around town, Woolrich highlights the loneliness of the

detective by physically isolating him. Though the narrator of “New York Blues” is not a traditional detective, he has a mystery to solve. The solitary nature of detectives is a theme seen in noir, regardless of a roving or fixed setting.

The “New York Blues” protagonist is further isolated because his location is not just fixed but temporary: a hotel room. Over the course of the short story, the protagonist describes one night spent in that room. While he does describe parts of the room itself (the radio that is his constant companion and occasional co-narrator, the shower curtain he nearly pulls from its rod), his focus is on the world outside that one room: taxis and their “sudden splurge...arriving at the hotel entrance one by one as regularly as though they were on a conveyor belt, emptying out and then going away again” (Woolrich “New” 379), Friday night parties, and the ever-present threat of the police out there trying to find him.

While the view from the hotel room may be poorly lit because it is nighttime, the room itself is often even darker, which allows the protagonist to resolve some details of the observed, or others, down below. It also serves the purpose of protecting the protagonist from being seen. In Sartre’s discussion of the Other, he argues that “we can not perceive the world and at the same time apprehend a look fastened upon us; it must be either one or the other” (“Look” 258). By simultaneously hiding in the dark and observing others outside his room, the protagonist can neither apprehend someone looking at him nor actually be seen. It is not until he turns his attention inward or back to the room that he remembers and fears that he may be watched. When he is no longer distracted by what he sees or hears outside, he returns to his own worries and the attempt to solve the mystery of why he is in the room.

The observer's character is in fact the mystery to be solved in this story. Just as the hotel room is left an unresolved image to the audience, the protagonist's identity is unknown. We never learn his name. Throughout the story though, as he recalls what brought him to hide in this hotel room and isolate him from his own past (the murder he has committed), the audience learns more about him. What sort of person he is becomes clearer, despite the darkness he surrounds himself with, through his observations of others. One cannot help but think he is not a bad man, though he has committed murder. His thoughts, his actions, and his fears are all ones the reader can connect with. This man could be any of us, given the right circumstances, and being isolated is one of those circumstances.

Despite his attempt to hide, the protagonist is not truly alone. The room service waiter and the night-service maid enter his room, and he receives a phone call from a friend named Johnny who had tracked him down. His generosity and friendliness towards those he interacts with seem forced, and he is fully aware of his lack of connection with other people, even mentioning at one time "a blurred glimpse of a person in motion...passing...too quickly to be brought into focus" (Woolrich "New" 371). While surrounded by people, Woolrich's protagonist is not part of their lives, nor are they, really, part of his. As Dickos writes, "the world...is populated by a more complicated species of common man—that person who fears the malevolent forces around him, and thus within himself. He is the noir archetype" (70). Though the protagonist appears disconnected from the people around him, the pages are filled with imagery of light and dark, radio broadcasts of traffic reports and music, and hubbub heard through the window facing the street. The city is alive and well, in stark contrast to the haunted, fearful

protagonist and his fellow city dwellers. This depiction shows how the urban landscape influences the characters, and the effect is not a positive one.

### **Sounds and Sights of the City**

The “New York Blues” protagonist explains to the reader that he has been in the hotel for more than three days, and yet what he recounts takes place over the course of one night, a Friday starting at 6 p.m. This focus on the city at night is a common theme of noir fiction (Keating 58). As David Platten says of some noir, “the city at night is represented as a figure of oppression” (129). In some ways this oppression is evident through the protagonist’s paranoia, but the darkness is also a sanctuary for a frightened creature. The darkness allows other senses to be enhanced, and it is in fact the light, in the form of a police spotlight at the end of the story, that blinds the protagonist from what is happening around him.

As he begins his narration, the protagonist describes, with the help of a traffic report on the radio, the emptying of the city for the weekend. He anticipates being left alone with only “those who are coming here for me tonight” (Woolrich “New” 370). In spite of his constant sense of being alone, there are many other characters he interacts with in one way or another throughout the story. While the waiter and maid enter his space, most of the crowd is outside the room. Walter Benjamin, in discussing impacts of modern cities on people, claims that it is public transportation that resulted in city relationships being “distinguished by a marked preponderance of the activity of the eye over the activity of the ear...people had never been in a position of having to look at one another for long minutes or even hours without speaking to one another” (38). This has likely had a profound impact on relationships and observations in cities, but I argue that



the cramped living quarters within cities has had as much, if not more, of an impact and that both sight and sound, particularly at night, are important to our observations of those around us. Sartre notes the difference between European and American city streets, where the European one is between a “path of communication and the sheltered ‘public place’” and the American city street is “a piece of highway” (“American” 123). There is no sense of community on the American city street (particularly New York City, which so often is the setting of Woolrich’s stories), and so denizens of the city inevitably carry the isolation they feel in their apartments with them onto the streets, and the visual and aural observation occurs at all times.

As the protagonist sits in the at-times-dark hotel room, his ability to see and hear what is outside his second-floor window is enhanced. He recognizes the arrival of a cab by such observant means: “In the pin-drop silence a taxi comes up with an unaccompanied girl in it. I can tell it’s a taxi, I can tell it’s a girl, and I can tell she’s unaccompanied; I can tell all three just by her introductory remark” (Woolrich “New” 380). Woolrich utilizes the radio to punctuate some of the protagonist’s thoughts and feelings with various advertisements and lyrics, and so the reader knows that the radio is on all night. Despite this constant background noise, the protagonist is acutely aware of the noises in the hallway and on the street. This is especially evident as the police he knows are after him (though he only figures out why as his memory returns to him in pieces through the story) arrive at the hotel. He senses their presence through “the absence of sound more than by its presence. Or should I say by the absence of a complementary sound—the sound that belongs with another sound and yet fails to accompany it” (Woolrich “New” 381). He goes on to explain that he heard the closing of

car doors without the accompanying sound of tires or brakes. Recognizing an attempt to avoid detection, his suspicions are immediately raised and he is not wrong. The reader, experiencing the story through the protagonist's perspective, becomes suspicious and anxious too.

Connections are made throughout the story between noise and life, quiet and death (and the associated fear of death). As the protagonist announces the progression of the night from his thoughts of parties leading to after-party meals and finally to party-goers returning to the hotel, he explains that "from now until the garbage-grinding trucks come along and tear the dawn to shreds, it gets as quiet as it's ever going to get" (Woolrich "New" 379–380). The party-goers are described as noisy and full of life (compared to the solitary, near-death protagonist), and as they go their separate ways in the pre-dawn hours, a stillness like death comes over the city. Every noise breaking this silence is met with his fear. He describes the fear associated with anticipation as worse than the fear of something present (Woolrich "New" 385). For the protagonist, noise doesn't signal life but instead the arrival of the living who might be coming after him. Physical isolation is, therefore, shown as safety for the protagonist, and breaking in on that isolation is equivalent to death.

His immediate reaction to the arrival of the police is to turn the lights out, explaining that hiding in the dark is an age-old instinct (Woolrich "New" 382). The concept of light vs. dark and a reliance on what he hears dominates the final pages of the story. With his vision impaired, the protagonist's ability to sense what the police outside the door or down on the street are doing is intensified. In fact, he notes some lack of accuracy associated with what we see. A darkened police car on the street might appear

empty to one focusing on what they see, but to one focusing on what they hear, a low whistle would suggest otherwise (Woolrich “New” 387). The protagonist, however, can only control the lights within his room, and the police soon shine a spotlight on him as he considers jumping from the second-story window to escape them. With his physical isolation in jeopardy, he begins to consider emotional isolation as the next best thing. The fear of being seen is as palpable to him as the fear of being caught.

When it comes to light and dark, it is actually the light that signals death. As with sound, Woolrich turns the reader’s expectations of light on end. Benjamin argues that the increase in gas lanterns, and thus light, in the nineteenth-century city made people in crowds feel safer (50). Yet, safety for the “New York Blues” protagonist is in the absence of light and his separation from the crowd. When they attempt to find him with the spotlight, “it lands over [his] head. Like a halo” (Woolrich “New” 388). In essence, once he is spotted, he is dead already. Sensing this danger and the futility of jumping towards the blinding light, the protagonist returns to the room where, despite the darkness, he can still see what is important: the radio shown by its “on” light and the pinhole of light exposing the new absence of a screw from the door’s lock. As the police in the hallway get closer to intruding on his room, he retreats to the bathroom, where his only true escape can be found: death via prescription overdose.

