

The Death Sentence

The victim's body was burned to a bubbling crisp. Her hair stood on edge as it released smoke that was accompanied by a certain scent – the kind one might associate with a factory or refinery. But the smell of burnt hair was substantially lost among the overture of other overwhelming odors. When the detective and his assistant had arrived, the rank smell emitted by the dead woman overburdened both of their nostrils.

The detective wrinkled his nose, while his assistant thought it more conducive to cover his own with the red handkerchief he always carried in his right jacket pocket.

"Any witnesses?" asked his assistant under the handkerchief.

The detective looked around. The only other person in sight appeared to be minding her own business across the way.

"None that we might rightly question, I suspect." He returned his gaze upon the victim.

"How are we going to discover who did this? Clearly, the woman died from her burns, but with neither witness nor murder weapon, what hope have we to find the culprit?"

"There is hope, but there isn't a lot of time. If we are to reveal the identity of this woman's killer, then we must do it within the given time restraint."

"Which is?" asked the assistant as he placed his red handkerchief back into his right jacket pocket.

"Two thousand words or less."

"I beg your pardon?"

"It occurred to me shortly after we appeared on the scene of the crime that we are living in a very finite universe – about a two thousand word universe to be precise. Thus, if we are to discover who killed this woman, we must do it within the given time frame of a

short story." The detective knelt beside the victim. "Less, now that I have spent sixty-two words explaining it to you (if you count hyphenated words like 'sixty-two' as one word), not to mention the added words describing my kneeling position."

The assistant raised his brow. "Egad, detective! We must hurry then!"

"Indeed." The detective removed an old penknife from his pocket and poked the poor victim. "Let us gather what we know, and begin with that."

"Straight away, sir," said the detective's assistant as he flipped to an empty page of his notebook and began to write. "The victim was fried to a bloody crisp—"

"Burned to a bubbling crisp. Details, my friend: notice the alliteration."

"Burned to a bubbling crisp...Sorry." He bit his bottom lip, berating himself for his blatant blunder. Bashfully, he continued, "Her hair is standing on edge, and she is emitting a most foul odor, if I may say so."

"You may. And do not forget to write down that she is a she, and not a he, and that we are men (given the use of the male adverbs) and that there is only one other person in this story, and that she is a she."

– Assistant wrote fast, shorthand b/c time limited.

– Detective says to take time. Don't want to miss details.

"Detective, would it not make sense to question the only other character in the story? After all, if neither you nor I murdered the victim, then logic would dictate that it was she who killed her."

"A sound plan, my friend; however you should note that tales of fiction such as these can have unforeseeable twists to them. Perhaps you or I killed the victim after all."

"I did no such thing! I only arrived here after her death, and I was with you!"

"I am merely pointing out that we cannot point

fingers and then look for evidence to support our misguided theories. We must adhere to the facts."

– "Must. . . adhere to. . . facts," says assistant aloud, jotting notes.

"Stop that now! You are wasting words, and thus our time to solve this case. We are down to one thousand, three hundred and forty-nine words, so we'd best hurry!"

At once, the two rather troubled men raced towards the woman who took a quick look at them and turned away.

"You there."

"Me?"

"Yes, you!"

"You're talking to me?"

"There is no one else I could be referring to, so yes. . . you," said the exasperated detective with a sigh. "Twenty more words, out the window," he muttered.

"What can I do for you, Mister. . .?"

"Detective. You can call me 'detective'; I cannot afford to waste any further words on introductions. You must understand that we are rather constrained for time, so I will get right to it."

"I understand, detective, and I am propelled to answer any question that I can."

"You mean to say that you are prepared to answer any question, or that you are compelled to answer any question?"

"Yes, both. . . either will do. My apologies."

"Should I be writing this down?" asked the detective's assistant. The detective ignored him, believing that it would take up too many words to explain why it would be redundant to do so. He did, after all, only have one thousand, one hundred and fifty-nine words to go.

"Did you murder that woman over there?"

"I most certainly did not!"

"That will be all, thank you."

"Detective!" blurted his assistant boldly, "Surely, we must be more meticulous than that!"

"We haven't the time."

"No, I mean to say, we must be more careful with our words if we have only the time to ask but a few questions."

"How do you mean, my friend?"

"You asked, 'did you murder that woman over there?' when you should have simply asked, 'did you murder that woman?'"