With death imminent, the protagonist is finally faced with that present fear as the police enter his room and the drugs begin to take effect. The days and nights of worry and attempts to recall what had happened and why he is in the hotel finally come to a close with the entrance of a woman in the now-lit room: the woman in his fuzzy memories that he had loved and strangled with her own scarf. As he recalled earlier, he had killed her

because he “couldn’t bear to see [his] fear reflected in her eyes” (Woolrich “New” 375). As the realization hits him that he killed a different woman, she explains that she had not gone to meet him, because she “didn’t like the way [he] sounded” on the telephone (Woolrich “New” 393). Like the protagonist’s own attempts at self-preservation in his darkened room focusing on the sounds of the city, his former love had saved herself by listening to the clues provided by his voice. For both the protagonist and his former love, their ability to observe those around them helped them to recognize danger and physical isolation was a means to avoid that danger. But while they both faced the potential of real fear, the audience begins to wonder if their own fears are present or anticipatory and whether physical isolation is a means to avoid danger or to avoid only the potential of danger that is possible through relationships with others.

### **The Sedentary *Flâneur***

Throughout the story, the protagonist often talks about feeling alone or how he perceives others in or around the hotel to be alone. At one point, in describing killing the woman to stop her from leaving him, he says that he had not wanted to kill her, that “[i]t was only love, turned inside out. It was only loneliness, outgoing” (Woolrich “New” 376). This expression of loneliness as an internal dilemma turned outward is not only mirrored in the interiority of Woolrich’s setting with an outward focus but also in the solitary figure, or outsider, within a crowd.

Benjamin describes the concept of the *flâneur*, or someone who strolls, as an observer (and outsider) in a metropolitan crowd with many similarities to the detective character. Benjamin says that the *flâneur* is “above all, someone who does not feel comfortable in his own company. That is why he seeks out the crowd” (48). Furthermore,

Tom McDonough expands on the concept through “a quote from Benjamin, to the effect that ‘no matter what trail the flaneur may follow, every one of them will lead him to a crime,’ and it has been [McDonough’s] double reading this quote invites—the possibility of the flaneur as both detective and criminal” (116–117). The “New York Blues” protagonist is both detective and criminal, solving the case against himself, which was forgotten since the crime and comes back to him as evidence like a blood-stained scarf makes itself known to him: “I didn’t even know I had [the scarf] there; the bellboy who was checking me in spotted it on the way up the elevator” (Woolrich “New” 375). While the traditional *flâneur* can hide his criminality in the crowd, a *flâneur* who remains sedentary is more likely to fail: his location and the truth will be found. The word *flâneur* has connections to idleness, and while the noun refers to an idle walker, I will be examining the sedentary *flâneur* who idles in one location; his crowd is not one that he is amidst on a street but amidst in a city.

Benjamin states that “[t]he original social content of the detective story was the obliteration of the individual’s traces in the big-city crowd” (43). Though this lack of identity is true of the people outside the “New York Blues” hotel room, it is by reestablishing (specifically, remembering) who the protagonist is at the end that there is any meaning to the story. Without this, the story has no arc and is only descriptive in nature. Towards the end, he says, “I can’t get out the window. I can’t go out the door. But there *is* a way out, a third way. I can escape inward. If I can get away from them on the outside, I can get away from them on the inside” (Woolrich “New” 390). The protagonist is still the *flâneur* who is uncomfortable when alone, but the trope has a slightly different role when observing from a fixed location rather than the typical meandering one. It is the

immersion in the crowd that allows the *flâneur* to forget how uncomfortable he is in his own shoes. Perhaps there is an element of obliteration of that individual's discomfort and past too. When observing a crowd from a distance, however, Woolrich's observer cannot help but turn his gaze inward, making associations between those he observes and himself.

When the *flâneur* begins to observe himself instead of others, he does not like what he sees. Regardless of whether he has committed a real crime, there is something inherently guilt-inducing about watching others. Benjamin notes that becoming a detective "does [the *flâneur*] a lot of good socially, for it accredits his idleness" (40). Detecting some exterior crime or criminal in the crowd also accredits his voyeurism. However, if the only crime the *flâneur* encounters is his own, then the act of watching others only adds to his criminality and his shame. Woolrich's protagonists are often observers, but there is arguably nothing sexual about their observation. Though *voyeur* comes from the French for "to see," it has a sexual connotation in English; the label of voyeur is not one Woolrich's protagonists want to be associated with, and thus detective is what they attempt to be. As McDonough points out, the *flâneur* can be read as both criminal and detective, and by recognizing one interpretation of voyeurism as a criminal act, the *flâneur* inevitably feels some guilt at his observations.

The definition of crime and criminality is also something that Woolrich plays with. The "New York Blues" protagonist does witness a crime, or an intended crime, but he excuses it. One of the observations through his window involves a young woman arriving via taxi and having a conversation with the night valet before entering the hotel. The protagonist describes the conversation and explains to the reader that she is a

prostitute, that the valet is something akin to a pimp. Although prostitution was a crime in New York City at the time the story takes place, the protagonist does not hold it against the woman (or the valet). Instead, he asserts that “clever, ingenious Man has managed to sidetrack [sex] into making life more livable” and that she is only “fighting loneliness for a fee” (Woolrich “New” 381). Her crime, then, which the protagonist doesn’t seem to recognize as a crime at all, is similar to his own; remember that he called killing the woman “loneliness, outgoing.” While there is regret in his narrative, there is something almost excusable about a crime done in an attempt to make one’s life livable. For Benjamin’s *flâneur*, “the masses appear as the asylum that shields an asocial person from his persecutors” (40); but who are the persecutors? In “New York Blues,” the audience gets the sense that the persecutors are those outside the crowd who care about the asocial or isolated person: friends, family, lovers. Before he sought out his hiding place in the middle of the city, the protagonist had been attempting to break free from the inherent isolation of a city, but with a failed attempt (in this case, a crime), he only slid further into physical isolation.

The *flâneur*, alone in a crowd whether physically amongst that crowd or merely isolated in a hotel room within a crowded city, is an intrinsically solitary and lonely figure. The “New York Blues” protagonist is not without friends though, and the fragility of the reader’s own social life does not go unquestioned when his friend Johnny arrives at the hotel. After talking on the phone earlier about a party celebrating Johnny’s new job and then being stood up by the protagonist, Johnny shows up just after the police. The protagonist acknowledges that there is nothing that Johnny can do to save him, but he is at once hopeful and yet realistic about the chances that Johnny will simply try. Johnny

does exactly what the protagonist expects: he turns and walks away from attempting to help his friend. No matter how many people we surround ourselves with, we are all solitary figures in the end: “each man dies as he was meant to die, and as he was born, and as he lived: alone, all alone” (Woolrich “New” 384).

The protagonist’s realization that he is alone seems to come from his intentional self-isolation. As he says early on in the night, “Something inside my mind keeps fogging over, like mist on a windshield” (Woolrich “New” 376). This is reminiscent of a veil mentioned by Benjamin: “This veil is the mass; it billows in ‘the twisting folds of the old metropolises’. Because of it, horrors have an enchanting effect upon [the *flâneur*]. Only when this veil tears...does he, too, get an unobstructed view of the big city” (60). As the protagonist’s separation from the crowd, the mass, extends into the night, the veil begins to part. Not only does he begin to remember the truth behind the crime he committed, but he begins to realize the truth behind his existence. As a sedentary, isolated *flâneur*, the crowd no longer acts as a distraction, despite his best efforts to continue observing them from the hotel room. Finally, as the story comes to a close, the interior and exterior begin to blur. The observations he makes from his hotel room are no longer separate from him but related to him. Those he observes are observing him too, and they eventually break into his room, bringing the crowd to him.

### **Surveillance and the Outlaw in the City**

The protagonist’s tendency towards voyeurism, in the tamest, non-sexual sense of the word, again brings to mind Sartre’s Other. If the protagonist is observing those around him, then it is possible that he would be paranoid about others observing him. As Sartre elaborates, “The look [of the Other] which the eyes manifest, no matter what kind



of eyes they are, is a pure reference to myself" ("Look" 259). Sartre notes that there does not, in fact, need to be an Other for one to feel observed ("Look" 276), that the look is felt during periods of shame or pride ("Look" 261). Not only does the protagonist feel shame at the murder he has likely committed, but there is some inherent shame in his voyeurism which may contribute to his paranoia about being watched. The paranoia would be justified too; the visibility in the hotel is not an illusion. The police find the protagonist's location by bugging Johnny's phone, thus demonstrating their previous surveillance (Woolrich "New" 383). This realized fear of being watched is a common theme in much of Woolrich's work, most notably the short stories "Rear Window" and "Fire Escape." While Woolrich's protagonists may be the first to look through the window, they trigger returned gazes, either from neighbors or police or both which immediately begins to break down the isolation of the protagonists.

The one thing that Woolrich's protagonists share with each other, and with many other noir characters, is questionable morals. As Treat et al. say, "the liminal antihero often acts outside accepted values, norms, roles, and behaviors as a hapless everyman, a charismatic rebel, or a roguish outlaw who challenges the status quo in their often morally ambivalent quest" (37). Woolrich's characters cover a wide range of antiheroism, with their own questionable morals resulting most often from lies or voyeurism or murder. A common character type through which Woolrich examines the antihero is the police detective. While the initial expectation and hope is that police would be moral heroes, the existence of antiheroic even villainous police, in reality and fiction, is undeniable.

Woolrich himself, in "New York Blues," sums up the range of police used

throughout his short fiction. As the police finally break into the hotel room, the protagonist recognizes in them a variety of men. He says, “as I look at them, as my eyes go from face to face, on each one I read the key to what the man is thinking” (Woolrich “New” 392). He identifies five sets of thoughts, though he acknowledges that he hadn’t counted how many there were in the room. While he attributes some supposed thoughts to each of them, he also calls them out by type: “soft with compunction...hard with contempt...flexing with hate...rueful with impatience...blank with indifference” (Woolrich “New” 392–393). These police types recur throughout Woolrich’s previous work, ranging from mostly helpful and heroic to the truly villainous. In a collection of short fiction that leans towards the noir categorization and that returns frequently the concepts of voyeurism and surveillance, Woolrich’s use of antiheroes, particularly in the form of police who are meant to serve and protect, is worthy of additional consideration, particularly in light of Karpiak’s argument that it is the characterization of police as antiheroes that leads to the social problem of police as an alienating force. This is evaluated in Chapter Three with continued discussion of “Rear Window” and additional discussion of two other stories: “Murder at the Automat” and “Detective William Brown.”

## CHAPTER TWO: BEHIND THE BINOCULARS: VOYEURISM AND THE AMATEUR DETECTIVE

The ability to solve crimes often requires training, great intelligence, or physical strength, but there is one type of detective in crime fiction in general that stands out from the others because he does not necessarily rely on these abilities: the amateur. In this chapter, I explore the amateur detective by focusing on the curious observer or voyeur as depicted in two short stories by Cornell Woolrich. Five years after “Rear Window” (1942) was published, Woolrich followed it with a lesser-known but similar short story entitled “Fire Escape” (1947).<sup>1</sup> Woolrich’s amateur detective, particularly as characterized in these two short stories, turns the locked-room mystery on its head and becomes a protagonist that appeals to readers because he is an everyman. Unlike the amateur’s professional counterparts, Woolrich’s short stories show that anyone with a keen eye for observation and knowledge of human behavior can solve the mystery on the other side of the window, as long as he doesn’t fall victim himself. But these short stories do more than highlight the abilities of amateur detectives; they bring up the problem of

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<sup>1</sup>“Rear Window” was originally submitted to the *Dime Detective* magazine as “Murder from a Fixed Viewpoint” but published as “It Had to Be Murder” in 1942. It was then collected with other short stories by Woolrich in 1944’s *After-Dinner Story* and retitled “Rear Window.” Similarly, “Fire Escape” was originally published in 1947 in *Mystery Book Magazine* as “The Boy Cried Murder” and retitled when collected in 1948’s Woolrich short story volume *Dead Man Blues*. Both stories were published under Woolrich’s pseudonym William Irish, and it is possible though not verified that changes occurred to the text between the original magazine publications and the short story publications (utilized in this thesis). (Source: Nevins *First* 245.)

voyeurism and ethics. For those who are not paid to observe, what is right and what is wrong? Furthermore, how does the act of voyeurism isolate the observer? In this chapter, I argue that watching allows the voyeur to avoid personal connections and isolates him emotionally. Just as Sartre argues that we are nothing until we are seen (“Look” 259), by watching others, Woolrich’s voyeuristic protagonist attempts to protect himself from being seen and from being part of the society around him.

The most common definition of voyeurism (or scopophilia) has its roots in Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis. Freud stated that the “pleasure in looking, or curiosity, which is revealed...was no doubt originally a sexual desire to look [scopophilia], directed towards sexual happenings” (*Introductory* 273–274). While it could be (and particularly with the film adaptation, has been [Mulvey 841]) argued that there is a sexual component to the voyeurism in Woolrich’s “Rear Window,” I believe that a unique analysis can be done with Woolrich’s work when the voyeurism is not viewed through a sexual lens. Freud also noted that “He who in the unconscious is an exhibitionist is at the same time a voyeur” (*Three* 24). Because to be seen in Woolrich’s short fiction is dangerous, the voyeurs are not of the same ilk as Freud’s exhibitionist voyeurs. Jonathan M. Metzl argues that more current interpretations of voyeurism connect “the voyeurism practiced by a civilization’s deviants with the acts of looking that are performed by its most upright members” (130–131). Though Woolrich’s voyeurs tend to exhibit some guilt associated with their voyeurism because of the negative social connotation, they are typically somewhere between the deviants and upright citizens Metzl speaks of, and one view of voyeurism in Woolrich’s work is that they look at others with the purpose of isolating rather than sexually gratifying themselves.

In both “Rear Window” and “Fire Escape,” a voyeur believes he witnesses a murder through a window, and as he pursues the truth, his own life is threatened. One difference is that the voyeur in “Fire Escape” is a young boy with a penchant for exaggeration. Nevins points out another difference, which is that in “Rear Window” the audience doesn’t “know all along that the viewpoint character’s murder accusation is correct but [is] made to oscillate between thinking he’s right and deciding that he’s the victim of a diseased imagination” (*First* 474). This question of whether the narrator/voyeur is accurate in his interpretation of his observations connects to the idea of what makes a credible witness. Woolrich’s concept of voyeurism is not about Peeping Toms who merely get (often sexual) enjoyment out of watching; it is about the connection those voyeurs have to others. Their observations do not impact only themselves, and thus they attempt to isolate themselves with the voyeurism, but it also forces them to begin to reach out, to solve the crime and to get justice.

The theme of voyeurism serves multiple purposes in Woolrich’s short fiction; the two most important ones for this chapter are to allow the reader to see the world from the protagonist’s point of view, which is not necessarily trustworthy, and to allow the protagonist (and perhaps the reader) to further isolate himself while feeling like he is part of society. Woolrich’s use of first-person narration, by voyeuristic narrators, allows the reader a closer connection to the protagonist’s point of view. In the case of “Fire Escape,” the point of view is third person limited (from a third-person narrator who knows only the protagonist’s thoughts), perhaps to allow for a more mature narration than would be expected from the child protagonist.

Seth M. Blazer tackles the concept of the voyeur by questioning if audiences,

particularly watching visual media, are considered voyeurs in an attempt to determine what is “good” voyeurism and what is “bad” voyeurism. Though his article focuses on visual media and the film adaptation of “Rear Window,” his thoughts apply to Woolrich’s short fiction as well. Blazer asks what voyeurism means: “certain images dance through your mind: a shadowy figure spying through a keyhole, a pervert with mirrors fastened to his shoes, that jerk in the locker room with a camera phone. But have you ever caught yourself watching someone?” (379). Blazer’s reminder for the audience to look at themselves connects to Woolrich’s short stories centered on voyeurism, which have a habit of drawing the audience’s attention to themselves (in a way, “watching” the story unfold). Woolrich’s voyeurs tend to be on the tame side, watching for the sake of entertainment rather than sexual gratification, which, although still discomfiting to the audience because of the negative connotations tied to perverts and jerks that Blazer points out, allows the reader to relate to them.

In a society that is becoming more alienated and allows, even encourages, easy online voyeurism, there is something recognizable and at the same time disconcerting to each of us about the man behind the binoculars. Blazer points to the advent of film, the rise of television in the 1950s, and the ubiquity of the internet as reasons why the majority of Americans can be identified as voyeurs (379). While Blazer’s article was written in 2006 and I believe that the public’s desire to watch has only increased in the last 11 years, the non-sexual “stimulation by visual means” that Blazer identifies was certainly present in Woolrich’s time. It is online voyeurism and interest in reality television that makes Woolrich so relevant today though. Curiosity about what is happening in others’ lives is almost more intriguing than what is happening in our own

lives. Woolrich wrote in one story, “self-preservation [is] stronger than curiosity in most people” (Woolrich “Murder” 123). However, it is when curiosity leads to a need for self-preservation that Woolrich’s stories hit their stride. The audience is reminded that their own curiosity and associated voyeurism could lead them down a dangerous path. The voyeurs in these stories, like the audience, are not just detectives but amateur detectives. Their lives are put on the line not just because of their desire to watch but their desire to have their voyeurism be legitimized: Hal Jeffries in “Rear Window” must prove to everyone his deductions are correct and Buddy in “Fire Escape” must prove that he is credible as a witness.