"My stars, you are correct! By asking the question as I did, I could only expect a half-truth at best! Perhaps this woman killed the victim somewhere else and then placed her where she lies now; hence, by me asking, 'did you murder that woman over there?' I had inadvertently inquired about the place of death, not the death itself!" The detective chuckled at the capricious nature of his own choice of words. This time, he would phrase the question correctly. "Did you murder that woman?"

"No," replied the suspect.

"Dammit!" The detective pondered. "Alright. . ." He made use of the ellipsis so that he might prolong the time he had left. He knew it only created a false sense of elapsed time, but it still comforted him to do it. "Let us look at the facts once more."

"I have them all written here, sir," said his assistant, waving his notepad near his own noggin.

"There isn't the time for that. No, I believe we only have time for one last monologue (interrupted only once by my assistant) in which I, the main protagonist of the story, shall deduce who killed that woman over there. First, let it be noted that from our inception we were made to be aware of our limited existence within a two thousand-word story. Why would the author introduce such meta-fiction into our tale, unless this

rather unconventional plot device was truly needed to solve the crime? Thus, it would seem that our ability to see beyond our own reality is the first clue.

"Second, notice how very little has been said about our setting, or the time period in which this predicament takes place. Case in point, when my assistant and I noticed the only other person in this story, we did not see her 'across the street'; we saw her 'across the way'. It would appear that time and place have nothing to do with the woman's death. Thus, the second clue is this: It does not matter where or when she was murdered.

"I might accuse the only other woman in the story; the motive would be that she is, as I said, now the only woman left in the story, and people prize their individuality greatly. But alas, the thought is only half-baked, for I still cannot fathom how she might have burned the victim to a crisp (not literally, for we must remain cautious in what we say), nor have I seen any evidence to suggest that she did it. All I know about this woman is that she was trying to mind her own business when she was first introduced (suggesting that she was not interested in our investigation, which leads me to deduce that she is not our killer), and that she suffers from the occasional malapropism – given that she used the verb 'propel' in the past-tense, when she meant to say 'prepared' or 'compelled'.

"I might accuse you, my assistant, but again you have not the means, nor the motive. Plus, the modus operandi is quite wrong. Had the victim been asphyxiated or poisoned, I would have asked you to remove your handkerchief so that I might inspect it for the telltale signs of having it stuffed down another's throat, or doused with cyanide. But the victim was burned to a bubbling crisp; she was not asphyxiated or poisoned.

"I too could be to blame for this heinous crime, but like everyone else here, I am without means or motive. Besides, it would hardly do to have the killer spend his entire existence trying to solve a crime that he himself committed. Thus, the three of us could not have murdered that woman."

"Who then is left to blame?" asked the detective's utterly dumbfounded assistant, having used up his only allotted interruption.

"By now it should be abundantly apparent. Clue one: we are aware of our reality, our limitations, and the author of this world. Clue two: the murderer could have killed her anywhere and anywhen (yes, I am aware that isn't a proper word, but my words are all I have, and fewer now than ever). Clue three: none of the characters within the story could have done it. Combined, these clues point to the only person who could have possibly killed our victim, and that person is the author himself!

"Only the author had the means to murder one of his characters in such a manner, but make no mistake: he did not kill her by burning her to death and then hiding the weapon between the lines on the page. No, the murder weapon was in plain sight this entire time; he used his words to kill her, and the opening statement is his confession. By stating that 'the victim's body was burned to a bubbling crisp,' it became so. Recall, if you will, that we are dealing with a tale that involves meta-language, thus if the author writes 'the victim's body was burned to a bubbling crisp' then we must address only the author's words, and not the scene that those words conveyed.

"It has become painfully obvious to me now: the distinctive use of alliteration throughout this entire tale that matches the initial killing sentence and the author's attempt to hinder me by robbing me of my precious, precious, precious word count so that I might not figure it out in time. What I don't understand is, why create a character that could solve the crime in the first place? Why not just commit the crime? Unless..."

He pondered, again via method of ellipsis.

"Unless," he said again, "the author wanted me to solve the crime. Of course! The genre! I never considered the genre! Clearly, this is a mystery story; the author must aptly adhere to an identifiable structure so as to appease the reader. Thus, there must be a murder,

and the author must include someone who might solve that murder. His aim was to please his audience - that is his motive - although it does not excuse the fact that he killed this poor woman."

The detective took a firm hold of his jacket by the lapels as he basked in his brilliant victory. He had the who, the when, the how, and the why, and with only twenty-two words remaining in his short, but meaningful life, he said, "Wait a minute! There is one thing I don't quite understand. . ."