Michael Cohen says that “[b]oth the detective and what he opposes are constructed as foreign to ordinary experience” and that this otherness is a requirement of the genre (106). Yet, he goes on to discuss how the act of detection, or as he says, “what Sherlock Holmes calls *deduction*,” is an everyday occurrence (Cohen 119). The human mind is constantly interpreting and making assumptions about what is seen. Jeffries in “Rear Window” comments on what he calls delayed action, his mind catching up with what he had witnessed throughout his narration, which is a useful technique for two reasons: the reader can relate to this in their own life, and it gives the reader an opportunity to realize what Jeffries has seen before he does. As a result of these deductions, Cohen says, “the lure of mystery, with its varied forms of inference, is a sympathetic appeal, suggesting that the genre hardly qualifies as escape literature, bringing us back as it does into the problems and solutions” of the everyday (121). However, it takes only a slight shift from the everyday to turn a mundane story into escape literature. To make something recognizable and believable yet dangerous draws

the reader in, allows them to experience it, even solve it, from the safety of their own home. Moreover, Blazer argues that Alfred Hitchcock's film adaptation of "Rear Window," which came out in 1954, "provided...a model for exploring these issues of public safety in surveillance for the common good versus our personal rights of privacy" (382). Blazer connects the Cold War (and continued relevance based on fear post-9/11) with this need to explore public safety issues tied to surveillance, but the political climate of World War II, when "Rear Window" was published, also lent itself well to citizen spies. Exploring these everyday issues in the 1940s was likely something of interest to Woolrich's readers.

While detective fiction's appeal is tied to the connections the reader can make to everyday experiences, Dennis Porter suggests that the "secret of its power resides to a large degree in the trick that makes...voyeurism a duty" (241). He argues, "Through the mechanism of the morally upright detective hero, the detective novel allows its readers to pry and peep...And the reader enjoys without guilt the luxury of watching without being seen" (Porter 241). Woolrich's detectives, typically amateur but occasionally professional, may not always fall under the category of morally upright, but he does blend the two appeals of the everyday and voyeurism into something the reader cannot help but connect to. Of course, to draw readers in, there must be something beyond the everyday, and Woolrich does this with the fear and anxiety of an everyman (or everywoman or everychild) placed in a slightly extraordinary situation. The everyday, particularly during times of war or political upheaval, often has threats looming overhead. As Dickos says, "The essence of Woolrich's sensibility is found...in the suspense of impending doom, in the fear of the helpless human being caught—often in nothing more



than his own paranoia” (101).

The “helpless humans” in Woolrich’s two short stories are a young boy with a penchant for lying and an invalid. Geoffrey O’Brien writes that “The perennial unanswered question of [Woolrich’s] protagonists is: Why me?” (91). To the reader, the question is: Could this be me? Unlike Cohen’s abnormal detectives, Woolrich’s could be any one of us, given the right, or perhaps the wrong, circumstances. Not only is it possible that any one of us could witness a crime, but the vulnerability of an invalid and a child speak to our own sense of vulnerability, to becoming not only the next victim but of being persecuted and prosecuted for disclosing our own voyeuristic tendencies. Though we may all agree that we have these voyeuristic tendencies, it is a matter of showing that the tendency is “altruistic” rather than “deviant” to avoid repercussions from admitting to it (Blazer 392). By solving the mystery through detective work, the amateur manages to overcome his own vulnerability, perhaps allowing the reader to reconsider his own vulnerability. Just as the *flâneur* had his idleness validated, the amateur’s voyeurism becomes useful instead of controversial. To answer O’Brien’s question, Woolrich’s protagonists are selected so that the reader can see that even those who may seem helpless are not without value. Even those who may have emotionally isolated themselves are worthy of acknowledgment.

### **The Isolated Observer**

Woolrich’s amateur detectives carefully attempt to balance self-preservation and curiosity. The logical response to witnessing a crime, however, often challenges the desire for self-preservation. For these detectives to be sympathetic characters, they must not only discover the truth but also convince the authorities that it *is* the truth by proving

that they are credible witnesses-turned-detectives. They must preserve their physical selves from the criminal and their credibility from the police. The suspense, then, comes from an imbalance created by the competing desires of self-preservation, curiosity, and credibility. The happy endings of these two stories suggests to the reader that Woolrich's amateur detective voyeurs were correct in their further surveillance and that while voyeurism is not necessarily a positive trait, it may have some merits.

Both of the heroes in these two short stories are secluded voyeurs, similar to the way social media today secludes people even as they reach for connections. In "Rear Window," a broken leg has sidelined Jeffries, and he has taken to watching the neighbors outside his window. Early in his narration, he acknowledges, "it *was* a little bit like prying, could even have been mistaken for the fevered concentration of a Peeping Tom. That wasn't [his] fault, that wasn't the idea. The idea was, [his] movements were strictly limited around this time" (Woolrich "Rear" 75); in other words, the window was convenient and he had nothing better to do, though this may merely be justification for his controversial desire to watch. This observation, it seems, is his only form of interaction, if one-sided, with people. The only character, before he begins to suspect his neighbor of murder, that Jeffries interacts with from the chair in front of his window is his able-bodied day helper Sam. Though Sam has worked for Jeffries for a number of years, the employer-employee relationship has not evolved into a friendship like the one with the nurse character in Hitchcock's adaptation. Sam barely registers in Jeffries's world, so he does not warrant the same attention the neighbors seem to. Even in his own home, Jeffries intentionally emotionally secludes himself from those he could connect to.

The main character in "Fire Escape," a 12-year-old boy called Buddy, does not

appear to have much in common with Jeffries at first glance, but their different situations place them in the same role of secluded voyeur. Though he is more mobile than Jeffries, his overactive imagination and desire to entertain have secluded him from his parents and children his own age. Like the boy who cried wolf, Buddy has lost credibility with those who know him, resulting in emotional isolation and at times physical isolation when he is grounded by his parents. While attempting to escape the New York City heat on his upstairs neighbors' fire escape one night, he realizes he can see into their window. The narrator wonders, "what did he care about watching grownups?—except for the funny, sneaky way they were both acting. That made him keep on watching, wondering what they were up to" (Woolrich "Fire" 145). In both stories, the voyeurism is passed off initially as the result of happenstance rather than desire. A significant difference is that Buddy actually witnesses a murder and that Jeffries only witnesses behavior suggestive of murder. What Buddy witnesses results in his attempt to be credible, and Jeffries is led to intentional surveillance to prove his theory. Jeffries, as an adult with a former personal relationship with a police detective, has the credibility but is unsure of what happened and would most likely lose credibility if he admitted his voyeurism. Buddy lacks the credibility, in part because of his history but also in part because he admits to his voyeurism (though unlike Jeffries, he knows exactly what happened).

Jeffries discusses how any "casual unthinking act" can impact a whole life (Woolrich "Rear" 111) and how witnessing such acts can "sink into [our] subconscious, to ferment there like yeast" (Woolrich "Rear" 99). His knowledge of human behavior is what gets him involved in a mystery that no one else even recognizes. Jeffries's ability to recognize the "chain of little habits that" make up people's lives is the strongest

connection to the “otherness” Cohen uses to describe the character of the detective (Woolrich “Rear” 79), yet I argue that it is part of human nature to recognize these habits as long as we look up long enough to witness them. This ability is something all observant people share, whether they are amateurs or professional detectives.

Jeffries is able to piece together not only a murder mystery but also its solution by witnessing his neighbor’s behavior. The neighbor, Thorwald, has been unemployed and caring for an invalid wife. When the wife disappears without warning and Thorwald cannot seem to bring himself to enter the bedroom where she had been confined, Jeffries becomes suspicious. This suspicion crystallizes when he begins to see Thorwald’s view become focused on the external world, like Jeffries’s *own* view. Jeffries meets his voyeuristic match, when Thorwald starts to look out from his window, and “two...played at the same game—stalking one another’s window-squares, unseen” (Woolrich “Rear” 106). Jeffries recognizes throughout the story the questionable morals of his voyeurism, often attempting to validate it and to avoid comparisons with Peeping Toms. As his voyeurism leans towards surveillance, he finds other excuses: attempting to validate his own voyeurism by saying he has nothing to feel guilty about, whereas, Thorwald presumably does (Woolrich “Rear” 81). The returned gaze that Jeffries experiences when Thorwald begins to look out his own windows also connects to Sartre’s Other. At the point that Thorwald as the Other gazes at Jeffries, Jeffries is conscious of his own actions and his own guilt at watching. We simultaneously value our privacy but expect entrance into others’ lives, and we certainly do not want to be reminded that there may be some shame in what we are doing. We isolate ourselves intentionally, like Jeffries has, in part so that we do not feel the judgment from others.

### The (Un)credible Witness

Though neither of Woolrich's amateur detectives acknowledge guilty feelings, Jeffries is hesitant to admit his voyeurism to anyone else, and Buddy is dismissed because he *does* admit to it. Jeffries also has the distinctly questionable problem of feeling in control due to his knowledge. After alerting Boyne to his suspicions, he notes that "[i]t gave [him] a peculiar sense of suppressed excitement, knowing [the police] were going to come in the minute [Thorwald] left" (Woolrich "Rear 92). His excitement here is not unlike the Peeping Tom's fevered concentration described at the start of the story. Again, while Jeffries does not acknowledge guilt regarding his appreciation for control from a distance, it is something that would make a reader, and any other character, uncomfortable. The desire to play god, just as the urge to lie or exaggerate, does not lend itself to the credibility of a voyeur.

Regardless of Jeffries's control issues and physical immobility, he has one advantage over Buddy: he is an adult. When Jeffries realizes that his detection has met the limit of his mobility, he calls on an old army-buddy-turned-police-detective named Boyne for help. Jeffries is careful not to explain how he knows a murder was committed, feeling that his evidence is "flimsy" (Woolrich "Rear" 90). Also, presumably because of a sense of some guilt over his voyeurism, he does not mention the window when talking to Boyne. However, despite a lack of evidence to follow up on, Boyne accepts the concerns because Jeffries was the source (Woolrich "Rear" 90). While an unknown police detective may not have believed Jeffries and Boyne's acceptance may have more to do with their old friendship, Jeffries's age compared to Buddy's is likely at play in his credibility.

In fact, Jeffries's voyeurism is never specifically discussed with or acknowledged by anyone else. This is in direct contrast to the Hitchcock film adaptation of the story, in which the two female characters who replace the character of Sam question and criticize the voyeurism before being pulled into it themselves. While Jeffries employs Sam to first get the name and address of the suspected murderer and then to break into the apartment and make it look like it had been searched while Thorwald is out, Sam never questions what Jeffries is doing or asking of him. Boyne at one point tells Jeffries that he feels like a fool for having gone along with the investigation based only on trust (Woolrich "Rear" 95). This conversation occurs in person, in the very room from which Jeffries has been watching Thorwald, yet Boyne does not ask or know why Jeffries requested the investigation. After Boyne leaves, Jeffries notes that Thorwald has "got his armor on against [the police]. But his back is naked and unprotected against" Jeffries (Woolrich "Rear" 96). Even when Boyne is in front of the window, Thorwald seems protected from his view. Thorwald is the only character who realizes that Jeffries is watching him, and it leads to Jeffries's life being in danger. Thorwald comes to murder him, but between Thorwald's discovery of Jeffries's voyeurism and Thorwald's death, the only word he can speak is "You—" (Woolrich "Rear" 110). Thorwald never completes his accusation. His armor against the police is finally broken after Boyne's visit to Jeffries's apartment; presumably the detective experienced the delayed action so often described by Jeffries himself.

Buddy, on the other hand, has no one's trust. When he tells his parents what he saw (thus admitting to his voyeurism), they believe it to be another, though extreme version of, one of his tall tales. Buddy then turns to the police. The narrator notes that

“[t]he thing had become psychological instead of physical. And he wasn’t so good psychologically. The line-up had turned into one of age groups before he knew how it had happened; a kid against four grownups. Grownups that gave each other the benefit of the doubt sooner than they would give it to a kid” (Woolrich “Fire” 180). The police quickly decide to close the investigation, and the story might have come to a close too if the murderers did not recognize an inherent risk in having an eye witness. Though a child may not seem a credible witness to police, he is credible enough to be feared by the criminals. Though this turn of events may seem unlikely in real life, it speaks to the anxiety the readers would feel if a character, even a vulnerable one, gave up on justice and let the bad guys get away.

This sense of justice that protagonists in detective fiction invariably must feel is part of their appeal to the reader. It is what keeps us turning the page, and it is what keeps the detective pursuing an otherwise dangerous case. As readers, we can only hope that if we were in a similar situation having caught sight of something, whether intentionally or casually, that we would not turn away from it, even if we found truth and justice to be in opposition to our sense of self-preservation. In fact, neither of Woolrich’s amateur detectives can turn their eyes away. The grasping for credibility becomes as addictive as the voyeurism itself.

### **Broken Windows**

In both stories, the lives of the curious observers come under threat. Curiosity, after all, killed the cat. However, Woolrich’s pessimistic worldview, as it turns out, is only filtered through the windowpanes of his detectives. Anna Woodhouse says that “it is...*through* the window of [Woolrich’s] writing that he enters into dialogue with the

city” (400), and it is also through the window that his characters not only view the world outside but eventually become part of it. Jeffries first calls on his friend Boyne, because he “didn’t want [his] room all cluttered up with dicks and cops taking turns nosing out of the window” (Woolrich “Rear” 90). He hoped that he could get the help of his friend without giving up his isolation and his view, not considering that a friend would breach that isolation more than any stranger would.

Jeffries remains immobile throughout the story, but Thorwald, whose own isolation had been broken by Jeffries’s visual intrusion, physically infringes on his isolation by breaking into his apartment to kill him. Thorwald is followed by Boyne attempting to save Jeffries’s life. This friend that Jeffries has not seen in 26 years has reentered his life, and the murderer receives his justice by a well-placed bullet that not only shatters Jeffries’s window but his isolation. It is perhaps no coincidence that it is the very next day that the doctor comes to remove Jeffries’s cast, for as the doctor says, he ““must be tired of sitting there all day long doing nothing”” (Woolrich “Rear” 114). With the return of Boyne into Jeffries’s life and his brush with death, there is a possibility that it is not just Jeffries’s newfound mobility that will bring him back out into the world.

Buddy begins to recognize his *own* isolation through impending physical danger. When the murderers break into his apartment, he “wanted the safety of the streets, where they wouldn’t dare try anything. Where there would be people around who could interfere, come to his rescue” (Woolrich “Fire” 175). Because Buddy’s isolation is primarily emotional compared to Jeffries’s physical isolation, he does find his way to the streets but does not find the safety he hoped for. The line-up remains one of age groups, and he is unable to find anyone to come to his rescue on the streets that night. That is,



until justice, thanks to his own quick thinking and a bit of luck, is served when the murderers are killed in a collapse of the derelict building where they plan to hide Buddy's body along with that of their other victim. The police slowly catch up, as they do in "Rear Window," and the detective who originally dismissed Buddy ends up giving him his own badge, calling him a detective and adopting him into that brotherhood. Buddy has, in effect, matured and gained the sort of helpful friend that Jeffries has in Boyne. As Buddy muses towards the end, "You fight when you die, because—that's what everything alive does, that's what being alive *is*" (Woolrich "Fire" 186). The reader gets the sense, though, that Buddy, now much less isolated than he was throughout the story, will not have to fight quite so hard next time.

Both of these voyeurs find themselves broken out of their emotional isolation and in the land of the living by the end of their respective stories. The vulnerable amateur detectives were threatened and not only survived but got the bad guy in the end. For the average reader, this type of detective is more relatable than Cohen's other detectives. While we may not have to test our vulnerability through witnessing a crime, we are each Woolrich's curious observers on the other side of the glass, trying to find a balance between self-preservation, curiosity, and credibility. As Blazer argues, "voyeurism is an inescapable component of our society" (391), but that does not mean that we should use it as a barrier to real relationships. Though Woolrich preceded social media, one cannot help but feel that his stories act as a reminder to us all to get out there and live, to not only lift our heads up and look around but to actively participate in the world before us.

### CHAPTER THREE: ALIENATION VS. FRIENDSHIP: HUMANIZING THE POLICE IN NOIR FICTION

While the majority of Woolrich's short fiction centers on amateur detectives (or more simply put, on protagonists placed in a dangerous and unexpected situation), the professional detective does appear in secondary and sometimes primary roles in his short fiction. Woolrich interestingly avoids the private investigators common in the hard-boiled genre and utilizes police detectives instead. Unlike the inquisitive observers who get involved due to curiosity or self-preservation, the police detectives are involved because it is their duty; yet their methods are often questionable and their end goals occasionally contrary to public interest. Like the hard-boiled private investigators in other fiction and Woolrich's amateur detectives who are often too ashamed to admit their voyeurism, the police detectives in Woolrich's short fiction generally fall somewhere on the scale of the antihero, who "often acts outside accepted values, norms, roles, and behaviors as a hapless everyman, a charismatic rebel, or a roguish outlaw who challenges the status quo in their often morally ambivalent quest" (Treat et al. 37). While characterizing the police detectives as antiheroes, the initial interpretation might be that Woolrich is contributing to an old school of thought in which the police are "the mechanism through which...alienation is enforced" (Karpiak 7). However, Woolrich's short fiction complicates our ideas about police as an alienating force by giving them various roles to play within the stories.

In his study of detective fiction and urban ethnography, Kevin G. Karpiak notes

that a “new framework is needed, one that takes the relationship of police and others in the urban social environment as contingent and emergent, rather than automatically casting police as the antiheroes, as the agents of” social instability and alienation (24). Woolrich’s police begin to give us an idea of what this new framework, or at least a transitional framework, could look like. He does this by showing police detectives as helpers, heroes, and villains. Nevins identifies a category of Woolrich’s fiction that he calls noir cop tales, which include the worst of the worst on the police force, and notes that “the moral outrage we feel has no internal support in the stories except the objective horror of what is shown...it’s yet another instance of how [Woolrich’s] most powerful...stories are divided against themselves so as to evoke in us a divided response that mirrors his own self-division” (“Introduction” xxi). Woolrich may not explicitly show the “moral outrage” that Nevins seems to wish for, but by pitting police characters against each other in his stories, I argue that there is some support within the story for what the reader feels. In the end, Woolrich is showing us that not all police are alike, so it is important to reconsider the alienation and the ideological isolation we may feel as a result of our complex understanding of the police.

Karpiak argues for reconsidering how police are viewed in literature and in real life. He accomplishes this through an analysis of police in literature, with an emphasis on noir fiction, in which he shows how heroes are only cast as heroes in contrast to the police, thus highlighting how police are typically shown as an alienating force. Karpiak refers to an article by Louis Wirth that, he argues, shows that “the interactions of city dwellers were characterized by ‘secondary’ rather than ‘primary contacts...that urbanites are less dependent on people in their attempt to fulfill their basic needs, but that these

interactions tend to be shallow and temporary” (8). He goes on to argue that the police can obstruct more meaningful relations within communities because of their duty to enforce the law (Karpiak14). However, Karpiak does note that there can be outsiders within the police forces typically depicted in fiction, and it is through the use of contrast that the outsider is seen as a hero (12). This contrast is what I argue Woolrich does effectively and that he does not contrast them simply to show the alienation resulting from “bad” police but to call attention to the “good” (though a more appropriate word might be “better”) police who might have more of a unifying effect.

In Woolrich’s fiction, as in the real world, it can be difficult to define what is good and what is bad. As protectors, the expectation is that police would be good. However, at their best, police in most noir fiction are viewed as detectives who accurately solve cases by potentially controversial means. Police are not often portrayed at their best though. Even in Woolrich’s stories with a heroic police protagonist, the hero is shown as an outlier, as an isolated do-gooder amidst a group of inept and/or aggressive law enforcement with more in common with the amateur detectives than the other police. While the police detective in the role of helper is there to lend some credence to the work done by amateur detectives, his lack of connection to the case and/or the victims prevents him from doing much real good, yet he is really the most likable of Woolrich’s police detectives. The villainous police detective, on the other hand, is generally punished for his actions but does not lose his influence when he dies. As Karpiak argues, to be a hero, “one needs the contrast of the Policeman” (17); therefore, the influence of the villainous police detective cannot be lost without also losing the more heroic police detective. The police corruption that is evident throughout much of Woolrich’s work pollutes everyone

who comes in contact with it, and the corruption not only impacts the detectives' morality but their ability to successfully do their duty. The corrupt police are not doing bad things for the good of the people but for their own advancement.

In order to evaluate Woolrich's representation of the police detective in light of Karpiak's study, I will analyze three representations of police based on three of Woolrich's short stories: as hero in 1937's "Murder at the Automat," villain in 1938's "Detective William Brown," and helper in 1942's "Rear Window." My shift in focus from voyeurism to representation of police allows for additional analysis of "Rear Window"; Boyne is an oft-forgotten character in the scholarship regarding both the story and the film adaptation, yet he is a character well worth exploring. In "Murder at the Automat," the narrator is a police detective who tells the story of a case in which a man is poisoned at an automat. The narrator goes above and beyond to solve the case, and while he seems heroic compared to his coworkers, even his methods for solving the case are questionable.

"Detective William Brown" was published a year after "Murder at the Automat." This story has some aspects that are similar to its predecessor but with a much more malicious bent. The narrator is again a "good" police detective, but he tells the story of the titular character, a fellow police detective who rose through the police ranks at a suspiciously fast rate. As in "Murder at the Automat," Woolrich does not give the audience the evidence necessary to consider the narrator a traditional moral hero, but he is shown as an outsider in a corrupt police force. The narrator begins to suspect foul play and eventually discovers evidence that proves that Detective Brown was shooting innocent men in order to frame them for murders they had not committed. Woolrich's

pairing of these different police characters provides the reader with a more complex understanding of police than the expected stereotypes.

**The Hero, “hardboiled dick though he was”<sup>2</sup>**

Woolrich’s heroic police detective is not unlike his amateur detective, who becomes obsessed with solving a mystery he has become personally connected to. Though the heroic detective is not personally connected to the crime like the amateur detective is, he sees it through to completion; he is dedicated to solving the case. If the duty of a policeman is to solve the mystery, bring the criminal to justice, and prevent further harm, the heroic policeman accomplishes all of these. The amateur and heroic police detectives share another commonality: they are not afraid to get their hands dirty to complete the job. The heroic detective in “Murder at the Automat,” for example, tells his boss that, once he had determined the murderer was a poisoner, “I...let her know I was onto her. I told her her coffee smelled good. Then I switched cups on her. She’s up there now, dead...You never would have gotten her to the chair, anyway” (Woolrich 131). Though the amateur does not resort to vigilantism (he relies on the police helper to avoid this), the heroic police detective sometimes resorts to questionable methods to get a confession or catch a criminal.

Like many of Woolrich’s amateur detectives who rely on voyeurism to learn of and solve crimes, Nelson is both an observer of details and an observer of the people around him. While Sarecky and the captain set their sights on the most obvious suspect at the automat and try to beat a confession out of him, Nelson recognizes early on that there

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<sup>2</sup>Woolrich “Murder” 126.

is more than meets the eye with this murder. He follows leads and interviews the dead man's family, all the while keeping in mind as he had told Sarecky that "no adult is a free agent...they're tied hand and foot by tiny, harmless little habits, and held helpless" (Woolrich "Murder" 127). Though in the end Nelson outsmarts the murderer in a way that results in her death, the reader is not left wondering if Nelson could have saved her. He used his skills of observation and his power as a police detective to save the innocent suspect from further brutality at the hands of his captain.

Though the heroic police detective is not one-dimensional or purely good, the reader is left rooting for him despite his questionable methods. In "Murder at the Automat," Woolrich accomplishes this in part with the contrast between the main character, Nelson, and his brethren on the force: a fellow detective named Sarecky, who plays the bumbling sidekick, and his captain who is cast as the more typical violent police officer. Woolrich's use of contrast, just as Karpiak discusses, of several types of police in this story allows the reader the ability to see Nelson as a hero even though he still aligns more appropriately with an antihero. In discussing the Byronic hero, the predecessor to the antihero, Lilian R. Furst writes, "the Romantics, while apparently in search of a hero, no longer wholly believed in his pristine existence, even if they were not yet ready to admit this openly to themselves" (54). While the appeal of the antihero has only increased over time, it would be difficult to write a story that did not include a character that is seen as better than the others. Though even Woolrich's most ethical characters are still morally ambiguous, the audience recognizes them as heroes because of the contrast with those who are worse.

### **The Villain, “There’s nothing worse than when a sheep-dog turns wolf”<sup>3</sup>**

The most common type of police detective seen in Woolrich’s stories, and the one that audiences likely expect in noir fiction, is the corrupt or villainous police detective. With a cast of characters similar to “Murder at the Automat,” the primary difference is that the focus is on the villainous detective, rather than the hero Greeley who instead acts as narrator. By the end of the story, the audience is left wondering if anyone in law enforcement is really good. This story aligns more closely with the noir fiction that Karpiak uses to show the alienation caused by police and the use of the contrast between a hero character, this time within the force, and the police in general. While the narrator is not only alienated for questioning the methods of the rest of the force, the audience is alienated from the idea of police in general because of the rampant corruption seen in the story.

The story covers a number of years, from Greeley and Brown’s childhood spent together to their first days on the force to Brown’s eventual detective badge and demise. From the start, Woolrich shows the contrast between the two 14-year-old boys. Brown is described as “flashy, brilliant, colorful” and leads “the field in everything,” and Greeley is described as “reliable” but “not very exciting” (Woolrich “Detective” 169). Clearly, what it takes to make it on the police force is what Brown had from a young age. But was it the expectation that Brown would be a success that led to his corruption? As a child, Brown tells Greeley, “I’m not going to *stay* a cop! Any fool can do that. I’m going to be an ace detective before I’m through!” (Woolrich “Detective” 169). Brown, of course,

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<sup>3</sup>Woolrich “Detective” 206.



was correct. However, Greeley eventually learns that Brown's success and rapid rise in the force is due to a recurring plot to frame an innocent person by shooting them and claiming they had resisted arrest. Rather than allow this to continue, Greeley attempts to not only help his childhood friend but his friend's innocent victims and the public at large.

Brown starts out ambitious rather than malevolent, but when he accidentally shoots the wrong man and is rewarded for it early in his career, he is corrupted by the success. Brown's accidental corruption is not unlike the corruption that spreads throughout the force; Woolrich does not seem to imply that any of these men are inherently bad, only treading a fine line that can easily be overstepped. It was Brown's initial killing that resulted in his promotion to detective and that gave him the idea that he could stage similar shootings for continued success. As their lieutenant says, "it's the results in this business that count" (Woolrich "Detective" 175). The system, like the men, is not inherently bad, but it does support corruption. Unfortunately for Brown and his victims, the *accuracy* of the results don't count in Woolrich's fictional world (as long as a suspect is apprehended, it doesn't matter who he is), just as they are often debated in the real world. Greeley is given a slap on the wrist for not beating Brown to the suspect, despite the fact that the suspect was running through a crowd of children at the time of the shooting. Woolrich's police force encourages not only results but results that do not promote the well-being of the general public.

While Greeley eventually makes detective in his own conscientious yet plodding way, Brown always had the benefit of being ahead. Despite Brown's success, on Greeley's first job as a detective, he began to suspect Brown's foul play that others on the

force had missed. Greeley did the actual honest police work and did it successfully. He, like all of Woolrich's detectives, is a keen observer and noticed something about Brown's actions that was suspicious. By following his own hunch, using his relationship to Brown to gain knowledge, and tracking down leads that no one else thought relevant (Brown had killed the suspect, after all, so there was no case to be had), Greeley does the true detective work to prove to himself that Brown is a criminal. Yet his ability to do his job well put the entire police department in jeopardy. As he points out to Brown, if the truth became public knowledge, it would "blow the roof off the whole division, tear us wide open... There's nothing worse than when a sheep-dog turns wolf" (Woolrich "Detective" 206). Greeley, and the rest of the police department presumably, does not see Brown's corruption as a threat but his own potential for exposing the corruption is the real danger. Greeley is the outsider within the force that Karpiak identifies as a hero character. With Brown's continued support from and promotions within the police force, if Brown were identified as a criminal, the corruption of the entire body would be evident to the public. As a result, Greeley must be the outsider within the police force, despite the fact that he has actually been doing a better job than Brown. Woolrich makes the identity of the outsider evident through the contrast of Greeley with Brown, who acts as a stand-in for the rest of the force.

Greeley, unlike the Nelson character in "Murder at the Automat," is also corrupted by his connection to Brown. Although Greeley follows his instincts and the clues in order to determine the truth surrounding Brown's actions, he does not do it in order to get justice for Brown's victims. Once he has all the proof he needs, Greeley confronts Brown and offers him a choice between reporting him and suicide. Brown's

victims will never be exonerated if Brown takes the easy way out, and Greeley doesn't seem to have a problem with that. In the end, Brown is killed in a shootout with another suspect, and the "fallen detective" learns in his final moments that Greeley will keep his secret (Woolrich "Detective" 207). Just as Karpiak defines the hero in contrast to the police, the villainy of a police detective in Woolrich's short stories can be defined in contrast to the heroic outsider on the force. The detective in "Murder at the Automat" actually does something worse than his peers (if killing a murderer is considered worse than beating up an innocent suspect), but that bad act resulted in good: a criminal was off the streets; some sort of justice was had. Brown also killed people, but they were innocent and his bad acts led to career advancement and helped the rest of the police force look good in the public's eye. While Greeley is arguably good at his job (he solved the case against Brown), his characterization as a hero is up in the air at the end of the story when he confronts Brown and Brown dies. The contrast, therefore, that Karpiak says we rely on to define the hero is no longer there. Greeley has been corrupted by Brown in the end, and his lack of desire for justice for Brown's victims shows him to be nearly as much a villain as Brown was.

**The Helper, "I'm a police officer and you're not"<sup>4</sup>**

Much of Woolrich's fiction revolves around amateur detectives. The involvement of police detectives is not strictly necessary, but there are often police detectives that play a secondary role. The helper police detective may have the training and the credentials to solve a case, but Woolrich places them in this secondary role to highlight the drive held

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<sup>4</sup>Woolrich "Rear" 89.

by those personally connected to a case. Rather than contrast a more heroic police detective against the rest of the police force, in this type of story, Woolrich is contrasting the amateur detective from the professional police detective. Police do not have all of the resources to investigate every suspicion or the background knowledge to even suspect a crime in the first place. The police offer what help they can, but it is often in the hands of the amateurs to find justice for the victim.

A prime example of Woolrich's use of police as helpers is his short story "Rear Window." This story is particularly useful for analysis, because the police detective not only helps with the case but saves the life of the amateur detective: a true helper. Karpiak discusses two types of detective stories outlined by Tzvetan Todorov in the 1970s: one involving a detective who becomes involved in the case after the crime and one involving a detective who "is himself implicated in the drama – his virtue, and oftentimes his very life, are at stake" (20). The former detective is more likely to be a professional, while the latter is more likely to be an amateur. While the amateur's life is in jeopardy, at least in "Rear Window," the story relies on the amateur to convince the helping police detective that he is correct and also to protect him from the criminal.

In this case, Boyne is anything but the alienating police detective that Karpiak warns against automatically recognizing in detective fiction. The amateur detective and main character is a man named Jeffries, who thinks he has witnessed behavior suggestive of murder. He involves the police for one primary reason: he isn't mobile and therefore can't follow up on his hunch on his own. He calls an old friend who has become a homicide detective, because, as he says, he "didn't want to get a flock of strange dicks and cops into [his] hair" (Woolrich "Rear" 15). Though Jeffries acknowledges to himself

and the reader that his suspicions are flimsy, his friend Boyne takes him at his word, “[b]ecause [Jeffries] was the source” (Woolrich “Rear” 16). Jeffries has a personal relationship with this particular police detective, and because of this, there is no fear of police evident in this story. While Jeffries and Boyne had lost touch with each other and Jeffries had emotionally isolated himself prior to the events of the story, Boyne is a friend and ally rather than an isolating force. Karpiak argues that community building is sometimes considered “a weapon” against police (16), but here Boyne is the start of a new community for Jeffries.

It is difficult to read “Rear Window” through the lens of police as antiheroes. The only time the audience questions Boyne is when he might fail to do his duty. If Boyne did not solve the case, or solve it in time to protect Jeffries from the man he has accused, then he would have failed to do his duty and lost his friend. The question of what is the police’s true duty is highlighted in “Rear Window.” Is it to solve the mystery, to bring the criminal to justice, or to prevent further harm? Ideally, all three would be accomplished, but the helper detective only manages to accomplish the latter two; it is the amateur detective who manages the first but lacks the authority or control to bring justice or to protect others or himself. Furthermore, Boyne’s unquestioning acceptance of Jeffries’s suspicions makes him complicit in Jeffries’s voyeurism and persecution of a man he does not know is guilty. This further complicates the relationship between police and amateur detectives. The act of helping may, in fact, be a criminal act in itself. When Boyne first decides that Jeffries has him on a wild goose chase, he tells Jeffries that their relationship needs to remain friendly rather than professional, stating that “[y]ou’re not yourself, and I’m a little out of my own pocket money, time and temper. Let’s leave it at that”

(Woolrich “Rear” 96). Boyne does not realize at this point that Jeffries’s suspicions were based on voyeurism or that he had been attempting to entrap his suspect, but he also sees no problem with going outside of his actual duties when he believes he has a credible source.

The helper figure is only significant to the story of “Rear Window” because of his relationship with the amateur detective. While Karpiak discusses the need to define a hero through the contrast with an antiheroic police force, it is a friendship rather than a relationship of conflict that defines the police detective in this story. However, the police in the case of stories with a non-police protagonist are less effective due to a lack of involvement. The suspected neighbor easily outwits the police by convincing them that no crime has been committed. For a crime of passion, as Jeffries suspects it was, the murderer is able to hide the body and show that his wife is still alive through the use of a decoy and a convenient old postcard. Boyne eventually catches on just in time to save Jeffries from becoming the next victim though. As Pamela Bedore discusses those connected to the victims of a crime, “personal grief renders them better advocates for their loved ones than even the most committed professional, thus demonstrating the importance of amateur detectives even in a world where police detectives are heroic” (56). When the police are not Woolrich’s central characters, they may seem to offer only a means to an end. However, for those with a good relationship with police, the police do come through in the end.

Karpiak concludes his article by saying that through his research, he “began to see ‘the police’ as not only an identifiable and distinguishable governing institution, but also as a more general problem – or tool – of sociability” (23). As an ethnographer, his

interest is in how “policing as a form of social, ethical, and cognitive problem” can help city-dwellers avoid the alienation that has seemed historically to be inherent when the police were considered merely as a governing institution (Karpiak 24). Karpiak looked to noir fiction to try to resolve an issue he recognized about police in the real world, but in the end, he suggests that that “new framework” is needed to cast a light on police as potentially something more than antiheroes rather than suggesting what that framework might be. Woolrich’s police-centric stories like “Murder at the Automat” and “Detective William Brown” seem to support the old framework in casting police as antiheroes and only outlining a hero amidst that group by contrast with the others. However, “Rear Window” is doing something else by using a friendship rather than a more adversarial relationship. The slowness and lack of effectiveness that the police are occasionally shown to have in “Rear Window” are a result of their lack of connection to the mystery they are attempting to solve (which the police, unlike the amateur detective, have no evidence [beyond Jeffries’s testimony] exists). Boyne and the police that work with him are shown as nothing but helpful though, and it is the friendship that Boyne and Jeffries rekindle that begins to turn the alienation that Karpiak associates with police into the community that is needed to provide some unification between police and the public.

It is important to note that the end results for the two “hero” police detectives discussed here are not as positive as what we see for helper detective Boyne. While Nelson in “Murder at the Automat” got his man and the admiration of his colleagues, the reader has no sense of his place within society as a whole. To guess what might be in his future, we turn to Greeley in “Detective William Brown.” Without the contrast of the more villainous Brown, Greeley becomes a negative figure within the society. He is

infected by Brown's corruption, which results in him no longer being an outsider within the corrupt police force. However, where does this place him in society? While he may not be isolated within his organization, he is now isolated in his everyday life. In Karpiak's traditional framework where the police in fiction and the real world are seen as an alienating force, the figure of the police detective cannot be alienating of others without in effect isolating himself from everyone who is not a brother in blue. By allowing Brown to corrupt him, Greeley isolates himself from the public he has vowed to serve and protect. Similarly, though there is no indication that Nelson is corrupt or at least on the same level of corruption as Greeley and Brown, by being accepted by his police department, Nelson loses his outsider quality and is also likely isolated from the public rather than unified with them like Boyne.



## CONCLUSION

The focus of this thesis has been on isolation in the short fiction of Cornell Woolrich, but the title also points to something else: window dressing. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, window dressing is “the act or an instance of making something appear deceptively attractive or favorable.” While this may seem incongruous with the “bitterly pessimistic worldview” that most scholars attribute to Woolrich’s writing (Lane 94), in reading Woolrich, I see a lot of hope and guidance for how his readers could have better lives. No, the stories are not attractive and none of us would want to live through what his poor, harassed protagonists go through, but there is a potential for happy endings after the concluding pages of the stories. One thing each of the stories addressed in this thesis share is that, in the end, the criminals died. It is bleak, but it is not entirely pessimistic. The good guys, as good as any of Woolrich’s readers can say we are, do prevail and generally have better prospects than they had at the beginning because their isolation, in whatever form it took, has been broken, or there are at least cracks in the window-glass.

Though less well known today than his noir counterparts Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett and even James M. Cain, Woolrich has a lot to offer current readers. As mentioned above, much of it is out of print but those that have been most frequently adapted are readily available. He has had at least 101 movies and television show episodes adapted from his short stories, novellas, and novels (Internet Movie Database n.p.). The thrilling aspect of his work might make the adaptations as interesting to

viewers as his fiction is to readers, but to get the full Woolrich effect, I recommend the fiction. His most famous story, recognizable due to Hitchcock's film adaptation *Rear Window*, is an excellent case. The film adaptation is the reason that I discovered Cornell Woolrich, and I imagine I am not alone in how I found him, but it is in many ways more of a Hitchcock film than a Woolrich adaptation. Hitchcock's interest in women as objects and romance is not something that is generally found in Woolrich's fiction, which interestingly could go towards backing up Nevins's claim regarding Woolrich's sexual orientation. While much of the scholarship on *Rear Window* focuses on the sexual nature of voyeurism, this is not the only topic of analysis found in the text "Rear Window." The romance between the film's Jeffries and (Hitchcock's creation) Lisa Fremont completely sidelines the friendship between Jeffries and police detective Boyne. For a man like Woolrich who did not have a lasting marriage and very little is known about his romantic relationships, it is quite possible that he was highlighting friendships over romantic relationships for a reason. To understand what Woolrich was trying to tell us about life, we must read his words instead of watch Hitchcock's vision.

The theme of isolation is what stood out to me in Woolrich's short stories. From my first introduction to Woolrich through Hitchcock's vision, I was first struck by Jeffries's interest in his neighbors. This is even more poignant in the short story. While Jeffries is both physically and emotionally isolated from any friends he might have once had, he is still intrigued by the human condition, specifically the human condition of just three sets of neighbors through whose windows he can see. Woolrich's "Rear Window" is actually based on an 1894 short story called "Through a Window" by H.G. Wells. While the plots are dissimilar, the invalid looking out his window and becoming

threatened by someone outside is seen in both. The view that Wells's protagonist has is of an active river though, and there is no sense of community in what he watches. While Woolrich's fiction is permeated with the sense of isolation, it is impossible to feel that isolation without also showing some form of community. Woolrich's protagonists are not originally part of their neighborhood, but by the end of each, there are enough hints that they might become active members in their communities of neighbors and friends.

"New York Blues," of course, is a notable exception to all the chances for happy endings seen in the other short stories examined in this thesis. As one of the final stories written by a man dying alone, I find it the most heartbreaking because it is more of a manual of what-not-to-do than a story of hope. The protagonist of that story feared being alone and killed a woman he mistook for the lover who was leaving him. His desperate grasping for community led him astray and resulted in complete isolation. One cannot help but wonder if this highlights that difference between the relationships that Woolrich and Hitchcock seem to value, friendships for Woolrich and romantic relationships for Hitchcock. For the "New York Blues" protagonist has friends like the character of Johnny; they even seek him out in his absence and he dismisses them. But the protagonist only has eyes for his lover, which leads him to complete isolation and then death. It is the most cautionary of Woolrich's tales, as if to say, hold your friends close. In an age when social media superficially aids the formulation and ability to maintain friendships yet really inhibits meaningful friendships, Woolrich's appeal to his readers not to isolate themselves stands out as even more critical than it may have been at the time he was writing.

This focus on isolation and relationships is what first drew me to Woolrich's short

fiction, but as I mentioned there is much more about it that can be studied. Nevins's biography of Woolrich includes a list of all the fiction published by Woolrich (or posthumously), and the list of novels, novellas, and short stories comprise 26 pages of the volume. Significant scholarship has been completed on the Hitchcock film adaptation and one François Truffaut's 1968 film adaptation of Woolrich's 1940 novel *The Bride Wore Black*. Little has been written on his other novels and even less has been written on his other short fiction. One area of potential focus touched on but not examined in this thesis is Woolrich's portrayal of romantic relationships. The short stories examined here suggest that to Woolrich romantic relationships were considered less vital than friendships. Nevins says that it was typical of Woolrich's fiction to show that romantic "love opens the door to horror and those who manage to survive have nothing left but to wait for the merciful release of death" (*Night* viii). Expanding this thesis's focus on the relevance of friendly relationships to life by looking at Woolrich's view on romantic relationships would be a logical next step.

If romance is not of interest to budding Woolrich scholars, there is considerably less scholarship about Cornell Woolrich than other American noir detective fiction writers. Anyone interested in adding to the body of scholarship has gaps aplenty to fill. Columbia University does maintain some archival material, including some of Woolrich's correspondence. This would likely be useful to review and could suggest some topics of study. Another resource that was accessed for this research but was not described in detail due to minimal relevance to the topic is the digital archives maintained by *The New York Times*. Because Woolrich spent most of his adult life in New York, there are dozens of articles about his books (including a few about him, namely regarding

his time at Columbia University and articles about his death) available.

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